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After Iran – A Look Forward

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Overview

It is often difficult to know whether events constitute a “crisis” or usher in a new era. Nevertheless, it would be fair to say that the Middle East War, which broke out on 7 October 2023 and culminated with the Israeli and American attacks on Iran ushered in a new era in the Middle East. A priori, it was clear that this war was not five “bilateral” conflicts between Israel and Hamas, Hezbollah, Iranian proxies in Syria and Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen, but one multi-theater conflict between Israel and Iran. There is clear evidence that Iran initiated the attack of 7 October in order to precipitate a crisis that would scuttle talks of a U.S.-Saudi-Israeli defense axis. Iran believed that a war in Gaza – like previous rounds – would be short and end with another ceasefire leaving Hamas in place, while achieving the goal of putting Israeli-Saudi rapprochement on the back burner.¹

Despite all the indicators, Iran was surprised by the Israeli attack, by the ease with which the Israeli Air Force (IAF) and Mossad agents on the ground took out key targets, including senior military, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and nuclear program figures, and by the American decision to take part. It believed that Israel and the United States were deterred by its deterrent rhetoric and posturing and that the Israeli public was exhausted and split in a way that would not allow the opening of a new front. It is also quite likely that the Iranian leadership relied on the exaggerated capabilities that the military and IRGC boasted



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and it fell victim to its own ideological propaganda. This would not be the first time in history that dictators have fallen into the trap of believing their own self-serving propaganda.

Iran was not the only actor to be surprised. The Iranian missile and drone attacks against Israel also fell dramatically short of the near apocalyptic dimensions that experts in Western capitals had predicted. Those experts missed the number of missiles that Iran could successfully launch, the (high) rate of Israel's interception of those missiles, and the low number of Israeli casualties due to extensive civil defense measures. This has changed the image of Iran both within its own public and in the region – now seeming to be a “paper tiger,” thus changing the dynamics of the region.

The timing of Israel's decision to attack Iran was driven, inter alia, by fresh intelligence regarding the high probability of Iranian nuclear breakout in the near term. According to this intelligence, Iran was expediting plans to drastically increase its missile production and to accelerate its nuclear weapons program with the aim of fielding a capability within a year, which – the Iranian leadership believed – would result in the utter destruction of Israel. This intelligence showed that Iranian activity had accelerated significantly since the end of 2024, with the goal of completing all stages for weaponization and then enriching uranium to weapons grade and assembling a first weapon. Another key trigger for the timing was the intelligence that Iran had begun a crash program for manufacturing more than 10,000 missiles that could reach Israel. The key goals of the Israeli campaign, therefore, were to significantly destroy or disable the physical infrastructure of the Iranian nuclear program and long-range missile capability and to eliminate the knowledge and experience behind the nuclear program.²

What Has Iran Lost?

Even before the Israeli attack on Iran, Iran had lost key strategic assets. Hezbollah, which Iran saw as its key deterrent against an Israeli attack, had been virtually destroyed and was fighting for its political relevance in Lebanon. The Assad regime in Syria had been toppled and replaced with an anti-Iranian regime, which began a dialogue with Israel. Iran's proxy militias in Iraq also then seemed to be less willing to risk their own existence in order to obey orders by Tehran. The last pawn in Iran's chess game remained the Houthi militia in Yemen. Unlike the Iraqi militias or even Hezbollah, the Houthis are totally dependent on Iran; its collapse would lead to the disintegration of their military and their eventual collapse. Iran was left, therefore, with three key deterrents: its ability to attack Israel with missiles and drones; the threat of nuclear breakout, and its ability to precipitate a crisis in the Persian Gulf. It has lost much of the first two and the third has been exposed as far less a threat than many imagined.

Another factor in Iran's strategy was its expectation that Russia and China (as well as the European countries) would deter an attack or at least would act to mitigate its consequences. However, despite Iran's support of Russia in the Ukraine War and its oil exports to Beijing, both these actors adopted a “holding position” throughout the 12 days of the Israeli attack on their “ally.” Factors in Moscow's muted behavior were Russia's strategic weakness due to the war in Ukraine and “Cold War 2.0,” and the recent lesson from its experience in Syria that



supporting a failing regime will not endear Moscow to any successor. Russian economic interests also played a role; conflict in the Gulf carries potential for a rise in oil prices, which benefits Russia. Russia may also have hoped that its arms industry could benefit from the destruction of—and consequent need to rebuild—Iran’s military might. Putin also did not seek conflict with Israel; apart from strategic considerations, he has high respect for Israel’s military and intelligence capabilities (and even a modicum of “philosemitism”).³ For China too, the investment in a regime that may not survive the year was not just sunken costs but could have had an additional cost in terms of the relations and oil supply with the successor regime.

The Israeli campaign focused on the centrifuge facility in Natanz, the Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant (PFEP) in Esfahan and the off-line plutonium reactor in Arak. In the Israeli strikes, most of the PFEP was destroyed along with the Uranium Conversion Facility and above-ground elements of Natanz. Further damage was inflicted by the U.S. strikes which severely hit Fordow and Natanz. The bombing would not have had to destroy all the centrifuges; the explosions underground and the resultant unbalancing of the centrifuges would have been enough to take them out of operation. Israel eliminated at least 16 key figures in the Iranian nuclear science community, and probably many more who were with them were also killed.⁴ The goal of reducing the missile threat was also successful; Iran now possesses far fewer (approximately 1,000) missiles that can reach Israel. Two hundred launchers and much of Iran’s indigenous missile-manufacturing capability has been disabled or destroyed.⁵

Western media have focused on the technical question of whether all of the Iranian stockpiles of Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) were indeed destroyed or buried under the ruins of Fordow and Natanz. Iran and some western pundits claim that it has, but there has been no confirmation of this.⁶ On the other hand, Israeli and U.S. Intelligence insist that most of the HEU was buried under the ruins of Fordow and Natanz, and that moving it would have entailed a number of steps—some which would have been detected.⁷ This is a question that will remain open, but not for a long time. If, indeed, Iran had transferred HEU from Natanz and Fordow, Western Intelligence agencies will be able to verify that.

The real assessment, however, should take into account the total damage to the Iranian nuclear ecosystem—the removal of the top scientific elite and destruction of its facilities for uranium enrichment, processing and, ultimately, weaponization. Taking all of these into account, Iran’s nuclear weapons program has been significantly set back and its ability to bounce back will be severely hampered by the conditions that will prevail: “snapback” sanctions, a continuous focus on Iran by Western and Israeli Intelligence, and the regime’s preoccupation with the domestic theater.⁸ If these conditions persist, Iran will not enjoy the conditions that allowed it to acquire centrifuge parts and to build needed facilities. The war, then, will have put the Iranian nuclear program back for at least one-to-two years.

The International Theater

The failure of Iranian deterrence towards Israel and the United States encouraged the E3 to support snapback sanctions despite Iranian threats that such sanctions would bring the region



closer to “war” and attempts to offer token concessions to delay the snapback. The decline of the Iranian threat allowed the new government in Lebanon to adopt decisions on the disarmament of Hezbollah—the “Crown Jewel” of Iran’s “Axis of Resistance.” Moreover, it left the Houthis vulnerable to Israeli attacks. The decline in the Iranian threat also facilitated the support of Arab and Muslim states around the Trump Plan for Gaza.

The Domestic Theater

Another element of conventional wisdom regarding Iran proven wrong was the expectation that an attack on Iran’s nuclear program would unite the Iranian people behind the regime. This was fundamentally flawed. Iranian social media is replete with expressions of joy for every killing of a senior regime official and reflect little care for the nuclear program. There is almost unanimous rejoicing for every IRGC officer or regime target that has been hit. There are hashtags of #Israel_Dont_Stop and “#Thanks Israel.”⁹

Iran’s loss of external deterrence power appears to be equated in the eyes of Iran’s public with its loss of domestic deterrence power. The regime is aware that once it failed to deter Israel and was so clearly defeated by the coalition of the “Big Satan and Little Satan,” its own domestic deterrence eroded.

There is no doubt that the regime was aware of these manifestations of internal opposition. It initiated a wide witch hunt against “Mossad agents” – primarily among the Kurdish, Azeri and Baluchi minorities – further exacerbating the unrest among these communities. The precautions of cutting off the country from Internet, increased IRGC and Basij presence in the streets, and efforts to harness Iranian nationalist sentiment for regime support had little success. The regime’s fears of a growing opposition are evident in the rise of executions since the “Twelve-Day War” on grounds of “armed rebellion against the state,” “corruption on Earth” and “enmity against God.”

Another indication of the regime’s awareness of the lack of domestic support is a rhetorical pivot since the beginning of the attack from traditional Islamic messaging to nationalist and pre-Islamic symbolism with the aim of unifying the population—particularly the youth – under a broader Iranian identity, while palpably sidelining the Islamist narrative. The regime deployed unprecedented pre-Islamic imagery across multiple platforms. In his first address after the attack (June 26), Khamenei used “Iran” and “nation” nearly 20 times at the expense of references to “Islam” and “Ummah.”¹⁰ A billboard depicted missiles striking the Star of David alongside mythical beasts from the Shahnameh, Iran’s pre-Islamic national epic, and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu bowing before the Persian Sassanid king Arash the Archer. State TV featured Achaemenid soldiers holding Islamic Republic flags. The regime even had the opposition patriotic anthem “Ey Iran” played at official events. It is not clear at all, however, whether these gestures to nationalist sentiments have succeeded in mobilizing the population better than the traditional Islamist rhetoric, which seemingly works no more.



Assessment

Iran initiated a war with limited strategic capabilities. The Iranian leadership believed it could deter any Israeli or American attack to destroy its nuclear and missile capabilities through the multiple threats of massive strikes by Hezbollah rockets and its own missiles, the closure of the Straits of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb and attacks on U.S. and Gulf State targets. It also apparently believed that its strategic relations with Moscow and Beijing would guarantee the support of those two powers to deter any Israeli and/or American attack.

All this proved wrong; neither Iran nor its proxies understood the effect of 7 October – the largest massacre of Jews in one short period of time since the Holocaust – on the Israeli psyche. Iran also severely underestimated the Israeli Intelligence and military-technological edge that enabled swift elimination of most of the Hezbollah and Hamas leadership and infrastructure, and eventually that of Iran itself. It also overestimated its own military prowess and the efficacy of both its surface-to-surface missiles against Israel’s air defenses and of its own air defenses. It also failed to digest the swift fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and subsequent loss of its key state proxy in the region, the decline in Russia’s clout in the region, and the reticence of Moscow and Beijing to be identified with a possibly vain attempt to save a regime that could affect their relations with any future regime in Tehran (as in Syria). The containment of the Houthi threat by the United States and Israel was also not in the Iranian scenario. Finally, the Iranian leadership did not expect the Israeli – and subsequent American – strikes on its nuclear, missile and regime sites or the total elimination of most of its nuclear program, including its sites, technology, military command and nuclear scientists. The war put to rest decades-old doomsday conventional wisdom that any attack on Iran would lead to World War III and to devastation of the entire region, put the capability of Russia and China to influence events beyond their borders in proportion, and opened the door to possible new configurations of alliances and strategies.

The Iranian leadership, therefore, was blinded by its own ideological fixation which dictated an under-assessment of its enemy (Israel) and its inability to objectively assess its own capabilities and deficiencies. It was convinced that Israel was – in Hasan Nasrallah’s words – “a cobweb entity” that would fall apart the moment it met with real adversity, that Israelis who “came from other countries” would flee, and that the Israeli military was falling apart and its pilots would not fly.¹¹ Every domestic conflict inside Israel was magnified by Iranian Intelligence and fed to the leadership as more proof that their assessments were right and their modus operandi was right: Israel was falling apart. The IRGC leaders believed that they were nearing the point of final defeat of Israel and its ultimate destruction. Therefore, everything they did – they believed – was leading in that direction. At the same time, the leadership apparently unwittingly accepted its own misrepresentation of the performance of Iran’s missile and air defense systems, and likely was not informed of their deficiencies. The leadership’s national conceit did not allow it to even consider the possibility that the enemy, which is supposed to be no more than a finger puppet of the United States, had higher technology than that possessed by Iran.



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Iranian leaders rushed blindly into the trap they had set for themselves. Iran's experience with the United States and Europe in the past and their self-image that they were "chess masters" while others played – at best – checkers or backgammon, convinced them that they could manipulate the United States into further negotiations, that Trump would vacillate, and that ultimately they would be able to surprise the world (as did North Korea, India and Pakistan) with a nuclear capability. The world then would have to accept Iran as a "superpower."

Khamenei, therefore, was trapped between Scylla and Charybdis. Attempts to carry out Iran's staple threats (attacks on Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, closure of the Hormuz Straits) would have invited further U.S. attacks and further disaster. On the other hand, to refrain from attacking U.S. targets after the American strike would have sent a message of weakness that would invite further pressure and exacerbate the domestic opposition to the regime. Acceptance of Trump's "unconditional surrender" ultimatum would have been viewed as capitulation. Notwithstanding, the regime's response – a pre-coordinated attack on Qatar – was widely mocked on Iranian social media.

At this point Iran has been defeated and, with it, its "Axis of Resistance." This creates potential for a "reset" of relations among Israel, Syria and Lebanon, and between Syria and its other neighbors, based on, inter alia, the animosity of the new Syrian regime to Iran and its need for Western aid. It also creates potential for a Middle East "Pax Americana" based on defense arrangements among the United States, Israel and America's Arab allies. However, this depends on a "deal" for a "Day After" in Gaza, which remains hostage to Israeli and Palestinian domestic politics. At this point in time, the prospects of such a "Day After" have improved.

The Iranian regime, however, will not "go gentle into that good night" and will probably launch a campaign against Israel, the United States and its allies in the Gulf with what remains of its traditional weapons: terrorism, subversion and assassination. Some of these efforts may bear fruit and lead to a new round of military conflict. In its attempt to restore its image as a threshold state, Iran may also take steps that will trigger another round of strikes against its residual assets and the regime. The "game" therefore is not "over" – it is on "pause."

These developments have already impacted the immediate sub-systems of the region, but will have a delayed effect on the more distant ones. The Syrian-Lebanese, Iranian-Russian, Turkish-Syrian Kurdish, Israeli-Palestinian and the Persian Gulf (which includes not only Iran and the Gulf States but also Israel and the United States) sub-systems are already transformed. The Iraqi-Iranian-Turkish-Kurdish sub-system; the regional threat of ISIS 2.0 (or Al-Qaeda 3.0); and the North Africa sub-system will be in the second-order effects. On the other hand, the specter of a "poly-nuclear" Middle East in the wake of Iranian nuclear breakout has receded.

The outcome of the war has already begun to spill over to the global balance of power. Russia has suffered a blow to its prestige as a "patron superpower" for at least as long as – and for some time after – the Ukraine War continues. It may, however, use whatever limited leverage it has to foment conflicts in order to enhance its value vis-à-vis the West. China remains in a holding pattern until the dust settles but may begin to exploit the instability in the



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region to develop an updated doctrine that merges the economic interests of its “Belt and Road” agenda with the strategic interest to pose a challenge to the United States. Chinese economic assets will also serve strategic purposes (such as ports for the Chinese submarine fleet). China may also see assets it accrues in the Middle East as “tokens” to be exchanged in its power game with the United States in East Asia. Instability in the region may lead, in the longer run, to a more active role for India, which is a major consumer of Middle Eastern energy. But, the relationship between the Middle East and the global system is “transitive” with reciprocal, mutual influence. The outcome of the Ukraine War on the one hand and developments in the U.S.-China rivalry (both trade wars and possible military crises in East-Asia) on the other, will influence scenarios in the region.

The second and third order ripple effects of the Middle East War and its corollaries are less apparent. Small- and medium-size powers will be able to precipitate strategic crises on short notice; these may arise from staking claims to ever-diminishing economic resources such as energy and water, the revival of age-old border disputes and invention of new ones based on demographic shifts and irredentist arguments, and populist responses to national “affronts.” The weakness of “superpower” patrons who can temper these conflicts by intervening with their proxies may render them more volatile. With the waning of the Iranian threat, Israel and the Arab states may turn their attention to Turkey’s “neo-Ottoman” aspirations. The weakening of states such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, even Turkey after Erdogan may lead to minority groups (e.g., Kurds, Azeris and Alawites) attempting to promote separatist or irredentist agendas. Other spinoffs of these scenarios may include exacerbation of “political entropy” in the region (e.g. Syria, Iraq) and of “re-tribalization” of the “Fertile Crescent,” resulting in a fuzzy “parcellation” of the region and its resources into areas of diverse levels of control by tribal-ethnic coalitions, including scenarios of ethnic cleansing.

Conclusion

All of this will ultimately result in new competitive “maps” of global interactions, alliances and coalitions, and conflicts in which the emerging “map” of the Middle East is a trigger. These new “maps” will not be as constant and homogeneous as was the map of “Cold War 1.0” and may be multi-dimensional, multi-vector and dynamic, reflecting the predominance of immediate security concerns over long-term economic and strategic interests. They will not be easily captured in the clichés of geopolitical discourse such as “balance of power,” “spheres of interest,” and “great power competition,” which constituted the ontology of the old maps’ architecture. They will be more like “multi-layer” Venn diagrams without necessary congruence between and among the interests of each player in the different domains: economic, military, national-ethnic, and others. The “economic” maps may also focus more on negative goals of denial of economic predominance and control over resources as a means to reduce another’s military advantage. Economic alliances will be formed in the face of changing options for energy supply and the protection of supply routes. The foreign policies of all actors will tend to be multi-vector, with small powers maintaining “polyamorous” relations with a



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number of rival states. The shape and dynamics of the new “maps” will pose novel challenges for defense and military planners. The West will have to discern how to leverage the economic interests of its allies in the region to convince them to support Western strategic interests.

¹ Correspondence between Hamas and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in documents found in Gaza. Yoav Zeitun, “This is ‘Plan Flood’: The documents that reveal the connection between Muhammad Sinwar and the Quds Force senior officer” (Hebrew), *YNET*, June 21, 2025, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/h1edcvengl>. Also see, (no author cited), “Iranian officials admit that Iran was involved in planning and carrying out the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7th” (Hebrew), *MEMRI*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.memri.org.il/cgi-webaxy/item?6170>. See above for statements by senior IRGC officers on their involvement.

² Emmanuel Fabian, “‘The stars aligned’: Why Israel set out for a war against Iran, and what it achieved,” *Times of Israel*, June 27, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-stars-aligned-why-israel-set-out-for-a-war-against-iran-and-what-it-achieved/>.

³ Putin explained Russia’s semi-neutrality by saying that, “there are almost two million Russian speaking people living in Israel; it is almost a Russian-speaking country today.” See, “Putin points to Israel’s huge Russian-speaking demographic,” *TASS*, June 20, 2025, <https://tass.com/politics/1977955>.

⁴ Many of these targeted killings were carried out, reportedly, by Mossad agents on the ground who activated drones or short-range missiles that were in place or guided IAF aircraft to the target. Shai Levi, “All that is allowed to be told: The Mossad’s operation in the heart of Iran in Operation Rising Lion,” *MAKO*, June 13, 2025, <https://www.mako.co.il/pzm-soldiers/Article-ed1952c43386791026.htm>; Amir Bohbout, “Unseen-before documentation: Mossad agents in action - on Iranian soil,” *YNET*, June 13, 2025, <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3757251>; Nir Dvori, “Documentation: Mossad’s operational force deploys attack systems in the heart of Iran-New details,” *MAKO*, June 13, 2025, <https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/f239747af17c5910/Article-497d0f5ac086791026.htm>.

⁵ Iran began the war with about 2,500 missiles that could reach Israel, and thousands of drones; it also had extensive missile-production capabilities. It launched at Israel about 500 missiles; about 50 penetrated Israeli air space. Many were either misfires or fell on the way in Iran, Iraq or Jordan, but most were intercepted by the Israeli 3-Tier missile defense. The IAF destroyed at least another 1,000 missiles on launchers or in their storage locations and has hit sites deep in eastern Iran, which operate planetary mixers, a vital component used to blend solid rocket fuel components together. Iran began the war with about 400 launchers; about half were destroyed either before launch (with the missiles being prepared) or immediately afterwards. Yoav Zeitun, “900 targets, 30 senior officials, 1,500 sorties | All the numbers from the war with Iran, and the documentation,” *YNET*, June 27, 2025, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/r1owqqingg>; <https://www.inss.org.il/he/publication/rising-lion-analysis/>.

⁶ David Sanger, “Some of Iran’s Enriched Uranium Survived Attacks, Israeli Official Says,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/10/us/politics/iran-attacks-damage.html#:~:text=The%20vast%20majority%20of%20the,Julian%20E.%20Barnes%20contributed%20reporting;and,Julian%20E.%20Barnes%20and%20David%20E.%20Sanger,‘Fate%20of%20Iran’s%20Enriched%20Uranium%20Is%20a%20Mystery,’”> *The New York Times*, June 26, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/26/us/politics/iran-nuclear-program-uranium.html>.

⁷ It may be assumed that high resolution and thermal satellite imagery could identify signs of centrifuge shutdown, transfer of the uranium hexafluoride into steel cylinders, sealing them, and loading and transporting them.

⁸ When the Israeli attack on the Iraqi Osirak reactor was being planned, the assessments of the potential damage to the Iraqi nuclear program ranged from putting it back two years to five years. Ultimately, it was put back for a decade and, at the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, it did not have a nuclear capability. Amos Yadlin,



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“Temporary delay or change of rules of the game? This is how we will examine the achievement against Iran,” MAKO, June 26, 2025, https://www.mako.co.il/news-columns/2025_q2/Article-15740252baba791027.htm.

⁹ From coverage of the Iranian social media by IntuView Ltd. Prominent hashtags included: #IranIsHappy; #WeStandWithIsrael; #IraniansStandWithIsrael; #اسرائيل_متشكریم; #سپاس_اسرائيل; Mahyar Tousi, post on Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DK04RxztX3d/>. See also Armin Navabi, “Why the Islamic Republic must Fall,” *Quillette*, July 8, 2025, <https://quillette.com/2025/07/08/why-the-islamic-republic-must-fall-israel-iran/>.

¹⁰ Full text of the speech by Ali Khamenei on June 26, 2025 on his website. “Statement ‘Iran must surrender’ is too big for the US president’s mouth; Zionist regime crushed under Iran’s blows,” <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/11751/Statement-Iran-must-surrender-is-too-big-for-the-US-president-s>.

¹¹ Matthew Levitt, “After Hezbollah’s Miscalculations, It Has Lost Much of Its Power,” *Policy Analysis*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 1, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-hezbollahs-miscalculations-it-has-lost-much-its-power>.

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