

The Long, Dark Shadow of the War on Iran



by Riccardo Alcaro

- Despite unsupported claims about imminent threats from Iran, the strategic goal of the Israeli-US attack on Tehran is to remove a challenger to Israeli military superiority and US influence in the region.
- The US Administration has sent conflicting signals about its objectives – from regime change to a “Maduro-style” leadership replacement or the destruction of Iran’s military capabilities – without a clear plan for the post-war.
- The conflict could produce a destabilised Iran facing internal unrest and fragmentation or a weakened but still intact Islamic Republic, isolated and distrustful, with lasting consequences for regional and international politics.

A most striking aspect of the Israeli-American attack on Iran is the confusion and inconsistency coming out of the Trump Administration’s public statements. President **Donald Trump**, Secretary of State **Marco Rubio** and Secretary of Defence (or War, as he has aptly rebranded himself) **Pete Hegseth**, along with other voices from inside the Administration, offered differing accounts of both the reasons for and the objectives of the attack.

Misleading motivations

The justifications put forward have ranged from immediate security concerns – preventing an Iranian attack or the development of nuclear and ballistic capabilities – to the overthrow of the regime. These are composite motivations, only minimally grounded in reality.



Iran's nuclear programme has **never advanced** to the point of posing an imminent threat of producing a nuclear arsenal. This was already the case before the twelve-day war of June 2025, during which Israel and the United States heavily bombed Iranian nuclear facilities, and it is even truer today.

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On the ballistic front, there is no evidence that Iran was working on **intercontinental ballistic missiles** capable of reaching US territory, and in any case, such a development would take years. Nor was there **any indication** that Tehran was preparing to activate its network of non-state militias – the “axis of resistance,” which Israel has significantly weakened over the past two years – to attack American targets in the region, or do it by itself.

Ultimately, the main reason for the attack is structural: an attempt to “resolve” the challenge that Iran has posed for decades to American interests in the region. In essence, this is a war driven by considerations of power and hegemonic control rather than immediate security or self-defence.

Shifting objectives

No more certain is what the administration actually wants to achieve. Trump himself has offered **different answers**, first hinting at the goal of toppling the clerical regime, then leaving open the possibility of a “Maduro model” (that is, replacing the leadership with a more compliant one while leaving the regime intact), before once again reverting to maximalist positions. The military action undertaken by the United States and Israel now appears aimed at the destruction of the entire Iranian military apparatus.

Yet, even if that is achieved, the United States does not have a clear idea of the post-conflict scenario it intends to promote. The Administration is in **no way willing** to commit to a nation-building process like those attempted in Afghanistan and Iraq. With an Iranian domestic context lacking an organised opposition and a unifying leadership, this implies a substantial lack of interest in the post-conflict transition by Trump and his aides.

Since Trump has received intelligence assessments indicating that the elimination of the Iranian leadership – starting with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei – would result in an **internal reshuffling** within the regime, it is plausible that he believes the best option is to continue the attacks with increasing intensity while waiting for a more pliant government to emerge, one willing to concede to all American demands in order to remain in power. This would amount to a “Maduro-plus model” **forced by war** rather than by a special forces operation. Should that occur, Trump could claim victory over the ruins of a country devastated by massive bombing yet still governed by an authoritarian regime.

However, a government that preserves the façade of the Islamic Republic and that emerges from the latter's same clerical or security establishment is very unlikely to renounce the missile programme or accept other limits on Iran's defensive capabilities. In fact, it is entirely plausible that it would seek to revive them and even reconsider the nuclear option in military terms.

Trump could therefore face a new “surprise” – an Iranian government unwilling to surrender despite military pressure. It would be the third time in just a few weeks the US president would be caught off guard by highly predictable (and predicted) effects of his actions, the first being his dismay that the massive naval deployment he ordered to the Gulf failed to bring about an Iranian capitulation (as Trump's Special Envoy **Steve Witkoff** publicly admitted) and the



second when Iran, as it had warned repeatedly, **externalised** the conflict to the Gulf Arab states after suffering the first attacks. In this context, the United States may be left with only the options outlined by Secretary Hegseth: attempting the **total destruction** of Iran's military machine through a campaign likely to last at least several weeks.

How sustainable such a **prolonged campaign** would be – militarily, financially and politically – is uncertain, given Iran's **military resistance**, the **economic consequences** of a war that is paralysing regional trade with repercussions on global energy markets, and the limited public support the operation currently enjoys in the United States.

In light of these considerations, the United States and Israel could indeed be preparing the ground for **armed uprisings** by some ethnic minorities, particularly the Kurds living in north-western Iran, as some news outlets have reported. The aim would be to draw the central government in Tehran into guerrilla warfare and thereby accelerate its weakening.

Dark scenarios

Depending on the success of the Israeli-American campaign, the scenarios that emerge are either a destabilised Iran, perhaps struggling with pockets of armed resistance in the periphery, or a weakened but still standing Islamic Republic, surrounded by an arc of deeply distrustful countries – Arab states, Azerbaijan and Turkey – and almost completely isolated internationally.

Israel, whose belligerence was instrumental in bringing the United States into the war (as Secretary Rubio **acknowledged** himself in a moment of jaw-dropping candour, soon disavowed), is aiming for the first scenario but could also live with the second. After all, unlike the United States, Israel entered the war on the basis of a clear long-term interest: preventing the emergence of a challenge to its technological and military superiority in the

region. Destabilised or weakened, Iran would not pose such a challenge for a long time.

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For the United States, however, the same calculus does not apply. Whether Iran collapses into a power vacuum or survives wounded and weakened, Washington would be called upon to invest substantial military and economic resources in the region to rebuild assets destroyed by the Iranians and sustain the security of Israel and the Arab partners that have seen the prospect of diplomatic détente with the Islamic Republic of Iran fade away. This would remain true even if, as some expect, Trump were to **declare victory** and stop the fight this week or the next.

The variables at play in a still-unfolding regional war are so numerous that forecasting the future resembles an exercise in divination. That said, with clearly defined Israeli objectives, an Iranian leadership that perceives the conflict as existential, and an American strategy that is as belligerent in its methods as oscillating in its aims, the conflict is bound to generate long-term violence and regional instability even beyond its immediate conclusion. The war on Iran is a systemic event, the importance of which is impossible to exaggerate. Just like we are still reeling from the indirect consequences of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, future generations will look back at the US-Israeli aggression against Iran in 2026 as the starting point of a new, likely darker, phase in the bloody and tragic history of the Middle East in the 21st century.

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