

Opinion **US-Iran tensions**

## The perils of war with Iran

Tehran's grand strategy has failed, but that is no guarantee Israel and America can succeed

**GIDEON RACHMAN**



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Going to war is always a gamble. Iran, Israel and now the US have all rolled the dice.

In the short term, it looks as if Israel's gamble has succeeded. The government of Benjamin Netanyahu has managed to kill much of the military leadership of Iran and to inflict serious damage on the country's nuclear and military infrastructure. Israel has also succeeded in its clear aim of drawing the US into the fight.

Donald Trump's decision to join the conflict was, in part, a reaction to the early Israeli successes. The US president is always keen to look like a winner and, in the aftermath of the US bombing raids on Iran, has claimed a "spectacular military success".

By contrast, the Iranian government's gamble that it could lead an "axis of resistance" to Israel — while avoiding open confrontation — has failed badly. For decades, Iran has skilfully advanced its interests across the region, by sponsoring proxies such as Hizbollah, Hamas and the Houthis, while working on its own nuclear programme.

For many years, the Iranian strategy looked both subtle and effective. In the Gulf states it was commonly complained that four Arab capitals — Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus and Sana'a (in Yemen) — were controlled by pro-Iranian forces. Iran had also got much closer to having the capacity to develop a nuclear weapon.

But this long-term strategy is now in tatters. The Assad regime has fallen in Syria and Hizbollah and Hamas have been gravely damaged by Israel. Now the Iranian regime itself is under direct attack.

The medium and long-term consequences of this war are, however, much less clear. Israel will struggle to convert short-term tactical successes — no matter how spectacular — into long-term security. The US has long and bitter experience of seeing initial military victories turn into grinding, endless wars. The Iranian theocracy is under unprecedented attack. But bombing campaigns rarely lead to regime change. So the regime could well cling on and live to fight another day.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and what's left of his military now face a menu of deeply unappetising choices. Emotionally, they will want to hit back. But Trump has promised that Iranian retaliation will lead to more intense US attacks.

In the interests of its own survival, the leadership in Tehran might opt for minimal retaliation and then reach for the diplomatic option. But the Iranians will also fear that, as American neoconservatives like to say, "weakness is provocative". A failure to respond could invite further attacks by Israel, as well as emboldening Iran's domestic enemies.

Tehran will also know that Trump made the decision to bomb against the backdrop of deep misgivings from his own supporters — who fear that the US is entering another "forever war". If Iran hits American targets in the Middle East — or forces up the price of oil by closing the Strait of Hormuz — then those misgivings and divisions within America will increase. Trump's first reaction would be to retaliate. But he is volatile and can reverse himself in an instant, particularly when under domestic political pressure.

The US has also been known to pull out of Middle East entanglements in the face of heavy losses. The 1983 bombing of the US marine barracks in Beirut, widely blamed on Hizbollah, cost the lives of 241 Americans — and led to a US decision to withdraw from Lebanon, rather than to escalate.

Memories such as that underline the risks that Trump is taking. The only end result that would allow the US to credibly claim “mission accomplished” would be if Iran completely and verifiably dismantled its nuclear programme, and if the current Iranian regime was somehow replaced by a stable, pro-western government, with no desire for further conflict with the US or Israel.

Those outcomes seem very unlikely. The more likely alternatives are a badly wounded but still hostile Iran — which could strike back in unpredictable ways. A second possibility would be the collapse of the current regime, followed by civil conflict — which might draw in outsiders or allow terrorists to establish safe havens. Either of those outcomes would risk drawing the US into yet another Middle Eastern war, including the commitment of ground troops.

The uncertainty over Iran’s options and America’s staying power underlines the fragile nature of Israel’s current successes. The Netanyahu government is currently at war on multiple fronts — in Gaza and Iran and, to a lesser extent, in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and on the occupied West Bank. It has no clear vision for ending any of those conflicts.

Israel has gone a long way to establishing itself as the superpower of the Middle East. It has (undeclared) nuclear weapons and the backing of the US. But, in the long run, it is untenable for a country of 10mn people to dominate a region with a population of several hundred million.

Israel is also taking big risks with its relationship with the US. Its brutal war in Gaza has severely damaged its reputation with the Democrats. If the Netanyahu government is now blamed for leading the US into another forever war, the American backlash against Israel could become bipartisan and long-lasting.

In their different ways, Iran, Israel and the US have all gambled on war. The risk is that they will all end up as losers.

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