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A month of war has shown the strategic failure of attacking Iran

What the US and Israel saw as a quick campaign, Iran sees as a fight for survival. Costs are rising and the end is nowhere in sight.

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US President Donald Trump © Anna Moneymaker / Getty Images

After one month of war against Iran, one conclusion stands out more clearly than anything declared in all the press briefings: Neither the US nor Israel entered this confrontation with a plan for a long war.

The campaign was conceived as a short and brutal episode, a shock operation designed to break Iran's will, force Tehran back to the table on humiliating terms, or in the most ambitious fantasies circulating around Donald Trump's political circle, trigger

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internal collapse and perhaps even regime change. Israel's aim was somewhat different, though complementary. It wanted to inflict the maximum possible damage on Iran's military and strategic infrastructure, weaken it for years, and reshape the regional balance through force. Yet in the first month of fighting, the central assumption behind both approaches began to collapse. Instead of folding and getting coerced into submission, Iran resisted like a state fighting for survival.

What doesn't kill Iran makes it stronger

American planners appear to have imagined a limited punitive maneuver lasting perhaps a week or two. The logic was familiar and, from their point of view, elegant. Strike hard, generate fear, disrupt command structures, raise the economic cost, and create a moment in which Iran's leadership would face a stark choice between capitulation and disaster. Some in the Trump camp seem to have believed that Iran's political system was brittle enough to crack under pressure. That assumption now looks less like strategy and more like projection. Washington entered the war expecting quick leverage rather than a drawn out contest of endurance.

Israel, for its part, appears to have approached the opening phase with fewer illusions about diplomacy and more determination to degrade Iran by force. The strategic instinct in West Jerusalem was not primarily to negotiate with Tehran from a position of strength, but to use the cover of an American-backed offensive to hit as much as possible and to push Iran backward in military, technological, and geopolitical terms. In that sense, Israel's goals were harsher and more concrete. But even here the first month exposed a contradiction. A state can damage Iran. It can kill, disrupt, sabotage, and bomb. Yet weakening Iran is not the same thing as breaking Iran. A campaign that hurts but does not decisively cripple can still end by strengthening Tehran politically, morally, and strategically if the attacked state manages to survive, retaliate, and turn endurance into legitimacy.

And this is precisely where Iran exploited the moment. Tehran broke the mental template through which many Americans had been reading the crisis. In Washington, the war seems to have been imagined as a tactical episode. In Tehran, it was understood as a strategic struggle, even an existential one. Iran's leadership acted not as if it were participating in another bargaining cycle, but as if it had entered a defining confrontation over sovereignty, deterrence, and state survival. That difference in strategic depth has shaped the first month more than any individual missile strike. A side fighting to improve negotiating conditions usually stops when the



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price becomes uncomfortable. A side fighting because it believes defeat would endanger its future absorbs pain differently, calculates differently, and escalates with a different kind of discipline.

At the same time, the Iranian authorities received an important internal political opportunity. External aggression almost always reshapes the internal mood of a country under attack, and Iran was no exception. Whatever grievances, divisions, and frustrations existed inside Iranian society before the war, the assault by the US and Israel gave Tehran a chance to consolidate the population around the state, the flag, and the idea of national survival. In moments like these, even a government facing criticism can reposition itself as the defender of the nation against foreign violence. This does not erase internal tensions, nor does it magically solve Iran's domestic problems. But it does give the leadership room to invoke patriotism, sacrifice, and resistance in a way that would have been much harder under normal circumstances. For the Iranian state, this may prove to be one of the most important political effects of the war.

From that point on, what was supposed to be an operation of intimidation started looking like a reputational trap for the US. Washington still possesses overwhelming destructive capacity, but power is never measured by firepower alone. It is also measured by political clarity, by the realism of objectives, by the ability to shape outcomes without self harm, and by the credibility of the order one claims to defend. In the first month of this war, the US damaged all four. It entered with rhetoric of strength and has already found itself talking about pauses, mediation channels, indirect messages, and deadlines extended under pressure. That does not look like a superpower dictating terms. It looks like a superpower discovering that coercion is easier to launch than to conclude.

The world is paying the price

The economic consequences alone make the operation look strategically self-defeating. A war of this kind does not remain confined to military maps. It spreads into oil prices, shipping insurance, central bank caution, inflationary pressure, food costs, investor panic, and political unrest in countries far from the battlefield. What may have been sold in Washington as a limited geopolitical shock has instead begun to resemble an accelerant poured onto an already unstable world economy. In that sense, one of the most likely long-term effects is not simply turbulence in the Middle East, but the deepening risk of global recession. And if recession does take shape, the US will have contributed to it not as a passive observer of chaos, but as one of its principal producers. There is a profound irony in that. Washington launched this war claiming security and strength, yet may end up exporting insecurity on a global scale while weakening its own economic room for maneuver.

The second major consequence is geopolitical, and in the long run, potentially even more serious. This war is speeding up the fragmentation of the international system. It is another lesson to the world that



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dependence on American guarantees comes with growing uncertainty, ideological volatility, and sudden unilateralism. Allies are reminded that the US can launch a major war and then demand solidarity after the fact. Partners are reminded that American decision making can be shaped by electoral instincts, media theatrics, and the inflated confidence of officials who confuse disruption with strategy. Neutral states are reminded that in moments of crisis, sovereignty and hedging matter more than alignment slogans. This is how multipolarity grows in practice: through repeated demonstrations that the old center can no longer discipline events without destabilizing them.



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Pressure exposes NATO faultlines

The war has also exposed how thin the cohesion in the 'collective West' has become. America's traditional allies did not rally in the way Washington expected. European governments showed skepticism, irritation, and in some cases outright distance. Alliance fatigue is showing under pressure. NATO still exists, still spends, still coordinates. But politically and psychologically, the old image of a fully unified Western bloc has taken another blow.

Credibility in alliance systems is cumulative. It is built over decades and can be weakened shock by shock.

Every episode in which Washington acts first and consults later, every outburst that treats partners as instruments rather than political actors, every demand for obedience without strategic explanation erodes trust a little further. A military alliance can survive such erosion for a while, especially when members still fear common adversaries. But the political soul of an alliance is harder to repair than its budget lines. The first month of war with Iran has widened the emotional and strategic distance between the US and parts of Europe, and it has done so at a time when Western institutions were already carrying the weight of internal contradictions. The collective West is now far less collective than it claims to be, and this conflict has only made that clearer.

The war is changing the Gulf – and Iran itself

For the Gulf states, the conflict opens the door to a new era as well. Their security conceptions were built for decades around managed dependence on the American umbrella combined with ambitious social and economic transformation at home. That model now looks less stable. The Gulf monarchies face a harsh reality. They remain exposed to Iranian retaliation, exposed to disruption in shipping lanes, exposed to energy shocks, and exposed to the possibility that Washington may act decisively but not predictably. In any case, the old assumption that American power automatically equals regional order has been weakened. For Gulf elites, this means security doctrine and development strategy can no

longer be treated as separate spheres. They are becoming one and the same question. The region is entering a new era in which old formulas of protection, growth, and political balance will have to be revised.

Iran's position is more paradoxical. Militarily, it has suffered. Economically, it remains under crushing pressure. The damage inside the country is real and severe. Yet politics is not an accounting sheet of destruction alone. Much depends on how the current phase ends. If Tehran were eventually forced into humiliating concessions, the present gains in image and positioning could evaporate. But at this stage, Iran has undeniably improved its international positioning in one crucial sense. It has shown that it can answer Washington and endure under immense pressure. Across much of the non-Western world, and in large segments of global public opinion that are deeply suspicious of American interventionism, Iran is increasingly seen less as the caricature of official Western messaging and more as a state defending itself against aggression by the US and Israel. Survival under assault can be politically transformative.

There is also a broader symbolic effect. For years, the dominant assumption in many Western capitals was that Iran could be boxed in, isolated, intimidated, and gradually bent into strategic submission. The first month of war has not validated that worldview. Instead, it has reminded observers that middle powers under extreme pressure can still generate strategic surprises when they are internally organized around endurance, asymmetry, and political patience. Iran did not have to win conventionally in order to alter the meaning of the conflict. It only had to deny the rapid political result that the aggressors were hoping for. And by doing so, it shifted the psychological terrain of the war.

The only victories are political

Israel, meanwhile, may be the only actor that can claim a short-term political gain, though even that gain is narrow and dangerous. The immediate beneficiaries appear to be the Israeli far-right currently in power. For them, war expands room for ideological hardening, securitized politics, and the argument that maximal force is the only language the region understands. A prolonged confrontation with Iran also helps keep domestic political dynamics inside an emergency frame, where dissent can be marginalized and radical agendas can travel further than they otherwise might. But this is not the same as a strategic Israeli victory. It is a political gain for a particular faction, not necessarily a stable gain for the Israeli state over time. A region pushed deeper into permanent war is not a region that guarantees long-term safety, even for the side that presently feels ascendant.



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The losses are strategic

If one looks at the ledger after a month, then the paradox becomes stark. The country with the greatest military weight may also be the one that has lost the most strategically. The US has absorbed reputational damage, intensified doubts about its judgment, strained allied confidence, worsened global economic instability, and accelerated the very multipolar drift it has long tried to slow. Israel has achieved a harder regional environment and a temporary opening for its most hardline political forces. Iran has paid heavily, but it has also demonstrated resilience, strengthened its narrative of resistance, and improved its international positioning in the eyes of many who now see it as a country under attack rather than a rogue state to be punished. The Gulf states have been pushed toward strategic revision. Europe has been reminded that transatlantic solidarity now has sharp limits. The West, in other words, is still armed, still wealthy, still institutionally significant, but it is no longer politically seamless.

This is why the first month of the war should not be read only through maps of strikes, casualty counts, and tactical moves. Its deeper meaning lies elsewhere. It has revealed the bankruptcy of a familiar illusion in American foreign policy, the illusion that one can use violence as a short demonstration, compel strategic capitulation, and walk away before the political consequences mature. That script worked badly even in a simpler world. In a fragmented world, an inflation prone world, an energy anxious world, and a world increasingly tired of unilateral American shocks, it works worse still. Iran understood the confrontation as a struggle over existence. Washington treated it too long as a maneuver. History tends to punish that kind of asymmetry in seriousness.



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By the end of the first month, cautious attempts at negotiations had begun to emerge, and it is the Americans who appear most interested in testing that track. This alone says a great deal about how the campaign has unfolded. The side that imagined it would quickly impose its will is now far more invested in finding an exit than it expected to be. Yet the parties remain far from peace. Their positions are still separated by distrust, anger, incompatible war aims, and the accumulated logic of escalation. The final outcome of the conflict remains deeply uncertain, perhaps more uncertain now than at its start. The fog has not lifted. It has thickened.

And yet one thing is clear even through that fog. Nearly everyone involved senses that the catastrophe is widening. The war is no longer perceived as a contained clash with neat limits. It is increasingly seen as a chain reaction whose radius keeps expanding politically, militarily, economically, and psychologically. The fear now is not only of more

destruction, more displacement, and more regional destabilization. It is also of the point at which escalation crosses into something far darker, including the possibility of a nuclear catastrophe. That fear may still sound extreme to some, but the fact that it is now being spoken aloud at all tells us how dangerous this conflict has become.

The most sobering conclusion is therefore also the simplest. Instead of restoring American authority, a month of war has exposed its limits. Instead of reuniting the Western camp, it has shown how divided and conditional that camp has become. Instead of solving the Iranian question, it has made clear that Iran cannot be dealt with as a mere tactical object. And instead of making the world safer, it has made it more fragmented, more suspicious, more expensive, and more unstable.



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