INSTITUTE for DEVELOPMENT and DIPLOMACY

ANALYTICAL POLICY BRIEF

10 March 2026

Fog of War in Iran

First Ten Days, Ten Findings, and Ten Trends to Watch

Jahangir E. Arasli

On 28 February 2026, with the launch of the U.S-Israeli military operation, the crisis around Iran transformed into open war. As the major armed confrontation centered on Iran escalates now in a wider geography and sends its shockwaves to the Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean, the South Caucasus, the Indian Ocean, and beyond, it is essential to make an initial assessment. This IDD paper analyzes the course of action of the first ten days, the strategic objectives of the three most involved sides, the preliminary lessons, and the potential future effects of the war.

U.S.-Israeli Course of Action

On the day of the attack (28 February), the U.S. and Israel were able to achieve an operational surprise. The first wave decapitating strike killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and many top commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the regular armed forces. Then, their massive missile and aerial strikes targeted Iran's command and control system, long-range ballistic missile (BM) units, an early warning and air defense network, the airbases, and the naval assets based near the Strait of Hormuz. Most of these targets suffered substantial damage and remain in the focus of continuous follow-on strikes until this moment.

By D+4 (3 March), the joint U.S-Israeli forces had, by and large, effectively suppressed Iran's air defense system and established supremacy in the adversary's airspace. With that, the bombing effort started shifting to other Iranian targets, such as conventional military forces, logistical and defense industry facilities, fuel storages, the country's secu-

Jahangir E. Arasli is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University and a former Adviser on International Issues in the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author, who may be contacted at jangir_arasly@yahoo.co.uk.

rity apparatus infrastructure, and its broadcast media networks. Noteworthy is that part of the strike sorties has shifted to the northwestern part of Iran adjacent to the interstate border with Iraq (which potentially may indicate preparation for the entry of Kurdish paramilitary formations into Iran).

As of D+8 (7 March), the joint U.S-Israeli forces were able to decompose the existing Iranian national authority architecture, substantially reduce its long-range strike capabilities (i.e., ballistic missiles able to reach the Eastern Mediterranean), suppress air defense, and destroy most of the operational units of Iran's two navies (the regular one and the one run by the IRGC). As the operation goes on, more damage will likely be caused to Iran's military potential in the upcoming days and weeks if any of the involved sides do not opt for an exit (which appears unlikely as of this writing).

Iran's Response

Upon the U.S.-Israeli attack, Iran activated promptly its "Mosaic Defense" doctrine, which grants operational- and tactical-level commanders a great degree of autonomy to act according to earlier endorsed plans in anticipated conditions of a severed chain of command.

Hence, at the start of hostilities, designated units started launching combined strikes with the use of mid- and short-range ballistic missiles and one-way attack (OWA) drones against a pre-designated bank of military and civilian targets in all GCC states (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman) as well as Israel, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Jordan.

In the context of the unfolded horizontal escalation of the conflict, the affected GCC states became the most exposed bystander-actors, given their vulnerable geographical posture, extensive critical infrastructure, and reluctance to retaliate against Iran in fear of triggering a vertical escalation.

Although the tempo and volume of the Iranian counterstrikes visibly decrease with time compared with the initial 72 hours of hostilities (especially the use of BM), the Iranian units that remain intact continue launching retaliatory salvos intermittently at a variety of targets in the Gulf theater of operations. Meanwhile, the targeted states continue limiting themselves largely to a passive missile and air defense engaging the incoming projectiles and drones.

On a parallel track, Tehran (or, perhaps more precisely, the particular military commanders in charge) focuses on projecting verbal threats and selective kinetic actions against commercial shipping in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

It is possible to anticipate that the pattern of Iran's strikes against targets in the Gulf theater and its anti-shipping operations will decline soon with the cumulative attrition of its arsenals.

U.S.-Israeli Strategic Objectives

The perceived strategic objectives of the US-Israeli duo are:

- The destruction, or, at minimum, critical depletion of Iran's long-range deterrent capabilities (ballistic missiles), the annihilation of its nuclear program's setup, and the erosion of its conventional military capabilities and defense-industrial base.

and

- The formation of a power vacuum, which is supposed to establish a permissive environment for "moderate" factions within the existing system to step in and take over the driver's seat.

It appears that the execution of the first objective is progressing successfully so far (except the suppression of assets targeting the Gulf theater of operations, including international shipping lanes).

The accomplishment of a second objective is a more complicated matter. It appears that the joint U.S.-Israeli effort pursues the establishment of a two-layered power vacuum: at the strategic level and on the ground. At the strategic level, the first-day decapitation strike and uninterrupted follow-up pressure apparently disintegrated Iran's decision-making mechanism, paralyzed the subsequent transition of power, and potentially incited competition between different parts of the state apparatus. At the ground ("street") level, the ongoing devastation of the country's security agencies and law enforcement infrastructure seems to be producing a control vacuum over citizens, facilitating their potential self-organization and resistance potential.

An ambiguous issue of the U.S.-Israeli strategy is their officially unconfirmed intention to exploit the armed factions of ethnic Kurds (from Iran, Iraq, and Syria) for a sort of ground invasion into Iran from the Iraqi Kurdistan region. Something similar worked in an adjacent theater, when in 2001 the deployment of a paramilitary formation under the cover of overwhelming air support took place in Afghanistan, when the Northern Alliance (which consisted largely of ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks) ejected the Pashto-dominated Taliban forces from Kabul. However, this will not bring about a similar outcome given current conditions in Iran. Still, at the current phase the Kurdish factor can serve as a "strategic decoy" for a potential successor government in Tehran saturated by the sustained gravity and density of the U.S.-Israeli attack.

Two core problems for the U.S. and Israel are now emerging. First, how to rapidly lock-in their achieved operational successes into a feasible strategic effect before a loss of momentum. Second, how to exploit the post-Ali Khamenei dynamics in Iran's elites. It appears this represents a potential point of divergence between U.S. and Israeli objectives. In case Tehran's new leaders were to promise to alter their strategic behavior (e.g., give up the nuclear program, BM capabilities, and support to the regional proxy networks), Washington might be ready to "strike a deal" with the "moderate" elements

of the existing regime without changing its basic settings (the Venezuela model). For Israel, which understands Iran as an existential threat, the desired outcome is systemic regime change.

Iran's Strategic Objectives

For Tehran, this is an existential war: the survival of the system established in 1979 is at stake. The strategic goal of the Islamic Republic is simple: to endure and survive—whatever the cost. To achieve these ends, Iran's pre-planned objective is to increase the price of war not just against the two aggressor states (which is not such an easy mission) but also for a broad array of non-involved or less-protected actors through the application of tactics and tools of asymmetric warfare. In this context, the regional economic domain (oil, gas, logistics, air transportation, and tourism) emerges as a main target, with subsequent conversion of broader effects onto the global economy.

Therefore, the center of gravity of Iran's response rests on strikes against oil export terminals and LNG infrastructure in all six affected GCC states as well as attacks against international shipping traffic in the Hormuz chokepoint. Secondary targets include iconic architectural landmarks in these states, whose targeting transmits the psychological perception of havoc worldwide. Politically, these actions work against Iran's cause of self-defense and build a *casus belli* that eventually could compel the initially neutral Arab states to counterstrike. Nonetheless, a combined strategy of destruction (through kinetic actions) and disruption (through verbal threat projection) has already started to produce a desired impact far beyond the affected theater of operations.

On the sidetrack of its asymmetric war strategy, Iran tries to activate the vestiges of its "Axis of Resistance" in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen in an attempt to partially paralyze or distract U.S.-Israeli combat operations and place more pressure on the global economy (particularly by blocking shipping traffic in the Red Sea and disrupting oil and gas operations in Iraq, Qatar, and so on).

At a glance, Iran's strategy of broadening the war theatre gives an impression of irrationality. However, this impression is only valid through a narrow Western optic; for the state system fighting for its own survival, it represents a very rational (and predicted) way forward.

The core peril in this regard is that Iran's cohesive strategy in the emergent vacuum of supreme authority rapidly fragments on "quasi-strategies" of various elite groups that are about to enter the competition for power in Iran. Put simply, the question becomes: Who's in charge? While the statements of the remaining Iranian political leaders aim at mitigating the negative effects of targeting bystanders, unknown actors in the military chain of command continue to strike.

The latter may partially explain the unprovoked Iranian drone strikes on civilian targets in Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan exclave (Azerbaijan has stated its neutrality in the ongoing confrontation). This provocation, in the views of individuals who have authorized it under the cover of plausible deniability, should deliver a "strategic message" to Baku and project additional destabilizing effects onto the global energy market (considering Azerbaijan's role as an important energy supplier to Türkiye and the European continent).

Iran's Domestic Dynamics

In many ways, Iran's post-Ali Khamenei domestic dynamic remains the center of gravity that will determine the forthcoming course of the war and its outcomes. On the tenth day of the war, Mojtaba Khamenei, the heir of the deceased Supreme Leader, was endorsed as his successor. Notably, the IRGC became the first institution to pledge its oath to the new leader. Although the compartmentalized conditions of the inner-circle's dynamics are non-transparent, it appears that the IRGC conducted a de-facto bloodless military coup, advancing its long-trusted candidate to this position. It looks also as if other groups, including civilian technocrats and clerics, became sidelined in the power transition process, leaving the IRGC as its sole beneficiary.

The key quandary, though, is how the new Supreme Leader and the generals who stand behind him will handle effective governance in conditions of disintegrated contour and sustained U.S.-Israeli pressure. Additionally, other factions will not necessarily accept that the ambiguously-looking nomination that circumvents the required elite consensus. Contrary to media hype depicting Mojtaba as a strong leader, he does not have sufficient religious scholarly credentials and does not enjoy popularity in already polarized Iranian strata. This likely means that he will critically depend on support from the IRGC who brought him to power.

Meanwhile, the ongoing depletion of the system's security and law enforcement structures due to the ongoing U.S.-Israeli strikes is naturally reducing its control over the public domain. This could potentially lead to the establishment of a permissive environment for self-organization of local urban and rural communities on anti-regime grounds (as it was during the 1978-1979 Islamic Revolution).

Ten Early Findings

The war has already demystified certain misconceptions, taking out some concerns and bringing forth different ones in their place. What happened, and what did not happen?

1. Iran was not able to keep a sustained rate of missile barrages on Israel; expected massive retaliatory strikes did not materialize and the damage caused is less than during the June 2025 war.

2. Iranian submarines, capital warships, and its "mosquito fleet" has not been instrumental in blocking the Strait of Hormuz; instead, a combination of one-way attack drones, uncrewed surface vessels, and psychological pressure facilitated the effective sealing of that sea gateway.
3. Iran's determination to strike the critical infrastructure of its Arab neighbors (either friendly or neutral) was a point of misjudgment, as was its arsenal of mid- and short-range BM, which remained largely intact during the 2025 war.
4. The impact of a cheap, replenishable, but lethal robotic arsenal at Iran's disposal was gravely underestimated, creating preconditions for an operational crisis in the Gulf theater at the current stage.
5. The war against Iran (like the conflict over Ukraine) demonstrates the critical importance of amassed and renewable pre-war stocks of expendables (e.g., ammunition, missiles, drones, etc.).
6. The impression of the permanent decline of the Iran-handled "Axis of Resistance" turned out to be premature, although its impact is not too grave and remains controllable so far.
7. The strategic interaction between Tehran and Moscow turned out to be a real matter (Russia first localized Iranian one-way attack drone technology, improved upon it, and transferred it back; additionally, Moscow apparently provides intelligence data to increase the precision of Iran's strikes).
8. The specifics of the global information environment (e.g., speed of information, the OSINT factor, the "post-truth syndrome," etc.) facilitate the achievement of maximal effects with a minimal application of capabilities (i.e., disruption can be more effective than mere destruction, as is displayed by Iran now).
9. The ancient maxim of wars always going adversely to the pre-war planning and the "fog of war" factor do not vanish in the twenty-first century.
10. The prevalence of domestic political motivations and intentions over strategic considerations when going to war can create a reality gap and mitigate a military force's numbers, superior training, and technological edge of over an adversary.

Ten Trends to Watch

The multiple impacts of the war transcend the mere domain of Iran and materialize on regional and the global levels. There are ten foci to keep in the field of view in this regard.

1. The internal dynamics in the Iranian upper echelon (e.g., the instrumentalization of the power transition), which is a key determinant of the decision to withstand or opt out for a compromise.

2. The potential resurgence of social protests (or uprisings) in Iran under conditions of deteriorating security control and increasing deficits of the provision of basic services and supplies.
3. The potential territorial disintegration of Iran, which will open a Pandora's Box in the broader region, given the specifics of the multiethnic composition of this country.
4. The potential humanitarian and environmental disaster in Iran due to the war and its impact on neighboring countries.
5. The potential re-galvanization of violent sectarian (Sunni-Shiite) conflicts in the Middle East (in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia).
6. The possibility of the Arab states targeted by Iran making choices between bad and worse outcomes, and then abandoning their fence-sitting postures and joining the war.
7. The domestic audience cost of the war for the Trump Administration (especially in the event of its potential elongation and the associated human lives' loss and fiscal burden) cast against the shadow of November midterm elections, which could accelerate the search for an exit strategy or an end to the war.
8. The resurgence of Russia, which will try to exploit an emerging window of opportunity not of its own making to recover its economy and turn the tide of war in Ukraine (although Ukraine and its main European backers also could find certain chances to exploit the Iranian crisis for their own advantage).
9. The change of China's strategic calendar related to Taiwan (in the event of the elongation of the war and/or an American fiasco).
10. The growing impact of the disruption of supply chains on the global economy (particularly, its effects on less stable countries in the developing world), which eventually can transform into a global shock (akin to the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict over Ukraine).

Overall, the Iranian crisis is currently developing a very dynamic amplitude with many emerging variables. It is premature to make definite conclusions and forecasts. Even so, two matters are possible to consider surely. First, the utility of force remains indispensable. Second, neither Iran nor the region will return to a pre-war status quo.