

The War on Iran – Beyond the “12-Day War”

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Wars are often named only after they have ended. Battles take their names from geography; wars, however, tend to be defined by duration or by the scale of their impact. History offers familiar examples, the Thirty Years’ War, the Hundred Years’ War, the Wars of Succession, or the grandly titled the Napoleonic Wars and the World Wars. The short but intense confrontation last summer between Israel, the United States, and Iran was quickly labeled the “12-Day War.”

Yet the current conflict has already outlived that designation. What was expected to be a brief and decisive military operation has instead evolved into a prolonged and widening confrontation. The conflict is no longer confined to its initial actors and it is increasingly drawing in neighboring countries and threatening to spill over into a broader regional and potentially global crisis.

President Trump’s call for NATO members, as well as China and Japan, to help secure the Strait of Hormuz is particularly telling. Should such involvement materialize, the conflict would take on a truly global dimension. Even without direct participation, the repercussions are already being felt worldwide. Energy markets have reacted sharply, with prices rising to levels that are beginning to affect global economic stability.

One of the reasons this war shows no clear end in sight is the fundamentally different objectives of the combatants involved. As is often the case, all sides claim success because each defines victory differently. For Israel, victory would mean neutralizing Iran as a strategic threat, whether through regime change or by weakening the country to the point that it can no longer project power. For Iran, survival itself would constitute victory. Enduring the assault and maintaining regime continuity would be enough. The United States, for its part, appears prepared to frame the outcome as a success regardless of the actual result.

Meanwhile, the human and economic costs continue to mount. Lives are lost, societies disrupted, and global markets destabilized, all while political narratives attempt to impose coherence on an increasingly uncertain situation.

President Trump’s approach to the conflict can be described as a form of strategic overconfidence, if not outright hubris. His earlier actions, most notably in Venezuela,

where he supported the removal of a leader and the installation of a more compliant successor may have reinforced his belief in the effectiveness of decisive, externally driven intervention. Similarly, the bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities last June was presented as a success, achieved at minimal cost to the United States.

Such experiences may have contributed to an expectation that Iran, weakened by internal unrest and external pressure, would respond in a similarly predictable manner. He must have been aware of the possible outcomes of an attack but proceeded nonetheless. Would this war have happened during his first administration, or would he have been talked out of it. Now he has no one to challenge him even in the slightest manner. He believes in himself just like many other delusional leaders we have witnessed in the past. Yet Iran has proven to be a far more complex and resilient adversary. Calls for its "unconditional surrender," echoing the rhetoric of the Second World War, have only underscored the limits of such analogies in today's geopolitical context.

An intriguing aspect of this conflict has been the survival of Iran's political leadership. Despite targeted strikes and attempts at decapitation, both the President and the Foreign Minister remain in place. This raises questions about the effectiveness of intelligence operations on both sides. Either these leaders are more adept at evading such threats, or they are not considered primary targets. At the same time, the assassinations of its leaders highlight a persistent vulnerability within Iran's internal security apparatus.

From a broader perspective, this war can be seen as unnecessary at least in the sense that it was not inevitable. Any aggressive war of choice is unnecessary even if various justifications are put forward. Russia's war against Ukraine was framed by Moscow as a preemptive response to NATO expansion. Similarly, Israel and the United States have justified their actions against Iran as necessary to counter an imminent threat. In both cases, the language of preemption masks decisions that were ultimately political choices.

Even when the conflict subsides, its consequences will reverberate far beyond the region. Middle Eastern countries will reassess their security strategies, potentially accelerating military build-ups or reconsidering alliances. The role of NATO, and its relationship with the United States, may also come under renewed scrutiny. President Trump's initial reluctance to involve allies, followed by his appeal for support when the situation escalated has exposed underlying tensions within the alliance. His subsequent criticism of NATO members for their lack of response, calling them 'cowards', further complicates the transatlantic relationship.

The upcoming NATO Summit in Ankara this July will therefore take place under a cloud of uncertainty. Questions about alliance cohesion, burden-sharing, and strategic direction are likely to dominate discussions.

As for how this war will ultimately be remembered, its name remains to be determined. It may still be associated with its duration, or perhaps with its geographic scope. Yet there is also a possibility that it will be remembered by the leaders who shaped it. The “Netanyahu–Trump War” would reflect not only the personalities involved but also the highly personalized nature of decision-making that has characterized this conflict.

President Trump has often sought to leave his name on buildings and monuments, symbols intended to endure. History, however, has its own way of assigning names and meanings. Physical monuments may fade, but the names attached to wars tend to persist.

And this, perhaps, is the most enduring legacy of all.