

Iran – a different conflict requires a different strategy

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US and Israeli military operations have damaged Iranian facilities and removed senior leaders but have not forced Tehran to change its strategic objectives. Attempts to weaken Iran through leadership targeting may have created opportunities for a younger and potentially



more militant generation within the IRGC. Iran views the conflict as a struggle for regime survival and is therefore unlikely to be deterred by intermittent airstrikes alone. Tehran appears to be pursuing a strategy of attrition, using regional allies and pressure on energy infrastructure to increase the economic, military and political costs for the West. Russian and Chinese assistance, together with Iran's regional networks in Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon, has transformed the confrontation into a broader and more complex geopolitical conflict.

Military action against Iran was intended to degrade its nuclear capabilities, weaken its leadership and compel Tehran to alter its strategic behaviour. However, according to an analysis published by former US House Speaker Newt Gingrich, the events of the past 15 months suggest that air power and leadership-targeting operations have not produced the political outcome sought by the United States and Israel.

Iran appears determined to preserve its governing system, rebuild its military and nuclear capabilities, and impose sufficient economic and operational costs to weaken Western resolve. If this assessment is correct, the conflict can no longer be treated solely as a series of discrete military operations. It is developing into a broader contest involving regime survival, regional proxy forces, energy security and support from Russia and China.

In July 2025, the United States launched strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities at Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan. Seven B-2 bombers, supported by Tomahawk missiles and other aircraft, reportedly completed the operation without suffering any losses. The apparent ease with which the strikes were conducted initially, demonstrated overwhelming US military superiority.

Nevertheless, the operation did not compel Tehran to abandon its strategic objectives. Subsequent reporting cited by Gingrich has suggested the possible existence of an additional nuclear facility, and indicated that Iran may be rebuilding and further hardening some of the sites damaged during the attacks. The Iranian leadership has therefore demonstrated both its ability and willingness to absorb significant military pressure.

A wider US-Israeli campaign reportedly followed on 28 February 2026, targeting senior Iranian political and military figures. The operation killed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and reportedly wounded his son and eventual successor. Rather than destabilising the governing system, however, the campaign may have strengthened the position of younger and potentially more militant figures within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

This raises questions about the effectiveness of leadership-removal strategies against an entrenched revolutionary system. Iran has developed multiple layers of political, military and security leadership capable of replacing senior officials. Removing older commanders may eliminate experienced decision-makers, but it may also create opportunities for more uncompromising successors.

The Iranian leadership and IRGC regard the conflict as an existential struggle. Those responsible for domestic repression and regional military activity may reasonably believe that the collapse of the present system would expose them to prosecution, retaliation or death. From this perspective, surrender or voluntary relinquishment of power offers little personal or institutional protection. This significantly reduces the coercive value of intermittent airstrikes.

Iran's apparent strategy is instead to prolong the conflict and increase its financial, military and political costs. Tehran may calculate that rising casualties, equipment losses and energy prices will weaken public support in the United States, and influence the outcome of the 2026 congressional elections. It could then seek negotiations under more favourable political conditions while retaining substantial control over its nuclear programme and regional network.

The conflict is also becoming increasingly internationalised. Russia and China are reported to be providing assistance to Iran, including intelligence and targeting support. In return, Iran and China are described as contributing to Russia's war effort in Ukraine. This emerging cooperation complicates Western military planning and places the Iranian confrontation within a wider strategic competition involving several theatres.

Iran also retains the ability to apply pressure through aligned groups across the Middle East. Pro-Iranian militias remain active in Iraq, the Houthis continue to threaten shipping and energy routes through the Red Sea, and Hezbollah remains a significant security concern for Israel. These groups allow Tehran to disperse the conflict geographically and impose costs without relying exclusively upon direct conventional confrontation.

Recent attacks affecting Saudi energy infrastructure illustrate the potential economic consequences. Disruption to pipelines, shipping routes or production facilities could increase global oil and diesel prices, place additional pressure on Western economies and deepen political opposition to a prolonged conflict.

Conclusion

The central argument is that the United States and Israel may be confronting a different conflict from the one originally anticipated. Military superiority has enabled them to damage Iranian facilities and eliminate senior leaders, but it has not persuaded the regime to surrender its strategic objectives. Iran has instead absorbed the attacks, replaced personnel and expanded the contest through regional allies and support from Russia and China.

A sustainable strategy would therefore need to extend beyond periodic airstrikes and leadership targeting. It would require a coordinated approach addressing Iran's nuclear and missile programmes, the resilience of its governing institutions, its regional proxy network, external assistance and the vulnerability of international energy routes.

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