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War with Uncertain Goals: Where Is the Middle East Being Dragged?

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Assessments of wars can often explain why they begin; however, they are usually insufficient in predicting how they will end. The war launched today by the U.S.–Israel duo against Iran reflects precisely such a picture. With one key difference: there are serious question marks about both the war's ultimate objective and when and how it will end. Uncertainty and confusion prevail.

The war that has begun between the United States and Israel on the one hand, and Iran on the other, cannot be seen merely as a new regional conflict. It also reveals a multidimensional picture that extends from the fragility of the global order to energy markets, from NATO deterrence and defence to the European Union's claim to be a geopolitical actor, and even to potential tensions arising in Gulf countries from differences in perception and sensitivity between governments and their peoples. I can share several observations that complement my article from last week.

Iran: A State with Deep Roots Beyond the Current Regime

Iran is a country with foundations rooted in a 2,500-year-old civilisation, possessing a strong state tradition and institutional reflexes. This historical legacy—from the Persian Empire to the modern Iranian state—has shaped Iran's political culture and governance capacity.

It is, of course, a fact that the current ruling regime in Iran has an authoritarian structure, whose oppressive weight is felt across society, and bears responsibility for the deaths of many innocent citizens. In recent years, protest movements—especially those led by younger generations—have clearly demonstrated a strong demand for change.

Yet, regardless of the dramatic situation the current regime has brought upon the country, this does not alter the reality of Iran's institutional state capacity. In the 1980s, during the eight-year Iran–Iraq “War of the Cities,” I personally witnessed this institutional strength while accompanying Ambassador Nüzhet Kandemir, then Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during shuttle diplomacy between the two capitals in his role as Special Envoy for the President.

It is also well known that in Iran's political history, perceptions of foreign intervention have often had a unifying effect across different segments of society. Even amid strong internal criticism and protests against the regime, external military or political pressure can reinforce national solidarity. Paradoxically, external threats may even serve as a lifeline for the regime. Therefore, the expectation of the U.S. and Israel that the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the damage inflicted on infrastructure would lead to regime change reflects an insufficient understanding of Iran's historical dynamics.

Another important point often overlooked in discussions about Iran's nuclear program is the continuity in the state's strategic reflexes. Even during the Shah's era, Iran invested in nuclear technology with Western support. Although the program receded after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, its importance re-emerged over time. In other words, Iran's nuclear ambitions are not merely a regime preference but a product of a broader state perspective. This is a reality frequently neglected by the U.S. and Israel: even if the regime changes, Iran's pursuit of strategic capacity will persist.

Russia's expectation of a quick victory in Ukraine in 2022—modelled after its 2008 war with Georgia—has proven misguided, as the war has now entered its fifth year. Similarly, the Trump Administration may have expected a swift outcome in Iran, as it did in Venezuela. However, what Washington overlooks in following Tel Aviv is that Iran is not Venezuela.

At the same time, early developments in the war suggest possible disruptions in Iran's military decision-making mechanisms. Weakening of the central command chain may have led some elements within the Revolutionary Guards to act more independently. The ballistic missiles fired toward Turkey—an alarming development—may have resulted from such command-and-control breakdowns. Regardless, any hostile act directed at Turkey is unacceptable.

The Narrowing Distance Between Washington and Tel Aviv

Under Trump's second administration, U.S. policy has increasingly aligned with Israel's security priorities. A striking parallel has emerged between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's long-advocated hardline strategy against Iran and Washington's policies.

Israel has become a dominant actor in shaping U.S. Middle East policy. This has further weakened the U.S.'s credibility, which is already losing moral standing globally.

Criticism that Israel is leading Washington is growing not only internationally but also within U.S. domestic politics—including among Republicans.

The Growing Humanitarian Crisis in Lebanon

One of the most dramatic reflections of regional tension is unfolding in Lebanon. Israel's operations, initially targeting Hezbollah in southern Beirut, have expanded into the city centre.

As a result, more than 850,000 people have been displaced, and many civilians—including children—have lost their lives. A situation similar to the tragedy in Gaza is rapidly emerging in Lebanon.

The Netanyahu government's policy cannot be explained solely by military objectives. It also reflects an attempt to deflect domestic political pressure stemming from corruption allegations. This approach has led to blatant violations of international law. Targeting civilians and heavily bombing urban centres constitute clear war crimes.

The Erosion of the Rules of War

Another critical issue is how the war is being conducted.

The modern international system has developed norms governing warfare, including the protection of civilians, proportional use of force, and adherence to international humanitarian law. However, recent developments raise serious concerns that these norms are increasingly being ignored.

Statements by U.S. Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth—describing the conflict as if it were a video game—have drawn significant criticism for trivialising its human dimension.

This situation creates what journalist Sedat Ergin aptly describes as a “moral dilemma”: on one side, the U.S. and Israel disregard international law; on the other, an autocratic regime with a troubling record of repression.

The EU and Transatlantic Divergence

The crisis also tests transatlantic relations. The EU’s long-standing ambition to act as a geopolitical player has often remained more rhetorical than real.

Inconsistent positions among member states and contradictory statements from EU officials illustrate this weakness. The EU’s silence in the face of violations of international law in Gaza and Lebanon further undermines its credibility.

Europe must now move toward a functional political unity that includes non-EU countries such as Turkey and the United Kingdom. Ultimately, Europe is larger than the EU.

The divergence between the U.S. and Europe is becoming increasingly visible. For instance, Washington’s temporary exemption allowing Russia to sell oil has drawn criticism from EU countries, notably Germany.

Great Power Competition, the China Dimension, and the Global Economy

Some analysts who argue that Trump is acting with a “brilliant” strategy have suggested that the United States’ real objective may be to create a war environment lasting 4–6 weeks, thereby disrupting energy markets and causing serious strain on the Chinese economy due to interruptions in oil flows. However, China’s possession of roughly four months’ worth of oil reserves makes it difficult for a short-term energy shock to have the expected level of devastating impact on its economy.

Iran’s moves to obstruct traffic through the Strait of Hormuz are seen as developments that directly affect one of the most critical arteries of global energy markets. The price of oil reaching around \$100 per barrel—and the possibility that a prolonged disruption could push it to \$150 or even \$200—has already led to significant volatility in the global economy.

Implications for Turkey

Recent developments have shown that they may have a direct bearing on Turkey in different ways, including a possible migration crisis. In this context, the three ballistic missiles launched towards Turkey were intercepted by NATO's ballistic missile defence system. Ankara asked Iran for an explanation and urged Tehran to take measures to prevent the recurrence of such acts. The issue has been raised at NATO, and statements made from Brussels have emphasised the Alliance's solidarity with Türkiye.

This episode has shown the strategic importance of NATO's ballistic missile defence architecture. Having taken part in the negotiations of the establishment of this architecture and contributed to the political decisions related to the deployment of the radar in Kürecik as part of this architecture one thing is clear: despite periodic criticisms directed at Kürecik—often reflecting broader opposition to NATO and particularly to the United States—recent developments have once again demonstrated the importance of ballistic missile defense capabilities for Turkey's security. This does not, however, mean that such systems can or should be used indiscriminately.

It must be acknowledged that Turkey's cautious, balanced policy so far has been the right one. One should not forget that military interventions by extra-regional powers in the Middle East have often been sources of long-term instability. Those who intervene tend to leave the region after demonstrating their "ability to manoeuvre," while regional countries are left to deal with the consequences. Türkiye, by contrast, will remain in this geography and continue to share borders with its neighbours.

A notable example in this regard is the decision of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) in 2003 to reject the government motion that would have allowed the United States to open a front through Turkey in the war against Iraq. This decision prevented the formation of a particular perception about Turkey's role and has remained an important reference point that continues to guide us today.

Another important issue for Turkey is the need to end the conflict before it spreads and prolongs. Some commentators will no doubt argue that a weakening of Iran would be preferable from Turkey's perspective. While such an argument may hold in theory, in practice, the preservation of Iran's territorial integrity, the maintenance of its borders, and the continued functioning of its state institutions—given its long-established state tradition—are also in Turkey's interest as a neighbouring country. The memory of the 2003 U.S. military intervention in Iraq, carried out on questionable grounds and resulting in the collapse of state institutions and long-term destruction, remains vivid.

Conclusion

The Middle East is passing through an extremely fragile threshold. Military operations with unclear strategic objectives have often produced unintended consequences.

What the region needs today is not more military force, but more strategic patience and diplomacy. Turkey should be prepared to mobilise its diplomatic capacity when the opportunity arises.

One final truth must not be forgotten: regimes may change, but states' geopolitical reflexes rarely do. Wars can be started—but how they end is often beyond the control of those who initiate them.