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## **Iran War: Without Strategy, There Is No Exit**

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**The U.S.–Israel conflict with Iran is unfolding without a coherent strategic framework, creating a widening gap between military action and achievable political goals. There are growing concerns that the current approach risks escalating into a prolonged, destabilising conflict with significant regional and global consequences.**

The stage the war launched by the United States and Israel against Iran has reached in the Middle East must now be assessed not only through developments on the ground, but also through the limits of strategic reasoning. Unfortunately, the fundamental problem today lies beyond the military dimension: the political objectives that should guide this process remain conspicuously undefined. If this ambiguity persists, it would not be difficult to conclude that the process is being driven less by strategic planning and more by reactive responses to unfolding developments.

Discussions in Washington among members of Congress, former security officials, and think tanks highlight criticisms that military engagement with Iran lacks a clear political objective. In particular, the risk of being drawn into a “prolonged but undefined conflict” is frequently evoked alongside the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Pentagon’s request to Congress for an additional \$200 billion allocation for operations against Iran, along with preparations to deploy an elite special forces unit of approximately 2,500 personnel, further amplifies these concerns, with the possibility of “boots on the ground”. These developments indicate that the intervention is not merely a temporary operation but points toward a broader and more sustained engagement. That said, President Trump’s remarks about gradually winding down the war effort reflect a contradictory situation.

One of the most striking outcomes of these debates has been Joe Kent's resignation as Director of the National Counterterrorism Centre. Kent stepped down, emphasising that the military process against Iran lacks a clear and attainable political objective and carries the risk of dragging the United States into a conflict with undefined duration and scope. His resignation resonated widely in Washington, seen not only as an individual protest but also as a sign of institutional unease within decision-making processes.

Similarly, the assessments made by U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard in Congress have deepened these debates. Gabbard stressed that while military pressure on Iran might yield certain tactical results in the short term, it does not guarantee a fundamental change in Iran’s strategic behaviour. She also warned that a weakening of central authority could lead to a loss of control and increased regional instability. These assessments are

significant in highlighting the disconnect between military gains on the ground and long-term political outcomes. Moreover, the fact that intelligence assessments did not support the claim—voiced by Trump and Netanyahu—that Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons was “imminent” has been entered into congressional records, underscoring the extent to which Trump has chosen to align himself with Netanyahu’s perspective.

## **The Gap Between Military Success and Strategic Outcome**

Statements from Washington and Tel Aviv frame the situation as one in which Iran’s military capacity has been degraded and deterrence restored. While such assessments may hold some validity, military success and strategic outcome are not the same.

A shared assumption across the Trump administration and the Netanyahu government is that sustained military pressure can fundamentally alter Iran’s behaviour. However, the limits of this assumption must be carefully evaluated by those who initiated this war.

Iran is a country with a deep-rooted state tradition, significant institutional capacity, and well-developed reflexes against external intervention with proven resilience. Even if the regime weakens, a radical shift in the country’s strategic orientation is unlikely. On the contrary, external pressure may unify diverse domestic factions around a shared perception of threat.

Recent statements from Washington and Tel Aviv also suggest that strategic ambiguity is producing not only political but also cognitive disorientation. President Trump’s rhetoric, which initially demeaned the Iranian leadership in personal terms, later shifted to describing them as highly intelligent actors—an indication of a notable change in tone. Likewise, the explicit expression of surprise at Iran’s moves regarding the Strait of Hormuz suggests that developments are exceeding initial expectations.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu’s approach of targeting Iran’s leadership through what has been described as a “death list” indicates that the war’s objectives are becoming increasingly narrow and personalised.

In this context, recent developments also reveal tangible differences in strategic priorities between the United States and Israel. Israel’s large-scale strike on a major natural gas field in Iran triggered Iranian retaliation against Gulf countries, creating serious risks for global energy supply and causing fuel prices to rise by around 15 per cent within 24 hours. President Trump first stated that the U.S. had not been informed of the attack, then revised his statement to say that he had warned Israel against striking that target. These contradictory remarks suggest that Washington felt the need to distance itself from the operation and that the two countries’ priorities do not fully align. Gabbard’s congressional testimony further confirms this divergence.

As a global power, the United States must consider energy security, the protection of its Gulf allies, and domestic political pressures arising from rising fuel prices. Israel, by contrast, operates as a regional actor driven by narrower, and in its view existential, security priorities, with the expectation of designing the region according to its security priorities, perceiving

Iran—not only due to its nuclear program and ballistic missile capabilities, but also the regime itself—as a direct threat.

My colleague Ambassador Şafak Gökürk’s recent analysis, titled “For Whom the Bell Tolls?”, aptly captures the essence of the current conflict. As he rightly observes, what is unfolding is not a conventional war but a struggle in which time pressure is being imposed on the adversary. The United States and Israel rely on destructive military power, while Iran relies on endurance. The aim is not only to win but also to exhaust the opponent over time.

In this context, as the war enters its fourth week, the United States’ temporary easing of sanctions on Iranian oil creates an absurd situation that deepens the inconsistency between military pressure on the ground and the use of economic instruments. Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, on the other hand, over the weekend qualified the ongoing US-Israel attacks as “illegal and unprovoked,” adding that Iran would continue to defend itself “for as long as necessary.”

One recent development has been that President Trump said that he would “obliterate” Iran’s electricity plants if it did not open the Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours. Iran dismissed the ultimatum as its missiles hit southern Israel, including near the country’s main nuclear research center.

### **Netanyahu’s Press Conference and Reckless Demagoguery**

This strategic divergence was also reflected in Netanyahu’s rhetoric during his March 19 press conference. It appears he primarily used this platform to send messages to the U.S. public and Congress, as well as to Western governments. While rejecting claims that he had persuaded Trump to enter the war, Netanyahu emphasised that Trump needed no persuasion. At the same time, he repeatedly stressed that the joint operation was being conducted under Trump’s leadership and that coordination between the two countries was highly effective.

Netanyahu also resorted to demagoguery by comparing the reluctance of some Western countries to support the war against Iran, with a banner “this is your war”, to the indifference shown toward Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

On the other hand, Trump’s statement that he had directly instructed Netanyahu to halt attacks on Iran’s energy facilities, alongside Netanyahu’s emphasis on Trump’s leadership, raises questions about how such messaging is perceived within Israeli public opinion. Nevertheless, in Israel, opposition to Netanyahu does not necessarily translate into opposition to the war against Iran. Given that Iran is widely seen as an existential threat, even Netanyahu’s critics tend to support the ongoing conflict.

### **The Most Realistic Scenario: A Prolonged and Evolving Conflict**

The most likely scenario is that both sides will eventually de-escalate tensions by framing the current situation as a “success” in their favour. However, this will not mean that the problem has been resolved. Current dynamics suggest that rather than reaching a decisive conclusion, the conflict will persist in a transformed shape. While such a pattern is not new for the Middle East, the risks now have the potential to spread across a much wider geography.

Iran’s actions in the Strait of Hormuz, effectively restricting maritime traffic, demonstrate that the crisis has evolved into not only a regional but also a global security and economic issue. President Trump, frustrated by the lack of expected support from allied leaders in ensuring maritime security, even accused NATO allies of being “cowards.” A joint statement issued on March 19, 2026, by leaders of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Japan strongly condemned Iran’s actions against commercial shipping. It warned of serious threats to global energy supply chains. While reaffirming the principle of freedom of navigation, the statement remained vague about when and how concrete action would be taken. The joint statement issued on March 21, with the participation of a broader group of countries, reflects an effort to stabilise energy markets.

Such multilateral initiatives show that the international system is reacting—albeit belatedly—while also underscoring the severity of the crisis. What must be borne in mind is that, should the war continue in this manner, the shock currently observed in oil and gas markets is only the beginning, and its consequences for global supply chains will be far more severe.

### **Critical Threshold: The Erosion of State Capacity**

A key issue that must be carefully considered is the distinction between weakening Iran and eroding its state capacity to the point of collapse. Ignoring this distinction could have extremely dangerous consequences. As noted in my previous article (<https://edam.org.tr/en/blog/war-with-uncertain-goals-where-is-the-middle-east-being-dragged>) the consequences of the Iraq war remain vivid. The collapse of state institutions can drag not only the affected country but the entire region into prolonged instability.

At this point, an important question arises: whether the Netanyahu government is seeing the erosion of state capacity as an implicit strategic objective. Preventing such a threshold from being crossed is critical not only for regional stability but also for the global system.

Recent warnings from Western countries indicate growing awareness of this risk. The increasingly visible critical stance, exemplified by statements from Pedro Sánchez, reflects rising concern about the long-term consequences of Israel’s policies. European leaders must therefore adopt a clear and principled stance—free from the burden of historical guilt and without fear of being labelled antisemitic. Recognising the Holocaust, avoiding prejudice against Jews, and criticising the policies of the current Israeli government are distinct matters. This is not only a moral choice but also a strategic necessity.

### **Conclusion: Diplomacy as the Deferred but Inevitable Instrument**

In light of all these developments, diplomacy emerges not as an option but as a necessity. Yet it is currently relegated to the background—not because it is ineffective, but because it is perceived as more politically difficult and costly in the short term. The limits of military methods are clear: they can weaken capabilities but cannot establish a sustainable political order.

For Türkiye, the priority is equally clear. Prolonged instability or the weakening of state capacity in a neighbouring country would have direct security and economic consequences. A balanced, cautious approach that preserves space for diplomacy is therefore the most prudent course.

Recent developments have also shown Gulf countries that their security arrangements with the United States—including hosting military bases—do not provide sufficient guarantees. It is therefore likely that they will seek a regional security architecture reminiscent of NATO that relies less exclusively on the United States and emphasises greater intra-regional cooperation. Discussions in this direction are already underway.

The fundamental problem in the Iran war today is not the use of military instruments, but the ambiguity of the political objectives they are meant to serve. Without strategic clarity, the use of force creates new problems rather than solving them. The real test for the Trump administration and the Netanyahu government is whether they can translate military developments on the ground into a coherent and sustainable political outcome. Otherwise, the resulting picture will be a familiar one: a conflict initiated but unable to be concluded, and that becomes increasingly difficult to manage over time.