



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

# Israel-Iran: towards a worse muddle?



The main question that the Israeli attack on Iran raises is what the endgame will be. Will it result in the maximalist demands of Israel and the US being met, or will it end in a much more diffuse, unstable, and inherently more dangerous muddle than we have had until now?

Most of the smart money is on the latter, at least in the short- to medium-term. The likelihood of Iran giving in to Benjamin Netanyahu's and Donald Trump's **demands** for a full surrender, at least on the nuclear issue, is low.

This also means that the likelihood of the attacks successfully pushing Iran into a meaningful deal is low. If the Iranians don't **meet** the Donald's red lines, what is there to talk about?

The chances of regime collapse are even more remote. The state structure is not as fragile as, for example, Assad's was in Syria before he **fell**. Also, while many Iranians abhor their rulers, it's a completely different thing to do the bidding of Israel and the US.

Thus, a new muddle is much the more likely outcome. Historically, muddles have been more prevalent than clearly defined overwhelming solutions or victories. We label them with all sorts of clever-sounding monikers, such as containment or constructive engagement to obscure the fact that they're, well, muddled, which we then call strategic ambiguity.

While muddles have a bad name, they are often far preferable to the kind of explosively violent confrontation that might end them, if they can be ended at all.

## No clear endgame

If Israel and the US choose confrontation, as they now have, it implies either that they are confident of a solution or they estimate that the price of confrontation is not that high and even small, incremental changes are worth the risk. Both assumptions appear questionable

and dangerous.

One of the dangers of the current confrontation is that it is opportunistic, rather than realistically aimed at ending or even decisively changing the Iran-Israel stand-off.

From the Israeli perspective, the circumstances offered a once in a generation window for action, and it might be that the country's leadership gave that more weight than what the actual outcome of the conflict is going to be.

Among the highly favourable elements were the diminution of Hezbollah and consequently the fall of Syria's Assad. The whole of the Iranian project, the famed 'Shia crescent' now seems vulnerable, and the thinking could well be that one more push might even topple the centre.

Then there's the war in Gaza, the appalling toll of which has not done Israel any favours in terms of international support. But it has reduced the threat of Hamas, albeit not before it carried out the attacks on 7 October 2023.

Also, the Iranian defences and the regime have been weakened by previous confrontations that flowed out of the Gaza war and of which the most direct attacks were initiated by Tehran itself last year. In hindsight, Iran broke the taboo on direct massive exchanges between the two rivals.

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There's also the matter of Donald Trump. Despite initial public handwringing and distancing himself from the Israeli attack, Trump is Israel's best friend in the White House in decades.

The problem for the Israelis is that he's also unpredictable, and if they rely on his promises,

they might come to regret it. That he's now threatening Tehran with US involvement was entirely foreseeable, whether he'll carry through is much less clear.

For those reading the Israeli attack as hubristic, there's much to unpick in the country's plan B rhetoric: what will happen if Iran doesn't cave and the Americans don't **attack** the Fordow facility?

There's a little bit too much talk of Israeli options in that case. Phrases such as 'out of the box' thinking and 'highly inventive, unexpected' Israeli moves tend to sound hollow. If they're real, they might also badly backfire. Who wants to contemplate what could go wrong in a potential air assault, using special forces, against Fordow?

Even if the US gets involved - or in the less likely case that Israel itself can **take out** Fordow and other potential sites decisively - the question of the endgame remains. The most optimistic scenarios, from an Israeli and US perspective, talk about setting the nuclear programme back by several years.

Whether successful in significantly delaying Iran's nuclear programme or not, the current action is bound to result in another very tense stand-off that can presumably only be altered by Iran's 'total surrender' on the nuclear issue or regime collapse.

## All roads lead back to the muddle

But let's examine possible consequences of these maximalist outcomes. Whether partly justified or not, Israeli - and also American - distrust of Iran runs so deep that even if the country agreed to all provisions for halting enrichment, allowing inspections under the Additional Protocol to resume, etc., they would not be wholly convinced that Tehran has really given up on its undeclared nuclear ambitions. A new muddle would emerge.

So, regime collapse would then seemingly be

the only game left in town. It might be what is ultimately hoped for, but it's a very shaky assumption to build a whole campaign on.



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And even regime collapse does not guarantee an end to the regional stand-off. There are many possible scenarios for what could happen in the for now unlikely case of the current system imploding or being overthrown, but few of them are positive, non-violent and ensure long-term stability.

The Israeli and also US intentions might be to at least have caused the cracks in the Islamic Republic that will eventually lead to its fall. But even if that's so, the process is bound to be drawn out and comes with its own dangers.

Thus, almost all roads, for now, lead back to the muddle, in one shape or form. While the previous muddle might have been unsatisfactory, a new one that resembles Israel's stand-off with Hezbollah and Hamas, meaning regular flare-ups, 'mowing-the-grass' operations and thus tit-for-tat confrontations, is surely even less so.

The hope in policy circles in the US and Israel might be that the attacks will have convinced Tehran of the Israeli and American determination not to allow it to possess a nuclear weapon, i.e., that it will have established deterrence.

In the past, Tehran has not shown much inclination to be deterred, at least in its confrontation with Israel. It has, on the other

hand, shown reluctance to enter into a full brawl with the US.

It might be the best that could be hoped for, a new stand-off with increased and more credible deterrence. The cost would have been steep and can still rise if the US gets involved. And it comes with new uncertainties and dangers of escalation without giving full guarantees of Iranian abandonment of enrichment.

Could this all have been avoided had Trump not left the previous **agreement** with Iran, the JCPOA?

Flawed though it might have been, the JCPOA not only bought time for the region, during which developments could have changed the equation, it also offered a model for more and possibly better agreements.

On the other hand, the JCPOA also showed that hopes of it influencing the Iranian leadership to become more moderate and reining in its regional ambitions were misguided.

It was a textbook muddle, but the deal that Trump was reportedly working on before the Israeli attack was, by all accounts, an even worse one, more precarious and poorly defined. It's doubtful that it will be improved by the current round of fighting.