



By: Shlomo Ben-Ami

Whose vision of the end of the war in Iran will prevail?



The US-Israeli war on Iran flagrantly violates international law. But so has nearly every other war since the adoption in 1945 of the United Nations Charter, which prohibits the use of force except in self-defense or, as in the cases of the Korean War (1950-53) and the First Gulf War (1990-91), with Security Council authorization.

Where the current Iran war stands out is not in its illegality, but rather in its lack of any clear or achievable objective.

In the United States, officials have **oscillated** between emphasizing regime change and suggesting that the operation will be limited to the targeted destruction of nuclear and ballistic-missile facilities, as well as Iran's navy.

President Donald Trump, for his part, has called for **unconditional surrender**, insisting that Iran install "acceptable" new leadership.

But he has also claimed that the US has already "**won in many ways**" in Iran – just not "enough."

Trump clearly wants to avoid a prolonged military engagement, which would erode support among his isolationist MAGA base.

In the meantime, he needs to limit the energy shock: already, Brent crude oil prices have surged by 29%, reaching nearly \$120 per barrel.

The same cannot be said for Israel, which has been targeting Iran's oil installations, including fuel depots in densely populated Tehran, as part of a "**total war**" strategy.

The Gulf states

The US also appears to be far more concerned than the Israelis about the war's impact on its allies in the Gulf.

Unlike Israel and Trump, who wants a role in choosing **Iran's leader**, the Gulf states recognize the flawed logic underlying the war.

They attempted to facilitate a diplomatic solution before the strikes began, not out of sympathy for the Islamic Republic, but rather because they knew that they would bear the brunt of Iran's retaliation.

Now, Iranian strikes on US military bases and Gulf oil facilities are undermining these countries' hard-won image as a safe location for international business – crucial to their efforts to diversify their economies away from oil.

If Iran targets their oil fields, global energy markets would face even greater upheaval.

The Gulf countries understand that regime change is a long historical process

More broadly, the Gulf countries understand that regime change is a long historical process, which the war may well do nothing to hasten, and that demands for unconditional surrender can prolong the fight and increase the costs.

After the Athenians defeated the Persians of antiquity in the Battle of Salamis (480 BCE), they demonstrated the wisdom of not insisting on total submission – a choice that opened the way for an eventual diplomatic accommodation.

By contrast, as the historian **Ian Kershaw** has shown, Allied demands for Nazi Germany's total surrender may have spurred the regime to keep fighting to the bitter end. Iran is displaying similar defiance today.

Not only did it select another hardliner, Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, as its new supreme leader; the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps also overruled President Masoud Pezeshkian's announcement that Iran would stop attacking the Gulf States.

For Iran this war is existential

For the Islamic Republic, this war is existential,

so it is reaching for any lever at its disposal.

Beyond its attacks on energy infrastructure, it has effectively closed the **Strait of Hormuz**, the sole conduit for some 20% of the world's oil and natural gas (including Iran's own exports).

It has also threatened to expand the conflict beyond the Middle East, targeting a British air base in **Cyprus** and launching a ballistic missile into Turkey's airspace.

Given that Iran possesses nearly 1,000 pounds of 60% enriched uranium, nuclear risks are rising fast.

A nuclear Iran would trigger a regional nuclear-arms race

If the Islamic Republic eventually does fall, there is little reason to expect an orderly transition to a more moderate government. Far more likely is a descent into chaos, extremism, and violence.

Whatever radical groups do emerge may well end up in possession of Iran's nuclear material – a risk that no international agreement could contain.

A nuclear Iran would also trigger a regional nuclear-arms race, with countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia rushing toward the bomb.

Even a decisive US-Israeli victory would be an unwelcome development for the Gulf states, as well as countries like Egypt and Turkey. They want Israel as a partner, not as a regional hegemon.

More fundamentally, the prospect of external powers overthrowing regimes they dislike (or supporting popular uprisings) is far from appealing to Arab autocracies.

Netanyahu's political legacy

There is no telling at which point in this process the capricious Trump will seek an off-ramp, declaring an ambiguous victory and

turning his attention elsewhere.

Four key considerations will shape his calculations: energy prices, the stock market, the midterm elections, and his upcoming summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

He surely hoped to control nearly 30% of the world's oil reserves (Venezuela's and Iran's) by the time he met with Xi.

Alas, Iran is a far harder nut to crack than Venezuela, and Trump must temper his unrealistic expectations.



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But putting the genie back in the bottle will not be easy, especially because Israel's leadership does not face the same political pressures as Trump.

Decades of indoctrination have left the Israeli public largely convinced that the Iranian regime is the embodiment of evil and must be uprooted.

Moreover, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu views "total victory" in Iran – as well as in Gaza and against Hezbollah in Lebanon – as integral to his political legacy, which is currently tainted by broken promises and **corruption charges**.

The costs of pursuing this largely impossible goal might prove greater than Netanyahu anticipated.

The growing sense among Americans that

Israel has dragged them into a costly war of choice could further erode the country's already-battered image to the point that alienation poses a real strategic threat.

That is the last thing Israel needs at a time when it has positioned itself as the only state in the Middle East that rejects the very notion of a **negotiated settlement**, be it on Iran or in Palestine.

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