



By: Pegah Banihashemi

Iran remains unstable regardless of the outcome of the war



More than one month has passed since the United States and Israel launched a joint war against Iran.

While US President Donald Trump has been groping for an **exit strategy**, airstrikes on major cities and government, military, and infrastructure targets continue apace, and look **set to escalate** in the coming weeks.

The effects of this sustained assault have varied. Key Iranian officials have been killed.

The status of the new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, is unknown, as he has not made any public appearances or statements in recent weeks.

Other high-ranking leaders—such as Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, speaker of the Iranian parliament—appear to be playing a central role in managing the Islamic Republic's affairs.

Despite extensive damage to police stations, courthouses, and other administrative buildings, the regime's security apparatus, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the volunteer Basij forces, remains intact and in control over the country.

In urban areas, they have established checkpoints across major streets. (Reports that they are **recruiting children** as young as 12 to assist with checkpoints and patrol duties raise serious legal and human-rights concerns.)

Moreover, political activists are still being arrested, and several individuals have been executed following convictions for charges related to espionage and national security.

The government has continued to use coercion

These developments suggest that even under wartime conditions, the government has continued to use coercion to preempt dissent.

In the same vein, the regime has severely **restricted internet access** from the war's earliest days, leaving satellite links as the only reliable connection to the outside world.

Security forces have also reportedly prohibited Iranians from photographing and documenting destruction.

Government-affiliated individuals, on the other hand, appear to have privileged access to unfiltered communication tools through so-called "white SIM cards," which allow them to disseminate official narratives on social media.

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Within Iranian society, a visible divide has emerged. Some citizens, fearing continued escalation, worry about the collapse of essential services such as electricity and water.

Others, however, view the war as a potential pathway out of authoritarian rule and are willing to endure hardship for a chance at political change.

There is, however, little indication that the Iranian leadership is preparing to retreat or relinquish power.

Perhaps most concerning is the condition of Iran's legal and institutional frameworks.

The holiday period has ended

Over roughly the last two weeks of March, the country celebrated Nowruz, the Persian new year, a time when public offices and schools close (this year, many educational institutions were already shut or operating online because of the war).

During this period, **Israeli and US missiles** rained down on civilian infrastructure, including universities.

Now that the holiday period has ended,

Iranians must return to offices and classrooms.

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Courts, police, and public authorities must resume functioning. But many of these institutions no longer physically exist or have been severely damaged.

While laws remain formally valid, the bodies responsible for enforcing them have been dramatically weakened.

To be sure, many existing laws lack legitimacy among large segments of the population, particularly those opposed to the current political system. But meaningful legal reform is unlikely, so long as the regime survives.

Intensified repression

The more likely outcome, assuming the continuation of the regime and an eventual move toward negotiations, is that these institutional weaknesses produce harsher internal policies.

Historically, the Iranian state responds to periods of vulnerability with intensified repression.

In this case, the authorities, lacking enforcement capacity, may try to reassert control through increased reliance on loyalist forces and expanded surveillance.

This could further empower regime supporters while leaving civilians and dissenters increasingly exposed.



The breakdown of central authority would likely create an institutional and legal vacuum - Mojtaba Khamenei

But if sustained external pressure leads to systemic collapse or severe dysfunction, the risks are equally significant.

The breakdown of central authority would likely create an institutional and legal vacuum.

As competing political actors fought for supremacy, police stations and courts could be abandoned or overtaken, creating an environment of near-total impunity.

Until a new governing structure emerged, such a transition would almost surely cause disorder, fragmentation, and uncertainty.

In both scenarios, Iran is likely to face a prolonged period of instability, rather than an immediate transformation.

Iran's experience during its eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s is a sobering precedent. The state demonstrated its capacity to impose brutal internal controls during wartime and to ramp up repression once it ended.

This suggests that whatever the regime's final status, Iranians face heightened coercion, if not institutional breakdown.

The question is not simply whether the regime will collapse or endure. Either way, Iran's fragmented society is staring down the barrel of a profoundly disrupted legal and

institutional order that is now at risk of being weaponized or disappearing altogether.

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