

The Middle East After the Iran War: Lessons and Outcomes

by [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#)

Mar 2026

Also published in Jerusalem Strategic Tribune

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#)

Ambassador James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. Previously, he served as U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq.



Articles & Testimony

However the conflict ends, it has already delivered pivotal lessons on U.S. military innovation and political strategy, the continued dominance of hydrocarbons, the future posture of regional and external powers, and more.

It is ambitious at this point given the uncertainties of the raging Iran War to inventory likely lessons and outcomes on the region's future. But it is also necessary, as analysis of alternative scenarios should best begin before a major inflection point is upon us. That inflection point could range from the end of the Islamic Republic and a new, quite possibly permanent peace order in the region, to a disguised American defeat and the rise of an even more radical, aggressive Iran, despite its disaffected population and tremendous losses. This essay examines first the state of the campaign, then the lessons learned, and, finally, the alternative endings. Despite the absolute necessity of Israel and the United States finally bringing war to an Iran that has brought war to the region for decades, there are no guarantees all will work out better.

Where We Are

The war now is one of attrition. Neither side is willing to commit ground troops, typically the decisive element of war. (U.S. Marines rushing to the region do not refute this assessment: so far the ground combat component of that force is but two lightly-armed maneuver battalions. Over fifty American and UK maneuver battalions, many with armor, were used in the 2003 assault on Iraq, whose territory, population and security forces were a fraction of Iran's.) The centers of gravity on both sides for the moment are holding up under military pressure: Iran's command and control, its domination of a still-cowed population, ability to block shipments out of the Gulf, and its missile and drone stocks; the United States, Israel, and Arab states' internal cohesion, weapons stocks, and, despite considerable oil and gas price increases, economies.

Most importantly, neither side is displaying a decisive collapse of will, with Gulf Arab states in particular so far

demonstrating both resilience and defiance of Iran. Under such conditions, the conflict likely will either shift to negotiations with or without a ceasefire, or escalate, most likely via devastating attacks on each other's hydrocarbons infrastructure with long term impact on regional and even global economies. Such escalation in turn would produce either a negotiated compromise ending, or the collapse of will of one of the participants. (That will not be the Israeli government and population. For Israel, this conflict, correctly, is existential, and costs so far easily bearable.)

What We've Learned

The short answer is a great deal in a very short time. But of the many lessons learned, the below are the most important.

Iran Is a Cause More than a State: As Kissinger once pointed out, Iran presents as both, to its advantage especially in confusing the West about how best to deal with it. (Although the millions of victims of Iran and its proxies' aggression in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Israel have long learned this lesson.) Its attacks on civilian targets in neighboring states seeking to remain neutral, and targeting of international oil supplies, have revealed the regime's nature. States may pursue temporary transactional deals with Teheran but cannot expect it to abandon its hostility to the entire regional system. The region thus will never be really at peace unless either the very nature of the regime changes into that of a normal state, or it is stripped of all capability, in perpetuity, to project power through nuclear weapons, drones and missiles, terrorists and proxies.

Ideology Is Asymmetrical: Much ink is spilled on different weapons systems and tactics producing asymmetric results, but the best example of asymmetry in this conflict is Iran's ability to prioritize its ideological mission of regional domination and religious orthodoxy over its own population, economy and even military losses in a way most normal modern states cannot. This gives Iran and other ideological states an ability to either motivate or terrorize their populations to support the cause being pursued. In short, it's hard to break the iron will of ideological states at almost any pain level. Modern liberal states (Israel, America after Pearl Harbor) can show equal will but only in the most extreme, existential situations.

Hydrocarbons Still Rule: This lesson begins obviously with the oil-rich Gulf states but applies significantly to the entire global economy and even to distant, oil and natural gas rich America.

Insurgents Win by Not Losing: Given all the above, this adage also applies to this conflict as Iran in many respects is running an insurgency against the rest of the region.

Modern Militaries Do Not Easily Innovate: Many see a key lesson in the ability of cheap but numerous air attack systems such as drones and rockets to overcome sophisticated but far more expensive and numerically limited defensive systems. But that lesson has been learned for over a decade by Israel, and since 2022 by both Ukraine and Russia. What is surprising is that the United States, with the world's most innovative high-tech economic/research base and most powerful military, didn't respond effectively to those lessons learned. The result in this conflict is even high-value scarce systems such as THAAD missile defense radars targeted and stocks depleted. It's not that the U.S. military ignored those lessons, it's that its formula for adapting to them—ponderous study, peacetime procurement rules, myriad legal hurdles and challenges, and refusal to accept "perfect is the enemy of the (get it now) good"—has not worked.

The United States Has Structural Problems With Clausewitz: Clausewitz, thinkers before him such as Machiavelli, and more modern practitioners such as Colin Powell all understood the importance of determining what realistic political goals are before trying to match military means to them, and of the truth that nations, not armies, wage wars. The baroque planning and often shifting explanations of the Trump administration in this conflict suggest this is a unique Trump administration problem. But an examination of previous American wars, including Iraq,

Afghanistan, and Vietnam, documents this as an inherent problem in U.S. military and policy thinking.

U.S. Gulf Bases Are a Double-Edged Sword: The U.S. began a serious Gulf states base build up after the Kuwait War on the assumption that American bases in a country would deter a major ground attack by signaling American resolve (and necessity with its troops at risk) to defend the basing country. They then were re-configured as air and logistics centers for American operations 2001 on in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, with a secondary mission of containing Iran. But these bases not only have not deterred Iran from effectively attacking the basing states from the air, but these bases themselves have been magnets for Iranian military action.

The GCC “Pull” Economic/Cultural Model in Question: Along with tough questions about the American security role, Gulf states given Iran’s possible survival as an aggressive force must rethink their shift to an international “pull” posture. For almost a century these states were “push” actors in the global economic, political and societal realms. Job One was “pushing” hydrocarbons into the world economy and thereby growing rich. This model allowed those states to maintain traditional religious and social mores, trade with the outside world without adopting its norms, and coexist with disruptive aggressive states, thanks both to American support and to the hydrocarbon “push” economies of those aggressive states Iran and Iraq themselves.

But in the last twenty years led by the UAE, Qatar, and then decisively Saudi Arabia, the Gulf has shifted to a “pull” economic model, leveraging immense oil and gas riches to pull in the advanced outside world, as a transportation, tourist, cultural, sports and financial center—think new Londons and Cotes d’Azur. But this shift, reflecting in part declining long term sustainability of hydrocarbons-based economies, required embracing modernity in its myriad forms, and thus dramatic changes in their entire societies. The resulting model, however, is more dependent on both a peaceful environment and the gradual fading of traditional religious and social norms. But Iran across the Gulf is a force for neither peace nor modernity, and much more capable of disrupting “pull-based” than “push” societies.

Israel Militarily Dominant But Not Invincible: Israel’s extraordinary military success, both offensive and defensive, the Israeli people’s resilience, and its intelligence capabilities in this conflict give it dramatic dominance in the region, building on its previous success with the help of others decimating the Iranian proxy network. But it does not have the strategically mobile ground forces to decisively defeat Iran or other distant foes. Its security thus cannot rest solely on its impressive military might but also on its political decisions concerning America, Europe, Arab states, the Palestinians, and Iran and other foes.

The United States Remains the Only Global Power: Despite Russia and China’s strong economic, diplomatic and “anti-American axis” ties to their chosen Middle East power, Iran, they have not done anything significant to stop America’s operations against Iran, and in fact do not have the military or other tools to decisively affect the conflict even if they wanted to. This does not mean they are not dominant players in their own regions, or that they are not positioning to profit from the Iran War, especially anything like an American failure. Europe, despite its military dependence on the U.S. and vulnerability to hydrocarbons, is even less able to play a realpolitik role either assisting, or defying, Washington.

American Global Deterrence Is in Play: Notwithstanding the just above, the United States has huge stakes beyond global economic health and Middle East stability in this conflict. Its entire global collective security system is tested by it. This is not a new phenomenon but has to be continuously learned anew. That collective security system has kept the world at peace (at least in terms of the alternative 1914-45 experience), and constrained powerful wannabe challengers to the system including Russia and China. But it requires the United States, as seen in the first years of the Cold War in Berlin, Greece and Korea, to engage and win in distant conflicts of limited strategic importance. Otherwise, the deterrence and containment principles on which the entire collective security system and thus international peace and prosperity rest come into question.

Outcomes

Regime Collapse Generates Regime Change: The Israeli military is focused on regime collapse, which means the inability of the Iranian political and military leadership to effectively govern and maintain a monopoly on violence—the prerequisite for the population to overthrow the regime. While military strikes can erode regime control, total collapse may not be possible, and even if collapsed, there is no guarantee the population would rise up, or that if it did the outcome would be a “normal” nation. It could also be chaos, or an Assad or Saddam style non-ideological but still aggressive dictatorship.

Plus ca Change: The current stalemate may lead to negotiations to end fighting and provide a solution, even if partial, to the Iranian nuclear program and especially the buried 400 kilograms of highly enriched uranium. This result, despite the much greater military damage, will look a lot like that of the June 2025 Twelve Day War. Iran’s capabilities will be diminished, but not its will; it will seek to rebuild its proxy network and weapons programs to once again challenge the status quo. Within a few years the situation will look much like 2000, before Iran began its serious march through the region and accelerated its nuclear program.

Disguised Defeat: This outcome would resemble a much larger version of the Trump 2025 ceasefire with the Houthis. Iran will stop shooting in return for an end of American and Israeli bombing. But its ability to hold the Straits at risk, and maintain at least elements of its nuclear program, will remain, and along with them its ability to destabilize the region.

Open Defeat: Iran’s current strategy is simply to keep shooting with whatever is left of its not inexhaustible but very large weapons stocks until the pain on Gulf states and the American public, diminishing American and regional partners’ own weapons stocks, and events elsewhere force the U.S. and Israel to end operations, with or without a face-saving formal understanding with Iran. This would leave Iran with enhanced prestige to seriously threaten the Gulf hydrocarbon business and advance its nuclear program.

Conclusion

The region, the United States, and the world will all be much changed by this conflict, as fundamental issues are in play: the relative power of major states and their ability to maintain their will; the capacity of ideological totalitarian states, particularly if threatened, to disrupt disproportionately the entire international order; the enduring vulnerability of the global economies vis-a-vis hydrocarbons. Israel, Gulf states and Iran will all have to think through how they move forward in a region with potentially never-ending disruption, with the boundaries of escalation ever more eroded. The United States for its part will have to decide how much of its domestic and international political capital, economic cost, and military effort it can devote to a region which, while critically important to the global economy, is still secondary to existential American interests.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Jerusalem Strategic Tribune website (<https://jstribune.com/the-middle-east-after-the-iran-war-lessons-and-outcomes/>). ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

The War in Iran Could Become Like the War in Ukraine

Mar 27, 2026



James Jeffrey

(/policy-analysis/war-iran-could-become-war-ukraine)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Diplomacy During War: Priorities for the Trump Administration

April 2, 2026, starting at 11:00 a.m. EDT (1500 GMT)



Emily Harding,
Richard Nephew,
Michael Singh,
Nancy A. Youssef

(/policy-analysis/diplomacy-during-war-priorities-trump-administration)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

With the Iran War, Hamas Tilts Toward the Brotherhood

Mar 26, 2026



Ghaith al-Omari

(/policy-analysis/iran-war-hamas-tilts-toward-brotherhood)

TOPICS

Great Power Competition (/policy-analysis/great-power-competition)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

