

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

The US-Israel War on Iran: Tehran's Perceptions and Objectives

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S*ummary*

Iran is fighting a 'war of balance', using controlled horizontal escalation as a tool to impose sufficient costs on the US and its regional partners.

From Iran’s perspective, the current war is a continuation of the US-Israeli attacks on the nuclear and missile program in June 2025, which was followed by European countries’ triggering of the ‘snapback’ of the UN sanctions, seen in Tehran as aimed at creating internal unrest. President Donald Trump’s threats to intervene in support of protesters created the worst security scenario for Iran: the overlapping of internal unrest with external attack.

Trump’s diplomacy was driven by a logic of strategic coercion or compellence that an internally weakened and militarily vulnerable Iran should make maximum concessions to remove the threat of a US attack. Iran found US assurances or inducements inadequate: only minimal sanctions relief upfront in exchange for far-reaching concessions on the nuclear file.

Iran was confronted with a long-dreaded two-front reality, where the US was waging a ‘hybrid warfare,’ using economic pressures and support for separatist forces to foment internal unrest and destabilise the regime, while using the threat of war to force Iran to give up its nuclear and missile programs. Tehran rejected strategic surrender and instead braced for a military confrontation, which could potentially improve Iran’s bargaining position vis-à-vis the US.

Tehran’s existential framing of the war— that is, the US/Israel war objective being regime change – led to a revision of its reactive posture of calibrated response, which was designed to avoid a full-blown war with the US.

The early US/Israeli strike killing the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei amounted to regime decapitation, with the expectation that it would create elite fracture or societal mobilisation against the regime. The strategy seems to have backfired.

The widespread targeting of security apparatus, especially command and regional bases of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and police, judiciary, intelligence, and Basij volunteer force (the primary instrument of managing internal unrest), aimed at degrading the coercive arm of the Islamic Republic to encourage political change from below. Trump defined the goal of war as ‘freedom’ for Iran. He appealed to the Iranian people to ‘take over’ the government. Similarly, Netanyahu called on people to take to the streets.

The US/Israeli sustained air campaign seeks to destroy military infrastructure: air defences, underground ballistic missile launchers and bases using B2 bombers, as well as the navy. Iran’s immediate retaliation despite decapitation strikes against military and political leadership underscores a decentralised command and control, or what the Iranian Foreign Minister described as ‘Mosaic Defence’. The idea is to

ensure not only flexibility and speed of retaliation, but also survivability in the face of a superior force.

Iran’s regionalisation of the conflict in the initial phase involved targeting Al Udeid airbase in Qatar, Al Dhafra airbase in the UAE, the US Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, Ali Al Salem airbase in Kuwait, and Muwaffaq Salti airbase in Jordan and Israel, primarily as an asymmetric strategic tool to create regional pressure on the US.

In tactical terms, Iran has a wider set of escalation options targeting US bases in the Gulf States. It can deploy its bigger arsenal of more accurate Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) and cheaper and numerous kamikaze Shahed drones, more effectively against non-military and symbolic targets in the Gulf than Israel.

The Gulf States find themselves entrapped in the US war against Iran. Their interest remains to contain the war as they fear joining the US offensive against Iran will invite greater economic costs and a prolonged instability. Tehran, for its part, is trying to impose a new deterrence equation in which Gulf security cannot be insulated from the trajectory of escalation and pressure against Iran.

On the first day of war, the IRGC Navy relayed radio messages to vessels stating that “no ship is allowed to pass the Strait of Hormuz.” Subsequently, an oil tanker was hit off Oman’s Musandam peninsula. For Iran, the objective is to create disruptions in a critical energy and shipping route, causing a spike in oil prices, and to ensure that war risks and economic costs are felt globally.

Analysts have noted that the Iranian strategy in the initial phase was to target US radar and communication systems at US military bases in the Gulf States, which functioned as early-warning systems for Israel. Since Israel was reassigned to the U.S. Central Command in January 2021, the US prioritised developing an integrated air and missile defence system in the Middle East with Israeli participation. After degrading US radar and interception capabilities, Iran can deploy its advanced long-range missiles against Israel more economically and with greater effectiveness in a prolonged war of attrition.

In terms of the end goal in the war, Iran is fighting a ‘war of balance’, where it is not in a hurry to seek a ceasefire. In other words, Iran is using controlled horizontal escalation as a tool to impose sufficient costs on the US, its regional partners, and globally, aiming to alter their calculations about striking Iran again. The objective remains the system’s survival and the restoration of eroded deterrence.

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