

Strategic Escalation: Analysing the Iran Versus US-Israel Conflict, It's Causes and Post-2026 Projections

Ahmed Osman¹ Robert Machyo^{2*}

1. School of Education, Garissa University, PO box 1801, Garissa 70100, Kenya
2. School of Education, Garissa University, PO box, 1801, Garissa 70100, Kenya

* E-mail of the corresponding author: machyorobert@gmail.com

Abstract

The ever present “proxy-war” between Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran, routinely backed by the United States through sanctions and intelligence sharing, transited into a very direct, intense and lethal war in early 2026. Following the collapse of nuclear talks and a succession of regional skirmishes, a combined US-Israeli attack, “Operation Epic Fury,” targeted both the top leadership of Iran and the regime’s nuclear infrastructure. This paper takes a look at the probable causes of this shift. It also examines the current status of the operational environment and presents well thought out projections on the regional security arrangements. It argues that eventhough Iran’s central command has been significantly downgraded, it is highly likely that the conflict will evolve into a long drawn, devastating struggle with far reaching global economic consequences. The findings suggest that while the Iranian state possesses unique mechanisms for survival, rooted in historical tenacity, the decapitation of its spiritual and logistical centers create a structural vulnerability that threatens to fragment the Shia geopolitical axis. This paper concludes that the interplay between ancient identity and modern clerical authority remains the decisive factor in whether the nation consolidates or fractures in the face of systemic shocks.

Keywords: Conflict, Nuclear, Escalation, Resilience, Geopolitical, Asymmetric, Strait of Hormuz, Blockade, Regime, Axis of Resistance

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1. Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East experienced a major transformation in early 2026 as the tri-nation tensions between United States, Israel and Iran catapulted from proxy-driven (Hezbollah and others), to a direct inter-nations warfare (Britannica, 2026). For decades, the conflict was characterized by Israeli “gray zone” operations and Iranian-backed proxy attacks through the “Axis of Resistance” (Trends Research, 2025). However, the failure of the 2025 “snapback” sanctions to stem Iran’s heightened nuclear enrichment plans led to a tactical shift by the Trump and Netanyahu administrations (SpecialEurasia, 2026). This paper critically assesses the current military situation in the Middle East and offers projections that are grounded in the reported downgrade of the Iranian command-and-control capabilities. More importantly however, the Islamic Republic of Iran possesses a national identity defined by millennial-long continuity and a distinct persian heritage that separates it from its regional neighbours. This cultural tenacity and resilience has historically served as a bedrock of national mobilization, particularly during existential threats. By examining Iran’s historical endurance and the central role of its clerical leadership, this paper explores the potential consequences of a systemic shock to the “Axis of Resistance.”

2. The Shift to Direct Confrontation

The current conflict, also referred to as the 2026 Iran War was triggered by failed diplomatic efforts and Iran’s big appetite for highly enriched uranium over and above levels agreed to during previous international negotiations. On February 28, 2026, a large scale air attack was carried out by the United United States and Israel, leading to the execution of Ali Khamenei, Iran’s Supreme Leader and other senior officials (Institute of War [ISW], 2026). This campaign, unlike earlier ones, targeted the regime’s most critical infrastructure and personnel, including intelligence heads and base commanders (Al Jazeera, 2026). The key objective, as communicated by the US administration, was to obliterate Iran’s Nuclear installations and to orchestrate a regime change (Jurist, 2026).

3. Military and Economic Implications

The immediate impact of “Operation Epic Fury” has been two-fold: partial strategic military success in Iran on the one hand but also very unstable international markets on the other. Here is a breakdown of some of the outcomes from the conflict:

3.1 Degradation of Command

The joint attacks have succeeded in significantly weakening Iranian air defences and disrupted centralized command and control capabilities, compelling the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to switch to a dispersed, compartmentalized operational tactic (ISW, 2026).

3.2 Worldwide Energy Crunch

Iran’s retributive threats to block the Strait of Hormuz possibly leading to the blockage of more than 20% of global Brent supplies sent prices surging past \$100 per barrel (SpecialEurasia, 2026). This interruption precipitated big losses in global equity markets as investors braced themselves for very long shortage (Trends Research, 2025).

3.3 Regional Asymmetry

While Iran’s conventional defences took a hard hit from the US-Israel attacks, its indirect proxy networks, including Hezbollah and the Houthis, continue to be potent tools for asymmetric revenge against US regional bases and Israeli urban targets (Al Jazeera, 2026).

3.4 General Predictions of Outcomes

In the event that this conflict continues unabated, a number of things could happen. They include:

Prolonged Proxy Wars: Irregardless of the massive debasement of its central command structures, Iran’s geographical size and entrenched ideological networks suggest an inevitable fall-back to a decentralized internal conflict or a “Maduro-style” survival strategy for remnant factions (Jurist, 2026). **Regional Realignment:** The war will predictably coerce Gulf states into an “ad-hoc: realignment with the US for protection; some or all of these nations will concurrently seek stronger economic ties with China and Russia to prevent a fallout that can come from a long drawn-out war (SpecialEurasia, 2026). **Nuclear Arms Race Risk:** In the absence of a reliable successive state and regime, the technical knowledge of Iran’s nuclear programme may become more difficult to monitor, likely leading to unchecked illegal proliferation among remnant radicalized factions (Britannica, 2026).

4. The Resilience of Iranian Identity and the Geo-political Void

With a history stretching back over 3000 years, Iran stands as a testament to the endurance of a civilization which predates much of the modern world (Axworthy, 2016). Home to a population of 89 million, the people of Iran carry a distinct identity, rooted in their Persian heritage and a culture that is famously not Arabic. This deep-seated sense of self has fostered a resilient spirit, allowing the nation to navigate centuries of upheavals while maintaining a proud, unbroken connection to its ancient roots.

This tenacity was most starkly defined during the eight-year war against Iraq. Despite being at their weakest point following a revolution, the Iranians refused to surrender even as Iraq was bolstered by the vast financial backing of Arab nations and sophisticated US weaponry (Abraham, 2008). They held their ground through sheer willpower and sacrifice, proving that their resolve could not be broken by external force or superior funding.

The assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in 2026 cannot be merely a political killing, it is viewed by followers as the eradication of the central leadership of Shiism worldwide, creating a void comparable to the sudden loss of a Pope in the Roman Catholic faith (Nasr, 2006). This killing would have reverberated swiftly and instantly across Iran and its allied “Axis of Resistance,” Plunging cities from Beirut and Damascus to Baghdad, Bahrain, and Sana’a into acute crises. Far beyond Iran’s borders, such shockwaves would trigger widespread mourning and anger among Shia communities in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India and Afghanistan, with many faithful protesting the killing of a man they viewed as a pious, irreplaceable guide against Western Influence.

In the immediate aftermath, Iran’s supreme security apparatus, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

has declared a state of emergency, vowing to never surrender; it has mounted massive retaliatory attacks while proxy groups struggle with the loss of their “command-and-control” center. The Supreme leader’s death has severed the spiritual and logistical chain that connects Taheran to its proxies in Lebanon and Iraq, turning the aligned groups into isolated and vulnerable entities struggling to survive. As the regional power balance threatens to shutter because of the killing, the geopolitical map of the middle-East is also undergoing a transformation which is setting the stage for either unprecedented scorching back-and-forth retaliations or surrender of the Shia Axis of Resistance.

5. Conclusion

The 2026 US-Israel-Iran conflict is one of the most significant engagements in the Middle East since the 2003 US war in Iraq. While the US and Israel have achieved immediate tactical gains in messing up Iran’s nuclear and leadership capabilities, the strategic end result is still not clear. The global economy is experiencing high volatility, and the regional “rules of the game” have taken a big paradigm shift (Jurist, 2026). Iran’s history suggests that external pressure often emboldens its national resolve rather than dismantling it. However, the unique intersection of religious authority and paramilitary coordination means that the loss of its Supreme Leader represents a vulnerability unlike any faced during the Iran-Iraq War. Whether the state would unite under IRGC or fracture into regional factions remains the primary concern for future Middle East stability.

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