

IENE Comment

The War of Unintended Consequences



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*By Lawrence Freedman**

A good rule of thumb is that the unintended consequences of any military operation can be as — or more — important than the intended ones. This is particularly the case with the war being waged by Israel and the US against Iran.



In a nod to international law, the Trump administration claimed it went to war because there was an imminent threat that required pre-emption, perhaps even a nuclear weapon or an intercontinental ballistic missile. No intelligence was offered to back up these claims. The messaging accompanying the opening strikes suggested that

this conflict would mark the end of a terrible regime that has been persecuting its people and fomenting regional conflict for decades.

But while the government has undoubtedly been rocked by the assassination of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, it has yet to fall apart. Many in Iran would be delighted to see the end of a tyrannical, corrupt regime. Unfortunately, the opposition is disorganised and lacks firepower.

At first, Trump seemed to think that a reconfigured regime might negotiate with the US. He mused about the possibility of a Venezuela scenario, in which Nicolás Maduro was abducted and Washington dealt with his underlings while leaving the democratic opposition frustrated. This is not an option in Tehran. The carnage inflicted on Iran and the mayhem caused in retaliation has been too great. Trump has declared himself surprised that so many potentially compliant alternatives to Khamenei have already been killed.

Now Trump demands unconditional surrender and a hand in choosing Iran's next leader while insisting he won't make the unpopular move of sending ground forces. As always, he assumes that if he hits his adversaries hard enough they will bend to his will. In practice, without a substantial US ground presence, events could soon move beyond Washington's control with consequences no one can predict.

It is possible that the regime will implode, with its remaining leaders fleeing and the Revolutionary Guards scattering. But the resulting power vacuum would be difficult to fill with a new government that enjoys wide support. Iran is a vast country with a complex social structure. Many long-suppressed groups are likely to demand a role in the new order and apt to become angry if denied. Unlike 1979, when the leaders of the Islamic revolution inherited a wealthy country with a strong oil-based economy, it is now in meltdown and public services are failing.

The precedents are not encouraging. When a country starts to suffer from chronic instability it requires an enormous effort, and considerable resources, to stabilise it. If this can't be achieved, there could be a variety of knock-on effects around the region, including flows of refugees.

In 1991, after a US-led coalition defeated Saddam Hussein's army, forcing it to retreat from Kuwait, Iraqi Kurds and Shia rebelled. These uprisings were suppressed ruthlessly as coalition forces looked on. After US and UK forces occupied Iraq in 2003, they were unable to stop a descent into vicious intercommunal violence. It took five years to get some sort of grip on the situation.

In Afghanistan things looked hopeful after the Taliban were pushed out of government. Eventually they regrouped and after two decades returned to power. In Libya in 2011 Colonel Muammer Gaddafi was killed and his regime collapsed. The US, UK and France helped the rebels but then left them on their own — the experience of Iraq deterred them from trying to exert control. The result was civil war and intense factional fighting.

Some severe unintended consequences are already with us. The Trump administration appears to have been surprised by the way in which Iran lashed out across the region with the aim of putting the Gulf states under pressure and causing a major international economic crisis.

In the long term this Götterdämmerung strategy may confirm Iran's fate; neighbours who were ready for an accommodation with the regime now have a stake in its downfall. But in the short term it has had some success.

Iran has long threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz if attacked, so there is no excuse for being caught out by this development. Trump has promised insurance cover and naval escorts, though it is not clear that the US has many to spare. For now, ships are hesitating. Iranian strikes against oil and gas facilities, which have led to surges in prices, have alarmed investors, and government supplies of liquefied natural gas are a particular worry.

There is a race to take out Iran's missile launchers while there are still sufficient interceptors to deal with those missiles that can be launched. Drones are less deadly but are coming through in larger numbers — providing Ukraine with an opportunity to prove its value in dealing with this threat, as the world leader in successfully intercepting Shahed drones on the cheap. Trump was still being rude about President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as this war began; perhaps he had not imagined he might need the Ukrainian president's help just a few days after it started.

The intended part of the war is going to plan. Israel and the US quickly achieved command of the skies so that they could attack targets with impunity. They have further obliterated the already supposedly obliterated nuclear programme; they have eliminated the Iranian navy and depleted Iran's stocks of missiles and production capacity. But the unintended consequences will largely be in the political, social and economic spheres — and they will be felt for some time.

**** The writer is emeritus professor of war studies at King's College London and author of 'Strategists and Strategy'. The article was published in the Financial Times, March 7, 2026.***

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3, Alex. Soutsou Str. 106 71 Athens, Greece, T: +30-210 3628457, 3640278, F: +30 210 3646144,
marketing@iene.gr, www.iene.eu

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