

02/03/2026

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10 questions about the war against Iran



The war launched by Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu on 28 February against the Iranian mullahs resulted, from day one, in the decapitation of the regime with the death of Ayatollah Khamenei and a significant number of other senior officials. And it now seems very likely that American and Israeli forces will succeed in defeating the Iranian armies on a purely military level. But as for the aftermath and consequences of this war on regional and global balances, many more questions remain unanswered. Let's examine a few of them.

I • A Venezuelan solution for Iran?

The first question that arises is, of course, what might happen to Iran itself after the forces of the Islamic regime have been defeated. It is often pointed out that no air operation has ever been enough to bring down an authoritarian regime. And the Iranian mullahs and their henchmen in the Revolutionary Guards demonstrated once again last January how far they are prepared to go to stay in power. Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out at this stage that Donald Trump, whose main concern has never been democracy and freedom for peoples, may be prepared to accept a Venezuelan-style 'solution' for Iran, with the maintenance of a dictatorship born of the Islamic regime, which would nevertheless yield to American and Israeli demands on the country's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

However, the situations in Iran and Venezuela differ quite radically due to the river of blood that separates the Iranian people from the regime after fifty years of constantly deadly repression, and even more so in recent weeks. The legitimacy and support base of the Islamic Republic are now very limited in Iran. It would probably become non-existent if, in addition, the leaders of this criminal regime agreed to bow to American-Israeli demands on major issues of sovereignty for the country. The mullahs' ability to remain in power in one way or another, even without ground intervention, therefore seems limited today.

II • A peaceful transition in favour of Reza Pahlavi?

If we accept this hypothesis, what might happen in Iran? Although powerful in the streets and in people's hearts, the Iranian opposition remains very weak in terms of organisation. A peaceful transition driven by internal dynamics seems unlikely at this stage. Could Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu succeed in imposing it from outside, particularly in the person of Reza Pahlavi, the son of the last Shah of Iran, who also enjoys some support within Iran itself?

There are many obstacles to such a solution. First of all, there would probably be fierce resistance from the surviving elements of the Islamic regime, who know that their lives would be at risk if such a scenario were to materialise. The internal legitimacy of an émigré who has lived most of his life outside the country would remain very limited at the outset. And even if the vast majority of Iranians are desperately seeking a solution to get rid of the mullahs, the fraction of the Iranian population that truly dreams of a return to the golden age of the imperial regime must be tiny.

Could we nevertheless dream of a Spanish-style transition for Iran? Many regional and global players, as we shall see, have no interest in the establishment of a regime in Iran that would be beholden to Netanyahu's Israel and Trump's United States and would become their ally in the region. And they will actively work to prevent such a scenario from coming to fruition.

III • Civil war and the break-up of the country?

In this context, one of the questions that arises is that of a possible civil war, particularly due to ethnic tensions. In a way, an Iraqi scenario, despite ground intervention, or a Libyan scenario, without ground intervention. However, the situations in Iran, Iraq and Libya are, a priori, very different. Firstly, Iran is a very old country, heir to one of the first known empires, and has almost never been colonised, unlike Iraq and Libya, which are only recent post-colonial creations. Iranian nationalism exists independently of the mullahs' regime and is deeply rooted in the population.

However, Iran remains a mosaic of dominated peoples who make up almost half of the population alongside the Persians themselves. These include the Kurds and Azeris in the north of the country, the Arabs in the west in Khuzestan on the border with Iraq, which is also Iran's main oil-producing region, and the Baloch in the east on the border with Pakistan.

Could the weakening of the Iranian central state resulting from the American-Israeli aggression jeopardise Iran's very survival within its current borders? This will depend to a large extent on the actions of other regional powers, but it cannot be ruled out, particularly on the part of the Kurds and Azeris on the one hand, and the Baluchis on the other.

The risk seems most immediate on the Baloch side, as there is already a fairly powerful Baloch nationalist movement. Furthermore, neighbouring Pakistan, which is currently at war with the Afghan Taliban, may have an interest in weakening Iran, the strongest ally of its Taliban enemies. As for the Azeris, they too may want to weaken their neighbour by fuelling Azeri irredentism, because Iran has now become the main protector of their hereditary enemy, Armenia, following Russia's withdrawal from the region. As for the Kurds, their Iraqi brothers may see this as the ideal opportunity to help them break free from Iranian domination and expand and consolidate the territory they already control. The ability to ensure a peaceful and orderly transition in Iran therefore also seems highly uncertain at this stage.

IV • What does Saudi Arabia want?

Among the major regional players, there is one that is sure to play a decisive role but whose future intentions remain uncertain at this stage: Saudi Arabia. This conflict comes at a particularly complicated time for the kingdom. Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has just had to give up his grandiose dreams of modernising the country with the fiasco of the Neom project.

He is also engaged in a quasi-war with his enemy brother Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), the leader of the United Arab Emirates, a close ally of Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu, who opposes him in Yemen, Sudan and Somalia. In fact, he is challenging his hegemony in the region. The current conflict, if it lasts long enough and does not quickly find a solution in line with the wishes of Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu, could deal a severe blow to the flourishing economy of Dubai and the United Arab Emirates, as an airport hub and haven of peace for the very rich. This would certainly not cause MBS undue grief...

MBS was certainly consulted before the Israeli-American strikes and apparently approved them. But going forward, he would certainly not tolerate the installation in Tehran of a regime that is a vassal of Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump and allied with MBZ against him. With Qatar and Erdogan's Turkey, he will most likely do everything in his power to prevent such an eventuality from materialising.

V • Netanyahu the big winner? Yes, but...

Benjamin Netanyahu seems, at first glance, to be one of the big winners of the operation, provided that the Iranian strikes do not cause too much damage in Israel. After Hamas and Hezbollah, he is effectively destroying a potential existential threat to his country. And he has managed to drag Donald Trump into this adventure, even though Trump humiliated him a few weeks ago by ignoring his opinion on Gaza. This military action, long supported by Israeli public opinion, should increase his chances of remaining in power. It also diverts international attention away from what is happening in Gaza, where he has once again blocked all humanitarian aid, and in the West Bank, where Palestinians are confined to their homes while settlers continue their abuses.

However, the final outcome is likely to be less favourable. It will depend first and foremost on the outcome of the crisis in Iran itself. If the region is destabilised in the long term, and in particular if Israel's close allies, the United Arab Emirates, emerge weakened without an allied regime managing to establish itself in Iran, the operation will undoubtedly appear, with hindsight, less positive for Israel. This is especially true given that opposition to Iran's mullahs had been one of the main drivers encouraging many Sunni regimes to align themselves with the United States and Israel. Once this threat has disappeared, the game is likely to become much more difficult for Israel in the region.

VI • It is unclear whether Donald Trump will manage to extricate himself from the Iranian quagmire

As for Donald Trump's United States, while the war against Iran runs counter to all his campaign promises to end distant foreign interventions, it does have the advantage of helping him extricate himself from the miasma of the Epstein affair in domestic politics and put the first serious economic difficulties into perspective by attacking an enemy that no one in the United States would think of defending.

Rallying around the flag may help him consolidate the authoritarian shift he wants to impose on American democracy ahead of the midterms next November. However, the final outcome will also depend on how events unfold.

In the case of Iran, Donald Trump has clearly miscalculated his strategy: according to Steve Witkoff, he was genuinely convinced that, given the armada he had assembled around the country, the Iranians would yield to his conditions without him having to attack. This was not the case, and he had to decide to attack Iran if he did not want to lose face.

Until now, he had fared rather well in the series of foreign operations he had launched, such as in Venezuela in January and Iran in June, without committing American forces on the ground for the long term. But at this stage, there is no guarantee that he will be able to extricate himself from the Iranian quagmire as quickly this time around.

VII • Vladimir Putin has less to lose than it might seem at first glance

Beyond the region, there is one player who seems, at first glance, to be one of the big losers in this war: Vladimir Putin. After Venezuela and Cuba, which are in a very difficult position, he is now losing another traditional ally, and an important one at that. Will this war significantly weaken him and force him to lower his guard in Ukraine in particular? Paradoxically, this seems unlikely.

Firstly, Iranian arms deliveries, particularly Shahed suicide drones, have certainly provided decisive assistance to Russia, which is embroiled in the war against Ukraine. But today, these flows have largely dried up. Russia now produces its own Shahed and Geran drones, which it is using against Ukraine. Furthermore, the multitude of sophisticated American munitions that Israel and the United States are currently using against Iran are weapons that cannot be delivered to Ukraine. On the contrary, the Pentagon's need to replenish its stocks in the coming months is likely to further slow down US arms deliveries to Ukraine.

Finally, the tensions over oil and gas prices and supplies resulting from this conflict, and in particular the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, are a real blessing for Putin. They should enable him to replenish his war chest despite the reinforced European and American sanctions.

VIII • Xi Jinping is taking a big gamble and will have to break his silence

While Russia may not be losing as much as it might appear at first glance in this war, the same cannot be said for China. After Venezuela, it is losing another privileged source of low-cost oil, which is vital for an economy that is highly dependent on external supplies. Furthermore, this region of the world is also crucial for the transit of its exports to Europe. Allowing the United States and its allies to control it alone is a major geopolitical risk.

Beyond this economic dimension, China also risks losing not only face but also geopolitical weight if it appears unable to come to the aid of its allies in difficulty, as is the case, after Venezuela, with the mullahs' Iran, with whom it had nevertheless concluded a strategic cooperation pact with great fanfare in 2021.

For the time being, China has chosen to keep a low diplomatic profile in the face of the American-Israeli offensive, but it will most likely seek to exert all possible influence to prevent a regime aligned with Donald Trump's United States from establishing a lasting foothold in Iran.

IX • Among the clear losers are the United Nations and international law

The United Nations and multilateralism are clearly among the losers in this affair. Unlike what happened in Iraq in 2002, the United States and Israel have chosen to attack Iran without even pretending to seek any backing from international law or the United Nations. This is despite the fact that Donald Trump himself had still succumbed to this ritual by having his peace plan for Gaza approved by the United Nations Security Council last November.

Is this the final nail in the coffin of international law and multilateralism? We have feared this since Donald Trump's return to the White House and the proliferation of attacks against the United Nations, its agencies, the World Health Organisation, the International Criminal Court and its judges... but this time the eulogy may well have been delivered in Tehran.

It is true that for many years now, the United Nations has proved incapable of resolving the most deadly conflicts, whether in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Sudan, Myanmar, Gaza, Ukraine or elsewhere. But the official recognition, as it were, of this now complete anomie in the context of this war undoubtedly brings the world into an even more dangerous phase.

X • A disaster for the European Union

Last but not least, among the big losers in this affair are, of course, the Europeans and the European Union. The Gulf region is essential for our gas and oil supplies; it plays a major role in the transit of goods between Europe and Asia; its destabilisation is likely to have direct repercussions for Europeans in terms of war, terrorism and waves of migration. In short, it plays a much more important role for us than for the United States. And yet Europeans are completely absent from the current crisis, just as they have been completely absent from the settlement of the Gaza crisis since 7 October 2023.

Yet the signing of the JCPOA in 2015, the Iranian nuclear agreement that Donald Trump then tore up in 2018, had been a great success for European diplomacy. We had demonstrated that we were credible interlocutors, capable of helping to avoid armed confrontation in the region. But since then, by being unable in particular to make Benjamin Netanyahu see reason and force him to respect international law in Gaza and the West Bank, the European Union has lost all credibility in the region as a defender of multilateralism and a potential player in balanced negotiations.

And in a world where only military force now counts, the weakness of our armies forces us to content ourselves with watching the missiles fly by and praying that the war waged by Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu will not have too negative consequences for us. The worst thing, however, would be to simply fall in line behind Trump and Netanyahu afterward and join them in this dangerous adventure. This would be another step towards vassalage, which would be disastrous for Europe and Europeans.