

Warfare for a Dying World Order: What the U.S.-Israel-Iran War Means

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ABSTRACT *Contemporary warfare increasingly reflects an international environment in which military force is deployed unilaterally and beyond established legal frameworks. In this context, war emerges as a central instrument for managing contested sovereignties and “surplus populations” through two distinct but overlapping modalities: annihilatory warfare, aimed at erasing the conditions for human presence, and asymmetrical confrontation, in which overwhelming force encounters adaptive strategies of resistance. Iran constitutes a critical case within this evolving landscape. Decades of sanctions, isolation, and geopolitical pressure have contributed to the development of asymmetrical and unconventional warfare capabilities that complicate, though do not eliminate, structural power imbalances. These dynamics resonate with earlier post-Cold War patterns of unilateralism and the instrumentalization of international law, yet also point to an important transformation: the declining need for legal or moral justification by dominant powers. Taken together, these developments suggest the emergence of a post-unipolar condition, in which the coherence of post-Cold War unipolarity has eroded without being replaced by a stable alternative order. Within this framework, the “Iran war” may be understood as an early manifestation of this phase, marked by fragmented authority, weakened normative constraints, and increasingly unrestrained uses of force.*

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Introduction

It is increasingly clear that the world is entering a new phase, ushered in by the growing relevance of raw force, often in the form of states' bare military might, utilized unilaterally and outside of international law. Indeed, military interventions, and wars where they develop, are a crucial feature of this world order. They are much more present than in the past as a means to manage "surplus populations,"¹ or unwanted populations whose fate has become inextricably intertwined with land property and resources, and unruly sovereignties, which must be curbed and tamed. Two types of military action seem to emerge: one of annihilation, like we see in Gaza and Lebanon, where we have one might that destroys the possibility for human presence to take over the land, without encountering substantial obstacles; and one of asymmetry, like we see in Iran, where overwhelming military power is unleashed with the same purpose of killing life, but is met with asymmetrical tactics of warfare and resistance.

This scenario is not entirely new. Following the collapse of the Cold War world order, 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, Antonio Cassese, the first President of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, argued that contemporary warfare is characterized by unilaterality, asymmetry of force, and the unwillingness to conquer a territory "traditionally" but, rather, by the will to establish military, political and economic hegemony on it.²

In such warfare, international law is often bent and instrumentalized to serve the purpose of the strongest party. In an interview, Italian scholar Danilo Zolo argued that another characteristic of warfare in the post-Cold War world is the vagueness of the label "terrorist," which helps bypass legal obligations under international law, and that, as such, is widely deployed as a justification for unilateral, illegal, terroristic-like state intervention.³ Referencing Tunisian lawyer and scholar Yadh Ben Achour, Zolo reflects that warfare is justified through the claim that wars serve "to liberate oneself from terrorist aggression," but that, because of the vagueness of the label of "a terrorist," one might forget who's terrorizing whom.

While many similarities exist between what we are seeing today in Iran and its regional neighborhood and this post-Cold War unipolarity, one major difference is the brazenness of the unipole and, I would add, the other world powers. Not only justificatory references to international law or saviorism are abandoned, but war victory is also unilaterally declared in unexpected and unverifiable ways, to the point that, during an interview in March 2026 former CIA director David Petraeus, a veteran of Iraq, declared, "The war ends when Donald Trump says that it ends [...] but of course, we will have to see if the Iranians agree and also end it."⁴ The subtext here is that, in any case, what Iran decides to do matters only up to a point because of unbalanced military power in favor of the United States. The unipole can sustain the

cost of entering a war with no clear plan and can strategize “by ear” as bombs rain down and the death toll increases; and largely, it can do so unchallenged, certainly not challenged by other world powers, such as China and Russia.

Despite the diffuse expectation that a new multipolar world order was about to emerge, four decades into post-Cold War history, things do not seem to have changed much. The most visible transformation has been a greater disregard for international law, since today’s world powers do not even bother to make up lies about weapons of mass destruction to justify unilateral military intervention. Faint and vague references to “immediate threats” seem to be enough. Is this the epitome of unipolarity, or is it a different, post-unilateral world order forming?

Warfare Playbook of a Dying World Order

At the end of December 2025, Iranians took to the streets, igniting the biggest and fiercest cycle of protests since 1979. In a familiar pattern recurring since 2017, protests initiated over economic issues and difficulties, and quickly turned to radical demands for political change, spreading nationally and targeting not exclusively governmental policies and performance but rather, the regime and the state themselves. The protests were widespread and became larger as Donald Trump and the contender to the national leadership

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of Iran, the son of the deposed king of Iran, Reza Pahlavi, declared that “help is on the way,” inciting Iranians to protest more and more intensely. A friend living in North Tehran mentioned that during the night between January 8 and 9, everybody was out in a spirit of defiance, courage, and unity. Streets were full of people from different walks of life and with different ideologies who, as we discovered later, got repressed and slaughtered in, up to this day, uncertain numbers – likely, tens of thousands. Later, Pahlavi made it clear that the protesters who were killed were collateral damage in his view. As he explained during an interview, demonstrating a lack of empathy and disregard for international humanitarian law, wars have victims.⁵

The protests opened a phase of crisis that resonated internationally, to the point that policymakers in Washington and Tel Aviv assessed that the Islamic Republic was at its weakest point and therefore, as “bombardable” as never before. As Iran traverses

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unprecedented crises, economically and in terms of political legitimacy, and with fewer and fewer allies in the region, Israel and the U.S. moved to “seize an opportunity” as precious as none before, striking an attack that neither Netanyahu nor Trump bothered to cast under the justification of international law.

It should be mentioned that the first attack took place while diplomatic negotiations were ongoing between Iranian and American representatives in Geneva, on the topic of nuclear enrichment and the missile program. On February 26, the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, tasked with brokering direct talks between the two parties, declared that significant progress was being made in the negotiations, but on February 28, the Israeli-U.S. attacks began. Trump declared that the attacks were motivated by the lack of progress in the negotiations, due to the unreasonable attitude of Iranian diplomats, and by an imminent threat posed by Iran to U.S. national security. Today, we

know that Trump's assertions must be taken with more than a grain of salt. Not only were the Iranians ready to make unprecedented concessions at the negotiating table,⁶ but numerous experts and policymakers have also disagreed with Trump and his administration that Iran posed a threat,⁷ including Joe Kent, the former director of the National Counterterrorism Center and a far-right political figure and Trump supporter.

Iran's reaction to the attack was to retaliate against Israel and the U.S.' regional allies, in an attempt to put pressure on the invincible military might that the U.S. and Israel together represent, via their allies. We know that several countries have been targeted, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Kurdish military positions in Iraq have also been bombed by Iran. The Islamic Republic has also reinforced its military presence on the Western border of Iran, as the U.S. reported that Kurdish political organizations and militias are preparing for a joint U.S.-Israeli-Kurdish ground offensive, which Iranian Kurdish organizations have always denied. At the border with Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani authorities deployed tanks after Iran launched a drone strike on the airport in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and after another drone fell near a school building in the village of Shakarabad, an incident for which Iran denies responsibility. The regional spillover of the war has taken root: Many wonder how Türkiye (unsuccessfully targeted by an Iranian missile, something Iran denies being

responsible for) and Syria will react vis-à-vis a joint Kurdish-U.S.-Israeli military initiative. The Lebanese Hezbollah and the Yemeni Houthis have confirmed their allegiance to Iran. The partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz also bears consequences, at a much larger level, as it is reported that China had talks with Iran to negotiate a safe passage of the oil it had purchased.

As the weaker party, Iran is using different asymmetrical strategies. Iran's goal is to hurt and pressure the U.S. and Israel by leveraging all of its power, from military retaliation capacity to working relations with world powers, such as China, which Iran hopes would push for an end to the conflict. In the meantime, chaos and devastation continue unabated. In Palestine's West Bank, Israel is proceeding with the annexation of the occupied territories at an unprecedented speed, and so is Israel's penetration into Lebanon.⁸ The carpet bombing of South Beirut and the evacuation order issued by the Israeli forces to more than half a million inhabitants have been accompanied by a ground invasion. Israeli Minister Bezalel Smotrich celebrated the strikes on south Beirut and promised that Israel will devastate it like Gaza's Khan Younis, and Lieutenant General Eyal Zamir declared that Israel will not stop until Hezbollah is disarmed, an uncertain measure that opens up the possibility for an indefinite permanence of Israeli forces at least in Southern Lebanon. The number of victims grows fast, in the thousands, in Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine.

Things continue to evolve extremely rapidly on the ground, also because of the indeterminacy of the political goals that the U.S. and Israel have. Trump, along with representatives of his administration from Rubio to Hegseth, has interchangeably shifted between "unconditional surrender" (met with defiance by Tehran), the destruction of Iran's military capacity, and regime change. Regime change has taken different forms, from killing the most confrontational elite factions to facilitate an internal turnover so that a less confrontational elite faction could emerge, to replacing the current political leaders with an alternative person externally imposed. None has materialized. Iran is today run by authorities that want to continue the war and are convinced that compromise is undesirable, if not unrealistic. The external candidate to the national leadership, Reza Pahlavi, does not seem to inspire Trump's favor. Also, he will not be brought to power by popular demands and support in Iran. In fact, he remains a controversial figure both in the diaspora and foremost within Iran, despite roaring and well-funded propaganda in his favor.

So, for the moment, the bombing continues, mostly because the military power of the U.S. and Israel allows for it. In fact, bombing remains the best option in the absence of clear political and diplomatic goals, which neither Israel nor the U.S. really needs, considering that their military capacity is not time-bounded or close to exhaustion. It is raw military might that dictates the rules of the game.



Cemetary of schoolchildren killed in a U.S.-Israeli strike on a girls' primary school are seen during a mass funeral in Minab, Iran on March 3, 2026.
STRINGER / AA

While the political objective might be ambiguous, the military strategy deployed by the U.S. and Israeli forces seems to be clear: to make life impossible. After three years of a genocidal military campaign in Gaza, the Israeli forces appear to have a refined list of targets and military strategy. Civil sites such as hospitals, schools, and pharmaceutical production centers have been targeted. According to the WHO, medical sites are being systematically targeted in Iran and Lebanon, unveiling a common pattern across Israeli strategies in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran,⁹ with the “June war” being a test. In the June war of 2025, hospitals were also specifically targeted, in scenes that were described as “a bloodbath.”¹⁰ But life is rendered impossible also through the targeting of economic and energy infrastructures. It is in this light that the bombing of oil depots and major

energy sites should be understood. Severing the people’s access to gas, electricity, running water, oil, and energy in general is part and parcel of a strategy that targets civilians through exhaustion. Furthermore, the health and environmental damage that has followed such attacks is significant, with UN health experts also sharing “nuclear concerns.”¹¹

Moreover, experts have started to notice the resemblance between Israeli attacks in Iran and Gaza. According to Amjad Iraqi, an International Crisis Group senior analyst, the similarities are striking for the type of sites targeted, such as medical and life-enabling infrastructures, and for the lack of restraint that Israeli warfare seems to have, as no diplomatic effort is used to balance reckless bombings.¹² Another resemblance has to do with the accusation that schools and

hospitals are being misguided as civilian sites, while, in reality, they serve as military and commando operational headquarters. The Israel-supporting news corporation *Iran International*, for instance, denounced that “IRGC commanders hold meetings in hospitals” already in February, citing anonymous sources.¹³ This has a striking resemblance to the narratives provided by the Israeli military about the existence of Hamas tunnels under hospitals in Gaza. Nicola Perugini and Neve Gordon have written extensively about these narratives, contextualizing them in the history of human shields, an expression that identifies the misuse by combatants of the civilians’ bodies as a shield in situations of conflict.¹⁴ As the lives of civilians must be protected in conflicts according to international law, Israeli and American lawmakers have repeatedly accused Hamas of misusing Palestinian civilians as shields in warfare.¹⁵ Building on this, Israeli lawmakers have then reworked the provisions of international law to innovate Israeli laws and theorize that civilians are a legitimate target when they “hide” or “shield” militants and combatants.¹⁶ Not “shying away” from this blatant violation of international humanitarian law are European lawmakers. In a clear example of this, German former Minister of Foreign Affairs Annalena Baerbock argued that Palestinian civilians and civilian sites could lose their protected status “if terrorists abuse this status.”¹⁷

Another resemblance is the use of AI-powered military technology in combat, in particular, for the

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identification of targets. The use of the AI-powered software “Where’s Daddy?” and “Lavender” in Gaza is sadly famous, and most of the drones deployed in Gaza are AI-powered. Lavender and “Where’s Daddy?”-equipped drones have been used to identify and target Hamas combatants, causing the death of an average of 30 people around them.¹⁸ These drones are responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians and children. AI is being used to bomb Iran, too.¹⁹ Both Israel and the U.S. are using AI models, including Anthropic’s “Claude,” to identify targets. AI models make decisions about the legitimacy of a target quicker than humans, but they also make mistakes. Examples include the bombing of a public park in Tehran called “Police,” which has confused the model, and also include the elementary school Shajarah Tayyebah in Minab, close to a military base, where over 160 children were killed.²⁰

The unmatched military power of the U.S. and Israeli unipole makes it in-

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dependent of calculations for survival and accountability. However, distinct from the Cold War era, there seems to be no challenger, although competitor states exist –notably, China and Russia. While one cannot define this scenario as one of unipolarity, multipolarity does not seem to be the right definition either. A post-unipolar dying world order, perhaps, is the best approximation.

The Regime, the People, and Foreign Intervention

Iranians live in an impossible situation today, caught between forces of death, quite literally. As bombs rain on their houses and their heads, national authorities add to the terror lived by the citizens by warning them that no mercy will be shown to the “soldiers of Israel” who are “acting as the fifth column of the Zionist regime and its eyes inside the country” – as the intelligence minister said in a televised message on March 7²¹ This message increased the fear within the population that authorities might go after them randomly.

According to an Iranian colleague based in Türkiye, following the June war, authorities arrested over 7,000 individuals and deported approximately 1.5 million Afghan refugees to Afghanistan, accusing them of espionage on behalf.

The regime is weak, but it is far from being dead. Not only has the void of power left by the killing of apical figures in the national elite, such as the Supreme Leader Khamenei and Ali Larijani, been filled by authorities that act in this emergency, but also the expectation that the state would crumble shortly after the start of the bombing did not materialize. The population did not storm the streets and the centers of power to take state institutions over, as predicted by Israeli and U.S. experts, and Iran has an unforeseen retaliation capacity. Militarily, Iran has a decentralized system of defense and a chain of command able to survive the killing of its head. The regime has been navigating a deep legitimacy crisis for decades now. In this situation, not only has the regime accumulated knowledge that enables it to manage the threat of instability, but also, the bombings have had the effect of reinvigorating nationalism within the population.

The regime’s legitimacy crisis is significant. The elimination of political diversity within the ruling elites since the late 2000s and early 2010s has created an ideological and security stiffening of the state, alienating popular consensus. The Islamic Republic has been following a global process of de-democratization, which has

seen ruling elites across the world increasingly relying on security and repression for their stability. Certainly, this process has taken specific forms in different countries, depending on contextual factors. In the case of Iran, across the decades, we have seen the systematic and increasingly violent repression of civil society actors and independent political organizations, from student and women's organizations to trade unions. While the regime has compensated this authoritarian involution with the attempt at expanding a loyal base through cultural and social initiatives,²² especially since the 2009-2010 fracture represented by the repression of the Green movement, the results of such efforts have not saved the regime from progressively losing legitimacy. Protest cycles have erupted regularly in the 2010s and 2020s, marked by a radicalization of the demands expressed. In the course of the 2010s, demands for a reform of the existing system have been gradually replaced by demands for a substantial change of the existing political and constitutional system. The deep economic and diplomatic crises pushed Iran toward Russia and China, weakening the grip that liberal international norms (traditionally promoted by the EU) had on the country. Unable to offer a solution to the real-life problems of the population – a roaring inflation, increase of poverty, lack of employment opportunity, also caused by predatory economic policies imposed by the national governments – the state relied on repressing the angry protesters who cyclically have taken to the streets in despera-

tion and defiance. Asma Abdi rightly argues that this is a crisis of social reproduction,²³ which weaves together economic and political demands for radical change, considering the impossibility of reproducing and sustaining life in Iran due to political violence and economic dispossession.

In the course of the past two decades, this shift to a much deeper crisis and much more radical demands for change has appeared clearly in the patterns of political mobilizations, too. This radicalization is not only evident in the slogans but also in the wider diffusion of protests, which decentralized Tehran as the political center of dissent, and their increased cross-class nature, which decentralized urban middle classes as the political protagonists of the mobilizations. Faced with more diffuse protests, both socially and geographically, the Iranian state relied more on repression.

And yet, contrary to predictions by monarchists, Israel and U.S. supporters and experts, the Iranian people did not take to the streets in a joyous celebration of Trump and Netanyahu's "bombs for freedom."²⁴ This does not mean that dissent disappeared, not at all. Rather, it means that freedom and liberation are seldom, if ever, achieved with bombing campaigns and external regime change. There is a substantial consensus among political scientists and experts that foreign military interventions may be successful in removing dictators but are never successful in creating liberal democratic systems.²⁵ On

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the contrary, they increase the risk of civil war, protracted violence through insurgency and counterinsurgency, political violence, and instability. This is corroborated by real-life examples, from Libya to Syria, from Iraq to Afghanistan. However, the unipole does not seem to be interested in reckoning with this reality, perhaps because they are not really interested in the legitimate demands for democracy and freedom of the Iranian people, but just want to weaponize them.

What’s Ahead

This might look like more of the “same old” imperial politics, where the most powerful take territory and resources without asking for permission. This unipolar world order, however, would hardly survive without negotiations with other powerful global poles, for example, China. In the past years, we have witnessed an increasing disregard for the princi-

ple of the inviolability of national sovereignty –including the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the successive abandonment of Ukraine, the genocide in Gaza, regular invasions of Lebanon, and bombing campaigns in Syria, Venezuela, and Iran.

It should be clear that all the dominant global powers rejoice in the possibilities opened by these violations. Violations, in fact, normalize the idea that national sovereignty becomes conditional upon their interests. However, this is only possible as the global powers avoid jeopardizing each other’s interests. It follows that this is neither unipolarity nor multipolarity, whose advent the experts have been theorizing in recent years. In fact, unipolarity is not dying to facilitate the birth of a system in which opposed states, values, and interests will balance each other out, creating opportunities for the emancipation of the oppressed people, as in, roughly, the Cold War. Rather, it will be a multipolarity characterized by a unity of intent and a lack of competition between superpowers, to the detriment of people’s self-determination. While things change rapidly, we already see the rehearsal for this in the way in which Trump seems open to considering “friendly” religious leaders in power in Iran, protecting everybody’s interests. The “Iran war” might be the first war of this new era. ■

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