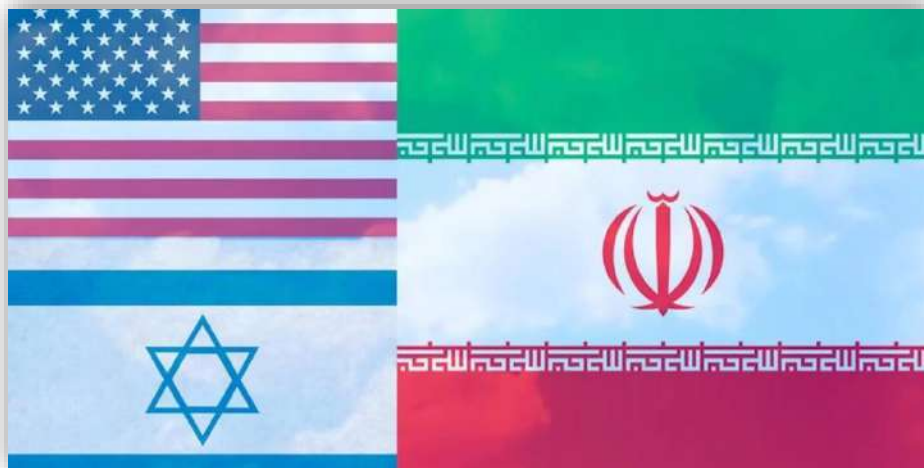


# WEEKLY ANALYSIS

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## FROM IMPOSED WAR TO VICTORY: EXPLAINING IRAN'S SUCCESS IN THE CONFLICT WITH THE UNITED STATES AND THE ZIONIST REGIME

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In this issue:

- From Imposed War to Victory: Explaining Iran’s Success in the Conflict with the United States and the Zionist Regime..... 3
- Structural Resilience of Iran’s System and Continuity of Function Under Crisis ..... 4
- Iran’s Counter-Response Capability and the Creation of Deterrence ..... 4
- Relative Victory and Its Strategic Dimensions ..... 6
- Failure to Achieve the Strategic Objective of Paralysis..... 6
- Transformation of the Logic of War: From Imposing Outcomes to Managing Crisis ..... 6
- Exposure of the Limits of Military Power..... 7
- Redefining the Concept of Victory ..... 8
- The Nature of Iran’s Victory ..... 8
- Conclusion ..... 8
- References:..... 9

Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



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## FROM IMPOSED WAR TO VICTORY: EXPLAINING IRAN'S SUCCESS IN THE CONFLICT WITH THE UNITED STATES AND THE ZIONIST REGIME

### Introduction

The joint military attack carried out by the United States and the Zionist regime against Iran appeared to be grounded in a particular strategic assessment. According to this assessment, delivering a decisive, concentrated, and forceful blow—especially targeting leadership, command structures, and critical military infrastructure—would significantly disrupt Iran's ability to respond and pave the way for achieving a swift and conclusive outcome, potentially leading to the collapse of the system or its surrender. This perception was rooted in previous U.S. experiences—particularly in Iraq—where short-duration, high-intensity wars emphasized the “first strike” as a determining factor in the rapid disintegration of the opponent's structure. However, the course of developments on the ground demonstrated a significant gap between this initial assessment and the realities that unfolded. Several weeks after the initiation of military operations against Iran, not only were there no clear signs of systemic collapse or a complete breakdown in decision-making mechanisms, but the country also managed to sustain its political and military functions. At the same time, Iran was able to deliver damaging responses across multiple levels against its adversaries.

This situation raises several critical questions: What characteristics within Iran's political and military structure enable it to absorb shocks and prevent disruptions from cascading throughout the entire system? Are we witnessing a multi-layered and distributed structure whose dependence on key individuals is less than initially assumed?

Alongside this issue, the nature and scope of Iran's responses also merit careful examination. Were these responses merely defensive reactions, or did they reflect a distinct model of conflict management capable of altering the adversary's strategic calculations? If such a model indeed exists, to what extent was it able to shift the logic of warfare from the “imposition of a rapid outcome” to the “management of a prolonged and costly crisis”?

This paper seeks to address these questions through an analytical lens, focusing on two primary axes: “structure and continuity of function” and “patterns of response and deterrence.” In doing so, it aims to



propose a conceptual framework for a deeper understanding of this confrontation and its broader implications.

### **STRUCTURAL RESILIENCE OF IRAN'S SYSTEM AND CONTINUITY OF FUNCTION UNDER CRISIS**

One of the prevailing assumptions at the outset of the joint military campaign by the United States and the Zionist regime against Iran was that targeting the highest levels of leadership and command would both disrupt Iran's ability to respond and create conditions of internal instability. This logic was based on the presupposition that decision-making within the Iranian system was highly centralized and dependent on key individuals, such that the removal of those figures would result in strategic paralysis.

However, developments in the Iranian case demonstrated a clear departure from this simplified assumption. The continuation of Iran's response capability, alongside the preservation of its core political and military functions despite the elimination of senior leadership figures, revealed that its decision-making and operational structure is not solely dependent on a single individual or a limited inner circle. Rather, the system proved capable of absorbing the shock caused by leadership losses and preventing disruption from cascading across the broader institutional framework.

This outcome points to the existence of a multi-layered structural system in Iran. Different levels of decision-making, command, and execution are interconnected in such a way that when one level is compromised, other levels are able to compensate and maintain continuity. At the same time, the persistence and scale of Iran's counterattacks signaled that the removal of top military commanders did not lead to the breakdown of the chain of command.

This is a critical observation, as in many military doctrines the primary objective of an initial strike is to disrupt decision-making processes and prevent effective retaliation. The failure to achieve this objective in the case of Iran indicates that the country possesses a multi-dimensional and resilient decision-making system capable of sustaining operations even under severe pressure on its highest command structures.

### **IRAN'S COUNTER-RESPONSE CAPABILITY AND THE CREATION OF DETERRENCE**

Another significant feature of the conflict between the U.S.–Zionist coalition and Iran is that Iran's response capability did not remain confined to a purely defensive posture. Instead, it evolved into a model



that may be described as active and asymmetric deterrence, which effectively altered the strategic calculations of its adversaries.

In practical terms, Iran demonstrated the capacity to employ a diverse range of instruments in response to military pressure. These tools were not necessarily symmetrical to the nature of the attacks but were nevertheless effective in directly influencing the opponent's calculations and increasing the costs associated with continuing or expanding the conflict. This model can be understood through three main components:

1. Mobile precision missile and drone capabilities Iran employed highly mobile, difficult-to-detect, land-based missile and drone systems. Through these capabilities, it was able to target the territory of the Zionist regime as well as U.S. bases, naval assets, and infrastructure across the region.
2. Activation of aligned regional networks by mobilizing allied groups across the region, Iran effectively expanded the operational scope of the conflict. This created logistical and operational challenges for its adversaries. For example, threats from regional actors forced U.S. aircraft carriers to alter their routes, significantly increasing operational costs and reducing flexibility.<sup>1</sup>
3. Expansion of the conflict into geo-economic domains Iran extended the confrontation into the geo-economic sphere by demonstrating its ability to target maritime assets associated with its adversaries. This resulted in the disruption of transit through the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>2</sup>

In effect, Iran utilized control over the Strait of Hormuz as a strategic lever within global economic calculations. The significance of this development lies in shifting the conflict from a purely military engagement to a multi-dimensional crisis. Energy security, global markets, and the economic stability of opposing states became directly vulnerable.

The combination of asymmetric military responses and geo-economic leverage imposed a structural limitation on the anti-Iran campaign: increasing costs and decreasing the predictability of outcomes. Under such conditions, despite having superior conventional military capabilities, the opposing coalition was unable to achieve a rapid, decisive, and low-cost victory. Consequently, the logic of the conflict shifted from the imposition of a swift outcome to the management of a prolonged and costly crisis.

It is important to note that this situation does not represent a complete deadlock or a decisive defeat for the opposing side. Rather, it reflects the emergence of a complex and costly equilibrium in which continued



military action produces consequences across multiple domains and extends beyond the battlefield. In this context, Iran's response capability—particularly in its asymmetric and multi-layered form—limited the effectiveness of military force as a decisive tool and transformed it into a high-risk and unpredictable instrument.

### **RELATIVE VICTORY AND ITS STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS**

Based on the analysis above, it can be argued that Iran has, thus far, achieved a **relative victory** in the conflict. This outcome can be understood across several dimensions, the first of which is as follows:

#### **FAILURE TO ACHIEVE THE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE OF PARALYSIS**

The United States and the Zionist regime, operating under the assumption that Iran's system was highly leader-centric, believed that eliminating top leadership would disrupt response capabilities and trigger internal instability. However, the continuity of institutional functions, the persistence of counterattacks, and the absence of political collapse demonstrated that this foundational assumption was incorrect.

This miscalculation fundamentally undermined the logic of the decisive first strike. As such, it constitutes a significant strategic failure for the planners of the war, as it invalidated the core premise upon which their initial strategy was based.

#### **TRANSFORMATION OF THE LOGIC OF WAR: FROM IMPOSING OUTCOMES TO MANAGING CRISIS**

While the United States initially sought a rapid and low-cost victory, Iran, through a combination of asymmetric military responses (including missile, drone, and proxy-based operations) and geo-economic leverage (such as the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, as well as threats to global energy security and trade), effectively expanded the spectrum of costs.

Moreover, Iran adopted a strategy of reciprocal deterrence: in response to threats—particularly those attributed to U.S. leadership regarding potential strikes on Iran's energy and transportation infrastructure—Iran signaled its willingness to retaliate by targeting energy and information infrastructures across the region. This escalation dynamic considerably broadened the potential scale and consequences of the conflict.

As a result, the cumulative cost of continued confrontation rose to a level that prevented the opposing side, despite maintaining numerical and technological military superiority, from achieving a swift and low-cost outcome. Under such conditions, U.S. leadership was compelled to move away from a strategy focused on decisive victory toward one centered on crisis management, including calls for ceasefire arrangements and their unilateral and open-ended extension.<sup>4</sup> This shift is, in itself, indicative of a failure to achieve the original strategic objective.

### **EXPOSURE OF THE LIMITS OF MILITARY POWER**

This conflict demonstrated that military superiority alone, when confronted with a strategically adaptive opponent employing decentralization, asymmetric responses, and geo-economic escalation, loses its capacity to impose outcomes decisively. This revelation carries significant implications not only for the United States and its allies but also for broader international perceptions of deterrence credibility.

For Iran, however, the implications extend beyond the battlefield. The conflict illustrated that even a major power may be constrained when facing a resilient adversary capable of imposing manageable costs while sustaining its own operational continuity. What became evident was not the absolute incapacity of the United States, but rather the functional limitations of military power when applied against a durable and adaptive opponent.

For U.S. allies, this experience raises a critical question: does military superiority necessarily guarantee decisive outcomes under all conditions? For Iran, the lesson is that through the strategic integration of diverse tools and the deliberate escalation of costs, it is possible to reduce the effectiveness of superior force.

In summary, while military power remains a crucial Element in international conflict, it does not, on its own, guarantee political success—particularly when it is not aligned with the structural characteristics and strategic approach of the opposing side. This gap between military capability and strategic effectiveness represents the true limitation of military power, a phenomenon clearly illustrated not only in this case but also in other prolonged conflicts, such as the extended U.S. engagement in Afghanistan.



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## REDEFINING THE CONCEPT OF VICTORY

In asymmetric warfare, victory is not necessarily achieved by the complete destruction of the adversary. Rather, it is attained by the actor that successfully avoids its own collapse, frustrates the objectives of the attacker, and raises the costs of conflict to such a degree that continuation becomes untenable.

Iran's position in this conflict reflects precisely such an outcome. Not only did the state avoid systemic collapse, but it also sustained effective functionality despite severe shocks. It preserved—and in certain respects strengthened—its deterrent capabilities, while placing its opponent in a position where it could neither credibly declare victory nor withdraw without incurring reputational and strategic costs.

Taken together, the outcome of this conflict does not constitute an absolute victory. Instead, it represents a form of “victory through survival and denial”—a condition in which Iran succeeded in altering the logic of the conflict and demonstrated that even in the face of overwhelming military superiority, the rules of the strategic game can be redefined.

## THE NATURE OF IRAN'S VICTORY

Overall, Iran's success cannot be understood as a traditional victory defined by the defeat of an opponent. Rather, it is a form of victory grounded in survival, continuity of function, the frustration of enemy objectives, and the imposition of a new strategic logic upon a more powerful adversary.

At the strategic level, achieving such an outcome against a coalition possessing overwhelming military and economic superiority constitutes, in itself, a historically significant success. Iran effectively transformed a war designed to eliminate or incapacitate it into a field for demonstrating resilience and reshaping the rules of engagement.

This outcome may be described as a qualified yet highly meaningful victory—one that underscores the evolving nature of conflict and the growing importance of adaptability, resilience, and strategic innovation in contemporary warfare.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the most important point to emphasize in this analysis is the gap between what the United States and the Zionist regime assumed about Iran's system and what they actually encountered in



practice. They believed that by removing a small number of individuals at the top, the entire system would collapse. However, Iran demonstrated that it possesses a multi-layered and distributed structure—one in which the failure of a single component does not paralyze the whole system.

At the same time, Iran did not limit itself to a purely defensive posture. Instead, by combining relatively low-cost but precise missile and drone capabilities, activating aligned regional actors, and leveraging the Strait of Hormuz as a critical artery of global energy, it was able to expand the conflict beyond a limited battlefield into a broader regional and even global crisis. The outcome was that the United States and Israel were unable to achieve the “rapid and low-cost victory” they initially sought and were instead compelled to shift toward managing a prolonged and costly crisis.

Under such conditions, the traditional understanding of “victory in war” loses much of its meaning. In asymmetric conflicts, the winner is not necessarily the side that destroys its opponent, but rather the one that avoids destruction, endures, and imposes sufficient costs to discourage the adversary from continuing the war. Iran effectively positioned itself within this framework.

In sum, Iran transformed a war that was designed to eliminate or incapacitate it into a test of resilience and an opportunity to reshape the rules of engagement. This outcome does not represent a classic or absolute victory. Rather, it is a form of “victory through survival and denial”—a situation that conveys a clear message: *it may not have defeated its adversaries outright, but they also failed to defeat it.*

In the context of confronting a coalition that includes some of the most powerful militaries in the region and the world, this in itself can be regarded as a significant and meaningful achievement.

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