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# Iran conflict moving forward



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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The war now being fought by Iran against Israel and the United States has moved **beyond the logic of a limited exchange**. It is no longer a calibrated duel of deterrence. It is a conflict about survival, coercion, legitimacy and political succession. The military dimension is obvious enough: air strikes, missile attacks, drone swarms, maritime pressure and proxy activity. But **beneath the battlefield lies a more consequential struggle over the future of the Iranian state itself**.

Iran entered this war from a position of structural weakness. Economic exhaustion, social frustration, recurrent unrest and accumulated political sclerosis had already eroded the regime's aura of permanence. The Islamic Republic still possessed coercive capacity, ideological discipline and regional reach, but **it no longer projected confidence in the way it once did**. Its responses to earlier Israeli and American pressure had already suggested a state trying to preserve deterrence with fewer options and narrower margins.

## 2. WAR, SURVIVAL AND THE SHAPE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

That is why **the current conflict should not be read simply as a military confrontation**. It is also a stress test of the regime's ability to absorb punishment without losing command coherence. Iran's leaders understand that they do not need to defeat Israel and the United States in conventional terms. **They need to survive, retain enough retaliatory capability to impose costs, and convince their adversaries that the price of pushing further will become politically and economically unbearable**.

That survival logic is central to understanding Tehran's behaviour. Iran's strategy is not one of clean escalation dominance. It is one of asymmetric endurance. It relies on dispersed command structures, missile and drone salvos, proxy pressure, psychological warfare, cyber activity and **the constant threat of widening the conflict geographically**. The aim is to turn superior Western and Israeli military power into a long and expensive burden rather than a decisive instrument. In that sense, **Iran seeks not battlefield superiority but strategic friction**.

This matters because **weakness does not automatically produce collapse**. The Islamic Republic is more brittle than before, but brittleness is not the same as imminent disintegration. A regime can be hollowed out, penetrated,

internally distrusted and **yet still survive if it retains the institutions of force.** The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Basij, the intelligence apparatus and the clerical-security nexus remain the decisive variables. As long as these structures continue to function, **any discussion of rapid democratic transition remains speculative.**

That brings us to the political question raised in earlier analyses: monarchy or republic? The debate is real, especially among diaspora circles and among those who see Reza Pahlavi as the only internationally recognizable figure able to front a post-Islamic transition. The monarchy has symbolic appeal because it offers continuity, recognizability and a break with the current republican formula, which many Iranians associate not with civic participation but with clerical domination. **Yet the core problem is not symbolic legitimacy alone. It is organizational power.**

No durable transition in Iran will be decided by sentiment on social media, exile enthusiasm or foreign preference. **It will be decided by which forces control the coercive organs of the state at the moment of rupture.** If the present system weakens further, the first real contest will not be between monarchists and republicans in the abstract, but **between competing security-backed formulas for preserving order.** In such a scenario, the decisive actors would almost certainly come from within the existing state, or from figures able to secure defections within it.

This is precisely why external military pressure can generate a paradox. **It can weaken the regime while also strengthening the argument for militarized continuity.** War concentrates power in disciplined institutions. It rewards secrecy, chain of command and emergency legitimacy. Under bombardment, fragmented opposition movements rarely gain immediate advantage. Security structures do. The result may not be the fall of the Islamic Republic in favour of a democratic opening, but the evolution of the system into a harsher, more explicitly security-dominated version of itself.

The wider geopolitical context reinforces this reading. Iran remains part of a broader anti-Western network linking Russia, China and various revisionist or sanctioned states, but **that network is not a true alliance in the military sense.** Moscow and Beijing benefit from Iran's role as a strategic irritant to the West, an energy variable and a regional counterweight, **yet neither appears eager to become the guarantor of Tehran's maximal war aims.** They are more likely to preserve Iran as a useful node than to rescue it

at any cost. That limits the value of the "ring of allies" in wartime. **Iran has partners, but not protectors.**

The same is true of Iran's proxy system. It remains relevant, but it is under strain. Proxies can multiply fronts, stretch missile defences and raise insurance, shipping and infrastructure costs across the region. But **they do not fully compensate for state vulnerability at the centre.** Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, the Houthis and other aligned actors can complicate enemy planning, yet the core issue remains whether the Iranian state itself can continue to absorb damage while maintaining enough cohesion to negotiate from a position short of collapse.

**The nuclear file, moreover, is likely to become more dangerous, not less.** A war launched to prevent strategic escalation can produce the opposite incentive inside Iran. If enough of the Iranian elite concludes that threshold status no longer deters major attack, the pressure to move toward a more explicit weapons posture may grow. Even if Tehran stops short of full weaponization, the political lesson drawn by its leadership could be that ambiguity without a harder deterrent is insufficient. **That would push the region into an even more unstable phase after the present fighting subsides.**

### 3. SHORT TERM FORECAST: SIX MONTHS

In the short term, the most likely outcome is not decisive regime change and not decisive military victory, but a **shift from intense opening blows to a chronic and punctuated conflict.** There may be pauses, informal ceasefires or temporary de-escalatory signals, but **the underlying confrontation is likely to continue** through missiles, drones, cyber operations, proxy attacks and maritime coercion. Iran will seek to prove that it remains capable of retaliation despite severe damage. Israel will seek to demonstrate that Iran's deterrent architecture has been fundamentally degraded. The United States will try to avoid being dragged into open-ended regional war while still supporting a coercive framework against Tehran.

During this six-month window, **the Islamic Republic is more likely to survive than to fall.** It may suffer heavily, lose infrastructure and see further elite fragmentation, but its coercive institutions are still better organized than its opposition. A sudden collapse cannot be excluded, especially if elite defections accelerate, but it is not the baseline scenario. **The more plausible short-term picture is a wounded but functioning regime, a frightened and exhausted**

population, and a region forced to adapt to recurrent shocks rather than a single climactic outcome.

## 4. MEDIUM-TERM FORECAST: SIX MONTHS TO TWO YEARS

In the medium term, the centre of gravity will shift from battlefield attrition to state adaptation. If the regime survives the initial war phase, it will likely tighten internal control, elevate the role of the IRGC in governance and economic management, and rebuild missile and drone production with urgency. The state may become less clerically performative and more nakedly securitized. The language of revolutionary legitimacy may persist, but practical authority would move further toward military and intelligence structures.

At the same time, the social contract would continue to erode. Inflation, sanctions, reconstruction costs, elite distrust and generational anger would all deepen the regime's legitimacy crisis. This does not automatically produce democratization. It could just as easily produce a colder, more nationalist and more militarized order. The medium-term danger is therefore not only regime endurance, but regime mutation.

This is also the period in which succession politics would become decisive. If Iran moves into a post-Khamenei or post-war leadership framework, the most likely outcome is some form of controlled continuity rather than constitutional reinvention. A temporary leadership council, an IRGC-backed supreme figure, or a hybrid clerical-security arrangement would all be more plausible than a rapid liberal transition. Opposition forces outside the state may gain visibility, but unless they can anchor themselves within the country and attract institutional defections, they will remain aspirational rather than executable alternatives.

## 5. LONG-TERM FORECAST: BEYOND TWO YEARS

In the long term, after two years, the conflict's legacy will depend less on who won the opening war and more on what kind of Iranian state emerges from it. Three broad possibilities stand out.

- **The first** is the consolidation of an "Islamic Republic 2.0": more centralized in security terms, less dependent on clerical charisma, more nationalist in tone and more explicit in its reliance on the IRGC. This is, in many ways, the most plausible long-term

**scenario if the current system survives the war and successfully manages succession.**

- **The second** is a negotiated transformation in which prolonged war fatigue, economic decay and elite fragmentation **eventually force a constitutional opening**. This could produce a more plural political order, but only after a dangerous transitional phase. In such a scenario, the monarchy question could return as a practical device for continuity and legitimacy, especially if no republican opposition acquires sufficient national authority. Yet even here, **any durable settlement would require the acquiescence or restructuring of the security services.**
- **The third**, and most destabilizing, is prolonged hybrid instability: **neither full regime restoration nor successful transition, but a fragmented Iran marked by recurrent unrest, intermittent repression, regional meddling and unresolved succession.** This would be the worst scenario for Iranians and one of the most dangerous for the wider Middle East, because it would combine domestic weakness with strategic unpredictability.

The overall judgment is that **the most likely path is neither imminent democratic transition nor the full restoration of the old order as it existed before the war. The likeliest destination is a harder Iranian state, less confident, more militarized and more openly dependent on the organs of coercion.** The war may weaken the Islamic Republic, but it may also strip away its remaining illusions and leave behind a system that is more austere, more security-driven and potentially more dangerous.

The central conclusion is therefore simple. **This war may decide what Iran can no longer be, but it will not by itself decide what Iran becomes.** The military campaign can degrade infrastructure, kill commanders and expose strategic vulnerabilities. **It cannot, on its own, manufacture a viable post-war political order.** That question will be settled by the interaction of internal power, social exhaustion, elite adaptation and foreign opportunism. And in that struggle, the future of Iran remains open, but not indefinitely so.

