

The Long Fuse: History, the Security Dilemma, and the Origins of the 2026 U.S.–Iran War

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Abstract

This paper asks why the United States and Iran are in a war. Tracing back the conflict from the 1953 overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh to the revolution of 1979. Four decades of mutual grievance, and the collapse of nuclear diplomacy, the paper argues that no single event explains the war that began on February 28, 2026. The conflict could be better understood as a seventy-year security dilemma: each side's defensive measures were consistently read by the other as offensive threats, and the spiral consumed every institution built to contain it. Working through the levels-of-analysis framework, the paper locates the war's deep cause at the systemic level, while state-level pathologies and individual leaders explain its timing and its decapitating form. Qualitative evidence from six films, half of them screened in this course, documents the asymmetric memory that kept the spiral turning. The paper conclude that this war was structurally probable though not strictly inevitable, and that by the standard of the administration's own 2025 National Security Strategy it is failing, at growing cost to American hegemony in the Middle East and beyond.

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Midmorning, February 28, 2026: the US and Israel initiated Operation Epic Fury. In twelve hours they would conduct nearly nine hundred strikes throughout Iran. By nightfall Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and much of the senior leadership of the Revolutionary Guard Corps lay dead (Britannica, 2026b). Two days later Iranian drones and missiles struck Israeli cities and American bases throughout the Gulf. It would not be the first or last time that either side assailed the other. It was day one of the largest interstate conflict the region has seen in decades. The war has never let up. Within hours both sides announced a ceasefire; neither committed to the agreement. The Straits of Hormuz briefly closed to shipping, then reopened, then closed indefinitely. In mid-July American warplanes hit more than 140 Iranian targets in a single night while the White House announced fresh restrictions on shipping (CNN, 2026). Experts pleaded for restraint. Iran and the US ignored them.

Americans have since been offered several origin stories for this war. Some say it began in 1953 when the CIA deposed Iran's elected Prime Minister. Some say 1979 and the hostage crisis, or the American shift in foreign policy post-9/11, or lobby groups and politicians with ties to Israel. To hear some tell it, this was a war Israel wanted while Biden opposed. Each of these stories is true. This paper will attempt to take them all seriously. Taken individually, none of them is sufficient to explain this war. What follows is the argument that this war was the latest iteration of a seventy-year security dilemma between these two states, a self-reinforcing spiral beginning with the coup in 1953 and calcifying after the revolution when each side's defensive programs were read by the other as offensive threats (Jervis, 1978). International structure provides context for why war became inevitable. Domestic-level politics and individuals help explain why it happened this spring and why Israelis sought to kill certain men.

The structure of this paper proceeds from the evidence. It begins with history, linking Operation Ajax to present-day hostilities. This section is necessary, because theory without evidence is worthless. Next the paper marshals this history to make theoretical claims. These will be organized around the levels- of-analysis framework; realism explains most of the puzzle, with some concluding nods to constructivism. The penultimate section demonstrates how six films, half of which were screened for this course, can be treated as data on memory and misperception that perpetuated the security dilemma. The conclusion returns to the question pair asked by the assignment description: was this war inevitable? How is it changing America's position in the Middle East, and possibly its global power?

Historical Background: Seventy Years of Spiral

Operation Ajax and the Original Sin of 1953

Any explanation of why the United States and Iran are at war in 2026 must begin in 1953, because that is where Iranians believe it starts. Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951. The company had been returning far more of Iran's oil wealth to Britain than to Iran for decades. Britain retaliated with an embargo. When economic pressure failed to bring Mossadegh to heel, London approached Washington. In August of 1953 the CIA and British intelligence orchestrated a joint operation known as TPAJAX that removed him from office. Methods were crude: bribe parliamentarians and clerics, plant newspaper stories, hire street mobs. The Shah returned to Iran with General Fazlollah Zahedi installed as prime minister (Kinzer, 2003). For sixty years, the CIA never formally acknowledged participation. Then came a coup de grace in 2013: declassified documents released on the sixtieth anniversary of the coup confirmed American involvement beyond any doubt (National Security Archive, 2013).

Cold War necessity was the standard American defense at the time. There was fear Iran would drift into the Soviet camp if Mossadegh was allowed to remain. But Abrahamian (2013) is skeptical. His reading of the history is that oil, not anti-communism was the primary motive. The Cold War rhetoric was applied after the fact for public consumption. Regardless of which is true, neither mattered to Iranians. Kinzer (2003) argues that by overthrowing Mossadegh the CIA destroyed the one political faction that could have made secular constitutional rule work in Iran. With no nationalist middle ground, and with conventional politics foreclosed under the Shah's increasingly police state years after the coup, mosque was the only venue where opposition could survive and organize.

1953 is when the spiral starts. Iranians cite the coup as evidence that America will never accept a sovereign Iran. Most Americans have never heard of it. This asymmetry works metaphorical violence in the relationship and will come back in both the theory and film sections below.

Response or Provocation: Supporting the Shah, 1954–1979

American support for the Shah continued after the 1953 coup and became stronger over the next twenty-five years. A 1954 consortium agreement gave American oil companies about forty percent of Iran's oil production (Kinzer, 2003). In 1957, the CIA and Israel's Mossad helped the Shah establish SAVAK, a secret police organization that became widely known for monitoring and torturing political opponents (Abrahamian, 2013). Tensions increased again in 1964, when Iran granted American military personnel immunity from Iranian courts. Ruhollah Khomeini publicly criticized the agreement, comparing it to the old system of foreign "capitulations." The government responded by sending him into exile, but this only increased his political importance and helped him become a major symbol of opposition to the Shah.

The relationship kept deepening through the 1970s. Under the Nixon Doctrine, Iran became one of the “twin pillars” of American strategy in the Persian Gulf, and after 1972 the Shah was allowed to purchase essentially any non-nuclear weapon in the American arsenal (Kinzer, 2003). On New Year’s Eve 1977, President Carter stood in Tehran and toasted the Shah’s Iran as “an island of stability” in one of the world’s more troubled regions (Carter, 1977). Thirteen months later, the monarchy was gone.

Was this quarter century, then, an American response or a provocation? Looking from Washington’s chair, it was the former: to Soviet pressure on the Northern Tier, to Persian Gulf oil’s security, to the larger logic of Cold War containment. Viewed from an Iranian street, those same policies represented provocation: the United States had overthrown an elected government, built up the police force that tortured its critics, and armed the man who presided over both. The unsettling fact is that these descriptions are equally true simultaneously (Kinzer, 2003; Abrahamian, 2013). Theory will give that situation a name later in the chapter (the security dilemma), where one side’s prudence appears to the other side as threat. For now it is enough to recognize that by 1979 the two countries were well inside it.

The Islamic Revolution and the Freezing of Images, 1979

When it did arrive, it was remarkably swift. Strikes and protests spread throughout Iran during 1978 and, in January 1979, the Shah fled Iran for the last time. Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile on February 1 and was greeted as a hero, soon establishing an Islamic Republic. But keep in mind that the revolution was not inherently Islamist from the start. At the outset, the protests were made up of bazaar merchants, liberals, leftists, and clerics; Khomeini ultimately outplayed his rivals (Abrahamian, 2013). In sweeping them away, the U.S. lost a

quarter century of Iranian relationship overnight. They had no relationship at all with his replacement.

We remember the embassy takeover that autumn. Washington welcomed the Shah back to America for cancer treatment in October of that year, sparking a protest movement by college students who called themselves followers of the Imam's line. On November 4, they seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran and held fifty-2 Americans hostage for 444 days. Americans forget what the hostage-takers said they were doing. They mentioned 1953: according to the students, the embassy had helped overthrow an Iranian government once before, and was about to do it again (Abrahamian, 2013). You do not have to agree with their position to understand cause and effect. The coup caused their fears. And their fears caused the crisis.

Neither side forgot. America cut off diplomatic ties with Iran in April 1980, never to restore them. A planned military rescue mission ended in disaster in the desert. But more important than the severing of ties was the hardening of images. Iranians cast the United States as the "Great Satan," while Americans saw Iranians as fanatic and violent extremists. Many constructivist scholars argue that these identities did causal work, limiting the scope of politically feasible diplomacy in Washington and Tehran for forty years to come (Bozorgmehri, 2026). To be sure: in the decades after 1979, every pathway toward reconciliation was blocked by both images simultaneously.

The Rise of the Mullahs and the Two Ledgers, 1980–2025

For Iran's new rulers, the 1980s supplied a brutal education in international politics. When Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in September 1980, no great power came to Iran's defense, and several quietly assisted the aggressor; the United States gave Iraq intelligence support and reflagged Kuwaiti tankers during the "tanker war" phase of the conflict (Kinzer, 2003;

Britannica, 2026b). In July 1988 the USS Vincennes shot down Iran Air Flight 655 over the Gulf, killing all 290 people aboard. Washington paid compensation and never apologized. Tehran drew a conclusion it has never abandoned: no institution or ally would protect the Islamic Republic, so survival required deterrence Iran could build for itself, in the form of ballistic missiles, armed partners abroad, and eventually a nuclear program held just short of a weapon (Abrahamian, 2013).

Americans were compiling a ledger of their own. The 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut, attributed to Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah, killed 241 servicemen, and American courts later linked Iran to the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia. Each side entered the 1990s convinced it was the injured party, and each had a body count to point to.

The period after September 11, 2001, offered an important opportunity for cooperation between Iran and the United States. Iran supported the U.S. campaign against the Taliban, which both countries viewed as an enemy, and also helped with the formation of Afghanistan's postwar government at the Bonn Conference. However, only weeks later, President George W. Bush included Iran in the "axis of evil." Many Iranian reformists viewed this statement as a rejection of their cooperation, while hardliners saw it as proof that the United States could not be trusted. The 2003 invasion of Iraq increased these concerns by placing American forces on both the eastern and western borders of Iran. It also showed Iranian leaders what could happen to a government labeled as a threat by Washington if it lacked an effective deterrent (Abrahamian, 2013). As a result, the chances for closer cooperation became much smaller.

Nuclear tensions continued to grow during the following years. After the Natanz enrichment facility became publicly known in 2002, Iran faced United Nations sanctions beginning in 2006, as well as the Stuxnet cyberattack on its nuclear program. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action limited Iran's enrichment activities in exchange for sanctions relief. The agreement remained in effect until May 2018, when President Trump withdrew the United States from it and introduced a policy of "maximum pressure." Tensions increased further after the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 and the direct missile exchanges between Iran and Israel in April and October 2024. In June 2025, Israeli and American forces struck the Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan nuclear sites during the twelve-day war. By the fall, "snapback" sanctions had returned and the Iranian rial was rapidly losing value. These events increased distrust on both sides and made further escalation more likely.

Israel and the Shape of the War

Israel's influence over American policy is often offered as this war's explanation in itself, and the record gives the idea real weight. Since the 1981 airstrike on Iraq's Osirak reactor, Israeli policy has followed what became known as the Begin Doctrine: no hostile state in the region will be permitted a nuclear weapons capability. Syria's al-Kibar site was destroyed on the same logic in 2007. Applied to Iran, the doctrine produced a long covert campaign, from sabotage at Natanz to the assassination of nuclear scientists, including Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in 2020, that repeatedly re-tightened the spiral at moments when diplomacy was loosening it. Prime Minister Netanyahu spent three decades pressing the confrontation onto the American agenda, from his red-line diagram at the United Nations in 2012 to his 2015 address to Congress against the JCPOA. The covert campaign went overt in the twelve-day war of June 2025, when Israel's opening salvo sent 200 fighter jets against more than a hundred targets in a single night (Britannica, 2026a).

That war left Iran's position badly weakened (Britannica, 2026b). To Washington and Jerusalem, it seemed to prove that military means now promised more than diplomacy could.

How much American policy does this account for? Mearsheimer and Walt (2007) think a lot. They argue that the well-organized pro-Israel lobby in the United States, led by AIPAC, has steered US policy in the Middle East toward confronting Iran farther than the facts on the ground and a disinterested analysis of America's national interest would dictate. Critics respond that Washington has many good reasons to want to contain Iran whether Israel asked for them or not, and that similarity of views among friends is hardly proof of collusion. Parsi (2007) challenges both sides from another angle: as far as he is concerned, Israeli Iranian hostility is itself a geopolitical rivalry that did not fully harden until after 1991. It was then, he argues, that the Soviet Union's collapse and Iraq's defeat removed the two states' common threats and therefore their incentives for moderating their antagonism toward each other. If Parsi is right, then their mutual hostility is contingent and strategic rather than eternal and theological. That matters for questions about how and whether it can be resolved. The view here lies somewhere in between. Yes, Israel clearly influenced when the war happened and how it was fought; the February assault was the culmination of years of Israeli lobbying for precisely this kind of campaign. But Iranian American rivalry predates Israel's rise to prominence in that competition; and the grievances detailed in the previous sections would remain even if Israel were suddenly to disappear tomorrow. The lobby thesis accounts for one distortion in American policy. It does not, by itself, account for war.

Iran Under Khamenei and the Road to February 2026

Ali Khamenei presided over Iran for thirty-seven years. The Iran that entered this war was primarily his creation: a theocracy whose Revolutionary Guard Corps developed into a

military and economic empire-within-an-empire; and whose nuclear latency was treated as a kind of regime life insurance. It was in those Gulf states that America's regional partners watched this logic proven in blood. Iraq and Libya both surrendered their programs; neither regime made it through the 2010s (Bozorgmehri, 2026). Tehran took note.

Khamenei's final years were marked by a growing legitimacy crisis within Iran itself. The Green Movement of 2009, the fuel-price uprising of 2019, and Mahsa Amini protest movement of 2022 were each met with bullets instead of concessions. Tehran's streets exploded again in late 2025 as renewed "snapback" sanctions crippled the rial, and at least 30,000 protesters were killed during the crackdown in January, by Iran's health ministry's count (Britannica, 2026b). That is a powerful spot from which to go to war: Iran cannot afford to back down to foreign pressure and risk appearing weak to domestic audiences, but it cannot militarily repel a superpower either. It chose to bet on the deterrents that it did trust.

In the dying days of diplomacy, it was not dead. Negotiations were set to resume in Switzerland in February 2026; they took place instead in ruins. Operation Epic Fury slew Khamenei alongside much of Iran's security leadership in the opening hours; Mojtaba was injured by a purported UAV strike (Britannica, 2026b). What it did not do was kill the Islamic Republic. President Pezeshkian's holdover government organized resistance, Iran's military transitioned into improvised "mosaic defense," and the last nine months have settled into a familiar routine: strikes, blockade, failed ceasefire (CNN, 2026). Decapitation was a bet that Iran's behavior was embodied chiefly by a few men at the top. The continued existence of the Iranian regime is the best evidence this paper has that it was wrong about where this conflict lives.

A Theoretical Construct

The Levels of Analysis

Seventy years is a long time for nations to be adversaries. Grievances accumulate into lists. Theory explains why those lists grew. International relations theory in particular. The field's most standard tool for making sense of conflict is the levels- of- analysis framework, which Waltz (1959) initially introduced as three “images” of conflict and Singer (1961) further refined. Applied, the idea behind levels is straightforward. Every war has its causes in individuals, domestic politics, or the anarchic international system, and which layer the causes are found in changes how we understand what the war is about. This text is organized around those three levels too (Genest, 2004). What follows does the same for the 2026 war.

Three individuals mattered for this war. President Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA in 2018 and campaigned for reelection boasting that maximum pressure brought Iran to the negotiating table. Netanyahu had made opposing Iran a lifelong political crusade. Khamenei had come to power in revolution and governed through an imposed war during the 1980s. Mutual distrust was for him something close to an article of faith. But individuals as level of analysis also explains what was distinctive about the war in 2026. It was partly fought at that same level. Its first shots were missiles fired by Epic Fury at named Iranian leaders.

Each state's domestic politics tells us something different about the war. Iran's regime faced existential political challenges at home which made American hostility both a cause for mobilization and something to fear. American decisionmakers were influenced by electoral politics and the kind of organized interest group competition described by Mearsheimer and Walt in 2007. Israeli politics rewarded hardliners within a fragile coalition government. None of the

three states acted like the simplifying unitary rational actor model; it bears stating so explicitly because analytical pundits often pretend they do.

As system level factors the probabilities of war climbed with a shifting balance of power. There is no policeman under anarchy, and no ability to enforce promises either. A rival regional power acquired nuclear weapons as an American hegemon and its ally struggled to maintain a shrinking margin of advantage. Balances of power like that have often encouraged the stronger party to try preemptive war. Singer cautioned that users of the levels framework pick which explanation carries the most weight by deciding which layer “sheds the most light.”

We weigh in this analysis and find that system matters most. Whatever else happened the structure of the international system made some war likely and leaders made it happen. The difference matters, because if individuals explain a war it will end with their deaths. Iran endured past those deaths; the war did not end.

The Security Dilemma and Realist Theory

One theory explains this war better than the others. The security dilemma, of the realist school, is according to the course text the oldest theory of international politics (Genest, 2004). According to Jervis (1978), the security dilemma is when the action taken by one state to increase its own security decreases the security of other states—even when neither side actually wants conflict. Looking at this war through the lens of the security dilemma, the fit is almost too neat. To Tehran, ballistic missiles and proxies and enriched uranium were defensive depth accumulated by a country that had been overthrown by foreign powers once, invaded by foreign powers once, sanctioned for decades, and bombed numerous times by Israel and the United States. To Washington and Jerusalem, those same programs were existential threats to allies and trade routes in blatant defiance of previous negotiations. Flip it around and American carrier

deployments and Israeli commandos are prudent self-defense to their proponents and strangling encirclement to Iran. Take Jervis' spiral model and replace the variables with names from this study: you get exactly the pattern the previous section laid out. Postures of defense causing insecurity in the other side, opportunities for de-escalation doomed by hardliners back home.

Realism even explains the shape that this war took. Cast as offensive realism, Operation Epic Fury could serve as a textbook case: a coalition of status quo powers acting while they still held undeniable superiority to destroy a rising power before it became too strong to manage (Mearsheimer, 2001). Iran, of course, fits defensive realism – seeking security through denying their enemy good options rather than trying to directly threaten them. But even the timing conforms to theoretical predictions: both sides launched their “preventive war” while negotiations were still technically ongoing because each knew what theorists call a commitment problem. Neither side could guarantee restraint after 2018, because the upending of the JCPOA after a change of leadership in Washington proved that American treaty commitments do not outlast administrations.

Before going further, one thing deserves mention right here. Just because realism explains why this war happened does not mean realism advocates for it. Think of Lissner and Rapp-Hooper's (2026) attack on the administration's favorite words: “flexible realism.” To say realism explains the start of this war is not the same as saying realists think it was a good idea. Most realists would not, because offensive realism counsels securing your position against rivals while avoiding peripheral conflicts that sap strength and offer no clear theory of victory. It is the lesson from the first day of class again: theories can explain things without endorsing them.

The liberal theories have little to offer as explanations, and that is part of why liberals lost this debate. Liberalism teaches that institutions, verification regimes, and economic connections

can tame the security dilemma (Genest, 2004). If anything foreign-policy-making humans have attempted to date, the JCPOA was designed as such a liberal order. It had the strongest verification mechanism ever negotiated into a treaty and leading up to the attack inspectors consistently verified that Iran was in compliance. The deal failed because of American domestic politics (nagged along by Iran's domestic politics). The sanctions that followed preemptively eliminated any mutual economic dependence that might have fostered mutually protective business interests. By 2026, liberals had lost their best tools for persuasion in both Tehran and Washington: it became self-evident to decisionmakers that only military force was credible.

Theory answers all of our questions but one. What makes Iranian-American conflict so special? Why were these particular rivals so completely unable to negotiate mutual security? This is where Bozorgmehri's (2026) "realist constructivism" comes in. Iran and the United States came to define each other as enemies at the level of identity, almost literally at the level of existence. Leaders on both sides could convince their publics that they were mounting an existential defense against the other. Add to that a strong dose of the asymmetric memory described in the 1953 section and you get spiral escalation by other means. Both history and theory lead me to the same conclusion: the United States and Iran are at war because nothing in seventy years of relations between the two survived enforcement or moderation when wrapped in anger about who we fundamentally are.

Data from Films

Film joins this paper as qualitative data. Documentary films cannot nail dates or casualty figures, but they carry forward something the previous sections kept stumbling into: the architecture of memory and perception that allows two populations to view the same facts and see completely different stories.

Thematically, the course screenings line up neatly with the paper's argument. *Remaking the Middle East: The U.S., Israel & Iran* is a PBS Frontline documentary that details the triangular dynamic above in the Israel section and presents evidence for how the case for taking on Iran was developed jointly in Washington and Jerusalem long before February 2026 (Frontline, 2026). *Iran Is Not the Problem* is much older, dating from 2008. Its age is precisely why it is valuable. Produced during a prior war scare, it detailed how American media coverage exaggerated Iranian power while omitting the history, 1953 particularly, that explained Iranian actions (Newman, 2008). Viewed in 2026, it feels like a time capsule: informational determinants for this war have been established almost two decades prior to its outset. The third screening relates directly to the theory section. In *Why America Is Losing the War with Iran* journalist Chris Hedges interviews John Mearsheimer, whose offensive realism was used earlier in this paper to rationalize the February attack, and Mearsheimer's sober judgment is that the war is unwinnable on realist grounds (Hedges, 2026). The theorist whose framework best explains the February attack, in other words, also considers it a strategic mistake.

Three additional works of media supplemented these assigned screenings through independent research. Taghi Amirani's *Coup 53* rebuilds Operation Ajax around a recently unearthed television interview with the MI6 operative Norman Darbyshire, whom Ralph Fiennes plays on camera from the transcript; the filmmaker's own struggle to wrestle the film free of archival roadblocks proves how thoroughly the coup was erased from Western consciousness (Amirani, 2019). Ben Affleck's *Argo* features a storyboard prologue that tells the story of the 1953 coup with remarkable frankness, devotes the ensuing two hours to portraying Iranians as an ominous revolutionary mass (Affleck, 2012), and won Best Picture. The best organized and funded democracy in human history forgot the prologue and rewarded the crowd. *Persepolis* is

the animated memoir of Marjane Satrapi, adapted into film with her partner Vincent Paronnaud. It provides what every other source in this paper except *Iran Is Not the Problem* conveys at scale: the lived experience of Iranian individuals. Satrapi suffers under the Shah's secret police and later under the Islamic Republic that deposed him (Satrapi & Paronnaud, 2007). Satrapi's dual anguish is a guardrail against conceiving of Iranians as unitary actors who "want" stuff.

Between them, the six films testify that the cognitive conditions of this war existed long before its start. Siege mentalities and skewed memories arose on both sides well before anyone launched a weapon.

Conclusion: Inevitability and the Price of Hegemony

The question posed to me was "Do you believe war with Iran was inevitable?" Of course not; no war ever is. Different decisions could have been made during the JCPOA years, and again as recently as February 2026, while negotiating teams were preparing to reconvene in Switzerland. But inevitability is not the right standard. It is obvious to me that by February 2026 war was the path of least resistance and peace—requiring heroic restraint from domestic political pressures in both Washington and Tehran—was the outcome that would have needed extraordinary, synchronized leadership in both capitals to achieve. An arms race seven decades long had long ago hollowed out every political and institutional check put in place to restrain it. The closing window imposed by the nuclear threshold, the internal necessities faced by a besieged regime which could not concede without imperiling its grip on power, and a hawkish coalition in thrall to the belief that delaying meant losing its relative advantage created a perfect storm. Individual human beings chose when and how, but the machinery had been geared up for seventy years.

Advocates of the war will point out that it seems to be going well. The administration even baked that inevitability into its planning: the Biden administration's National Security Strategy released in November 2025 described Iran as "greatly weakened" and proclaimed that there was "less to this problem than headlines might lead one to believe" (p. 28). Iran's nuclear capability has been degraded and its nuclear senior leadership largely eliminated, and fairness compels me to acknowledge that those are real accomplishments of warfighting. But the same document identified as America's vital interests "that the Strait of Hormuz remain open" (The White House, 2025, p. 28) and yet five months into the war the strait has at times been shut to commerce. A policy that announced the Iran problem was mostly solved three months before unleashing the largest war in the region in decades and which has brought about the exact contrary of its stated objectives has failed, by its own criteria.

America's regional hegemony is not the only victim here. Millions of dollars' worth of interceptors are shooting down tens of thousands of dollars' worth of drones, military focus and capital is being diverted from Ukraine and China, and Russia and China are the only powers benefiting internationally (Hamdach, 2026). Iran grows weaker, yet regional escalation continues all the same. The war itself is raging against the consensus of international law: it was neither approved by Congress nor authorized by any Security Council mandate, and Bennis (2026) convincingly argues the Biden administration is burning through the rule-based international order's last shreds of legitimacy by simply refusing to acknowledge the war is illegal. And this is not just one presidential administration making mischief that his successor will mop up. Threat inflation has been bilateral at the elite level for two decades now, as Zunes (2026) details, and Congress's resistance to date has been shallowly procedural rather than substantively oppositionist.

Analysts like Bozorgmehri (2026) predict not victory but rather managed escalation going forward, and events over the past five months bear him out. But we should learn too from Jervis (1978), who reminds us that in a security dilemma both sides can honestly view themselves as virtuous defenders. That is why trying to parse blame is not terribly helpful analytically. Security dilemmas end one way and one way only: with compromises that allow all sides to enjoy greater security than they do in an escalatory spiral. I see no evidence anyone in power wants that.

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