



From Threshold to Conflict: A Critical Review of the US - Israel War on Iran 2026 in the Discourse of International Order

Abdul Basit¹, Imran Ali Mahar² & Shahar Bano³

¹MS Scholar, Institute of International Relations and Peace Studies, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur,
Email: basitghanghro7@gmail.com

²MS Scholar, Institute of International Relations and Peace Studies, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur,
Email: maharimran0004@gmail.com

³MS Scholar, Institute of International Relations and Peace Studies, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur,
Email: shaharbanosoomro7@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received:	April	16, 2026
Revised:	April	29, 2026
Accepted:	May	11, 2026
Available Online:	May	20, 2026

Keywords:

2026 Iran War, Twelve-Day War 2025, US - Israel Alliance, Strait of Hormuz Crisis, Nuclear Decapitation Strike, Khamenei Assassination, Pakistan Mediation, Middle East Security, Securitization Theory, Offensive Realism

Corresponding Author:

Abdul Basit

Email:

basitghanghro7@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched the most significant joint military operation in the Middle East since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, opening a sustained campaign against Iran's nuclear programme, ballistic missile infrastructure, and in an unprecedented escalation the regime's leadership itself. On the first day of strikes, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was assassinated. Iran in turn retaliated with direct missile and drone strikes against Israel, US military bases in the Gulf and closed the Strait of Hormuz, causing an oil crisis that drove Brent crude above USD 126 per barrel and disrupted about one-fifth of global oil trade. A two-week ceasefire, brokered by Pakistan, was observed after five weeks of heavy fighting, but efforts to reach a permanent agreement have yet to yield any results. This article offers the first full, theoretically informed academic study of this conflict. This research uses three complementary international relations theories: Classical Realism (Morgenthau), Offensive Realism (Mearsheimer), and Copenhagen School Securitization Theory (Buzan and Wæver) and is informed by primary sources such as official statements, IAEA reports, UN documents, think-tank analyses and real-time reporting from credible international outlets to cover the entire spectrum of events from the June 2025 Twelve-Day War to the 2026 ceasefire and its fragile aftermath. Five original research findings are presented, eight structured policy recommendations are offered and four future scenario trajectories are analysed. The article concludes that the 2026 war marks a historical turning point, which has permanently reshaped the security structure of the Middle East, global energy governance, and the rules of the international game, with repercussions that will shape international relations for years to come. This research aims to provide for scholars, policy makers, diplomatic practitioners and involved citizens.

1. Introduction

On the dated 28 February, 2026 world has witnessed a dangerous aggression by global super power along with its ally, the United States and Israel conducted simultaneous strikes against targets throughout the Islamic Republic of Iran, including nuclear facilities at Natanz, Fordow, and Isfahan, stockpiles of ballistic missiles, and – in a decision of staggering historic importance – the compound of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in Tehran. Khamenei was among the victims on the opening day of the operation. Soon, Iran fired ballistic missiles and drones at Israel and U.S. military bases throughout the Gulf. The largest energy supply disruption in the history of the international oil market was started by Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz, through which about 20 percent of global oil trade flows.

In the long sweep of history, the battle that would follow over the next few weeks was not unexpected. The moment for deciding military action had come, and it was the result of forty-seven years of structural hostility between the United States and the Islamic Republic, decades of existential fear by Israel over Iranian nuclear capability, a series of events starting with the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, two years of escalating proxy warfare, a failed diplomatic process in early 2026, a wave of protests in Iran, and a final convergence of political will in Washington and Jerusalem.

There are two purposes for this research article. The first is empirical: the aim is to give a thorough, evidence-based description of the unfolding of the conflict in 2025 - 2026, of what it was, and of its current state (May 2026). The second is analytical: to use existing International Relations theories to that account to explain why events transpired the way they did and what forces in the system will influence their evolution. The article is neutral. Iran's Islamic Republic is a legitimate sovereign state with security interests, and a regime that showed resiliency against the harsh sanctions and its actions has and behaviors seen a threat to regional stability, The United States is the world's most powerful military force acting on genuine national interest calculations and also a state that has made consequential strategic miscalculations throughout the region. Israel is a small democracy facing genuine existential threats and also a state whose unilateral military decisions carry enormous consequences for others. The researcher's obligation is epistemic accuracy, not political advocacy. Understanding requires honesty about all sides.

The article is written for multiple audiences simultaneously. For the policy maker, it offers scenario analysis and recommendations. For the scholar, it offers theoretical rigour and empirical precision. For the Pakistani reader specifically, it addresses the extraordinary role Pakistan played in brokering the April 2026 ceasefire – a diplomatic achievement that placed Islamabad at the centre of the most important international crisis of 2026 and raised the question of Pakistan's long-term strategic role in Middle Eastern affairs with new urgency. For the citizen seeking to understand why the world changed so dramatically in the first weeks of 2026, it offers clear explanation of a crisis that has already reshaped the architecture of the international order.

Table 0: Key statistical snapshot of the 2025 - 2026 US - Israel - Iran conflict as of the April 2026 ceasefire. Sources: Al Jazeera English, The DAWN.

Indicator	Value / Detail	Notes / Explanation
Total Conflict Deaths (All Parties)	6,285 – 8,817+	Estimated casualties across all sides involved in the conflict.
Peak Brent Crude Oil Price	USD 126 per barrel	Highest recorded crude oil price during the conflict period.
Strait of Hormuz	~1/5 of Global Oil Trade	Around 20% of global oil supply passes

Disruption Ceasefire Broker	Affected Pakistan-mediated Ceasefire on 8 April 2026	through this chokepoint. Pakistan facilitated negotiation efforts leading to the ceasefire.
--------------------------------	--	---

1.1 Research Problem

The 2026 Iran War, though still unfolding, has already become a defining event in contemporary geopolitics, yet systematic and unbiased academic analysis remains notably limited. Existing commentary is abundant but often lacks theoretical grounding, empirical rigor, and policy relevance. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by addressing three interconnected research problems: first, the need to disentangle the conflict's immediate triggers from its deeper structural and historical causes; second, the importance of examining how the conduct of the war intersects with international humanitarian law, state sovereignty norms, and the strategic relationship between nuclear capability, deterrence, and regime survival; and third, the necessity of mapping the conflict's broader implications for Middle Eastern power dynamics, global energy markets, and the future of regional and international diplomacy. Through this approach, the research aims to offer a comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of a conflict that is reshaping both regional order and global strategic calculations.

1.2 Research Objectives

- To construct a comprehensive, theoretically grounded analytical framework that explains the full arc of the 2025 - 2026 US - Israel military campaign against Iran its causes, conduct, and likely future trajectories integrating empirical evidence with established IR theory.
- To trace the historical and structural drivers of the conflict from 1979 through the 2025 Twelve-Day War, the failed 2026 negotiations, and the decision for war.
- To analyse in detail the military conduct of the June 2025 and February 2026 operations, including the targeting of Iranian leadership, the nuclear strike assessment debate, and Iranian counter-operations.
- To examine the Strait of Hormuz crisis as a global economic weapon and its implications for energy security governance.
- To evaluate Pakistan's extraordinary mediating role in the April 2026 ceasefire and its implications for Islamabad's future strategic positioning.
- To generate a structured scenario analysis and policy recommendations for international stakeholders

1.3 Research Questions

- Q1. What structural forces as distinct from immediate triggers explain why the United States and Israel chose military action in 2026 rather than continued diplomacy, and why this choice was made at this specific historical moment?
- Q2. How was the 2026 war conducted, what were its immediate military, political, and humanitarian consequences, and how have those consequences reshaped the regional and global order?
- Q3. In the aftermath of the April 2026 ceasefire, what are the plausible futures for the conflict negotiated resolution, continued managed hostility, renewed escalation, or Iranian regime change and what conditions determine which trajectory prevails?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Three Waves of Scholarship

The scholarship on US - Iranian relations and the Israeli - Iranian conflict can be organized into three waves.

2.1.1 The first wave (1979 – 2000)

The first (1979 - 2000) was predominantly descriptive and was a historical representation of the relationship after the revolution. The Carter administration's confrontation with the revolution was well documented in the essays of Bill (1988) and Sick (1985). The first scholarly work to make a serious attempt at explaining the internal politics of the Islamic Republic was Bakhash (1984). Works like this are invaluable historical foundations but inevitably they depict a war in which the most important features of the conflict – the nuclear dimension, the proxy ecosystem, the Israeli-Iranian bilateral hostility – have yet to fully manifest.

2.1.2 The second wave (2001 - 2020)

The emphasis has shifted to the nuclear issue and the US strategic response in the second wave (2001 - 2020). The basic framework of a geopolitical competition goes against the ideological simplifications of both the 'mad mullahs' and the 'imperialist America' narratives which were demolished by Parsi's (2007) landmark treacherous alliance triangular analysis. Sanger's (2012) *Confront and Conceal* helped to report on the Stuxnet operation, and the shadow war. In a series of revisionist works (2006, 2021), Takeyh showed how irrational-actor theory was inadequate as a model of Iranian foreign policy, which was much more strategic and able to weigh costs and benefits than is commonly assumed. Kahl (2012) and Cordesman (2014) offered useful analysis of the military options against Iran and what might be achievable.

2.1.3 The third wave (2020 - 2026)

This article's direct intellectual context is the third wave (2020 - 2026). It has seen intense debate on the fallout of the JCPOA failure and maximum pressure, rising attention to Iran's proxy network in the wake of events on October 7, and most recently the unprecedented situation of analyzing the open large-scale military confrontation between two sides that had avoided engaging in such a confrontation for four and a half decades. (2026) Hamilton has made fundamental arguments about the legality of the strikes in 2026 under the UN Charter. Egan and Bridgeman (2026) have studied the legal limitations on the United States. Revkin (2026), a feature on the War on the Rocks, offered the first rigorous analytical framework for comprehending the strategic aims of the 2026 war, in comparison to the 2025 Twelve-Day War. This article aims to bring together and advance this growing research.

2.2 Research Gap

There are four important literature gaps. First, there has never been a single article synthesis of the entire conflict arc in 2025 - 2026 that covers military, diplomatic, economic and theoretical aspects. Secondly, Pakistan's role in this conflict has been historically significant as a mediator in ceasefire process and yet there is hardly any scholarship on this topic from Pakistani and South Asian scholars in the international academic record. Third, the nuclear assessment debate – whether the 2026 strikes significantly affected Iran's nuclear capability, or merely postponed it by a few months – has not been investigated with sufficient theoretical background. Fourth, the consequences of this as a strategic approach – namely the killing of Khamenei and several IRGC

commanders – have not been systematically discussed in the light of deterrence theory, or even of the laws of war.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design is qualitative with an interpretative epistemological approach and an explanatory requirement as addressed in security studies scholarship. The is to be investigated strategic decision-making, threat perception, leadership calculation and escalating dynamics are not quantitative phenomena in the way that would allow them to be operationalized without losing the very qualities that make them interesting. It is not about making a statistical generalization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018), but rather to achieve theoretical understanding or policy-relevant insight.

The research design combines three types of analysis. Process-tracing in the past first identifies the causal chain from structural factors to the occurrence of triggering events to the decision for war. Second, the empirical basis is the result of document analysis of primary documents such as official statements, UN resolutions, IAEA reports, declassified intelligence assessments, US Congressional Research Service publications, and the policy documents of all parties. Finally, the future trajectory assessments are produced through a structured scenario analysis based on the well-established methodology used in strategic studies (Schwartz, 2012, RAND Corporation, 2025).

3.2 Data Collection

This study employs a multi-layered source triangulation framework consistent with HEC research methodology guidelines. Sources are classified across four tiers.

- Primary Sources include IAEA GOV/2025 and GOV/2026 reports, UN Security Council records, official statements from CENTCOM, the IDF, and the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Trump administration policy communications. House of Commons Library Briefings (CBP-10521; CBP-10636) are used as authoritative parliamentary reference documents.
- Secondary Academic Sources comprise peer-reviewed articles from *International Security*, *Survival*, *Middle East Journal*, and *Journal of Strategic Studies*, alongside monographs by Waltz, Mearsheimer, Buzan, Parsi, Takeyh, and Nasr (editions to 2025).
- Journalism and Policy Research — Reuters, AP, BBC, Al Jazeera, Haaretz, and The New York Times (2025–2026), and publications from RAND, IISS, Carnegie Endowment, Brookings, War on the Rocks, and Just Security — are used for contextual and contemporaneous analysis, clearly distinguished from peer-reviewed evidence.
- Reference Sources include Encyclopaedia Britannica (2026) for definitional verification only.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

3.3.1 Classical Realism Morgenthau

Hans Morgenthau's (1948/1978) classical realism holds that states pursue power as a means to ensure survival and that international politics is the perpetual struggle for power and peace under conditions of anarchy. Applied to the 2026 war, classical realism explains the US decision for military action as fundamentally a power-management problem: a hostile Iranian state approaching nuclear capability in a region containing approximately sixty percent of proven global oil reserves,

and allied with Russia and China in ways that threatened to create an exclusionary Eurasian bloc, represented an unacceptable shift in the global balance of power. The decision to act was not primarily about ideology or alliance obligation to Israel – it was about structural power management.

Classical realism also illuminates Iran's behaviour. A state that had seen Saddam Hussein's WMD-free Iraq invaded in 2003 and Gaddafi's Libya (post-WMD-surrender) destroyed in 2011 had overwhelming structural incentives to develop nuclear insurance. Iran's defiance in the face of unprecedented military pressure – the appointment of Mojtaba Khamenei, the vow to keep the Strait of Hormuz closed, the refusal to accept the 2026 war's terms as presented – is precisely the behaviour Morgenthau's framework would predict from a state with significant residual power refusing to accept hegemonic subordination.

3.3.2 Offensive Realism (Mearsheimer)

John Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive realism argues that great powers seek not merely survival but the maximisation of relative power, and that this structural logic makes great-power competition inevitable. Offensive realism provides the clearest single-theory explanation for the 2026 war: the United States could not permit Iran – allied with China and Russia – to become a nuclear threshold state with regional hegemonic capability, because that would permanently foreclose US military and energy influence in the Persian Gulf. The Begin Doctrine that Israel gave to the 2025 and 2026 strikes is textbook offensive realism: disarm your enemies before it's too late to do so without paying exorbitant prices.

But this is also why the 2026 war extended beyond the Twelve-Day War of 2025, as per the principles of offensive realism. After a limited operation in 2025 that did not kill Iran's nuclear program, but merely postponed it, the US and Israel were faced with Mearsheimer's classic dilemma: the cost of inaction (Iranian nuclear capability achieved) was now greater than the cost of action (regional war, oil crisis, Russian/Chinese reaction). After that calculation changed, the war was a foregone conclusion, whoever was in charge in Washington and Jerusalem.

3.3.3 Securitization Theory (Buzan, Wæver, de Wilde)

The Copenhagen School's securitisation theory (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998) suggests that security is not an objective state but a speech act: an issue becomes a security issue when a securitising actor manages to present it as an existential threat which needs to be addressed outside of ordinary political processes. The 2026 war is the result of decades of successful securitization. Both US and Israeli political elites had securitized Iranian nuclear ambition so much that it became almost impossible to challenge as an existential threat in the public and political discourse of both countries, one demanding military action. From a securitization perspective, the war of 2026 was not a decision, it was the virtually inevitable conclusion of a discourse which, over three decades, had left no other option but for war or nuclear Iran.

In contrast, Iran's leaders have been able to 'securitize' the presence of US military forces and Israeli attacks as existential threats for the Islamic Republic, allowing for emergency measures such as leadership change under the guise of the threat, closure of the Strait of Hormuz, and missiles launched against Gulf Arab states that would not otherwise be politically acceptable. Securitization also shows why Pakistan's mediation was acceptable to both parties: Islamabad had not fully securitized Iran as an adversary, and Iran had not securitized Pakistan, leaving Islamabad as one of the few credible third party channels available at the time when both parties were looking to an off-ramp.

4. Historical Architecture: From 1979 To The 2025 Twelve-Day War

4.1 The Foundational Rupture: 1979 and its Structural legacy

The 2026 war came about through no accident. It is the result of forty-seven years of structural hostility, whose origins go back to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the breakup of the US - Iran alliance it has engendered. Prior to 1979, Iran under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was a key component of US Middle Eastern policy: one of its biggest weapons customers, a provider of regional security, and under the doctrine of the “Twin Pillars” a virtual ally of Israel in countering Soviet influence and Arab nationalism. The CIA's involvement in the 1953 coup that reinstated the Shah after Mossadegh only exacerbated the wound on the national consciousness of Iran, and the revolution's anti-American nature was already structurally overdetermined even before it received a theology-political formulation from Khomeini.

The 1979 - 1981 hostage crisis burned the relationship into collective memory with an intensity that outlasted multiple political generations on both sides. The Iran - Iraq War (1980 - 88), during which the United States covertly supported Iraq including providing intelligence on Iranian troop positions and acquiescing to Iraqi chemical weapons use deepened Iranian conviction that the United States would use any available instrument to ensure Iranian subordination. The US shooting down of Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988 (killing 290 civilians), which the United States refused to officially apologize for, became a permanent fixture of Iranian grievance discourse.

4.2 The Nuclear Question Emerges: 2002 - 2018

Iran's nuclear programme, begun under the Shah with American assistance, was revealed in its undeclared extent by the National Council of Resistance in 2002. The subsequent decade was dominated by the NPT safeguards crisis, multiple rounds of negotiations, escalating sanctions, the UN Security Council resolutions requiring Iranian nuclear suspension, and the shadow war of covert operations including Stuxnet (2009 - 10), scientist assassinations (2010 - 12), and the 2018 Mossad seizure of Iran's nuclear archive. The 2015 JCPOA represented the apogee of the diplomatic track, achieving verified Iranian compliance with enrichment limits at the cost of extensive sanctions relief. Trump's 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA destroyed that equilibrium. By 2024, Iranian enrichment had reached 84% just below weapons-grade and breakout time had compressed to under two weeks.

4.3 October 7, 2023, and the Acceleration Toward War

The 2026 War was not caused by Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, which resulted in some 1200 Israelis killed and an estimated 250 taken hostage. However, it changed the political and strategic landscape in three basic ways. Firstly, it was an overwhelming domestic political rationalization for Israel's most aggressive military posture in decades. Second, it showcased the strategic value of Iran's Axis of Resistance proxy network in such a manner that it attracted the US and Israeli focus on its total destruction, rather than incremental dismantlement. Thirdly, the next two Israeli campaigns to Gaza and Lebanon, which significantly disrupted Hezbollah's military capabilities in 2024 and 2025, systematically eliminated Iran's forward deterrence buffer leaving Iran as the sole remaining strategic threat. By the beginning of 2025 Iran's main deterrence tool of the last 30 years, the proxy network, was in serious trouble. Iran was bared in a way it hasn't been in decades.

The precedent and the logistics for bilateral direct conflict were set with the first-ever direct missile/drone attack on Israeli territory launched by Iran on April 2024. Will and ability had been proven on both sides. This next step-up was no longer a question of the military but of politics.

4.4 Timeline of Key Events and Strategic Significance (2023–2026 Iran–Israel–US Conflict)

Table 1: Chronological overview of the 2023 - 2026 US - Israel - Iran conflict escalation. Sources: Britannica (2026 Iran war); Al Jazeera (2026/3/11); Reuters (Feb 28, 2026); House of Commons Library CBP-10521.

Date	Event	Strategic Significance
Oct 7, 2023	Hamas attack on Israel (~1,200 killed)	Triggers regional escalation and fundamentally shifts Israel's security doctrine, enabling a more aggressive regional posture.
April 2024	First direct Iran–Israel exchange: Iran launches 300+ drones and missiles at Israel	Establishes precedent for direct interstate confrontation; demonstrates Israel's layered air defence effectiveness; marks limited Israeli retaliation inside Iran.
June 13–24, 2025	“Twelve-Day War”: Israel strikes Iranian nuclear and military infrastructure; U.S. joins strikes on nuclear facilities	Natanz, Fordow, and Isfahan targeted; significant degradation of Iran's nuclear infrastructure (damage assessment contested); conflict ends with externally brokered ceasefire.
July 2025	Iran suspends IAEA cooperation; nuclear programme shifts to hardened/underground facilities	Reduces international verification and transparency; increases uncertainty over Iran's nuclear capability; accelerates sanctions pressure.
Late 2025	Economic collapse indicators: currency depreciation, sanctions escalation, and domestic unrest	Marks deepening regime legitimacy crisis amid economic contraction and widening protest activity.
Feb 2026	Failed indirect nuclear talks in Oman	Diplomatic breakdown eliminates remaining negotiated pathway; signals shift toward military resolution preference among key actors.
Feb 28, 2026	Major US–Israel coordinated strikes; high-value Iranian leadership targeted, including Supreme Leader Khamenei	Marks outbreak of full-scale interstate war; represents unprecedented decapitation-strike strategy against Iranian command structure.
Mar 1–Apr 7, 2026	Iranian retaliation: missile strikes on Israel; attacks on Gulf US bases; Strait of Hormuz closure; oil reaches USD 126/barrel	Regional war expansion; global energy shock; maritime insecurity; cumulative casualties exceed 6,000; Lebanon front reactivates.
Apr 7–8, 2026	Pakistan-mediated ceasefire agreement between US and Iran; partial reopening of Strait of Hormuz	First de-escalation phase; emergence of Pakistan as an intermediary diplomatic actor; initiation of formal talks in Islamabad.
May 2026	Fragile ceasefire continues; US naval pressure maintained; internal Iranian leadership consolidation under Mojtaba Khamenei	Conflict transitions into unstable post-war phase; unresolved nuclear ambiguity and continued geopolitical tension sustain risk of re-escalation.

5. The Twelve-Day War, June 2025: The First Open Conflict

The June 13 - 24, 2025 Twelve-Day War represents the crucial intermediate stage between the decades of shadow war and the 2026 open conflict. Understanding it is essential to understanding why the 2026 war took the form it did. Israel launched the opening strikes on June 13, 2025, targeting Iranian nuclear facilities at Natanz, Fordow, and Isfahan, as well as military sites and regime infrastructure in Tehran. The anticipated attack, according to War on the Rocks (2026), 'followed nearly two years of war between Israel and Iran-backed militant groups that also saw two direct confrontations between Israel and Iran in 2024.' The United States joined specifically to target nuclear sites on June 22, 2025, deploying B-2 bombers and other advanced strike assets against Fordow – a facility buried deep underground that only bunker-busting munitions deployed by the US military could reach.

US strikes on June 22, 2025, at 02:10 - 02:35 IRST, targeted Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan. US officials described 'extremely severe damage and destruction' to all three sites, with Natanz described as 'destroyed' and Fordow and Isfahan suffering 'major damage.' Iranian officials confirmed 'significant and serious damages' while claiming the damage was not irreversible. The IAEA stated the sites 'suffered enormous damage.' A leaked preliminary report from the US Defense Intelligence Agency assessed, in contrast, that the strikes set back Iran's nuclear programme by 'only a matter of months' – a politically explosive assessment that CIA Director John Ratcliffe immediately countered, claiming 'new information indicated severe damage... that would take years for Iran to rebuild.'

Iran responded with strikes on Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the largest US military base in the Middle East. Trump announced a ceasefire on June 24, declaring that the US and Israel had achieved their military goals. On July 2, Iran suspended cooperation with the IAEA. The critical strategic lesson of the Twelve-Day War – which Al Jazeera's March 2026 analysis identified as having 'trapped US and Israel in a longer war' – was that defined, limited strikes against nuclear infrastructure left room for negotiation. That diplomatic breathing room was nonexistent in the 2026 war, which involved a decapitation of the leadership and explicit goals of regime change, and turned a nuclear-management exercise into an existential struggle with no easy routes to withdraw without fundamental concession.

6. The 2026 War: Causes, Triggers, And Opening Strikes (February 28, 2026)

6.1 The Decision for War of February 2026

To grasp the nature of the timing of the 2026 war, it is important to focus on the confluence of four specific structural conditions in the months leading up to February 28. In the first place, Iran's military strength was significantly diminished. By the time of the 2025 Twelve-Day War, nuclear infrastructure had been damaged and senior scientists killed, while the October 7 wars had taken a heavy toll on Hezbollah, Hamas and other proxy capabilities, Iran's currency had gone into free fall and the economy had shrunk under the sanctions. As the Britannica account notes, 'Given Iran's weakened position, the United States and Israel calculated that they had greater opportunity to advance their objectives through military means than by diplomatic means.'

Second, the domestic political situation in Iran had deteriorated sharply. Extensive protests erupted in early 2026, 'motivated by a weakened economy as well as struggling infrastructure, illustrating the regime's weakened legitimacy within the country' (House of Commons Library, CBP-10521). The protests were suppressed with force, but their existence signalled to US and Israeli planners

that a military campaign might be received by segments of the Iranian population as an opportunity for regime change – a calculation that proved, in the event, to be significantly over-optimistic.

Third, the February 2026 indirect nuclear negotiations in Oman – which the Omani foreign minister had described as showing 'significant progress, with Iran willing to make concessions' – were effectively killed when President Trump said he was 'not thrilled' with the talks. This closure of the diplomatic channel removed the last political constraint on the military option.

Fourth, the personal relationship between Trump and Netanyahu reached an unprecedented intimacy. Netanyahu described their relationship as speaking 'almost every day, exchanging ideas and advice and making decisions together,' with Trump telling him their friendship was 'a hundred times stronger than any relationship between an American president and an Israeli prime minister.' This extraordinary bilateral alignment of the two leaders' personal political interests – both faced domestic pressures that a dramatic military success could alleviate – removed the institutional friction that had historically moderated US - Israeli military decisions.

6.2 The Opening Strikes: February 28, 2026

At midmorning on February 28, 2026, US and Israeli forces launched 'a broad strike in full synchronization and coordination following months of close and joint planning' (NBC News, March 1, 2026). The strikes hit targets across Iran simultaneously: nuclear facilities; ballistic missile stockpiles and production facilities; IRGC command centres; and – in the decision that defined this war's character as fundamentally different from the 2025 operation – the residence of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Khamenei was killed in the first day of operations. Multiple senior IRGC commanders, including the IRGC commander and Iran's Defence Minister Aziz Nasirzadeh, were also killed.

Netanyahu, at a press conference, confirmed the scope: 'In the current operation, we also opened the path for a broad strike against Iran's massive missile stockpiles and missile-production facilities, as well as its nuclear project – including severe blows to senior Iranian scientists who led the development of nuclear bombs meant to destroy us. They are no longer here.' Trump's stated objectives encompassed 'regime change,' 'termination of Iran's nuclear programme,' and 'disarmament of its ballistic missile capabilities' – objectives that went far beyond the nuclear-management framing of the 2025 Twelve-Day War and that, as Al Jazeera's analysis noted, 'shattered the previous rules of engagement, dragging the region into an open-ended war of attrition with zero diplomatic off-ramps.'

7. Conduct of the 2026 War: Military Operations, Iranian Retaliation, And The Strait Of Hormuz

7.1 US - Israeli Military Operations (February - April 2026)

The US - Israeli military campaign was sustained and multi-phase. The initial phase (February 28 - March 15) targeted nuclear infrastructure, missile arsenals, IRGC facilities, and leadership compounds across Iran. Tehran came under heavy attack. A satellite image shared by Airbus DS on February 28 showed 'heavy damage at Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's compound' (Reuters). The second phase (March 15 - April 7) expanded to energy infrastructure: Trump threatened on March 21 to target Iran's 'civilian energy infrastructure if Iran did not agree to allow ships to pass through the Strait of Hormuz without interference,' extending the threat to Kharg Island – through which nearly all of Iran's oil exports pass – and to desalination plants on March 30.

7.2 Iranian Counter-Operations

Iran's retaliation was significant but calibrated to avoid triggering a US escalation to the civilian infrastructure attacks Trump had threatened. Iranian ballistic missiles struck Tel Aviv on February 28 – the first Iranian missile strike on the Israeli commercial capital in history – killing 28 Israeli civilians, injuring 8,590, and causing USD 50 billion in Israeli economic damage by April 30. US military bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia were struck, including the US Fifth Fleet service centre in Manama. Iran also struck oil and gas facilities across the Gulf and a residential high-rise building.

The most economically consequential Iranian action was the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately twenty percent of global oil trade normally passes. Iran struck oil tankers, seized two merchant ships, and sank one tugboat. Twelve seafarers were killed or missing. The International Energy Agency warned that the supply disruption was 'the largest in the history of the global oil market' (Bloomberg, March 13, 2026). Brent crude surged to USD 126 per barrel at its peak; the March 9 single-day gain of 23% was 'the biggest daily gain since at least 1988' (MEXC, March 9, 2026). JPMorgan's chief economist warned: 'The global economy remains dependent on the concentrated flow of Mideast oil and natural gas through the Strait of Hormuz... The near-term scenario is a spike toward \$120 per barrel followed by moderation as the conflict subsides.'

7.3 Casualties

The human cost of the conflict was severe, particularly for Iranian and Lebanese civilians. The following table summarizes casualty data as of the April 2026 ceasefire.

Table 2: Casualties of the 2026 Iran war by party (as of April 2026 ceasefire). Source: Al Jazeera Casualties of the 2026 Iran war; HRANA (Human Rights Activists in Iran); Lebanese Health Ministry; US CENTCOM; Israeli Ministry of Defense. Note: All figures are estimates and subject to revision; military casualties in Iran are likely higher than confirmed figures due to restricted access.

Country / Party	Killed (Estimated)	Injured (Estimated)
TOTAL (All Parties)	6,285 – 8,817+	44,511+
Iran	3,468 – 6,000+ (including 1,701 confirmed civilians; 1,221 military per HRANA)	15,000 – 26,500
Lebanon	2,586 (Lebanese Ministry of Public Health)	8,020+
Israel	47 (28 civilians, 18 soldiers, 1 contractor)	8,590
Iraq	117+	361
United States	15 military personnel	538 military personnel
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	13	224
Kuwait	10	115
Other Gulf States (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman)	9	86
France / Philippines / Other nationals	5	13

8. The Nuclear Dimension: What the Strikes Achieved and did Not

The central stated objective of both the 2025 Twelve-Day War and the 2026 operation was the destruction or permanent degradation of Iran's nuclear programme. Whether either operation achieved this objective is one of the most consequential empirical questions in contemporary strategic studies – and the answer remains deeply contested.

Three competing assessments have emerged. The US official position, advanced by CIA Director Ratcliffe following the June 2025 strikes, was that 'new information indicated severe damage to the nuclear facilities that would take years for Iran to rebuild.' The leaked US Defense Intelligence Agency preliminary report assessed, in stark contrast, that 'Iran had moved much of its stockpile of enriched uranium before the US strikes took place and that the strikes, which did not collapse the underground facilities, set back Iran's ability to produce nuclear weapons by only a matter of months.' Israeli intelligence, per reports from the same period, assessed that nuclear facilities had been 'damaged but Iran's nuclear program has not been destroyed.' The IAEA, whose access was already severely restricted following the July 2025 suspension, stated the sites 'suffered enormous damage' but could not verify the extent without inspection access.

The critical variable that neither operation fully addressed was the question of the enriched uranium stockpile itself. Iran had, by 2024, accumulated an estimated 5,000+ kilograms of enriched uranium at various enrichment levels – sufficient, if further enriched to weapons-grade, for multiple nuclear devices. The DIA's preliminary assessment that Iran had moved 'much of its stockpile' before the strikes – if accurate – means that even a successful physical destruction of enrichment facilities would not have eliminated Iran's weapons-production potential. The nuclear question, in the aftermath of both 2025 and 2026 operations, remains structurally unresolved.

Comparative Nuclear Program Assessment: 2025 Twelve-Day War vs. 2026 Conflict (Preliminary Findings)

Table 3: Comparative nuclear damage assessment – 2025 Twelve-Day War and 2026 War. Sources: US official statements; leaked DIA report (March 2026, via AP/NYT); IAEA statements; Israeli intelligence assessment (as reported by Reuters); Britannica (2026 Iran war entry).

Assessment Dimension	2025 Twelve-Day War Outcome	2026 War Outcome (Preliminary)
Physical Facility Damage	Natanz destroyed; Fordow and Isfahan sustained major damage. U.S. assessment (DIA leak) indicates a temporary setback of several months.	Repeated strikes on primary nuclear facilities; reported killing of IRGC-linked nuclear scientists; IAEA describes “enormous damage” to infrastructure.
Uranium Stockpile	Exact status unknown; IAEA access suspended (July 2025), preventing verification.	U.S. DIA (leaked assessment) suggests significant portions of stockpile were relocated prior to strikes; current locations remain unverified.
Enrichment Capability	Severely degraded in the short term; estimated recovery timeline ranges from 1–2 years depending on reconstruction capacity.	Further degradation reported due to repeated strikes and dispersal of infrastructure; underground redundancy increases uncertainty in long-term recovery estimates.
Weaponisation	Extended; estimates vary	Further extended; however, uncertainty

Timeline	significantly (ranging from months to several years depending on assumptions).	over stockpile location implies potential latent weaponisation capability may still exist.
IAEA Verification Status	Cooperation suspended (July 2025), eliminating independent monitoring capacity.	Full suspension continues; ceasefire framework (May 2026) does not include a verified inspection or monitoring mechanism.

9. Leadership Decapitation and Iran's Succession: Mojtaba Khamenei

The killing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on the first day of operations is the defining feature that separates the 2026 war from all previous iterations of the US - Israel - Iran conflict. For forty-five years, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic was treated as untouchable – a political constraint that reflected both the legal norms of sovereign immunity and the strategic calculation that decapitation of a state's supreme leadership would eliminate diplomatic off-ramps and harden domestic resistance. The decision to kill Khamenei represented the explicit abandonment of those constraints.

On March 9, 2026, Iran's Assembly of Experts, which was tasked with electing the supreme leader upon his death, elected Mojtaba Khamenei as the successor to his late father. Mojtaba Khamenei was a long-standing favorite to succeed his father, and had been seen in Western estimates as a hardliner more hawkish than the supreme leader. In his first public statement read by a state television anchor, he announced that 'the only place Americans should be in the Persian Gulf is at the bottom of its waters,' and that a 'new chapter of the region's history is being written. He made clear his intention to safeguard Iran's nuclear and missile program and to prevent the opening of the Strait of Hormuz.

As deterrence theory would have predicted in the case of a decapitation strategy in a revolutionary state with deep ideological roots, the new leader, eager to demonstrate his own revolutionary credentials, was more ideological than the previous one. Trump's public remarks that Mojtaba Khamenei was 'unacceptable' as successor did not have any operational impact. The decapitation of the regime's top leadership did not result in a popular uprising or a capitulation of the leadership, as the Trump administration's stated objective of regime change required.

The March 11, 2026 analysis by Al Jazeera was spot-on in emphasizing the strategic irony of the pivot from nuclear-infrastructure strikes (2025 model) to decapitation strikes (2026 model), “locking US and Israel in a war of attrition.” The 'defined scope' of the 2025 target had 'left room for negotiations', whereas the 2026 target on leadership 'eliminated that space.

10. Pakistan's Mediation and The Ceasefire In April 2026

10.1 Pakistan's Unique Position

Perhaps the most geopolitically important fallout of the war on Pakistan's international image is its new role as the mediating power in April 2026 ceasefire. Pakistan was in a truly unique structural position, having functional relations with Iran, a border of 909 kilometres, deep cultural and religious ties, as well as relations with the United States, which are of fundamental strategic importance, despite the constant tensions between the two countries. It was a Muslim majority state that was credible in the Islamic world, a nuclear power with its own hard won sense of security dilemmas and a country that had not been engaged in the conflict on either side.

The domestic pressure on Pakistan's government was intense. As Al Jazeera reported on April 8, 2026: 'In Karachi, demonstrators tried to storm the US consulate on March 1, leaving at least 10 people dead.' Pakistan's Shia Muslim population, 'estimated at 15 to 20 percent of the country's roughly 250 million people, was watching closely. As sectarian tensions rose, [Army Chief] Munir summoned Shia clerics to Rawalpindi and warned that violence inside Pakistan would not be tolerated.' Pakistan was simultaneously engaged in what officials described as an open war against the Afghan Taliban' managing three simultaneous security crises of the first order.

10.2 The Ceasefire Process

Pakistan's diplomatic engagement was systematic and high-level. On March 3, Foreign Minister Dar addressed the Senate, outlining Pakistan's position and offering to facilitate dialogue in Islamabad. On March 31, Pakistan and China jointly delivered a 'five-point initiative' calling for an immediate end to hostilities and allowance of humanitarian aid. PM Sharif spoke directly with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian as formal talks were being arranged. A US delegation was expected to be led by Vice President JD Vance, accompanied by Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner.

On April 7, Trump posted on social media that 'a whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again' a statement that represented the war's rhetorical apex of escalatory threat. Within hours, however, the dynamics shifted. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi announced Iran would agree to a ceasefire if attacks against Iran were halted. On April 7 - 8, Trump announced on social media that he had agreed to a two-week ceasefire brokered by Pakistan. Iranian officials confirmed the agreement; Iran's Supreme National Security Council claimed 'a historic victory, asserting the US accepted Tehran's 10-point plan.'

The ceasefire terms included: suspension of US - Israeli bombing of Iran for two weeks; reopening of the Strait of Hormuz to commercial shipping; and the commencement of Islamabad talks. Iran issued a five-point counter-proposal including security guarantees against future aggression, war reparations, and international recognition of Iranian sovereignty over the Strait of Hormuz terms unlikely to be accepted by the US but signalling the parameters of any eventual negotiation. As of May 2026, the ceasefire remains in effect but fragile. The US has imposed a naval blockade on Iranian ports. The Islamabad talks have begun but produced no breakthrough. The Strait of Hormuz remains effectively closed to most shipping despite the ceasefire terms.

11. Regional and Global Implications

11.1 The Global Energy System

The 2026 war has exposed with brutal clarity the structural vulnerability of the global energy system to conflict in the Persian Gulf. The Strait of Hormuz crisis produced oil price spikes to USD 126 per barrel the highest level in four years and generated what the IEA described as the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market. The Financial Times reported that 'oil companies in Iraq, Kuwait, and Qatar have begun reducing oil production because shipping traffic remains largely halted in the Strait of Hormuz.' Qatar warned that 'war will force Gulf to stop energy exports within days.' The conflict has also generated global food security warnings as fertiliser supply chains from the region were disrupted.

11.2 Lebanon and the Proxy Ecosystem

The 2026 war reignited the Israel - Hezbollah conflict in Lebanon. As the House of Commons Library noted, 'the conflict prompted the resumption of the Israel-Hezbollah war' with 'more than

one-sixth of the population in Lebanon displaced.' Lebanon's Health Ministry reported 2,586 killed and over 8,000 injured. A Lebanon - Israel ceasefire was declared on April 16, but violations were reported by both sides within days. The broader proxy ecosystem already weakened by 2024 - 25 Israeli operations against Hamas and Hezbollah has been further degraded, but the conditions that make proxy groups strategically attractive to Iran persist.

11.3 Russia, China, and Great-Power Dynamics

Russia and China both vetoed a US-backed UN Security Council resolution on April 7 a draft calling for an end to Iranian attacks on shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and for states to 'coordinate efforts defensively for shipping access.' China called freedom of navigation a 'shared call of the international community' but refused to support a resolution it viewed as legitimizing the US - Israeli military campaign. Russia, locked in its Ukraine war, saw the Iran conflict as creating both a US strategic distraction and through Iranian drone and missile technology sharing a degradation of Israel's regional strategic position. Both powers' diplomatic cover for Tehran has complicated the ceasefire negotiations.

11.4 The International Legal Dimension

The 2026 war has generated fundamental international law questions. Hamilton (2026) raised the question of whether the US - Israeli strikes constituted a 'tipping point for the UN Charter,' given that they were conducted without UNSC authorization, were explicitly aimed at regime change (a goal not covered by any recognized self-defence exception), and involved the assassination of a head of state. US domestic laws constraints were studied by Egan and Bridgman (2026), who pointed out that the 60-day War Powers Resolution deadline was important, as Trump had informed the leaders of Congress that 'hostilities' with Iran had ended, a statement made questionable by the fact that the naval blockade was still in place, and that the Iranians continued to counter the operation. The long-term international legitimation of the conflict will be determined by these legal challenges

11.6 Implications for Pakistan

The consequences of the 2026 war for Pakistan are both perilous and potentially game-changing. The perilous dimension is current—Pakistan faces the prospect of a long border with Iran, a significant and mobilized Shia population, economic vulnerability due to energy price spikes, and political ties to Iran that are at the center of a multifaceted regional security matrix involving Afghanistan, India and the Gulf. The protests that resulted in the death of at least 26 - 35 Pakistanis brought to the fore the political volatility in the country that the war has created.

Diplomatic is the transformative dimension. Pakistan's mediation of April ceasefire, which no other potential mediator (EU, Turkey, Qatar, Oman) was able to achieve, is a testament to its role in the mediation and has boosted the country's international image in a manner unseen since the 1990s. Despite a domestic political crisis, Afghan border conflict and economic crisis, a country still delivered the most impactful diplomatic service of 2026. This accomplishment opens up opportunity (growing international involvement, economic leverage, international credibility and legitimacy) but also responsibility (pressure to turn the ceasefire into a lasting settlement).

12. Theoretical Analysis: Applying IR Frameworks To The 2026 War

Overall, the 2026 war is a unique opportunity to challenge and refine existing IR theoretical frameworks and to examine a real-world case in unprecedented detail. The analysis below uses

each of the three frameworks developed in Section 5 for the three major empirical dimensions of the war.

The war's structural inevitability: with Iran's nuclear threshold and its decaying conventional military deterrence (proxy network in disarray, economy gone under), and a particular political convergence between the White House and Tel Aviv (Trump-Netanyahu), a structural logic of the balance of power pointed toward military action as the leading strategy. With the ideology removed, Morgenthau's idea of the national interest makes sense: The United States was not primarily seeking to defend Israel or democracy, but to stop a hostile nuclear threshold state from consolidating control of the world's most significant energy choke point. What this lack of regime change does not undermine is classical realism, but rather that there are limits to power projection.

Offensive realism (Mearsheimer) explains the maximalist escalation from the 2025 model (nuclear infrastructure targeting) to the 2026 model (nuclear targeting + decapitation + regime change). Having established in 2025 that limited strikes could not permanently resolve the nuclear question, the structural logic of offensive realism demanded a more decisive action at the first favourable opportunity – Iran's weakened position in early 2026. The fact that the decapitation strategy failed to produce its stated goal (regime change) is predicted by offensive realism's own logic: states do not simply surrender when their leadership is killed; they fight harder, because the alternative capitulation – eliminates their remaining leverage.

Securitization theory (Buzan & Wæver) provides the most nuanced single-framework explanation for the war's specific character. The thirty-year securitization of Iran's nuclear programme as an existential threat – so thoroughly that even Trump, facing his own stated desire to avoid Middle Eastern wars, felt politically unable to accept the diplomatic off-ramps that Oman had offered produced a discourse structure in which military action was not a choice but an obligation. The securitization of the Strait of Hormuz closure by Iran, conversely, as a civilizational threat ('a whole civilization will die tonight') explains why Trump was willing to threaten destruction of Iranian civilian infrastructure – a threat that, had it been executed, would have been categorically different in international law from the military-target strikes of the preceding weeks. The ceasefire was possible because Pakistan had not been part of either securitization narrative – giving it the rare status of a credible neutral channel.

13. Key Research Findings

Finding 1: The 2026 War Was Structurally Determined, Not Accidental: The 2026 war was not produced by miscalculation, accident, or the idiosyncrasy of individual leaders. It was the structurally predictable outcome of the convergence of five factors: Iran's nuclear threshold status; the destruction of Iran's proxy deterrence buffer; Iran's economic and domestic political weakening; the failure of the 2026 diplomatic track; and the unprecedented personal alignment of Trump and Netanyahu. Each factor alone might have been managed; their simultaneous convergence in early 2026 created a condition that all three theoretical frameworks identify as a structural imperative for action from the US - Israeli perspective.

Finding 2: The killing of the Supreme Leader Khamenei on the first day of operations, the most audacious aspect of the 2026 war, did not achieve its strategic objective, namely that the regime would change or the population would rise up, as the Trump administration's goals required. Within nine days, Iran's Assembly of Experts selected a hardliner to follow Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The new supreme leader appears to have had a more provocative public stance than his predecessor. The Axis of Resistance was not broken but its condition was degraded. The decapitation strategy, by making the conflict into an existential struggle rather than a nuclear-

management operation, removed the diplomatic off-ramps, and left the two sides in a more costly and less manageable conflict than the 2025 model would have been.

Finding 3: The Nuclear Question Remains Structurally Unresolved: The stated aim of the US - Israeli campaign of permanent degradation of Iran's nuclear capability has not been realised. The CIA director's 'years to rebuild' estimate and the DIA's 'months' assessment is not just spin, but intelligence uncertainty itself. More importantly, the stockpile issue – whether Iran has managed to shift its stockpile of enriched uranium before the strikes – means that the potential to produce weapons may still exist even if facilities are destroyed. In any postwar settlement, the nuclear question will remain a key factor in US - Iran ties.

Finding 4: Pakistan's Mediation is a Historical Achievement, Not a Diplomatic Success: The April 2026 ceasefire mediated by Pakistan is neither a diplomatic success nor a mere reproduction of other mediation efforts, but rather a structural proof that Islamabad has been able to do in this particular conflict what no other country could. This success provides responsibility and leverage for Pakistan's foreign policy which it has lacked in the Middle East hitherto. The way Pakistan handles this situation in Islamabad will have a great impact on its international image in the next ten years or so.

Finding 5: The April 2026 ceasefire and the current Islamabad talks are not a resolution of the structural conflict but rather a pause. Iran's new leaders have pledged to maintain its nuclear and missile capability. The U.S. has put a naval blockade in place, and is not providing any of the security assurances that any Iranian nuclear concession would require. The Strait of the Hormuz is effectively closed. The humanitarian fallout thousands dead, millions displaced, Lebanon's population broken up, the global economy disrupted puts political pressure on all sides that makes compromise difficult. The ceasefire is a temporary "stop" in a conflict that cannot be solved by answering only one of the three questions that need to be answered at the same time: nuclear question, security guarantee question, and the regional order question.

14. Scenario Analysis: The War's Future Trajectories

Based on historical analysis, theory and the ongoing dynamics, four possible future scenarios are proposed. Rather than predictions, they are offered as a way to think about policy through structure.

Table 4: Structured future scenario analysis for the 2026 Iran war's post-ceasefire trajectory. Probability estimates are qualitative assessments based on structural analysis, not statistical modelling.

Scenario	Description	Required Conditions	Probability Estimate
A: Negotiated Comprehensive Settlement	Islamabad talks produce a new nuclear agreement covering enrichment limits, IAEA access, US security guarantees, and phased sanctions relief. Strait fully reopens. Long-term regional stability framework established.	US willingness to offer credible sovereign security guarantees; Iranian elite consensus under new leadership; sustained diplomatic effort over 12–24 months; Russian/Chinese constructive	Low–Medium: 15–20% — Harder due to elimination of diplomatic norms and Mojtaba Khamenei's hardline posture.

B: Managed Ceasefire + Prolonged Stalemate	Ceasefire holds intermittently; reduced-intensity naval blockade; slow Islamabad talks; Iran preserves nuclear option; conflict becomes a “frozen conflict” similar to Korean peninsula.	engagement. Continued restraint from both sides; sufficient but controlled economic pressure; sustained Pakistani mediation.	High: 40–50% — Most structurally likely due to lack of decisive victory or acceptable peace terms.
C: Iranian Regime Change / Internal Collapse	Economic collapse, military pressure, and protests lead to regime change. New leadership negotiates a comprehensive settlement.	Severe economic collapse; military unable to suppress protests; new leadership willing to break from revolutionary ideology; lack of Russian/Chinese intervention to stabilize regime.	Low: 10–15% — Regime historically resilient; Mojtaba Khamenei’s hardline selection reduces likelihood.
D: Renewed Full-Scale War	Ceasefire collapses; US/Israel resume large-scale strikes; Iran activates remaining proxies; regional powers pulled in; risk of limited Russian/Chinese involvement.	Iranian nuclear test/weaponization; major terror attack attributed to Iran; domestic US political pressure; Strait of Hormuz naval incident.	Medium: 25–35% — Structural roots of war unresolved; miscalculation risk remains high.

15. Policy Recommendations

The following structured policy recommendations are directed at specific actors. They are grounded in the analytical findings of this article and are designed to be practically actionable rather than aspirationally abstract. They do not favour any party's interests over others' — they favour stability, reduced human suffering, and a durable regional order.

Table 5: Structured policy recommendations by target actor and time horizon. Recommendations are analytically grounded and bias-free with respect to the parties involved

Target Actor	Recommendation	Rationale	Time Horizon
United States	Offer legally binding and formally articulated security guarantees against forcible regime change as part of any nuclear settlement framework.	Without addressing Iran’s core security concern — that the US seeks regime change regardless of nuclear concessions — no durable agreement is possible. The 2026 war reinforced Iran’s belief that concessions do not prevent targeting; only credible guarantees can enable verifiable limits.	Immediate
United States	Commission an independent review of the nuclear strike	The true impact of the 2026 strikes remains unclear. Misunderstanding	Short-term

	effectiveness debate (CIA vs. DIA divergence) and share findings with allies.	the program's actual status leads to poorly calibrated policy. Honest assessment is essential for strategic planning.	
Israel	Accept that regime change was not achieved in 2026 and pursue a negotiated nuclear settlement as the more durable path to long-term security.	Mojtaba Khamenei's rise shows the war hardened Iran's leadership rather than weakening it. A verifiable agreement provides better long-term security than indefinite military confrontation.	Short-term
Iran (New Leadership)	Signal readiness to negotiate nuclear limits in exchange for genuine security guarantees and sanctions relief; fully reopen the Strait as a confidence-building step.	Iran faces severe economic and humanitarian pressures. While defiant rhetoric is domestically necessary, it should not block the diplomatic opening created by Pakistan's mediation.	Immediate
Pakistan	Institutionalise its mediation role by creating a permanent US–Iran diplomatic channel in Pakistan, potentially co-sponsored by China; leverage this for Gulf economic ties.	Pakistan's unique position as mediator is a strategic asset. Converting crisis mediation into a durable institutional framework enhances regional influence and economic benefits.	Short-to-medium term
Pakistan	Engage the international community on humanitarian issues — including Lebanon's displacement and Iranian civilian casualties — as part of its mediation identity.	Pakistan's legitimacy as a mediator depends on being seen as responsive to Muslim-world humanitarian concerns. This strengthens its diplomatic credibility.	Immediate
EU / International Community	Restore IAEA inspection access as an immediate ceasefire condition in Islamabad talks.	Nuclear diplomacy cannot function without verification. The lack of IAEA access since July 2025 is extremely dangerous and must be reversed before any durable deal is possible.	Immediate
All Parties	Establish a permanent direct crisis communication channel (hotline or mediated back-channel) among Washington, Jerusalem, and Tehran.	Direct military exchanges without communication channels create extreme miscalculation risks. Hotlines have historically prevented nuclear escalation in other rivalries.	Immediate

16. Conclusion

The war between the United States and Israel against Iran has not yet ended - it is ongoing in 2025 - 2026. The ceasefire agreement negotiated by Pakistan remains in effect, but it is fraught with uncertainty as of May 2026. The blockade by sea is ongoing. Strait of Hormuz is partially closed.

There has been no breakthrough in the Islamabad talks. Over 6,000 people have died and many thousands injured. In Lebanon, people are being partly displaced again for the second generation. The world's largest ever single energy supply shock, at least since 1988. But even the structuring issue that has propelled this conflict for over 20 years, the nuclear question, has not been resolved.

The 2026 war has been posited to be a structurally unavoidable result of several factors: nuclear threshold status, proxy deterrence collapse, Iranian economic and domestic political weakness, failed diplomacy, and unprecedented US – Israeli leadership alignment. It has shown that the maximalist goals of the war were not realised – regime change and permanent nuclear destruction – and that the decapitation strategy of the war, which aimed at removing the diplomatic path to a solution that the 2025 model had left open, brought about a war of attrition instead of a war of decisive resolution. It has uncovered five findings from original research and eight policy recommendations, all aimed at bringing everyone from the current precarious impasse to a sustainable solution.

The most significant analytical implication of this study is not what has been done, but what has not been done: a sustainable framework for the nuclear issue. The 2026 war has, at great human and economic expense, taken a toll on Iran's nuclear infrastructure and conventional military power. It has not addressed the structural issues of what Iran's security requirements are and whether the international community is willing to meet them. Until that question is answered with the security guarantees that Iran's actions always seem to suggest it is needed, the nuclear question will come back in the form it can with the technical means Iran has and the political will it shows. But the war that has brought so much suffering might—unless the diplomatic opportunity now presented in Islamabad is taken and acted upon quickly—turn out to be less a resolution than an acceleration.

Finally, Pakistan's mediation efforts should be highlighted. The idea of Pakistani diplomats being able to communicate between Washington and Tehran at a time when direct communication between the two was broken down is not only a proud moment in Pakistani diplomatic history, it is a structural demonstration of something much more important: that states which maintain relationship across hostile divides, which refuse to be fully securitized into either camp, which invest in the credibility of neutrality and the reputation for good faith, have a kind of strategic asset that military power cannot replicate. In a world where the most dangerous situation could be the lack of communication between two entities that may, at times, violently interact, it is priceless. The challenge for Pakistan is to turn a crisis into a permanent diplomatic work.

In war the task of the scholar is not to take sides, but to take sides with the truth, to state his case so his hearers will be a little better equipped to make their decision.

References

1. Al Jazeera. (2026, April 8). *How Pakistan managed to get the US and Iran to a ceasefire*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/4/8>
2. Al Jazeera. (2026, March 11). *12 days: How 2025 Iran blueprint trapped US, Israel in longer war*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/3/11>
3. Associated Press. (2025, November). *US strikes target Iranian nuclear facilities after escalation in Gulf region*. <https://apnews.com>
4. Associated Press. (2026, March). *Casualties mount as Iran–US conflict intensifies across multiple fronts*. <https://apnews.com>
5. Associated Press. (2026, April). *Ceasefire halts major offensives in Iran as global powers push for talks*. <https://apnews.com>

6. Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A new framework for analysis*. Lynne Rienner.
7. CBS News. (2026, May). *US beginning effort to guide stranded ships through Strait of Hormuz*. CBS News Live Updates.
8. Cordesman, A. H., & Toukan, A. (2014). *Analyzing the impact of preventive strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).
9. Council on Foreign Relations. (2026, March 9). *Iran names new supreme leader*. <https://www.cfr.org/articles/iran-names-new-supreme-leader>
10. Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE.
11. Egan, B., & Bridgeman, T. (2026, February 28). *Top experts' backgrounder: Military action against Iran and US domestic law*. Just Security. <https://www.justsecurity.org>
12. Financial Times. (2026, March). *Iran conflict disrupts global oil flows as Strait of Hormuz faces repeated closures*. <https://www.ft.com>
13. Hamilton, R. (2026, February 28). *International reactions to military strikes on Iran: A tipping point for the UN Charter?* Just Security. <https://www.justsecurity.org>
14. House of Commons Library. (2026). *Israel/US–Iran conflict 2026: Background and UK response* (CBP-10521). UK Parliament.
15. House of Commons Library. (2026). *Israel/US–Iran conflict 2026: Reopening the Strait of Hormuz* (CBP-10636). UK Parliament.
16. International Atomic Energy Agency. (2025). *Implementation of NPT safeguards in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (GOV/2025/22). IAEA Board of Governors.
17. Just Security. (2026). *Collection: Iran, Israel and the United States at war (2025–2026 operations)*.
18. Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. W. W. Norton.
19. Morgenthau, H. J. (1978). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace* (5th ed.). Knopf. (Original work published 1948)
20. Nasr, V. (2007). *The Shia revival: How conflicts within Islam will shape the future*. W. W. Norton.
21. NBC News. (2026, March 13). *Iran's new supreme leader vows to keep blocking Strait of Hormuz as oil prices spike again*. NBC News Live Blog.
22. Parsi, T. (2007). *Treacherous alliance: The secret dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States*. Yale University Press.
23. PBS NewsHour. (2026, April/May). *Iran's supreme leader vows to protect nuclear and missile capabilities*.
24. Reuters. (2026, February 28). *Iranian leader Khamenei killed in air strikes as US, Israel launch attacks*. <https://www.reuters.com>
25. Reuters. (2026, March 9). *Iran names Khamenei's hardline son Mojtaba as new supreme leader, oil surges*. <https://www.reuters.com>
26. Sanger, D. E. (2012). *Confront and conceal: Obama's secret wars and surprising use of American power*. Crown Publishers.
27. Schwartz, P. (2012). *The art of the long view: Planning for the future in an uncertain world*. Crown Business.
28. SIPRI. (2025). *SIPRI yearbook 2025: Armaments, disarmament and international security*. Oxford University Press.
29. Takeyh, R. (2021). *The last Shah: America, Iran, and the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty*. Yale University Press.
30. War on the Rocks. (2026). *What's going on in Iran?* <https://warontherocks.com>

31. Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE.