

MNI POLITICAL RISK ANALYSIS-Short Campaign Or Long-Term Conflict: Iran War Factors

by Tom Lake and Adam Burrowes

Since the launch of the joint Israeli-US strikes on Iran on 28 February and the subsequent regional conflict, there has been significant market interest in attempting to parse comments from political and military officials from all sides to try and gauge how long the war might last. This comes from the widespread view that a 'short' conflict could limit the economic fallout and allow a 'return to normalcy'. Conversely, a longer war risks sustained constraints in hydrocarbons from the Gulf that risks inflationary spikes, energy supply shortages, and a higher interest rate path.

Identifying the length of the conflict is, of course, impossible. There are in the [words](#) of the late US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld too many 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns'. As such, a sensible way of looking at the situation may be examining the factors that could push the conflict towards a short war (weeks, a month), and those that direct it towards a longer conflagration (many months). These factors are by no means an exhaustive assessment of the factors that will influence the conflict, which are both increasingly global in nature, but also down to the capricious views of individual leaders on both sides.

Short War

Market Pressure: It is likely no coincidence that Trump's dovish pivot came amid major volatility in global markets. Most notably in oil and gas, but also in global stock markets and other commodities that transit via the Gulf like fertilisers, crucial to world food supplies. Andrew Ross Sorkin wrote, "Is the TACO trade back? President Trump's signals that U.S. strikes on Iran could conclude soon appear intended to soothe a market rattled by soaring oil prices. This raises a provocative question: Does the S&P 500 now dictate U.S. foreign policy?" Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) told Fox News on March 10 that "high oil prices will be a problem in the midterms, and if the conflict in Iran persists, I think you're going to see a disastrous election." Gas prices are likely to be particularly salient during this midterm cycle, with much of the discourse focuses on affordability. According to Silver Bulletin, inflation is Trump weakest issue, touching as low as -35% net favourability in late 2025. According to data from AAA, the average national cost of gas is up nearly 50 cents from last week, to \$3.48 per gallon. That is lower than during the fallout from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but will register with voters who remain sensitive to inflation. The UVA Center for Politics [noted](#) in January that the traditional link between gasoline prices and presidential approval has become weaker in recent years, but it will remain a powerful talking point for Democrats during a midterm year.

Political Pressure In US: Opinion polling in the first days of the war shows the US public broadly opposed to military intervention in Iran. A CNN poll conducted 28 February-1 March showed just 41% of respondents in favour of US intervention, lower than the Libya intervention of 2011 (47%), NATO's Kosovo airstrikes of 1999 (58%) or the invasion of Grenada in 1983 (53%). The prospect of rising gas prices putting pressure on already-stretched household finances could see public support decline even further. With all

members of the House of Representatives and one third of the Senate facing mid-term elections in November, the president may find the relatively fulsome support from GOP lawmakers for his initial strikes fading away if it looks as if their races are being impacted. Even without a gas price shock, the midterms will come to increasingly dominate the political landscape as the year goes on, sucking the political oxygen out of other areas, including foreign policy. Going into election season in the midst of a war dragging on in the Middle East costing American lives and significant resources is unlikely to be the ideal scenario for Trump or Republican leaders in Congress.

Hardliners Retaining Power in Tehran - A factor pushing towards a shorter conflict may be the appointment of Mojtaba Khamenei as supreme leader and Ahmad Vahidi as new head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Both are hardliners and have been put in place to indicate continuity and no change in stance from Tehran. Without a collapse of the regime, the Trump administration is likely to exhaust its list of priority targets for aerial bombardment and could wind down its strikes within weeks.

Isolationists Steer Trump To De-Escalation: Overnight, US President Donald Trump declared "*I think the war is very complete, pretty much*", and said the US was "*very far ahead of schedule*". Speaking to Republican House members, he claimed that the US was engaged in a "*short-term*" military operation in Iran to "*get rid of some very evil people*". Trump sought to downplay any rifts between he and his vice president, JD Vance, on the war. Speaking to reporters he said Vance was "*philosophically a little bit different than me*" and that the vice president was "*maybe less enthusiastic about going*" into the conflict. Nevertheless, Vance has been notably quiet on the topic of the war, and there is a sizeable contingent of both Republican lawmakers and Trump's MAGA base that aligns with the vice president's 'America First' isolationist view that getting involved in foreign conflicts has not served America's interests.

De-Escalation Does Not Necessarily Mean Return To Status Quo Ante: Israel will not want to let the opportunity to once and for all eliminate Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes slide by. However, if the fully US draws back, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu may be forced to halt his aerial bombardments as well. It should be noted that this scenario does not necessarily end in a peace agreement or other deal. Indeed, it may be marked with more frequent sporadic US/Israeli airstrikes if/when Iran begins the laborious task of re-arming and trying to start up any nuclear facilities. Alternatively, speculation of US/Israeli special forces being deployed to secure Iranian nuclear sites, and threats that all senior Iranian leaders face elimination could spook Tehran into a deal. At present, this looks like an overly-optimistic vision from the West.

Long War

Clash Of Civilisations: Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Israel and Iran have painted the other as an existential threat to the continued existence of their countries, and indeed the respective ethnic and religious groups they represent. Each side has built up sizeable arsenals of weaponry, and both nations' security services have conducted overt and covert operations intended to destabilise the others' regime. Iran built up its 'axis of resistance' group of proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Israel will never feel secure while Iran has nuclear potential, or indeed while the

clerics are in charge. The Iranian Shia regime views Israel and the US as enemies that must be defeated as part of a righteous war, while the primarily Sunni nations of the Gulf are viewed at best as accessories to Iran's enemies and at worse willing accomplices against Tehran, and as such drone and missile attacks can and should continue. For any eventual cessation or de-escalation of hostilities to be reached, it will need the buy-in of Tehran. Even if Trump signals that the US is looking to end its operations, Iran's political and military leaders may continue to hit targets in the Middle East, dragging out the conflict.

Gulf States Seek Greater US Response Amid Ongoing Iranian Strikes: Sustained attacks on Gulf states could see these countries – all of them significant investors in the US and purchasers of US arms – demand more from the US in terms of stopping attacks on their cities. This particularly the case if crucial infrastructure such as water filtration plants in addition to oil and gas facilities and ports, are attacked and damaged. These pose massive risks their economies. They could also deal a hammer blow to their positions in the minds of many western businesses as safe havens in a dangerous region that have seen cities in the Gulf states become destination for expats and tourism. The US being drawn into ground operations to halt Iranian missile and drone strikes risks a much more protracted conflict.

Iran Hawks Steer Trump Towards Regime Change: It is not only MAGA isolationists that hold significant sway within the White House, but also a smaller remnant of old-school Republican foreign policy hawks.

- Secretary of State Marco Rubio is viewed as one such figure, alongside Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-SC). Both have in the past advocated for full regime change in Tehran as crucial for US security.
- The role of real estate mogul and Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff, and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, who led US negotiations with Iran, could also prove influential. If both indicate that acceptable terms are not likely to be forthcoming from Tehran, it could dissuade Trump from reigning in the conflict.
- At the Pentagon, during Trump's first term many observers viewed the then-Secretary of Defense, former Commander of US CENTCOM James Mattis, as a moderating influence on Trump's more interventionist whims. However, incumbent Secretary of War/Defense Pete Hegseth, a former news anchor and retired infantry officer, does not have the experience of overseeing large military operations and therefore may not be inclined to caution against a longer-term conflict.
- Finally, there is the influence of external leaders, notably Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu. Trump and Netanyahu have met on multiple occasions, with the Israeli PM frequently praising Trump's stance on regional issues. It is unclear when Israel will get such a clear opportunity to eliminate the Iranian regime, and as such Netanyahu is likely to push Trump as far as possible in maintaining the wave of airstrikes on Iran, and potentially even ensure the removal of the clerics via ground operations.

As noted at the top of the piece, attempting to directly call the length of the war in terms of days, weeks, or longer is an impossible task. The US, Israel, and Iran are all invested in keeping their adversaries guessing as to what the next stage of the operation could entail, and how long it could last, as well as the conditions to which they would agree to end hostilities.

The intensity of the conflict and the broadening of the number of countries directly involved either being hit by Iranian drones/missiles or countering such attacks makes it very difficult to envisage an 'off-ramp' that is acceptable for the Trump administration to claim victory as well as allowing the Iranian regime to save face, pointing towards a longer conflict. However, markets have already taken some comments from Trump and other administration officials looking to downplay the prospects of a lengthy campaign as a signal that the president's enthusiasm for the conflict is waning. In any case, in the short term significant volatility both in global markets and the geopolitical landscape are all-but-guaranteed.

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