



"The Era of American Military Dominance Over the Middle East Is Over"

Trita Parsi

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Born in Iran, Parsi moved to Sweden with his family as a child before later settling in the United States. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies, where he studied under Francis Fukuyama and Zbigniew Brzezinski. Parsi holds a Master's Degree in International Relations from Uppsala University and a Master's Degree in Economics from the Stockholm School of Economics.

He has served at the United Nations, taught at leading universities, and is a frequent commentator in major international media.

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The following is the interview given to CEBRI-Journal in July 2026.

Many analysts argue that the United States underestimated Iran's willingness and capacity to restore deterrence. In your

view, what were the main strategic miscalculations made by Washington before the outbreak of this war?

TRITA PARSI: The main miscalculation the US side committed before the war was to believe Iran feared war more than it feared capitulation. Beyond miscalculating Iran's strength, the US side more crucially believed that the Iranian theocracy would seek to save itself by capitulating to US demands on the nuclear front, not understanding that nothing constituted a more decisive threat to the theocracy's survival than capitulation. The Iranians believed they could survive war, perhaps even come out on top (which appears to have happened), but they could never survive capitulation because they would lose their core base of support in that scenario.

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Indeed, to the hardcore supporters of the Iranian government, its resistance against the US is a central pillar. This is why many of them—but far from all—also oppose an accommodation with Washington. Surrendering to the US would delegitimize the theocracy in the eyes of these steadfast supporters and push it towards collapse much faster than even a decisive defeat in war could. Washington never understood this. On numerous occasions, Trump and his

envoy Steve Witkoff expressed frustration over Iran's refusal to surrender. The US issued military threats, to no avail. It moved a third of the US navy to the Persian Gulf, to no avail. And when the US tried to find a face-saving exit from its military bluff—by requesting that Iran respond performatively to a limited American strike—Tehran refused to oblige, further exasperating the American administration.

The second decisive miscalculation was to fundamentally underestimate Iran's power and the resilience of the theocratic system. Trump was convinced by the Israelis that assassinating the Supreme Leader would either lead to the theocracy imploding from the inside or for the remnants of it offering their capitulation in return for a Venezuela-style deal in which Iran would give up its sovereignty to the US in return for a figure within the theocracy being allowed to take custodianship of the country.

Again, the American misreading of Iran is borderline comical. Washington viewed Iran no differently from authoritarian governments in the Middle East such as Iraq under Saddam Hussein or Libya under Moammar Qaddafi. In those systems, power was entirely centered in the hands of the ruling family. By assassinating the ruler and his children, these systems would completely collapse. Iran is organized entirely differently. Power is dispersed throughout a vast system—the *nezam*. Redundancies are deliberately

created because the theocracy is itself a revolutionary government that from the outset was organized to withstand a counter-revolution. As a result, taking out even its top leaders does not bring about a collapse of the regime because it is designed to quickly replace that leadership with other revolutionaries waiting in the wings. While it is not a democracy in the Western liberal sense, neither is it a dictatorship in which power is centered in the hands of very few and, as a result, suffers from the vulnerability that inherently comes with such systems.

You recently argued that Iran has established a new regional equation by directly retaliating against Israeli strikes on Lebanon. Do you see this as the emergence of a genuine collective deterrence framework in the Middle East, or is it still too dependent on the current political circumstances to become a lasting regional order? If Iran is now willing to impose costs on Israel for actions taken against Lebanon, could this logic eventually be extended to Gaza, Syria, Iraq or Yemen? Where do you think Tehran would draw the boundaries of this emerging deterrence doctrine?

TP: One of the fundamental problems for stability in the region has been that Western countries—under the guise of upholding Israel’s right to defend itself—

have actively sought an uneven balance in the region that would allow Israel almost complete maneuverability in the region. Under this uneven balance, Israel would be able to strike at countries such as Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq at will, with impunity and without American involvement (Israel even built military bases in Iraq without the knowledge of the Iraqi government). Israel has sought to extend this dominance to Iran as well but failed.

Israel asserts that it must have this impunity in order to survive. Thus, for Israel to feel safe, everyone else in the region must be unsafe. Israel should be able to deter everyone else, but no one should be able to deter Israel.

Needless to say, this is, at the end of the day, not a formula for stability. Rather, it is an arrangement that is inherently unstable. Major powers like Iran—regardless of their form of government—will never accept living under the military hegemony of a country not even ten times its size. Even smaller countries, such as Lebanon, will resist.

But for years, regional States lacked the hard power to push back. Their pushback was primarily asymmetric. Having restored its own deterrence, Iran is now trying to establish extended deterrence to include Lebanon. This will be the first time in a very long time that a regional power is willing to put hard power behind its efforts to prevent Israel from attacking a *third* country.

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It remains to be seen if the effort is successful. While the US-Iran Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) led by JD Vance did appear to move in the direction of an American acceptance of Iran's protection of Lebanon, the Israeli-Lebanese agreement brokered by Marco Rubio appears to contradict the MoU and reasserts Israeli dominion over Lebanon.

Assuming it is successful, it will in and of itself not establish a new *regional* equilibrium. But it may be a step toward a balance that demands restraint and non-maximalism from *all* sides.

Moreover, while Iran may desire to extend this to Gaza, it does not appear to have the leverage to do so at this point. If its extended deterrence in Lebanon proves successful, however, Tehran may inch toward including Gaza as well.

But it is important to understand that deterrence in Lebanon directly

strengthens Iran's own security as it deters Israel from attacking Iran due to Hezbollah's intimate relations with Tehran. Iran's relations with Hamas are not comparable, and, as a result, including Gaza in this arrangement does not automatically translate into a deterrence benefit for Tehran.

Your analysis suggests that the traditional separation between different conflict theaters in the Middle East is breaking down. For decades, conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere were largely treated as separate theaters of confrontation. You argue that this separation is now eroding. How does this new regional logic compare to other historical cases in which States expanded deterrence commitments beyond their own territory?

TP: It is important to recognize that the region is not going from a situation in which extended deterrence did not exist to one in which it does. It is going from a scenario in which Israel, with the support of the West, has sought to establish and sustain complete dominance over the region, in which it has given itself the right to intervene militarily almost anywhere in the region with complete impunity. Look at the complete silence from the West when it comes to Israel's assassination campaigns throughout the region. Israel even went so far as to try to assassinate Hamas negotiators in

Doha, capital of Qatar, a country that is a close ally of the United States.

The *carte blanche* Europe and the United States have given Israel over the last couple of years, and by which Israel has willfully committed war crimes and even genocide without facing any meaningful pushback from the West, is what is lacking precedent in modern times. Most of the West has completely set aside international law and instead prioritized their political, diplomatic, and military support for Israel. By that, they have completely destroyed their own credibility in the eyes of most of the Middle East and the Global South writ large.

As mentioned earlier, such a situation is untenable. Such a regional imbalance begs to be balanced.

Whether Iran's extended deterrence is the right answer is a different matter. What is clear, however, is that the posture and the policies of the West are a decisive part of the problem. Even if Israel desired it, it could never have achieved this imbalance on its own. The role and support of Europe and the United States were instrumental.

Ultimately, it is much better for the region to move towards an inclusive security architecture based on collective security and an explicit rejection of the containment-based logic. However, movement in that direction requires leverage against Israel and its continued occupation of Palestine. Since the West

has proven itself unwilling to provide that leverage, it will by necessity have to come from somewhere else before the region can advance toward an inclusive security architecture.

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One implication of your argument is that Israel may no longer enjoy complete freedom of military action in neighboring countries. How significant is this shift for the broader regional balance of power, and does it represent the first serious challenge to Israel's military dominance since the end of the Cold War?

TP: It is still too early to tell, but a likely outcome of the United States and Israel's ill-advised war against Iran may be that Israel will lose much of its impunity and maneuverability

in the region. The Israelis will do everything they can to prevent this from happening, as well as reverse it if it does happen. It will indeed be a significant shift in the dynamics of the region if it occurs.

While Israel's opposition is unsurprising, such an outcome is ultimately better for Israel itself as well. It is this Western-provided impunity that has fueled maximalist policies and politics in Israel and moved it further away from recognizing the necessity of peace and coexistence. This impunity has enabled an Israeli outlook that is anathema to peace. It has made the Israelis believe that they can live securely without suing for peace and without ending the illegal occupation of Palestine. Indeed, this policy has further fueled Israel's territorial appetite, which renders conflict rather than peace far more likely. It has also made Israelis believe that they can live and survive in a state of perpetual warfare. This has had a profound and negative impact on Israeli society. As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself stated, Israel will now live like Sparta: peace is neither achievable nor desirable; war is unending, and the only thing that matters is your ability to constantly wage it successfully. *This impunity has ensured that peace is no longer part of Israel's survival strategy.*

No State will ultimately survive living in accordance with these principles, particularly not a State that is so

dependent on the West and the United States for its military needs.

In 2004, a senior Israeli military official told me about his concerns in this regard. He told me that when he fought in the 1967 and 1973 wars, both he and his fellow soldiers believed that if they won the war, the Arab side would eventually sue for peace. To him and most Israelis at the time, war was unfortunately necessary to achieve peace, he said. But when he looked at Israeli soldiers today, he told me, he did not see any belief in peace. He did not see in them the foundational view that peace was necessary. This generation of Israeli soldiers had resigned themselves to the belief that perpetual warfare was their lot in life. He was deeply worried about how this would impact Israeli society. This was 22 years ago.

You suggest that the United States increasingly prefers regional stability over maintaining Israel's unrestricted military freedom. If this trend continues, are we witnessing the beginning of a transition from a US-centered regional order to a more multipolar Middle East in which regional powers themselves define the rules of deterrence and escalation?

TP: Regardless of Washington's decisions going forward, the era of American military dominance over the Middle East is over. The American

security umbrella has neither proven to be reliable nor effective. The Iran War revealed its stunning limitations. The military bases the United States had set up throughout the region were supposed to prevent an Iranian attack. Instead, it was the US itself that started the ill-advised war, and then, in that war, the bases did not act as a deterrent against Iranian attacks but rather as a magnet for them. Moreover, from the perspective of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States, the majority of whom oppose this war, the United States prioritized the defense of Israel over the defense of its own bases. Iran also proved far more effective in striking and destroying these bases as well as hitting other targets in countries that were supposedly protected by the American umbrella.

Altogether, this will lead to a scenario in which many of these States will continue to retain a strong military relationship with the United States, but they will no longer put all of their security eggs in the American basket. They will continue to buy American weapons, but it appears likely that most American bases in the region will slowly but surely sail off into the sunset. Neither the United States nor the GCC countries will be eager to pay for their reconstruction. The Pentagon has also hinted that it may move the headquarters of US Central Command (CENTCOM) to Israel, because of the vulnerability of Bahrain to Iranian attacks.

But we have to be humble and recognize that the region knows what it is leaving, but it is not entirely clear what it is moving towards. What will replace American dominance is at this stage still undecided. Could it be new bloc formations in a multi-polar region? Could States such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey come together to try to continue the policy of containing Iran? Alternatively, will these regional States come together to rehabilitate Iran in the region's security structures while forming a block against Israel?

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In my view, the former is unlikely. There will be efforts to balance Iran, but it will be coupled with new efforts to integrate Iran economically, since four decades of Iranian containment ultimately did not work and eventually resulted in a disastrous war. Economic integration a

la Europe pre-2022 has not been tested in the region, and this is the direction they are currently moving towards.

In my view, it would be a mistake, however, if that also leads to a new bloc formation against Israel. Instead of changing the paradigm of security in the region, all we would see is a change in its fault lines. The decontainment of Iran would be coupled with the recontainment of Israel. Neither will provide long-term security for the region. Only a truly inclusive security arrangement can do so. But that, of course, requires a fundamental shift in Israel's regional approach, including an end to the illegal occupation—which is unlikely to happen as long as the West continues to underwrite Israel's violations of international law.

China has become Iran's most important economic and diplomatic partner in recent years. To what extent do you believe Beijing supports Iran's emerging regional deterrence strategy, and how might China react if the current Israel-Iran confrontation escalates into a broader regional conflict?

TP: China has cleverly stayed out of this conflict. While it has provided Iran with intelligence, it has kept its support below the threshold that could legitimately provoke the US. China's approach is not one based on having a favorite in the region. Rather, China is laser-focused

China has cleverly stayed out of this conflict. While it has provided Iran with intelligence, it has kept its support below the threshold that could legitimately provoke the US. (...) China is laser-focused on its own interest: ensuring that it has access to a stable level of energy coming out of the Persian Gulf (...).

on its own interest: ensuring that it has access to a stable level of energy coming out of the Persian Gulf that enables China, at optimal cost, to bring millions of its own people out of poverty while catapulting China toward great power status. It is less concerned with who dominates the region, who is controlling a specific disputed area of land, or the ideological leanings of specific leaders—as long as the region doesn't turn against China, is not susceptible to US pressure to undermine China, and as long as China can rely on its energy resources.

While China is perceived as seeing Iran as a closer party geopolitically than, for instance, Turkey or Saudi Arabia—two close US allies, of which one is a NATO member—Beijing did sign 25-year

strategic partnership agreements with Riyadh and Ankara long before it did so with Tehran.

Tehran is well aware of this. It knows that its relationship with Beijing is not a military alliance and that Beijing would never sacrifice its own interest to support Iran against any of its regional rivals or against the US. China plays a much longer game in which entanglement in other

countries' conflicts is rightfully seen as highly detrimental distractions.

As such, China will likely support most variations of regional arrangements that come out of this war as long as they provide reasonable levels of stability and do not put China in a detrimental position.

The United States would have been in a much stronger position today had it similarly approached the Middle East in the past thirty years. 

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