



## War and Political Goals: An Analysis of the Iran-United States Conflict 2026

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### ABSTRACT

The military conflict between Iran, the United States, and Israel in February 2026 marked a significant escalation in Middle East security dynamics, which have been dominated by indirect conflict and proxy wars. This article analyzes the conflict through the perspective of Carl von Clausewitz's "On War," which states that war is a continuation of politics by other means. This research questions whether the military operations in the Iran–United States–Israel conflict in February 2026 had clear and directed political objectives. The article was examined using a qualitative approach based on literature review and strategic analysis. This research found that the military escalation that occurred showed signs of a war of choice, inconsistency, and an endgame that did not achieve the desired outcome.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The military conflict between Iran, the United States, and Israel in February 2026 marked a significant escalation in Middle East security dynamics. For more than a decade, relations between these three actors have been dominated by shadow wars, cyber operations, sabotage of strategic facilities, and the involvement of proxy actors in various conflict zones such as Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Clearly, the current situation is critical, as it could reshape the Middle East, even for Iran itself (Vakil, 2026). The situation changed when the United States, along with Israel, launched an attack on Iran on February 28, 2026. A series of attacks targeted strategic Iranian installations. The Mullahs did not remain silent, launching retaliatory attacks targeting vital US military bases across the Middle East. Six US military bases in the Middle East were targeted by Iran in retaliation (Lum, Willis, 2026).

In this war, United States President Donald Trump stated the objectives of the attacks on Iran. However, Trump has failed to explain the war of choice in the war against Iran. Trump has been unable to provide a coherent strategy and a clear direction for this war (Smith, 2026). Initially, Trump aimed to change the regime in Iran, but over time, the United States' war objectives have shifted and become more ambiguous (Lewis, 2026). Americans are also fed up and tired of the wars in the Middle East (C-Span, 2026). It is worth noting that the military operation took place while Iran and the United States were negotiating Iran's nuclear enrichment. These negotiations, mediated by Oman, began on February 26 and ended on February 27 without producing a significant agreement. However, Omani Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi confirmed that Iran agreed that it would never possess nuclear material that can be used to make weapons. (Metrotvnews.com, 2026) This nuclear issue later became one of the reasons why Trump, along with Israel, carried out the attack on February 28 that killed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Regarding nuclear matters, during his first term in office, on May 8, 2018, Trump withdrew the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement with Iran. This was the agreement regarding Iran's nuclear program previously reached in July 2015. This US move marked the beginning of a worsening of Western efforts to control Iran's nuclear program. Immediately after the JCPOA expired, Iran gained greater freedom to enrich its nuclear arsenal (Bobal, 2026). Ultimately, it's unclear what Trump's ultimate goal is. After the nuclear argument, the US also cited regime change in Iran, marked by the death of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iran is now led by Ayatollah Sayyid Mojtaba Khamenei, Ali Khamenei's son. Iran under Mojtaba Khamenei is considered even more aggressive in confronting both the United States and Israel (Lewis, 2026). The inconsistency of statements and actions fails to explain the threat the United States faces from Iran (Sanger, 2026).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Political Means***

Carl von Clausewitz theory about war is a continuation of politics by other means. Clausewitz, in his book 'On War', states that war is an action carried out using force in an effort to force the enemy to follow our wishes. The conditions

shown today in the US-Israel war against Iran. The United States, together with Israel, launched an attack on Iran on February 28, 2026, with the intention of imposing its will on Iran. They practically use physical force in the sense of combat means without the moral force regulated by international law and as a state based on law. The outcome of a war is determined by the victor. This means that war can force the opposing side to do what we want, but only the victor can do it. Conflict is the precursor to war, and ultimately, war can be triggered by a conflict of interests between nations (Mas'udi, 2023).

There are other ways besides bloodshed to achieve the goal of using force. There is nothing good about war from a moral perspective, but from the art of war, it is difficult to close one's eyes to its dangers and cruelty. The attack carried out by the United States and Israel against Iran raised two important issues faced by the US as a superpower. The total means and determination of Iran's strength. The problem here is that determination is very difficult to measure because it is embedded in the layers of Iranian society itself. But in the end, determination is very difficult to measure and can be estimated only through one's motives (Clausewitz, 2021). Every war has political goals, and it also has military goals to achieve. In practice, political objectives cannot be determined by their own standards because they deal with reality: the fact that three countries are at war: the United States and Israel, against Iran. The US has political objectives in its operations in Iran, and war is a means to achieve those objectives. The question now arises whether the US has achieved this objective through Operation Epic Fury in Iran. In reality, this has been difficult for the United States since the war first broke out on February 28th. The United States clearly aims for conquest in this war and the destruction of Iran's combat power. Meanwhile, Iran continues to resist with its defenses against US attacks. This also falls within Clausewitz's Center of Gravity concept.

### *Attacking the Center of Gravity*

The Center of Gravity is a crucial element in Clausewitz's theory. The primary objective of the Center of Gravity is to attack and destroy the enemy's forces. The US's targeting of Iran's Center of Gravity was intended to achieve victory and, of course, to achieve its desired political goals. The concept of the center of gravity (CoG) in warfare cannot be simplified as simply the accumulation of material forces. Drawing on the analogy of classical mechanics, the center of gravity is understood as the point at which all gravitational forces accumulate and function to maintain the balance of an object (Echevarria II, 2002). When this framework is applied to the study of military strategy, the CoG is interpreted as the locus of equilibrium that determines the cohesion and stability of the entire enemy system.

The CoG is not synonymous with the force itself, such as the number of military personnel, or the resources that support that force, such as industrial capacity. Rather, the CoG is the point of equilibrium that allows all elements within a system to operate in a coordinated manner. In this regard, the CoG has a centripetal function, namely as a force that pulls and unites various system components into a coherent strategic direction. One of the targets of an attack must be the enemy's weak and vulnerable points (Fowler, 2002).

This concept also requires an adequate level of connectivity among enemy elements. Without sufficient interconnectedness and interdependence, an entity cannot be viewed as a systemic whole, making the existence of the CoG irrelevant. In other words, the CoG only emerges in structures with strong internal integration. Finally, the approach to the CoG is effects-based, where the primary goal of attacking it is to cause systemic disruption to the point of total collapse. Therefore, identifying and targeting the CoG is crucial in strategic planning, as its success directly impacts the collapse of the enemy's capacity to survive and operate effectively (Echevarria II, 2002).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research method used in writing this journal is guided by qualitative research methods, obtaining data from books, published journals, and media publications. In the context of war theory, the dynamics of Iran's war against the United States and Israel can be analyzed through the classical thinking of Carl von Clausewitz in his monumental work "On War," which asserts that war is essentially a continuation of politics by other means (Clausewitz, 2021). This view positions war as an instrument used by states to achieve specific political goals. From this perspective, military action should not stand alone but rather be part of a broader political strategy. Various studies in international relations and defense studies also emphasize the relevance of Clausewitz's ideas in understanding modern conflict. For example, research in the journal *International Security* and the *Journal of Strategic Studies* shows that the success of military strategy depends heavily on the alignment between political goals, military strategy, and instruments of state power. The Iran vs. US-Israel war is not only seen as a military conflict, but also involves politics as part of the strategic goals of each party involved in the fighting. Ultimately, the United States lacks a clear objective in waging war against Iran, including inconsistencies in President Donald Trump's statements and his desired endgame.

The United States continues to employ a military deployment approach as a strategy to maintain influence in the Middle East. This approach has not been fully accepted and has instead created a security environment that could trigger military escalation in the region. However, the war exposed critical gaps in regional air defense and technology (Cicurel, 2025). This conflict also demonstrated the clash of capabilities between the United States and Iran. Iran, for example, has consistently developed asymmetric warfare capabilities by strengthening its ballistic missile arsenal and regional proxy network as a deterrent against US military power (Johnson & Metz, 2001). This situation demonstrates that the Middle East region is transforming defense patterns and military strategies that are increasingly complex and multidimensional.

## **RESEARCH RESULT**

The war between Iran and the United States and Israel since February 28, 2026, raises important questions in strategic studies regarding the extent to which the conflict still reflects Clausewitz's principles on the relationship between war and politics. The resulting military escalation does not appear to be entirely based on clearly defined and coordinated political objectives. A series of military

operations and counter-responses is more influenced by the need to maintain deterrence credibility, domestic political pressures, and rapidly changing regional security dynamics. Against this backdrop, this article aims to analyze the Iran-United States-Israel conflict in February 2026 through the perspective of Carl von Clausewitz's theory of war. This research seeks to explain the political objectives, inconsistencies, and endgame pursued by the United States in the war against Iran. Thus, this study is expected to provide a conceptual contribution to understanding the relationship between military strategy, political objectives, and conflict dynamics in the context of contemporary international security.

## DISCUSSION

### *The Rationality of the Iran-United States War*

The United States, along with Israel, conducted "Operation Epic Fury" without explicitly explaining the intent and purpose of the attack on February 28, 2026. Political objectives in war are crucial as a form of affirmation that war is a political instrument subordinate to the goals of the state (Clausewitz, 2021). In the Iran-United States-Israel conflict, the political dimension remains the primary driver. The US's war on Iran is a War of Choice, a conscious decision to wage war to achieve a specific political, strategic, or self-interested goal. War occurs when one nation's goals clash with another nation's, and it chooses to confront them with force (Smith, 2020). However, there was no clear objective in this war; the United States and Israel rained missiles and drones on Iran. Instead, Iran sought to defend national sovereignty, maintain regime continuity, and strengthen its deterrence capacity against external pressure. To this day, Donald Trump has never been able to explain the purpose of the war against Iran. His statements are constantly changing, while Israel's political goals, as the one also attacking Iran, are very clear. Israel wants to establish a "Greater Israel" where it can expand its territory and exert full control over the Middle East. Trump's unclear stance immediately drew criticism from many, especially his political opponents.

Senator Tammy Duckworth of Illinois stated that the US's Operation Epic Fury against Iran is still very much in effect, with its intended outcome unknown (Lewis, 2026). Trump's actions have been deemed unclear from the outset, from regime change to comments about disarming Iran's nuclear capabilities. Trump and Iran also attempted a ceasefire, although it did not proceed as planned. The ceasefire negotiations, mediated by Pakistan, failed to produce an agreement. Trump instead escalated the situation by blocking access to and from the Strait of Hormuz, making the United States' war of choice even more apparent.

Congressman John Garamendi, Ranking Member of the House Armed Services Readiness Subcommittee from the Democratic Party, urged Trump to immediately end the war against Iran. Garamendi then introduced a War Powers Resolution to end Trump's illegal war in Iran. Trump's unilateral decision was deemed illegal because it lacked authorization, and Iran continues to maintain and even control the Strait of Hormuz. Trump's actions have created a security disaster and an economic crisis in the United States domestically (Garamendi, 2026). Trump's initial political goals included regime change and the weakening of Iran's nuclear capabilities, which later shifted to. However, the objectives he sought to achieve remained unclear. This lack of clarity demonstrated the

rationality of the United States' war on Iran. Ultimately, the US war on Iran escalated between the two sides.

The escalation of America's war against Iran led to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz waterway for the United States and its allies, including Israel. Responding to the soaring prices of crude oil and other resources, the United States announced the "Project Freedom" initiative in early May 2026 to ensure the passage of ships from the Persian Gulf while Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth stated, "Project Freedom is defensive, focused in scope, and temporary, with a single mission: protecting innocent commercial shipping from Iranian aggression."

Project Freedom failed because collaborating countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait refused to grant the United States access to their military bases. After only 36 hours of its announcement, Project Freedom was temporarily suspended. This is yet another example of America's political failure in the war against Iran.

### ***The Trump Administration's Inconsistency***

Unlike classic wars, which have relatively clear and limited political objectives, this conflict demonstrates a tendency toward increasingly ambiguous and maximalist objectives. This ambiguity creates a gap between political objectives and military capabilities, potentially causing the war to lose its strategic direction. Within Clausewitz's framework, this reflects a failure to maintain proportionality between ends and means, ultimately pushing the conflict toward a protracted war.

This can be seen in Trump's shifting explanations of the objectives of the war against Iran. Initially, Trump stated that the objective of the war was to address Iran's nuclear program. However, this goal later shifted to regime change in Iran. However, this shift ultimately led to a regime change in Iran, which failed to materialize, instead resulting in the replacement of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei by Ayatollah Seyyed Mojtaba Khamenei. This was part of Trump's claim to bring democracy to Iran, a failed effort that could potentially be detrimental to his domestic politics. Another stated goal of Trump's was to destroy Iran's entire military power by attacking with missiles and drones. This goal wasn't entirely unsuccessful; military power was slightly reduced by the American attack. However, Iran was still able to resist, as even after three months of attacks by the United States and Israel, they were still able to survive and counterattack (Cicurel, 2026).

The protracted US war against Iran gave rise to a new goal for the Donald Trump administration: blocking ships from leaving the Strait of Hormuz. This blockade was implemented by the United States in an attempt to bring Iran to the negotiating table. However, the move failed to produce results. This again demonstrates the inconsistent objectives stated by the Donald Trump administration in the war against Iran, which has led to uncertainty about the war's outcome. Evidently, after attempts at negotiations, the Pakistan-mediated ceasefire collapsed due to Iran's refusal to sit down with the US for talks (Huda, 2026). Iran itself has become deeply distrustful of the US. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi believes the US can no longer be trusted

(Metrotvnews.com, 2026). Abbas criticized the US for only wanting to negotiate by imposing points on Iran.

### *Misreading the Situation*

The success of a war is determined not only by tactical victory on the battlefield, but primarily by the clarity of the desired political goals. When political goals are not clearly formulated, the process of determining the endgame becomes unclear and opens the way for conflict escalation that is difficult to stop. In the context of the conflict between the United States and Iran, the main problem that emerged was the unclear definition of strategic victory by the United States. From the beginning of the conflict's escalation, Washington's political goals appeared ambiguous: whether to deter Iran's nuclear program, weaken Iran's regional military capacity, achieve regime change, or simply maintain geopolitical dominance in the Middle East. This unclear objective created difficulties in determining the parameters of war success.

The concept of center of gravity is a key element in Clausewitz's theory, referring to the enemy's primary source of power (Echevarria II, 2002). In this conflict, each side identified the opponent's center of gravity differently. For the United States and Israel, Iran's center of gravity included regime stability, its nuclear program, and the strength of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In contrast, Iran views the US military presence in the region, Israel's economic and energy infrastructure, and domestic stability as vital elements that must be targeted. Interestingly, the development of the conflict shows a significant shift from conventional military targets to economic and civilian infrastructure. Attacks on energy facilities, logistics routes, and strategic industries demonstrate that the center of gravity is no longer a single entity, but rather a complex network of systems. This transformation demonstrates that the concept of center of gravity needs to be interpreted more broadly in the modern context, where state power is determined not only by military forces but also by economic and social stability. Over time, the Strait of Hormuz became the center of gravity in the war between Iran, the US, and Israel. Iran cleverly used the Strait of Hormuz as leverage against the United States. However, in practice, US intervention in Iran has demonstrated a disconnect between military operations and the strategic objectives it seeks to achieve. This can be seen in:

### *Mistakes in Identifying the Center of Gravity*

The United States' fundamental error lies in its assumption that Iran's Center of Gravity is personal, centered on its supreme leader and nuclear infrastructure. This approach is reflected in the strategy of decapitation through military operations that successfully targeted Iran's leadership elite. However, from Clausewitz's perspective, the CoG is not always physical or individual. In a country with a strong ideological foundation, the CoG lies in social cohesion and national spirit. The death of Iran's supreme leader did not disintegrate, but rather strengthened the passionate element of the Paradoxical Trinity. The rapid succession process demonstrated a systemic resilience that the US had not anticipated. Furthermore, Iran has shifted its CoG to the realm of systemic warfare, namely the ability to disrupt global systems, particularly the economy

and energy, as a form of broader strategic power. The US's inability to read this shift has caused its military strategy to lose operational relevance.

### ***The Strait of Hormuz as an Instrument of the CoG***

Military dominance does not automatically guarantee victory in modern warfare. Iran demonstrated that geographic control of the Strait of Hormuz could serve as an asymmetric Center of Gravity against the West. Taking advantage of this strategic position, Iran did not completely close the strait, but instead implemented strict security protocols that created uncertainty in the global market. Approximately 30% of global oil and 20% of LNG flows through this route, so even a limited disruption would be sufficient to trigger instability in global energy prices (Yilmaz, 2026). This strategy reflects the economic use of the fog of war, where ambiguity generates significant strategic impact without legitimizing large-scale military intervention. In this case, Iran successfully attacked the United States' most sensitive CoG: domestic economic stability and the global energy system.

### ***Fog of War and Escalation: Uncertainty as a Driver of Conflict***

Clausewitz described war as an arena filled with uncertainty (fog of war) and friction (Clausewitz, 2021). In the Iran-US-Israel conflict, these conditions were the primary factors driving escalation. The lack of accurate information makes it difficult for each side to understand the opponent's intentions and capabilities. This increases the risk of misperception, which in turn triggers disproportionate retaliation. This pattern creates an escalation spiral, where every military action is met with increasingly intense retaliation.

Furthermore, the involvement of non-state actors, such as regional proxy groups, complicates the conflict structure and expands the battlefield. Thus, the fog of war is not merely a passive condition but also functions as a mechanism that accelerates escalation and prolongs the conflict. This apparent error demonstrates the United States' failure in this war: its failure to manage the dynamics of international alliances. The concept of entrapment explains how partner nations can become trapped in conflicts that do not fully align with their national interests. In this context, countries like Indonesia face a strategic dilemma between maintaining relations with the US and maintaining domestic stability and historical ties with Iran. Global energy dependence and domestic pressures have led many countries to choose a passive neutral position.

Consequently, the US has found itself in diplomatic isolation. The assumption that an attack on Iran would garner widespread support proved flawed, especially as the global economic impact began to be felt by partner nations. This demonstrates a miscalculation in interpreting regional and global responses. Clausewitz emphasized that political objectives should be the primary guideline in war. However, in this conflict, the United States demonstrated significant strategic ambiguity. In the initial stages, the intervention focused on halting Iran's nuclear program. However, that objective shifted to regime change. This shift created a gap between military means and increasingly maximalist political objectives. The unpreparedness to conduct long-term stabilization operations exacerbated the situation. Furthermore, the ambiguity of objectives

led to the failure of the negotiation process due to the lack of clear parameters for victory. Meanwhile, Iran increasingly excelled with strong and entrenched diplomacy, holding meetings with influential allies such as Russia and China.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States' joint Israeli attack on Iran lacked a clear political objective. The United States failed in its military operations against Iran. While it appeared to weaken Iran's military might, it failed to achieve regime change and bring democracy to Iran. Furthermore, the United States failed to force Iran to the negotiating table, despite pressure regarding Iran's nuclear enrichment. This inconsistency also plunged the United States into uncertainty. Since the beginning of the war, the US has been unable to pursue a more decisive victory over Iran. Consequently, in domestic politics, Donald Trump has repeatedly issued statements that have confused the public and politicians. The outcome of the United States war against Iran has resulted in a protracted battle that continues to this day. The Center of Gravity of Operation Epic Fury clearly encompasses more than just the one stated by Trump, from nuclear facilities to efforts to open the Strait of Hormuz. In the context of the United States' war against Iran, the combination of ambiguous political objectives, misidentified Center of Gravity, and the dominance of the Fog of War creates conditions for escalation that are difficult to control. The lack of a clear definition of victory has led to continued military operations without a clear political resolution. On the other hand, misreading the source of Iran's power prevented military pressure from producing the desired strategic change. The world needs to prepare itself for the possibility of a major crisis resulting from the war between Iran and America and Israel. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has clearly caused economic conditions to take a big hit. Striving for peace is difficult at the moment, but at least it is an effort towards ending the war.

## ADVANCED RESEARCH

The limitation of this journal is that the conflict is still ongoing, so it's impossible to know for certain how the war will end. However, it's possible to carefully analyze the policies adopted in Iran's war against the United States and Israel. Suggestions for further research include greater use of literature or direct interviews.

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