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Scholars, Sycophants, and the War on Iran

What the experts always knew, and what Washington chose to ignore

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The world has entered yet another week since the US-Israeli war on Iran began on February 28. A time where the word "ceasefire" has reached new heights of meaninglessness in Gaza and Lebanon. As the conflict continues overtly and covertly, one question deserves serious analytical attention: *how is it that given the vast scholarship available on Iran and the Iranian political system, most of it produced in the West, did the United States walk into a quagmire that has resulted in heavy damage to its Arab friends in West Asia, acute deficiency in terms of international support, and no discernible strategic gain? How did the American establishment pick a course of action so contrary to the wisdom of its own available expertise on Iran, and, evidently, to subsequent public opinion?* The following is a brief exploration into this question.

How Iran is different - And not so much

From the perspective of political science, Iran is quite fascinating on many fronts. It is a system born out of political and social revolution, with a most unique arrangement of institutions designed to balance and decentralise power between competing elite interests—one that has, over the years, proved its worth in terms of state stability even under heavy external and internal pressures. US sanctions ironically punished the middle class, who are the drivers of gradual change. Sanctions have now further entrenched economic power away from the private sector.

Iran is not, in any possible way, similar to Iraq or Venezuela. The West knew this. If it didn't know, it knows better now. Iran is not a personalist regime. The ingenuity of post-revolutionary Iran is that it created what Lucan Way and Steven Levitsky would call a "durable autocracy" born out of a "revolutionary regime" - one whose institutional depth derives precisely from the fact that it dismantled its predecessors and embedded loyalty into entirely new structures. Revolutionary parties and movements that come to power through mass mobilisation, Way and Levitsky argue, tend to build the most resilient, albeit authoritarian systems, because there is simply nothing left to defect to, and consolidate power against an "enemy". In Iran's case, the threat of external interference did not need a case to be made, since it has been an open secret for quite some time now.

Vali Nasr's 2025 book Iran's grand strategy: A political history represents perhaps the most authoritative recent account of Iranian decision-making. He argues that the Islamic Republic's foreign policy cannot be reduced to ideology or theology. It is driven by a coherent strategic logic shaped by decades of war with Iraq, American containment, and the 2003 invasion of its eastern neighbour. Nasr has argued that Washington's understanding of Iran is "hopelessly inadequate and dangerously outdated". The former Obama advisor's

analysis makes this war predictable.

As is becoming more evident in the aftermath of the assassination of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, it is the institution of the Supreme Leader which held authority in the state and not just the man, though he shaped the institution, and this authority is proving resilient so far. The institution acts as an arbitrator and balancer between competing elite factions, and Khamenei, for his part, was seen as an able manager in this regard. The executive authority in the Iranian political system has a built-in contingency for leadership succession; the system went into autopilot mode without falling apart. Ali Vaez of the International Crisis Group captured this precisely when he observed that Iran's leadership survived the opening phase of the war because there are multiple power centres with overlapping authorities, and that factionalism is simply built into the "DNA of the system".

Samuel Huntington argued that the primary measure of political development is not democracy or prosperity, but institutionalisation - the capacity of political organisations to adapt and maintain authority. By that measure, the Islamic Republic has institutionalised itself formidably. Therefore, external actors who mistake the absence of liberal democracy for the absence of political order do so at their peril. Iraq had Saddam Hussein; remove Saddam, and the state collapses into its constituent fragments. Iran has the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council, the IRGC, and the Supreme Leader's office. These interlocking institutions do not depend on a single individual for their coherence. If the West's intelligence and academic communities understood this distinction, the policymakers chose to ignore it anyway.

Trita Parsi of the Quincy Institute has been, perhaps, the bluntest on what Trump got wrong at the foundational level. He argues that this war was presented by the Israelis as an easy and fast operation against a weak Iran (we see it as the same cakewalk logic that preceded Venezuela). However, Trump is realizing that the conflict with Iran is neither quick nor simple. The belief that assassinating Khamenei would cause the regime to implode reflects precisely the personalist-regime misreading that the scholarship had spent years refuting.

Trump's court and Waltz's first image

The erratic and ego-driven nature of the current American presidency and its sycophantic cabinet is widely reported in the Western media and needs no rehashing here. However, we may usefully turn Kenneth Waltz's first-image analysis on the Trump presidency itself, rather than on the Iranians, to explain the military turn in American foreign policy towards Iran after years of other forms of diplomatic and non-military pressure.

Waltz locates the causes of war in human nature, i.e., in the psychology, ambition, misperception, and ego of individual leaders. It is the least fashionable of his three images in mainstream International Relations scholarship, which prefers structural explanations. But it is the most illuminating when applied to the current moment in Washington. Vali Nasr has observed that the traditional tools of foreign policy analysis - trajectories of institutional policy, calculations of national interest, the momentum of bureaucratic expertise - break down entirely when one is dealing with the calculation of a single person, and what is in it for him personally. In the case of this war, Nasr notes, there is nothing really in it for the United States on the ground, which raises the question of why the escalation happened at all. This is a question that the first image is uniquely equipped to answer.

Parsi describes a pattern that should unsettle careful observers. The pattern is that

of "deadlines, threats, ultimatums - and behind them, a growing recognition that none of it is working". Trump's increasingly volatile rhetoric reflects a leader who lacks escalation dominance. Trump is stuck in a situation that he can't get out of without admitting defeat, given that Washington didn't have a coherent set of objectives to begin with. In Parsi's assessment, the United States may escalate, but not from a position of strength.

Ali Vaez has been equally unsparing. In his assessment, Trump has started a war he now cannot end. The point is not incidental; rather, it speaks directly to the first image. A cabinet selected for loyalty rather than expertise, a principal who conflates personal prestige with national interest, and a court culture that punishes dissent are not conditions under which sound strategic assessments travel upward through the bureaucracy. The scholarship on Iran existed. The institutional memory was there. What was absent was a decision-making culture willing to receive information that complicated the preferred course of action. This is what Waltz's first image, applied structurally to a whole administration rather than a single leader, looks like in practice.

What expertise was always saying

The scholarship on Iran, based in the West, was neither obscure nor ambiguous. It held, broadly, that Iran is a state with genuine domestic resilience derived from revolutionary ideology and nationalist sentiment; that it has demonstrated a capacity to absorb punishment without regime collapse; that military pressure strengthens hardliners at the expense of reformists; and that the IRGC, far from being destabilised by external attack, derives much of its domestic political relevance from precisely such attacks. None of this required classified intelligence. It required listening.

Nasr's work had argued that the maximum-pressure sanctions campaign that preceded this war had not weakened Iran into moderation. Instead, it had hardened it, radicalised it, and made it far more determined that the United States could not be trusted. The size of Iran's middle class - the social constituency most naturally inclined toward accommodation and reform - had been decimated. The more hardline leadership rose to the helm. Thus, when the war finally came, it arrived in a country that had been systematically stripped of the internal advocates for a different path.

Vaez's observation on what the war actually produced is devastating in its concision. He states that in an attempt to prevent Iran from developing a weapon of mass destruction, the United States handed Iran a weapon of mass disruption, i.e. an effective control over the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one-fifth of the world's crude oil and natural gas supplies normally flow. His observations reinforce that the war has not weakened Iran into submission; instead, it has strengthened its bargaining position while destabilising the global economy.

Levitsky and Way add a further dimension by observing that external confrontation tends to consolidate a regime's internal position - rallying nationalist sentiment and marginalising those within the system who might otherwise push for accommodation. Iran's political cohesion was forged in the crucible of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), and this elite cohesion is seen again in the latest war. Parsi has extended this point in the context of the latest war. He observes that the stark political choice being presented to ordinary Iranians is no longer between regime and opposition, but between supporting the war and opposing it. Anti-regime Iranians are increasingly saying that this is not the moment for internal political fights, but for defending the country. The war may have handed the Islamic Republic a nationalist legitimacy and political cohe-

sion it had been losing.

Zarif and the road not taken

Perhaps the most instructive voice in this entire episode is that of Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's former foreign minister, the architect of the 2015 nuclear deal, and now an academic writing from Tehran in the middle of a war he had spent his career trying to prevent. Zarif has published a comprehensive roadmap for ending the conflict in Foreign Affairs, proposing that Iran place limits on its nuclear programme under international monitoring and reopen the Strait of Hormuz in exchange for an end to all sanctions - along with a mutual nonaggression pact and economic cooperation.

What is striking about Zarif's proposal is not its content but its timing and what it reveals about the trajectory of the war. Before the campaign, Iran's negotiating position was more ambiguous. After five weeks of strikes and the assassination of the Supreme Leader, Zarif has proposed permanent constraints, full ratification of the Additional Protocol, and complete material transfer of enriched uranium. The military campaign, in other words, lowered the floor of what Tehran is prepared to accept, which is precisely the opposite of what maximum pressure was supposed to achieve. As Zarif himself notes, calling Trump's demand for zero enrichment "fanciful," the question now is whether Washington has the discipline and credibility to close a deal at all. Parsi makes a pointed assessment that the administration may want a deal in principle, but it lacks both the discipline and the credibility to close one. Trump's erratic messaging and repeated reversals have left Tehran deeply doubtful about whether any agreement would hold.

Zarif's warning that a ceasefire without addressing the roots of the crisis would only delay further conflict is, in fact, a restatement of the entire analytical failure that produced this war. The roots of the crisis - Iran's strategic logic, its institutional resilience, its reading of American credibility, the domestic political economy of the Trump administration - were all knowable before the first strike. They were known. The expertise existed in abundance, produced by the very scholars whose assessments now read as prophecy.

The deficiency of the willing

The acute lack of international backing for the war is telling. The United States entered this conflict with a narrower coalition of supportive partners than any comparable intervention in recent memory. Arab states in the Gulf, regardless of their private calculations regarding Iranian regional influence, found themselves in the uncomfortable position of bearing the consequences of a war they neither formally supported nor could openly resist without incurring costs. Parsi has observed that the region - aside from Israel and perhaps the Emirates - is largely uncomfortable with the war, concerned not about a tidy regime change in Iran but about state fragmentation, internal conflict, large-scale refugee movements, and separatist tendencies that could spill across borders throughout the region.

This is how it unfolds when first-image irrationality interacts with second-image structures - the domestic political economy of the Trump court - and produces third-image consequences. Here, the results are in the form of a reconfiguration of regional alignments that serves none of the actors' stated interests. Vaez, when talking about possible ceasefire negotiations, has articulated the structural issue clearly. He states that without a diplomatic framework, any lull in fighting merely buys time without building anything substantive. A tenuous pause is not a sustainable ceasefire, and if maritime tensions and reciprocal accusations persist, the danger of miscalculation remains extremely high.

The question that will be asked even after the escalation ends is the structural question. If decisions follow contrary to the

scholarship available to institutions, then what precisely is the foreign policy decision-making apparatus for? Huntington's answer, from a different context, remains apt where he argues that institutions exist to convert private impulse into collective, rule-bound action. Therefore, it can be argued that when the institution is captured by the impulse, you get the war on Iran.

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