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The Right War, The Just War? Assessing The Ongoing Middle East Conflict (5)



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An unfortunate outcome of the escalating geopolitical and military developments in the Middle East has been the failure to appreciate the true nature of the fight involved. As Carl von Clausewitz urged, the most important strategic consideration that a statesman and a commander must make is to establish the “kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for nor trying to turn it into something alien to its true nature.” But, as the course of the ongoing conflict involving the United States, Israel, and the Islamic Republic of Iran demonstrates, this has not been the case.

First, the characterisation of the fight as a binary “existential war” (from the Israeli perspective) or a crusade against an “axis of evil” (from Iran’s perspective, referring to the US, Israel, and their allies) is inherently problematic and contradictory. Although the perception that this is a war for survival is based on the extraordinary destructiveness of regional escalations and proxy attacks, the use of such absolute terminology—rather than recognising it as a complex geopolitical power struggle—signifies a state of intense or extreme fear. There have also been unwelcome consequences to responding to the Iranian threat network with total-war strategies and resources.

As Sir Michael Howard argued in a similar context: To declare war... is at once to accord adversaries a status and dignity that they seek and that they do not deserve. It confers on them a kind of legitimacy ... But to use, or rather to misuse, the term “war” is not simply a matter of legality or pedantic semantics. It has deeper and more dangerous consequences. To declare

that one is at war is immediately to create a war psychosis that may be totally counterproductive for the objective being sought. It arouses an immediate expectation, and demand, for spectacular military action against some easily identifiable adversary, preferably a hostile state - action leading to decisive results.

In fact, the narrative surrounding the US-Israeli campaign against Iran has taken on ideological dimensions. The “loaded and elastic frame” implicit in the metaphor of an existential clash has been used to justify fast-track policies and has become a camouflage for discourses such as pre-emptive strikes on nuclear facilities, regime change, and forceful regional transformation or democratisation. In the case of the US and Israel, this framework has sometimes been used to tighten control over domestic narratives or to justify sweeping military actions in the name of common defence against insecurity.

Second, there has been a tendency to conflate not only the threat but also the enemy. Understandably, sudden escalations –such as the October 7 attacks in Israel by Hamas, a proxy of Iran, and the subsequent regional barrage—prompted the construction of the enemy as seen through the eyes of the immediate targets: Israel and the United States. Washington and Tel Aviv placed all groups—Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and various Iraqi and Syrian militias—under the singular umbrella of “Iranian proxies.” This was based on the argument that these groups share intelligence, personnel, weapons (such as ballistic missiles and drones), funding, and subscribe to the same ideological agenda orchestrated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Accordingly, all of these groups, along with the Iranian state itself, became targets of a generalised military campaign, often regardless of their distinct local objectives or the specific nature of the threat they pose. Also targeted were supply chains and any entities that could provide advanced technology or weapons of mass destruction (WMD) components to Iran, or the technology required to acquire nuclear breakout capability.

This resulted in discourses such as a “regional war on radicalism” and responses predicated on the assumption that the nature and impact of these militant groups are the same across the board and, therefore, could be addressed through “one-size-fits-all” military policies. Yet, both historically and as recent developments demonstrate, the root causes of the conflicts that have spawned these armed groups in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Gaza are quite dissimilar, deeply tied to local socio-economic and political vacuums. The groups involved in these conflicts also differ in terms of motivations, domestic constraints, and the degree of tactical autonomy they exercise from Tehran.

The Just War?

This also brings up the question whether the US-Israeli campaign against Iran adheres to the long-established norms of warfare. In other words, there are concerns about whether military action in a state of asymmetric, regional proxy warfare is justifiable in terms of “just war” theory. The debate on just war and the use of military force can be traced to Paul Ramsey’s *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility*, and Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars*. The intellectual roots of this tradition lie in Greek and Roman political thought, later articulated by Augustine in his treatise *The City of God*. In its classic form, just war theory concerns the justified use of force, set squarely within a normative consensus on the purpose of political order.

Just war theory has been interpreted in many ways, but concerns about proportionality and costs remain central to the debate. The issue of proportionality is complex but highly relevant in the context of asymmetric warfare, and it becomes even more complicated when one of the parties to the conflict is a democratic state. The paradox is that while the adversary (Iran’s Quds Force and its non-state proxies) seeks to compensate for power asymmetry by resorting to unconventional tactics—such as drone swarms, guerrilla warfare, and the concealment of military assets in civilian areas—state actors like the United States and Israel face severe international condemnation when their large-scale

retaliatory airstrikes and counter-insurgency measures cause widespread civilian casualties or infrastructural collapse.

There is also a concern that once proportionality is abandoned, there are no meaningful limits to brutality, and all parties to the conflict become trapped in vicious cycles fed by revenge rather than logic. The results are tragically similar—grieving families, regional instability, and a profound desire for revenge that perpetuates the violence.

Pre-emption

Linked to the use of military force is the doctrine of pre-emption. The legal and moral permissibility of pre-emptive military strikes has been one of the most controversial subjects in the conflict with Iran. Pre-emption as a US strategy was heavily outlined during the Bush era, arguing that containment is not possible against "shadowy networks" or "unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction." Thus, action would be taken before threats fully materialise.

A 1988 US Department of Defense memo defines "pre-emption" (preventive attack) as an "attack initiated on the basis of incontrovertible evidence that an enemy attack is imminent." Whereas "preventive war" is initiated in the belief that military conflict, while not imminent, is inevitable and any delay would involve greater risk. The way these terms are applied to Iran's nuclear programme or its forward-deployed missile bases implies a certain subjectivity that allows for broad interpretation.

However, America is not the only country embarking on such mechanisms. Pre-emption has long been an essential, even foundational, component of Tel Aviv's war strategy, the "Begin Doctrine," particularly against states hostile to Israel acquiring WMDs (e.g., strikes in Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007), or against the Iranian entrenchment in Syria and Lebanon. As Avi Dichter, former Head of Shin Bet, famously articulated regarding asymmetric threats, it is "not an eye for an eye. It's having him for lunch before he has you for dinner.... If we miss this opportunity, more Israelis will die."...There is no fair fight against terrorists. Never has been. Never will be."

However, preventive wars and strikes—such as assassinating Iranian generals in third-party countries or sabotaging nuclear facilities—are controversial since, like deterrence, they rely on what Brian Angelo Lee terms “retrospectively disproportionate violence.” Pre-emption, critics argue, involves the use of military force to thwart an attack that has not yet occurred and perhaps never will. Such a policy therefore strains international law and norms, risking a reckless abandonment of established rules of engagement. Moreover, as Harvey Rishikof pointed out in similar contexts, “although some forms of terrorism [or proxy warfare] may be containable by deterrence, all... is not.”

Reciprocity

A concomitant aspect of the just war argument is the principle of reciprocity. The question here is whether provocations delivered by Iran or its proxies justify the violation of customary rules that prohibit strikes on diplomatic missions, sustained infrastructural bombardment, and targeted killings. This is linked to the question of whether just war principles can be applied to state-sponsors of asymmetric war. Mark Osiel notes that transnational armed conflicts involving actors who disregard just war principles—such as launching indiscriminate rocket attacks on civilian populations – Houthis, Hama or Hezbollah -often tempt state actors to justify similar disregard for norms in the name of security.

There are a number of implications following from the above. First, it challenges the central assumption of military planners that the destruction of the IRGC leadership or proxy commanders will end the regional threat. Second, although military force is utilised to degrade capabilities, in the long term, strategies to curb Iran’s network purely through “decapitation” strikes have not been entirely successful. As a result, the US and Israel are left to fight an almost perpetually elusive target, with a constantly moving center and focal point across multiple borders.

Third, by conflating these issues, militarised rhetoric widens the fissures between the West and the broader Middle East. Historically, US and Israeli policies have fuelled suspicions of a neo-imperial agenda. Many in the region see the campaign

against Iran not merely as a security measure but as a war to maintain Western hegemony while ignoring Palestinian grievances. Others view it as part of a religiously or ethnically driven conflict. In sum, the rhetoric of a binary war offers a one-dimensional view of what is essentially a multidimensional geopolitical and socio-historical problem.

Costs?

What about the costs? “Absolute military power” generates a very particular kind of arrogance and corruptibility. This is manifest in the willingness to bypass diplomatic avenues and international law. This “apart from being counter-productive, has taken attention and resources away from other, more promising, approaches. There is also a concern that the constant footing of war has pushed domestic democratic projects, human security, and economic integration to the backyard in favour of hyper-militarisation.

Limits Of Coercive Power

Arguably, against an actively hostile state and its proxies, the use of force would always be the first line of defence to reduce the immediate threat. Waiting passively for missile barrages or proxy invasions to happen would undermine a “government’s legitimacy in proportion to the [adversaries’] capacity to inflict harm.” Therefore, there is a perceived need to seize the initiative and pre-empt attacks. It is still necessary to eradicate specific military assets, such as missile silos or weapons caches, that pose a clear and present danger.

However, the use of military means has limits and often leads to undesirable consequences. Its unrestrained or indiscriminate use creates new resentments, new grievances, and the next generation of autocratic leaders and regimes to threaten the world order again. As former U.S. diplomat John Brady Kiesling cautioned, “The more aggressively we use our power to intimidate our foes, the more foes we create.” In fact, massive infrastructural destruction provides evidence of the adversary’s narrative, giving them a reason to persist. Autocratic regimes and proxy militias typically hope for indiscriminate crackdowns and heavy-handed responses. Their hope is to “alienate the public from the government” or the

international community. An indiscriminate state response undermines global and regional support for counter-measures.

Thus, there is a growing recognition of the limits of coercive power and an understanding that violence is an appallingly blunt instrument for the solution of difficult political and regional problems. Traditional strategies of military deterrence are constantly tested; instead, there is a need to adopt a holistic strategy of containment while actively addressing the underlying causes of regional discontent.

Nations recognise the importance of non-kinetic strategies, including strategic communication, economic sanctions, diplomacy, political reforms, and negotiated settlements (such as addressing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which Iran heavily leverages for legitimacy). First, there is almost universal recognition that the use of military force, though necessary to degrade capabilities, is not sufficient to counter Iran’s strategic depth. Both the “excessive” and “inadequate” use of force can lead to strategic failure; the key lies in applying the “minimum effective force.”

Second, there is a need to address the broader political, social, and economic conditions of the region in order to undercut the grievances that autocratic regimes exploit to mobilise populations. It is diplomatic engagement and regional security integration that ultimately need to be encouraged to secure lasting stability.

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