

Wars are easy to start but difficult to end

Tui Motu 2026 March-April

Kevin P Clements

Honorary Director and Distinguished Fellow Toda Peace Institute

As I write this there is no certainty about when and under what circumstances the Israeli and American war on Iran will end. The criteria for ending the war are as vague as the original justifications for it. Both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Trump are flawed leaders who seem to enjoy creating mayhem. They have lethal military systems, little human empathy and seem to enjoy inflicting violence and death on innocents and combatants alike. They resort to violence because they have formidable military capacity and because they can. They are both acting unilaterally without UN or Congressional Approval. International lawyers argue that without Security Council and Congressional Approval, the War is illegal. There was no US or Israeli discussion, with allies about the wisdom of and justifications for a military attack on Iran. It was a war cooked up by Israel and the US alone and the justifications were threadbare.

The ostensible failure of the “bad faith” nuclear talks provided the first flimsy fig leaf for aggression. Trump made great play of imminent nuclear threat from Iran, despite most expert opinion arguing that Iran (despite its enrichment programme) is a long way from developing a nuclear weapon. In addition, Iran’s foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has always reiterated that Iran “will under no circumstances ever develop a nuclear weapon”. The other irony is that Trump withdrew the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), otherwise known as "Iran’s 2015 nuclear deal". This was a negotiated agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (USA, UK, France, China, Russia, plus Germany). In this agreement the parties agreed to limit Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for economic sanctions relief. Iran agreed to restrict uranium enrichment, reduce centrifuge counts, and allow increased IAEA monitoring.

The second justification for the war was Regime Change. Trump argued that this was the time for the Iranian people to rise up and change the regime. His earlier call last year in support of opposition groups overthrowing the regime ended in the slaughter of thousands. This time as he called for a national insurrection, he said “This will be probably your only chance for generations...For many years, you have asked for America’s help, but you never got it. No president was willing to do what I am willing to do tonight. Now you have a president who is giving you what you want, so let’s see how you respond.” While there are many who yearn for an end to Iranian Government oppression these calls for regime change are irresponsible if there is no way to provide concrete help and support to dissident movements. Regime change cannot be secured from the air alone.

The third justification for the war was to eradicate Iranian drones and ballistic missiles and to decimate the Iranian Navy and Airforce as well as the Iranian Revolutionary guard.

The fourth justification was to end Iranian State sponsored regional and national terrorism. This was the objective that has been driving Israel’s prosecution of the war.

These different justifications for the original attacks have been amended as time goes on. Despite the decapitation of Iran's religious leader Ali Khamenei and his replacement by his son, regime change no longer has the priority it had in Trump's first announcement of the war. There is growing awareness in the States and elsewhere that these objectives and their subsequent reordering do not add up to a coherent strategy. Similarly, there is no clear end game and no way of determining when the war's objectives have been reached.

In recent Congressional hearings, Senator Elizabeth Warren, said that the Trump administration "cannot explain the reasons that we entered this war, the goals we're trying to accomplish and the methods for doing that". She also pointed to the high cost of the military operations against Iran, which some have estimated to exceed \$5.6bn in the first two days alone.

Warren pointed out that Republicans cut healthcare subsidies last year in an effort to reduce federal spending but appear to have no problem approving military expenses. "While there is no money for 15 million Americans who lost their healthcare", she noted, "there's a billion dollars a day to spend on bombing Iran".

When Trump was asked about how the war would end he cited "Unconditional surrender". But this leaves open the question of who will surrender and on what terms. The new political leadership in Iran have indicated that they will make the cost of this war so high that it will be the US and Israel that will surrender. This may be a very tall order given how much the US has degraded Iranian military capacity but since the assassination of Ali Khamenei, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi announced that Iran had activated its "Decentralized Mosaic Defence" strategy. This strategy disperses command structures, weapons systems and operational units across vast geographic and organizational lines so that military functions can continue even under intense attack.

In order to calm jittery oil markets Donald Trump indicated that the military was far ahead of schedule and the war could end soon. Then a few hours later he backtracked and said "We have won in many ways, but not enough". His Secretary of Defence/War Pete Hegseth decided that his contribution to the war would be to remove the Rules of War so that the military could "kill without mercy". The Trump White house had no coherent strategy for starting the war and an even more chaotic strategy for ending it. Meanwhile it is estimated that 6,000 -7,000 Iranians have lost their lives and Israel has generated the displacement of 700,000 people in Lebanon in its efforts to finally eradicate Hezbollah. Each one of these deaths and displaced persons will generate more martyrs to wreak vengeance on the US and Lebanon.

Finally in terms of the original objectives.

First: Nobody knows where Iran's enriched uranium is being stored. This is a danger in that it could fall into the wrong hands. The Iranian Government insists that it has no desire to develop nuclear weapons but this war might force Iran's revolutionary guard to contemplate nuclear weapons in order to prevent another American strike.

Second: Despite Trump's desire to be involved in the election of a new leader, the Iranian leadership has closed ranks and appointed a successor who might well be more extreme than his father. There is no spontaneous revolution in sight so the prospects for regime change-

without boots on the ground – is slight and Iranian Democrats will have their hopes dashed again.

Third, the American bombing campaign has probably destroyed much of Iran's conventional ballistic missile arsenal. But once there is a ceasefire and a restoration of repressive political order one of the first things that will happen will be a re-armament campaign.

Fourth; It is highly unlikely that this war will result in the end of Iranian asymmetric warfare. If there is capital to be made from regional instability and national autocracy Iran will be back to its old tricks of fuelling political grievance.

So in terms of the four very hazy political justifications for Trump and Netanyahu's invasion none of them will generate long term peace and stability. The fact is that there is little difference between Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the Trump Netanyahu invasion of Iran. Both were illegal under international law, and both will embolden other revanchist states. Both are generating death and destruction and will never generate political and military stability. I remain convinced that this war is Trump and Netanyahu's war of choice to divert attention from political scandal at home. Small and Medium sized states like NZ, Canada and Australia need to be resolute in their defence of an international rules-based order. Without it we will live under Thucydides aphorism that "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."