

# Fair Observer

Monthly



March 2026

Fair Observer  
Independence, Diversity, Debate

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# Fair Observer Monthly



March 2026

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# ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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# Can Bangladesh's Nationalist Party Transform the Country's Foreign Policy?

Saume Saptaparna Nath  
March 03, 2026

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**Dhaka's incoming government won elections on a "Bangladesh First" foreign policy platform. To successfully lead the country, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party must broaden its external partnerships while avoiding friction with established regional actors. Its diplomatic approach should therefore be grounded in pragmatism and careful strategic considerations, prioritizing Bangladesh's national interests over short-term gains or rhetorical posturing.**

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The recent parliamentary election in Bangladesh, which returned the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to power with a two-thirds majority, marks a potential paradigm shift in the country's foreign policy trajectory. With former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed's long political era coming to an end, the BNP, led by Tarique Rahman, is expected to recalibrate Dhaka's relations with regional actors, including India, Pakistan and China.

In his post-election statements, Tarique Rahman espoused a "Bangladesh First" approach, asserting that the country's foreign policy would henceforth be guided by national interest and the welfare of the people. However, uncertainty clouds the next administration. Will the incoming BNP government's foreign policy mark a sharp departure from its predecessor, or will structural

and regional constraints limit it to pragmatic adjustments?

## India–Bangladesh relations at a crossroads

Bangladesh and India maintained a particularly strong bilateral relationship during the tenure of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, which was largely shaped by New Delhi's objective of maintaining political stability in Dhaka. Given Bangladesh's strategic geographic location, India has consistently sought to ensure stable access to its northeastern provinces via the Siliguri Corridor through transit agreements with Bangladesh. At the same time, India was concerned about China's growing presence in the Bay of Bengal, which influenced these ties. However, following the overthrow of Sheikh Hasina's government in a mass uprising in 2024, relations between New Delhi and Dhaka worsened significantly.

The diplomatic fallout was marked by Indian accusations of religious minority repression in Bangladesh, misinformation campaigns and trade restrictions. Most significantly, India's refusal to extradite Hasina, who fled to the country following her ousting, despite Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal having sentenced her to death for her role in the 2024 protests, exacerbated the diplomatic tensions further.

Under the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus, anti-Indian narratives gained increased prominence among opposition groups and segments of the broader public in Bangladesh. Moreover, India's continued support for the Awami League in recent elections contributed to rising public dissatisfaction in Bangladesh and heightened perceptions of Indian interference in the country's internal politics. These developments have complicated bilateral relations and ignited domestic debates over issues of sovereignty and foreign policy autonomy in Bangladesh.

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Nevertheless, India has started to adapt to the new political reality in post-Hasina Bangladesh. In February 2026, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar attended the funeral of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, whose son Rahman is poised to assume leadership. In addition, following the BNP's victory, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Rahman and reaffirmed his country's support for a democratic and inclusive Bangladesh.

Informed observers predict that the BNP will adopt a pragmatic approach toward India, grounded in mutual benefit and strategic necessity. Given India's status as Bangladesh's closest neighbor, the new government has significant incentives to restore a productive working relationship with New Delhi, irrespective of whether the relationship reverts to the level of political intimacy seen during the Hasina administration. Therefore, Dhaka must adopt a cautious middle ground in its relationship with India.

For the BNP government, redefining relations with India will require recalibrating the country's strategic cooperation with New Delhi while maintaining Bangladesh's political autonomy and decision-making authority. Maintaining such a delicate diplomatic balance amid prevailing anti-India and anti-Bangladesh sentiments among certain groups in both countries will be challenging, especially given that such vitriol is often amplified by rumors, misinformation and political propaganda.

In this context, the BNP government may face domestic pressure to adopt a firmer rhetorical stance toward New Delhi, even though strategic interdependence and regional stability require continued engagement and cooperation with India.

### **A recalibrated engagement with China?**

Relations with China are likely to pose the most consequential strategic challenge for the incoming BNP government. Under former Prime Minister Sheikh, Beijing expanded its influence in Bangladesh through infrastructure projects linked to its Belt and Road Initiative and closer defense cooperation with Dhaka. This trend continued after the political transition, with the interim government reportedly receiving over USD 2.1 billion in Chinese loans and grants, as well as diplomatic recognition, through high-level talks with Beijing.

In 2026, China is expected to remain Bangladesh's largest trading partner and a core part of the country's defense plans. This growing defense relationship is evident in the 2025 deal, under which China agreed to build a drone manufacturing plant in Bangladesh, as well as ongoing talks to acquire J-10CE fighter aircraft. China has successfully institutionalised its close relationship with Bangladesh, thereby narrowing the strategic choices for the next government. The BNP is therefore likely to continue economic engagement with Beijing, as protecting Chinese investments in the country aligns with Bangladesh's national interests.

Although historically perceived as aligned with Beijing, the BNP's diplomatic record reflects a pragmatic foreign policy strategy of alliance diversification. Under Ziaur Rahman's administration (1977–1981), Bangladesh strengthened diplomatic and military ties with China to broaden external partnerships beyond India and the Soviet bloc. This hedging approach continued under Khaleda Zia, when military cooperation and economic engagement with China expanded through several agreements, including infrastructure, trade, and technical assistance.

However, Dhaka's hedging strategy toward China will likely come under intense scrutiny from great-power players, pressuring the incoming

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government to navigate mounting hostility from India and the United States to China's expanding regional influence. Questions about the sustainability of large-scale infrastructure financing and accusations of Chinese debt entrapment will further shape Dhaka's approach toward Beijing. Consequently, BNP is likely to strike a balance between strategic prudence and economic collaboration in its engagement with China. It would be wise for the BNP to avoid placing Bangladesh at the center of the intensifying strategic competition between China, the United States and India.

### **Pakistan's bid for re-engagement**

During the Awami League government, Pakistan remained relatively distant from Bangladesh, largely due to Dhaka's long-standing strategic alignment with New Delhi. Furthermore, unresolved historical grievances over Pakistan's atrocities during the Bangladesh Liberation War continued to shape Dhaka's diplomatic posture and constrained the prospect of closer bilateral engagements. However, this dynamic changed during Muhammad Yunus' interim government, when Bangladesh and Pakistan took steps to restore ties. In an effort to rebuild mutual trust, the two countries resumed direct air links, increased civilian and military exchanges, and relaxed visa policies. Moreover, Islamabad explored renewed defence cooperation with Dhaka, including discussions on the potential sale of fighter aircraft.

Beyond official diplomatic channels, Pakistan has pursued soft-power outreach by engaging Bangladeshi cultural figures and media platforms, including the participation of Bangladeshi artists in Pakistan Idol. Amid persistent anti-India sentiment among segments of Bangladeshi youth, Pakistan appears to be leveraging cultural diplomacy and public engagement to shape public opinion in its favour and encourage closer ties with the new government in Dhaka.

### **Looking ahead: Bangladesh's foreign policy choices**

For Dhaka, diversifying external partnerships is an ideal strategy to reduce overdependence on any single regional actor. This approach involves balancing relations with both Islamabad and New Delhi and engaging with partners in the Middle East. Bangladesh will also need to maintain a transactional approach toward both India and Pakistan, ensuring that its engagement with both regional players remains transparent, structured and guided by clearly defined national interests rather than ideological alignment.

For the incoming administration to be successful, the BNP's "Bangladesh First" policy must prioritize the country's national interests, diversify external partnerships and address regional challenges, such as the Rohingya crisis. The incoming BNP government, therefore, should avoid entanglement in great-power rivalries between the US, India and China. Instead, the new administration's diplomacy should be grounded in pragmatism and strategic calculation rather than rhetorical posturing.

[Omar Abdelrahman edited this piece.]



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## A War to End All (Middle East) Wars?

Gary Grappo  
March 03, 2026

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**The US and Israel's strike on February 28 eliminated Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other top leaders, revealing deep regime vulnerabilities despite ongoing negotiations. While widespread public discontent and protests persist, the regime's powerful security forces maintain strict control, limiting immediate change. The conflict's resolution depends on difficult concessions, but Iran's ideological rigidity and internal divisions make a peaceful and swift end uncertain.**

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**O**n the morning of February 28, the United States and Israel launched a long-anticipated major attack on the Islamic Republic of Iran. The attacks occurred despite reports that talks between the US and Iran, mediated by Oman, were showing signs of progress.

### **Exploiting bad judgment and arrogance**

Despite the claimed progress in negotiations — which US President Donald Trump disputed — the US acted based on intelligence indicating that Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his security leaders would be assembled in or near his Tehran residence for a security meeting. The Americans shared their information with the Israelis, who were also tracking Khamenei's movements in anticipation of a leadership decapitation strike. The meeting was an action-

forcing event, affording the two sides an opportunity too good to pass up.

Respective attack orders were issued by Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The Israelis zeroed in on the meeting site, and their missile and bomb attack virtually leveled the compound complex of the Supreme Leader and other top Iranian leaders. Khamenei's death was a foregone conclusion.

One lesson to be drawn from this attack, as this war continues, was the astonishing ignorance, naivete, poor judgement and arrogance of the Iranians to call such a high-level gathering of officials in a single location. In the West, innumerable media pieces had been written in the run-up to the attacks about the Iranians' failure to understand the severity of their situation and the precarious state of their defenses against a presumed US onslaught. The pundits were right.

The Iranians, however, believed their own rhetoric of invincibility, despite the evidence of last June's Israeli and American attacks on Iranian nuclear, air defense and missile installations in the Islamic Republic. The Iranians were unable to capably defend themselves then. Nor could they do so on February 28.

### **Now who's in charge?**

Iran has lost its Supreme Leader, the Head of the National Defense Council, Commander in Chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Defense Minister, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, several intelligence chiefs, and other senior defense and intelligence officials. What remains of the leadership must now confront its most consequential decision. Who will lead the Islamic Republic? Shortly before his death, Khamenei had reportedly named Ali Larijani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, to lead the government until Khamenei's successor could be

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selected by the constitutionally designated body entrusted with that decision, the Assembly of Experts.

The odds-on favorite, however, for the real power in Iran is unquestionably the IRGC. In fact, for years now, major decisions in Iran have run through the IRGC leadership, whether on security, economics, judicial matters or foreign policy. It's uncertain whether even the Supreme Leader could override the IRGC, and he likely rubber-stamped their "recommendations." Whoever is selected by the Assembly of Experts to be the next Supreme Leader will be answerable to the IRGC, the real decision-making authority in Iran going forward.

In the midst of that leadership naming process, the Iranians must also either find a way to end the war or continue to prosecute it. The latter would be foolhardy, but not beyond the leadership's blinkered capacity to recognize and accept reality.

But ending the war would mean making heretofore unacceptable concessions on ideology and regime identity. Ending the current conflict would mean acceding to American demands: forswearing nuclear enrichment and disclosing the location(s) of all existing enriched uranium, ceasing all support for regional proxies like Hezbollah, the Houthis and Hamas, and accepting strict limits on ballistic missiles. Given the further weakened state of the regime, the US administration is also likely to (and should) insist on immediate and unconditional access to the country's nuclear sites by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and even the release of many (if not all) political prisoners. These are doubtlessly painful political decisions, but they represent the current reality of not only American but also international preferences for lifting sanctions and accepting Iran into the fold of the international community, if that is what Iran seeks.

But for the IRGC and others in the Iranian leadership, whether hardline or so-called moderate — a distinction without a difference — these compromises would mean surrender of the ideology that has enslaved Iran and imprisoned the Iranian people for the last 47 years. The regime has always defined its *raison d'être* as survival. That is why the war is likely to continue for a while.

### **American vulnerability**

The American side is not without constraints. The war was launched without the Constitutionally required approval of the US Congress. Domestic issues such as the Epstein files, tariffs and rising concerns over affordability have already eaten into what had been *carte blanche* support for the president in the Republican-majority Congress and among the US public. Moreover, Donald Trump still hasn't shared his war aims with the American public. And criticism among Trump's diehard Make America Great Again (MAGA) supporters over another Middle East "forever" war, which this president had campaigned vigorously against, has increased.

Trump must keep an eye on the upcoming American midterm elections. Republicans are currently expected to lose their majority in the House and possibly even the Senate, which would be devastating for Trump's political program. The president cannot afford a drawn-out conflict in the Middle East.

### **And the big unknown**

There is another faction whose view also matters, the Iranian public. Demonstrations against the regime following the January massacres of protesters, in which some 30,000 Iranians were executed, have reappeared, though in lower numbers and fewer locations. Following the announcement of the Supreme Leader's death, celebrations took place throughout the country.

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There were demonstrations of mourning for Khamenei, too. Outside polling suggests that fewer than 20% of the population supported Khamenei's Islamic regime.

Trump and Netanyahu have called for the public to rise up again and overthrow the regime. However, irrespective of the damage caused by the American and Israeli attacks, the IRGC, the nearly ubiquitous paramilitary Basij forces, and other security and police forces have all the guns, and the Iranian public is all too familiar with the cost of challenging their power. Even if the Americans and Israelis were to double down on attacks on various IRGC and other security facilities, the fact remains that the guns would remain in the hands of the regime's brutal security forces, however diminished they might become.

But could the public still exert sufficient influence to actually have an impact? It's not inconceivable. Were enough Iranians to turn out in protests — say 20 to 30% of the population — even an ideologically hardened leadership would be forced to take notice and respond in some fashion to their demands. Attempting to massacre its way out of such protests would likely provoke the great middle of Iranian society, enraged to see friends, neighbors, classmates, sons and daughters slaughtered again in the streets. Harsh condemnation from Iran's regional neighbors and the international community, including even the United Nations, would follow swiftly. In the face of such internal and external denunciations, the new leadership would face a critical decision point, likely forcing some sort of accommodation with the Americans but, most importantly, with the Iranian people.

A less possible but no less inconceivable event is that in the face of an IRGC-perpetrated bloodbath of the civilian population, Iran's conventional armed forces, the Artesh, might step in to “defend the Iranian people.” The

conventional army numbers 350,000–415,000 versus the IRGC's 150,000–200,000. With defections, the balance could move even more favorably to the Artesh. But this would require high-risk decision-making by courageous Artesh commanders, whose forces would face a well-armed and ideologically committed IRGC fighting for its survival. Such an outcome could also provoke a dangerous civil war. Nevertheless, with mass public support as well as that of the international community, the balance tips toward the conventional army.

So, it seems no side has the ability to either fully prosecute the war or suffer the consequences of a long siege. The logical, reasonable and sensible move would be for a new Iranian leadership to offer concessions necessary to end this war and convince the Americans and Israelis to end their strikes. Those are the very same conditions that were on the table in the negotiations that preceded the attacks. Sadly, logic, reason and good sense have not been qualities normally attributed to Iranian political decisions over the last 47 years.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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## **Undoing the Endangerment Finding: Science, Policy and the Fight Over US Climate Authority**

Luiz Villares  
March 05, 2026

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**US President Donald Trump’s repeal of the endangerment finding undermines decades of climate science linking greenhouse gas emissions to severe environmental and health harms. The latest scientific reports emphasize the urgent need for deep emissions cuts this decade to limit warming and avoid irreversible damage. Legal challenges are expected as this rollback threatens the foundation of US climate policy and regulatory authority.**

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**O**n February 12, 2026, President Donald Trump announced that the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is reversing the legal finding it has relied on for nearly 20 years to limit heat-trapping pollution from vehicle tailpipes, oil refineries and factories. This action reverses a long-standing determination based on climate science, stripping the agency of its regulatory authority to control emissions.

In 2009, the EPA issued a comprehensive scientific “endangerment finding” that greenhouse gases (GHGs) pose a threat to public health and welfare. The agency prepared the document after thoroughly reviewing US and international peer-reviewed climate assessments in response to a US Supreme Court decision requiring review before regulating GHGs under the US Clean Air Act.

The present administration justifies its proposal by citing a new Department of Energy report that selectively ignores the extensive body of peer-reviewed research and instead relies on outdated and disproven claims. This illustrates another instance of strong climate change denial efforts.

In the years following the EPA’s 2009 endangerment finding, federal action quickly turned the scientific decision into regulations. Starting in 2010, the administration and agencies established vehicle-emissions and fuel-efficiency standards. They used the Clean Air Act to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from power plants and other industrial sources. These efforts peaked in 2015 with the Clean Power Plan and a series of climate and mobile-source regulations, marking the most ambitious federal attempt to reduce US emissions.

The next three administrations alternated policies. Between 2017 and 2020, regulations were rolled back: the Clean Power Plan was targeted for repeal, the Affordable Clean Energy proposal was introduced and vehicle emissions targets were relaxed under the Safer, Affordable Fuel-Efficient Vehicles Rule (SAFE). Starting in 2021, the Biden administration worked to undo many of these rollbacks, restore stricter standards and reaffirm the scientific basis of the endangerment finding at the core of federal climate policy. Now, with the current US Presidency, there seems to be a trend to disconnect climate science from national environmental regulations.

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## **Economic claims vs. domestic reality: assessing fossil-fuel benefits**

The current administration claims that, over generations, fossil fuels have saved millions of lives and lifted billions of people out of poverty worldwide. However, a more detailed analysis indicates this isn't accurate for America since 1980.

In the US, although the average income of a US citizen was \$57 per day, in 2023, an estimated 36.8 million Americans lived below the poverty line of \$24.50 per day, according to the US Census Bureau. This results in an official poverty rate of over 11% of the total American population.

Poverty in the US is often linked to economic and social factors, including the lack of a strong social safety net and significant racial disparities. Since 1980, income inequality has been rising sharply. This trend results from political and economic shifts that seem to have disproportionately benefited the wealthiest. During this period, fiscal policies started to resemble favors to the wealthy, with tax cuts benefiting those already in advantageous positions.

Beyond social inequalities, the continued use of fossil fuels directly conflicts with the endangerment finding issued during President Barack Obama's first term. However, the EPA now states that the decision "unreasonably analyzed the scientific record" and that its scientific basis was overly pessimistic and unsupported. Such an opinion blatantly contradicts the majority of climate science in the US and worldwide.

## **Science under siege: EPA, evidence and vulnerabilities**

In a briefing with reporters last month ahead of the EPA's decision, the president and CEO of the

Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Manish Bapna, called the expected repeal "the single biggest attack in US history on federal authority to tackle the climate crisis." On the NRDC's website, they explicitly say: "This decision is dangerous. It's also illegal. We will see them in court, and we will win."

The expectation of legal plaintiffs against the EPA's "endangerment finding" relates to its very purpose and legal basis: Under the Clean Air Act (section 202[a]), the EPA determined whether GHGs from new motor vehicles "may reasonably be anticipated to endanger" public health or welfare. This followed the Supreme Court's decision in *Massachusetts v. EPA* (2007), which required the EPA to make such a determination for GHGs if supported by science.

Climate science has always been based on peer-reviewed research, including work from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) — the UN body established in 1988 to assess climate change —, the National Research Council, the US Global Change Research Program and other reputable organizations. These sources demonstrate that GHG emissions are driving climate change, leading to impacts such as rising temperatures and sea levels, extreme weather events, ecosystem and agricultural impacts, and public health concerns.

The dangers of global warming are evident: In 2024 alone, 27 confirmed disasters caused over \$1 billion in damage and resulted in more than 550 deaths in the US. This includes Hurricane Helene, which affected North Carolina, Georgia and Florida; the wildfire that destroyed 11,000 homes in California; and the severe floods in Texas in early 2025.

Several peer-reviewed journals and national science academies raised concerns that revoking the EPA's endangerment finding would weaken

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the scientific basis for US climate regulation. Scientific comments and academy statements emphasized that the endangerment finding consolidates decades of peer-reviewed evidence linking greenhouse gas emissions to widespread harms, and that removing it could hinder agencies' ability to use that evidence in policymaking.

A new report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine states that "the evidence for current and future harm to human health and welfare caused by human-caused greenhouse gases is beyond scientific dispute." Across editorials and academy documents, authors pointed to converging lines of research on warming trends, studies linking emissions to extreme events and a large body of impacts research as the basis for maintaining a regulatory framework that connects scientific findings to statutory protections.

The American Geophysical Union (AGU), a nonprofit scientific society, involved climate and health experts, submitted a signed letter and testimony at EPA public hearings, and provided comments with over 650 expert signatures supporting the endangerment finding and its scientific basis. The letter criticized the EPA's attempts to manipulate or censor climate science with inaccurate information. This is the strategy of most anti-climate-change organizations and their supporters.

### **The global mean surface temperature discussion**

The conservative think tank The Heartland Institute, on the other hand, praised the upcoming change. According to them, climate science spends trillions of dollars fighting climate change based on flawed assumptions, mainly because it emphasizes temperature measurements on an essentially meaningless and fabricated metric: the global mean surface temperature (GMST).

Present anti-climate change scientists argue that GMST lacks a clear regulatory definition and is, in fact, physically meaningless under basic principles of thermodynamics. Yet, they support warming claims based on alleged temperature changes; they assert that the methodologies and assumptions used by the IPCC to identify and predict temperatures are "fundamentally fraudulent" because averaging temperatures is meaningless outside an equilibrium system, which Earth and its various climates are not. They claim that a standard measurement system should be used to obtain accurate measurements of average temperature change.

The technical analyses used to cast doubt on IPCC temperature data are part of a popular "cherry-picked" narrative, where technicalities like the GSMT are quickly discredited by physics and thermodynamics arguments. This is a common climate change denial tactic. We need to examine the IPCC's methodology thoroughly.

The GSMT is the clearest indicator of planetary warming. It is calculated from land, ocean and satellite data that all show the same trend, and the results are reported with uncertainty ranges. Hence, policymakers understand the risks and confidence level of the numbers. Recent studies indicate that the Earth has warmed by about 1.2 °C since pre-industrial times. The agreement among different instruments, consistent methods and transparent uncertainty estimates gives this measure strong scientific credibility.

This temperature indicates the planet's energy imbalance caused by greenhouse gases and other factors. Climate models that incorporate observed emissions successfully reproduce this trend, and research attributes most of the warming to human activities. A nearly linear relationship between cumulative carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions and temperature increase allows scientists to estimate remaining carbon budgets and timelines for

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reaching net zero. The temperature signal is confirmed by rising ocean heat content, shrinking glaciers and higher sea levels, providing additional supporting evidence.

For decision-makers, this metric directly links emissions to impacts, helps establish risk thresholds and guides adaptation strategies and policy choices. Its consistency, physical basis and policy relevance make it essential for monitoring global warming and focusing efforts to reduce emissions to reach net zero.

### **The evolution of climate science during the endangerment finding**

After all, it is interesting to note the evolution of climate science from 2009 to date. Climate science has matured over the last 16 years, thus supporting all evidence for the continued “endangered finding” designation. IPCC is key to this position.

The IPCC unites 195 countries and covers three main areas: climate science, impacts and adaptation, and mitigation. It releases comprehensive assessment reports (AR) approximately every six to seven years; the current cycle is AR6. The science working group for AR6 included 234 authors from 66 countries, including coordinating and lead authors, along with hundreds of contributors; the report cites over 14,000 references and received more than 78,000 review comments. The IPCC warns that emissions must decrease by more than 40% by 2030 to prevent catastrophic outcomes. Its findings are subject to thorough expert and government review and have gained global recognition, including a share of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007.

By the time the EPA issued the “endangerment finding”, the IPCC had already released its Fourth Assessment Report in 2007. In short, it described possible futures: the planet would warm, sea levels would rise and risks would increase if emissions

continued. By 2023, the sixth assessment strengthened the science: human activity is unquestionably warming the climate; 1.5°C is likely to be reached soon under many scenarios; and many impacts and limits to adaptation are now visible. The window to prevent the worst outcomes is quickly closing. Meanwhile, anti-climate science clung to cherry-picked narratives, such as distrusting the use of GSMT, while the IPCC advanced the world’s understanding of climate change.

Over the past 16 years, IPCC assessments have strengthened the evidence and refined estimates by incorporating more observations and improved models, directly linking cumulative CO2 emissions to warming through updated carbon budgets. The scenario framework shifted to shared socioeconomic pathways with clear mitigation options, illustrating how emissions choices relate to projected temperature and sea-level changes. The report warns that risks are greater and start at lower warming levels, with damages already underway that will worsen with each additional degree, and it provides more precise short-term reduction targets and net-zero timelines to limit warming.

End-of-century temperatures now range from about 1.5°C with strong mitigation to over 4°C in high-emission scenarios, and sea levels are expected to continue rising for centuries under the worst conditions. The updated carbon budget allows only a few hundred billion tons of CO2 with a roughly 50% chance of staying near 1.5°C, highlighting the importance of reaching net-zero CO2 to prevent further long-term warming.

In the near term (up to around 2040), many pathways still allow us to limit warming to 1.5°C, but impacts will grow more severe and accumulate over time. In the long run, cumulative emissions determine the final amount of warming; delays increase the dependence on carbon removal, raise

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the risk of irreversible changes and lock in higher sea levels.

### **Net zero as a timescale: an urgent mandate**

The science now reads like a timeline: deep, rapid and sustained cuts this decade, and reaching net-zero CO<sub>2</sub>, are clear paths to lower long-term risks. Delaying actions increases costs, raises risks and limits options. The choice facing governments, businesses and societies is no longer whether to decarbonize but how quickly and fairly to do it.

Separately, the EPA's announcement is already sparking legal battles with environmental groups that have pledged to oppose proposed rollbacks. Before that fight officially begins, the agency must initiate a rulemaking process that will take months or longer to finish.

IPPC's AR6 makes net-zero CO<sub>2</sub> a near-term timetable, not a distant aspiration: cumulative emissions determine long-term warming, so rapid, deep cuts this decade are required to avoid locking in irreversible harms. That scientific mandate implies urgent policy actions to phase out unabated fossil infrastructure and scale clean alternatives, while pairing mitigation with adaptation and equity measures.

Because the EPA's "endangerment finding" is the legal foundation that allows such rules, weakening it risks immediate and significant litigation; courts will decide whether administrative rollbacks align with established science and statutory obligations, making legal challenges a key battleground for maintaining the timelines AR6 and upcoming reports require.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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## **The Time Is Out of Joint: Power, Misalignment and the G1.5 World**

Masaaki Yoshimori  
March 07, 2026

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**The international system today is not collapsing, but its institutions and power realities are increasingly misaligned. States remain economically interconnected, yet access to trade, technology and finance is now shaped more by strategic alignment and security concerns than by universal rules alone. Japan's Taiwan signaling and its use of frameworks like the CPTPP illustrate how countries are adapting to a "G1.5 world" of managed interdependence and persistent uncertainty.**

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**W**illiam Shakespeare’s line “the time is out of joint” is often read as a lament for disorder or moral decay. In its original dramatic setting, however, Hamlet is troubled less by chaos than by misalignment: a world in which established forms remain intact while the forces that once animated them have shifted. Authority persists, rituals continue and titles still command obedience — but the underlying logic binding them together has loosened. This image captures with unusual precision the present condition of the international system.

### **Managed interdependence and structural uncertainty**

Contemporary global politics is not defined by the collapse of institutions. International organizations still convene, legal rules are invoked and procedural norms are performed with remarkable regularity. What has changed is the relationship between institutional form and the distribution of power, risk and strategic intent that once gave those institutions coherence. Rules remain, but they no longer align smoothly with the realities they are meant to govern.

What has emerged in place of postwar liberal universalism is not autarky, nor a simple retreat from globalization, but a system of managed interdependence. Markets, finance and supply chains continue to bind states together, yet access to them is increasingly conditioned on political alignment rather than legal entitlement alone. Efficiency, once the dominant organizing principle of the global economy, now competes with resilience. Uncertainty is no longer episodic, arising from crises or shocks, but structural, embedded in the routine operation of the system.

This shift reflects a deeper transformation in how power is exercised. The postwar order rested on the assumption that economic exchange could be largely insulated from geopolitical rivalry and

that legal and procedural constraints would discipline state behavior. That assumption has eroded. Economic relationships are now routinely evaluated through the lens of security, vulnerability and strategic dependence. Trade agreements, industrial policy and investment screening increasingly function as tools for managing exposure in a fragmented environment rather than as neutral mechanisms of liberalization.

### **Japan, Taiwan and the recalibration of ambiguity**

Japan’s evolving approach to Taiwan illustrates how states adapt to this new landscape. Tokyo’s signaling has grown more explicit in recent years — not because Japan seeks confrontation, but because ambiguity alone no longer guarantees stability. As the strategic environment around Taiwan has hardened, silence and procedural neutrality have come to carry their own risks.

Japan’s response has been multifaceted. Trade frameworks such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), efforts to secure semiconductor and advanced technology supply chains, and selective forms of security coordination have become instruments for navigating uncertainty. These measures do not amount to a formal abandonment of long-standing policy constraints, but they do reflect a recalibration of priorities. Economic openness is no longer treated as an unconditional good; it is increasingly filtered through concerns about continuity, leverage and alignment.

In this context, recent remarks by Prime Minister Takaichi attracted particular attention. Her suggestion that a naval blockade around Taiwan could constitute a “survival-threatening situation” for Japan implied the possible mobilization of the Self-Defense Forces under existing legal frameworks. The importance of such

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remarks lies less in their immediate operational implications than in what they signal about shifting thresholds for action. Statements once avoided in the name of ambiguity are now articulated openly, not to provoke escalation, but to clarify stakes in an environment where silence may be misread.

This shift reflects a broader change in how strategic ambiguity works. In the past, ambiguity was often seen as a stopgap — a way to postpone difficult decisions while shared rules and norms kept the peace. Today, it plays a difficult role. Clear red lines can invite rivals to test how serious those threats really are, and overly specific promises can trap governments in commitments they later regret. By contrast, leaving some things unsaid can create caution. When adversaries are unsure where the real limits lie — or how a country might respond — they are often less willing to take risks.

### **The emergence of a G1.5 world order**

The broader international system in which these dynamics unfold does not fit neatly into familiar categories. It is neither a leaderless G0 world marked by pure disorder, nor a G2 condominium in which the US and China jointly manage global affairs. Instead, it resembles what can be described as a G1.5 world. In this configuration, the US retains primacy over critical margins of access and enforcement, while China possesses growing leverage without shared rule-making authority. Power remains concentrated, yet obligation has thinned. Rules persist, but their application is selective and increasingly shaped by political considerations.

The time, then, is out of joint not because order has vanished, but because its components no longer move together. Power, law and legitimacy have fallen out of alignment. The resulting system is neither chaotic nor stable in the traditional sense. Instead, it is marked by friction — by the

continuous negotiation of access, obligation and risk. In a G1.5 world, the challenge is not to resolve every tension, but to manage misalignment with patience, restraint and a clearer understanding of evolving risks.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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## **What the Iran War Reveals About the Limits of Chinese Power**

Daniel Wagner  
March 07, 2026

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**China condemned the operation that started the Iran War but refrained from direct involvement, revealing limits in its strategic**

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**partnerships. The disruption of Iran’s oil exports to China highlights vulnerabilities in Beijing’s energy and geopolitical strategies. This crisis shows that while China offers economic ties and diplomatic support, it stops short of providing security guarantees to its allies.**

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**W**ithin hours of the start of the Iran War, Beijing issued a statement condemning the operation as a violation of international law and calling for an immediate ceasefire. As Iran began to burn, China did nothing else. That gap — between the rhetoric and the reality — is perhaps the most important story emerging from the ruins of the Islamic Republic. Not the oil disruption, not the regionalization of the War, not the unknown unknowns about the future. What may matter most in the long term is that China has lost its most important Middle Eastern partner while Beijing watched.

### **The collapse of China’s Iranian oil ecosystem**

Iran supplied about 13% of all the crude oil China imported by sea last year, with more than 80% percent of Iran’s total oil exports flowing to Chinese refineries — most of it to smaller “teapot” operations along the coast that had quietly built their business models around sanctioned, discounted barrels. That ecosystem has now collapsed.

Chinese refiners have been pushed into global spot markets where they must compete for replacement oil at war-inflated prices, settling transactions in US dollars under close international scrutiny. The yuan-denominated shadow trade that sustained both Iran’s economy and Beijing’s dedollarization ambitions is gone, possibly forever.

Beijing spent the better part of a decade preparing for precisely this kind of disruption — diversifying suppliers, building strategic reserves, accelerating its domestic renewables buildout, and establishing alternative pipeline routes through Central Asia and Russia. China will absorb this, but what it cannot so easily absorb is the lesson that the war broadcasts to every country that has built its security around a partnership with Beijing.

### **The limits of China’s partnership model**

The 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Iran, signed in 2021, was supposed to be the flagship of Beijing’s alternative world order — proof that countries could anchor their futures to China rather than to Washington’s alliance system. Iran was to receive investment, integration into Chinese-led institutions such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and de facto diplomatic cover through its association with Beijing. In exchange, Beijing took advantage of cheap oil — a critical node in the Belt and Road Initiative’s overland corridors, and a geopolitical buffer against American power projection in the Gulf.

The problem is that China’s version of partnership comes without a security guarantee. True to form, this has always been Beijing’s calculated position — no entangling alliances, no forward military commitments, no meaningful positions that are not skewed to Beijing’s advantage and no risk of being dragged into someone else’s war.

Chinese analysts defend this as strategic wisdom, arguing it gives Beijing maximum flexibility and avoids the type of overstretch that has degraded American power. In practice, it means that when the US and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury, China’s comprehensive “strategic partner” had no one to call.

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## Strategic messaging meets strategic reality

Beijing's defenders will note that intervening militarily was never a realistic option. China is not going to fight the US over Iran. The issue is whether Beijing's entire framework for challenging American dominance — the Global Security Initiative, proclamations about a multipolar world order in which China is prominent, and solemn declarations that “the East is rising” and that China stands for peace — means anything when tested by violence. The answer is no.

There is also the question of what China may have inadvertently contributed to the war's timing. Reports that Beijing was supplying Iran with carrier-killer missiles — weapons that would have taken months to deploy but whose transfer narrowed the window for any diplomatic resolution — suggest that China's deliberate ratcheting up the heat may have accelerated the crisis it sought to avoid. It was a profound strategic miscalculation: China helped make the war more likely while lacking either the will or the means to prevent it.

### Beijing's Calculus: business with Washington

For Chinese President Xi Jinping, the immediate calculus is clear. He is prioritizing the upcoming summit with US President Donald Trump in Beijing. He is protecting the trade truce that has given China room to breathe during a period of acute economic pressure. He is choosing business with America over solidarity with Iran. While being rational, it is also exactly what Washington always suspected China would do when forced to choose.

The longer game is harder to read. China will likely seek to expand its economic presence in Iran once the dust settles, positioning itself for the reconstruction contracts and the oil access that will

eventually reemerge — just as it did following the end of the Iraq War. Beijing is already framing its restraint as proof of responsible statecraft — in contrast to American militarism.

But the countries that matter most to Chinese grand strategy — Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, the emerging economies of Southeast Asia and Africa, and the Global South more generally — are watching. They are watching China absorb a significant strategic loss, respond with only statements and wait. They are undoubtedly calculating what a partnership with Beijing would actually be worth in their own hour of crisis and need.

The Iran war has not ended China's rise, but it certainly has clarified its terms. While Beijing can offer markets, infrastructure and diplomatic cover, it will not offer security. That distinction may well prove to be the defining limit of Chinese power in the century ahead.

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[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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## **Inconvenient Fictions: The Deliberate Dismantling of International Law and Norms**

Joanna Rozpedowski  
March 10, 2026

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**The recent World Economic Forum and Munich Security Conference signaled a growing sentiment that international law is a poor fit for this era of hard-power rivalry. However, US sanctions on the International Criminal Court reveal a paradox: Governments dismiss international law as naive while simultaneously using resources to suppress its application.**

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**A**t the recently concluded World Economic Forum in Switzerland and the Munich Security Conference in Germany, a striking rhetorical current ran through the discussions of great-power rivalry and shifting alliances: the suggestion that international law, alongside the once-unassailable “rules-based international order,” now amounts to little more than a mental “abstraction” based on a trivial consensus. A language of idealism that defined the

normative landscape post-World War II is poorly suited to the logic of transactionalism, pragmatism and hard power politics we have now decisively entered, argue the North Atlantic and European elites and the Trump administration faithful.

The implication is clear: in a world defined by fierce geopolitical competition between the US–EU–NATO alliance and its China–Russia–BRICS counterpoint over contested spheres of influence and denial, legal norms are mere rhetorical devices rather than binding constraints. And as such, they can be imagined away at will, as Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio recently attested.

Labeling international law an “abstraction” serves a strategic purpose. It deliberately lowers expectations of compliance, normalizes selective adherence or overt violation, and provides political cover for conduct that might otherwise invite vehement condemnation or censure. Our Western political establishment now argues that any significant restraint on state action, otherwise guided by the cold and calculating logic of power, must be effectively neutralized. Within weeks, we have moved past the “fake media” narrative and, by a seeming political elite consensus, entered an ever-contested realm of fake laws and contrived norms.

There is, however, at least one problem with this make-believe framing. If international law and, by extension, those pesky “international rules” were truly an abstraction — an inert, inconsequential and powerless invention of humanity’s “better angels of our nature” and its more humane imagination — no one would deign to sanction the people who invoke it or weaken the institutions that wield it.

### **Sanctioning international courts**

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Exhibit A: The International Criminal Court (ICC), born out of the 1998 Rome Statute, was established to investigate and prosecute individuals — including heads of state and commanders in the field — for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression.

It exists not as a philosophical proposition or a suggestion, but as a lived reality with which states, using the preponderance of modern military might and violence against human beings in the line of fire, must reckon. The ICC is a treaty institution with 125 state parties, a defined jurisdiction, a prosecutor and a bench of 18 judges. Its operations are textual, procedural and institutional, and its case load — given abhorrent and ongoing violations of international law — is expanding.

In early 2025, US President Donald Trump issued an executive order imposing sanctions on ICC officials in connection with the Court's opening of preliminary investigations into alleged war crimes in Gaza. This investigation touched on the conduct of both Israeli officials and, potentially, US personnel, deeming the court's actions an "unusual and extraordinary threat" to US national security. The sanctions included asset freezes and travel restrictions targeting the Court's prosecutor, Karim Khan, as well as judges and staff involved.

Sanctions, too, are not rhetorical gestures but material instruments of economic and political coercion. They are instruments that require legal authority to impose, bureaucratic infrastructure to administer and diplomatic finesse and capital to defend. Governments do not reach for such concrete and tangible tools against noumenal fictions and phantoms.

This was not Washington's first such attempt at confrontation and intimidation, however. During his 2017–2021 term, the Trump administration targeted the ICC's investigation into the situation

in Afghanistan by imposing sanctions on then-prosecutor Fatou Bensouda and restricting the visas of Court personnel — before the Biden administration rescinded those measures in 2021. The pattern suggests not that the Court was then and remains now an illegitimate or irrelevant notion, but that it is compelling enough to provoke repeated and escalating state responses.

### **Silencing the messenger**

Exhibit B: The same logic applies to the treatment of United Nations Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese, the independent expert mandated by the UN Human Rights Council to report on the human rights situation in the Palestinian territories. In a series of reports and public statements, Albanese characterized Israeli military conduct in Gaza as constituting grave violations of international humanitarian law, including findings she described as consistent with genocide under the 1948 Genocide Convention.

The response, rather than engaging with and rebutting serious and substantive legal claims, called for punitive measures, her removal, her sanctioning or the termination of her mandate, and dismissing her findings as biased or going beyond remit.

If the legal norms Albanese invokes — the Genocide Convention, the Geneva Conventions, the Rome Statute — are indeed mere abstractions with no practical weight, then her reports are simply an overindulgent academic exercise. There is no need to silence an academic with no expansive executive powers. Yet even Plato feared the poets in the Republic. Poets who shaped how citizens felt about war, death, the gods and justice; who bypassed logic, reason and *raison d'être* and who aimed to move the heart, to elicit emotion. With no formal authority, no army, no office and no decision-making power, they were more

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formidable and thus more threatening to those they described and indicted in the public square.

The intensity of the effort to discredit or remove Albanese is, in itself, evidence that her invocations of international law carry consequences. It is the facts on the ground and not normative “fictions” that ground culpability and legal liability. What consequences, then, do states fear from an entity that is both a paradoxical fiction and a reality?

### **The paradox**

At the heart of contemporary great-power behavior lies a contradiction. Governments simultaneously dismiss international law as naïve or inapplicable to hard realities, and mobilize significant political, legal and economic resources to suppress its enforcement mechanisms. These two positions cannot be coherently held at once.

To call the rules-based order an abstraction while sanctioning the ICC is to acknowledge, implicitly, that the Court’s work has real-world effects. To demand the removal of a UN rapporteur for her legal findings is to concede that legal findings shape reputations, mobilize opinion and potentially constrain state action. Power rarely mobilizes against what it considers immaterial and irrelevant.

The prohibition on genocide is codified in the 1948 Genocide Convention, ratified by 153 states. The protections afforded to civilians in armed conflict are enshrined in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and ratified by every recognized state on earth. These are not poetic metaphors but grave crimes that, in the language of international law, “shock the conscience of mankind.” They are treaty obligations. What may be contested, therefore, is not the international law’s existence, but the political will to apply and enforce it

consistently — and, crucially, the authority to interpret it.

The deeper struggle is not over whether international law exists but over who gets to wield it. Who defines genocide? Who determines proportionality in armed conflict? Who judges compliance with the laws of war and who suffers its consequences? The post-1945 legal order attempted to institutionalize answers to those questions through the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court, treaty bodies, special tribunals and independent rapporteurs. What the current moment reveals is that those institutions are contested not because they are weak, but because they are established and functional enough to produce findings that leading states and their allies find increasingly inconvenient.

This is a political crisis, not a legal one. It is a crisis of political conscience and of moral coherence. The treaties remain intact. The institutions have not yet ceased to exist. What is eroding, however, is the shared commitment among Western states, no less, to operate within their constraints — or at a minimum, to acknowledge their legitimacy. The rhetoric heard in Davos and Munich is the ideological scaffolding for that erosion: If the order was always just a naïve but convenient fiction, then abandoning it is not a betrayal, but a maturation necessitated by a pragmatic geopolitical realignment, its exponents argue.

When the United States sanctions the ICC, it signals to every government under investigation — in The Hague, in Geneva, before the Human Rights Council — that legal accountability is a function of geopolitical alignment rather than conduct. That signal, if received, will shape behavior. Given technological possibilities (i.e., reemergence of energy, laser and chemical weapons use), the temptations to transgress

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international law and elide the normative consensus grow in proportion to the possibilities of securing strategic advantage in a perpetual contest over power, its maintenance and expansion.

This calculus has found institutional expression within the current American defense establishment. At a Pentagon press briefing on March 2, 2026 — the Trump administration’s first public statement since US–Israeli strikes on Iran commenced — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth declared that the operation would proceed with “no stupid rules of engagement, no nation-building quagmire, no democracy-building exercise, no politically correct wars.” The remarks were not incidental but highly premeditated. As early as September 30, 2025, addressing US generals and admirals at Quantico, Virginia, Hegseth had already framed rules of engagement as “politically correct and overbearing” constraints on the military imperative to “unleash overwhelming and punishing violence on the enemy.” The Iran campaign, undeterred by “what so-called international institutions say,” operationalizes the secretary’s principle of “maximum lethality, not tepid legality” accelerating the erosion of the institutional architecture that requires civilized nations to abide by legal obligations and translate them into responsible battlefield practice.

The debates at Davos, Munich and the Pentagon should not be about whether international norms and laws are real. That question is settled, if not by the treaties themselves, then by the energy expended trying to suppress them.

The productive debate ought to focus on how best to reform and strengthen these institutions, ensure their impartial application across geopolitical lines and build the coalitions of states willing to defend them when doing so is politically costly. How do we ensure and protect unbiased operations of future tribunals, in the conduct of

future conflicts, and on the ground in places where civilians have no protection except the “aspirational language” of the laws of war? How do we ensure that international law is a proactive instrument of foreign policy and a counterweight to state self-aggrandizement?

International law is admittedly flawed and imperfect; it has been politicized and asymmetrically enforced because it is fundamentally human. But it is not a phantasmagoria. And the proof of that, paradoxically, lies in the resurgent ferocity of the effort to silence those who invoke it.



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## Should India's Supreme Court Have Banned a Grade 8 Social Science Textbook?

ICARE  
March 10, 2026

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**India's Supreme Court has recently banned a grade 8 Social Science textbook, citing problems with the textbook's mentions of judicial corruption in one of its chapters. We discuss the Supreme Court's order from both legal and educational angles, drawing upon comments from scholars and academics as well as documents from the Ministry of Education. Our in-depth and dispassionate analysis finds that the Court failed to appreciate the textbook's educational context and could have adopted a different route.**

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**O**n February 23, 2026, India's National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) released the second part of its Social Science textbook for grade 8, the first part having appeared in mid-2025. These textbooks are part of a series of new Social Science textbooks for the Middle Stage (grades 6 to 8), entitled Exploring Society: India and Beyond. Taking umbrage at a few paragraphs

discussing corruption in the Judiciary, the Supreme Court of India passed strictures against the NCERT, issued a show-cause notice for criminal contempt against its director and ordered a complete ban on the textbook.

### What is the NCERT, and what does it do?

The NCERT is an autonomous body under the Ministry of Education, which has for several decades designed curriculum frameworks, syllabi and textbooks for schools aligned to the central government's CBSE board of education. It is also one of the bodies tasked with designing and implementing teacher training in the country. To put things in perspective, let us recall that India has nearly 250 million school students, over 20 million of whom follow the CBSE board of school education. The rest follow mostly state boards of education or a few other central or international boards. Besides, NCERT textbooks have traditionally been regarded as major references beyond the classroom. Preparing and publishing textbooks across all disciplines is therefore a weighty responsibility.

In recent years, two different committees formed by the Ministry of Education formulated a 65-page new National Education Policy (NEP 2020), followed by a 562-page National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE 2023). These two major documents together seek to revolutionize India's school system by offering a new philosophy of education and making schooling stimulating, engaging and enriching — not just a mere accumulation of facts, figures and other data to be learned by rote. Apart from spelling out a new pedagogy in great detail, they lay much emphasis on encouraging the students' ability to critically reflect on the material, and preparing them to meet the challenges of today's world. We will return to this last point.

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In other words, the new textbooks are mandated to be written on the new foundation laid down by these two documents. So far, only textbooks of various disciplines for grades 1 to 8 have appeared, and are available for download from the NCERT's website. A complex system of committees oversees this work. From top to bottom: two overarching committees — the National Syllabus and Teaching/Learning Material Committee (NSTC) and the National Curriculum Frameworks Oversight Committee (NOC) — are ultimately responsible for the preparation and finalization of the new syllabi and textbooks. The former creates Curricular Area Groups (CAGs) for the various disciplines — the CAG for Social Science (CAG-SS), in our present case — which, in turn, form Textbook Development Teams (TDTs) of experts, one per grade or textbook. According to the official notifications, these various groups and committees are expected to work in collaboration with the NCERT, the textbooks' publisher.

The CAG-SS, together with the CAG-Economics, had so far produced textbooks for grade 6, grade 7 (in two parts) and grade 8 (part one). In a departure from the past, they brought geography, history, cultural heritage, political science and economics together, rather than keeping them as separate books. This meant a substantial reduction in the overall syllabus for the Middle Stage.

### **India's Supreme Court took issue**

On February 24, the day after the NCERT put the new textbook for grade 8 part two on sale, The Indian Express published an article with the catchy title, "NCERT's new Class 8 book lists 'corruption in judiciary', 'massive backlog' as challenges," focusing on two or three paragraphs of the chapter. The next day, a few Supreme Court advocates, including Kapil Sibal and Abhishek Singhvi, drew the attention of a Supreme Court bench headed by the Chief Justice of India (CJI), Justice Surya

Kant, to the article, expressing shock at the content of the textbook — without having read more than the article, it appears. The CJI expressed his strong displeasure, protesting at what he perceived to be a "conspiracy" to defame the Judiciary, and announced his intention to pass an order against the textbook and the NCERT, which he did the next day.

The order, issued in the name of Justice Surya Kant, Justice Joymalya Bagchi and Justice Vipul M. Pancholi, found that the offending passages had been written "in a reckless, irresponsible, contemptuous, and motivated manner" which revealed "a discernible underlying agenda to undermine the institutional authority and demean the dignity of the judiciary." It issued a show-cause notice for contempt of court to the Secretary, Department of School Education and Literacy in the Ministry of Education, and the NCERT director Professor D.P. Saklani. It asked for "all copies of the book, in hard or soft form ... [to be] forthwith seized and removed from public access." It imposed "a complete blanket ban ... on any further publication" of the textbook. And it asked the NCERT to provide, by the next hearing on March 11, the details of the NSTC committee, the "specific names and credentials of the Textbook Development Team responsible for drafting" the said chapter, and all records of meetings pertaining to the chapter. The NCERT and the Ministry of Education tendered unconditional apologies, affirming that the offending passages were unintentional and reflected an "error of judgement."

Because the banning of a textbook is unprecedented in India's legal and educational history, there followed a flurry of articles in the press or on online media platforms, a few news items or debates on TV channels (this example from Palki Sharma on Firstpost), YouTube videos (such as this one by Pradeep Singh, in Hindi, praising the authors of the textbook), and

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numerous social media posts — all of it generating thousands of comments generally critical of the Supreme Court's strictures. Leaving aside plain news reports, some articles (examples here and here) broadly endorsed the Supreme Court's views, while most others, to which we will turn, argued that the Supreme Court's line of action was excessive or even questionable in law.

It is noteworthy that comments and analyses covered the whole political spectrum, from so-called "right-wing" media (an example here) to so-called "left-wing" ones (an example here). Let us clarify that we use these labels in their popular acceptance and without any judgment; our perspective here is strictly apolitical.

### **The legal angle: the ban and the use of "criminal contempt"**

There has been much debate on whether the Supreme Court was right in imposing a ban. In a detailed analysis on the respected Bar and Bench platform, two legal academics, Syed Shiraz Fazal and Twinkle Hussain, asked, "Even assuming that protecting judicial integrity is a legitimate aim, was a complete blanket ban necessary? Could the Court have directed revision, contextual clarification, or expert review instead? A prohibition on any further publication appears at first glance to fail the least restrictive means test."

Several commentators suggested that "a complete ban must meet an exceptionally high threshold," and since the facts presented in the concerned chapter were all based on official figures and authentic quotations (including one by the previous Chief Justice of India, Justice B.R. Gavai, on judicial corruption), the absolute necessity and urgency of a ban were debatable. In fact, the Bar and Bench analysis, taken together with an article by the Supreme Court advocate Prashant Bhushan in *The Indian Express*, another by V. Aravinda in *The Federal*, and an unsigned

one in *The Statesman*, titled "Silencing Civics," made the point that the Supreme Court had milder options before going all the way to a ban. Citing earlier judgments, several commentators (let us add here Ummar Jamal in *The Indian Express* and Saurav Das in *Frontline Magazine*) argued at length that the ban was detrimental to academic freedom and public debate, contrary to the assurance in the Supreme Court order that it did not intend to "stifle any legitimate critique or to bring to task any individual or organisation exercising their right to scrutinize public institution, including the Judiciary."

The legal scholar Gautam Bhatia posed a challenge to the order through an intriguing legal argument. He first observed, "The Court does not possess unlimited power. It is crucial to seriously consider what constraints the Constitution places upon judicial power." He went on to question the Court's power to ban a book and argued at some length that "The judiciary does not have the constitutional power to directly restrict speech (that is, to ban books or censor films via judicial decree)." In his opinion, "Judicial orders banning books are without jurisdictional foundation, and incorrect in law." This, of course, opens up a fascinating debate, which we cannot probe deeper here.

Finally, the question of the show-cause notice issued for criminal contempt of court received less media attention, but over the years, several High Court or Supreme Court judges, such as here, have stated, "The contempt of court is a special jurisdiction to be exercised sparingly and with caution." In another case (with many similar observations on record), the judge observed, "Every important issue needs to be vigorously debated by the people and the press, even if the issue of debate is subjudice before a court. ... For the improvement of any system and that includes the judiciary, introspection is the key. That can

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happen only if there is a robust debate even on issues which are before the court.”

Many social media posts also pointed out that by imposing such a ban, the Supreme Court had in effect drawn far greater attention to the contentious passages in the chapter — a well-known and unavoidable fallout of book banning. Prashant Bhushan observed in his article that “The more the judiciary tries to suppress discussion or restrict access to information, the more distrust is likely to grow in the minds of citizens. As the judiciary is not above scrutiny and is accountable to the people, there is no doubt in my mind that the inclusion of references to judicial corruption and delays in the NCERT curriculum is in keeping with the constitutional values of transparency and accountability that surely must pervade the judiciary above all other institutions in the country.” In the same line, Ummer Jamal wrote, “Removing references to judicial corruption from educational material does not remove corruption from the judiciary itself. Documented instances over the years show that the problem cannot be erased by silence.” Or in Saurav Das’s words, “... blanket bans and threats of contempt against curriculum makers sound like censorship.”

Altogether, there is a good case to argue that the Supreme Court’s order could easily have been more measured, especially since, as the Justices are well aware, they are the ultimate legal authority and their order cannot be appealed.

However, in the end, the legal angle is not the core issue.

### **The educational angle: the NEP 2020’s mandate**

To lay our finger on that core issue, let us return to the Supreme Court’s order and its central argument, which needs to be quoted in full:

The necessity for judicial intervention nevertheless has arisen not from a desire to suppress criticism but from the imperative to safeguard the pedagogical integrity of the national curriculum. Young students in their formative years are only beginning to navigate the nuances of public life and the constitutional architecture that sustains it. It is fundamentally improper to expose them to a biased narrative that may engender permanent misconceptions at an age when they lack the perspicacity to appreciate the manifold and onerous responsibilities that are discharged by the judiciary on a day-to-day basis.

So it is not really the textbook that the Justices have passed judgement on; it is India’s school students who, still “in their formative years,” will be incapable of discernment. At this point, the Justices have shed their robes and turned into educationists. Indeed, deciding what students are capable of reflectively engaging with, and at which stage, is not the task of our courts; it is the job of educationists. And not just any educationists — only those who have closely studied and understood the NEP 2020 and the NCF-SE 2023.

Let us therefore recall that the NEP 2020 “envisages that the curriculum and pedagogy of our institutions must develop among the students a deep sense of respect towards the Fundamental Duties and Constitutional values, bonding with one’s country, and a conscious awareness of one’s roles and responsibilities in a changing world.” The mandate is clear: the new education must make students aware of the challenges facing our society and institutions so as to “truly shape our next generation of citizens”. For this to happen, “cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem solving” need to be developed.

The NCF-SE 2023 develops the point: “Culture is thus not seen as merely an ornament or a pastime, but an enrichment which equips the student (and Teacher alike) to face the many

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challenges of life, challenges which may be personal or collective in nature.” Turning specifically to Social Science, the document offers these guidelines: “It [the content in Political Science] should also include an understanding of inequity and discrimination in society, and its reasons, alongside the progress that has been made and the ways and efforts that have been made towards inclusion and justice and its successes, failures, and challenges. Students are expected to explore probable solutions to these challenges, including what people can do individually to address these issues.” It also invites projects that will let students “investigate, explore, and respond to complex questions, real-world challenges, and problems.”

In the order, the Supreme Court nowhere mentions the NEP 2020 under which new syllabi, textbooks and (later) digital material are mandated to be developed. The order’s depiction of a passive, impressionable, indiscriminating student who must be protected from real-life situations is rooted in the 20th century, while the NEP 2020 offers a roadmap for 21st-century education. The Supreme Court has not taken into account the whole educational context in which the new textbooks are conceived and prepared. It has also failed to notice that today’s thirteen-year-old has access to a wide array of news, information (and misinformation) and national and international debates. It is true that any form of indoctrination through education should be condemned, but the Court’s order has failed to establish such a charge.

Nor are we trying to blame the Court for stereotyping today’s students. The tasks facing Justices daily in Court are onerous and of far-reaching consequences, often directly affecting the lives of crores (tens of millions) of Indian citizens. They cannot be expected to have expertise in fields that are not their own — a widely accepted principle, which explains the courts’ frequent

recourse to expert advice. Except in the present case.

### **Did the textbook “selectively” target the Judiciary?**

When senior advocates brought the issue to the Chief Justice of India’s attention, they accused (according to press reports) the textbook of “selectively” targeting or focusing on the Judiciary. One of them asked why corruption in the Executive or Legislature was not equally highlighted. This very question revealed their ignorance of the new textbooks for Social Science. Had they merely glanced at them, they would have realized that the textbooks published so far have highlighted social, cultural, political, bureaucratic, environmental issues and challenges. Let us mention a few closer to the current controversy.

**From grade 7, part 1 textbook, pp. 206-207:** “... It is important to keep in mind, however, that even democracies have their problems. Issues such as corruption, wealth disparity, excessive control by a few over democratic institutions, erosion of the judiciary’s independence, manipulation of information channels, and several more, can cause hurdles in achieving the ideals of democracy. What can we do as individuals, and as a society, to remain vigilant and minimize these issues and hurdles?”

**From Grade 7, Part 2 textbook, p. 156:** “... The above roles of the government are executed through India’s Constitution, thousands of laws, many layers of elected representatives, a vast bureaucracy, and a judiciary (brief description in the next section), all of which help us greatly in our daily lives. However, you might wonder why, then, our country and her people also still face so many problems. Why do we still hear of cases of

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bribery and corruption in public office? We still encounter many issues that need to be addressed — people in difficult socio-economic conditions, lack of access to good education and healthcare, infrastructure that is of poor quality, inadequate access to government schemes, and so on. How do you make or help the government do what it is meant to do? How do you ensure that your grievances with the government are addressed?”

**From Grade 8, Part 1 textbook, p. 131:** Cartoons portray election candidates using abusive language, being caught by the police with bundles of banknotes in their car and government officials campaigning for the ruling party.

**From Grade 8, Part 1 textbook, pp. 158-159** (in a section entitled “Challenges to the Effective Functioning of the Legislatures”): the chapter has a table showing that the number of sittings in the Lok Sabha declined steadily from 1952 to 2004, followed by a statement by a former chairman of the Rajya Sabha noting the sharp decline of productivity of the Rajya Sabha “under the impact of disruptions.” The text asks, “What conclusions can you draw from this statement? What implications does this have for the role that the Rajya Sabha is expected to play?”

The text goes on, “Concerns have been expressed by sections of the society about the fact that a substantial proportion of their representatives in the Lok Sabha have criminal cases against them, and that many sessions are marked by angry or biased debates that do not seriously address issues affecting the people.” It then reproduces cartoons poking fun at politicians/election candidates, with the remark, “The media also plays an important role in communicating the concerns of the electorate.

These cartoons express them with humour, a practice common to all healthy democracies.”

The above examples highlighted problematic aspects of our democratic systems. The charge that the impugned chapter selectively focused on the Judiciary is simply untrue, as several media pieces also stressed (e.g. Sanjay Maurya in Hindustan Times or Padmaja Joshi’s introduction to a TV debate). This is a good reminder that tearing a few lines out of their context — both textual and educational — is bound to distort their intention and message.

### **Did the impugned chapter portray the Judiciary in a bad light?**

This is perhaps the central question. What did the chapter “The Role of the Judiciary in Our Society” say about the Judiciary? Going by the discussion started by senior advocates, and by the Supreme Court’s order, it painted a very dark picture of the Judiciary. Unfortunately, with the Supreme Court having suppressed the textbook, the public is not in a position to independently appraise its contents. This regrettably prevents a national debate on the new textbooks’ approach — a debate which should also involve parents, teachers and the students themselves.

However, some of us perused the chapter’s contents when the textbook was first released, and the impression we formed was very different. We should first note that the passage on “Corruption in the Judiciary” was only one subsection of a section on “Challenges Faced by the Judicial System.” More importantly,

The chapter effectively conveyed (in a simplified manner) the principles and concepts behind the Judiciary’s role and functioning.

The chapter highlighted the Judiciary’s important role in imparting justice, protecting the

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Constitution and human rights, intervening in social and environmental issues, and striking down laws if they are found to be unjust or unconstitutional.

The section on “Challenges Faced by the Judicial System” was presented factually; it explained the complexity of the field and the issues involved and engaged the student’s reflection at several points.

The impugned subsection only used official and public data, which has long been debated by members of the Judiciary and in the national press. It also used a public speech made by the previous Chief Justice of India. In other words, it showed that the systemic issues in the Judiciary have been flagged by members of the Judiciary themselves. (In fact, had the textbook’s authors wanted to tarnish the Judiciary’s image, they could have drawn on a wide choice of members of the legal fraternity condemning judicial corruption. Suffice it to mention here Justice K. Ramaswamy’s anguished remarks in 1997, Justice Ruma Pal’s public lecture of 2011, Kapil Sibal’s scathing remarks in 2010 on the Judiciary’s failure “to eradicate the phenomenon of corruption” and long debates on the issue in the Rajya Sabha in 2003 (part 1 and part 2), with remarks by Kapil Sibal and Arun Jaitley, among others.

The entire section stressed principles of accountability and transparency, which are the pillars of democracy. The section did not point fingers towards anyone and ended on this positive note: “... Efforts are constantly being made at the state and Union levels to build faith and increase transparency in the judicial system, including through the use of technology, and to take swift and decisive action against instances of corruption wherever they may arise.”

In our opinion, therefore, there was no attempt in this subsection to tarnish the image of the Judiciary. As in earlier chapters of political science, it simply informed the student of the real-life challenges facing India — challenges which the Judiciary itself has often expressed concern about. The chapter effectively and positively conveyed the enormous responsibility of the Judiciary as the guardian of the Constitution and the Law.

We find, however, that there could have been a better choice of words for the title of the contentious subsection and a more nuanced approach of its content, stressing in particular the Judiciary’s own efforts in improving its service to citizens. We hope that such a revision will be permitted.

### **How do we best prepare tomorrow’s citizens?**

If the new education fails to equip students to reflect on — and help resolve — the challenges of the 21st century, the purpose of NEP 2020, with its emphasis on the need to develop the students’ critical thinking, will be defeated. The school system will continue to produce passive minds groomed to accept all taught material as final and sacrosanct.

Almost all the challenges our Indian society presents ordinary citizens with on a daily basis — whether it is corruption at all levels, deficient infrastructure, social discriminations, social injustice, lack of concern for the environment, red-tape, delayed justice, etc. — are deeply entrenched problems that go back many decades or, in some cases, centuries. None of those challenges can be humanly solved overnight. As many leading lights of the country, right from the makers of the Constitution, have pointed out, it is only if the public becomes aware and remains vigilant that things can and will change. It is one of the objectives of education to help build such an

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awareness through critical thinking. In our opinion, the discussions in several chapters of the new Social Science textbooks are aligned with this objective.

We noticed, incidentally, that other chapters — of geography, history, cultural heritage and economics — have also contributed to such awareness-building at different levels, without hesitating to highlight challenges, controversies and problems in those areas. We find that these textbooks take a holistic approach to our nation, including its historical and cultural foundations, and should be read as a whole — not just one isolated paragraph, which is bound to give a wrong impression. This is the educational angle which the Supreme Court failed to appreciate.

As we stated earlier, today's students have access to a wide range of information and are prone to become cynical about our country's problems: Let us keep in mind that about two hundred thousand young Indians renounce Indian citizenship every year. We owe our children honesty and transparency — both about the unique and great features of India and about ailments affecting governance and society alike — while at the same time conveying the hope that these ailments can be cured.

In the end, let us quote again from The Statesman's article, which refers to "the daily experience of litigants who wait years for a hearing and of lawyers who navigate a system stretched close to breaking. By invoking contempt and ordering a blanket ban on the [NCERT] book, the court has chosen to treat this discomfort as defamation rather than diagnosis." Or Ummar Jamal's positive conclusion, "Age-appropriate discussion of corruption, inefficiency, and case backlogs does not weaken democratic values. It reinforces them by encouraging accountability."

We hold India's Judiciary in high respect. The above analysis is offered in a constructive spirit, and in the hope of shifting the focus back to students and the need to prepare them for an increasingly competitive, unstable and challenging world.

[We are a group of educationists, academics, jurists and concerned citizens, who prefer anonymity at this juncture.]

[Note: In all text and quotations, all emphasis in italics is ours.]

[Cheyenne Torres edited this piece.]

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Indian Citizens and Academics for Responsible Education (ICARE) is a group of educationists, academics, jurists and concerned citizens, who prefer anonymity at this juncture.

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## **The Tale of the Elephant (the US) and the Mahout (Israel)**

I.M. Manava  
March 11, 2026

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**In geopolitics, the US is the elephant — powerful but often misguided — while Israel is the mahout directing the US. This dynamic shapes the narrative of the Iran conflict: Important history and Iran's diplomatic efforts are ignored to fit a simplistic "good vs. evil" story favoring Israel's agenda. Recognizing this dynamic and seeking diverse perspectives is**

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**crucial to both understanding the truth and determining our own independent objectives.**

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**M**any years ago, I went to the Indian city of Jaipur. From there, to get to Amber Fort, situated on a hilltop, you could take an elephant ride. As we tourists queued to climb up the steps and get on the elephant's back, all eyes and cameras were on the huge beast. We watched in amazement as it swayed its trunk from side to side, shifted its massive weight from one foot to another and occasionally took a huge shit. It was only after I had settled into the boxed seating high up on its back that I noticed the mahout — or the elephant driver — sitting in front of us, near the elephant's neck.

While this image may seem a throwback to a bygone era, it is strangely relevant in today's geopolitics.

The lumbering beast is the current USA. It is big and powerful — in terms of economic might and military ability — and it throws its weight around. It has soft power too and a broad cultural reach. Sometimes and unexpectedly, it shits on other countries — friends and foes alike. It is not always smart. And it can be directed.

The mahout is Israel. It's small and relatively weak, but it's smart. It directs the US and tells it what to do. Vote this way in Congress and give us these arms. Shield us in the UN. Make our enemies your enemies. Now start a war on Iran (June 13, 2025). Now stop the war on Iran (June 24, 2025). Now, restart the war on Iran (February 28, 2026). And now, report this on the news — and report it in this way. Say this; do not say that; and certainly don't ask about that other stuff.

### **The Israeli narrative**

Not only is Israel steering US foreign policy in the Middle East, but it's also steering the Western narrative surrounding this most recent war on Iran. The story coming from the Israeli administration, Western leaders and Western mainstream news channels is identical. And with the recent takeover of TikTok by pro-Israeli billionaires, even social media is being controlled by Israel.

In that strongly pro-Zionist story, the chapter on Iran does not begin in 1953, when the British and American secret services overthrew the democratically elected, hugely popular, anticolonial government of Iranian Premier Mohammad Mosaddegh — because Mosaddegh was planning to nationalize their country's oil industry so that at long last the Iranians could profit from their own oil resources — and placed their own man, “The Shah of Iran”, as dictator. In fact, no one — not even supposed hard-hitting objective journalists — should bring up this seminal event.

The Israeli narrative — and now the West's accepted narrative — begins on the date that the countries and the people Israel and/or the US (the border blurs) have been long harassing, finally cannot take it anymore, and retaliate. In terms of Iran, that story begins on November 4, 1979, when — for no apparent reason — 66 Americans were taken hostage at the US Embassy in Tehran.

### **The rules of the ride**

Like any good story, there are several simple, easy-to-understand premises. Israel is the good guy and “the victim,” and always will be. And as such, it is to be unconditionally supported, even if it is conducting a genocide in its own country. Iran is the bad guy and the aggressor, and always will be. And as such, it can never be trusted or negotiated with. There is no room for nuance.

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The Iranians are supremely unhappy under their current government. This has nothing to do with the fact that, since 1979, the West has severely sanctioned its energy, banking (leading to shortages in medicines and agricultural products) and military sectors, resulting in a difficult life for Iranian citizens. It is only because the Iranian administration is suppressing, torturing and killing its people. Apart from making life hell for Iranians, the Iranian administration's other *raison d'être* is to destroy Israel and the US. Therefore, as long as Iran exists, neither Israel nor the US — nor indeed the world — can be safe.

In a throwback to a colonial and racist era, Israel — being a white-presenting and west-facing country — is the only country in the Middle-East that is mature, trustworthy and responsible enough to have nuclear arms. Never mind that in the 1960s, US President John F. Kennedy was against Israel having nuclear weapons. Conveniently, he did not survive for long. Israel then stole both nuclear technology and uranium from the US to make its own nuclear weapons.

And like any good story, it is selective. Don't portray Israel as anything less than perfect. Don't mention that they invaded Palestine in the early 20th century, and later formally occupied the country. Don't mention that they displaced and have suppressed Palestinians for over 70 years. Don't mention that Israel has a history of inciting wars in the Middle East — beginning in 1956 when they preemptively attacked Egypt during the Suez Crisis and in 1967 when they proactively attacked Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Don't mention that Israel has killed over 70,000 people in Gaza since October 2023 and, despite a supposed current ceasefire, continues to do so in both Gaza and the West Bank.

Don't bring up former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's comment about Mossad agents walking together with the Iranian protesters this

January. Don't question if and how Israel may be involved in Jeffrey Epstein's network, nor why the US feels compelled to do Israel's bidding — even when it goes against American national interest. Do not state that Israel began this most recent war on Iran, and the US was forced to join in. Do not report that Israel continues to use the Gaza-honed tactic of “double-tapping” targets (including schools and hospitals) to maximize civilian casualties in Iran. Don't question possible Israeli attempts to expand the war with false-flag attacks in Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, Azerbaijan and Cyprus. And don't forget that Israel is God's “chosen nation”, the current US President is that same God's “chosen one”, and so neither is bound by any earthly rules of sovereignty or human rights.

Don't portray Iran as anything more than evil. Don't mention that Iran has a glorious past to rival that of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. Don't mention that Israel owes Iran billions of dollars (mostly for purchases of oil before 1979), which it has been ordered to pay but still has not done so. No need to mention that Iran has a moral backbone and has been continuously supporting Palestinians in their fight for freedom.

Remember that while Israel has an “administration” and “allies,” Iran only has a “regime” and “proxies.” Don't mention how Iran came in good faith to the negotiation table with the US several times in the past year, and each time, just when they were making progress, Israel bombed Iran. Don't mention that this time Iran had already agreed to all US demands before Israel attacked them. Don't humanize Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (despite his regime's obvious transgressions) by mentioning that he was also a religious leader revered by many, was a family man with a wife and six children, spoke several languages, loved poetry and lived a Spartan lifestyle. Don't mention that his death was mourned — not only in Iran, but in Pakistan, India, the UK and Australia.

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Say that Iran is bombing neighboring countries, but don't clarify that they're aiming specifically at American bases and assets in those countries. Don't mention that by allowing US bases and arms on their land and allowing US planes to use their airspace, those neighboring countries are aiding the US in its attack on Iran. And certainly don't ask why — contrary to the American administration's earlier confident predictions and now pleas — not all Iranians are dancing in the streets of Tehran deliriously happy that Israel and the US are bombing them and killing their leaders, nor are they demanding regime change; those expressions seem limited to the Iranian diaspora, mostly in the US.

### **All aboard**

The Western nations — both leaders and people — see the elephant and are impressed by its massive strength. In their awe, they unquestioningly swallow the narrative. But they don't always notice the mahout. Within hours of the US and Israel attacking Iran, regardless of their ongoing disagreements on trade and even severe concerns over the US threatening their sovereignty, the Western nations all fell in line behind the proposed narrative.

Australia's Anthony Albanese did not go so far as to openly support the attack on Iran, but painted Khamenei as a total bad guy and therefore an acceptable target for assassination and regime change. Canada's prime minister, Mark Carney, was more robust in his support, calling Iran "the principal source of instability and terror throughout the Middle East." Both men were reiterating long-established Israeli talking points. And stunningly, most European countries (such as Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden) actually condemned Iran for retaliating.

Israel has already been successful with its first target of regime change: the US. It has weaponized the US and is using it as a spearhead to attack Iran. But the rest of the West need not follow. The big question is not who will win this immediate physical war, but rather, who will win the narrative war. In the answer to that question lies our world's well-being.

As long as we swallow this Israeli narrative, conflict will continue. Israel does not seem satisfied with just Palestine or even destroying Iran. Its ambitions (and recently US ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee) speak of a "Greater Israel" spanning from the Nile in Egypt to the Euphrates in Syria and Iraq, as well as parts of Turkiye. Just last month, former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said, "Turkey is the new Iran". And with America's unconditional support, Israel has the muscle to fight for it. However, there's no need for the rest of the West — people and politicians — to help Israel fulfill this ambition. In fact, it would be dangerous, destructive and immoral to do so.

Fortunately, today, our sources of news and views are no longer limited to mainstream press and our leaders. We now have a range of independent media. One can easily turn to numerous online platforms and podcasts to get different perspectives from respected voices. As just a few of many examples, hear retired American Colonel Douglas Macgregor and Columbia University economics professor Jeffrey Sachs on political science professor Glenn Diesen's Greater Eurasia podcast, or foreign analyst Alexander Mercouris on The Duran podcast, or geopolitical theorist Jiang Xueqin on the Breaking Points podcast. We should listen and learn.

In fact, we've probably already learnt several significant things just in the last few days. We're being taken for a ride. The elephant is big and has the potential to do a lot of harm, but don't be

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overawed by it. However, notice the mahout; it's wise to know who he is and where he wants to take us. And most importantly, it's imperative to know when to get off.



After a first career in international health organizations and aid agencies, and a second career in academia in Europe and Asia, I.M.

Manava has retired to golf, grandchildren, gardening, guest lectures and a gorgeous armchair from which she muses on the perplexities of peoplekind. Educated at Erasmus University and Oxford University, she hopes to learn more along the road of life. She's currently writing a book on the vagaries of geopolitics, tentatively titled *It's Complicated*.

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## Madonna — Diva Provocatrix

Ellis Cashmore  
March 16, 2026

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**Madonna turned up at the Milan Fashion Week in February. As always, she created a stir, issuing a reminder that she remains fascinating, engaging and relevant, even in her sixties. For nearly a half-century, she has commanded the attention of the global media, often because of her habit of offending people, sometimes because of her singing and always because of her ability to adapt to changing environments — to endure.**

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“I think the most controversial thing I’ve ever done is to stick around. I have seen many stars appear and disappear, like shooting stars. But my light will never fade.”

So says Madonna, with a measure of defiance. She’s someone who understands that endurance, not provocation, is her greatest transgression. She is now 67: For more than four decades, she’s offended religious leaders, unsettled moral guardians and insulted polite society. Yet none of those affronts has proved as subversive as her refusal to exit quietly. In a culture organized around novelty and replacement, she’s managed to weaponize longevity.

Madonna’s career might be seen as a sequence of calculated shocks: The wedding dress writhing of “Like a Virgin,” the supposedly sacrilegious imagery of “Like a Prayer,” the BDSM themes of *Sex*. A notable biography of her is subtitled *A Rebel Life*. But her subversive moments, however incendiary at the time, were ephemeral. If anything, her most renegade accomplishments often went relatively unnoticed. Like earning \$50 million (£26.7 million), a record for a female singer in 2004. Or selling more than 400 million records, including albums, singles and digital. Grossing more than \$1.3 billion from her tours, another record. In 1992, she signed a then-unprecedented \$60 million deal with Time Warner.

But what really distinguishes Madonna is not the intensity of any single provocation or her prodigious earnings but the cumulative force of her continued presence. She’s outlived her critics, her imitators and many of her contemporaries. The real scandal is not what she did but that she survived so long.

Her endurance matters not simply because it is unusual but because it allowed her cultural experiment to take place. Over decades, Madonna tested the limits of exposure, turning private life

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into public performance until the distinction between the two appeared to dissolve. What started as provocation became a template for modern celebrity.

### **The zeitgeist**

In February, she sat in the front row at Dolce & Gabbana's Milan Fashion Week show, her arms wrapped around her knees, heavily tinted glasses shading eyes that have seen nearly every iteration of fame in the modern era. Leather gloves accessorized her black outfit, a theatrical flourish that harked back to her Erotica tour of 1992–93 (gloves, corsets and leather were part of the visual vocabulary she borrowed from fetish subcultures and, in that tour, repurposed for public consumption.) Across the mirrored runway, models twirled in lace and pinstripes, reflecting Madonna's many incarnations of the past.

To call Madonna a diva is almost tautological. She is the very definition of a temperamental, world-renowned singer, famed for her volatile temperament and for being notoriously difficult to please. Formidable, demanding, exacting, she's a force as likely to exhaust collaborators as she is to enchant audiences.

Her epigones and successors — Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Ariana Grande, included — entertain, enchant, influence and inspire, yet all seem anodyne next to Madonna. None has matched her performative ferocity, her willingness to court scandal and alchemize controversy into precious metal. Forty years in, Madonna remains unrepentant, uncontainable, unyielding, the center of attention. She may no longer shape the zeitgeist on her terms, but she remains part of it.

In the 1980s, the world was barely aware of cellphones, the internet was inconceivable and social media was something English novelist H.G. Wells might have dreamt up. Madonna arrived in

this landscape as a wannabe dancer who soon learned how to take the cultural pulse. She figured out that the press (as it then was) could either proclaim or annihilate her, that audiences rewarded artists who aroused as well as just entertained them, and who provided spectacle as well as song and dance. She decided to combine them all. In doing so, she did more than respond to a shifting world; she helped catalyze a further shift, scandalizing at every opportunity and dissolving the binary between private and public.

### **The experiment**

Madonna Louise Ciccone moved to New York in 1978, a 20-year-old with nothing but ambition and a few borrowed instruments. She danced, drummed and sang with local bands before releasing her debut single "Everybody" in 1982 and her first album, *Madonna*, in 1983. By 1984, her second album, *Like a Virgin*, produced by Nile Rodgers, cemented her international status. The video for the title track and her performance at the MTV Video Music Awards in a wedding dress simulating masturbation was a foretaste of what was to come.

In 1985, few could imagine a woman deliberately inducing scandal and usually achieving the results she desired. Madonna's real innovation lay in recognizing something earlier entertainers had missed: Scandal had changed its meaning. No longer necessarily career-ending — as it had been in the cases of Roscoe Arbuckle, Ingrid Bergman and Errol Flynn — controversy had become a resource. Madonna didn't provoke randomly; she choreographed provocation, each gesture and outfit a calculated engagement with public sensibilities. Audiences, she seemed to conclude, actually enjoyed being outraged: the surge of anger, shock and indignation was oddly satisfying. This may appear obvious today. In the 1980s, it was radically contrarian.

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Her 1989 album *Like a Prayer* marked what might have been a Eureka! moment. Madonna appeared to sense that audiences would demand ever more from stars. This was before MTV's *The Real World* launched in 1992, allowing viewers to eavesdrop by watching what became known as reality TV. Madonna seems to have arrived at a broadly similar conclusion: Audiences were turning into peeping Toms.

Her ambition was not to shock for its own sake, but to maintain attention by disclosing more and more of what once passed as a private life — and without inhibition. Madonna became, in essence, her own living experiment in making her personal life open to inspection. Before her, entertainers like Elizabeth Taylor had, in the 1960s, allowed private lives to seep into public view via a more cautious media, but this was rare or sensational and delivered to surprised audiences by the then-nascent paparazzi. Madonna made it a career strategy, presenting her personal self as indistinguishable from her stage persona and inviting audiences to witness. Not just witness: Audiences were encouraged to judge her; condemning Madonna was integral to her success.

### **Like Semtex**

The 1990s solidified Madonna's role as a cultural provocateur. The film *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991) documented her *Blond Ambition* tour with unprecedented candor, offering glimpses into backstage rivalries, rehearsals and intimate moments, all alongside the theatricality of her onstage performances. The film predated reality television by years, yet already anticipated its voracious appetite for the minutiae of celebrity.

Around the same period, her book *Sex and the City* and album *Erotica* pushed boundaries of sexual representation, blending performance, fetishism and artifice. She intentionally offended, proving unequivocally that scandal was like *Semtex*, a

powerful explosive, but very pliable so that, handled carefully, it can be turned into different shapes. In the years that followed, Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian corroborated this when they appeared on sex tapes that would have ruined show business careers in earlier times.

Yet Madonna's influence went beyond shock and outrage. Critics like Camille Paglia recognized her as a harbinger of postfeminist performance: She demonstrated how a woman could be sensual, assertive, ambitious and aggressive while curating her image in a way that conferred power. From this perspective, being sexy was a form of empowerment. Madonna's conquests were both commercial and symbolic, reframing what it meant to be a female entertainer in a male-dominated industry. Her affectations, from the pink cone bra to platinum blonde hair, were signifiers of her autonomy.

By the mid-1990s, Madonna was both a diva in the operatic sense and a pioneer in media literacy. Her aforementioned 1992 renegotiation with Time Warner secured her own record label. She remained a polarizing figure: The world alternately praised and disparaged her, keeping her relevant. She had transformed scandal into art and fame into an instrument of social influence. The celebrity landscape she helped sculpt is what we see all around us today.

Even into the 2000s and 2010s, Madonna's career reflected a Darwinian adaptability to changing environments. The 2003 MTV Video Music Awards kiss with Britney Spears sparked a viral debate, raising questions about bisexuality. Tours such as *Sticky & Sweet* and albums like *Hard Candy* demonstrated a willingness to collaborate with younger artists while retaining her signature sound. Her postfeminist sensibilities, rooted in self-expression and independence, carried through to her later albums and public

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appearances. At the 2023 Grammys, she reacted to critics, accusing them of “ageism and misogyny.”

### **Diva provocatrix**

Today, Madonna’s presence at Milan Fashion Week is emblematic of both her longevity and her continued authorship of the fame narrative. She’s still a model for what it means to inhabit the public sphere on one’s own terms. Unlike many successors, she hasn’t become her own tribute act. She’s refused to trade on nostalgia and strives to remain relevant. A figure whose demands, exacting nature and unyielding vision have shaped not only the entertainment industry but the very ways in which audiences understand and appreciate spectacle, Madonna evokes a reminder about the way we live — vicariously, voyeuristically, derivatively and by proxy.

Her legacy is inseparable from the media she mastered and, to be fair, was mastered by. Madonna didn’t merely reflect social and technological changes — she anticipated them, attempted to manipulate them and tried to force the world to respond. It did: From MTV to social media, from the controversy of Like a Prayer to the candor of Truth or Dare, she engineered a dialogue with audiences that has altered our relationship to celebrities. Many will not think this is such a good thing.

Madonna belongs in the same pantheon as Maria Callas (1923–77), Judy Garland (1922–69) and Barbra Streisand (b. 1942), all imperious figures feared as much as revered for their exacting standards and refusal to accept reality when it failed to conform to their visions. Like them, Madonna has attracted detractors as well as worshippers, her difficulty inseparable from her distinction. Yet she added something new to the tradition: Madonna was not simply a diva but a diva provocatrix, a performer who treated outrage as an artistic medium. While there are many

contemporary stars of immense wealth and visibility, none appears willing — or permitted — to embody the risk, volatility and sheer force that once defined the type. Perhaps Madonna truly is the last of them.

[Ellis Cashmore is the author of *The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson*]

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



**Ellis Cashmore** is the author of *The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, Celebrity Culture* and other books. He is a professor of sociology who has held

academic positions at the University of Hong Kong, the University of Tampa and Aston University. His first article for *Fair Observer* was an obituary for Muhammad Ali in 2016. Since then, Ellis has been a regular contributor on sports, entertainment, celebrity culture and cultural diversity. Most recently, timelines have caught his fancy and he has created many for *Fair Observer*.

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## **FO Live: Iran War Analysis — Will the Trump Administration Put Boots on the Ground?**

Gary Grappo, Glenn Carle, Atul Singh  
March 18, 2026

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**In this episode of FO Live, Atul Singh, Gary Grappo and Glenn Carle examine the escalating US–Israel–Iran war and argue it’s unlikely to end quickly. They highlight the limits of military power, the resilience of Iran’s**

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**regime and the low probability of meaningful change. They also underscore major economic risks, from disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz to global inflation.**

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**E**ditor-in-Chief Atul Singh speaks with former US Ambassador Gary Grappo, who served as Envoy and Head of Mission of the Office of the Quartet Representative Tony Blair in Jerusalem; and FOI Senior Partner Glenn Carle, a retired CIA officer who now advises companies, governments and organizations on geopolitical risk. They discuss the expanding war between the United States, Israel and Iran. They analyze a simple but urgent question: Can Washington or Jerusalem shape the conflict on their own terms, or has the region already entered a more dangerous and open-ended phase? As the three discuss military limits, Iranian regime dynamics and global economic exposure, they suggest that the war is unlikely to end neatly and may instead deepen many of the structural problems it is supposed to solve.

### **War without a clear end**

Atul begins by pressing Gary and Glenn on the most immediate issue: how long the conflict might last. Gary rejects the idea that US President Donald Trump can simply decide when the war ends. Iran retains agency and can continue the confrontation even after Washington declares success. Tehran has multiple ways to keep pressure on the US, Israel and the Gulf states, so the conflict could stretch on for weeks or even months.

Glenn agrees and places the problem in a broader American mindset. He argues that US leaders too often imagine war as if it were governed by the logic of sports, with fixed rules, a final whistle and an obvious winner. That illusion is especially dangerous in this case. “There is

always a tomorrow and today is never decisive,” he says, warning that military campaigns rarely produce clean political endings.

Even so, Glenn notes that the war does have material limits. However powerful the US may be, it cannot sustain high-intensity operations indefinitely because munitions are being consumed faster than they can be replaced. That creates a likely window of several weeks, after which political patience in Washington may begin to erode.

### **Iran’s regime is wounded, not transformed**

The discussion then turns to Iran’s internal structure after the death of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the rise of his son, Mojtaba. Atul describes the succession as a hardening rather than a break, arguing that the new order combines personal vengeance with institutional continuity. Gary agrees that the regime sees the war as existential, but he stresses that the decisive force is not the supreme leader alone. In his account, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps remains the true center of power, shaping strategy, controlling major parts of the economy and exercising influence across intelligence, security and the judiciary.

Although many Iranians may despise the system they live under, both Gary and Glenn are skeptical that popular anger can easily become organized political transformation. Glenn argues that autocratic systems are highly effective at eliminating credible challengers before they can emerge. Gary adds that in wartime, ordinary people worry first about survival: food, water, work and family security, not abstract democratic transition.

Military pressure may weaken Iran, destroy infrastructure and deepen public misery without producing a viable alternative political order. It

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seems hopes for a sudden uprising or a unifying opposition figure remain improbable.

### **Global economic shock**

Atul next broadens the frame from strategy to economics. He points to soaring insurance costs, stalled shipping and the vulnerability of the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly a fifth of global gas and oil passes, along with a significant share (a third) of the global fertilizer trade. Even before any total closure, fear alone is enough to disrupt commerce. Shipowners hesitate, insurers raise premiums and energy markets become unstable.

Glenn argues that these effects will not collapse the world economy outright, but instead generate inflationary and recessionary pressures that reach nearly every country. Gary further emphasizes how deeply interdependent the global economy remains. Gulf monarchies rely on hydrocarbon revenues, imported food and fragile social bargains. South Asia and Africa are particularly exposed to spikes in oil, gas and fertilizer prices. Iran, already under strain, is even more vulnerable.

Atul also raises a larger possibility: that prolonged disruption could force states to accelerate their transition away from Middle Eastern hydrocarbons. Gary agrees, suggesting that the war may strengthen long-term investment in electric vehicles, solar energy and other alternatives. In that sense, a conflict centered on oil could also hasten the search for a post-oil future.

### **Grand strategy or chaos**

Atul asks whether the Trump administration is pursuing a wider geopolitical strategy aimed at controlling oil chokepoints, weakening Iran and squeezing China. Glenn dismisses this idea outright. “That is crazy talk,” he says. He argues that foreign policy is usually far less coherent than outside observers imagine. Statesmen are rarely

master strategists calmly moving pieces across a global chessboard. They are more often overwhelmed officials responding to crises as they arise.

Gary broadly agrees. Long-range planning exists in theory, he says, but war reduces governments to reacting under pressure. He doubts that any such strategy would work anyway, especially because Russia would almost certainly continue supplying China if Beijing faced an energy shock. Both Gary and Glenn therefore see less evidence of a grand design than of improvisation, contradiction and strategic drift.

That diagnosis leads to a deeper criticism of US power. Glenn argues that American conservatives have repeatedly assumed military force can reshape political and cultural realities abroad, despite decades of evidence to the contrary. Iraq remains the obvious warning. In Iran, as in earlier wars, destruction may be achievable, but durable political transformation will not be.

### **A long conflict with no satisfying outcome**

Atul, Gary and Glenn converge on the view that Iran may emerge weaker and less able to project power beyond its borders, but the underlying political structure may survive. Israel and the US may win battles in the air while failing to produce a stable regional order. The global economy may absorb the shock, but only by spreading pain far beyond the battlefield.

Gary and Glenn also dismiss fears of an imminent Israeli nuclear strike on Iran, arguing that such an action serves no meaningful military purpose under present conditions. That restraint matters, but it does not change the larger picture. This war is less a controlled campaign than a dangerous process whose consequences will be felt in the capitals of Tehran, Tel Aviv, Washington and far beyond.

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[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

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**Gary Grappo** is a former US ambassador and a distinguished fellow at the Center for Middle East Studies at the Korbel School for International Studies, University of Denver. He possesses nearly 40 years of diplomatic and public policy experience in a variety of public, private and nonprofit endeavors. As a career member of the Senior Foreign Service of the US Department of State, he served as Envoy and Head of Mission of the Office of the Quartet Representative, the Honorable Mr. Tony Blair, in Jerusalem. Grappo held a number of senior positions in the State Department, including Minister Counselor for Political Affairs at the US Embassy in Baghdad, US Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman, and Charge d’Affaires and Deputy Chief of Mission of the US Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. From 2011–13, he was President and CEO of The Keystone Center. He currently serves as CEO of Equilibrium International Consulting, providing analysis and policy guidance on foreign affairs to businesses, institutions and the media. Grappo is the former chairman of the Board of Directors at *Fair Observer*.

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**Glenn Carle** is a noted author, an avid reader and a retired CIA officer with rich experience. As Deputy National Intelligence Officer, Glenn led the 17 agencies of the intelligence community in preparing the US government's most senior assessments of transnational threats to the nation for the president, members of cabinet and the

nation's most senior military leaders. During his career, he was detailed to the Executive Office of the President, and has extensive negotiating and policy experience. Glenn also led sensitive programs in the Directorate of Operations at the Central Intelligence Agency in four continents. He did a BA in Government at Harvard, an MA in European Studies and International Economics at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and further masters study in International Relations at the Institut d'Etudes politiques de Paris. Glenn was an intercollegiate ice hockey player and was elected to his hometown’s athletic hall of fame.

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**Atul Singh** is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of *Fair Observer*. He has taught political economy at the University of California, Berkeley and been a visiting professor of humanities and social sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. Atul studied philosophy, politics and economics at the University of Oxford on the Radhakrishnan Scholarship and did an MBA with a triple major in finance, strategy and entrepreneurship at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He worked as a corporate lawyer in London and served as an officer in India’s volatile border areas where he had a few near-death experiences. Atul has also been a poet, playwright, sportsman, mountaineer and a founder of many organizations. His knowledge is eclectic, and his friends often joke that it comes in handy when access to Google is limited.

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# Andaman Sea “Ghost” Fleet: The Invisible Oil Fueling Myanmar’s Genocide

Tommaso Franco  
March 20, 2026

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**In the Andaman Sea, the Rohingya exodus and the “Shadow Fleet” converge in a “Ghost Protocol”. By deactivating AIS transponders, traffickers hide both humanitarian atrocities and the ship-to-ship (STS) transfers of sanctioned jet fuel powering the Burmese junta’s airstrikes. This deliberate invisibility transforms international waters into a lawless corridor where digital silence facilitates both maritime death and military terror.**

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**T**here is a stretch of water between Myanmar, Bangladesh and Thailand where the Rohingya humanitarian crisis and the interests of Iran’s “Shadow Fleet” converge. The Andaman Sea is no longer just a migratory route; it has evolved into a lethal criminal ecosystem. Here, invisibility is a deliberate strategy used to move both human lives and sanctioned fuel, ensuring supplies for the Burmese military junta’s fighter jets. In this maritime no-man’s-land, a brutal, vicious cycle unfolds: The freedom of movement enjoyed by these “ghost ships” translates into terror from the skies for those left behind in the hinterland.

## **The Rohingya: an endless exodus**

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority from Myanmar’s Rakhine State, were stripped of citizenship and rights by a 1982 law. Victims of what the UN described in 2017 as a “textbook

example of ethnic cleansing,” over 740,000 people fled to Bangladesh. Today, approximately one million of them live in the Cox’s Bazar district, home to Kutupalong, the world’s largest refugee camp. The 2021 military coup shattered any hope of repatriation, fueling a desperate, multi-stage journey toward Southeast Asia.

This hell begins in Teknaf, on the coast of Bangladesh. There, refugees brave the deadly currents of the Naf River on small, overcrowded boats that frequently capsize. Those who survive fall into the hands of traffickers, who manage clandestine departures toward the Andaman Sea from hidden mangrove inlets, packing hundreds of people onto fishing vessels to evade the Coast Guard.

## **Welcome aboard the “ghost” ships**

Once at sea, the operational phase known as the “Ghost Protocol” begins. This involves deactivating the Automatic Identification System (AIS) — a tactic technically referred to as “going dark.” By switching off these electronic transponders, traffickers eliminate all traceability of the vessel’s route and position. By becoming invisible to radar, the vessels transform into floating prisons. Deprived of Wi-Fi, traceability and legal protection, refugees are amassed in fish holds. This lack of connectivity is not a technical limitation, but a deliberate strategy by smugglers to prevent the reporting of abuse and torture used to extort money from families.

In this technological limbo, the crews themselves become invisible slaves, recruited through deception and forced into months of sailing without pay. The practice of going dark eliminates any chance of assistance: In the event of a breakdown, no signal exists to guide rescuers. Data from 2025–2026 confirms the lethality of the Andaman Sea route: One in five people is reported missing or dead. With over 600 confirmed victims

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in the past year, the true toll remains tragically uncalculable.

### **The Junta link: the ship-to-ship operations fueling the airstrikes**

Myanmar's instability has transformed the Andaman Sea into a military corridor disguised as a migration route. The networks transporting Rohingya south toward Malaysia and Indonesia are often the same ones that, through ship-to-ship (STS) operations in international waters, supply the military junta with sanctioned fuel (Jet A-1). Without these maneuvers, the regime would be unable to power the Chinese-made jets and drones responsible for bombing civilians. Precisely because it is prohibited, the junta must rely on STS operations to bring fuel into the country while concealing its origin.

Large “mother ships” loaded with crude oil from the Russian Federation or Iran — countries officially under international sanctions — transfer their cargo on the high seas to the Burmese shadow fleet, which operates on behalf of the junta. Once there, the fuel is “laundered” by falsifying documents to make it appear to have originated from legitimate Southeast Asian ports: a proven mechanism that finances authoritarian regimes through these invisible fleets.

### **Justice at sea: the cynical game of bouncing and reflagging**

The tragedy is amplified by “informal pushbacks.” In the absence of a coordinated Search and Rescue (SAR) system, such as the one in the Mediterranean, boats are bounced between the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Extreme abuses have been documented, including refugees forced to jump into the open sea and swim for miles back toward Myanmar under armed threat. Despite the High Seas Treaty (BBNJ) entering into force in

January 2026 — adopted by the UN — the protection of human life in Southeast Asia remains a mirage.

While the treaty aims for transparency, Myanmar's instability and the region's fragmented sovereignty allow shipowners to bypass all oversight. By changing flags (reflagging) with staggering speed, vessels mask their maritime criminal records. By exploiting “shadow states” like the Comoros, Panama or the Cook Islands, they operate within a bureaucratic gray zone. Small island nations become involuntary accomplices in a system that guarantees impunity. International authorities find themselves chasing not physical ships, but “ghosts” that switch identities every time they approach a new port or a refueling operation, making their capture nearly impossible.

While the International Court of Justice in the Hague proceeds with the genocide case against Myanmar, the Rohingya tragedy in the Andaman Sea remains the result of a criminal architecture that exploits the physical and digital geography of Southeast Asia. As long as the world permits the existence of a ghost fleet beyond any rules, the sea will continue to be a place of silent violations. To save lives, we must first turn on the radars, enforce on-board connectivity and recognize that every deactivated AIS signal is a potential crime against humanity. Breaking the cynicism of the “bouncing game” is the only way to restore dignity to these people that the world has left invisible for too long.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



**Tommaso Franco** is an emerging Rome-born geopolitical analyst and member of the *IISS* and *Chatham House*. He cut his teeth at *Limes*, Italy's premier geopolitical review, where he

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mastered the art of power before it hit the headlines. An active contributor to *The Australian Institute of International Affairs*, *Limes*, *The European Sting* and *Notiziegeopolitiche.net*, Tommaso holds a Master's in International Relations (MA in European Studies) from Luiss University, Rome, where he refined his ability to transform complex data into strategic on-the-ground intelligence. Specializing in Asian friction points and human rights, he transforms cold data into scorched-earth truths. His analytical rigor, complemented by deep social commitment and extensive volunteer work in challenging urban realities like Scampia, Naples, is redefining how we see the world's most invisible conflicts.

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## **Bad Bunny's Record-Breaking Popularity Proves That Latinos are Paving the Way in the Americas**

Laura Pavon  
March 21, 2026

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**Puerto Rican performer Bad Bunny's 2026 Super Bowl Halftime Show marked a historic moment as the first to be performed entirely in Spanish, celebrating Latinx culture and Puerto Rican identity. The performance highlighted themes of colonial history, sovereignty and diaspora resilience while challenging dominant narratives in the US. Featuring collaborations with singers Ricky Martin and Lady Gaga, it was a powerful statement of unity and resistance.**

**B**ad Bunny, a Puerto Rican icon born Benito Martínez Ocasio in Bayamón in 1994, made history at the 2026 Super Bowl Halftime Show. His performance is historic for many reasons. One of the most significant reasons is that it is the first halftime show since Super Bowl I in 1967 to be performed entirely in Spanish. It occurred during the same week that Bad Bunny won the Grammy for Best Album for *Debí Tirar Más Fotos (DTmF)*, or "I Should Have Taken More Photos" — the first Spanish-language album to win such an award.

These achievements are politically relevant because they concern not only Spanish as a language, but also what the language, music and the artist himself represent. In light of the recent surge of violent racism and civil rights violations against Hispanic, Latinx, Latin American and immigrant individuals in the US, both in discourse and in action, recognizing and representing these groups is of the utmost importance.

### **A cultural moment that challenged national narratives**

Bad Bunny's popularity speaks to the resilience of the Latinx diaspora and the undeniable truth of a multilingual, multicultural and multiracial America. It's safe to assume that almost every person of Caribbean, Latinx or Latin American descent who watched the halftime show felt emotional and experienced a much-needed sense of pride.

However, US President Donald Trump described it as a "slap in the face to our country" on his social media account. Based on this characterization of the show, I infer that the president recognizes the halftime show as a challenge to his idea of the nation.

Indeed, it was a slap in the face when considering what Bad Bunny's masterful

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performance challenged. The reason for the slap is not because it was “terrible” nor because “nobody understands this guy,” as Trump alleged. No, the performance was a slap in the face because it challenged the long-held beliefs of those who support colonialism and white supremacy.

For a country whose greatness is tied to the dispossession of indigenous populations and immigration, it served as a reality check and a historical reminder. Negating the significance of the performance shows an inability to recognize the large Spanish-speaking population in the US and a lack of insight into the shared history of the Americas.

This collective history includes the fact that indigenous populations in the Americas, including parts of the US, were colonized by Spain before the US existed. Spanish was once a colonial language, but today, it is also a symbol of cultural rebellion against Anglo-imperialist ideals of homogeneity, especially given the racialization and criminalization of Spanish speakers.

In the same social media post mentioned earlier, Trump added that the performance “made no sense.” However, the performance struck a chord precisely because it resonated with a large global audience and was deeply relevant to history.

### **From viral artist to symbol of the Americas**

Through this spectacular production, Bad Bunny showed the world that America has multiple meanings and identities — and that more than one person can define them. Since he first went viral in 2016 with his SoundCloud hit “Diles”, and going from working in a supermarket in San Juan to the multimillionaire he is today, Bad Bunny’s artistic persona reflects the multifaceted, complex and intersectional character of the Americas.

In one of the songs from his 2023 album *Nadie Sabe Lo Que Va A Pasar Mañana* (No One Knows What Tomorrow Will Bring), called “Monaco,” Bad Bunny tells the story of how he went from humble beginnings to attending the famous Monaco Formula 1 Grand Prix. As he says in the lyrics, he is hanging out with actors like Leonardo DiCaprio and Brad Pitt, discussing topics that only billionaires can understand. During the performance hosted by the NFL, when “Monaco” was playing, he delivered a message in Spanish directly to the camera that said, “I never stopped believing in myself. You should also believe in yourself. You’re worth more than you think. Believe me.” Minutes later, he took a moment to whisper, “Puerto Rico, never stop believing in yourself.”

The above parallel between his own journey and that of Puerto Rico is just one example of the many tributes he has paid to his homeland since he began making albums. Bad Bunny’s massive representation has always occurred alongside his public denunciation of Puerto Rico’s involuntary dependency on the US.

For example, “Estamos bien,” a 2018 hit, was the first of many protest songs and Puerto Rican anthems written by Bad Bunny. The song alludes to the messages that Puerto Ricans sent to their loved ones in the diaspora after the days-long blackout caused by Hurricane Maria, which exposed the island’s structural neglect. These anthems, along with some of his public statements and appearances at protests, are a lesser-known aspect of his fame. His unique, melodic, gravelly voice and his ability to blend depth and emptiness in his lyrics with Afro-Caribbean rhythms sometimes overshadow his activism. However, his cultural relevance has caught the attention of academics. Numerous panels, academic articles and classes have been developed around him.

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In addition to taking a political stance on Puerto Rico, many of his greatest hits, such as “Yo Perreo Sola” and “Titi Me Preguntó,” focus on the freedom to express gender and sexuality, central themes to his popularity. All of these songs were featured in the halftime show. However, his latest album, *Debí Tirar Más Fotos*, was the key focus in the show’s production. This is noteworthy because the album focuses on the disputed history of Puerto Rican sovereignty. Given the resurgence of imperialism under the Trump administration, the fate of Puerto Rico becomes particularly relevant. This resurgence is evident in Trump’s renewed territorial expansionist efforts, such as his interest in Greenland and his interventionism abroad, as seen in Venezuela.

Puerto Rico has remained the last occupied Spanish-speaking territory since Italian explorer Christopher Columbus set foot on the island in 1492, and the US took over the island from Spain in 1898. After invading the island, the US made Puerto Rico a free-associated state, granting some rights but taking many others away. These include the right to vote in US elections and, most importantly, the right to national sovereignty. In this regard, the song “Lo que le pasó a Hawái” or “What Happened to Hawaii” is one of the most powerful in *Debí Tirar Más Fotos*, as it conveys the hope that Puerto Rico won’t suffer the same fate as Hawaii and be forced into US statehood.

The nation’s legal ambiguity is a contested subject in Puerto Rico and the US Congress. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, for instance, has been one of the most vocal advocates of the Self-Determination Bill, and Puerto Ricans have held several referendums displaying the complexities and divisiveness of existing in the ambiguity between statehood and self-determination. As I mentioned earlier, Bad Bunny has long advocated for Puerto Rican independence. For example, he has publicly stated that he “would never want to see Puerto Rico become a state.”

## **Cultural pride and memory on the halftime stage**

Another major theme of Bad Bunny’s Super Bowl performance was his tribute to and recognition of the Puerto Rican, Latinx and Caribbean communities in the US. Through props and imagery, the production not only denounced a long history of resistance to cultural homogenization and erasure but also honored the profound influence of the diaspora on the US’s cultural heritage and social fabric.

For example, Bad Bunny brought the iconic Highland Park Mexican taqueria in Los Angeles to the stage, while also paying homage to the importance of the Caribbean in New York City and to the development of Latinx music genres based there, such as salsa. During his halftime performance of “Nuevayol,” the stage was designed to resemble a classic New York street, featuring a bodega next to a Dominican barbershop. The song opens with a remix of “Si te quieres divertir, solo tienes que vivir un verano en Nueva York” by the salsa orchestra El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico, which translates to “If you want to have fun, you only have to spend one summer in New York.”

With all eyes on him during the performance of “Nuevayol,” Bad Bunny sang about one of the city’s attractions, “Un shot de cañita en casa de Toñita,” as Toñita, the octogenarian heart and soul of the last Caribbean social club in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, handed him a drink. As he gradually became the global phenomenon he is today, Bad Bunny made rare appearances at this small social club, located in a Nuyorican neighborhood on the verge of disappearance, in the heart of trendy, homogenized Williamsburg.

Bringing Toñita to center stage at the halftime show in San Francisco embodies the struggle of Latinx and Caribbean diaspora communities

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against gentrification, developers, and other forms of attempts at erasure. Just as the Caribbean Social Club provides a physical and symbolic space for the hispanophone immigrant community, the opening scene of the original “Nuevayol” music video features the Puerto Rican flag flying atop the Statue of Liberty — a well-known entry point for immigrants. In line with the overall sentiment of the song, this tribute to the 1977 Puerto Rican Nationalist takeover of the statue also signals the legitimacy of the immigrant presence in the US.

Bad Bunny’s portrayal of the Nuyorican experience is part of the broader history of the Puerto Rican diaspora’s grassroots activism and art. The first large wave of Puerto Rican immigration to New York occurred in the 1950s. This set the stage for a vibrant second generation of Nuyorican artists and activists who flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, the Nuyorican Poets Café established a groundbreaking hub for slam poetry in the Lower East Side, and the Young Lords Organization was a pivotal civil rights group. One of the Young Lords’ most notable protests against the lack of public services in their neighborhoods occurred in 1968 when they took over a Methodist church in Harlem and converted it into a daycare center. Given this history, Bad Bunny’s proud representation of Boricuas in the US cements his position within the long tradition of Latinx artists and activists who have fought against the neglect and displacement of their communities while raising awareness through protest art.

Similarly to how Bad Bunny made his way into the most popular American sporting event despite the longstanding institutional exclusion of those he represents, Nuyorican and Latinx communities have historically forged numerous artistic and cultural paths. As previously mentioned, the confluence of rhythms and ethnicities in New York City’s cultural landscape laid the groundwork for the creation of salsa, the most globally influential

Latinx genre to date. Although salsa rhythms originated in Cuba and Puerto Rico, the genre did not become established until the founding of the Brooklyn-based Fania Records, which made 1960’s New York central to its formation.

In Bad Bunny’s *Debí Tirar Más Fotos*, salsa takes center stage as he blends orchestral salsa with Puerto Rican bomba and plena, as well as his upscale reggaeton and dembow production styles. Of all the songs on the album, “Baile Inolvidable,” meaning “unforgettable dance,” stands out because it reinterprets and reestablishes the genre. During the halftime show, “Baile Inolvidable” followed Lady Gaga’s performance of a salsa-inspired version of her hit “Die with a Smile.” Bad Bunny danced to “Baile Inolvidable” with Lady Gaga, symbolizing a sense of binational and bilingual unity through rhythm and dance. In several early interviews, before achieving (and maybe even surpassing) Gaga’s global fame, Bad Bunny named Lady Gaga as his biggest idol. Their Super Bowl collaboration sends a message of unity and serves as a testament to Bad Bunny’s success story.

### **A moment of justice: Ricky Martin and the politics of language**

His second guest was his fellow Puerto Rican, Ricky Martin. Martin is an iconic Latino artist from a previous generation who sang “La Copa de la Vida” at the 1999 Super Bowl. The National Football League made him translate the song to “The Cup of Life.” Because Ricky Martin wasn’t allowed to sing in Spanish in the ‘90s, his a cappella performance of “Lo que le pasó a Hawaii” during Bad Bunny’s halftime show has been called an “act of justice.” This moment of vindication alone conveys the symbolic intensity of the entire show.

Right before Ricky Martin’s emotional performance, we saw Bad Bunny give his Grammy

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to a young child and whisper, “Puerto Rico, cree siempre en ti.” The camera stayed on the child for a moment, allowing us time to reflect. Some speculated that the boy represented either Bad Bunny’s past self or Puerto Rico. Others speculated that he was Liam Conejo Ramos, the five-year-old boy who was infamously detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and later released. Although the child was an actor, the speculation sheds light on what was on people’s minds as they watched the performance.

Shortly after the shot of the child holding the Grammy Award, Martin’s voice is heard singing the chilling words: “Quieren quitarme el río y también la playa, quieren el barrio mío y que abuelita se vaya. No sueltes la bandera,” which translates to “They want to take my river and my beaches. They want my neighborhood and my grandma to leave. Don’t let go of the flag.” Soon after, Bad Bunny is seen holding a large Puerto Rican flag in the middle of a sugarcane field. The flag is light blue instead of the official darker shade. Incidentally, this flag was banned from 1948 to 1957 due to laws intended to suppress Puerto Rican nationalism. This moment of him in the field holding the unofficial flag resonates, as stated, with his long-term making of protest anthems.

One such protest anthem is the hit “El Apagón” (or “The Blackout”), in which a female voice states the same sentiment as in “Lo que le pasó a Hawaii” with the words “No me quiero ir de aquí, que se vayan ellos,” or “I don’t want to leave, let them be the ones to go.” Furthermore, the official video of the song features a short documentary on the human impacts that foreign interests have had on the island.

The song “El Apagón” also has its own epic moment in the Super Bowl. As dancers dressed as sugarcane workers climb electric posts, Bad Bunny sings, “Everyone wants to be Latino, but they lack

flavor, energy and reggaetón.” The 2022 version of the song is a testimony to the long-lasting aftermath of Hurricane María in 2017 and the insufficient US aid that left the island without electricity for days. “El Apagón” immediately became an anthem and a form of historical memory for the island’s neglect.

In addition to exposing the unequal and racialized distribution of public aid, the song unveils a centuries-long, systemic colonial worldview. Both “Lo que le pasó a Hawaii” and “El Apagón” epitomize what groundbreaking Black feminist scholar Bell Hooks termed “imperialist nostalgia” in her 1992 book *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*. This concept describes the paradox by which imperialism destroys and enslaves conquered territories while simultaneously idolizing and mystifying them as paradises to be exploited and visited, or as fashionable aesthetics to be imitated. Thus, the idea that “everyone wants to be Latino” carries significant implications.

### **“Seguimos Aquí”: identity, sovereignty and the power of presence**

Toward the end of the halftime show, a group of flag-holders takes the stage and surrounds the casita, a signature prop from his latest world tour. From the overhead camera view, we see all the flags being raised. First is the US flag, followed by the Puerto Rican flag and then the flags of all the other nations in the Americas. Throughout the show, we have seen flags emerge as a recurring theme in the symbols employed to vindicate national identity and self-determination. After focusing on the flags, the camera moves to Benito, who is grabbing a football.

Holding the football, he begins, “God bless America.” Then he continues, “Be it Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and so on.” Bad Bunny made a point of

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acknowledging all the countries in the Americas. He did so with a traveling shot, walking toward the viewer while continuing to carry the football and looking into the camera the entire time. In the still photo of the larger composition, the flags surround him in the background. Further back, a neon sign reads, “The only thing more powerful than hate is love.” These are the same words he delivered when he received the 2026 Best Album Grammy, directly addressing ICE’s actions toward immigrants and protesters. In addition to what the larger frame shows, listing all the nations asserts their identities and their right to be recognized as sovereign entities with horizontal relationships with one another.

Though not at the top, the US was included on the list of countries stretching from south to north, appearing just before Canada. After finishing the list, he held up the football he had been holding and displayed a message written on it. He then read the message aloud: “Seguimos aquí,” which means “We are still here.” By making a touchdown gesture with the ball, a symbol of victory, Bad Bunny physically expressed the same message written in “Seguimos aquí,” which encapsulates the unwavering presence of Latinx communities in the face of ongoing supremacist, colonial and imperialist endeavors.

The triumphant touchdown momentarily resolved the debate over whether the halftime show was an affront or a source of pride. For at least one cinematic moment, Benito and those he represents claimed victory. “Seguimos aquí” is written in the present tense, expressing the idea of always having been there and a sense of continuity. The controversy surrounding the halftime show ultimately serves as a reminder of historical power struggles over narratives, such as those concerning the use of Spanish and the right to occupy spaces of representation. Despite the government and armed forces’ attempts to undermine indigenous sovereignty and

fundamental civil rights, Bad Bunny’s halftime performance shone as a much-needed moment of beauty and vindication.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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## **Hormuz Constrains the US Administration, but Won’t Save the Regime**

Gary Grappo  
March 26, 2026

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**The closure of the Strait of Hormuz and subsequent rise in oil prices have hamstrung the US and Israeli war effort in Iran, which heretofore has progressed militarily spectacularly well. Some discrete diplomacy with America’s NATO and Gulf allies could potentially mitigate the Hormuz affair. Nevertheless, the closure is a ploy by a regime desperately hanging onto power as its instruments of power are systematically undermined and destroyed.**

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**H**aving pummeled Iran with devastating effect for nearly four weeks, the administration of US President Donald Trump finds itself in a tight spot over the Strait of Hormuz. The Iranian government, despite its navy and air force having been nearly entirely destroyed by American and Israeli forces, has effectively closed the critical shipping channel by threatening ship traffic with missile and drone attacks. Ship owners and insurance companies have halted their services into and out of the Persian Gulf.

Such a closure should have been anticipated by US planners and administration officials well before launching the first wave of attacks on February 28. The security of the Persian Gulf and safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz have been a fundamental principle of US policy in the Middle East since at least the administration of Jimmy Carter in 1979.

But the administration either did not heed or discounted warnings from those who would have known. Trump's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dan Caine, specifically advised Trump that a closure attempt was a real possibility. The president erroneously reasoned that once the Americans and Israelis took out the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, the Iranians would capitulate. As the administration has come to realize, this was a major failure in judgment.

For decades, Iran has threatened to close the Strait if attacked. During the so-called Tanker War phase of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Iranians tried to close the Strait but ultimately failed. Additional attempts and/or threats were made in 2011–12 and 2018–19. During the June 2025 Israel-Iran War, the Iranian parliament voted to close the Strait, but Tehran eventually backed off. Professional American diplomats, intelligence officers and military planners of the State and Defense (now War) Departments and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) would most certainly

have known this and communicated the information up the chain.

The US administration and its Israeli allies now face a conundrum. Even if Trump decides to declare victory and end the US attacks, Iran appears determined to maintain closure of the Strait until certain commitments are made, including a pledge not to renew attacks in the future, closure of US bases in the Middle East and payment of war reparations. There is zero chance of the US or Israel accepting such terms, and even if accepted, they would be meaningless. Tehran is certainly aware of that but seeks to save face and use such commitments as “proof of victory” to their public in a war in which they've suffered devastating and humiliating losses.

### **An avoidable problem but still hope**

Trump appealed to NATO allies to commit vessels to secure safe passage in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Unsurprisingly, NATO countries with the means to do so rejected the request. Having been left out of the planning for the attacks, NATO members were understandably reluctant to commit their forces to an operation to secure the Gulf and Strait without prior planning for such an undertaking.

A more farsighted US administration would have reached out to NATO members well before the attack launch to propose that they support freedom of navigation operations in the area in the event the Iranians attempted closure. That would have allowed for planning and mobilization in advance. It is also the way NATO has operated throughout most of its nearly 77-year history.

Of course, it has not helped that, dating back to his first administration (2017–2021), Trump and others in his administration have used nearly every opportunity to insult, denigrate, disparage, demean and humiliate NATO members and the NATO

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organization. His contempt for America's most important and oldest alliance is hardly a secret. It is also a stain on America's image as a reliable global superpower.

There may still be hope yet for persuading some NATO allies to lend support. After all, Europe needs the Strait to be open to normal tanker and shipping traffic at least as much as the US does, and probably more. Moreover, the Gulf Arab countries also do. The administration should consider ending its rhetoric and discreetly consult NATO and Gulf countries about securely opening the Gulf and Strait. Others with similar interests, in Asia, for example, might also be persuaded. But it will require respectful, urgent and serious diplomacy.

Such help would be most welcome as the war taxes the US military and its diminishing stocks of munitions and other critical supplies. The president has ordered US ground forces to the region, including US Marines, and may be considering adding the elements of the US Army's 82nd Airborne Division. While the exact purpose isn't known, speculation suggests the US may be planning to seize Iran's principal oil terminal and port, Kharg Island, responsible for 90% of the regime's oil exports, or to capture or neutralize the estimated 400–440 kilograms of 60% enriched uranium stored in underground bunkers in Isfahan, but also perhaps Natanz and Fordow. These operations are fraught with challenges and risks and would be highly complex and costly for the US in terms of lives and expense, irrespective of the outcome.

### **Declare victory and end the war?**

In addition to failing to anticipate the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the US administration and its Israeli partners failed to fully consider the commitment, fervor and resolve of Iran's regime. It is one deeply immersed in the righteousness of

their political-religious mission. To capitulate and deny that mission would be to deny their identity and betray the fundamental principles of the Islamic revolution. Married to Iran's dominant Shi'a religious faith, which glorifies martyrdom for the faith, this revolutionary resolve takes on a dimension and depth not fully appreciated in the West. It gives the leadership and its followers, especially among the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), an almost mystical or spiritual determination to defend the regime, whatever the costs and in spite of overwhelming losses and the unpopularity of the regime.

This reality leaves the US administration with few options. It may continue to wage this war and inflict ever more destruction on the country's defenses and perhaps even economic infrastructure. The regime and the Iranian people will suffer, but the leadership will not capitulate short of annihilation.

The US could also negotiate. But it should not expect more than short-term, tactical concessions made after extended negotiations spent haggling over microscopic details. The regime won't negotiate itself out of existence. Its threat against the Strait is one way to demonstrate its remaining capability in the face of incalculable military and political losses. They have found the Americans' Achilles heel: oil and the global economy. They won't give up the Hormuz card without concessions from the US and Israel.

President Trump can also declare victory and end the US role in the war. Israel might go along. But the Iranians have a say, too, and might choose to continue threatening shipping traffic in the Gulf and Strait. It might also decide to begin enriching its remaining 400 kilograms of enriched uranium (provided it still possesses the requisite number and type of centrifuges, which is unknown). Therefore, the war does not end, though this "first phase," if it may be called that, may. At that point,

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the US must decide when and how to re-engage with Iran to end Iran's effective siege of the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. It becomes the very "forever war" against which Trump so vigorously campaigned in running for office.

There is one final alternative. But it's one Trump and the formidable war machines of the US and Israel have little control over. It's the Iranian people and their abiding resentment of the regime.

### **The war is a disaster for the regime**

However the Hormuz predicament is resolved, it should not distract anyone from the country's current state. Iran has been irreparably weakened. The Hormuz closure is a ploy intended to show that the regime still has leverage. It does indeed, but it can't sustain a regime that's lost its navy and air force, seen its regional proxies reduced to gun-toting tunnel dwellers and suffered significant losses in its ballistic missile capabilities.

Its economy was already on the brink of collapse before the war started. Its currency is worthless; punishing economic sanctions will continue. It has no allies willing to come to its aid. Soon, it won't be able to feed its people, pay public employees or conduct the most basic public services. A greater number of Iran's middle class will slip below the poverty line. It will lack energy to cool homes and offices in Iran's fast-approaching searing summer heat. Water shortages, which have plagued the nation for years, will worsen. The regime was helpless to resolve any of these problems before the war. It will end the war in a much worse state.

Iran's security forces have been weakened but remain largely intact. Morale has reportedly suffered as rank-and-file IRGC forces and their paramilitary militia, the Basij, and regular armed forces, the Artesh, have helplessly watched the nation's defense and security infrastructure

systematically destroyed. Some troops aren't getting paid, and desertions have been reported. Potentially worse, tensions have begun to appear between the better-funded and more politically powerful IRGC and the larger but less supported Artesh.

Worst of all for the regime, the Iranian people will know all of this, having witnessed much of it firsthand. They and the regime know the regime is at its weakest point in its 47-year history. Oppression will increase, and the system necessary to maintain it will be more costly. There may not yet be outward signs of another uprising of the sort we saw in January. But perhaps when the war dust settles and Iranians feel safer from the war itself, they will emerge to challenge the regime again with renewed vigor, hope and rage.

When they do, it is likely to be ugly. Updated estimates of the number killed by regime security forces in January now reach more than 36,000. The next round will be worse as the regime struggles for survival against its own citizens. Should the people prevail, regime elites know their fate. Rank-and-file troops of the Artesh and police may feel hard-pressed to defend a regime they know is on life support and cannot provide for the most basic needs of government and the people. Will they be motivated to attack their own people?

If and when that happens, the world will know the Islamic Republic has reached its well-deserved end. That may be Mr. Trump's best hope, but it's out of his hands.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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## **Beware Hubris: Trump’s Iran War Has an Ozymandias Flavor**

Alan Waring  
March 28, 2026

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**Never short of hyperinflated self-praise and self-adulation, US President Donald Trump has been true to form regarding his blitzkrieg joint attack with Israel on Iran. But, beyond the bombast and hyperbole, how will King Ozymandias and his White House retinue cope when real-world hubris arrives? With most of Iran’s population likely to reject his imposed Pax Americana and subjugation, what then? American and Israeli firepower can never crush Iran’s indomitable 7,000-year stoicism and will to survive.**

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**F**or well over 50 years, long before the popular 1979 Revolution that then enabled Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic Revolutionary Party to grab total power in 1980 (having shut down, exiled, imprisoned or killed all political opposition in the fledgling post-revolution proto-democracy), I have been privileged to enjoy a close personal and professional relationship with Iran, its people and some of its institutions. I have visited Iran many times, traveled around this vast country, advised on national industrial and economic issues, spoken at national and local conferences, and published numerous papers and articles on Iran. I have met thousands of Iranians in many strata and walks of life.

Of course, such personal exposure inevitably brings both insights largely inaccessible to foreigners and also potential biases. Such biases are not necessarily problematic but merely reflect the fact that personal exposure is likely to add to an outsider’s knowledge and also modify their understanding of why they are as they are and see the world as they do. Gaining such cultural insights greatly aids communication. Of course, acquiring such insights by “abduction” is not the same as necessarily agreeing with whatever is revealed. I was a kind of opportunist “barefoot ethnographer,” a participant observer, not a “disciple.”

Nevertheless, with this unusual level of access and understanding over such a long period, I confess to having become somewhat conflicted — the more so over recent years since President Donald Trump first came to power in the US in January 2017 and took a decidedly aggressive stance against Iran, and his subsequent unrestrained joint military attacks with Israel on Iran in 2025 and 2026. On the one hand, who would not want a freer, unrepressed and more prosperous life for Iran’s 94 million population and both national and regional security and peace for all nations in the Middle East (including Iran

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and Israel)? But, on the other hand, has the increasing belligerence of Israel and the US towards Iran, culminating in their joint unprovoked mass bombing of Iran in February and March 2026 (an undeclared but de facto imposed war) delivered — or ever likely to — those desirable objectives?

### **Iranians are conflicted**

Having endured decades of imposed wars, international sanctions, economic decimation, pariah status, great hardship, authoritarian government and a suffocating lack of personal freedom, those still in Iran desperately crave a normal, safe, peaceful and hopeful life for themselves and their families. But, does the recent US and Israeli military onslaught against Iran really herald such a change, or is it fools' gold offered by devils-in-disguise?

The present Iranian population, inside and outside Iran, is very conflicted. Some of their reasons are broadly similar to my own, outlined above. In addition, most Iranians, including, I would gauge, a majority of those thirsting for a change of governance, are also angered not only by being relentlessly bombed but also by the sheer “might is right” arrogance and the megalomaniacal and bloodthirsty anti-Iranian rhetoric and vilification emanating from Trump, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and others in the White House coterie. The Times, noted for its right-leaning pro-US editorial worldview, ran a scathing article on America's Iran War, which noted that Trump's White House had twisted British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's famous maxim that “Jaw, jaw is better than war, war” to now mean “Jaw, jaw is better for war, war.” Providing copious examples of quotes by Hegseth, Trump and others, the article opined, “You'd be forgiven for thinking that Donald Trump and his staff's salvoes were culled from a Bond villain.” More on Team Trump's psycho-dramatics later.

### **A profile of Iran's population**

The Iranian population today comprises three discernible main worldview groupings. Group 1 are ultra-conservative die-hard Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) regime supporters. One subgroup, amounting in total to some 10% of the adult population, incorporates the vast majority of state and municipal officials, judiciary, senior and middle-ranking military officers, most of the Shia clergy and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including their Baseej enforcers. In addition, a larger subgroup includes the relatively uneducated and conservative masses in low-income jobs. The latter sub-group is estimated to be some 20% of the adult population. Following the targeted killing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini by US-Israeli bombing on February 28, 2026, vast defiant crowds celebrated the succession of his son, Ayatollah Mojtaba Khomeini, as Iran's Supreme Leader on March 9, 2026.

Group 2 comprises well-educated, Western-oriented 18–35-year-olds, typically living in the Tehran-Karaj conurbation of some 12 million people or in other large cities across the country. This group, which accounts for an estimated 40% of the adult population, are desperate for substantive liberal change in Iran's governance, economic reform and rapprochement with the US. They have provided the majority of street protesters against the IRI regime. These unarmed protests have been going on for several years, during which large numbers of protesters have been killed or wounded on the streets by armed IRGC/Baseej forces, or have been jailed, and some even executed. Reported beatings, torture, sexual assault and even murder of arrested protesters are legion. The most egregious period of regime crackdown so far has been over several weeks from December 2025 to February 2026, when many thousands of protesters were reportedly killed.

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Group 3, amounting to an estimated 30% of the adult population, comprises over 35-year-olds with rents, mortgages and families to provide for or elderly parents to look after in an ongoing hyperinflationary economy, all of whom value safety and economic and political stability. These include large numbers of middle-aged veterans of the 1979 Revolution and Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) who survived firstly the hardships and privations of that era and then the decades of Western economic sanctions up to the present. Most of this group, while fed up with years of international sanctions, chronic corruption and economic mismanagement, and yearning for change, veer away from actively deposing the IRI regime unless it is done by nonviolent means and does not involve interference from external forces or interests. Like Group 2, they would greatly welcome a change to a liberal, competent and noncorrupt regime, but not by their openly challenging the IRI regime or engaging in its violent overthrow.

### **Why aren't Iranians rising to depose the IRI regime?**

As if to demonstrate the Trump regime's appalling ignorance of Iran's long history and its contemporary reality, in the days before the US and Israel's joint blitzkrieg on Iran started in February 2026 and while bilateral negotiations between Iran and Washington were still proceeding, Trump's Special Envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, made an astonishing public statement. With a puzzled facial expression and language, he said that the President was "curious" as to why Iran was "not capitulating" to his demands to give up immediately and cease forever all nuclear ambitions and activities (military and civil) and cease backing and using armed proxies to terrorise the region, while having to accept that all US economic sanctions against Iran would remain in place. Or else!!

Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi gave his own succinct and telling answer: "Curious to know why we do not capitulate? Because we are IRANIAN." In other words, Trump and Witkoff appeared unaware of a core national characteristic of the cultural and psychological makeup of Iranians, namely an absolute resistance to foreign threats and bullying or any kind of attack on their national identity, sovereignty, territory and self-determination. Such national pride, patriotism and "unto death" stoic resistance served them well during the eight years of the Iraqi-imposed Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) in which Iraq was backed and armed by the US and other Western countries.

With vastly superior military equipment and US backing, Saddam Hussein said he expected to win this war in a few weeks or months, but after eight years, he had to concede a stalemate ceasefire. The same stoic and tough resistance has characterized Iran's response to subsequent decades of increasingly harsh international economic sanctions, largely orchestrated by the US. With a 7,000-year history and national survival of Persia ingrained in their culture, today's Iranians are unlikely to be impressed or swayed by the threats, swagger or attacks (military or economic) from the 250-year-old neophyte USA. Defiance and resistance will be their defining response.

The common reaction to Witkoff's and Trump's puzzlement, from the bevy of seasoned political analysts, historians, Iran watchers, journalists, etc. (e.g., CNN), was one of initial incredulity at the breathtaking ignorance and naivety of these two most senior representatives of the US government regarding Iran's history and US–Iran relations. This was then quickly followed by unrestrained guffaws at such an embarrassing display.

Further embarrassing puzzlement has been expressed by Trump and White House grandees about why the Iranian population has not heeded

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Trump's exhortations to rise up and sweep away the IRI regime. In addition to the police, the IRI regime has established an extremely well-organized, well-armed and ruthless internal security system (IRGC plus Baseej militias) to keep the population in line. In contrast, anti-regime protesters and the general population are unarmed, unorganized and lacking in any identifiable national or even local leaders. It is amazing that so many unarmed protesters have nonetheless persisted in challenging the IRI regime for so many years. Many have already paid the price with their lives or serious injury, but to seek to overthrow the regime by force without any weaponry or organization would be doubtless suicide.

In addition, as outlined above, most of the estimated 70% of the adult population who want regime change shy away from engaging in violent overthrow or else recognize its futility without leadership, organization and weaponry. The detailed analysis of the thirst inside Iran for regime change, and the percentage likelihoods of the various scenarios for it happening, provided by my colleague James Denton's Fair Observer article in early 2023, is still highly relevant.

In addition, when Iranians hear Trump imploring them to rise up and overthrow the IRI regime, they scoff cynically at the notion that he would ever provide them with any tangible assistance to achieve such an outcome. Even in Trump's first presidency, he and his then White House team were keen on regime change in Iran. As I wrote in 2018 (pages 234-235) in a chapter on The Alt-Right Anti-Iran Project, "they envisaged this resulting from a popular uprising inside Iran" but failed to understand that, just as when US-backed Saddam Hussein launched his unprovoked war on Iran in 1980, the whole population including those disaffected by the IRI regime responded with *zeereh parcham* (rally to the flag) patriotism.

As recently as January 2026, the US Department of Defense (unofficially now Department of War) issued a new National Defense Strategy document, which contains (paragraph 2) the following statement: The Department will "no longer be distracted by interventions, endless wars, regime change and nation building." Iranians ask themselves why, in less than two months, Trump has radically changed his mind, or was this new doctrine intentionally a complete fiction?

Iranians also vividly remember US President George H.W. Bush in 1991, urging the Iraqi population to rise up against Saddam Hussein with implied promises of US military assistance. No such help materialized, and the Iraqi Marsh Arabs, Shia anti-Ba'athist insurrectionists in Najaf and Karbala, and Kurds in northern Iraq, in particular, suffered mass slaughter. Iranians today take full note of how glib and duplicitous US Presidents can be in sacrificing foreign populations from the safety of the White House. It is unsurprising, then, that they would not be persuaded by Trump's implied but doubtful promises of practical assistance to overthrow the IRI regime.

### **Lack of a credible leader**

What about the lack of any political group or popular leader in Iran who could replace the Islamic regime and its Supreme Leader? It is unsurprising that any potential contenders fail to make themselves known, since to do so would invite rapid detention or elimination by the current regime.

Ah, but have no fear, there is surely a ready-made leader-in-waiting in the person of Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, son of the last Shah, who has been living in comfortable exile in the USA for much of the time since 1979. He was then still in his teens. He has never held any government office or responsibility, but has established a prospectus

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and well-oiled publicity campaign for his return to Iran as the next Shah. The campaign has essentially been to reestablish the Pahlavi monarchy and to reintroduce an imperial style of semi-feudal governance like his father's. More recently, perhaps sensing such an outdated model just won't fly with Iran's population today, he has raised the possibility of his returning as a constitutional figurehead monarch "at an appropriate time."

Crown Prince Reza appeals mainly to older Iranians, those old enough to remember the Pahlavi era before 1979. These are mainly Iranian emigrés abroad and a minority inside Iran who hanker after the pre-Revolution days. Although Reza is well educated, articulate and charming and receives much publicity and airtime in the West, his prospectus suffers from a number of handicaps.

The outdated "reprise model" of his father's pre-Revolutionary era is one handicap. Others include his lack of government experience and, apparently, a poor intellectual grasp of the extent and depth of state governance requirements for such a strategically pivotal country as Iran. However, perhaps the most damning criticism is a lack of self-awareness of his controversial personal attitude and conduct in public. In recent years, he has made no secret of his keenness for a post-IRI Iran to return to strong and friendly relations with Israel, which existed during his father's reign.

While such sentiments are perhaps not in themselves outrageous, unverified videos and photos from 2023 of the Crown Prince and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with arms round each other's shoulders and beaming faces (since deleted from internet sources), and Reza socializing with Israeli politicians and "big shots" in a Tel Aviv nightclub, have been received very badly among Iranians generally. Such behavior demonstrates a shallow regard for the sensitivities

of the Iranian people and a preparedness to engage in what many see as inappropriate collaboration with Iran's sworn enemy.

Even President Trump, while not unfriendly towards Reza Pahlavi and offering him words of encouragement and photo opportunities, has nevertheless made it clear that he does not regard the Crown Prince as a credible new leader for a post-IRI Iran.

### **MAGA President Bluto Knuckledragger rules the world**

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings. Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair." This famous quotation from Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem in 1818 about the Egyptian pharaonic ruler Ramses II (Ozymandias in Greek) was intended not to idolize the greatness of Ozymandias but rather to warn of the vulnerability of leaders with inflated and narcissistic egos to unnoticed context changes over time and unforeseen developments and events that they cannot control.

Unsurprisingly, President Trump is widely thought of as an Ozymandias figure, given his unrelenting penchant for uttering grandiose and bombastic statements about his own superlative greatness and achievements, contrasted with equally bombastic assertions about the alleged worthlessness or bad character of — well — just about anyone and everyone, from foreign leaders, US politicians, judges, corporate leaders, dignitaries, celebrities, sports stars, film stars, pop stars, religious leaders, journalists, ethnic groups, non-Judeo-Christian religions, particular nationalities, disabled people, refugees etc.

Even a small fraction of such insults and invective would be unbecoming, unprofessional and unacceptable from any person holding even a minor position of responsibility or authority, let alone a President of the US. But, clearly, the Bluto

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Knuckledragger (the main antagonist of Popeye) personality of this King Ozymandias could not care less.

Trump's vast array of pet hates, targets for disparaging remarks and petulant Executive Orders naturally includes anyone who dares to disagree with, contradict or challenge him in any way, or simply stand their ground on what they regard as their own national best interests. So, unsurprisingly, Iran has long been a candidate for his angry invective, petulance and threats, culminating in his 2025 military strikes and current 2026 Operation Epic Fury, otherwise known as the War on Iran.

In the past ten years, there have been many published analyses and commentaries on the source of Trump's often bizarre emotions and behaviour. For example, Professor Tim Wilson's video in 2026 on Trump as a dangerous liability suggests that his childlike tantrums stem from an arrested development, whereby his adult personality is locked into a permanent state of infantile perception, attitude and behavior.

The 2019 book *Dangerous Charisma* by Professor Jerrold Post, psychiatrist and political psychologist, examines the psychopathology of Trump and his followers, which is highly relevant to his wide-ranging neoimperialist aggression, unsupported territorial claims and bullying against several countries, mainly traditional allies of the US. Most countries trading with the US have also capitulated to his bizarre tariff aggression. Countries (e.g., Canada, Greenland, Denmark, Panama) confronted by his potential land-grab rhetoric are still attempting to negotiate a way out. Venezuela's historically anti-US authoritarian dictatorship has been left in power following the US short-lived invasion, the extraordinary rendition of President Nicolas Maduro to await trial in the USA and the US effectively taking control of Venezuela's vast oil industry.

Meanwhile, Trump has now established an oil blockade of Cuba and threatened to end its 67-year-old communist regime.

However, confronted by an Iran that is not just uncooperative, resistant and noncompliant to US demands but also steadfastly defiant, Trump's narcissism, delusional paranoia, and fragile and easily wounded ego finally responded in 2025 to Netanyahu's persistent urging for the US to join Israel in a massive unprovoked and pre-emptive attack on Iran's nuclear and other facilities in June 2025 (the Twelve Day War). The further unprovoked preemptive attack in February 2026, but on a much larger scale (Operation Epic Fury), is still ongoing. However, Trump's apparent ignorance about Iran and its post-World War II history, his lack of grasp of military matters (or perhaps his deliberate dismissal of good advice from the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]), his inadequate war planning, his frequent and often contradictory changing and expansion of the war's objectives, and contradictory statements from Trump and his Cabinet colleagues have been characteristic.

Also characteristically, Trump has continued with his narcissistic, grandiose hyperbole regarding the current war on Iran. Almost every day, he has issued formal statements in such language, or similar statements on his Truth Social online platform or at press conferences or public events, for example, March 8, 2026, and his triumphant, if premature, claim "We won! We won!" on March 12, 2026. Trump also appears to be unconcerned when US or Israeli missiles inflict mass civilian casualties on Iran's cities (e.g., a girls' school in Minab). At a Republican conference, he even gloated in "gallows humor" style over the death of nearly 100 sailors when, without warning, the US sank an Iranian warship in open waters off Sri Lanka, some 3,400 kilometers from Iran, remarking with a smirk, "It's more fun to sink 'em" than to capture them.

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But what about all the sycophants and “yes men and women” that Trump has surrounded himself with as his White House Cabinet and entourage? These, too, fall under the scope of Jerrold Post’s political psychological assessment. Two top officials in particular evidently share Trump’s penchant for displaying a narcissistic, aggressive, bullying, self-congratulatory style: Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, who has unilaterally and without Congressional approval retitled his post to that of Secretary of War.

### **The armchair comic book warriors**

Hegseth has been especially vocal about the Iran War, giving regular briefings extolling the US’s military supremacy, predicting a quick and overwhelming victory, and dismissing Iran’s military capabilities with contempt. In many ways, Hegseth’s wild anti-Iran invective has far upstaged that of Trump. For example:

“They are toast, and they know it.”

“We will hunt you down without apology and without hesitation, and we will kill you”.

“This was never meant to be a fair fight; we are punching them while they are down, as it should be”.

The Iranian leaders are “rats in hiding,” and the newly elected Supreme Leader has been “disfigured” by US/Israeli bombing.

On day 13 of Operation Epic Fury, Hegseth gave a lengthy one-man public statement and press briefing on the war’s progress, seeking to convince an increasingly sceptical American public that early victory was assured with a complete annihilation and capitulation of Iran, and to soothe domestic and global anxieties and markets about growing economic damage. Reaction inside the US

and globally has been cool and largely unconvinced.

It is not just Hegseth’s self-aggrandizing, triumphalist language, his repeated exaggerated assertions of Iran’s crushing imminent defeat (now stretched already from one week to four–six weeks or longer) and his bloodthirsty, undiplomatic words that cause increasing skepticism and alarm. Just as telling are his physical presentation, body language and stage performance.

Hegseth always appears immaculate and well-groomed, perhaps reflecting his grounding as a Fox News TV presenter. Although this may be a potential advantage for audience acceptability, in his case, it seems excessive. Rather than cutting the gravitas figure of a cabinet secretary, his square-jawed, clean-cut, lightly tanned, play boy visage makes him look much more like a telegenic model for TV adverts for male grooming products, toothpaste or tanning lotion. Add to this his uncontrolled habit of looking overly earnest and sincere, his dramatic turns of phrase, his dogmatic assertions, his aggressive evangelical delivery and his constant emphatic hand gestures, and he falls naturally into the genre of crusading “hard sell” politico-religious televangelists so popular in the US.

Another unmistakable trait is Hegseth’s barely suppressed, constant bubbling anger. This anger seems to be caused by deep frustrations, particularly relating to his strongly held Christian fundamentalist beliefs and American Crusade agenda (set out in his book of that name) that he would like to see fulfilled, but which so far seems to elude him. His controversial worldview on this issue involves his seeking to impose on the Pentagon an “onward Christian soldiers” culture that normalizes exclusively Christian ideology and language from a bygone era and sanctifies using America’s military might to achieve notionally superior Christian subjugation or elimination of

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non-Judeo-Christian religions and nations. The US war program against Iran, which started in 2025, has become Hegseth's major launch pad for his personal crusade and fixation to ensure a Messianic return, a second coming of Christ, through declared US supremacy and, as necessary, intimidation, conquest and subjugation of "the other."

His ethnocentrist, religiocentrist and politically partisan superiority beliefs, agenda and actions also apply to the US Military and the US population overall. This directly rejects the equal rights of all citizens guaranteed by the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution. Hegseth's White House Colleagues, President Trump, the Republican Party and many of their supporters have raised no complaints or objections about this flagrant rejection of the Constitution that Trump and all his Cabinet have sworn under oath to uphold.

For Hegseth, his knowledge of the history of Iran and its relationship with the US appears to start with the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the "evil Ayatollahs." No apparent recognition of the CIA's orchestration (with British involvement) of the 1953 coup against the Shah's Prime Minister Dr Mohammad Mossadegh, which relegated the Shah to the role of Washington's puppet — and sowed the seeds of the 1979 Revolution. As the distinguished Professor Ali Ansari has put it, "The coup revealed America's influence and malevolent ambitions in Iran. The immense sense of betrayal that was felt — and cultivated for later generations."

Deep mistrust of the US government stemming from the 1953 coup continues today, seared into the psyche of every Iranian, and accentuated by Trump's demand that any new national political leader of Iran must meet his approval. Trump, the suzerain imperator, sees Iran's future only as a US vassal state, and Hegseth seeks to oblige.

Hegseth exudes a juvenile, immature attitude towards governance, international affairs, international conflict and the prosecution of war. His gung-ho jingoistic fervor for battle whenever he addresses audiences betrays the excitement of a 13-year-old armchair "warrior" getting carried away reading Captain America comic books or playing video war games. His vicarious "fantasy hero" exposure to battle avoids him ever being in harm's way, unlike all the American service personnel sent into the Iran War theater.

Vance also shares Hegseth's barely suppressed bubbling anger. He rarely smiles and always looks possessed by inner demons and ready to explode. His outrageous televised screaming spectacle against Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (a US ally) in the latter's White House meeting with President Trump on February 28, 2025, with Trump and others egging him on, will surely go down in history as the most disgraceful display of undiplomatic bullying in modern times.

While less vocal than Hegseth on the Iran War, by Vance's rhetoric and published statements, he nonetheless shares Hegseth's militant worldview on Christian fundamentalist supremacy and the importance of the US government imposing this on its own population and the rest of the world. He is reportedly a supporter of the Seven Mountains Mandate, namely that the state should actively advance Christian supremacy in US society via control of seven key spheres: government, religion, education, family, business, media, arts and entertainment.

Unlike Hegseth, who possesses a very high degree of certitude about his identity and divinely ordained Christian mission, Vance appears conflicted and unhappy with his identity. Born James David Bowman, he first changed his name in 1990–91 to JD Hamel and then again to JD Vance in 2013. It is rare for males to change their surname, although his first surname change

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appears to have a reasonable justification. However, more than one surname change is extremely rare. There is speculation that he may suffer from some kind of narcissistic delusion of grandeur condition that drives him towards gaining enhanced public and political approval and adulation by reinventing his name to something more memorable, attractive and high-powered.

### **Hubris, delusion and the illusion of total victory**

As many seasoned military and statecraft experts and observers have noted, all the hyperbolic US triumphalism spewing out daily from King Osymandias's White House regarding a total Iranian defeat may be a tad premature on several major counts.

Beware hubris. The US has failed repetitively to learn from its past strategic mistakes overseas regarding inflated false assumptions that its undoubted massive military superiority alone will guarantee total victory in all respects, e.g., the Vietnam War, Iraq Wars and Afghan debacle. Unleashing overwhelming military firepower may succeed in causing a target country great loss of life, economic and material damage, and even capitulation, but military victory alone cannot win hearts and minds or guarantee long-lasting peace. Total victory also requires ensuring that a defeated enemy retains sovereignty, builds stable governance, rebuilds a strong economy, ensures political and religious freedoms and human rights, and stays at peace with other countries.

When it comes to Iran, the Trump White House has failed miserably to acknowledge the old maxim “know your enemy but know yourself better.” The limited individual and collective self-awareness displayed has been as pitiful as their knowledge and awareness of the Middle East in general and Iran specifically.

Destructive, damaged personalities and pathological traits also seem to pervade the Trump White House and negatively influence US policy towards Iran. Large-scale field and clinical studies (e.g., Fritzon, Brooks et al, 2016; and 2020, pages 295–325 and 327–365) have revealed that compared to a normative expectation of some 3% of the general population exhibiting clinically raised levels of psychopathy, when it comes to boardrooms and similar power centers, the prevalence rises to 20%. Could it be even higher among the Trump White House Cabinet and entourage? And, what about the governing groups in Iran and Israel? Perhaps all countries should conduct “due diligence” clinical psychological evaluation of political leaders, just as is often already standard for police and military personnel. Such screening might then encourage “Jaw, jaw” rather than “War, war.”

Perhaps soon the long-suffering Iranian people might finally be able to chant with confidence the Persian New Year invocation “Sad saal beh, az in saalha” — (May the next) one hundred years (be) better than these years.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



**Dr Alan Waring** is a retired risk analyst with extensive international consulting experience with government departments, corporations and institutions. He is the author of *Corporate Risk and Governance* (2013) and several other books on risk, as well as the editor and contributor to *The New Authoritarianism: A Risk Analysis*, a three-volume publication by Ibidem, published from 2018 to 2021. He is also an Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Risk and Decision Sciences (CERIDES), European University Cyprus.

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# FO Exclusive: The Dangerous Implications of the New US/Israel–Iran War

Glenn Carle, Atul Singh  
March 31, 2026

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**In this section of the March 2026 episode of FO Exclusive, Atul Singh and Glenn Carle highlight how Iran’s decentralized “mosaic” strategy and asymmetric tactics increase the chances of prolonged escalation of the Iran war. Continued conflict with Iran, choking off the Strait of Hormuz, seems most probable. The economic fallout would be global and dire, triggering energy shortages, fuel, fertilizer and food inflation, potential 1970s-style stagflation and long-term challenges to both American global leadership and the US dollar.**

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**E**ditor-in-Chief Atul Singh and FOI Senior Partner Glenn Carle, a retired CIA officer who now advises companies, governments and organizations on geopolitical risk, continue the March 2026 edition of FO Exclusive by discussing the most consequential development of the month: the widening US–Israel war with Iran. They frame the conflict not simply as a regional confrontation but as a structural shock with military, economic and geopolitical implications. By examining battlefield dynamics, strategic scenarios and cascading economic effects, Atul and Glenn argue that the war is already reshaping assumptions about power, markets and the global order.

## **Tactical success, strategic uncertainty**

Atul starts with the scale of the military campaign. By March 21, 21 days into the war, US and Israeli

forces had struck more than 7,800 targets, destroyed over 120 vessels and flown more than 8,000 combat missions. The opening phase appeared to demonstrate overwhelming operational dominance. Yet the expected political result — rapid Iranian capitulation — has not materialized.

Instead, Iran has absorbed the strikes and continued to resist. Glenn emphasizes that tactical superiority does not automatically translate into strategic victory. The early assumption that Iran would collapse under pressure now appears misplaced. The discussion, therefore, pivots from battlefield metrics to the structural factors underpinning Iranian resilience.

## **The IRGC and the “mosaic” model**

Atul and Glenn argue that Iran’s endurance stems largely from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its decentralized “mosaic strategy.” Over decades, the IRGC has built a dispersed command structure with redundant leadership layers, independent provincial decision-making and distributed infrastructure. This design reduces the effectiveness of decapitation strikes and allows continued operations even after heavy losses.

Glenn explains the logic by comparing centralized vulnerability to distributed resilience: “If you have a single point of failure, you cut a telephone wire and... the communication stops, but if you have 50 different telephone wires going 50 different routes, then you have a much harder problem.” The analogy underscores how Iran’s structure mirrors modern networked systems. Deep underground facilities, dispersed drone production and succession planning up to four levels reinforce this resilience. As a result, the conflict has shifted from expectations of quick collapse to the prospect of prolonged attrition.

## **Four scenarios, one dominant trajectory**

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Atul and Glenn outline four potential outcomes. The first, Iran folding, now appears unlikely. The second, an early negotiated settlement, is rational but improbable given mutual distrust and divergent objectives. The third scenario, unilateral cessation by Washington and Jerusalem, also seems doubtful because Israel perceives the conflict as existential and seeks continued pressure.

The fourth scenario, escalation, appears the most likely. Iran's leverage lies in constraining traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, while the United States faces pressure to reopen the chokepoint. Glenn questions Washington's strategic clarity, invoking a proverb to highlight the problem: "Whatever wind is blowing... serves no purpose if you have no destination." Without a clear objective, escalation risks becoming self-perpetuating.

Atul adds that Israeli strategy resembles "mowing the lawn," repeatedly degrading Iranian capabilities in hopes of weakening the regime. Yet this approach, combined with Iranian resilience, increases the likelihood of sustained conflict rather than decisive resolution.

### **Short- and medium-term economic shock**

Beyond military scenarios, Atul and Glenn stress immediate economic consequences. Disruption in the Strait of Hormuz constricts energy supply, raising prices for crude oil, LNG and refined products such as jet fuel and diesel. Prices of fertilizers and industrial inputs will shoot up as well, causing high inflation globally. All "danger signs are flashing red."

Within a year, the effects compound. Higher fuel and fertilizer costs threaten agricultural output, raising the risk of food shortages, particularly in import-dependent countries. Gulf monarchies, facing reduced energy revenue, may draw down investments, sell assets and pause

purchases of US debt. These shifts could push interest rates higher and depress global asset prices.

The ripple effects extend across Europe, Asia and emerging markets worldwide. Energy-dependent economies face slower growth, while manufacturing centers confront rising input costs. Financial markets may be underestimating the persistence of these pressures.

### **Long-term consequences for global order**

Looking further ahead, Atul and Glenn warn of a profound structural transformation. Sustained high energy prices could produce stagflation reminiscent of the 1970s, or even more severe inflation given today's monetary conditions. Monetary policy has been far too loose for far too long. Furthermore, the petrodollar system may weaken if Gulf states lose confidence in US security guarantees. Reduced demand for dollars could gradually erode America's financial dominance.

Glenn concludes with a broader geopolitical warning. He suggests what intelligence planners like him once envisaged as the worst-case scenario: Pax Americana is giving way to a fractured international system. The restraints of international law and the UN-Bretton Woods system on inter-state behavior are declining. Instead, the world is experiencing an increase in Hobbesian conflict, and increasing striation of states into "haves" and "have-nots," in which the strong become stronger and the weak become de facto satellites. A system with several poles with several great powers is emerging. Weaker states increasingly orbit around these poles. A Hobbesian world where the powerful dominate and the weak suffer is increasingly coming into place.

Atul concludes by saying that this could be America's Suez and 2026 is the new 1956. If Iran

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prevails then it will extract geopolitical rent from the Strait of Hormuz. The Persian Gulf will not be an American lake again. Donald Trump would end up as the American Anthony Eden who presided over the British disaster to retake Suez, another key chokepoint, in 1956. There is a further question about American global hegemony: If America cannot open the Strait of Hormuz, can the US Navy enter the Taiwan Strait?

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



**Glenn Carle** is a noted author, an avid reader and a retired CIA officer with rich experience. As Deputy National Intelligence Officer, Glenn

led the 17 agencies of the intelligence community in preparing the US government's most senior assessments of transnational threats to the nation for the president, members of cabinet and the nation's most senior military leaders. During his career, he was detailed to the Executive Office of the President, and has extensive negotiating and policy experience. Glenn also led sensitive programs in the Directorate of Operations at the Central Intelligence Agency in four continents. He did a BA in Government at Harvard, an MA in European Studies and International Economics at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and further masters study in International Relations at the Institut d'Etudes politiques de Paris.



**Atul Singh** is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer. He has taught political economy at the University of California, Berkeley

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