Beyond Tehran: The Real Battle After the Iran Ceasefire

Emmanuel Navon / 16 April 2026

Executive Summary

The ceasefire between the United States, Israel, and Iran does not mark the end of the war but a temporary pause in an ongoing strategic confrontation. Military action followed the failure of diplomacy to halt Iran's nuclear, missile, and proxy expansion.

The war has already produced significant effects: degradation of Iranian military infrastructure, disruption of its nuclear program, and weakening of its regional network. These gains, however, remain incomplete and reversible.

A central flaw in prevailing policy frameworks—particularly in Europe—is the tendency to treat Iran as a state actor reacting to pressure, rather than as the center of a system built on proxy warfare and regional penetration. This misreading obscures the fact that Iran's power operates primarily through its network—Hezbollah, Hamas, militias in Iraq, and the Houthis—which together form the backbone of its regional strategy. Weakening that network is therefore not a source of instability, but a precondition for any durable change in the regional balance.

The ceasefire creates a strategic choice. Allowing Iran to regroup will restore the [illegible]e. Sustaining pressure can further degrade its ability to project power [illegible]e regional balance. The outcome remains open.

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Introduction

The ceasefire that halted large-scale hostilities between the United States, Israel, and Iran has been widely described as the end of the war. This interpretation reflects a recurring analytical error: treating conflicts as short, clearly bounded episodes rather than as phases within longer strategic confrontations.

This framework does not apply to Iran. The Islamic Republic is not a conventional actor pursuing limited, transactional objectives. It operates through a long-term strategy that integrates military development, ideological ambition, and the systematic use of proxy forces. This strategy is not episodic. It unfolds over decades and across multiple theaters, adapting to pressure while maintaining its core objectives.

The ceasefire, therefore, does not resolve the conflict. It suspends a phase of high-intensity operations within a broader contest over the regional order.

The relevant question is not whether the war has ended, but whether the balance of power has shifted in a way that constrains Iran's model, and whether those constraints will endure.

Answering that question requires moving beyond binary judgments of victory or failure. It requires examining whether the underlying drivers of the conflict—nuclear advancement, missile expansion, and proxy entrenchment—have been weakened in a meaningful and lasting way.

I. Why Military Action Became Necessary

Military action was not a first resort. It followed a prolonged period in which

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nomic, and political tools failed to alter Iran's strategic trajectory.

Over more than two decades, multiple negotiation frameworks sought to limit Iran's nuclear program and moderate its regional behavior. These efforts included binding agreements, sanctions regimes, and attempts at economic integration. While they imposed constraints at specific moments, they did not change the underlying direction of Iranian policy.

Instead, Iran used time strategically.

On the nuclear front, it advanced its enrichment capabilities, accumulated stockpiles of enriched uranium, and developed the technical infrastructure required to sustain and accelerate the program. Even when agreements imposed temporary ceilings, they did not dismantle the industrial base or the expertise required to resume enrichment at higher levels.

At the same time, Iran invested heavily in missile and drone technology. It developed a large inventory of ballistic missiles with increasing accuracy and range, alongside a growing arsenal of unmanned systems capable of both precision strikes and saturation attacks. These capabilities allowed Iran to threaten critical infrastructure across the region, including energy facilities, ports, and urban centers.

The most consequential development, however, was the expansion of Iran's proxy network.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah evolved into a heavily armed hybrid actor with tens of thousands of rockets and missiles, embedded within the political system while retaining full military autonomy. In Iraq, Iranian-backed militias became institutionalized within the security apparatus while maintaining independent command structures. In Yemen, the Houthis transformed from a local insurgency into a strategic actor capable of targeting international shipping routes and Gulf infrastructure. In Gaza, Hamas operates as a governing authority and military force aligned with Iran's regional strategy, opening a southern front against Israel while

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grated into Tehran's broader network. In Syria, Iran entrenched itself
oination of local and foreign forces.

These were not isolated developments. They formed a coherent system designed to project Iranian influence, shape regional dynamics, and deter adversaries through the threat of multi-front escalation.

Diplomacy did not dismantle this system. It slowed elements of it while leaving the overall structure intact.

By the mid-2020s, Iran had reached a point where its combined capabilities—nuclear threshold potential, long-range strike systems, and a network of embedded proxies—posed a layered threat. This threat was not hypothetical. It had already manifested in repeated attacks on infrastructure, shipping routes, and regional actors.

At that stage, the choice was not between war and stability. It was between action and the continued strengthening of a system that had already demonstrated its destabilizing effects.

II. What the War Has Already Achieved

The war has produced both tangible military effects and broader strategic shifts.

At the operational level, sustained air and precision strikes targeted key components of Iran's military infrastructure. Air defense systems were degraded, reducing Iran's ability to protect strategic assets and creating greater operational freedom for future action. This loss of defensive depth is one of the most consequential outcomes of the conflict.

Iran's missile and drone programs were also affected. Production facilities were damaged, supply chains disrupted, and stockpiles depleted. While Iran retains these capabilities, their scale, reliability, and rate of replenishment have been reduced. This limits its ability to sustain prolonged high-intensity operations.

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. ogram experienced significant disruption. Key facilities were struck, operations interrupted, and timelines extended. Although enriched uranium

remains, the infrastructure required for further advancement has been degraded, introducing uncertainty into the program's trajectory.

These operational effects matter. But their significance lies in how they alter the broader strategic environment.

First, the war demonstrated that Iran is vulnerable to sustained military pressure. This challenges a central premise of its deterrence model: that its capabilities would prevent or severely limit such operations.

Second, it exposed the limits of Iran's asymmetric strategy. Iran was able to impose costs, particularly through its ability to threaten energy infrastructure and disrupt shipping. However, it was unable to prevent significant damage to its own systems.

Third, the war has begun to erode the regime's narrative of resilience. The Islamic Republic presents itself as a durable, strategically patient actor capable of outlasting its adversaries. Repeated exposure of its vulnerabilities weakens this narrative. Historical experience shows that ideological regimes are rarely defeated outright; they are weakened through cumulative setbacks that undermine both capability and credibility.

Fourth, the conflict accelerated operational integration between the United States and Israel. Joint targeting, intelligence fusion, and coordinated execution have established a level of military interoperability that will shape future contingencies.

The war has not eliminated Iran's capabilities or ended its strategy. But it has disrupted its trajectory. Iran is now operating from a weaker position than before the conflict began.

III. A Misunderstood War

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ure of the current debate is the gap between Western interpretations those prevalent in much of the Middle East.

In Western discourse, Iran is often portrayed as reacting to external pressure, and its proxies are sometimes framed as forces of resistance. This interpretation reflects familiar narratives but does not correspond to the political reality experienced in the region.

Across the Arab world, Iran's influence has taken a different form. Rather than acting through conventional alliances, Iran has built parallel structures within sovereign states: armed groups, political networks, and economic channels that operate alongside or within official institutions.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah functions as a state within a state. It participates in formal politics while maintaining an independent military apparatus capable of overriding national decision-making. In Iraq, Iranian-backed militias are integrated into the security system but operate with external loyalties. In Yemen, the Houthis have extended Iranian influence into one of the world's most critical maritime corridors.

These arrangements have not produced stability. They have weakened state authority, fragmented governance, and entrenched long-term instability.

For many regional actors, Iran is not a defender of sovereignty but a source of its erosion. Its model is not perceived as resistance but as a form of indirect control.

Western frameworks that interpret Iran through the lens of resistance obscure this reality. They lead to policy positions that treat efforts to dismantle Iran's network as escalatory, rather than as responses to an existing structure of coercion.

This misreading has practical consequences. It results in analytical hesitation and policy ambiguity at precisely the moment when clarity is required.

The current war has exposed this gap. Western commentary has focused on the risks of escalation. Regional actors have focused on the opportunity to dismantle a system that has constrained their sovereignty for decades.

Skip to content this divergence is essential for assessing both the meaning of the war and the implications of its outcomes.

IV. From Tehran to Beirut: Why Finishing the Job Matters

Iran’s regional power is not confined to its national territory. It is embedded in a network of proxy actors that extend its reach and amplify its influence.

Hezbollah is the central component of this network.

It is not simply a proxy. It is a hybrid structure combining military capability, political authority, and social infrastructure. It dominates key aspects of Lebanese life while acting as a direct instrument of Iranian strategy.

This arrangement has structural consequences. Lebanon does not exercise full sovereignty over its territory or its security policy. Decisions affecting national stability can be shaped by an actor aligned with an external power.

The economic consequences are equally significant. Hezbollah’s position has contributed to Lebanon’s prolonged financial collapse by deterring investment, limiting international engagement, and perpetuating instability.

From a strategic perspective, Hezbollah serves as Iran’s forward operating platform in the Levant. Its missile arsenal—once estimated at over 100,000 projectiles—provides Iran with the ability to threaten Israeli territory at scale. Its operational capabilities enable multi-front escalation.

The weakening of Iran creates an opportunity to disrupt this structure. But proxy systems do not collapse automatically. They adapt.

Hezbollah has demonstrated this repeatedly. After previous conflicts, it rebuilt its capabilities, replenished its arsenal, and refined its operational doctrine. This resilience is supported by external funding, logistical networks, and deep local entrenchment.

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ıed pressure, recovery is not a risk but an expected outcome.

Sustained pressure changes this dynamic. It disrupts supply chains, limits funding, and constrains operational capacity. It forces adaptation under constraint rather than recovery under stability.

The potential impact of sustained pressure is substantial. Weakening Hezbollah would allow the Lebanese state to reassert authority. It would reduce Iran's regional reach. It would remove a major obstacle to any future normalization between Israel and Lebanon.

More broadly, it would signal that Iran's model of indirect control can be reversed.

The war has created the conditions for such a shift. Whether those conditions are realized depends on whether pressure on Iran and its proxy network is maintained beyond the current ceasefire.

V. Europe's Strategic Blind Spot

European responses to the war have largely replaced strategy with procedure.

Appeals to international law, calls for de-escalation, and reliance on institutional mechanisms have been presented as policy. In practice, they have functioned as substitutes for it.

The reliance on the United Nations Security Council illustrates this problem clearly. The Council is not a neutral enforcement body. It is a political arena in which decisive action can be—and routinely is—blocked by veto powers aligned with Iran.

Invoking it does not constrain Iran. It signals the absence of a viable alternative.

Resolutions that cannot pass and enforcement mechanisms that cannot be implemented do not shape outcomes. They provide diplomatic cover for inaction.

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and integrated. Treating it as a sequence of isolated incidents misrepresents its nature.

Risk assessment is also skewed. European analysis emphasizes the dangers of escalation while underestimating the risks of passivity.

The war has already demonstrated Iran's ability to disrupt energy infrastructure, target shipping routes, and threaten critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz. These are not regional concerns. They directly affect European economies.

The assumption that geographic distance provides protection is no longer valid. Missile range, drone warfare, and proxy operations have already erased it.

The conflict is not peripheral to Europe. It exposes vulnerabilities in energy security, defense preparedness, and strategic posture.

Conclusion

The ceasefire has halted military operations, but it has not altered the nature of the confrontation with Iran. The system that drove the conflict—combining nuclear threshold capability, long-range strike systems, and a network of proxy forces—has been weakened but not dismantled.

The war has already shifted the strategic balance. It has degraded critical components of Iran's military infrastructure, disrupted its nuclear program, and exposed the vulnerabilities of its model of indirect power projection. These are not marginal gains. They have changed the starting point from which Iran will operate going forward.

But partial degradation is not a stable outcome. Systems of this kind do not remain

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efinitely. They either continue to deteriorate under sustained pressure
e that pressure is lifted. This is the central issue created by the

ceasefire. It is not a question of whether the war has achieved everything. It is a question of whether the gains already achieved will be consolidated or reversed.

If pressure on Iran and its proxy network is reduced, recovery is the most likely outcome. Iran has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to rebuild capabilities, reconstitute supply chains, and reassert influence through its proxies. The conditions that made the conflict unavoidable would re-emerge.

If pressure is sustained, further degradation is possible. The weakening of Iran's proxy network—particularly Hezbollah—would not only reduce immediate threats but also alter the structure of regional power, opening the possibility of restoring state sovereignty in affected countries and reshaping regional alignments.

For European and NATO actors, the implications are immediate. The conflict has demonstrated that Iran's capabilities—missiles, drones, and proxy operations—already extend into domains that affect European security directly. This is not a distant crisis. It is part of the same strategic environment.

The ceasefire therefore does not resolve the conflict, but it forces a choice: either Iran's system of power projection is allowed to recover, or it is pushed further into decline.

Emmanuel Navon

Ambassador of Israel to Japan