

The Metaphor of the Elephant in the Teacup; The Riddle of the Third Imposed War

Mohammad Reza Kaffash Jamshid

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Today's headlines:

Mohammad Reza Kaffash Jamshid,
Member of the Ardabil Governance
and Legislation Think Tank

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This allegory can be analyzed at three distinct levels:

1. The Elephant (America’s Absolute Power) in the Teacup (Geographical and Strategic Limitations)

Massive Military Force Lacking Maneuvering Space: The United States possesses the largest and most advanced military force in the world, yet in the Persian Gulf region and the Strait of Hormuz (which narrows to approximately 40 kilometers at its tightest point), it is incapable of deploying its full military capacity. Massive aircraft

carriers in these narrow waterways operate like an elephant in a teacup—vulnerable and deprived of sufficient maneuvering space.

Asymmetric Deterrence: Fully aware of this reality, Iran has invested extensively in short-range weaponry (coastal ballistic missiles, naval mines, and fast attack crafts) that achieve their maximum operational efficiency precisely within this confined space. The US military is designed to fight across vast oceans, not within a closed sea like the Persian Gulf, which effectively functions as a basin.

2. The Elephant (US Economy and Logistics) in the Teacup (Political and Logistical Limitations)

Exorbitant Costs vs. Limited Achievements: To sustain its military presence in the region, the US is compelled to deploy tens of thousands of troops, hundreds of aircraft, and dozens of vessels across small, vulnerable regional bases (such as those in Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE). All of this hardware and personnel remain exposed to Iranian missile and drone strikes. In the recent

conflict, all of these air and naval bases were targeted with precision and high intensity by Iranian missiles and drones.

Fragility of Supply Lines: Given the potential blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, the logistical and supply lines sustaining this massive force have become highly fragile and heavily dependent on heavy airlift operations. In other words, for the elephant to survive inside the teacup, it must be continuously fed from the outside; however, the feeding passage (the Strait of Hormuz) faces a direct threat from the adversary, namely Iran. Strategic airlift has similarly fallen short, failing to provide effective logistical support.

3. The Elephant (The Military Superpower) in the Teacup (Limited Political Objectives)

Grand Objectives vs. Limited Instruments: United States objectives in a war against Iran (such as halting the nuclear program, eliminating Iran’s regional proxy forces, and achieving regime change or behavioral modification) are strategic

and long-term. Conversely, the instruments available to it in this conflict are restricted and tactical. Aerial bombardment cannot force Iran into submission, and a ground invasion constitutes strategic suicide given Iran’s strategic depth, vast geographical scale, and population size.

Reverse Gear for the Elephant: Just as an elephant inside a teacup can move neither forward nor backward, the United States finds itself gridlocked in a stalemate. Prolonging the war is highly prohibitive in cost, yet a retreat would mean conceding defeat and undermining its credibility both regionally and globally.

A Final Image: The Difference Between an Elephant and a Bee

In this conflict, Iran plays the role of the bee: operating not only within a restricted geographical space (the Strait of Hormuz) where the elephant cannot move freely, but also utilizing specific tactics (swarm attacks by fast attack crafts, unpredictable target selection, and low-cost weaponry contrasted against the exorbitant costs of US air defense systems). Consequently, the more powerful the elephant is, the more vulnerable and helpless it becomes.

Therefore, the “elephant in a teacup” metaphor precisely underscores the central riddle of this third imposed war. The world’s largest military superpower, constrained by geographical, political, and tactical limitations, is practically incapacitated from leveraging its full capabilities. Confronting a rational and asymmetric adversary, it remains trapped in a costly, futile stalemate.

The Primary Primary Sources of the American-Zionist Aggression against the IRI and Iran's Strategic Initiatives in this Conflict

Dr. Shahram Fattahi, Assistant Professor of International Relations and Secretary of the Governance and Legislation Think Tank of Kermanshah

The unquenchable tension and conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran on one side and the United States of America and Israel on the other constitutes one of the most enduring and complex geopolitical disputes in the contemporary international system. This confrontation, whose roots trace back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, has over the past decades manifested primarily through proxy wars, regional rivalries, economic sanctions, and intelligence and cyber warfare.

However, the military attacks by the US and Israel against Iran in June 2025, followed by the resurgence of hostilities in February 2026, represent a critical turning point in this conflict. For the first time, the military confrontation between these actors shifted into a phase of direct and overt clash.

These developments not only signaled a transformation in regional deterrence patterns but also demonstrated the convergence of a complex matrix of ideological, geopolitical, geo-economic, and strategic factors in shaping the war. Concurrently, Iran's response to these strikes was not merely defensive; rather, it encompassed an array of military, intelligence, and strategic initiatives that dangerously and surprisingly upended regional deterrence equations.

The present article seeks to examine the primary catalysts and root causes of the US-Israeli assault on Iran, while analyzing Iran's strategic initiatives and structural achievements over the course of this war.

1. Ideological Origins and Drivers

1-1. The Ideological Confrontation between the Is-



lamic Republic of Iran and Israel

One of the most critical dimensions of the Iran-Israel conflict is rooted in the ideological realm. Since its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran has defined its political identity within the framework of the discourse of the Islamic Revolution and support for anti-colonial, anti-occupation movements in the region. Within this matrix, the Palestinian issue became a core pillar of Iranian foreign policy. Israel, as the structural symbol of the occupation of Palestinian land, has been subjected to foundational, deconstructive criticism in the official discourse of the Islamic Republic, depicted as an illegitimate, abhorrent entity—a “cancerous tumor.” Conversely, Israel's security identity is deeply informed by the historical experiences of European Jewry, particularly shaped by the events and myths of the Holocaust and the Diaspora. From this

perspective, any potential threat to Israel's existence is categorized strictly as an existential threat. Consequently, the political discourse of the Islamic Republic, which fundamentally challenges Israel's legitimacy, has been perceived by Israeli leaders as an existential threat.

Over the past four decades, this ideological confrontation has gradually translated into acute military and security rivalries, establishing one of the most complex security dynamics in the Middle East. In other words, a discourse drawing sustenance from Ashura and Mahdism entered into an inevitable confrontation with the Armageddonist vision of the Zionists.

This clash of strategic narratives has positioned the concepts of regime change, behavior modification, or the restructuring of the political system of the Islamic Republic as long-term objectives within the Middle Eastern policies of both Zionists and

Evangelicals. Certain strategic documents from the 1990s, most notably the famous Clean Break report, explicitly emphasized the necessity of undermining regional states that provide support to Palestinian resistance factions.

In contrast, within Iran's security discourse, the United States is viewed as a hegemonic power seeking to contain or weaken the Islamic Republic. Within this framework, the cultivation of defensive and strategic capabilities—including the missile and nuclear programs—is pursued as an indispensable tool to guarantee state survival and maximize deterrence.

2. Geopolitical Factors

2-1. Regional Rivalry and the Network of Proxy Actors
A defining feature of the Iran-Israel rivalry in recent decades has been the cultivation of a network of non-state and proxy actors across the Middle East. By supporting groups such as Lebanese

Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and various resistance factions in Iraq and Syria, Iran has successfully established strategic depth against Israel—a strategic doctrine that can be termed the “New Doctrine of Peripheral and Transnational Defense.”

In response, Israel views this network as an immediate threat to its national security and has formulated an aggressive counter-strategy. Several Israeli analysts have likened this structure to the “Octopus Doctrine,” wherein Iran operates as the command center (the head) and the proxy groups function as its operational arms.

The October 7, 2023 attack on Israel and the subsequent regional escalation prompted Israel to adopt a far more aggressive posture toward the Axis of Resistance. A series of intensive military and intelligence operations, alongside targeted assassinations of the leadership and infrastructure of this axis throughout 2024 and 2025, formed a core component of this approach, effectively launching a war framed in terms reminiscent of the Crusades.

The defining and unique trait of such conflicts is the sense of sanctity surrounding them, which strips away conventional strategic calculations and can naturally yield highly unconventional and extraordinary outcomes. This ideological conviction is precisely what has unified the Iranian populace—despite domestic nuances and demands—and rendered the armed forces so formidable, resilient, and inspiring in one of the most lopsided asymmetric conflicts of the contemporary era.

On the other hand, another major catalyst for escalating regional tensions has been the formation of counter-alliances in the Middle East,



positioned directly against the Islamic Republic’s own alliance-building, which operates within the matrix of Shia geopolitics and primarily utilizes sub-national actors. The normalization and expansion of ties between Israel and several Arab states via the “Abraham Accords” introduced a new model of security convergence to the region.

These shifts have structurally altered the Middle Eastern security architecture, introducing highly volatile dimensions to the geopolitical rivalries among regional actors. In multiple instances, United States military installations in the region have functioned as logistical and operational command hubs, a factor that has spiked security sensitivities and pushed the irreconcilable duel between Iran and Israel to the absolute brink of open war.

3. Geo-economic Dimensions of the Crisis

The Persian Gulf remains one of the world’s most critical geo-economic zones, holding a vast percentage of global oil and gas reserves, with a massive share of global energy exports traversing its maritime shipping lanes. Within this arena, the Strait of Hormuz stands out as the world’s premier energy chokepoint.

Data consistently shows that a substantial portion of the global maritime oil trade passes through this narrow

strait (approximately 20%). For this reason, any military flare-up in this zone immediately impacts global energy markets, rapidly and severely shocking the global economy. Throughout various cycles of regional friction, the potential disruption of oil tankers transiting the Strait of Hormuz has remained a paramount concern for international markets.

Should this transit corridor face restrictions or a total blockade, the consequences would immediately manifest as spiking energy prices, severe disruptions in global supply chains, and intense economic pressure on industrialized nations. Consequently, ensuring freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz remains a cornerstone of international security calculations.

Parallel to this issue, economic sanctions have also acted as a primary driver of the crisis. Following the United States’ unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, economic sanctions against Iran were aggressively scaled up. Nevertheless, Iran has actively sought to mitigate these pressures by broadening its economic partnerships with global powers like China and Russia and designing alternative financial and trade mechanisms.

4. Strategic Dimensions of

the Conflict

At the strategic echelon, Iran’s nuclear program continues to serve as a primary axis of contention between Tehran and the West. In recent years, strategic analysts have frequently described the status of Iran’s nuclear program through the lens of “nuclear threshold status”—a concept denoting a state’s latent capacity to develop nuclear weapons rapidly, contingent solely upon a political directive.

Israel views this threshold status as an unacceptable threat to its national security and has historically deployed a wide array of instruments, particularly intelligence and cyber sabotage, to derail the program’s advancement. Concurrently, the United States has cycled through various policies ranging from maximum economic pressure to diplomatic negotiations to manage the issue. Nonetheless, the developments of 2025 and 2026 proved that this matter remains one of the most volatile flashpoints in Middle Eastern security. It provided a pretext for Zionist and Evangelical factions to initiate what they deemed “preemptive strikes”—first in June 2025 and again in February 2026. Their underlying objective was to decapitate Iranian leadership, statesmen, and military commanders, thereby forcing regime collapse, the partitioning of Iran, and the imposition of a “New Middle East” order where all political and economic pathways would fundamentally terminate in Tel Aviv.

However, a series of deeply flawed Hebrew, Western, and even Arab prior assumptions regarding the realities of the field and the asymmetric warfare imposed on Tehran proved to be miles apart from actual conditions, ultimately subjecting them to massive, costly, and devastating strategic surprises.