

Simon Mulongo argues that as the conflict drags on, perception is proving as powerful as firepower.

After more than 11,000 airstrikes, one fact refuses to cooperate with official optimism and Iran is still firing back.

These are more than 30 days into the war that commenced on February 28, with about 900 coordinated US and Israeli strike sorties within the first operational cycle, the conflict has evolved into a multidomain contest where kinetic outputs, statistical realities, and narrative constructions diverge with almost theatrical precision.

What was framed under Operation Epic Fury now resembles a prolonged demonstration of enduring warning, that war without clear political objectives degenerates into violence without direction, where effort accumulates but meaning dissipates.

At the strategic level, the most consequential failure is not operational but conceptual, because the war was initiated without clearly defined decisive objectives, without a structured end state, without an exit plan, and most critically, without alliance synchronisation, despite Western doctrine historically resting on coalition warfare as a force multiplier. In Nato operational planning frameworks, political consultation precedes military action, ensuring legitimacy, interoperability, and burden distribution. Here, that sequence was inverted. The US moved first and consulted later, only to discover that allies previously dismissed under "America First" were neither politically inclined nor strategically obligated to participate.

The statistical manifestation of this breakdown is evident in alliance behaviour. More than 60 percent of core Nato states either refused participation or restricted operational support through denial of airspace, logistics, or basing access. With Spain, France, and Italy imposing direct constraints while the United Kingdom declined combat involvement.

From an alliance theory perspective, this represents a measurable decline in collective action capacity, where the probability of coalition alignment drops significantly when prior trust erosion exceeds threshold levels.

At the operational level, the consequences of this isolation are equally quantifiable. The United States has conducted more than 11,000 strike events across 31 Iranian provinces, deploying B2 bombers, F35 platforms, carrier strike groups, and long range assets in what is arguably the most intensive air campaign since 1945.

Yet intelligence assessments confirm that only about one third of Iran's missile arsenal has been verifiably destroyed, another third degraded or concealed within hardened subterranean networks, and the remaining third remains unaccounted for. In statistical modelling terms, this produces a control confidence of roughly 33 percent with a residual uncertainty exceeding 60 percent, a distribution that falls well below the threshold required for decisive suppression.

This outcome reflects Iran's adoption of what military theorists would classify as distributed survivability doctrine, where redundancy, concealment, and mobility reduce vulnerability to precision strike systems.

From a tactical analytics perspective, Iran's strike efficiency has improved,



People at the site of a residential building in Tehran, Iran, that was damaged by an Israeli air strike on March 27. PHOTO/ REUTERS

Iran war: Misinformation and the fiction of victory

with reports indicating enhanced targeting precision against high value assets, including claims of damage to advanced platforms such as the E3 Sentry system at Prince Sultan Air Base. While verification remains contested, the implication is significant. In military terms, Iran is converting limited resources into sustained operational relevance.

Iran's strategy

Simultaneously, Iran has operationalised a doctrine of multidomain punishment, targeting not only military installations but systemic nodes within the adversary's operational ecosystem. The Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately 20 percent of global oil flows, has become the central theatre of strategic leverage.

By imposing selective control over maritime transit, Iran has effectively transformed geography into economic coercion. Oil prices have responded accordingly, with volatility increasing.

This approach aligns with modern concepts of systems warfare, where the objective is not territorial conquest but the degradation of interconnected networks that sustain adversary power. Iran's strategy is, therefore, less about defeating the United States militarily and more about increasing the marginal cost of continued engagement to politically unsustainable levels.

And here the philosophical dimension begins to intrude with almost comedic irony. President Donald Trump continues to assert that victory is near, that Iranian capabilities have been "decimated," and that the war could conclude within two to three weeks, even as missile waves continue. This is not merely optimism. It is strategic narrative management, an application of

perception dominance doctrine where the objective is to shape domestic and international belief irrespective of empirical conditions.

Western media ecosystems have played their role with disciplined selectivity. Israeli censorship has constrained reporting on strike impacts and vulnerabilities, while US outlets emphasise initial successes and minimise ongoing challenges.

The result is an information environment where the observable data set is incomplete by design. Iran, by contrast, has adopted an alternative strategic communications model, openly announcing targets, publicising strike outcomes, and integrating humour, symbolism, and digital messaging into its diplomatic posture.

The contrast is striking. One side restricts information to preserve narrative coherence. The other amplifies information to reinforce deterrence credibility. Both are engaged in information warfare, but their methods reveal dif-

ferent underlying strategic cultures.

Meanwhile, Israel's operational strain introduces another layer of complexity. Engaged across multiple fronts, including Gaza, southern Lebanon, and sustained Iranian missile pressure, the Israel Defence Forces face measurable manpower and resource constraints. The consideration of extending mandatory military service reflects a transition toward protracted conflict conditions, with economic and social implications that extend beyond the battlefield.

Yet perhaps the most surreal dimension of this conflict lies in its political theatre. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's limited physical appearances and reliance on controlled video communications have fuelled speculation, not always grounded but persistently circulating, about the nature of leadership presence in a highly mediated environment.

In conditions of extreme censorship, where independent verification is constrained, the boundary between physical reality and constructed imagery becomes increasingly porous. One is tempted to observe, with cautious humour, that in modern warfare even existence can be strategically curated.

And so the war proceeds, not toward resolution but toward escalation risk. History suggests that such transitions rarely produce clarity. They produce consequences.

Within this evolving landscape, Iran's position remains paradoxical. Despite absorbing significant damage, including thousands of casualties and infrastructural losses, the state retains functional coherence, residual deterrent capability, and strategic leverage through Hormuz.

From a statistical standpoint, Iran has achieved strategic denial, preventing

its adversaries from converting overwhelming superiority into decisive outcomes.

The broader implication extends into the realm of international relations theory. The post 1945 order, built on multilateralism, legal restraint, and alliance cohesion, is visibly eroding.

What emerges in its place resembles a hybrid system where power is exercised unilaterally, legality is selectively interpreted, and alliances function conditionally. The war on Iran is not an anomaly. It is a symptom.

And in that sense, the final irony is unavoidable. A war launched without clear objectives, without allies, and without an exit plan has succeeded in demonstrating precisely what it sought to deny, that power without strategy is noise, that dominance without legitimacy is fragile, and that in the long arc of history, arrogance is not a force multiplier but a liability.

Or, to put it less politely, one cannot bomb one's way out of a problem one never properly defined.

The writer is a PhD candidate and works with EMANS Frontiers Ltd., Governance & Security Consultants.

