



Iran: War, Escalation and the Aftermath

Sir David Capewell, Former UK Chief of Joint Operations



Sir David Capewell

A year ago, Sir David Capewell joined Saranac's webinar series and singled out Iran as one of the geopolitical flashpoints most likely to produce military action. The intervening twelve months have proved his assessment correct. A former senior British military commander with direct experience of planning for precisely this kind of operation, Sir David returned to offer both strategic framework and operational candour on a situation that is, as he was quick to note, still very much in motion. What emerged was a picture not of a contained military episode but of a conflict with deep structural misalignments, unpredictable escalation pathways, and consequences that will outlast every political cycle now in play.

The objectives are real but misaligned

Sir David opened by reaching for Clausewitz: the supreme act of statesmanship is to define what kind of war one wishes to embark upon before embarking on it. By that measure, all three principal actors have fallen short. The US, Israel and Iran each entered with distinct and incompatible aims. Coherent objectives are not the same as aligned ones, and that absence of alignment is the overarching character of what is unfolding.

The objectives of this conflict are misaligned across all three belligerents

No other nation on earth can execute what the American military machine has executed here

Among the most significant observations of the session was Sir David's assessment of what the campaign has revealed about the state of American military capability. The operation being executed bears a resemblance to plans he was co-responsible for with American counterparts twenty years ago. What is categorically different now is the agency afforded by artificial intelligence, automation and autonomy. No other nation on the planet could execute what is being executed. The message this sends is directed not only at Iran but at every power that aligned against the United States. For allies, the message is equally pointed: you are either embedded in this complex industrial capability, or you are not.

Escalation: horizontal and vertical

Iran's asymmetric strategy is drawing Gulf neighbours into the conflict, multiplying the cost of any settlement

Two escalation pathways dominated the analytical portion of the session. The first is horizontal. In asymmetric conflict, the weaker party's strategic skill lies in ensuring the confrontation does not become a conventional one. Iran is doing precisely this, drawing neighbouring Gulf states into the orbit of the conflict and complicating any future path to negotiation. Turkey presents a particular complication through the Kurdish question and pressures on its southern flank, making it a prominent player in whatever stability operation eventually follows.

The second pathway is vertical: both sides are doubling down. American and Israeli strikes are intensifying; the IRGC is sustaining resistance through drones and autonomous systems. The concern Sir David raised here was not nuclear, but radiological. Forces retain access to uranium and high-grade explosives. A dirty bomb detonated by a faction within the orbit of Iran is not an implausible scenario and would trigger a response that could rapidly become uncontrollable.

The Strait of Hormuz and the limits of US withdrawal

The Strait of Hormuz is the pivotal escalation flashpoint of the conflict

The Strait of Hormuz sits at the centre of the vertical escalation risk. In the Iran-Iraq war, mines in the strait took months to clear, in some cases years, at a time when allied minesweeping capability was substantial. That capability barely exists today. The mining of the strait, or the loss of a major American or allied vessel, would likely produce a further escalation from which it would be very difficult to withdraw.

Sir David was consistent and emphatic on one point: the military operation, formidable as it is, will prove to be the simpler part of what lies ahead. The aftermath presents difficulties of a different order. The notion of the Iranian people rising spontaneously to form a new government he assessed as close to far-fetched, not out of cynicism but out of an understanding of the sectarian complexity of Iranian society. The de-Baathification parallel from Iraq is apt and alarming: factions are many, agendas diverge, and radical elements will be actively seeking to exploit the chaos as a staging ground against the West.

Key takeaways

- **Objectives misaligned across all parties.** The US, Israel and Iran each entered this conflict with incompatible aims. The absence of alignment makes any negotiated settlement structurally difficult.
- **American military capability is unmatched.** The integration of AI, automation and autonomy into US operations sends a clear message to China, Russia and every adversarial power.
- **Escalation risk is real and two-directional.** Horizontal escalation draws in Turkey and Gulf neighbours; vertical escalation through the doubling down of strikes raises the prospect of a radiological incident or the mining of Hormuz.
- **The aftermath will outlast the fighting.** Sectarian fragmentation, the absence of an obvious negotiation convener and the de-Baathification precedent make stabilisation the harder challenge by far.
- **AGI is closer than public timelines acknowledge.** The war in Iran offers a first glimpse of what that future looks like in the field. The race between democracies and autocracies to harness it is already underway.

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