The Invisible Battlefield: How the U.S.–Iran Conflict Reshapes the Lives of Ordinary People

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People in Iran assembling for an evening solidarity gathering. Photo by Sina Drakhshani (Unsplash).

Military conflicts are traditionally judged by battlefield outcomes, territorial change and the achievement of strategic objectives. This essay argues that these measures, while important, no longer provide a complete understanding of modern warfare. Using the U.S.–Iran conflict as a case study, it examines how contemporary war extends beyond the battlefield into economic systems, political institutions, and the psychological lives of ordinary people. Its central argument is that modern conflict increasingly tests the resilience of societies as well as the effectiveness of their armed forces.

The battlefield no longer ends where the fighting stops.

Every war produces visible casualties. Soldiers are killed, civilians lose their lives, infrastructure is destroyed, and governments calculate the military cost of conflict. These losses rightly dominate headlines and military

assessments because they are immediate, measurable, and deeply tragic. They become the statistics by which wars are remembered and, frequently, the measures by which victory or defeat is judged.

Yet modern warfare also produces consequences that are considerably harder to count.

They can be found in the Iranian graduate questioning whether a future still exists at home, the American family paying more for fuel and household necessities, the European manufacturer confronting unpredictable energy costs, and the farmer in a developing economy facing higher fertiliser and food prices. None belongs in the same category as those killed, injured or displaced by war. Yet all may experience consequences created by political and military decisions made thousands of miles away.

The United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report 1994 challenged the traditional state-centred understanding of security by arguing that security should concern people as well as territory. Its concept of human security broadened the discussion beyond national borders and military capability to include the economic and social conditions that allow individuals to live with dignity and reasonable confidence in their future (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994).

Three decades later, the U.S.–Iran conflict demonstrates the continuing relevance of that idea. Economic and technological interdependence has reduced the protection once provided by geography. Military confrontation in one region can rapidly affect energy markets, international shipping, investment, inflation, and household finances elsewhere.

This essay therefore asks a question conventional military analysis can overlook:

When governments wage war, who ultimately pays the price?

The New Battlefield

Not all battlefields are marked on military maps.

Clausewitz (1976) understood war as an instrument of politics. Military force was not an end in itself but a means through which political objectives could be pursued. That insight remains fundamental. What has changed is the international environment through which military action now produces consequences.

Globalisation has created societies dependent upon international energy markets, financial networks, digital infrastructure and complex supply chains. Keohane and Nye (2012) describe the interdependence created by such relationships: states remain politically sovereign while becoming increasingly exposed to economic developments occurring beyond their borders. Military conflict can therefore travel through these systems even when armies do not.

The Strait of Hormuz provides perhaps the clearest contemporary example. What appears on a map as a narrow maritime passage connects

Gulf energy producers with consumers throughout the world. Disruption therefore creates consequences extending far beyond the immediate military theatre. The World Bank (2026) estimates that the Middle East conflict has contributed to higher energy prices, greater inflationary pressure and weaker economic growth, forecasting global growth of 2.5 per cent in 2026. It also warns that higher fertiliser prices could feed through into food costs, creating particular difficulties for developing economies (World Bank, 2026).

Energy markets have become strategic terrain

The consequences do not stop with oil. Energy is embedded within transportation, agriculture, manufacturing, and household consumption. When energy prices rise, transporting food becomes more expensive, manufacturing costs increase, and businesses reconsider investment. The OECD (2026) identifies the Middle East conflict as the dominant force shaping the present global economic outlook, with the energy shock pushing inflation higher and weakening growth.

This does not mean that every increase in the price of groceries or gasoline should be described as an act of war. Such language would exaggerate the argument. Rather, it demonstrates how the indirect consequences of military confrontation can be transmitted through systems upon which modern societies depend.

Schelling (1966) argued that coercion concerns influencing an opponent's calculations rather than merely destroying its military capabilities. Today those calculations extend into energy security, financial confidence, infrastructure and public opinion. The ability of societies to absorb disruption has therefore become increasingly relevant to strategic power.

The battlefield now includes the institutions that allow societies to function.

The Iranian Citizen: Patriotism, Uncertainty and the Hope for Change

Nowhere is the distinction between military security and human security more important than inside Iran.

It is tempting for outside observers to interpret Iranian society through a simple political division: those supporting the Islamic Republic and those seeking its replacement. Such a distinction fails to capture the complexity of public opinion. Citizens can criticise their government while defending national sovereignty, desire political reform while fearing instability, or resent economic hardship while opposing foreign military intervention.

Research conducted after the June 2025 Twelve-Day War demonstrates this complexity. Gallagher, Ramsay and Mohseni (2025) found notable evidence of a rally-round-the-flag effect among Iranian respondents, including positive assessments of aspects of the government's and military's

wartime performance. Yet the same research found continuing political and economic discontent, with six in ten respondents identifying the economy or aspects of it as Iran's greatest challenge.

That distinction matters.

Mueller's (1970) classic work on the rally effect helps explain why external military threats can strengthen national solidarity without necessarily resolving underlying political grievances. An Iranian citizen may therefore support the defence of the country without supporting every aspect of the political system governing it.

Equally, dissatisfaction with that system should not automatically be interpreted as support for foreign intervention.

War introduces another emotion into this already complicated relationship: uncertainty. Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) Prospect Theory demonstrates the importance of potential losses in decision-making under uncertainty. Its central insight is that people tend to weigh losses more heavily than equivalent gains, so the prospect of losing what they already have can outweigh the promise of something better. Applied cautiously to wartime society, this framework offers a useful way of considering why individuals confronting an unpredictable future may become increasingly reluctant to take risks. When the range of possible outcomes includes severe and sudden loss, caution often appears more rational than ambition. The effects are visible in everyday choices. Families postpone major purchases. Entrepreneurs delay investment. Graduates reconsider whether to build careers at home. Parents question whether their children will inherit greater opportunity or prolonged insecurity. Each decision, taken alone, seems prudent, yet together they can slow the wider economic and social recovery that the population ultimately depends upon.

These decisions will never appear in military casualty figures. Yet collectively they can reshape a country.

The economic background makes these decisions still more difficult. The International Monetary Fund currently projects that Iran's economy will contract by 5.4 per cent in 2026, while consumer-price inflation reaches 68.9 per cent (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2026a). Such figures are macroeconomic measurements, yet for ordinary citizens they translate into tangible pressures. A shrinking economy and rising prices mean that the same income buys less, eroding purchasing power in everyday life. Likewise, fast-rising prices reduce the value of savings, creating uncertainty over how households can protect what they have. Together, these conditions force families into increasingly difficult decisions about the future.

This is where the psychology of the conflict becomes particularly difficult to interpret. War may strengthen attachment to the nation while simultaneously increasing frustration with the circumstances in which people live. These two responses do not necessarily cancel each other out. A person may feel a deep loyalty to their country and, at the same time, resent the economic hardship, insecurity or political failures that the war has exposed

or deepened. Each feeling can coexist with the other, and neither is easily reduced to the other.

The same ambiguity appears in how people look ahead. War may generate hope among some that political change will follow, since the upheaval itself can seem to open a path towards reform. Others, however, fear that change imposed through war will produce greater instability rather than improvement. Such concerns are not confined to separate groups of people. Both emotions may exist within the same individual, pulling in opposite directions as they weigh the costs and possibilities of the conflict. This internal tension is what makes the psychological dimension of the conflict so difficult to read from the outside.

We should therefore resist claiming to know what "the Iranian people" want.

There is no single Iranian response.

What the available evidence allows us to say is more restrained, and perhaps more important. External threat can strengthen national solidarity, but it does not necessarily extinguish aspirations for economic, political or social change. In other words, a shared sense of danger may bind a population together without silencing the demands its members already hold. Solidarity and reform can therefore coexist, and analysts should avoid assuming that one must displace the other.

Perhaps one of the least visible costs is, therefore, expectation itself. Roads and buildings can eventually be reconstructed once the resources and political will are in place. Restoring confidence is a far more demanding task. People must come to believe again that education will produce opportunity, that savings will retain their value, and that tomorrow will be more secure than today. Each of these beliefs rests on years of stable institutions and predictable conditions, and once they are shaken, rebuilding them may take considerably longer than repairing physical damage.

The American Citizen: A Distant War Comes Home

The experience of Americans is fundamentally different.

Most Americans do not confront bombardment, displacement or the destruction of their communities. Equating their experience with that of civilians living inside the conflict would diminish the severity of what those populations endure.

But distance does not mean immunity.

For Americans, the conflict arrives primarily through economic, political, and personal channels. Energy prices provide the most obvious example. When disruption in the Gulf reduces global supply or raises fears about future availability, the consequences can reach American consumers through fuel and transportation costs before spreading more widely through the economy.

The IMF's July 2026 outlook found that the global disinflation process had stalled, with global headline inflation revised upward to 4.7 per cent for 2026 (IMF, 2026b). Importantly, however, the IMF also concluded that the international economy had weathered the war-related shock better than initially feared, helped by inventories, expanded production outside the Gulf, renewable energy and declining energy intensity.

That qualification matters.

A serious assessment of war should not select only the evidence that supports a predetermined argument. Consider the international economy. The conflict has clearly disrupted it, with supply chains interrupted and prices pushed upwards. Yet the same system has also demonstrated an ability to adapt, as trade routes were redirected and producers found alternative markets. This pattern matters for the wider debate. Resilience is therefore not merely something war threatens, to be counted only as a loss. It is one of the mechanisms through which societies limit the consequences of war. Recognising this does not deny the damage done. It simply places that damage within a fuller account of how economies and communities absorb shocks.

At household level, however, inflation and uncertainty alter behaviour in ways that ripple outward. Families begin to reconsider discretionary expenditure, postponing or cancelling purchases that they would otherwise have made without hesitation. Prospective homebuyers confront uncertainty over affordability and interest rates, which makes it harder to judge whether a mortgage commitment will remain manageable over time. Retirees, who depend on the steady value of their savings and investments, become more cautious about how they hold them. Businesses, in turn, reconsider expansion when future costs become more difficult to predict, since investment decisions rely on reasonable expectations of what production and borrowing will cost.

Again, none of these experiences is comparable to physical injury, bereavement, or displacement. Their significance lies elsewhere. They demonstrate something different: the ability of geographically distant conflict to penetrate civilian life through economic systems. Ordinary households feel the effects not through the battlefield itself but through the prices, supply chains and markets that connect them to it.

There is also a human burden much closer to the traditional experience of war. Behind every military deployment stand families who live with the possibility of injury, escalation or loss. Their anxiety rarely appears in strategic assessments, which tend to measure objectives, capabilities and risks in terms of forces and territory rather than the daily lives of those at home. That omission matters. This anxiety is one of the most direct ways a distant war enters American homes, shaping how the public understands a conflict long before it reaches headlines or policy debates.

The political consequences are becoming visible as well. A Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted five months into the war found only 35 per cent of Amer-

icans supporting it, while half expected the conflict to leave the Middle East more chaotic rather than more stable (Reuters/Ipsos, 2026). These figures matter because democratic governments depend on sustained public backing to pursue long campaigns, and falling support narrows the room for manoeuvre available to policymakers. Public confidence in the purpose and outcome of military action is therefore no longer a background consideration. It is itself becoming part of the strategic environment, shaping what governments can credibly promise, how long they can sustain operations, and how adversaries and allies judge their resolve.

The American experience reinforces rather than contradicts the essay's central argument. Modern conflict affects different populations with radically different levels of severity. Its consequences, however, are no longer confined to those geographically closest to the fighting. Distant societies can feel its effects through trade disruption, migration flows and shifts in public opinion. This means that the reach of a conflict is determined less by distance than by the connections that link one society to another. Read in this light, the American case illustrates the essay's point rather than complicating it.

When the World Pays

The argument becomes more striking when the people bearing the consequences belong to neither belligerent.

The World Bank's June 2026 assessment describes the Middle East conflict as a major shock to the international economy. Higher energy prices, greater inflation and borrowing costs are expected to weaken global growth, while developing economies face particularly difficult conditions. Growth in developing economies is projected to fall to 3.6 per cent in 2026, compared with 4.4 per cent in 2025 (World Bank, 2026).

Consider the chain of consequences.

Conflict disrupts energy supplies. Energy prices rise. Shipping and manufacturing become more expensive. Fertiliser costs increase. Food production becomes more expensive. Households thousands of miles from the battlefield pay more for basic necessities.

No missile needs to reach them.

This is where economic interdependence becomes both a strength and a vulnerability. The same systems that allow goods, capital and energy to move efficiently during periods of peace also transmit disruption during periods of conflict.

The consequences are not distributed equally. Advanced economies generally possess greater financial capacity to diversify energy supplies, support industries, or cushion vulnerable households. Developing economies frequently possess fewer options. The OECD (2026) warns that prolonged disruption would impose particularly severe economic and social costs on countries most exposed to energy and food-price shocks.

Those least responsible for a conflict may sometimes be among those least able to afford its consequences

A farmer facing higher fertiliser prices, a manufacturer confronting rising energy costs and a family spending a greater proportion of its income on food are not casualties in the conventional meaning of the word. But they are bearing part of the cost.

That distinction is essential. The idea of the invisible battlefield should broaden our understanding of war, not trivialise its physical horrors.

Rethinking Victory

This brings us to the central policy question.

How should victory be measured?

Traditional strategic analysis asks whether military objectives were achieved, whether an adversary's capabilities were degraded and whether deterrence was restored. Governments and armed forces must continue asking these questions.

But they should also ask others.

Did society withstand the economic shock? Did political institutions retain legitimacy? Did critical infrastructure continue functioning? Did citizens retain confidence in the future?

Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) argue that security extends across military, political, economic and societal sectors. The U.S.–Iran conflict demonstrates the usefulness of that broader framework. A country may possess formidable armed forces while remaining vulnerable through energy dependence, economic instability, damaged infrastructure or political fragmentation.

This does not replace Clausewitz. It extends the question he posed about the relationship between military force and political purpose.

If military action exists to produce greater political security, then the condition of society after military action matters. Tactical success that produces lasting economic weakness, political instability or diminished national confidence cannot automatically be regarded as complete strategic victory.

National resilience therefore deserves a more prominent place within strategic analysis.

Resilience is not passive endurance. It is the capacity of a society to absorb disruption without losing the institutions, economic functions and public confidence upon which national power ultimately depends.

This has practical implications. Energy diversification becomes part of security policy. Protecting digital and physical infrastructure becomes security policy. Maintaining trusted institutions becomes security policy. Preserving supply chains and emergency reserves becomes security policy.

Military power remains indispensable.

But the society it exists to protect is itself part of national power.

Modern strategic planning must therefore evolve to account for this multidimensional reality. If security is no longer confined to physical borders or active combat zones, national defense must encompass the stabilization of domestic and global systems. A state that can neutralize enemy firepower but succumbs to domestic inflation, fragmented supply networks, or systemic public distrust has achieved only a hollow victory. Preparing for conflict in the twenty-first century requires bridging the traditional divide between civilian governance and strategic defense, treating economic health, civil cohesion, and infrastructural integrity not as secondary concerns, but as primary pillars of national security.

Ultimately, recognizing the existence of invisible battlefields requires a fundamental shift in how leaders evaluate both the decision to enter conflict and the criteria for ending it. War can no longer be viewed as a localized contest of force, isolated from the delicate networks that sustain everyday life. Every strategic decision ripples through global markets, national institutions, and individual households, leaving marks that linger long after active hostilities cease. True strategic wisdom lies in understanding that winning a war involves more than defeating an opponent on the battlefield; it requires safeguarding the complex, fragile ecosystems of modern human society so that peace, when it returns, leaves a world still capable of thriving.

Conclusion

The U.S.–Iran conflict will eventually be assessed through familiar measures. Analysts will count casualties, calculate expenditure, examine weapons performance and determine which strategic objectives were achieved.

Those assessments will be necessary.

They will not be sufficient.

The Iranian graduate reconsidering a future at home, the American household absorbing higher costs, the European manufacturer postponing investment and the farmer confronting higher agricultural inputs occupy profoundly different circumstances. Their experiences should never be treated as equivalent.

What connects them is something else.

Their lives have been altered by political and military decisions over which they exercise almost no control.

That is the invisible battlefield.

It does not replace the physical battlefield. Nor does it turn every economic inconvenience into a casualty of war. Rather, it reveals an additional dimension of contemporary conflict: military confrontation now travels rapidly through the economic, political and psychological systems upon which ordinary life depends.

The policy implication is straightforward. Governments preparing for future conflicts must think beyond military resilience. Energy security, eco-

nomic adaptability, infrastructure, institutional trust and social cohesion increasingly form part of strategic power.

Perhaps this is how the U.S.–Iran conflict should ultimately be remembered—not only for what happened on the battlefield, but for what it revealed about warfare beyond it.

History will ask who won.

We should also ask who paid the price.

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