

# No More the Rhetoric of Regime Change

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President Donald Trump speaks to reporters as he walks to board Marine One on the South Lawn of the White House, Friday, May 8, 2026, in Washington. Photo: AP/PTI

Senior officials in the US army no longer describe their Iran campaign as one to topple the regime. Instead, they now say that it is to **reduce the military capabilities** of the Islamic republic. The war which US and its ally Israel thought will be like 'bang and done' is shaking the world for the past two months.

Brent crude oil prices have gone up to **\$107** leading to several spill-over effects in other sectors. Experts estimate the normalisation time that will be needed for oil and gas markets can be months. Even if the war stopped today, the damages it has caused will need **3-5 years to recover** and get back to the pre-war levels. Political leaders around the world have likened it to the Covid-led emergency situation.

Trump's ratings are **at all time low** with 58% in disapproval. Plus, a clear win over Iran looks illusive. All this has made Trump shaky and trying to wash his hands off as soon as possible, although his **Gulf allies want US to continue the war** till a decisive victory over Iran is reached.

## Iranians rally behind existing regime

John Mueller found that approval ratings of American presidents in the past has always been highest during external aggression. People have an increased sense of patriotism during such times of duress. They tend to rally 'round-the-flag'.

Exactly this is what is happening in Iran. Rather than bringing over a regime change, this aggression by US-Israel has reinstated the Islamic regime in Iran for some time to come. There are no signs of any popular unrest amongst the civilians. People now see Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as a martyr, and not what the US wants them to believe that he was a criminal who brutally ruled the country for 47 years. Besides civilians, top echelons have further solidified their hold on power under the leadership of Revolutionary Guards and Mojtaba Khamenei.

What has actually happened, along with a long-term economic crisis, is destabilisation of west Asia, resurgence of Shi'a-Sunni divide, animosity between the Iran and Arab nations, and more fuel for future conflict.

This all looks like the repeat show of the same play in different stages – Afghanistan, Iraq, and now Iran. Apparently, lessons learnt from the two earlier campaigns, which lasted 20 and eight years respectively, could not garner sanity.

Triggered by the 9/11 attacks on the US, Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2001 was quick. Fighting alongside the Northern Alliance and other anti-Taliban forces, US and its allies were able to defeat the then Taliban government in a matter of two months. The **Bonn Agreement of 2001** installed a relatively democratic interim government in the country under the tribal leader Hamid Karzai. US was, to some extent, able to bring about a regime change and secure democracy in Afghanistan for some time.

Although initial campaign was swift, it dragged America into the longest war in its history lasting approximately 20 years (2001-2021). The Taliban did not vanish after being ousted from Afghanistan. They regrouped in the rural areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan and trained to become more intense and improvised explosives.

In 2021, they returned to the same position as they were in 2001. They put ban on women's education and work, rampant human rights violation ensued. In the process of 20 years, over **46,000 Afghan civilians were killed and over 5-6 million displaced**.

The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan raised questions on the role and **effectiveness of external powers in nation building**. Several interviews conducted by the Special Inspector General of Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) noted that there was no clear strategy,

nor was a chance of clear victory. The agenda for the campaign kept changing from eradicating Al Qaeda to state-building, etc.

Operation Iraqi Freedom began in March 2003 even though no evidence of active Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programme was found in the country. This hasty invasion became a scar for US foreign policy and dragged it into a bloody eight-year-long war with mounting financial and human cost.

In Iraq, **276000-3,08000 total direct war deaths** were recorded from 2003-2019. The then US president George W. Bush was determined to clean the "**Axis of Evil**" containing, Iraq, North Korea and Iran. The "**One Per cent' doctrine** that proposed that even if there is 1% threat to America from any country/regime, it needs to be neutralised.

In case of Iraq war, Bush enjoyed the support from the Congress. Although some skeptics were not comfortable with it, but in the absence of UN support, they also bowed down eventually. Post 9/11, **Bush's approval ratings were remarkably high**. It shot up from an average 50% in early 2001 to 86% by end of September 2002.

The Iraqi government collapsed in April and Saddam Hussein was captured by Dec 2003 and then executed in 2006. For Bush, mission was accomplished and a significant step was made in the "War on Terrorism". Bush was largely mistaken as the legacy continued for next 8 years.

The brutal insurgency that followed in Iraq ensued resulted in the deaths of 4,500 US troops, more than 300 other coalition forces and the displacement of innumerable Iraqis. Financially it drained out over \$3 trillion from the US exchequer. By the end of 2011, when US troops withdrew, Iraq had become a rogue state under the ISIS.

The Iraq invasion sowed the **seeds of militancy and terrorism** across the world. It heightened anti-Americanism not only in the Middle East but worldwide. According to historian Kimber Quinney of University of California, San Marcos, Iraq invasion spread the red carpet for human suffering for centuries to come.

## **Post 9/11 wars**

Dr Savell from Watson School of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, estimated **3.6-3.8 million indirect deaths** in conflict zones – Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen – post 9/11. Conflicts after the twin-tower attack gravitated towards civil wars, insurgencies and terrorism.

Militants led by Taliban in Afghanistan **increased its attacks on US and NATO forces** since it returned to power in 2021. Al Qaeda overtime has matured and is in the process of

integrating itself as local sociopolitical force in countries where it has branches. In 2020, Al Qaeda had around **30,000-40,000 members** in various countries.

In the last twenty years during the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns, US had focused more on military strategy than the socioeconomic problems of common people in these countries, which has been the fodder of the jihadis. Salafi-jihadists have used carefully the instability caused by the US wars which is helping their recruitment process as well. Withdrawal of American troops from both Afghanistan and Iraq left the region more vulnerable than it was earlier.

### **US military-industrial complex**

In this whole scheme of things, the sole gainer is the defence industry, with stakeholders such as Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, etc. **US spends over \$1 trillion in defence**, of which 54% of Pentagon spending goes to private firms. These private contractors have made war a profitable business.

With the advent of AI use in military operations, the relation between war and industry has moved to new heights. In Gaza, algorithm processed data on all people living in the strip based on their phone records, social connections, movement patterns is available. These humans are then converted into a list of targets. **One such system produced 37,000 such targets in the first week of Iran war.**

The companies associated with this system are **global giants** like Palantir (one of the primary infrastructure provider to US military), Anthropic, OpenAI, Google (Project Nimbus with Israeli defense worth \$1bn), Microsoft, Anduril (builds weapons for lethal targeting), and more. These companies are not neutral provider of war infrastructure, rather an integral part of modern warfare. They earn profit as long as war continues in different parts of the world. US has been a primary supplier of AI powered subsidised weapons to Israel.

The killing of 158 school children in Minab on grounds of the school being **identified by the algorithm as a military target** will not haunt the owners of Microsoft, OpenAI, Amazon Web Services, etc. But it will definitely lead to more grievances and more bloodshed in days to come.

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