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When the War is Over



Tim Jones served in the UK Foreign Service for more than 40 years, including as Ambassador to Tajikistan and Armenia as well as being Chargé d’Affaires in Tehran. He was seconded to the EU Council Secretariat as Chief of Staff to the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, as well as to the EEAS and the EU Administration of Mostar (Bosnia). He has covered the full spectrum of international Economic issues, including in the British Embassy in Berlin during the Brexit negotiations, and has wider experience of law enforcement cooperation and crisis management.

What is the emerging outlook for post-war relations between Iran and its Arab neighbours in the Gulf?

Iran will see itself as having won a strategic victory both because the regime has stayed in place and also because the US has implicitly recognised Iran’s control over the Straits of Hormuz. Iran is back to being the regional power that it was under the Shah, who supported Kurdish rebels against the then Government of Iraq and sent troops to Oman to fight rebels supported from Yemen. The Shah was also the father of the Iranian nuclear programme, willing to sign the NPT so long as this did not set him at a disadvantage to his neighbours.

The regime that is emerging from the smoke of assassination strikes is based around a hard core of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, many of them veterans of the eight year “imposed war”, when Iraq launched ballistic missiles at Iranian cities. The regime remains notionally Islamic, but it is increasingly absurd to call it a “theocracy” - Clerics generally hold no particular power by virtue of being clerics. Ali Khamenei’s credentials as a “Grand Ayatollah” were always shaky, his son’s even more so. We now have a Stalinist variation on Khomeinism, in which the only real ideology is the regime’s own self-interest. The IRGC’s tentacles, strengthened by years of control over the black international economy that developed under sanctions, put it in a position of power not unlike that of the SS under the Nazis.

While the regime is becoming less Islamic, Shi’ism remains deeply significant as a national unifier. Iran became Shi’ite at much the same time as England became Protestant and for similar reasons. It was a rejection of the pretensions of the Ottoman Sultan to be world-wide “Leader of the Faithful”. The religious ceremonies that mobilise Iran are those that distinguish the country as Shi’a, in particular Ashura (this year 26 June). This is an extravagant commemoration of the Martyrdom of the Prophet’s grandson Hussein in a hopeless battle against vastly superior forces, idealising noble suffering as a form of victory.

The regime is now confident that regime change is only possible through invasion and military occupation and that this is not going to happen. Also that, as the US and Israel will not be satisfied with anything short of regime change, any deals will be in the form of short-term ceasefires; a sustainable peace is not achievable. The hard liners will point to the collapse of the JCPOA and

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the June 2025 attacks of last year as proof that concessions to the US get Iran nowhere. They have achieved their current leverage by brutality, both internal and external.

In the past it was possible to believe that Iran would be satisfied not actually to possess nuclear weapons but knowing that it had the technology to produce one if necessary. The regime might well now see no downside in having the real thing. And it has no real incentive to negotiate about this in a situation in which it believes that there is no solution ultimately acceptable to the United States in which the current regime survives.

Iran's southern neighbours need to find a way to assure their security in a situation in which simply relying on US protection has been shown to be insufficient. A complicating factor is that tensions which were already growing between the UAE and Saudi Arabia have spread into policy towards Iran: the UAE has moved from "armed neutrality" to directly attacking Iran. This in turn seems to be exposing tensions within the UAE where rulers closer to Iran (such as the Emir of Sharjah, who shares with Iran the Island of Abu Musa) are apparently unhappy with the direction being taken by Abu Dhabi.

Any stable ceasefire seems likely to turn into a "cold war" between Iran and some, at least, of its southern neighbours. Is there a way out of this?

For decades post-war Europe and the USSR engaged in a cold war, which at times threatened to spill over into nuclear conflict. There were also tensions within each side, especially following de Gaulle's return to power in France in 1958. Nevertheless, in the course of the early 1970s it was possible for them to negotiate the "Helsinki Accords", and later to agree on arms control measures. An essential foundation of this process was an evolving set of "Confidence Building Measures" (CBMs) which gave all the parties reassurances that their partners in the process remained committed.

The Iranian regime is deeply mistrustful. However, it does have a mutual interest with its neighbours in regional stability and in issues like freedom of navigation, putting certain infrastructure "off limits" for military action and observation of military exercises. These interests and a common NPT obligation to submit all nuclear material to international monitoring can become a shared source of confidence. Patient and reliable development of CBMs would start to create a basis of trust, which could be expanded over time into a more solid regional security structure.

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