The Iranian Crisis and Russia: Seven Lessons

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The massive Israeli and U.S. airstrikes on Iran hardly came as a complete surprise. For several months, the U.S.-Israeli strike force had been concentrating in the Persian Gulf. Tense negotiations between Iran and the United States had stalled and were unlikely to yield progress.

The deaths of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, members of his family, and a number of senior military and political figures have sent shockwaves through the region. Iran has retaliated with missile strikes against Israel and U.S. infrastructure in the area. The military operation has already disrupted maritime oil shipments in the Persian Gulf and the financial and logistical hubs of the UAE and Qatar. Iran stands a good chance of withstanding the assault, as a full-scale ground invasion appears unlikely. However, the strikes

will further erode the country's industrial base, deepen its economic crisis, and impoverish its population. Should Iran manage to endure this round of aggression, it is unlikely to be the last—unless the current attacks prove prohibitively costly for the aggressors.

The situation offers several important lessons for Russia.

LESSON 1: SANCTIONS ARE FOLLOWED BY MILITARY FORCE

The U.S. has imposed sanctions on Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Iran withstood this economic pressure, but the damage has been significant, growing as Washington managed to expand the coalition of sanctioning countries, internationalizing restrictions through the UN Security Council, and persuading third countries to halt purchases of Iranian oil. Moreover, the U.S. and its allies repeatedly supplemented these sanctions with assassinations of nuclear engineers and intelligence officers (e.g., in 1980, 1987, and 2025), with cyberattacks, and with threats of military attack. This pattern has been applied elsewhere: Iraq, Yugoslavia, Libya, Syria, and Venezuela.

For now, direct military force against Russia remains unlikely, largely due to fears of nuclear escalation. Nevertheless, force is being applied indirectly through large-scale aid to Ukraine, including for frequent Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory. Despite the recent defeat of Ukrainian forces in Russia's Kursk region, new forays are possible. European NATO members' ongoing military modernization increases their liability to use force at points of contact with Russia—particularly in the Baltic region.

The deterrent effect of Russia's nuclear weapons could be undermined if the West falsely convinces itself that Russia would not risk using them for fear of a nuclear response. Military crises between Russia and the West, of one kind or another, are a real possibility.

LESSON 2: WESTERN PRESSURE WILL BE LONG-TERM

For years, a strategy of gradual attrition has been employed against Iran. While economic pressure through sanctions once dominated, recent months have seen a shift towards military attrition through

repeated strikes. These do not involve large-scale ground operations or occupation; instead, they rely on missile and bomb attacks that steadily degrade the target's military-industrial capacity. With each new round of escalation, Iran's ability to resist weakens further. For now, Tehran retains the capacity to launch painful retaliatory strikes, but further rounds may exhaust it.

Russia must therefore prepare for the long-term application of sanctions—measured not in years but in decades. Occasional easing of certain restrictions is unlikely to be followed by their full removal, especially not in sensitive areas such as dual-use export controls. A similar logic applies to the military dimension. Any lull in hostilities, in Ukraine or elsewhere, will likely be followed by a new military crisis.

LESSON 3: CONCESSIONS DO NOT WORK

Throughout its lengthy confrontation with the United States, Iran has made multiple concessions. Most prominently in the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA), enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 2231. In exchange for sanctions relief, Iran accepted significant limitations on its nuclear program. Yet just three years later, the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the deal and imposed new demands. The concessions bought only a brief respite and ultimately failed to alleviate long-term U.S. pressure.

In the current context of negotiations over Ukraine, Russia has shown notable firmness. This may draw criticism from those seeking peace, as each day of continued fighting is measured in lost lives and resources. But this stubbornness is justified, given that compromises merely provoke new demands. Compromise, at least unilateral compromise, is thus impermissible. Especially given that trust between Russia, the U.S., and Ukraine is virtually non-existent. The Iranian experience only reinforces this caution.

LESSON 4: LEADERS IN THE CROSSHAIRS

The attack on Iran demonstrates that legitimate leaders and senior officials have become priority targets. The earlier kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro signaled this shift. Leaders have

been killed in war before—as in the Soviet storming of Amin's palace in Afghanistan in 1979, or the deaths of Libyan and Iraqi leaders after U.S.-led interventions. However, such deaths were often incidental. In Iran, we witness the deliberate targeting of the Supreme Leader, his family, and numerous officials.

Russia is acutely aware of the threat to its President and high-ranking officials. Already for some time, assassinations on Russian territory have been attempted—and sometimes accomplished—against military officers, officials, journalists, and civic activists. The Iranian case confirms that protecting the national leadership is now the task of not only the intelligence services but also the armed forces. Gaps in counterintelligence, personal security, air defense, and broader military preparedness can leave leaders dangerously exposed.

LESSON 5: INTERNAL UNREST INVITES EXTERNAL INTERVENTION

Shortly before the airstrikes, Iran experienced mass protests driven by internal divisions and economic hardship. Clashes between demonstrators and security forces resulted in numerous deaths. These protests were exploited by Iran's adversaries and likely seen as indicating that an effective strike might topple the weakened political system, as had been the case in Libya and elsewhere.

The collapse of the USSR demonstrates that internal economic decay and societal divisions can lead to disaster even without external intervention. Effective governance, timely reform, and trust between state and society are essential to maintaining stability. Cracks within society or the elite are tantamount to an invitation for increased external pressure.

LESSON 6: 'BLACK KNIGHTS' ARE IMPORTANT, BUT NOT A PANACEA

Even under crushing sanctions, Iran managed to maintain trade with various countries—the literature terms such sanctions-busters 'black knights.' In the 1980s and 1990s, Iranian oil was sold at a discount to buyers in Western and Southern Europe, Turkiye, Syria, Japan, India, and China. The U.S. invested enormous diplomatic capital to cut off these flows but could only reduce Iran's revenue, not eliminate it.

Yet the military-political situation was a different matter. Iran was left one-on-one with its adversaries. Third parties do not help those adversaries, but they do not have the desire or ability to oppose their attacks on Iran, either. 'Black knights' can mitigate economic pressure, but they are useless in preventing military attacks.

Russia has similarly reoriented its trade under sanctions, with exports to China, India, and other friendly nations growing rapidly. Yet mutual military-political obligations with them remain absent. Russia will have to confront its adversaries alone, with the recent exception of North Korea's participation in countering Ukraine's invasion of Kursk Oblast. Moreover, Russia itself ensures the security of its CSTO allies, adding to its own burden and responsibility.

LESSON 7: THE NEED FOR A BALANCE OF POWER

Unlike many previous targets of U.S. military action, Iran is far from defenseless. In 2025, Tehran responded with domestically produced missiles and drones, and it is doing so again today. While it is too early to assess the weapons' precision and effectiveness, the U.S. and Israel appear to view the damage from Iranian retaliation as acceptable—so far. Yet Iran has also taken steps previously considered extreme, such as closing the Strait of Hormuz to navigation. The U.S. Navy may eventually restore safe passage, but doing so will require time and resources, and success is not guaranteed—especially if Iran remains resilient.

Russia possesses far greater capabilities to counter potential strikes on its territory. Nuclear deterrence aside, Moscow has the means to inflict significant damage across multiple domains and directions. Yet an adversary may deem that damage to be painful but acceptable. Even in the nuclear sphere, the pain threshold can shift. As political struggle intensifies, sensitivity to injury falls, something well-demonstrated by the 20th century.

The Iranian situation inspires little optimism. Instead, it is fostering a fatalistic resolve on all sides, which risks becoming the defining spirit of the coming years.