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Shivan Mahendrarajah

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Can True Promise III reshape Iran's geopolitical fate?

A likely but for-now hypothetical military operation, True Promise III presents Iran with a critical opportunity to neutralize US and Israeli overreach in West Asia and secure a decisive settlement for its domestic challenges.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

Why is the US vested so heavily in entrenching itself in West Asia? The reason is certainly no longer to ensure access to cheap oil and gas, as in past decades – the US has sufficient supplies of its own; it is even seeking to position itself as Europe's key energy supplier.

Today, the US is in the region for one main reason, which is to protect Israel's existence and enable Tel Aviv to flex its economic, diplomatic, and military muscle across the Arab world. But in order to achieve this, it must remove Israel and Zionism's greatest impediment, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Tehran not only sponsors the region's Axis of Resistance against western hegemony but, more than anything, represents sovereign, independent, self-sufficient Muslim capabilities – the 'threat of a good example,' if you will.

To this end, Washington has imposed sanctions on Iran, fortified military bases across the Persian Gulf, and deployed troops, aircraft, and carrier strike groups, all to ‘contain’ the Islamic Republic.

The fall of former president Bashar al-Assad’s Syria adds another dimension to the threats accumulating against Iran: the possibility that NATO member Turkiye will be used as a US proxy to open anti-Iran fronts in Iraq and Azerbaijan. In the Persian Gulf, the US’s Saudi and Emirati allies maintain a front against Yemen’s Ansarallah-aligned forces, a relatively new and powerful member of the Resistance Axis.

While the rhetoric of Iran’s leaders is often focused on the evils of western ‘malevolent’ agendas, on the home front, Iran also faces mounting challenges. Inflation is soaring, the rial is in freefall, housing is increasingly unaffordable, and energy shortages have led to blackouts. Public frustration mounts as these issues are often blamed on governmental incompetence. Iranians are asking pressing questions – What about skyrocketing rents? Food prices? Heating during winter? How will eradicating the ‘roots of Zionism’ help with ‘bread-and-butter’ issues?

No doubt, Washington will seek to take full advantage of this rare convergence of Iran’s domestic and regional setbacks to target the Islamic Republic in the coming months.

Will an Iranian counter materialize?

Iran’s true adversary is not Israel directly but the US, without which Tel Aviv could never hope to project its power in the region. Neutralizing US influence – through war or the credible threat of it – would weaken Israel’s protector. Operation True Promise III presents such an opportunity.

As noted by *The Cradle* earlier last month: “The only agreements with the US that hold weight are those blessed by Israel – and Israel will only agree if it is militarily defeated.”

A follow-up to Iran’s previous direct operations against the occupation state, this retaliatory operation will likely aim to strategically defeat Israel – and, if necessary, deter the US – to compel a comprehensive treaty that addresses Iran’s economic woes. Time is not on Tehran’s side; prolonged negotiations akin to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) are no longer viable.

Renowned 19th-century strategist Carl von Clausewitz wrote, “The degree of force that must be used against the enemy depends on the scale of political demands on either side.”

What are the objectives – the political demands – of Operation True Promise III? Deterring Israel from attacking Iran as it did on 26 October? Or bringing the US, and thereby Israel, to the negotiating table?

Tehran's political and military leadership must view the next operation as an opportunity to bring about a full and final settlement. This is no longer about incremental escalation to deter the US–Israeli war on Gaza, but about settling the prospects of any foreign direct war on the Islamic Republic.

In 2003, Iran proposed a 'grand bargain;' however, it was rejected by the Bush Administration. It can be revived, not through nuclear talks, but by calibrated force. A 'Peace of Westphalia' that settles the Iran–Israel question is possible.

Economic malaise

Iran's economy is ailing. There is no sugar-coating this fact. Decades of sanctions have destroyed the rial, which stands at over \$1 = 800,000 rials and is expected to decline further. Inflation officially hovers around 33 percent, though real rates are thought to be much higher in the provinces.

Borrowing costs, tied to high interest rates, stifle businesses and families alike. Tehran's housing market is equally grim, with rents up 50 percent year-over-year. As winter deepens, blackouts and natural gas shortages worsen the situation, and air pollution renders Tehran's air nearly unbreathable.

A source in Iran sent a picture of polluted air to *The Cradle* with the caption, "This is what we breathe every day."

Not all of this economic malaise can be blamed on sanctions, which is Tehran's oft-repeated excuse. Despite Iran's recognized development miracles over the past four decades, governmental neglect has exacerbated infrastructure issues in irrigation, energy, and housing. Population growth has outpaced housing development, while the centralization of ministries in Tehran has further strained resources. With a third of the workforce employed by the state, decentralization could alleviate urban pressures. Meanwhile, unemployment remains stubbornly high at 7.5 percent.

Israel may be "weaker than a spider's web," as the late Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah famously stated, but Iran also has inherent vulnerabilities.

War is inevitable

Assad's fall has emboldened Tehran's enemies. Iran is perceived as vulnerable because it has lost a 'central' member of the Axis of Resistance, Hezbollah has been 'sidelined' yet adapting, and US regional partners Saudi Arabia and the UAE are currently pressuring Yemen's de facto government in Sanaa.

In Washington and Tel Aviv, discussions of war with Iran are no longer whispers. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his far-right allies openly advocate for conflict,

backed by financial and ideological zeal from figures like billionaire Miriam Adelson, who has invested heavily in President-elect Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2025. Her late husband, Sheldon Adelson, once said the US should "solve the Iranian problem by dropping a nuclear bomb."

Threat scenarios to pressure Iran internally include Turkish-backed terrorists in Syria attacking Iraqi Shia-led resistance factions and attacks inside Iran by Mujahideen-e Khalq (MeK), Baluch, and Kurdish terrorists. Geopolitical analyst Lee Slusher posits that Ankara may also try to foment unrest among Azeri peoples in (Iranian) Azerbaijan.

Washington and Tel Aviv are not seeking government change in Iran; they seek government collapse. The ideal scenario is for Iran to disintegrate along ethno-linguistic lines, with warring factions jockeying for supremacy.

Their models are Libya (post-Qaddafi), Iraq (post-Saddam), and Syria (post-Assad). While Iranian factions fight among themselves, as Syrians are doing, US and Israeli bombers will seek to demolish Iranian military infrastructure just as the occupation air force destroyed 80 percent of Syria's remaining military capabilities.

Clausewitz's guidance

If the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps's (IRGC) goal is merely to deter Israel, it can achieve this. However, such deterrence alone will not lift sanctions or revive Iran's economy. Without broader action, US support for proxy groups and internal destabilization will persist, potentially leading to a scenario akin to the Syrian state's prolonged demise.

Iran must, therefore, consider a grander strategy. As Clausewitz noted, "The scale of the military objective ... must align with political aims."

In True Promise III, Tehran must aim higher than in past operations. The true target is not Israel – a mere proxy – but its enabler, the US. Deterring the US would, by extension, weaken Israel's position. The IRGC must deliver a clear message: US air defenses like THAAD cannot protect military or civilian assets.

Strikes on key Israeli targets such as infrastructure in Haifa and Tel Aviv, refineries, and offshore platforms must visibly disrupt the region, producing damage too significant for western media to ignore. Such actions would expose Israel's vulnerabilities, undermining the illusion of its military invincibility.

Yemen's ability to force the USS Harry Truman vessel to retreat offers a template. Demonstrating that the US Navy cannot effectively project power against Iran would shift the strategic calculus in Washington. Similarly, targeting Saudi and Emirati energy infrastructure

would showcase the regional ramifications of any conflict, driving home the ‘unacceptable costs’ of war.

Operation True Promise III must be guided by two principles: exposing the ‘improbability of victory’ and demonstrating the ‘unacceptable cost’ of conflict. Israel’s narrative of perpetual ‘victory’ is basically a Ponzi scheme reliant on appearances.

By dismantling this illusion, the IRGC can force US policymakers to reevaluate their commitments. The real battle lies not in Tel Aviv but in Washington. For Iran, the stakes are existential – secure a decisive settlement or risk slow disintegration under relentless pressure. True Promise III offers a fleeting but critical window to negotiate from strength. Tehran must seize it.

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