

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



On Iran

MAJ Brennan Deveraux and Dr. Jacob Stoil

In this episode of *SSI Live*, Major Brennan Deveraux interviews Dr. Jacob Stoil, a research professor of Middle East Security Studies at the Strategic Studies Institute, regarding the ongoing operations against Iran. The conversation explores the historical context of tensions with Iran and examines current and future challenges that region may face in light of recent events.

John Deni

Hello and welcome to *SSI Live*. You've long known the Strategic Studies Institute, or SSI, at the US Army War College, as the go-to location for issues related to national security and military strategy, with an emphasis on geostrategic analysis. SSI conducts strategic research and analysis to support the US Army War College curricula; assist and inform Army, DoD, and US government leadership; and serve as a bridge to the wider strategic community. Now, we are bringing you access to SSI analyses, scholars, and guests, through this, the *SSI Live* podcast series. Thanks for joining us.

Brennan Deveraux

Welcome back to *SSI Live*. I'm still your host, Major Brennan Deveraux. Today, we're talking with Dr. Jacob Stoil, a research professor of Middle East Security Studies at the Strategic Studies Institute. He's also the chair of applied history at the Modern War Institute. Dr. Stoil specializes in applying lessons and understanding from military history to the contemporary and future operational and strategic environment, bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practitioner focused solutions.

He is a historian who received his doctorate from Oxford. And today we're going to really push his looking back to looking forward method for this conversation. We're exploring the ongoing US Israeli military campaign against Iran and its potential strategic implications. But before we jump in, I want to be clear that the views and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the guests and not necessarily those of the Department of the Army, US Army War College, or any other agency of the US government.

Thanks for joining us, Jacob.

Jacob Stoil

Thank you so much for having me. This is going to be, I think, a really fascinating talk.

Deveraux

Yeah. And I've actually tried to get you on just for a regular *SSI Live* podcast. But for obvious reasons, as we look to the Middle East, you've been quite busy.

Stoil

The Middle East does tend to be one of the hotter theaters, both in terms of temperature and activity.

Deveraux

You've done great so far at SSI, tied in with commands. I know you've worked with ARCENT (US Army Central), CENTCOM (US Central Command), [the] Joint Staff, and have taken some trips not just to their locations, but out to the Middle East itself.

Stoil

Yeah. And I think this is one of the strengths SSI really brings to the force is our ability to link academics who can then tie into academic networks, who have a practitioner focus in their work and bring it at the time and place of need, bring that academic and research background in whenever we can. So it's one of the things I've really enjoyed about this position.

And I think really if this podcast can advertise that, not just me, but the entire team at SSI stands pretty ready to do this kind of work.

Deveraux

And we have every region represented. And you bring over a network you had built up, when you were working over at SAMS (School of Advanced Military Studies) out of Fort Leavenworth.

Stoil

Yeah, I had the privilege to be a SAMS instructor for nearly eight years. Five years on the AMSP (Advanced Military Studies Program), which dealt with the kind of majors and lieutenant colonels from the operational level planning and then three years with the O6-level program called ASLSP (Advanced Strategic Leadership Studies Program), working on the strategic level, which has the benefit of getting to visit every combatant command that the US military has and get briefed by them.

So it's a great program for understanding kind of the strategic and integrating the strategic picture.

Deveraux

And I know when you talk to some of the senior leaders, the uniform wearers, it also provides some instant credibility. Maybe, you know, the secret handshake. We like to joke about, but probably a nice, fun foot in the door. We'll go ahead and transition. But before we get into what's ongoing, and everyone, I think, is tracking what's ongoing, we'll talk a little bit about it in detail, can you offer up some historical context on the region? Why tensions are what they are and kind of how we got here without going too much into, you know, maybe a graduate seminar on the history of the Middle East.

Stoil

I think the key point to remember here is Iran has really been at war with the US for nearly 40 years. The US has not necessarily reciprocated being at war with Iran, but Iran has seen itself at war with the US since essentially the Iranian Revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini, in his writings, is very explicit about the US as his enemy.

As a really fun fact, when he was getting ready to take over in Iran. The US was very much in the Cold War frame. And so we thought of him as a religious leader and therefore an anti-communist, which was true. He didn't have much love for the communists and was anti-Soviet, but we didn't hold his rhetoric that he also hated America to be true, because in our mind, if you were a religious leader, you were anti-communist, and if you were anti-communist, you were pro-America.

The Soviets also backed him because they looked at all of his "Death to America" rhetoric and his revolutionary rhetoric and said, "well, if you hate America and you want death to America, then you're obviously a Soviet." Even if you say communism is evil. So, it's really inbuilt into the idea of America as an enemy. Is really inbuilt fundamentally into the Iranian revolutionary ideology.

And it's something they've been carrying out since the beginning. Obviously, a lot of our listeners might remember or be familiar with the Iran hostage crisis, where one of the first things the regime did when it took over with stormed the US embassy and take our diplomats hostage. Then there were a lot of times where they killed US personnel in Lebanon, both civilians and military, the Marine Corps barracks bombing, the embassy bombing, all our key parts of them.

And this didn't stop. It continued going.

Deveraux

I think it's important to note, when we say they've been at war with..., that's tangible. There are tangible actions, not just Iran hates us. But we've seen historical events and even fairly recently, if we looked at, say, the global war on terror, I remember, very much finding weapons that were clearly supplied from, Iran. So good points on some of these more actual historical events.

Stoil

Yeah. And I think that's really important, especially for our veterans who are veterans of the, global war on terror. They will know that Iran used that as an ability to, use that as an opportunity to target American service personnel and American civilians throughout the globe, though principally in Iraq. And we can talk about everything from some of the rocket systems that came in to the explosively formed penetrators.

Iran has been responsible for the death of potentially thousands of Americans over the years. So they very much took actual practical action on this war. And the US largely did not. And this leads to a historical context where after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran starts to look at more means to secure itself. That it feels that it might be in jeopardy, that there's some US rhetoric coming after it, and it also is feeling kind of its strength that it's been able to use its proxies to target America and target Israel for quite some time. And there hasn't really been blowback against it.

And so it begins to invest very heavily towards a nuclear program and the alignment of three key aspects of their strategy. The development of the nuclear weapons program, long range missile and then drone strike and loiter munitions, and also the backing of proxies, really become the cornerstones of their approach to their global power.

And through the way they enter deals with Russia, and even now or until very recently on as Russia was fighting in Ukraine, they served as a strategic deep area for Russia, helping Russia with its drone production and some of the Shahab drones that have been raining over Ukraine are directly coming from Iran.

Deveraux

Similar to a lot of Western nations. Then, the Ukraine battlefield has been really a battle lab, potentially for Iran.

Stoil

They have taken lessons from it. It has been something of a battle, but it's more of an area where they've been able to provide critical support to an ally. And in return, that ally was supposed to provide them critical support. It certainly provided them money. It's provided them resources towards their nuclear program and of course, their air defense system, which as of now is in somewhat of tatters. Not a great advertisement for buying Russian product, I suppose, but, it less about a lab and much more of an opportunity to really integrate with an ally.

Deveraux

I think you make interesting point about the air defense, and I don't think Iran had the most exquisite potential Russian systems. I know for a while they were sitting still on S-300. I don't know their current capabilities and what we're targeted. It kind of helps build a narrative that I had talked with, Evan Ellis about in here about Venezuela.

One of the takeaways was air defense is defeatable, which is something people kind of struggle with because there is a narrative that I have this giant protective bubble. But even the United States, you know, we built these exquisite systems. Something can still get through. There's only so much air defense can do, when overwhelmed by an attack.

Stoil

Absolutely. And it's not just overwhelmed. One of as we'll get to kind of what we talk about in the more recent history, one of the big features of the last year was the 12-Day War, Operation Rising Lion from the Israeli side and Midnight Hammer from the US side, which really set the conditions for where we are now by degrading a huge amount of Iran's air defense capability in the early hours and days of that war.

And so Iran going into this situation was not Iran, you know, going into the summer. But when we look at the overall history, essentially Iran developed a strategic vision that was about deterrence that it believed and just kept getting reinforced that through its proxy, through its missile system, through offering a very high cost for US activity, certainly higher than the US was willing to pay, it could deter the US long enough that its nuclear program would be able to develop, and that it would develop kind of more security relationships and really become a prominent Middle East power.

And until three years ago, that very much looked on course. It was heading [in] that direction. It had signed agreements with Saudi Arabia to start to end some of the local tensions there. Hezbollah was powerful. It looked like it had stabilized the Assad regime, which was one of its weak points. The things were looking like they were going Iran's direction.

Deveraux

It's not that that's not a potential viable strategy. The pursuit, I know, at least theoretical. The pursuit of nuclear weapons, very dangerous, often leads to trouble. But the successful production of nuclear weapons makes it very dangerous to engage with a nation. So, I at least understand the premise.

Stoil

Especially when you combine it with their proxies. The US maintains global strike capabilities. Iran would talk about, essentially, that their proxies were essentially their global strike. They could reach out and hit Europe, and have, they could hit South America, and they have. And between them in their ballistic missile program, they have the ability to have significant reach, which increases the deterrence value.

And they also understood that if the US really wanted to come in and topple the regime with the full force of the US military, this wouldn't stop them. So they developed what they called the mosaic defense plan, which was an idea of how to increase the deterrence by showing that it would be very, very costly for the US to enter Iran.

And at the same time, that same plan is very important in how they've repressed their own population. So Iran coming into 2023 had reason to believe that its deterrence strategy was working, had reason to believe that it could continue to work going forward, and although it had weakened its internal security position because it had engaged in more and more repression of its own population, it still had reason to be fairly confident, at least coming into 2023.

Deveraux

One of the things I love debating, when talking about deterrence, is this challenge of measuring the negative. Theoretically, you are successful with deterring until you're not right. So, it's hard to judge the difference between a, and especially when you're probably not getting the best advice and you're receiving a lot of propaganda for your intel, but it's probably really difficult. Historically, even looking back, I'm sure it's very difficult to measure the difference between my deterrence plan is working. Or is the adversary potentially just not yet ready, to advance with their plan?

Stoil

I think in Iran's case, because they had such a long period where there were lots of things they had done to the US that would normally or you would think would merit some kind of retaliation, and the retaliation had either been relatively minor or targeting a proxy or not forthcoming. They had reason to they had pretty good indication their strategy was working.

And you can look at things like after the Marine Corps barracks bombing and the embassy bombing in the 80s, the US did strike back against the Iranian proxies in Lebanon. And then we withdrew from Lebanon. And so Iran built up an idea that the US might be able to inflict pain on them if they cross the line, but that there would be a limited appetite and a limited duration for that pain.

And again, this was contingent on their proxy network being intact, their missile program being an attack and then being able to really affect lots of different areas simultaneously to raise that cost.

Deveraux

I would challenge and you definitely know more than I do, but the nuclear program itself, whether that's from, attacks from America or other actors, has been a historical target. Very few actors want Iran to get nuclear weapons. And I could think of a couple different instances of some sort of strike or, I know there was, what, the STUXNET, you know, program.

So there's been at a minimum, you know, some efforts, kinetic non-kinetic through other means to deter them from pursuing that pillar on their strategy.

Stoil

I would actually say it's less to deter and more to retard, right. All of these were there to mitigate the development, to get Iran to raise the cost of Iran's development, to slow it down. And even on the diplomatic side, things like the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), the framework, the diplomatic framework for reducing Iran's nuclear development, which had a sunset clause and a whole bunch of other things built into it.

None of these were able or were really going to stop the nuclear development. What they were going to do is slow it down, make it harder, make it more expensive, make it more of a challenge, but not fully stop it. Unfortunately, the only two really way ways to fully stop it would either be for the Iranian government to go to the page in their playbook for to try something different.

This is not what we want in life, or for it to be kinetically destroyed.

Deveraux

There were some attacks, I know, some things have gone boom, you know, but it's I know it's also very challenging. It's challenging to target all that stuff. It's challenging to find all the things that need to be targeted. Things start getting buried underground. Individuals can be targeted and I know have, or have had accidents,

Stoil

Workplace accidents seem to be very common among Iranian nuclear scientists.

Deveraux

Right. And that's what I mean. But I don't know who the actors are. But, you know, the program at least has been targeted. But if we look. Okay, so a little bit more recent history, I know that tensions have always kind of been high or in my lifetime, at least, with Iran, but more recently, we've seen kind of a buildup.

You already talked about the 12-Day War. What's been going on the past month, past couple of months.

Stoil

Before we get to the past couple months. There's one really key date that we have to remember, which is October 7th, 2023. This is Iran at the height of its power and the height of its offensive capability, endorsing the plan by one of its allies to really change from using a from a kind of deterrence defensive position to actually trying to move into this offensive, attaining strategic goal through force position.

And it seems initially like it's going to work and then it doesn't. Right. And when we come out of the 2023 October 7th War, if we look around the region, Iran lost a lot of its deterrence capability. Hezbollah was very big and scary before the war. Then it wasn't. Yeah, right. And Hezbollah,

even in this war, has been reluctant to get involved, got involved a little bit late in the game and is now taking a lot of punishment.

And the Lebanese government is basically going to them and saying, hey, stop it, and have just ordered the military to actually stop. Hezbollah's rocket launches, which is the first time, to my knowledge, that this has happened in any way, not just statement, but with perhaps facts on the ground backing it up. Hamas was a very powerful entity, as could be seen by its launch of the October 7th attack, with a large missile array that could cause a lot of effects by last summer. By the 12-Day War, it was no longer: it's minimized, it's contained, etc.

And we can kind of go around the region and see that a key cornerstone of Iran's deterrence and defense, this proxy network, because of the aggressive activities coming out of October 7th, and because of their involvement, is no longer what it was until they lost one of the key corners of their development.

What's happened in the last couple of months since the 12-Day War, since the summer is, when the US launched Operation Midnight Hammer, the attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, following from the Israeli Operation Rising Lion, which degraded a lot of Iran's command and control air defense missile and some of their nuclear capabilities, the US was essentially offering Iran an off ramp, right?

The US did a very limited strike. Certainly nothing near or total capability, and offered Iran the chance to change course, to go and say, "okay, we're not going to have a nuclear weapons program. We're not going to pursue long range strike missiles, and we're going to stop funding terror and attacking the US." That have really consistently been, for what it's worth, the US's three key negotiating demands would be nice if they stop massacring their own people and repressing them.

That's something we obviously very much want to have happen, but it was not one of our key negotiating demands. Iran consistently declined to take that offramp, right. Those were its three red lines in negotiations. Will there will be willing to talk about a lot of things, but what they're not going to do is stop their proxy network, stop building their offensive missile capability, and stop entirely their nuclear program.

Okay. So that means we...

Deveraux

We're at an impasse.

Stoil

We're at an impasse. And part of the reason Iran felt that they could survive that impasse is, first and foremost, they didn't believe the US actually wanted to strike Iran. We can look back at our history. We can see a number of times we've appeared to be at an impasse. A number of times rhetoric has gotten very heated, and yet there have not been strikes.

Deveraux

There's also been whether it's a narrative or just kind of an assumption, with the pullback of the US presence from the Middle East, whether that's in prioritization or in actual capabilities, could also potentially foster, you know, that narrative that maybe the US doesn't want to operate here.

Stoil

Absolutely. We've been very, very clear that the Middle East should not be our focus anymore. The *National Security Strategy* said as much. Right. It said we don't need to be in the Middle East anymore. That was written essentially into the *National Security Strategy*. And I think, President [Barack] Obama, with our first pivot to the Pacific, and we've been in a long pivot or repeated fast pivot ever since we've been very clear.

We're not that we don't want to be in the Middle East. And that reinforces Iran's position and reinforced their view in the world, that there was a lot they could get away with by just saying no.

Deveraux

Actually, I talked with a couple of strategists in here, not long ago about the recent, *National Defense Strategy*. And they had framed it in this really neat idea of not, we had the pivot to the Pacific, with the new one looking at this pivot to the Americas. Either way, kind of downplaying our role in the Middle East.

Stoil

Absolutely. And there's a lot of signs that the American public is supportive of this idea that, you know, we don't want a forever wars again. Nobody wants another Iraq, another Afghanistan. Been there, done that. Not our favorite.

Deveraux

I have. Yeah. Been there, done that.

Stoil

Exactly. And so this reinforced Iran's position that it could negotiate, do a little bit harder negotiation. And that kind of dragged on in the autumn time period. Now, in the meantime, they began to reconstitute. They looked at reconstituting using Russian support. They looked at building back their defense, their missile program, all of these things that were exactly what we told them not to do.

And it's really comes to a crescendo as the economic crisis and drought crisis in Iran create a lot of popular discontent. And you start to see mass protests of the Iranian population as we get towards winter, as we get towards the kind of December January time frame. So on one hand, we have the US saying, "hey, we gave you an out here, we could have hit you a lot harder. We didn't because we want to negotiate."

On the other hand, you have the Iranian population saying, "we're really done with this regime" or large parts of the Iranian population.

Deveraux

Although they weren't necessarily affected by it. I'm sure the Arab Spring is probably something in their mind as they look at what a population can do in the region.

Stoil

I think it's somewhat in their mind, but not majorly, more their own history. Right? The Iranian population brought down the Shah. Before that it had brought down other leaders, right? So they don't need to look outside their country to understand what popular anger can do. And the Iranian regime built a[n] entire structures of repression to keep the population down.

Now, what they tried to do earlier, in previous kind of decades is balance. Give some liberalization potentially, while also repressing. Give economic activity, give subsidies, give outlets for culture, all kinds of things, while still repressing as their economic situation became worse and, the inherent tensions of being a revolutionary republic, and revolutionary and republic are very important to their backers, and also being the Islamic Republic and also wanting this kind of aggressive foreign policy.

That said, a lot of internal tensions that don't really all live comfortably in the same house. And so as those tensions continued to arise, they had fewer and fewer means to mitigate them, and they continued to fall back more and more on straight repression of their population. And this again comes to a head in December. And they try to figure out a way to talk their way out of the December and January protests and popular uprisings.

And in the end, they can't, they don't have the resources to do it. And so instead, they massacre their population. And that obviously has big impacts in the US, big impacts globally as we are watching on the nightly news, and on YouTube and anywhere else you're getting your news from the massacre of the civilian population.

Deveraux

And then as we start getting closer to just this last weekend, we start seeing some potential movement of US capabilities and the increase in diplomatic efforts, warnings. I know articles are floating around the internet. If you look through February talking about the, you know, what kind of military potential the US is pushing, just like if you looked at, you know, Latin America, before the [Nicolás] Maduro action, any thoughts on, kind of how that was unfolding?

Stoil

Yeah. So it was unfolding as part of the backdrop of negotiations. Right. We were attempting to show to Iran that they really did have two options here. One option would be to negotiate meeting our fairly minimum terms. And the other option is what ended up happening. Right. The show of military force should crystallize the future potential to any country.

In Iran's case. Again, they didn't think this is what would happen. And to an extent, they've built a structure to allow for, if we think about operations against them in terms of frequency and duration, they've built a structure of resilience that can survive a very high frequency of operations, a very intense period of operations. They have resiliency, they have redundancy, they have the ability to survive a very intense period of operations, provided that's a short duration.

Right. So they built they had confidence that even if the US was going to operate against them, it would not be over a long term. It would not be sustained. It would not really be pushing regime change, that US operations would be relatively short but intense, and that they could survive that.

Deveraux

I'd be curious how much of the resistance to, you know, meeting any sort of demands, how much of that resistance is based on calling the potential bluff right, thinking that the US isn't actually going to act, or it's going to act in a way that they could survive and work the tit for tat, as we've seen, you know, historically, balanced against sign of kind of a regime security to domestic population aspect, it's easy to say, "here's the thing I know I need to do," but if I then look back home and that's going to end furthering the revolt, getting me overthrown, forcing me to lose power. How much is that, leader potentially playing that two level game of having an international conversation or saving face back home?

Stoil

I don't think the issues of the nuclear program would be saving face back home for a very long time. Iran's official position is we don't really want a nuclear weapons program. Wink wink, nudge nudge. We're doing it anyway. But on the open that they're saying they don't really want one. The missile program there and the wars that they're fighting abroad and the support of the proxies have been increasingly unpopular in a large segment of the Iranian domestic population.

So I don't think they were risking a two-level game issue there, but they are ideologically risking something because it is. And we'll go back to there. It is written right into the revolution, right into Khamenei's writings, that they really do want to wipe out Israel, and they really will look forward to the downfall of the US. These are very important ideological points for them.

Deveraux

And that's kind of what I'm thinking is it's not necessarily what the demands are, but saving face as not conceding or, you know, being bullied by the Americans. I'm envisioning, since I live in pop culture, *Talladega Nights* and Ricky Bobby refusing to even just say "I like flat pancakes" and getting his arm broken instead because he can't, you know, tell the other person, I can't concede to you. It doesn't even matter if it's a reasonable request.

Stoil

I don't think that's as much a play Iran has conceded to the US in the past. JCPOA is a good example, and their proxies have certainly conceded, both in terms of Hamas's agreement to the 20-point ceasefire plan and Hezbollah's agreement to repeated ceasefire plans. Iran's view of concession is that a lot of times you can concede and when it comes to implementation, that's a whole different ballgame.

But I do think the fundamental aspect of it was they did not believe that regime change was really on the cards, that this was something that was imminent. And there they believed, again, it could be bad in the short term. They don't doubt the amount of combat power the US or Israel can put into their country, certainly not the Israelis after the 12-Day War this summer, but they do doubt that they'll be able to stick it till the end.

Right? That this will have long enough duration to bring down the regime.

Deveraux

Well, I think that takes us right up to what we saw this weekend. And I know that, literally by the day, our information will become less and less relevant. It's a very fluid situation. But what can you tell us a little bit about that opening salvo, the, you know, the first 24, 48 hours, kind of what you were thinking from your foxhole, and then, you know, in your community that that really looks at the region.

Stoil

Yeah. I think the first 24 hours, a lot of what you've seen in the news or may have seen in the news seems fairly accurate to me. It was wildly successful. Probably more successful than one might have assumed. The senior leadership of the Iranian regime was largely eliminated. And so in that way, the first 48 hours looks very successful. The Iranian missile program is being degraded. The Iranian air defense program is all but missing at this point. It's almost entirely, it seems to be almost entirely destroyed. And a lot of key Iranian facilities, both for their command and control and their repression of their own population, have been destroyed.

So in that sense, it's very successful. I think what's very interesting is Iran strategy coming out of that.

Deveraux

They've even published, you know, on the US CENTCOM website, some strike videos, so we can see Iranian systems being destroyed. So it looks like the targeting and employment of US and, really Israeli assets, at that aspect, the operational aspect of it has been highly successful.

Stoil

Yeah. And we can see kind of what the Iranian strategic reaction is to this, which is they're trying to broaden the war. Right? So we've seen Iran violating international law very clearly by directly targeting hotels in Dubai, and other civilian targets, obviously in Israel and now trying to, targeting places like Cyprus, trying to draw the British into the war.

And the reason they're trying to draw everybody into the war to widen this as possible and spread the pain as much as possible, is because what they're really aiming to do is build pressure on the US, to force the US to stop the war. Right. So, as UAE (United Arab Emirates) gets involved, as Saudi gets involved, as Bahrain gets involved with Qatar, gets involved as even Oman gets involved, it's Britain gets involved and Jordan and Israel and, Iraq and pretty much now everybody in the region right there have even been missiles, though probably not on purpose, landing in Syria.

Right. Everybody's getting involved. Hezbollah just joined in bringing Lebanon into this fight. What they're hoping is that the pressure these countries will build is that they'll support the US and coalition efforts. But at the same time, call for a stop. This is getting too expensive. This is losing our citizens' lives. We didn't want to be in this in the first place.

And now we're getting targeted. Find an off ramp, America. And this is an absolutely necessary strategy because of the successes of the American and Israeli strikes. They need this to not continue to last. They need to achieve a short duration.

Deveraux

I think that's actually an incredibly interesting point. And to be honest, worth a small paper. It goes completely counter to a Western look at how we leverage partners and alliances. We intentionally will put, you know, boats from a couple different nations together so that if a strike on one, you know, "oh, you didn't just hit me, you hit my friends. And now we're bringing people in."

And there's the joke that, you know, an attack on America is the best thing, or an American asset is the best thing for an ally who's in a conflict. Because now America is all in. So I think that's really neat to kind of flip the narrative to say, if we could bring in some of these partners, in the region, it might bring more pain for a short time, but it also might throw up the guardrails.

Yeah. Really interesting way to reframe the value, the role of the partner, an ally. They don't just come with their own restraints. They might reshape how the coalition looks at the problem.

Stoil

Iran's taking into advantage the economic vulnerability of both the global economic system through oil and hydrocarbons and all the things coming out of the Middle East, but also the Middle Eastern economic system, the countries such as UAE and Dubai that have a, that are very networked in I mean, obviously Dubai being part of UAE, but the extent to which they're networked into the global economy, the extent to which they rely on foreign direct investment and tourism and the global economy functioning, this all becomes very expensive to them very quickly and therefore also very expensive to the US and the entire globe.

And so this is a way they can, if they can convince those leaders, that would be better for this war to be over, then those leaders can try to put pressure on the US in a way that Iran does not have the capabilities to do.

Deveraux

I think people underestimate how expensive war is apart from the obvious collateral of, you know, a loss of life, or even the loss of systems. Right? Like, oh my gosh, we lost the system. That system was so expensive. Just shooting the missile is incredibly expensive. Just flying the planes for extended periods of time is incredibly expensive.

Stoil

And there's at the end of the expensive. And then there's also the broader end of expensive, right. Air traffic is no longer transiting the Middle East. Well, that's a huge problem because it means the fastest flight route from anywhere in the northwestern hemisphere to the South Pacific to Singapore, and through there, is no longer available. Right. So, the knock-on effects of a war in the Middle East are actually fairly profound across the entirety of the integrated global economic system.

And again, that's what Iran is really counting on here. They know at this point that their military capabilities are not sufficient to deter the US and to deter Israel, that on a purely military level, that they're defensive capabilities are no longer sufficient to stop the US and Israel. So they're trying to maneuver in the strategic space. They're trying to move in through information, and you can see all kinds of misinformation spreading.

There's reports that US ships have been found that the Abraham USS Abraham Lincoln was severely damaged. All of this is kind of misinformation coming out of the Iranian regime. There are conflicting reports about how many civilians have been killed. All of this kind of stuff that's coming through, and that's all part of them trying to leverage the strategic environment.

And it's something they've learned from their proxies. Hamas and Hezbollah performed fairly poorly in the end against the Israeli military but were able to be very effective in the broader global strategic environment and information environment. So they're trying to do the same thing on a macro level.

Deveraux

And information is hard to stop. Information is an incredibly effective tool, especially when laced with either a bit of truth, or just believability. I mean, it's very believable. I'm trained and have done the firing of rockets into an urban environment. I fully understand those rockets might blow things up that are not necessarily the intended target.

So, to say that rockets or missiles blew something up, at face value, that would be very easy for someone to take as truth or to say that there are strikes getting back in that are successful because there is an aspect of Iran has had a little bit of success. And there's also potential incidents with friendly fire, just accidents.

The things can be shaped well, even just an old video of something happening could easily be framed as something successful now. And then, once it's online, it's spreading like wildfire. I think everyone saw random videos of the US base in wherever is on fire. And you can see smoke. I don't know where the US base in, you know, country X is, and I'm in the military. So my random uncle who's just following, the news updates, it'd be very hard not to just accept that at face value.

Stoil

Yeah, and it's not just your random uncle. Most news outlets no longer have on staff, military analysts, Earth, your defense analysts who can look at this material. Some news outlets have inadvertently republished or put out false Iranian claims. Right. And Iran is very good at maneuvering it in the space. It's been maneuvering in this space for a while.

Additionally, US news outlets and global news outlets need to generate headlines. And without military analysts, a video of a strike doesn't tell them anything. It's just a strike. So they're looking for quotes. They're looking for a "this person said," "that person said," and this is again, space that Iran has become very, very adept in maneuvering in. But it may not be enough without, again, the strategy of targeting other regional countries to try to get them to increase the pressure.

I think that's really the crux of what we see. If you ask me where we are now, where we are now is that the US and Israel are doing that high frequency thing that Iran expected as its worst case scenario, very effective strikes throughout the country, degrading Iranian military capabilities, degrading Iranian security capabilities, degrading and killing the Iranian leadership.

Unfortunately, of course, there have been US, Israeli, and other partner and allied casualties because Iran is able to strike back. And that's one of the of course, always the terrible cost of war. But it's going much better for the US than Iran would have anticipated. And so now they have to put all of their eggs in the basket of reducing the duration.

So that's going to be information that's going to be diplomatic, that's going to be targeting allies and partners to get them to put that pressure. And of course, targeting the US to raise the cost and raise the cost and raise the cost. So that way we also look at a shorter duration operation. That's really where their attempt to survive life.

And in doing so, then they believe that if they can survive, even at a very, very limited capability, as long as the regime can continue to repress its own population and achieve internal stability, it can continue to reconstitute and it can build back up. And, it will have taught the region a lesson, which is that as scary as the US is and as powerful as the US is, it stood up to it again and managed to survive and come back.

And now, if you're another regional country, the next time there's a crisis, you're not going necessarily want to bet on the US. And so that's really the crux and center of Iran strategy. Obviously, the counter strategy to that is necessarily protecting our partners and allies, as we've seen that the US is doing, but also making sure that Iran can't walk out of this war with a narrative, even if Iran as a regime still exists at the end, if we take the off ramp, is not capable of walking up out of the war with an off ramp narrative of we confronted the US, we confronted it throughout the two scariest people in the region, and we came out okay.

Deveraux

We're going to shift a little bit. Not quite future predictions, as no one knows the future. But if we could take kind of what we know from the past, what we know what's happening now, and as I joked before, you know, "now" starts changing very quickly, let's look at potential challenges that these different actors, because there's a lot of different actors that you talk about are going to face.

So let's just start with, with Iran. So you laid out a plan for them to go forward. What's their biggest challenge to executing in.

Stoil

Their biggest two challenges really are one, the US doesn't fight right to us, becomes convinced that regime change is necessary. Our partners may say stop. And we say, actually, we agree with the Israelis on this one. We're going to continue and see this one through. That's a really big challenge because Iran has no way to control that. There's nothing Iran could do if the US become set on that.

A second challenge, if they're making a bet, they're making it better by broadening this war. What they're going to do is increase pressure on the US to end the war, right? To bring it to a quick conclusion, probably a negotiated or limited one. There is a possibility that in broadening the war, they're going to convince all of their neighbors that really, this Iranian regime should not still be a player in the neighborhood, that it needs to go.

So they're going to bring people who were neutral to them, who had an understanding with them, who had, perhaps even military-to-military cooperation with them. They're going to take them from going, yes, we're okay with Iran. We don't love them, but we can live with it, too. Actually, they have to go, please US, take care of them, and maybe we'll help too.

Right. And so there is an inherent risk in the strategy of the Iranian strategy is not a strategy you want to do if everything's going swimmingly. This is really a strategy of last resort because what it does risk, if it risks increasing, if you want to put it in Clausewitzian terms the amnesty of the entire region

against them and possibly drawing in Europe, the UK has certainly changed its stance over the last 24 hours and may continue to do so.

Right. So as a draw, the European partners, perhaps a consensus formed that actually the regime needs to go and this is the time to take care of it, even if they were not, if the countries weren't initially in favor of these operations. So that's a huge risk for them. Another huge risk is that this goes on just long enough to destabilize them, right?

That they have internal factions to split off, that they come out of this in a way similar to Assad, where he came out of the main part of the civil war victorious, but not strong enough to hold on for the next shock. Right. Did the next time something happened in that case, the Israeli strikes against him that further weakened the Assad regime.

And then the, you know, usher coming in, right, that Iran may survive this but be too weak for the next thing. So I think those are their three big potential challenges going forward.

Deveraux

And if we go around the region, then, some of these actors who are potentially being pulled in at a minimum, are facing collateral damage, the region: what are some of the challenges as we look at? You don't have to go by country by any means, but a couple of these countries that, either are in close proximity to Iran or have worked with Iran or, are just finding themselves, a surprise that they're getting drawn in.

Stoil

Of course, there are the physical and economic challenges, right? They're getting hit. There's only a certain amount that getting hit can happen before it starts to cause some serious pain, whether that's economic, whether that's, you know, capability, physical stability, all of those things are on the table. OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) has agreed to increase oil production temporarily to keep oil prices from skyrocketing.

But severe damage to oil infrastructure will have long term impacts. Right. So for a lot of kind of the Gulf actors, there's a lot of danger here in terms of their long-term success. Now it's a danger they could rebuild from. Absolutely. Do they have the economic wherewithal to do that? Pretty much certainly. Right. These are not poor countries, but it's not something they've had to deal with in a very long time, certainly since the Iran-Iraq war.

There's a potential for serious targeting and economic fallout. It puts a spotlight on their military, on their defensive capabilities. For countries that rely on a lot of expat population, if this goes on for a longer duration, that expat population may consider that maybe they don't want to be living under rocket bombardment, maybe as their countries to repatriate them and to bring them back in a noncombatant evacuation. This could have huge knock-on effects, at least temporarily, for the countries in the region.

As we move elsewhere. Lebanon, this can be very profound. So Israel does shaping operations. Before this war, they've been increasing their targeting of Hezbollah and especially have below rocket forces. In the weeks leading up to this war. They also communicated to Lebanon that Israel would not target Lebanon once this war began. If Hezbollah didn't strike Israel. Well, now, Hezbollah struck that Israel and Israel responded by a fairly intense wave of operations in Lebanon. And the

Lebanese government has now said that the Lebanese Armed Forces are ordered to stop Hezbollah from future rocket launches.

This is a really big deal. It's a big challenge to the internal stability of Lebanon. It's a big challenge, obviously, to Hezbollah, but it enters us into a fairly unknown period of what happens if the government really does decide to stand up to Hezbollah in a very serious and military context as we look to Israel, obviously, this has profound effects on Israel.

The removal of Iran as a major adversary would be the first time Israel has lived without Iran trying to kill it for a very long time. It's been a major focus of their defense establishment. It change its dynamic obviously, with Lebanon, it may change the dynamic with the Houthis in Yemen about whether they can continue to pose a threat to Israel.

Hamas has insulated itself somewhat from the loss of Iran. There will still be a big deal for them in Gaza by relying increasingly on Turkey and Qatar or Qataris for some of their support. And so it does have the potential for strategic change, but perhaps more limited there.

Deveraux

I'm actually really curious. We don't have to dive too much into it, but the proxies, if home base kind of goes away, whether that's just a kind of re-shift or, you know, adjustment and, and how that regime exists. I'm curious, really, what happens to those proxies as they find themselves in a little vacuum of, you know, kind of how they operate, who they necessarily answer to, but, you know, coordinate with, provide funding for or, you know, maybe the leashes just cut.

Stoil

I think it very much depends. We tend to colloquially look at all of these kind of Iranian-backed groups as Iran's proxies, but there are significant differences in how they operate. So Hezbollah is very closely tied to Iran and relies on Iran for quite a lot. Hezbollah will be in a much, much weakened position. It will be very hard for it going forward without that close Iranian support.

Hamas has existed without Iranian support and with Iranian support at various times or with different levels of Iranian support, is probably the better way to say it, and has taken moves to insulate themselves that this won't be a killing blow for them if the kind of center of the network collapses, it will change how they have to operate.

It will change who they're operating with, but it won't be the end for them. Palestinian Islamic Jihad, by contrast, is a lot more tied to Iran, but have operated under the umbrella of Hamas before and may do so again. The Houthis were originally not closely tied to Iran and then became very closely tied to Iran, are now very dependent on Iran.

But in recent years, we've seen them starting to reach out to countries like China, and China providing them capabilities and support. And so there's a possibility that they may find a different patron in another great power. And I do think that is something that is kind of one of the missing aspects here, which is China. I know there's a lot of people saying, you know, that for the Indo-PACOM (US Indo-Pacific Command) problem set for the Pacific, this is very bad, right?

There's a lot of US stuff not in the Pacific, but China in recent years has been making trying to make on trades and strategic growth in the Middle East. China was the one who negotiated some of

the non-aggression pact and the kind of return of relationships between the Iran and some of the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia. China was very much involved in that.

And they rested on kind of that Chinese diplomatic effort, which is now been shown to not really be worth the paper it was printed on, as Iran has completely violated, had violated the terms of it. And it's striking the very countries with which China had helped negotiate an agreement. So it's really hurting some parts of Chinese global standing.

Additionally, China has start to back Iran. There was the potential of a deal for Iran to get hypersonic anti-ship missiles from China.

Deveraux

Which is a bad day.

Stoil

Potentially bad day. That didn't happen because the war began beforehand. And Iran is kind of been flailing around looking for support from Russia and China in terms of practical, actionable support. And it has not been forthcoming. So, to an extent, one of the interesting things that are coming out of this is that in the Middle East at least, this is doing significant harm to China's strategic position and global position for global competition.

It's also showing that the US does what we say we do, right. We had been saying that if you don't, if Iran doesn't meet certain standards, you would strike. It would be a much bigger strike and the US is living up to that. So I do think there is a global perspective to take here, and that this is not necessarily been as dire as one might think for our kind of global competition with China.

Deveraux

I think it's worthwhile to take that into account with what I talked with Evan Ellis about, when looking at Venezuela as well. He said similar comments that, China was, you know, surprisingly quiet, or, where it was making noise. It was definitely doing it just through diplomatic channels. So that's an interesting aspect of the partner you choose.

Stoil

It's the partner in choose. And also, one of the things that I think when comparisons are made, it's often forgotten, is people will look at the size of the Chinese military. They are, they have this huge military with lots of new capabilities, etc., etc. True they do, but they haven't invested in the global reach and the global logistics chain.

I think they're especially in some kind of more popular publications. There's this idea of, well, how much what percentage of US military personnel are engaged in sustainment and maintenance, and all of this in China is much more warfighting that, well, the truth is, what you're seeing in Iran is the reach of all of that sustainment and maintenance.

Our ability, the tip of our spear, can go very, very far and very deep because of the sustainment and maintainers and all of that staff work that's behind it, that's pushing it forward. And when countries bet on China, when they bet on China in the Middle East, whether they, TEF analysis point bet on China in Latin America, the fact is China doesn't have that capability, at least not yet.

And it's something that gives us the decisive advantage that we're seeing in practice in Iran today.

Deveraux

When that global reach, I mean, that's built into strategy. It's not just we can go from the United States to anywhere, as we have positioned capabilities, sustainment capabilities, operational capabilities, combat capabilities, really around the globe. So to be able to, as we talked about before, to position for a show of force, isn't necessarily a deployment from, you know, the Atlantic off to the Gulf. It's moving forces from various parts of the world where needed, to kind of show what we can do.

Stoil

And that's also heavily based on our alliances. Right? We were able to put up quite a lot in Israel this time, including an F-22 squadron, our partial squadron, a packet of F-22s. Right. We were able to put in Israel because we have the integrated partnership with them. We've practiced with them, we have that close relationship, and we have a common understanding, even if we don't always agree on strategic ends, we do have a common understanding of how to operate and have that experience and have a level of mutual trust with them.

And so it's something else that this really shows, which is our ability to leverage those allies and partners to achieve our reach and our policy goals in the region.

Deveraux

Now, I think it's a great point. I'm going to push the envelope a little bit. So I said, I'm going to take advantage of your applied history. We like to look back, to look forward. You don't have to go overly specific like I made you do in a recent project, which is going to be great, and everyone should check it out.

Stoil

It's going to be great. It might need a little revision on what happens with Iran, but it's a great project. And he's referring to the global China project. And when this comes out, I really encourage everyone to read it. I was a bit skeptical being a Middle East person on getting all of us together to work on China, but it is, it did end up being a fantastic product.

Deveraux

Forecasting China's Posturing for a Global War. I think it's going to be really good. You don't have to go overly specific. But if we could take our, you know, what we know about the past, what we're studying on the region now, with a little bit of a lens as we open up that cone towards the future, what are some potential scenarios for how this plays out? And it's kind of strategic impacts?

Stoil

I think that's a great question. So I'd really divorce two futures. There's really a point of departure of if we're talking about a future where the US takes an offramp and leave some form of the regime, whether it's an IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) led regime, whether it's realized by kind of the survivors, however, it is some form of the regime in place in some kind of negotiated future, or if we really pursue regime change. And these bring us to two very, very different kind of chains that go from there.

I'll talk about the first one, the limited one. From there. It will really depend on what narrative Iran has at its head after this, there will be really two narratives. There will be something along the kind of there, but for the grace of God to go, I right.

Deveraux

So they learn the lesson.

Stoil

Learned the lesson, essentially they crossed a red line. Don't do that again. All right. There's also the option that they've taken repeatedly of saying, "hey, look our strategy worked, the US hit us really hard or Israel hit us really hard, or they hit a proxy really hard. But basically, we're in a position to reconstitute and to kind of wait until the US gets distracted, gets bored, changes position, and then not actually implement any of the things we might have agreed to or implement them."

But get around them here and there around the edges to really go back to our old ways. In that case, you'll see eventually a resurgent Tehran, Iran who's doubling down. And unfortunately, what that likely means is more future conflict. Either from Israel or the US, as this becomes a more regular form of activity around us. Bad things and somebody strike them back.

It could be what was used to be referred to an Israeli strategy of mowing the grass, of a kind of repeated system of Iran. The bad. There's the raid, Iran death, bad there, the raid.

Deveraux

And it's going to be probably challenging to distinguish between those two paths, because public facing Iran will have learned its lesson. But we'll really have to look for the indicators to see if, that's really just for show.

Stoil

Yeah. And that'll be a lot about how they the future becomes implemented. Right. How we go from whatever the negotiated end is until the implementation of that kind of reality, whether it's inspections or whatnot. And that will be a real challenge to see. So we'll see on that one. Now, if we go to the more regime change model, the way the regime changes will be determined a little bit by how the strikes go and how the work goes.

I like to liken it to figuring out which way a tree will fall. When you're cutting it down, it really depends on how you strike the final blow. I know there's been a lot of talk about, you know, there's no unified opposition that's out there that can just take over. I would say as a historian, it's very rare that there's a unified opposition that just kind of walks in and takes over.

When you think about, say, the French Revolution or in fact, the Iranian Revolution or the Russian Revolution, there's this period where everybody can agree that they don't like the previous regime, and they're unified on that. They're coalesced all around that, and then there will be ideological differences. So I'm not as concerned that there's no unified opposition to take over.

Deveraux

I might not have the same historical background, but from books, TV shows, and movies that once we get the country, that kind of model, often ends with a lot of violence, as well as they look internally for that struggle for control.

Stoil

Transitions among governments are very rarely peaceful. I think that's one of the great Testaments to the US system of our democracy, in that when we have an election, we get a government transition, and there's not usually a lot of violence around it. But even if we look at our own early history, the period between the end of the Revolutionary War and the Constitution was not free from violence and rebellion.

You had things like Shays Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion. Since we're sitting here in Pennsylvania, it's worth mentioning. So we can expect that almost any way the regime falls, there will be a period of violence in transition, how it falls. You have a couple of different options. You have something of an internal coup logic, right? At some point, the punishment is enough that various actors in the military and security enterprise get together and say, we really want to stop taking this punishment.

And it's the more ideological government that's causing this. Let's get rid of them. That could come from the Iranian conventional military. That's not the IRGC. It could come from other elements of the security service. So there's one version which is done kind of security service led, military led something of a coup. And changes the government, keeping largely the structure intact but allowing for new options going forward.

There's another version that we could call kind of Tehran first, where in the regime becomes significantly weakened in Tehran and its kind of core heartland provinces, its security mechanisms are no longer there, and the population, either spontaneously or in a coalition, rises up and removes the regime from power. Obviously, that will create some deal of chaos, but it can also lead to quite good things down the line.

Another version would be a regional dissolution that Iran holds enough power at its center, protecting its core a little bit like a boxer, but in doing so loosens its grip on some of its other regions. So the Kurdish areas, the Azeri areas, Balochistan by the Pakistan border and kind of, Arabistan on the Iraqi border, some of those areas and what we could see is something more akin to a regional, either temporary or permanent regional breakup.

In all of these cases, what you would then see is regional competition for influence. Who can influence the future of Iran, because Iran is a just naturally a fairly fertile, though it does have these drought conditions, populous, strong economy with lots of hydrocarbons. There will be competition, and that competition will need to be managed as well to get the best possible outcome.

In addition to that, you could expect to see kind of some unexpected groups where Iran has been under repression for a very long time. When you lift the lid on repression, society starts to try to find its new way. And that's also can lead to surprises. And we don't know what the surprises might yet be, but they should be anticipated.

In any case, any way the regime falls, I think we will see this competition from regional and great powers to gain influence in the future. We'll see a period of instability, and we'll see an attempt

to bring new stability. And when we're thinking about that attempt to bring new stability, we need to understand some of the drivers of instability in Iran, such as the water crisis that can be addressed, that would help any new Iranian government to achieve stability, and that will become an important part of our future outlook.

Deveraux

I appreciate you taking the time. The future for anyone is unclear. But this one definitely will be changing rapidly, and I'm sure you'll be watching. I'll be watching. And maybe in a couple months we could sit down again and, kind of rehash, you know, where it went. I also would challenge you on behalf of my boss and SSI to pen something short to get it out there as well.

For those that don't necessarily listen for a podcast, I know you are probably going to be very busy for the next couple weeks. Lots of interviews. But if you can find time, a short article would be great, too. For our listeners who are also readers, that could check out our *Parameters Now*, newly launched, online venue.

We have hit about an hour, which is much longer than we normally go. Jacob, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me.

Stoil

Thank you very much. I've greatly enjoyed it, and I will get working on that article. I really appreciate you taking the time, especially on short notice, and the entire crew here at the Media Center for Army War College and the SSI staff and Army War College staff for being flexible and arranging this on a short notice as we navigate this crisis. And thank you also to the listeners for taking the time, hopefully to listen to something interesting.

Deveraux

Yeah. And hopefully we can turn it and get it out here pretty quick. Because like I joked a couple times, its relevancy is going to go down by the day as the situation unfolds. But listeners, thank you for the time. I hope you enjoyed the conversation. For more Army War College podcasts, check out *Decisive Point*, *Conversations on Strategy*, *CLSC Dialogues*, and *a Better Peace*.

Deni

You can now find *SSI Live* on TuneIn radio and on popular podcast directories like Stitcher—and at the iTunes Store. If you have any comments on our podcast, thoughts on what you'd like to see addressed, or a response to something you heard here at *SSI Live*, please go to our website. That's SSI.armywarcollege.edu. Find me, John Deni, in the staff directory, and send me an e-mail. I look forward to hearing from you. For the *SSI Live* podcast series, I'm John Deni. Thanks for listening.