

War with Iran and the Limits of American Power in the Middle East

A *Works in the Works* presentation by Prof. Peter Parides, September 22, 2026

"Your enemy has a vote."

It is a simple rule of war, and one easily forgotten by nations powerful enough to believe they are writing the rules themselves. A missile may hit its intended target. A navy may be destroyed. A government may be incapacitated. But then the other side responds.

In his *Works in the Works* talk, Professor Peter Parides of the Social Science Department examined the current war with Iran through a guiding proposition: nineteenth-century Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz's assertion that war is a continuation of politics by other means. Military success alone cannot constitute victory. Parides explained that a successful war campaign requires clearly defined and achievable political objectives. Or, as he put it more directly, "You don't win a war by blowing stuff up." Obvious, perhaps, until it isn't.

Parides considered four major American objectives in Iran: degrading Iran's offensive capabilities, destroying its naval power, preventing it from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and dismantling its ability to direct regional proxies. The results, he argued, are mixed. Iran's conventional military strength has been substantially degraded, yet missiles and drones remain operational, enriched uranium remains in the country, and regional actors including the Houthis continue to exert influence. The United States, in Parides' analysis, has neither won nor lost. The more interesting question is what "winning" would mean.

Here the talk moved beyond inventories of missiles, ships, and military targets into the messier terrain of politics. American and Israeli objectives were not always aligned. Plans for regime change depended upon assumptions about Iranian popular resistance and Kurdish participation that did not materialize. Turkey had interests of its own. Iran had interests of its own. So did Hezbollah, the Houthis, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China. Allies could agree on an enemy without agreeing on an endgame.

That divergence was most visible in the relationship between President Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Although the United States and Israel entered the war as close military partners, Parides emphasized that the two leaders did not share the same vision of how the conflict should end. He noted that Trump expected the conflict to resemble the rapid U.S. operation in Venezuela and initially anticipated a war measured in weeks rather than months. Netanyahu, by contrast, pursued the broader objective of regime change and continued Israeli freedom of action against Hezbollah. Trump sought a negotiated exit and, at several points, pressed Netanyahu to halt strikes that threatened to derail talks with Iran. By June, Netanyahu himself described it as an "open question" whether he and Trump were aligned on the war's endgame. Their relationship was a microcosm of Parides' larger argument: military cooperation does not necessarily produce political consensus, even between allies.

Parides used Iran's response to demonstrate the strange mathematics of asymmetric warfare. American Patriot interceptors cost roughly \$2 million each and require more time to manufacture, while Iranian drones can be produced for a fraction of the price—roughly \$50,000 each—and much faster. The more technologically sophisticated weapon does not necessarily confer the greater strategic advantage. Sometimes the weaker power does not need to overpower the stronger one. It just needs to outlast it.

Parides argued that asymmetry extends beyond weaponry. Iran's ability to disrupt shipping through the Strait of Hormuz affects oil prices and, consequently, political pressure inside the United States. American public opinion, congressional opposition, elections, economic costs, and military stockpiles all become part of the battlefield. These are not necessarily weaknesses in the conventional sense; some are features of democratic government. But they are limits, and Parides' larger point was that military strength cannot make those limits disappear. Nor can it produce agreement on an endgame.

The presentation ended without resolution. Earlier that morning, President Trump told the U.N. General Assembly that he faced a choice: reach a deal with Iran or "annihilate the Islamic Republic." Negotiations remain uncertain, and political authority within Iran is complicated enough that even the question of whom the United States might negotiate with has no simple answer. Parides described a conflict changing so quickly that he had been revising his presentation the night before and adding slides as new developments occurred.

The most useful distinction the talk leaves behind may be this: Military power can determine what gets destroyed; political power is measured by what happens afterward. Between the two lies everything an enemy, an ally, an electorate, an economy, or an unexpected consequence might decide to do next.

They all get a vote.

Review by Phebe Szatmari