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Editorial

Clausewitz reminds us –

> [T]he supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.[1]

The 2026 Iran War initiated by the United States and Israel on 28 February 2026 was seemingly not well thought through by the Trump administration, and there were no clear, plausible or congruent political objectives.[2] There is a cost to impulsive decision-making, and there is no such thing as a quick war. This war once again displays the limitations of air power and the consequences of poorly conceived strategy in a war of choice, especially against a determined asymmetric opponent that has time, patience, experience of protracted wars, and layered security institutions on its side. Despite killing some of the Iranian top leadership, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and largely destroying the Iranian air force and navy, the United States and Israel have not been able to achieve regime change in Iran nor its political capitulation. Instead, the war has enabled hardliners in the Iranian government and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to tighten their grip on domestic security, the Iranian economy, and society. The war also strengthened the resolve of the Iranian regime not to give up its nuclear ambitions.[3] Moreover, this war produced several regional and global crises.

The war expanded horizontally into a wider regional war when Iran, in retaliation for US–Israeli strikes, conducted missile and drone attacks against the energy and civilian infrastructure of the Gulf Arab states.[4] Iran also attacked Israel, US embassies and military infrastructure in the Gulf region, as well as the Incirlik air base (a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation facility) in Türkiye.[5] The Iranian proxy forces, Hezbollah (in Lebanon) and the Houthis (in Yemen), have already conducted missile attacks against Israel.[6] Israel responded by resuming and intensifying the Israel–Hezbollah War in southern Lebanon, involving Israeli ground troops and air strikes. These operations have resulted in the displacement of over a million Lebanese civilians and aggravated an already precarious humanitarian situation in the country.[7] Hezbollah is increasingly attacking Israeli ground forces with drones guided by fibre optic cables. These attacks are difficult to counter.[8] Ending the Israel–Hezbollah War has also become a disputed point in negotiations between the United States and Iran, with the latter demanding a ceasefire in Lebanon. Ending the Iran War could therefore also influence the war in Lebanon and possibly the security situation in Gaza.[9]

On 4 March 2026, Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz by threatening and attacking commercial ships, which largely blocked maritime traffic through the Persian Gulf, although a small number of ships were able to transit the strait daily through the Iranian

"toll booth" system.[10] The Iranian closure of the strait, through which 20 per cent of global oil production normally flows, has subsequently produced a global oil shortage of 12,3 million barrels per day, which is approximately 10 per cent of global oil consumption.[11] Increased global oil production, as well as exports via the Saudi Arabian East–West oil pipeline and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Habshan–Fujairah pipeline, both of which circumvent the Strait of Hormuz, has contributed towards reducing the overall deficit. The continuing war and closure of the Strait of Hormuz have resulted in global oil prices rising from around US$75 per barrel in late February 2026[12] – to US$126 per barrel by 30 April 2026.[13] As fuel and other prices (e.g. fertiliser) are increasing – even in net oil-exporting countries, such as the United States – overall global economic growth is expected to decline significantly, while inflation will probably grow.

With reference to the human toll, by 7 April 2026, United States–Israeli airstrikes have, resulted in approximately 3 375 deaths in Iran as well as 25 000 injured.[14] Prior to this, the Iranian security forces killed thousands of civilian protestors who protested against poor economic conditions, and demanded freedom, dignity, human rights and the downfall of the Islamic Republic.[15] Since the start of the war, the Iranian population has suffered extensive job losses, further hyperinflation, limited stocks of medicine, and no internet connectivity. Since 13 April 2026, the US maritime blockade in the Strait of Oman (east of the Strait of Hormuz) has created a "double blockade", which is aggravating the situation. With the blockade of the Strait of Oman, the United States intends to prevent vessels from leaving or reaching Iran in order to cut off Iranian oil exports and oil revenue.[16] The ad hoc and fragmented negotiations between Iran and the United States only produced a fragile ceasefire since 7 April 2026. From the negotiations and media statements, it became clear that the Iranians are determined to introduce a system of control and/or management of the Strait of Hormuz – in conjunction with Oman.[17] Iran intends to charge vessels a fee to pass through the strait, especially to fund reconstruction projects after the current war. In response to the US blockade, Iran has threatened to attack the port facilities of Gulf Arab states.[18]

Iranian drone and missile strikes have inflicted significant damage on civilian infrastructure in Gulf Arab states and on US military bases and military equipment in the region, despite sophisticated air defence systems in place. This war again shows the difficulty, high cost and unsustainability of defeating relatively cheap drones with expensive air defence missiles. For example, an Iranian Shahed drone with a range of 2 000 km costs between US$20 000 and US$50 000, while a US Patriot air defence missile costs about US$4 million.[19] Similar to the Russia–Ukraine War (since 2022), the 2026 Iran War raises questions about the future need for expensive fighter aircraft in order to conduct airstrikes on the battlefield. Ukraine, with a weaker air force, started the first "drone war" by relying extensively on such platforms for battlefield and deep strikes against Russia, and drones now account for approximately 70 per cent of Russian casualties.[20] As an asymmetric force, the Iranian military followed suit.

Besides the ceasefire, the United States and Iran have reached a political stalemate with regard to terms for a peace agreement, since both sides want to show strategic advantage after the war. At the moment, the United States is not in a better position than before the war, since it has expended a lot of expensive munitions, and lost aircraft and other military equipment to the amount of approximately US$2,8 billion.[21] Moreover, the United States is facing international political pressure to end the war and the maritime blockade of the Strait of Oman. At the end of the Iran War, the United States and the Middle East might however be worse off than before the war.

While the crisis in the Persian Gulf is dragging on, China, as an 'unofficial mediator' in the current Iran War, is presenting itself as a voice of reason and a responsible global power.[22] China criticised Israel and the United States for starting the Iran War, and called for adherence to international law and the re-opening of the Strait of Hormuz. As the biggest trading partner of Iran and buyer of sanctioned oil, China is in a unique position to influence peace negotiations and provide discreet support to Pakistan, which hosted negotiations between the United States and Iran, as the main mediator.[23]

In mid-April 2026, Ukraine reported an incident where its military regained lost territory against Russian forces using only remote-controlled ground robots (unmanned ground vehicles) and drones.[24] Ukraine also intensified its long-range drone strikes on Russian oil infrastructure and military targets, increasing pressure on Russian oil exports.[25] On 24 March 2026, Russia launched over 400 drones against Ukraine during a day-time attack,[26] and broke this record on 15 April 2025 by launching 659 attack drones.[27] Both Russia and Ukraine use approximately 300 drones for strikes each day. This drone war has produced a "dead zone" that 'extends deep behind forward elements', which compels dispersion and creates fragmented manoeuvre.[28] Contemporary wars with drones, therefore, involve attritional warfare that requires mass drone production and innovation. According to Seth Cropsey, who served as deputy undersecretary of the US Navy during the Reagan administration, 'the side that properly harmonizes the close and deep fight, and leverages capabilities to ultimately facilitate a breakthrough and exploitation, will be the victor'.[29]

In late April 2026, Tuareg separatists and Al-Qaeda-linked Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) fighters executed coordinated attacks against Mali government forces in Bamako, Gao and other locations, taking over several military positions and the town of Tessalit in the northeast.[30] During these attacks, the defence minister of Mali, Sadio Camara, was killed. The Mali military and the Africa Corps (a Russian private military company) have not been able to push back rebel groups, and lost significant territory in northern Mali, including the Kidal region. Apparently, the Africa Corps in Mali has become more defensive and cautious compared to its forerunner, the Wagner Group, and has surrendered their weapons to Tuareg fighters before evacuating the town of Kidal. Bamako remains surrounded by JNIM forces, which have set up roadblocks at entrances to the city.[31] The question is whether the renewed co-operation between JNIM and Tuareg separatists could result in further setbacks for Mali security forces and their Russian backers. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the joint military force of the Alliance of

Sahel States (AES) will be able to turn the tide against violent extremist organisations after severing ties with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and abated collaboration with the African Union, the European Union and the United Nations.

Complementing these reflections on current developments, this issue of *Scientia Militaria* includes five scholarly articles that deepen our understanding of current defence, security and military affairs through historical, strategic, ethical and human-centred perspectives.

The first article is by Gavin Heath, who taught English and Geography in South Africa and the United Kingdom before lecturing at the former University of Natal. In his study, he examined the South African military deployment along the Italy–France border in June and July 1945, in the immediate, chaotic aftermath of the Second World War. By drawing on war diaries and other primary sources, Heath reconstructed the operational efficiency and diplomatic tact displayed by the First City/Cape Town Highlanders as well as supporting units. Not only did they have to safeguard the alpine frontier while the territory was under an illegal French occupation, but they also had to carry out these operations under challenging environmental conditions. This account offers valuable insights into post-conflict stabilisation and border security operations as well as multinational military co-operation. Such lessons remain relevant to the fragile ceasefires and humanitarian challenges, as evident in Lebanon and the Persian Gulf, as discussed earlier.

The second article is by Nicolas Wolbrandt, an authority on Middle East politics and international arms co-operation, affiliated with the Department of History (War and Conflict Studies) at the University of Potsdam. Wolbrandt studied South African–Israeli military-technical co-operation during the 1970s and 1980s. As Wolbrandt argues, given the South African international isolation and arms embargoes, the South African government may have officially stated that it aimed for defence-industrial autarky. This goal was, however only partially achieved through South Africa's covert relationship with Israel, which helped close critical capability gaps through technology transfers and joint development of drones, missiles and platform upgrades. From a more generalised strategic perspective, the article illustrates how states evaluate selective external partnerships when facing urgent defence needs. Furthermore, Wolbrandt highlights the limits of sanctions when these are undermined by geopolitical alliances. These insights could serve as a framework for analysing defence-industrial strategies under sanctions and geopolitical constraints, as in the development and use of drones in the Iran War and the Russia–Ukraine War.

The third article is by Sunday MA Aloko of the Department of History and War Studies at the Nigerian Defence Academy. In his study, Aloko analysed the Battle of Ore in September 1967 during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). The author builds on the premise that this case study has been overlooked in current historiography, thereby obscuring its importance as a decisive turning point in the wider conflict. The battle halted the Biafran western offensive, boosted federal morale, and redefined the strategic geography of the conflict around the southeastern heartland. Aloko's research findings

highlight the value for current researchers of examining understudied battles and strategic decision-making in African military history, not only to correct the historical record but also to derive strategic lessons. Many of these lessons are directly applicable to ongoing insurgencies on the continent, such as those involving Tuareg separatists, JNIM, and Russian-backed forces in Mali and the Sahel region, as discussed earlier.

The fourth article is by J David Thompson of King's College London. In his study, Thompson explored the ethical challenges of principal–proxy relationships in warfare. Building on the concept of "dirty hands", Thompson argues that forming such relationships does not, by itself, excuse violations of moral absolutes, and that traditional *jus ad bellum* criteria should remain the governing moral framework when states decide to support proxies. These reflections are especially pertinent in an era of intensified proxy engagements in regional conflicts, as demonstrated by Iran through its use of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen during the 2026 regional escalation discussed previously.

The final article is by Dale Haarhoff, a clinical psychologist in the South African Military Health Service with extensive experience in operational psychology and peace support operations. Haarhoff proposes a short-term intervention strategy aimed at military personnel and veterans with combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder. The strategy on which he focused was informed by general systems meta-theory and interactional pattern analysis, which rested on a sequenced five-step therapeutic process to address perpetuating factors, such as a lack of control and isolation. The case studies on which Haarhoff reports not only confirm the effectiveness of the strategy, but also the speed with which it provided relief compared to others. Haarhoff's research is timely for two main reasons. Firstly, as societal attitudes towards mental health become more open, an increasing number of ageing veterans from earlier conflicts, such as the Southern African Border War (1966–1989), may come forward to seek assistance for long-term and untreated combat-related trauma. Secondly, Haarhoff's research offers a practical framework for addressing the growing psychological demands on personnel, including members of the South African National Defence Force, who engage in asymmetric conflicts, peace support, and stabilisation missions across the continent.

This issue also features five book reviews that complement the preceding analyses and reinforce the focus of *Scientia Militaria* on defence, security and military affairs. Pieter Roos reviewed *Close Air Support: Case Studies on the Integration of Air Power on the Battlefield,* edited by Harry Raffal and John Alexander. The volume not only depicts the historical integration of air and ground forces but also offers important insights into the persistent challenges of close air support and the increasing role of drones. These themes relate to the earlier discussion on the limitations of air power and asymmetric drone warfare as evident in the Iran War and the Russia–Ukraine conflict.

In the second book review, Abel Esterhuyse evaluates Gerhard Kamffer's book, titled *Die Geskiedenis van die Kommando's, 1715–2003*. In this detailed account, Kamffer traces the long-term evolution and strategic contribution of the South African commando system to contemporary territorial and rural defence. This book is especially pertinent to current debates on reserve forces, area defence, and internal security challenges across the African continent, including the insurgencies in the Sahel.

Brooks Marmon assessed Tycho van der Hoog's *Comrades Beyond the Cold War*. Marmon analysed the North Korean military and diplomatic engagement with Southern African liberation movements. The book emphasises the enduring dynamics of external support, alliances, and proxy relationships in African security affairs.

Johnny O'Neil reviews Claudio Chistè's *Rise of the Warrior Leader*, which proposes a hybrid steward–warrior leadership model for navigating crises and volatile security environments. By comparison, the last book, reviewed by Jean-Pierre Scherman, offers vital lessons on decision-making and on preventing escalation in complex conflict environments. As Scherman discusses, Paolo Tripodi, in his latest title, *Rwanda 1994: A Failure of Leadership and a Preventable Genocide,* achieves this through a detailed examination of military leadership failures in UN peace support operations.

The combined articles and book reviews in this issue demonstrate the continuing value of rigorous historical, strategic, ethical and human-centred scholarship in defence and security studies. By engaging with both past conflicts and contemporary challenges, the articles and book reviews offer relevant insights for policymakers, practitioners and scholars alike. *Scientia Militaria* remains committed to advancing such critical debate on military affairs in an increasingly complex international environment.

The Editorial Team

Anri Delport & *Evert Jordaan*

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