

# PEARLS AND IRRITATIONS

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## Modern warfare requires cultural intelligence

May 6, 2026



*Washington's failure to subdue Tehran stems in part from overlooking the Iranian mindset moulded by Persian civilisational pride and the Shiite sense of martyrdom. It underscores the value of cultural intelligence as the third pillar of warfare, alongside human and singular intelligence.*



Cultural factors rarely figure in commentaries on the meandering US-

Iran war. Yet American strategists overlooking vital Persian cultural dynamics has arguably denied the US an unequivocal victory so far.

The war reveals how the nature of modern battlefields has transformed. Mashing each other in the trenches of Flanders or My Lai is obsolete. Technologically superior firepower alone no longer suffices; understanding the adversary's civilisational mindset matters too.

Ancient conquerors chased loot, land and slaves; defeated cultures were irrelevant. As empires coalesced, cultural engagement became unavoidable. Plutarch records that Alexander the Great valued it as a tool for maintaining stability.

The Industrial Revolution bred mechanised warfare, fuelled by ever-upgraded weapons. European wars, moreover, were fought between similar civilisational neighbours; racial and cultural differences were minimal, trumped by superior technology among allies and foes alike.

The Second World War against Japan, followed by the Korean, Indochinese and Vietnam wars, exposed warfare styles moulded by distinct histories. The contrast between the Western linear approach and 'Asian' lateral ways were starkly revealed: Japanese kamikaze tactics baffled Western warriors, while the Vietnamese proved that disruption, rather than dominance, could shape the battlefield.

In February, the US was seduced by the chance to decapitate Iran's leadership in one swoop. It launched a war without strategic coherence. This approach betrayed abysmal ignorance of Iranian culture, which is forged by Persian civilisational pride and the potent Shiite narrative about martyrdom, and of the relative weight this mindset places on religio-ideology and emotions. Confounding expectations, the assault sparked no popular uprising despite arms being sent clandestinely to abet it. Ending the war in 'three to four days' was a Trumpian chimera. Two months on, the goalposts remain fluid.

The West struggles to comprehend the Shiite theocratic mindset. While Sunni and Zionist extremists often deploy violence for political ends, the Shiite concept of martyrdom is rooted in the profound emotional narrative of Hussein's sacrifice at Karbala in 680 CE. The US killing of Khamenei instantly made him a martyr – the second in 1,400 years of Shiite history – bolstering the narrative of sacrifice against overwhelming odds and inadvertently mobilising the population rather than demoralising it.

Two consequences are now crippling US-Israeli war (or peace) prospects.

First, Persia has a long tradition of decentralised governance dating back to Darius the Great, whose provincial Satraps were near-independent, checked only by annual imperial audits. Iran's ayatollahs have installed a similar system: a 'mosaic' defence structure that is decentralised across 31 provinces under IRGC commanders. Israeli assassinations and last year's 12-day blitz only buttressed the structure: satraps execute preordained orders, keeping command-and-control intact.

Second, decapitation ignored the organic culture of hierarchical systems, in which information and authority flow upward. Beheading the top layer scatters institutional knowledge, spawns factions and fragments command structures. No clear negotiator emerges, prolonging the quagmire.

Reports already point to tensions between advocates of persistent diplomacy and hard-line IRGC commanders. Mr Trump laments the lack of a foe with whom to negotiate. A fractured regime is hardly a plus for America if the goal is peace, not prolonged instability.

Why has the United States miscalculated so badly? Two time-worn adages have long guided military campaigners, as enunciated by Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*: 'If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles'.

As for 'know yourself', the sheer American strategic incoherence for justifying the launch of the Iranian offensive and the subsequent erratic diplomacy and delusional presidential pronouncements speak for themselves.

As for 'know thy enemy', the Trump administration has comprehensively purged 'old hands' and regional experts in the State and Defense Departments, sharply depleting in-house knowledge of Iranian culture and politics. Do Witkoff or Kushner have any expertise in the Persian socio-political landscape?

Accounts of the 27 February meeting in the White House Situation Room with Netanyahu confirm that this brain drain has created an echo

chamber. Lacking diplomats and generals who grasp the religio-cultural nuances of the Shiite mindset, Americans have fallen back on a linear enumeration of the thousands of targets hit as proof of 'wins.'

The First World War, the first major war of the industrial age, confirmed the continuing relevance of humint (human intelligence) and introduced the value of sigint (signals intelligence) in warfare. Now, America's strategic defeat – soothed only by tactical wins – underscores the value of cultural intelligence. Without it, a military campaign can swiftly curdle.

The days when superior armaments alone dominated the battlefield are past. Modern conflict demands a third pillar: CQint - Cultural Intelligence. To defeat an enemy today, one must understand their mind, not merely their machine.

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The views expressed in this article may or may not reflect those of Pearls and Irritations.

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We recognise the First Peoples of this nation and their ongoing connection to culture and country. We acknowledge First Nations Peoples as the Traditional Owners, Custodians and Lore Keepers of the world's oldest living culture and pay respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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

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