When Precision Becomes the Problem

On AI warfare, institutional collapse, and what happens after the buildings are still standing

Chris George | Liminal Mind | 20 March 2026

I've been watching the Iran war the way I suspect most systems researchers have — with a split attention. One eye on the immediate horror of it, the other on the patterns underneath. The speed. The precision. The particular kind of damage being done.

This morning, the IRGC confirmed that Ali Mohammad Naini, their spokesperson, was killed in an overnight strike. He had appeared on Iranian state television just hours earlier, insisting that Iran's missile production remained fully operational. By dawn he was dead. His electromagnetic signature — phone data, movement patterns, the accumulated trace of a life conducted under surveillance — had been sufficient to direct a weapon to him before he could move.

That compression of time between identification and elimination is not accidental. It is the point. And understanding what it produces, beyond the immediate deaths, is what I want to think through here.

The Machine Behind the Strikes

Since Operation Epic Fury began on 28 February with the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the targeting campaign has been driven by an AI architecture developed and battle-tested in Gaza. The primary systems include Gospel, also known as Habsora — an AI engine generating strike recommendations from fused satellite imagery and signals intercepts; Lavender, a human tracking system correlating behavioural patterns, communications metadata, and location data across thousands of individuals; and Fire Factory, which optimises weapons loads and builds time-sensitive strike plans at machine speed.

The US achieved 5,500 strikes in the first eleven days of the war. That number is not the product of human planning cycles. It is the product of kill chain compression — the reduction of the gap between target identification and weapon deployment from hours or days to seconds. Human operators are technically present, but reports from the Gaza precedent suggest verification windows as short as twenty seconds before authorisation. The Lavender system carries a documented error rate of approximately ten percent. At the scale of this campaign, that is hundreds of incorrect identifications expressed as strikes.

The girls' school in Minab — 165 dead, most of them children — is believed by analysts to reflect AI misidentification of a government-affiliated institution. The system saw a pattern. A human ratified it in the time it takes to read this sentence. A school ceased to exist.

> *The question I keep returning to is not whether this targeting architecture is militarily effective. It demonstrably is. The question is what kind of situation its effectiveness has created.*

As of today, confirmed dead include: the Supreme Leader, the IRGC Commander, the Defence Minister, the Defence Council Secretary, the Intelligence Minister, the Basij Commander, the National Security Council Secretary, and the IRGC Spokesperson. Estimates of total officials killed across all tiers reach approximately forty. Mojtaba Khamenei, installed as Supreme Leader eight days after his father's assassination, is attempting to govern a state at war from an undisclosed location, with a shattered command structure, and no functioning diplomatic apparatus.

Kodak Had the Patents Too

I want to make an argument that I haven't seen made anywhere else in the current coverage, because the coverage is almost entirely focused on the military dimension. Bear with me while I go somewhere unexpected.

Kodak invented digital photography in 1975. A company engineer named Steven Sasson built the first digital camera and presented it to management. The response, as he later described it, was: that's cute — but don't tell anyone about it. Film was generating seventy percent profit margins. Why cannibalise it?

Within roughly a decade of digital photography becoming mainstream, a company worth thirty-one billion dollars had filed for bankruptcy. The assets were still there. The buildings were still standing. Many of the smart people were still employed. But the organisational conditions that allowed institutional knowledge to be converted into strategic action had already been destroyed — not all at once, but through a series of decisions that each made rational short-term sense and collectively proved fatal.

Boeing destroyed its own engineering culture by laying off experienced engineers to cut costs, severing the embodied understanding of why certain decisions had been made decades earlier. The 737 MAX failures were not primarily technical. They were the consequence of an organisation that had systematically removed the people who held the tacit knowledge — the judgment, the contextual memory, the informal networks — that made the organisation genuinely functional.

NASA, when ordered to return to the moon, discovered it had forgotten how. The plans existed. The institutional knowledge did not. It had lived in specific people. Those people had retired. The knowledge had not survived them.

Bell Labs, after the AT&T breakup, retained its formal structure but lost the ecological conditions that had generated the transistor, information theory, and Unix. The institution continued to exist. Its generative capacity did not.

> *The pattern across these cases is consistent: institutional collapse is not the disappearance of an organisation. It is the destruction of its capacity for certain kinds of function — the tacit, relational, embodied knowledge that enables adaptive decision-making under pressure.*

This knowledge does not exist in documents or org charts. It exists in the relationships between people, in the contextual judgment accumulated over years of shared work, in the informal networks through which meaning is made and decisions are reached. It cannot be reconstructed quickly, and its absence is frequently invisible until the organisation encounters precisely the conditions that require it.

What Has Been Created in Iran

The western strategic narrative assumes a linear sequence: remove the leadership, the population rises, a more compliant government emerges, the nuclear programme is neutralised. This is a legible, manageable story. It is also almost certainly wrong.

What has actually been created is a state that no longer functions the way states need to function to be manageable. The Iranian government under Khamenei was hierarchical, mappable, and — precisely because it was legible — susceptible to the tools of intelligence, diplomacy, and targeted pressure. Western agencies had spent decades developing that map. The strikes have destroyed the map along with the territory.

Iran's nuclear programme was not centralised in the people who have been killed. It is distributed across facilities, scientists, and knowledge holders whose locations and current status are uncertain. In a functioning hierarchical state, nuclear assets have command and

control architecture — authorised use requires decision chains. In a fragmented state with multiple semi-autonomous command nodes and no clear central authority, those protocols become unreliable. Distributed nuclear capability without central coordination is arguably more dangerous, not less, than a functional programme under unified command.

The IRGC's external network — Hezbollah, Houthi forces, Iraqi Shia militias — was not commanded in a way that dies with commanders in Tehran. These organisations have their own leadership, their own resources, their own commitments. Removing central coordination does not demobilise them. It potentially liberates them from the strategic constraints that Tehran's calculations imposed. Actors who previously had to factor in Iranian interests now need not.

And then there is the precedent. Every norm broken in this operation — the assassination of a head of state, the AI-enabled targeting at scale, the acceptance of mass civilian casualties in a school strike — becomes available to every other actor in the international system. China watching Taiwan. Russia watching whatever comes next. The knowledge that AI-enabled state decapitation is a viable strategic tool does not remain proprietary.

The Latency Problem

The most dangerous aspect of what has happened may be the gap between what has already occurred and when its full consequences become visible.

Kodak's institutional failure preceded its visible collapse by a decade. The organisation continued to look functional long after the conditions for its survival had been fatally compromised.

The Iranian state may continue to perform certain functions — internal policing, some military operations, basic administration — while the capacity for coherent strategic decision-making has already been removed. Mojtaba Khamenei faces a structural impossibility: he must assert authority to actors who no longer share the institutional framework that made such authority meaningful. He must negotiate using a diplomatic apparatus whose senior figures are dead. He must coordinate military responses through a command structure pre-delegated to operate without central direction — meaning it no longer necessarily responds to central direction.

The historical record of externally-engineered state decapitation does not contain examples of stable outcomes produced. Iraq 2003 required physical occupation, massive reconstruction, and a decade of direct governance — and still produced ISIS. Libya 2011 produced ongoing civil war. The conditions that enabled reconstruction in Germany and Japan after 1945 — total physical presence, unified external governance, massive financial investment — do not exist in Iran in 2026, and there is no indication they are planned.

What has been created is a large, complex, nuclear-adjacent state whose behaviour can no longer be predicted, managed, or meaningfully influenced by the tools used to create this situation. That is not a failure of military execution. The military operation has been extraordinarily precise by any historical standard.

> *It is the consequence of military success applied in the wrong analytical frame.*

I write about systems, about the knowledge that lives in bodies and relationships rather than records, about what happens when institutions lose the human substrate that made them function. I did not expect to be writing about it in this context, on this morning, with this particular urgency.

But the pattern is the same whether we are talking about a photographic company in Rochester, an aerospace manufacturer in Seattle, or a theocratic state in Tehran. Remove the relational architecture fast enough, and what you are left with is not a manageable successor

situation. You are left with emergence — unpredictable, self-organising, and beyond the reach of the precision instruments that created it.

That should concern us more than it apparently does.

Chris George is a visual artist and systems researcher based in Wales, working under the practice name Liminal Mind. His current project, Quantum Memory, investigates embodied knowledge, institutional memory, and the knowledge held in bodies rather than records. *liminalmind.co.uk*