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IRAN WAR

Netanyahu has vowed regime change in Iran, but will he settle for less?



Alex Brandon/AP/File

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shakes hands with U.S. President Donald Trump during a news conference in Palm Beach, Florida, Dec. 29, 2025.

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TEL AVIV, ISRAEL; AND WASHINGTON

With a new war with Iran in its second week, and Israeli political and military leaders counseling patience among Israelis, what the government's actual war aims are and whether they are attainable remain elusive.

In contrast with President Donald Trump's zig-zagging on exactly why he decided to send the United States to war against Iran alongside Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's messaging has remained fixated on regime change in Iran since Day 1.

The U.S.-Israeli attack "will create the conditions for the brave Iranian people [to] rid themselves of the yoke of tyranny," Mr. Netanyahu declared at the war's outset. On Tuesday, he addressed Iranians directly on X, urging them: "Be ready to seize the moment!"

WHY WE WROTE THIS

Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu has been consistent in stating his Iran war aim: regime change. But can he declare victory without it? "An exit strategy needs to be realistic," cautions one Israeli analyst. "Because if it is not realistic, there is no exit."

It is unclear, however, whether Mr. Netanyahu's "mission accomplished" requires overthrowing the Islamic Republic or, as some former Israeli military officials and analysts suggest, whether destabilizing the regime and severely reducing the threat it poses, especially its nuclear program, would suffice.

But even these more limited goals might increasingly be at odds with the Trump administration's tighter timetable (and shorter patience) for the war, as it focuses increasingly on the safe flow of the region's oil.

No clear Israeli fallback

“For Netanyahu, the endgame in this war is to see a heavily diminished Iran,” says retired Col. Miri Eisen, who worked in military intelligence for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Though the prime minister would like to see regime change, she says, he would likely be satisfied with less.

“He wants to see that the physical threat” from Iran’s nuclear program, missiles, and its regional proxies “are brought down to an incredibly low level,” Ms. Eisen says. “It’s the culmination of what he’s been talking about for many, many years.”



Majid Asgaripour/WANA/Reuters

People hold pictures of Iran's new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, during a funeral ceremony for Iranian military commanders killed in the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran, in Tehran, March 11, 2026.

Yet, with no evidence of a popular Iranian uprising, and Mr. Trump appearing to back away from his own demands for regime change, analysts say it is unclear whether Israel has a clear plan to pursue that objective or what its fallback might be.

“The thing that we wish to see happening is that the regime in Iran is going to change and to be replaced by a regime that is pro-Western, more or less ready to give up the ideas of hegemony in the Middle East,” says retired Brig. Gen. Yossi Kuperwasser, who heads the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security.

This would mean Iran would give up its nuclear project, its ballistic missiles arsenal, and its proxy armies such as Hezbollah and Hamas, he says.

“That is our dream, and that’s also the dream of the United States,” says Mr. Kuperwasser, the former head of the research division of IDF military intelligence. But after the dreams, he adds, “comes reality.”

The Iranian regime shows no signs of bending and has chosen hard-liner Mojtaba Khamenei to replace his father, the slain Ali Khamenei, as supreme leader.

Iran underestimated

There are also increasing jitters that Israel and the U.S. might have underestimated the response from Iran, which was weakened by the 12-day Israel-Iran war last June but says it will fight as long as necessary.

Despite U.S. and Israeli attacks against the regime’s missile launchers and stockpiles, Iran continues to attack Israel with round-the-clock ballistic-missile and drone attacks and has been hitting its Arab neighbors in the Gulf region, driving a spike in oil prices. Steve Witkoff, the Trump administration’s special envoy, might visit Israel next week, presumably to discuss next steps.

Shlomo Brom, a former director of the strategic planning division in the IDF, says he does not see that the U.S. and Israel have set out a realistic strategy to end the war.

“An exit strategy needs to be realistic. Because, if it is not realistic, there is no exit,” says the retired brigadier general, now a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies, a think tank in Tel Aviv.



Ronen Zvulun/Reuters

People take shelter from incoming missiles in an underground garage in Tel Aviv, Israel, March 4, 2026.

Israel and the U.S. have attained “enormous” military achievements on the ground, Mr. Brom says. But he adds that when they are not coupled with realistic, achievable goals – that are themselves a compromise between all you want to what you can actually get – then the war will “drag on,” until Mr. Trump “will be fed up with it.”

Regime change could mean completely taking out the Islamic leadership, Mr. Brom says, but it could also mean working with a more moderate Islamic replacement that will more easily yield to U.S. and Israeli demands and seek a better relationship with the West.

“Judging from the little information that is coming from Iran,” he concludes, “I don’t see any movement toward regime change.”

The nuclear target

If Israel and the U.S. drop regime change as a goal, says Eyal Hulata, a former Israeli national security adviser, they will be seeking objectives that are easier to “define and also measure,” such as further downgrading Iran’s missile and nuclear programs.

After the June war, Mr. Netanyahu addressed the nation and declared: “Dear citizens of Israel ... we achieved an historic victory, one that will last for decades.” Just eight months later, he was announcing a new operation to stop the same threat.

“We caused the nuclear project very devastating damage [in June], but we didn’t finish the job,” says Mr. Kuperwasser.

Iran still has 450 kilograms (about 1,000 pounds) of highly enriched uranium in an underground tunnel, he says, and has refused, in talks with the U.S. before the war, to export its stockpiles.

The thinking in Jerusalem was that waiting to attack would only have allowed Iran to rebuild its nuclear and missile capabilities, so the strategy was it was best to strike now.

According to Adi Stoler, head of the international media division of the IDF spokesperson’s office, the second phase of the war, which she says has already started, will focus on taking out Iran’s remaining nuclear capabilities while continuing to deplete its missile arsenal and assassinate more regime officials.

“The goal is to make sure that Iran will never pose a threat again to the State of Israel,” she says.

Differing stakes

Analysts say there are significant differences in how victory would be perceived in the United States and Israel.

For Mr. Trump, if the war can “end in a way that he will be perceived a victor, or at least he can make arguments why he is the victor, that is sufficient for him,” says Mr. Brom.



Amir Cohen/Reuters

Smoke from Israeli shelling is seen rising in southern Lebanon during an escalation of fighting between Iranian proxy Hezbollah and Israel, March 8, 2026.

But for Mr. Netanyahu, seeking to recover politically from the stain of Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack, the stakes are far higher. Anything less than regime change in Iran might be seen as a failure by the Israeli public, observers say.

Meanwhile, Israelis have been hunkering down in bomb shelters pounded not just by Iran but also by its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah.

According to an Israel Democracy Institute poll, an overwhelming majority of Jewish Israelis, 93%, support the war in Iran, with most believing it should continue until the regime is overthrown.

“Most Israelis believe that this war is necessary in order to seriously degrade the regime’s military capabilities and also at least try to bring down the regime,” says Meir Javedanfar, an Iranian-born lecturer at Reichman University in Israel.

But while most Israelis are willing to endure the current hardship, they want to know this is the elusive “last round” – one that will vanquish the existential threat Iran has posed for decades.

That public expectation might make it even harder for Israel to stop the war on its own. America will ultimately make that call, and Israel will have no choice but to acquiesce, says Ms. Eisen, the retired IDF colonel.

“In most of our wars, it takes an outer force to stop us,” she says.



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