IRAN

US And Israel United In War, Divided On What Comes Next

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TEL AVIV -- Driving past the gleaming skyscrapers of downtown Tel Aviv, a huge video billboard catches the eye as the advertisement switches from groceries to a giant portrait of the US president with the caption: "Thank you, God and Donald Trump!"

The tribute bears witness to Israeli gratitude for America's role in the military strikes on Iran. Israeli officials have repeatedly stressed that the two countries are in lockstep.

"The cooperation is historic between the US military and the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) and between the Israeli Air Force and the US Air Force," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on March 6 in an example of how the two countries are on the same page.

There is indeed extremely close military and political coordination. But there are also areas where priorities differ.

When Does This End?

For years, Netanyahu has pushed the idea of regime change in Iran and still appears committed to that aim.

"Our aspiration is to enable the Iranian people to cast off the yoke of tyranny," he said on March 9.

But most analysts believe regime change cannot be achieved quickly, so Trump's statement later that day, that the war could be over " very soon," raised the question: What if America's choice of an end date is earlier than Israel's?

"The United States is the one who leads when it comes to that end date. Israel is willing to continue these attacks against the Islamic regime. We're also engaged against Hezbollah, an Islamic regime proxy in Lebanon. We would like to continue that. But we'll stop when the US says we need to stop," Miri Eisin, a former deputy head of the Israeli military's Combat Intelligence Corps, told RFE/RL on March 10.

"There were very clear aims of regime change, and you're not seeing that. But let's be realistic about it. There's the rhetoric of politicians and there's the reality of the military. For the military, every additional day [means] more targets. For the politicians, they make their own decisions," added Eisin, now a fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at Reichman University in Tel Aviv.

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As Trump Hints At End Date For War, Israel Pursues Its Own Goals With Lebanon Strikes

War Aims

In fact, it is not entirely clear whether regime change is even one of the US objectives.

When US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth listed US war aims a few hours after RFE/RL spoke to Eisin, he didn't even mention it.

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"One: Destroy their missile stockpiles, their missile launchers, and their defense industrial base, missiles and their ability to make them. Two: Destroy their navy. And three: Permanently deny Iran nuclear weapons forever," Hegseth said as he went through the goals of the conflict.

Trump has spoken of "unconditional surrender" and said regime change would be "the best thing that could happen."

He said on March 10 that he was "disappointed" that the Iranian regime chose Mojtaba Khamenei to replace his late father as supreme leader but declined to say what the United States might do about it.

RFE/RL has spoken to a number of US congressional aides focused on national security in Washington who have voiced concern about a potential disconnect on this and other issues.

"One government appears to be pursuing regime collapse," a Republican aide said on condition of anonymity. "The other says it isn't -- except when it does. And that's the rub. On key objectives, we're not entirely in sync."

In any war, the timeline usually depends on the aims being pursued. Following the three objectives listed by Hegseth, victory can be declared without regime change.

Some analysts argue the United States may prefer an earlier end to operations than Israel if oil prices rise too much because the two countries have a different pain-tolerance level in this regard.

Sarit Zehavi, head of Tel Aviv think-tank Alma, said Iran's war strategy -- and its attacks on the Gulf states -- was focused on just this.

"The interest was to create a situation that America will not finish the job. To create a situation that the Gulf countries will ask Trump to stop," she said.

Oil

There have also been some hints of divergence on military targets, with Washington reportedly unhappy at an Israeli strike on an Iranian oil facility which showered Tehran in black rain a few days ago.

Asked about this on March 10, Hegseth said hitting the oil sites "wasn't necessarily our objective."

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But he rejected the idea that Israel was pulling the United States into operations that go against Washington's interests: "We're not getting pulled in any direction. We're leading, the president is leading."

On Capitol Hill, another aide, speaking on condition of anonymity, cautioned: "Destroying oil fields can spiral energy markets. Israel sees it as crippling Iran's ability to fund war, but for the US there's a risk we drag the global economy into the conflict. It's a tactical win with strategic costs."

On March 9, influential Republican Senator Lindsey Graham spelled it out in a social media post. "Please be cautious about what targets you select," he wrote, adding that the oil economy would be crucial for Iran's reconstruction.

But Yoel Guzonsky, a former member of Israel's National Security Council, said his country's strikes on Iranian oil facilities had in fact been a calibrated warning shot.

"Both the US and Israel are being very careful not to hit the main oil installations with Iran because they know that Iran's retaliation might be in the Gulf states, and then we'll see a different scenario," he said, referring to the danger of future Iranian strikes on Gulf-state oil industry targets.

"Iran didn't even scratch the oil fields and the gas fields in the Gulf," he added. "Perhaps Iran is saving itself another escalatory step toward a longer war."

Hezbollah

The issue of Hezbollah, designated as a terrorist organization the United States, also suggests Israel and the White House have slightly different priorities in this war. For Washington, hitting Iran is top of the agenda. In Israel, Hezbollah is a threat that's much closer to home.

"People don't think about the fact that I drive up north, and I live up north, and you can be 100 meters, let alone a kilometer or two, from these different sites that Hezbollah is firing from. So, for us, that's a very near and present danger," Eisin told RFE/RL.

There have been numerous Israeli media reports and analyst predictions in recent days that a much larger ground offensive against Hezbollah in Lebanon may be being prepared.

But, Eisin added, this was not diverting Israel's attention from the war with Iran. Eisin said Israel was mostly using different kinds of forces in Lebanon and was also attacking Iranian targets there.

"Israel openly attacked a few days ago, at the heart of Beirut, an Islamic regime Quds force.... So, you see that combo here. We're attacking the Islamic regime, different types of terror army capabilities, both in Lebanon and in Iran," she said.

But for Washington, the calculus is different. "From a US perspective, Hezbollah is a proxy problem, rather than a direct existential threat," one congressional aide said.

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