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Israel's War on Iran and Netanyahu's Role

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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For the second time in less than a year, Israel, in alliance with the United States, has launched a large-scale attack against Iran, using the latter's nuclear and missile programmes and regional influence as pretexts to achieve its own goal: the overthrow of the Iranian regime. Israel had previously waged a war on Iran in June last year, a 12-day conflict in which the US joined by striking Iranian nuclear facilities. Over the past three decades, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has played a major role in inciting hostility towards Iran, making it a central objective of his political career to destroy and overthrow the regime in Tehran, thus ensuring Israel's continued regional monopoly on nuclear weapons and preventing the emergence of any regional power to rival it. Israel has been the driving force behind broader international efforts, particularly by the US, to isolate Tehran and impose the harshest possible sanctions on it, in order to weaken it and force it to abandon its nuclear programme. Ultimately, this has once again culminated in war.

History of Incitement Against Iran

Netanyahu has played a central role in promoting the idea that Iran represents the greatest existential threat to Israel and has been one of the most insistent of Israeli politicians calling for a confrontation against it. He has been doing this since the beginning of his diplomatic and political career in the early 1980s, when he served at the Israeli Embassy in Washington as Deputy Chief of Mission (1982-1984), before being appointed Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations (1984-1988). During this period, he built an extensive network of relationships within American political and media circles, and became perhaps Israel's most prominent English-speaking spokesman in the West.¹ From this early stage of his career, he stressed that Iran was the main strategic threat to Israel, calling on the US to adopt a more hardline policy toward the Islamic Republic. As he launched his political career in the 1990s, he placed the Iranian nuclear programme at the centre of his speeches and policies, warning that Iran must not be allowed to possess a nuclear weapon. For three decades, he has repeatedly claimed that Iran was years – sometimes months – away from producing an atomic bomb.² In 1992, when he was a member of the Israeli Knesset, he warned that Iran was “three to five years” away from being able to produce such a weapon. In 1993, he published an article warning of the danger the Iranian nuclear programme posed to Israel, arguing that Iran constituted the most serious threat to the Hebrew state and predicting that it would possess a nuclear bomb by 1999.³

When he first became prime minister in 1996, Netanyahu addressed a joint session of the US Congress, urging US lawmakers to “stop the nuclearization of terrorist states,” and saying: “The deadline for attaining this goal is getting extremely close.”⁴ In February 2009, as leader of the Likud party and candidate for prime minister, Netanyahu told a visiting US congressional delegation that Iran was “probably only one or two years away” from acquiring military nuclear capabilities. He attributed this assessment to “Israeli experts” – without providing any further evidence.⁵ But the most infamous example of his exaggeration of the Iranian nuclear threat came in September 2012, when he addressed the UN General Assembly, holding a cartoon drawing of a bomb with a lit fuse. Netanyahu warned the world that Iran was enriching uranium so rapidly that it could produce enough fissile material for a nuclear device

1 “Benjamin Netanyahu,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed on 9/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9IS>.

2 Mohamad Bazzi, “Like George W Bush, Trump has Started a Reckless War Based on a Lie,” *The Guardian*, 22/6/2025, accessed on 9/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9IW>.

3 Yuri Drokman, “Netanyahu in 1993: By 1999, Iran will have a nuclear bomb,” *ynet*, 3/3/2015, accessed 9/3/2026 (in Hebrew), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Bagh>.

4 “After Years of Sounding the Alarm, Israel's Netanyahu Focuses World Attention on Iran,” *The Washington Post*, 23/2/2012, accessed on 9/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9uE>.

5 Bazzi.

within a few months. He then used a pen to draw a red line through the cartoon bomb, marking the stage of the nuclear programme at which, he said, Iran must be stopped. He claimed at the time that Iran could produce a working nuclear weapon “by next spring, at most by next summer.”⁶ More than 13 years have passed since that speech, and Netanyahu continues to talk about Iran’s imminent acquisition of a nuclear weapon.

Over the years, the Israeli premier has persistently called for the complete dismantling of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure through maximal economic sanctions, aiming to eliminate its nuclear programme or topple its regime entirely. He argued that if international sanctions failed to bring this about, it should be achieved through military force. As such, he vehemently opposed the JCPOA nuclear agreement concluded between Iran and world powers in July 2015,⁷ and publicly clashed with the Obama administration over the issue.⁸ This culminated in his famous address to the US Congress that year, in which he vehemently criticized the JCPOA, arguing that it was a dangerous deal that would allow Iran to become a nuclear power.⁹ His speech sparked a major controversy in the US, because he delivered it on the invitation of the Republican leadership in Congress, without coordination with the Obama administration.¹⁰ Nearly a decade later in 2024, Netanyahu reiterated his stance in another address to Congress, claiming that Iran represents the primary threat in the Middle East, and that a confrontation with it was inevitable.¹¹ Netanyahu also played a key role in the decision by Obama’s successor, Donald Trump, to withdraw from the nuclear agreement in 2018.¹²

In parallel with this ongoing campaign of incitement, Israel has spent three decades preparing itself to wage war against the country, with the minimum objective of destroying its nuclear programme – and possibly going as far as overthrowing the regime. This has necessitated significant changes in the structure of the Israeli army in light of major shifts in modern warfare. Israel has focused, in particular, on enhancing the capabilities of its air force, equipping it with the latest aircraft, military drones, and aerial refuelling tankers, as well as developing military satellites, improving the performance of its military intelligence units and various other security agencies, and developing cyber and artificial intelligence systems. It has allocated substantial budgets and deployed specialized personnel for these purposes.

Simultaneously, it has built a modern naval fleet capable of conducting operations on the high seas. This has included equipping the navy with six German-made Dolphin-class submarines capable of carrying nuclear warheads, thus granting Israel the capability to launch a second nuclear strike. This buildup of the Israeli military’s strength has endowed it with strike capabilities able to reach countries more than 1,000 kilometres (620 miles) away, which implicitly includes Iran.

6 “Binyamin Netanyahu Demands ‘Red Line’ to Stop Iran Nuclear Programme,” *The Guardian*, 28/9/2012, accessed on 9/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9YK>.

7 “The Israeli Position on the Iranian Nuclear Deal,” Situation Assessment, Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 26/7/2015, accessed 9/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9sv>.

8 Mahmoud Muhareb, “US-Israeli Relations in the Aftermath of Netanyahu’s Congress Speech,” Policy Analysis, Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 12/3/2015, accessed 9/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9AS>.

9 “Watch and Read: Netanyahu’s Full Speech to Congress,” *The Times of Israel*, 3/3/2015, accessed on 9/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Uu>.

10 “U.S. Congress invites Netanyahu for Iran speech, Obama Blindsided,” *Reuters*, 22/1/2015, accessed on 9/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9TJ>.

11 “PM Netanyahu’s Address to a Joint Meeting of the US Congress,” *Prime Minister’s Office (Israel)*, 24/7/2024, accessed on 9/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba7M>.

12 Barak Ravid, “Netanyahu: I will suggest to Trump ways to cancel the nuclear deal with Iran,” *Haaretz*, 11/12/2016, accessed 9/3/2026 (in Hebrew), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9Bah3>.

Laying the Groundwork for an Attack on Iran

Netanyahu capitalized on the regional and international situation in the wake of the Hamas-led attacks of 7 October 2023, to weaken Iran and strip it of key pillars of its influence, particularly its network of regional allies, with the ultimate goal of launching a war against it. He exploited Trump's return to power in the US to turn this long-held dream into a reality in June 2025. During this war, which lasted 12 days, Israel and the US delivered a severe blow to Iran, particularly focusing on its nuclear facilities.

For years, Israel has been convinced that the Iranian regime will not easily abandon its nuclear programme, and that the best way to stop it is to overthrow the regime itself. Israeli politicians came to assume that as long as the Iranian regime exists, it will inevitably seek nuclear weapons, for reasons related to the regime's perception of Iran's position and role in the region, as well as its desire to protect itself from external threats, whether American or Israeli.¹³ This includes an implicit recognition that

nuclear weapons, in such a situation, serve as a deterrent.

Israel's public policy is a Israeli based strategy National overthrow the Iranian regime based on Day Wall argued that

1. Eliminating the Iranian leadership, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and senior political and military officials, at the outset of any military operation. The study argued that this would destabilize the regime and create a new reality that could lead to its total collapse.
2. Establishing clandestine communication channels with Iranian military, security, and political figures, as well as civil society activists and senior members of ethnic minorities, and providing them with various forms of assistance in their efforts to overthrow the regime.
3. Encouraging and supporting the Iranian opposition abroad, and preparing it to return to Iran once widespread demonstrations erupt and a "revolutionary situation" emerges – then helping it to seize power.
4. Providing assistance to Iran's ethnic minorities, supporting their activities, and promoting their separatism in order to destabilize and weaken the Iranian regime.¹⁵

Israel and the US administration began coordinating over a new war against Iran shortly after the end of military operations in June 2025. Despite both Trump and Netanyahu declaring that they had won a "great victory," the Trump administration remained unable to impose its conditions on Iran regarding its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, particularly since large quantities of enriched uranium remained manufacturing facilities and restarting work on its nuclear programme.¹⁶ in Iran's possession without any clear information on their fate or whether Iran could access or utilize them. In late 2025, Israel began leaking information about Iran's successes in repairing its ballistic missile. The wave of protests that erupted in Iran in December 2025, and the Iranian authorities' bloody

¹³ Ephraim Kam, "Iran's Deterrence Concept," Strategic Assessment, The Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv University, vol. 24, no. 3 (July 2021), accessed on 9/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9My>.

¹⁴ Raz Zimmat, "The Iran-Israel War and Regime Stability in Iran," Policy Paper, Institute for National Security Studies, 24/7/2025, accessed 9/3/2026 (in Hebrew), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Qu>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Amos Harel, "Despite achievements in the skies of Tehran, the Iranian regime shows no sign of surrendering," *Haaretz*, 6/3/2025, accessed 9/3/2026 (in Hebrew), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9gm>.

crackdown against them, provided Trump with a pretext to ratchet up the pressure Tehran and force it to accept his terms. Netanyahu played a significant role in encouraging Trump to launch a new war against Iran, particularly during a visit to Washington in early February 2026.¹⁷ They agreed that Israel would initiate the attack by assassinating Khamenei and the Iranian leaders accompanying him, exploiting military intelligence on the location and time of their meeting. The US could not carry out this strike because US law prohibits the assassination of foreign heads of state,¹⁸ whereas Israel assassinates its adversaries on a regular basis, blurring the lines between politics and organized crime.

Israel's War Aims

Israel has not explicitly declared that the objective of its war on Iran is regime change. Nevertheless, it is using every means at its disposal to achieve this goal, through military strikes against targets related to Iran's nuclear programme and its ballistic missiles, and especially institutions of the Iranian regime and its centres of influence. This includes the regime's political and military leaders, headquarters, bases, institutions, and commanders of the army, Revolutionary Guard, Basij paramilitary group, intelligence services, and police, as well as the economic and administrative infrastructure of the state that underpin the regime's rule. Israel is seeking to prolong the war as much as possible in order to achieve its objective, as Netanyahu has openly said.¹⁹

There is no disagreement between Israel's political and military echelons regarding the goals of the war. Since the 7 October attacks, the Israeli army has supported the use of military force at every opportunity to weaken Iran. However, the military establishment also understands – perhaps more than the political leadership – that toppling the Iranian regime will not be easy, and will likely require a long and intensive air campaign targeting vital facilities and key economic infrastructure, including oil, gas, and energy facilities, and the electricity grid, which will impact the lives of normal Iranians. So far, Washington has opposed such a campaign; even if it were to achieve its objectives, it would completely remove Iran's oil production from global markets for an extended period, with far-reaching impacts on global energy prices, something the Trump administration seeks to avoid.

The divergence between Israel and the Trump administration goes beyond this question; the two also disagree on the question of toppling the Iranian regime. While the Trump administration prefers to effect change from within and force the regime to change its policies, while preserving its existing structure to avoid a power vacuum that could lead to chaos or civil war, Israel seeks its overthrow, regardless of the consequences.

On the other hand, Trump frequently contradicts himself, and the war's objectives change as often as he gives interviews – sometimes several times a day. Meanwhile, the Israeli leadership appears persistent, clear, and explicit in its objectives, which amplifies its influence on Trump and on the American decision-making process regarding Iran.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Amos Harel, "Khamenei's killing could be the first stage of an attempt at regime change," *Haaretz*, 28/2/2026, accessed 9/3/2026 (in Hebrew), at: <https://acr.ps/1L9Bagm>.



Conclusion

Israel exploited the situation in the wake of the 7 October attacks and Trump's return to power in the US to conclude decades of incitement and preparation: striking Iran and wiping out its nuclear and missile programmes. This also aimed to prevent the emergence of any rival in the region, thereby ensuring Israel's continued regional hegemony and monopoly over nuclear weapons in the Middle East. It is worth noting that Israel destroyed Iraq's nuclear programme when it bombed the Osirak reactor in 1981, as well as that of Syria, in a strike on the al-Kibar site in 2007. Today, backed by one of the most supportive US administrations in its history, Israel aspires to go even further, overthrowing the Iranian regime and even plunging Iran into chaos or civil war, ultimately leading to its fragmentation into ethnic cantons or mini-states. This would be achieved by inciting the various minorities who collectively constitute about half of Iran's population and by supporting the most radical separatist factions in the country. While the Iranian regime is striving to resist the aggression and stand firm against Israeli plans aimed at overthrowing it and breaking the country apart, the balance of power is heavily tilted against it. This is especially true in the absence of a superpower that supports Iran and provides it with the means to resist.