

America First or Israel First? Will Trump Join Netanyahu's War on Iran?

Former Israeli peace negotiator Daniel Levy on what's driving Netanyahu and why this will be a defining moment for Trump's MAGA movement.

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It surely comes as no surprise that in the context of Israel's latest "war of no choice," it has targeted and caused mayhem in [civilian areas in Iran](#). In another unprovoked Israeli war of aggression, the starting point is that there is no such thing as international law or a distinction between combatant and civilian (that's not to suggest that Israel's adversaries adhere to such standards either, but they are sanctioned by the West, while Israel is enabled).

Israel itself coined the term the "[Dahiya doctrine](#)" (named after the Beirut suburb), to describe the crime of terrorizing an urban civilian population. That doctrine is now being applied to Tehran.

It's no surprise, either, that [Israel has bombed Iranian TV](#) (taking out journalists has become something of a sport for Israel's military in Gaza). But this is not Palestine, not Gaza.

Israel's goal is not to ethnically cleanse and then settle Iran. Given this truth and the transparently fabricated nature of Israel's claim that it had no choice but to act now, having [failed](#) to produce any evidence that Iran posed an imminent threat or that Iran was racing to weaponize its nuclear enrichment program, we must seek an explanation for the nature and timing of Israel's actions elsewhere.

Why Now?

Iran, as we are now witnessing, does have the capacity to inflict a level of pain on Israel, but it has only done so when provoked (as happened on a smaller scale last year). Surely, the headline since Israel launched its genocidal campaign against the Palestinians has been Iran's choice to sit on the sidelines – that the 'leader of the Axis of Resistance' was not a constraining factor on Israel.

Domestic politics, especially when it comes to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his personal and political calculations, is never a bad starting point in understanding the decision-making in Israel. Netanyahu has been running out of political road, and although he has stabilized his government, his coalition has been in serial crises, and he has trailed [substantially in the polls](#) for 20 months. Israel is already heading to the campaigning start-line in advance of elections by next autumn, but perhaps considerably earlier.

Given the extent to which Iran looms in Israeli threat perceptions, much-hyped for decades by Netanyahu himself, and given the sense of success in decapitating and defanging Hezbollah, going after Iran is one of the last and most dramatic political dice Netanyahu could roll. It's something Netanyahu has for decades threatened but desisted from. However, his political calculation is more desperate today, and he may well have concluded that any further progress in the Omani-hosted US/Iran talks would produce a US stop sign and close the door on this option for good – or at least for the duration of time before Israel's election.

Netanyahu was hoping that strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities and missile launching sites, a leadership decapitation (notably on the military and civilian-scientific side), and riding the wave of cool espionage/tech interventions would not only be considered a national success but an on-ramp to personal political revival.

Perhaps the Israeli system is drinking its own Kool-Aid on regime change prospects; anyway, the likely more desirable scenario for Tel Aviv would be maximal state collapse, chaos, and fragmentation in Iran – a version of Libya or Syria on a grander scale.

The gamble was that Netanyahu and the Israeli system knew this was unlikely to be a cakewalk – that Iran has a response capacity. The euphoria of the first night of strikes generated a reunifying consensus among the Zionist political spectrum. But that is partially turning to uncertainty after successive nights of Iranian missiles penetrating both Israeli military and civilian sites.

It is useful to understand that the tone inside Israel – among much of the commentariat, political, and security class – has shifted to an [acknowledgment](#) that while Israel has scored major hits, it is apparently not close to removing Iran's nuclear enrichment or ballistic missile infrastructure, and doubts are surfacing as to how long Israel could sustain absorbing Iranian counter strikes (to put it bluntly, the pain threshold and economic resilience modalities of the two countries look very different).

Consensus is a rare thing in Israel, but in the Zionist camp, there is near unanimity that everything will depend on one key variable: whether or not the US directly joins Israel's military campaign. That game-changing factor is not only about the balance of forces; it is likely viewed by Netanyahu as his electoral meal ticket.

Netanyahu and the Israeli system are coalescing around that singular purpose – drag Trump in.

What Will Trump Do?

The challenge for Israel of pulling the US into another Middle East war is a proposition of a whole different order of magnitude compared to the successful bamboozling of the Trump administration in the last half year.

Given that the Trump team had so little experience, familiarity, or depth on this (and not only this) negotiating file, stacking the deck to scupper those negotiations was relatively easy, as it was on Gaza.

First, Israel [tried to push](#) the so-called [Libyan model](#) – offering Iran the relishing prospect of complete capitulation, followed by pursuing a military intervention to secure regime change anyway. More effective was the effort to replace a negotiation premised on Iran's nuclear [Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) (NPT) rights to limited domestic civilian nuclear enrichment with one

that insisted on [zero enrichment](#). That, in turn, helped create the sense of negotiation impasse, which likely had Trump green-light Israel's attack as a way of getting Iran to re-engage more on American terms. Having thus duped team Trump, Netanyahu launched his strategy of precipitation, initiating action on the assumption that you could cajole your bigger ally into joining forces with you.

That strategy – and a whole lot more that flows from it – now hangs in the balance. Trump must choose whether to stop the war, join the war, or, in dilly-dallying and failing to decide, allow himself to become a prisoner of unpredictable circumstances and Netanyahu's machinations.

Make no mistake, if Trump insists on Israel bringing this to a close, that is what will happen. And he has good reason to do so – from the political balance of power inside the MAGA world and its base of supporters to economic spillover effects and the potential of Israeli-encouraged Middle Eastern military adventures to derail entire presidencies.

Netanyahu is in full press mode, not just to get additional US weapons deliveries and diplomatic and economic support. Netanyahu is determined for this to become America's war. Netanyahu's campaign in [US media](#) is [hardly subtle](#). Israel will use every lever and ounce of its lobbying muscle to drive such an outcome in DC.

But it will go much further. Netanyahu's bag of tricks will include escalating provocations designed to produce an Iranian reaction that enhances the prospect of US military engagement.

The obvious one would be Iran or Iranian-backed armed groups directly targeting US assets – something they have not done thus far. In any hair-trigger situation, the prospect also exists of false flag operations. [An act of Israeli subterfuge](#) (making a hit on something American look like it was coming from Iran), cannot be ruled out. Israel might achieve the same outcome if the Iranian political reaction to Israel's unlawful aggression generates a US counter-response – for instance, if Iran expels IAEA inspectors from its nuclear facilities or withdraws from the Non-Proliferation Treaty ([steps apparently being considered](#)). And, of course, there is the possibility that Iran, at some point, changes its traditional position and

decides that Israel's latest adventurism forces it to actually push towards the nuclear weapons capability it has hitherto eschewed.

Should the US and Iran move to resume negotiations, Netanyahu and his chorus will push the line that it's a demonstration of Iranian weakness, and that Israel must be allowed to finish the job.

Because the longer this goes on, two additional factors will come into play. First, circumstantial factors, happenstance driving events – for instance, if there are [casualties of US citizens](#) in Iran's strikes on Israel. Secondly, and if this continues, then with the passage of time and as the US actively intervenes on the defensive side to support Israel, as well as in the possible provision of new and more devastating arms, and as the death and destruction inside Iran mount, it will become increasingly politically untenable for Iran to pretend it is only fighting Israel. As in Gaza, this may already be America's war ([this excellent thread](#) by analyst Mouin Rabbani unpacks such a scenario).

In many ways, this is a defining moment for MAGA – is it an America-first or an Israel-first movement?

Decentering Israel's Genocide in Gaza

Whichever way that call goes, and alongside the pain already inflicted on the Iranian side, Israel can almost certainly point to an additional significant achievement in opening this new front – it has decentered the daily cruelty still being inflicted on Palestinians and has deflated the galvanizing challenge to Israel's ever more transparent genocide. For now, at least, the illegal seizure of the [Madleen Freedom Flotilla](#) ship and [mistreatment of Greta Thunberg and co.](#), the [abomination to humanitarian aid principles](#) known as the [Gaza Humanitarian Foundation](#), and the daily death toll of dozens in Gaza are getting less attention.

What we all just witnessed was Israel instigating an unlawful act of aggression against Iran's territorial integrity and sovereignty, again making a mockery of the UN charter and its membership in that body. That act was carried out by a state that is [recognized to have nuclear weapons](#) and is not

a member of the NPT against a state that is a member of the NPT and does not have a nuclear deterrent.

Israel's military strikes also violated provisions for the protection of nuclear infrastructure, described by IAEA Director General [Rafael Grossi](#) as a grave breach of nuclear safety, incurring the danger of radiological contamination.

Yet Israel's Western enablers are back in their comfort zone, describing the danger not of Israel's actual nuclear program, but of Iran's potential future nuclear threat, proclaiming [Israel's right to defend itself](#) when it is the aggressor. The latest [G7 statement](#) demonstrates how divorced from both reality and most of the world the leadership of the West has become. In other words, they're in their happy place of Israel as the victim – parroting Israeli narratives and talking points, just as they have done, not only through decades of Israel deploying illegal occupation and an apartheid regime against the Palestinians, but also through these long months of starvation, displacement, and relentless war crimes in Gaza.

Will Western opinion buy it? [Polls were already showing](#) that public support and sympathy for Israel in Western Europe has hit the lowest level ever recorded by YouGov, and even in the US, a [poll](#) from April shows views among Republican adults under 50 have dramatically shifted in the last three years, with 50% saying they view Israel negatively, compared to 35% in 2022 (the numbers among Democrat voters – as opposed to elected officials – consistently show unfavorable ratings for Israel and support for sanctions).

Many have refused to avert our eyes from Gaza, and the focus will return for others.

Meanwhile, [Israel has moved yet more forces into the occupied West Bank](#), imposed a siege on the area, and isolated all Palestinian towns, [placing each under a lockdown](#).

So, attempts to position Israel as a worthy ally rather than a rogue state no longer pass the laugh test for ever-growing numbers of citizens.

It's too early to know whether this latest act of hubristic criminality will constitute the moment of overreach for Israel that finally generates the desperately needed change of course.

The course that the country is on can never deliver well-being or security for the people of the region or for Israelis themselves. Whether in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Iran, Syria, or Lebanon, Israel's actions are those of an extreme state with a destabilizing, radicalizing, and revisionist agenda. This may even be the moment more Israelis acknowledge the suicidal path their government is on.

International law and accountability must be applied fairly and universally, as advocated by the new [Hague Group](#). A ceasefire must not only be imposed immediately but also comprehensively, and not least, for Gaza.

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