

## Middle East war

# Israel waits on US to settle 'unfinished business' with Iran

Any action against Tehran could tip regional balance further in Israel's favour, even as some US interests are put at risk

**Mehul Srivastava** in London, **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv, **James Shotter** in Jerusalem and **Abigail Hauslohner** in Washington

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As Donald Trump weighs military strikes against Iran, one normally loquacious and vehement champion of toppling the regime in Tehran has kept a noted silence: Benjamin Netanyahu.

Other than a quick nod this Sunday to the "bravery of Iran's citizens", the Israeli premier has said little about the nationwide protests and violent crackdown that have wracked the Islamic republic in recent weeks.

But no matter what shape Trump's promised intervention takes — military action, talks under the threat of strikes, or a mix of cyber attacks and/or deeper sanctions aiming to reignite street protests — a weakened Iranian regime will only further tip the regional balance in Israel's favour.

Yaakov Amidror, a former national security adviser and a Netanyahu confidant, said Israel stands to gain whether Trump seeks to bring down the regime or is ultimately aiming for something more limited.

If he pursues regime change, "it means they think the same as us . . . that the fall of the regime is worth it, even if it leads to chaos," said Amidror, now a fellow at the Jinsa think-tank.

“If at the end of the day, he makes a deal, and he gives up the plan to destroy the regime [in exchange] for cleaning Iran of its nuclear and missile projects . . . it’s [also] a fantastic result.”

The path to that is likely to be rocky. Israel is already preparing to be among the targets of any Iranian retaliation, as it was during the first Gulf war of 1991, when Saddam Hussein pummeled Tel Aviv while George Bush bombed Baghdad.

But in the long rivalry between the Islamic republic and the country the regime derides as “Little Satan”, Netanyahu’s Israel already holds the strongest strategic position in its history.

### Israel’s cruise and ballistic missile ranges



In a 12-day war last year, Israel wiped out Iran’s aerial defences, assassinated senior nuclear scientists and military leaders, and convinced the US to deploy the world’s largest conventional weapons against Iran’s underground nuclear sites. It also stoked fears within the Iranian regime over Israel-linked traitors in its midst.

However, Israeli officials say Trump pushed for a ceasefire deal before Israel could fully destroy the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' massive ballistic missile capabilities, some of which managed to pierce Israel's multi-layered aerial defences. "Unfinished business," said an Israeli military official, who repeated warnings that Iran was still reconstituting its arsenal.

Trump said last month during a visit by Netanyahu that the US would "have no choice" but to strike Iran if it was found to be rebuilding its weapons arsenal. But he said the reports had not yet been confirmed.

The US president struck a more aggressive tone this month, however, in response to the regime's worsening crackdown on protesters, and has vowed to come to their "rescue" — leaving Israel with the opportunity to reap the benefits without taking part.

"It's a historic opportunity to make a change — and a dramatic change — across the Middle East and the world," said Zohar Palti, a former head of both policy at Israel's defence ministry and of intelligence at the Mossad spy agency.



A US attack damaged Iran's nuclear technology centre at Isfahan in June 2025 © Maxar Technologies

One former US official who worked on Iran and the region said Israel realises it has “a golden window with Trump” and has found that the president is largely willing to “outsource the Iran portfolio to Israel”.

The US president has yet to indicate he has made up his mind on whether and how to strike Iran. While defence analysts and former officials said this week that possible targets could include regime or IRGC bases, infrastructure or even the leadership, the president as of Wednesday appeared to be still weighing what kind of intervention would fulfil his promise to bring help to protesters.

The Trump administration has also demonstrated a limited appetite for extended military intervention. “These things are done before breakfast,” said Brian Mast, chair of the House foreign affairs committee and a Trump backer.

Sima Shine, a former head of research at the Mossad, where she had focused on Iran, said few in Israel expected Trump’s threats to deliver the “fairytale dream — a change of regime, a pro-western democratic system that takes root in Iran and produces good relations”.

But there is little doubt, she said, that Israel and the US were working together behind the scenes. Israel and the US routinely share intelligence and have co-operated before in operations against Iran, including assassinating the revered IRGC general Qassem Soleimani.





Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) forces provide the backbone for the Tehran regime © Vahid Salemi/AP

Israeli intelligence has proven over the years exactly how deeply it has penetrated Iran — assassinating nuclear scientists at will, deploying drones on Iranian soil, and carrying out targeted air strikes against military leaders.

But Israel has never seriously pursued regime change in Iran, having learned the limits of its abilities when it failed in the 1980s to manage to install a friendly government in Lebanon.

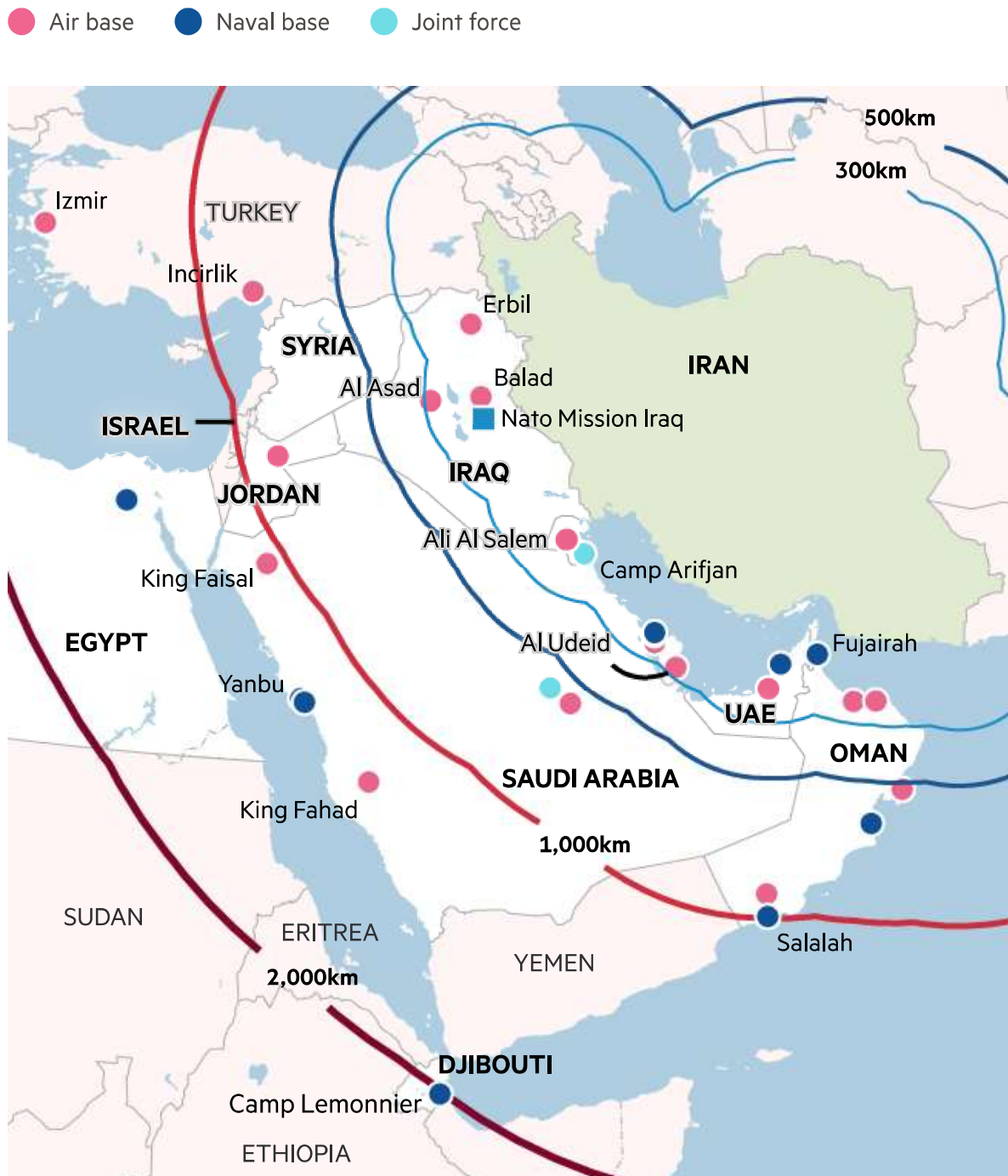
Trump, meanwhile, has been emboldened by the success of the US military's recent mission to pluck Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro from his fortified lair in Caracas and deliver the ousted president overnight to a US court.

"The biggest question in Washington right now is 'Has Trump's relationship with force changed?'" said a former US defence official. "Once you see it works — complex military operations with no casualties — it feeds the beast."

While Trump has focused publicly on his desire to "help" Iranian protesters, Israel hopes that US strikes would include Iran's ballistic missile production facilities or that Washington will negotiate their closure, said several Israeli officials.

## Iran has significant missile capabilities in the region

Bases with US troops in the Middle East and ranges of Iran's ballistic missiles



Although the US and Israel often appear to be in lockstep when it comes to actions in the Middle East, friction — or even a divergence of interests — is often also felt between the pair in private, said a former US official who has dealt with Netanyahu for years.

“Did Netanyahu approve of the [2015] nuclear deal with Iran? Not with Obama, and then again, not when Trump started negotiations,” he said.

Trump is also more attuned than previous US administrations to his close relationships with Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. A chaotic collapse of the Iranian regime, or even retaliatory Iranian strikes — which last year targeted a US base in Qatar — risk further destabilisation in a region consumed by more than two years of war.

“The Gulf states are not on the same page, neither with the Americans nor with us,” said Shine, the former Mossad analyst. “They are not thinking like us or the Americans — they are thinking of their own interests, and their own improved relations with Iran. And of course, they don’t want to see a development that further strengthens Israel.”

*Cartography by Steven Bernard*

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