

Middle East war

Iranians rethink the price of regime change

Destructive US and Israeli war and Islamic republic's resilience have alarmed even those who supported foreign intervention

Najmeh Bozorgmehr in Tehran

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After thousands were killed in a brutal crackdown on anti-regime protests in Iran in January, Mandana gave up hope for reform from within. She came to the conclusion that the Islamic republic's leaders had to go even if it meant US and Israeli-led regime change.

So when the two countries attacked the compound of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on February 28, killing him and several of his family members, Mandana — who like others interviewed used a pseudonym — believed the change she coveted had finally come.

Her experience in the terrifying days since has shattered that belief. Air strikes have targeted not just military sites and senior regime figures but have repeatedly hit civilian infrastructure.

Over the weekend, Tehran was enveloped in toxic black smog after Israel bombed fuel depots around the city; on Tuesday, massive explosions caused widespread blackouts.

“We weren’t supposed to be bombed,” Mandana said, her voice trembling after a massive explosion near her apartment by Vanak Square in central Tehran. “Our city, our country, this wasn’t supposed to happen. How is it that Venezuela . . . saw clean, bloodless regime change, but not here?”

RESUME

Black clouds blanketed Tehran on Sunday after an oil facility was hit © X

The scale of destruction and the apparent resilience of the Islamic regime, which appointed Khamenei’s son Mojtaba as the new supreme leader in an act of defiance, has prompted many Iranians to rethink hopes that foreign intervention might bring about its end.

Approaching two weeks into the war, no signs exist of the sort of anti-regime unrest that broke out across the country in January before being crushed in a brutal crackdown that killed thousands.

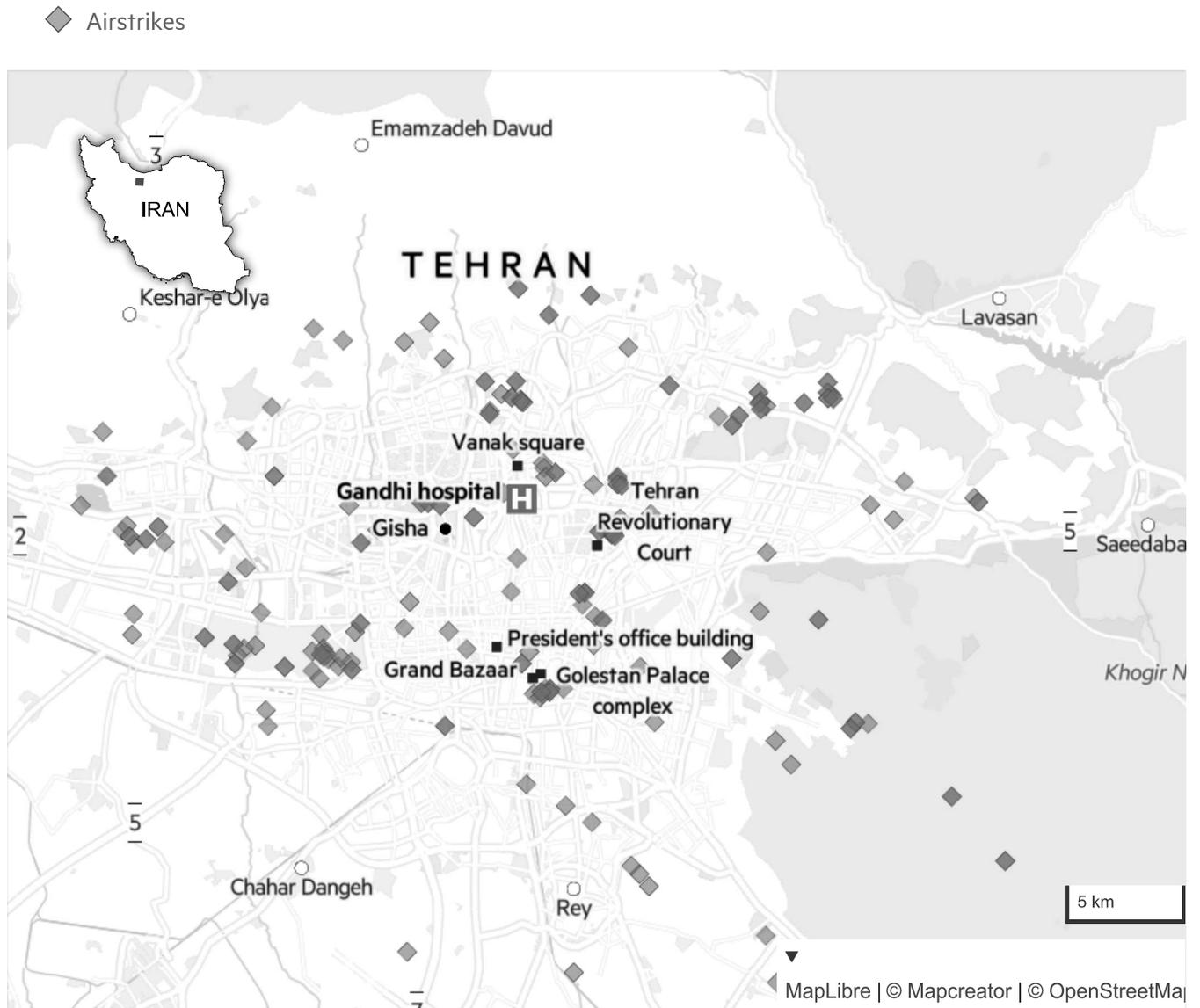
Instead many, even those who loathe the Islamic republic, appear to have recoiled at the destruction and comments including Donald Trump's threat to target electricity production facilities if the regime escalated. The US president also said Iran's map will "probably not" be the same after the war, sparking fears the conflict could break apart the country.

One sociologist in Tehran, who is critical of the regime and the war, said there was anecdotal evidence of a growing "sense of nationalism emerging from the war" as happened during Israel's 12-day conflict against Iran last year, when people rallied around the flag.

"The fear of Iran's destruction is increasingly uniting people as they fear the consequences of such a large-scale conflict," the sociologist said, asking not to be named.

US-Israeli airstrikes across Tehran

Strikes from Feb 28 to 5pm GMT Mar 10 2026



FINANCIAL TIMES

Sources: [Liveuamap](#), FT research

Non-military sites have become collateral damage, as air strikes target police stations, military facilities and officials living in residential neighbourhoods. More than 1,000 civilians have been killed and over 8,000 homes damaged or destroyed, according to official figures.

The scenes of devastation — to schools, a desalination plant, passenger aircraft and historic landmarks such as Tehran’s Grand Bazaar and Golestan Palace — have shocked many Iranians.

“If they wanted to assassinate the supreme leader, why are they waging full-scale war?” asked one woman. Before the war, she — like many anti-regime Iranians inside and outside the country — had welcomed military intervention.

Expatriate communities staged large rallies in western capitals, calling for an end to the Islamic republic. Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of the late ousted Shah, also supported military action, promising to return to lead Iran once the regime had collapsed.

“Maybe he should come now with his three daughters and see how it feels to be bombarded,” said one woman, who opposes the current regime but also rejects a return to monarchy. “Those who supported the war should take responsibility now. But I doubt they will.”



Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of the ousted Shah. Analysts believe the exiled royal may have lost support from more recent converts to his cause as the brutal reality of war sets in © Kent Nishimura/Bloomberg

When many Iranians put aside their disillusionment with their leaders to embrace patriotic gestures during the June war, the regime presented this as proof of public support and ignored calls for reform after the conflict was over.

This time, Iranians — traumatised by the crackdown in January — have been more hesitant, fearing that expressions of patriotism or anti-war sentiment will again be co-opted by the authorities.

In northern Iran, a woman whose son was killed in the protests stopped wearing black the day Khamenei died, feeling that some revenge had been exacted. In Tehran, another woman baked a cake for her neighbours to celebrate the supreme leader's demise. But she was so shocked by the scale of the subsequent attacks that she later left the city.

The Islamic republic, for its part, is taking no chances. Authorities have filled squares with loyalists each evening, drawing on the vocal minority of regime supporters to project strength and support. They also patrol the streets on motorcycles carrying loudspeakers that blare out religious songs.

“These are our real supporters,” said one regime insider. “This is genuine loyalty, rooted in Shia Islam — something the Americans can never understand. Even if the leader of the Islamic system is killed, the system will survive because Shiism is alive.”



A group of supporters of Iran's late leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at a pro-government gathering in Tehran last week © Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto/Getty Images

The regime's apparent resilience in the face of the greatest conflict since the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s has led some to question whether even a prolonged war would bring about its demise.

After Mojtaba Khamenei was selected as the new supreme leader on Monday, supporters across the country also took to the streets.

But Khamenei has not been seen since the war started and he is yet to speak to Iranians about his plans. The US and Israel have threatened to assassinate whoever takes over and rumours are rife that he was injured during the war.

His selection has stunned many anti-regime Iranians, who fear a supreme leader who will continue his father's hardline agenda, resistance to reform and hostility to the west.

"If things stay like this, we're in a worse place now than before the war," said Mahboubeh, a translator. "A country destroyed; Khamenei replaced by another Khamenei, 30 years younger."



People inspect a destroyed police station in Tehran last week © Majid Khahi/Isna/Wana/Reuters

Meanwhile, monarchists support Pahlavi and back the US and Israeli intervention despite its toll. But analysts believe the exiled royal may have lost support from more recent converts to his cause as the brutal reality of war sets in.

The majority of Iranians who see the January killings as unforgivable are lost over how to push for change. This includes Sara, a teacher in her forties who once hoped for the regime's overthrow but now admits she has changed her mind.

"I've come to terms with the bitter reality: the Islamic republic is resilient," she said. "I never thought I'd say this, but if someone from within the regime becomes a real reformer, why not? In the end, we just want peace and welfare."

Marjan, a housewife, could not hide her emotions when news of Khamenei's death broke. She had believed it would usher in the regime's collapse. "Now I wonder, even if the Islamic republic falls, what will we inherit: a land in ruins?"

Cartography by Steven Bernard

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