

Opinion **Middle East war**

## Netanyahu's grand strategy is coming apart

The Israeli leader has tried to secure his country by entirely military means. It isn't working.

**GIDEON RACHMAN**



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War with Iran was the fulfilment of a 30-year dream for Benjamin Netanyahu. The Israeli prime minister has warned for decades that Iran poses an existential threat to his country. On February 28, he finally unleashed a full-scale attack on the Islamic republic. Better still, from Netanyahu's point of view, the war was a joint operation with the US.

Netanyahu persuaded Donald Trump that war would bring about regime change in Iran. At the very least, he was determined to end the Iranian threat to Israel.

But his Iran campaign has gone badly wrong. The Iranian regime is still firmly in place and has shown that it can still fire missiles at Israel. Iran-backed Hizbollah has shelled northern Israel and is battling Israeli troops in Lebanon. And now Netanyahu's close alliance with Trump is under intense strain.

Iran's missile attacks last night were a response to Israeli strikes on southern Beirut. Israel has now responded by bombing Iran. But Trump seems determined to prevent further escalation. The US president told the FT: "I call all the shots. He [Netanyahu] doesn't call the shots."

Netanyahu now faces a very difficult choice. Does he call off strikes against Iran and Hizbollah — and risk looking weak in the eyes of both the Iranian regime and the Israeli public? Or does he defy Trump and endanger his alliance with America?

For all the brave words from Israeli politicians about demonstrating that Israel is a sovereign nation that makes its own decisions about how to defend itself, the reality is that the country remains very dependent on US weaponry and air defences.

The dilemma is all the more acute because the peace deal that Trump is working on seems likely to leave Iran in a stronger financial position — and still with a residual nuclear capability.

The successful closure of the Strait of Hormuz has given the Islamic republic a new and powerful tool. The fact that Tehran has also shown that it can hit US military bases and the infrastructure of Gulf states — and not be toppled in retaliation — has further strengthened Iran's deterrent capability.

Netanyahu insists that his country must have a free hand to go after Hizbollah, which has in the past forced the evacuation of thousands in northern Israel. The Israeli offensive against Hizbollah has, in turn, forced more than a million Lebanese from their homes. But Trump phoned Netanyahu last week and instructed him, in apparently abusive terms, to curtail Israel's campaign in Lebanon.

The emerging Israeli quagmire in Lebanon is part of a broader strategic failure. Israel has now been at war for almost three years since the Hamas attacks on October 7 2023. The brutality of the Israeli campaign in Gaza has done immense damage to the country's international standing — with the International Court of Justice agreeing to consider accusations that Israel has committed genocide.

Nonetheless, Netanyahu insists that he is leading his nation to victory. In September at the UN, he boasted that Israel had “crushed” most of Hamas's “terror machine”, “crippled” Hizbollah and “devastated” Iran's nuclear and missile programmes.

But these claims look increasingly flimsy. Hamas is still in place in Gaza; Hizbollah is still a powerful force in Lebanon. The Islamic republic still has Iran in its grip and can still sow havoc with its missiles and drones.

In each case, Netanyahu made the same mistake. He chose to pursue an entirely military solution to Israel's security problems — ignoring the political and diplomatic dimensions. As a result, he has mis-sold the tactical successes of Israeli military and intelligence — such as the killing of Hizbollah, Iranian and Hamas leaders — as proof that Israel is becoming more secure.

But, by now, it should be obvious: Israel cannot kill its way to security. If one group of leaders is assassinated in Gaza or Beirut or Tehran, others will emerge to replace them.

It is simpler — politically and intellectually — for Netanyahu to portray Israel's enemies as mindless fanatics who can only be eliminated, rather than to engage with the underlying issues that are driving conflict. As a result, the Israelis refuse to consider that many Palestinians, Lebanese and Iranians are likely to respond in the same way to being bombed and killed that Israelis did to October 7 — not by surrendering but by fighting even harder.

Anybody who talks that way is accused by Netanyahu of sympathising with terrorists. As a result, the Israeli prime minister has silenced debate rather than leading it — as a true statesman should.

By initiating an all-out war on Israel's enemies, Netanyahu aimed to restore his own reputation and to secure his political future. Victory over Iran was meant to be the capstone achievement: the final triumph over the ultimate enemy — conveniently achieved in an election year.

Instead, Netanyahu is likely to go into the elections later this year with the country's enemies alive and kicking — and with support for Israel falling sharply across the west and even in the White House. Israeli elections are almost always close — so it is unclear if Netanyahu will lose power. But security is likely to be the number one issue. And Netanyahu's vision for Israeli security has failed. He deserves to lose.

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