



The fantasy of an easy victory in the war on Iran

The US and Israel declared regime change as their ultimate goal. That, however, would be difficult to achieve.



Iranian demonstrators protest against the US-Israeli strikes, in Tehran on February 28, 2026 [Majid Asgaripour/WANA via Reuters]



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Earlier today, the United States and Israel launched an attack against Iran, hitting targets across the country. In their televised speeches, US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made clear that they are after regime change, not military pressure to secure a deal.

The attack and Iran's swift response underscore just how precarious the diplomacy has become. The outbreak of war followed mediators' announcement of a significant "breakthrough" in negotiations, with talks set to resume next week. Clearly, diplomacy was never meant to succeed and was merely used to mask war plans.

From the timing of the attack, it is apparent that Washington and Tel Aviv had already made up their minds weeks ago. Israeli media reported that the operation had been coordinated with Washington to come ahead of the Purim holiday, which commemorates the biblical story of the Jewish people being saved from mass killing in ancient Persia.

While both Trump and Netanyahu are clearly after a "victory" declaration, whether they can actually achieve it is unclear.

Targeting the Iranian leadership

Israel and the US have claimed to have focused on taking out civilian and military leadership and military installations. Perhaps the hope is that they can bring the war to a quick end.

Israel claimed that it had achieved "very high success" in eliminating Iran's leadership, with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Masoud Pezeshkian among those targeted. Photos have already emerged of a major strike on Khamenei's secure compound. Israeli media have reported the killing of General Mohammad Pakpour, a commander in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Ali Shamkhani, adviser to the supreme leader, and Amir Nasirzadeh, Iran's defence minister.

Israel is clearly trying to reassure its citizens that it has the capability of reaching deep into Iran's top layer of leaders.

But there has been no confirmation of leadership deaths so far from Tehran. Iranian media have claimed that Khamenei and Pezeshkian are safe and has reported instead on an air strike on a girls' school in the city of Minab, with a death toll of at least 80.

Unlike the 12-day war last June, when Iran's retaliation was slow and measured, this time around, the Iranian armed forces retaliated almost immediately. Ballistic missiles were fired at US bases in Iraq, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Israeli cities like

Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Eilat.

The speed of Iran's retaliation indicates that it had anticipated these attacks and had its retaliation plans ready. The question now is whether Iran can outlast US resolve, which faces both domestic and international pressure.

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Domestic dangers

Trump launched the war on Iran amid little enthusiasm among Americans for another foreign conflict. A recent poll by YouGov and The Economist suggests that just 27 percent of the US public supports the US using military force against Iran. Another survey conducted by the University of Maryland registered even lower approval: 21 percent.

The war has significant domestic political ramifications for Trump. As the operation progresses, if Iran fails to surrender, the US president will be caught between getting bogged down in a protracted conflict by escalating, and being seen as weak if he backs down.

As the midterm elections approach, the war will become a litmus test for Trump's presidency. If the conflict does not go as the president has envisioned, it could reflect poorly on the Republican Party in the polls. If the GOP loses control of Congress to the Democrats, it would prevent Trump from pursuing his political agenda. Democrats gaining control of Congress could pile more impeachment pressure on Trump.

What is victory?

No analyst thinks this war will be short. Unlike the 12-day war, which resulted in a ceasefire, this conflict already looks broader and deeper. Iran's readiness to retaliate across the region suggests it is willing to wage a long war rather than compromise.

One problem Washington and Tel Aviv are facing is how to keep the pressure on Tehran without creating uncontrollable instability in the region. The other problem they have is that they put regime change as their ultimate goal.

In his speech announcing the attack on Iran, the US president appeared to suggest that the US army would stick to an aerial campaign and would not deploy troops on the ground. He appeared to put the responsibility for toppling the Iranian government in the hands of the Iranian people, saying “the hour of your freedom is at hand” and calling on them to rebel.

This call comes two months after Iran witnessed unprecedented mass protests across the country. The Iranian authorities, however, launched a brutal campaign of repression, killing thousands. At the moment, a similar wave of mass protests seems unlikely. That legacy of repression weighs heavily on society, and Iran appears resilient.

Meanwhile, leadership “decapitation strikes” by the US and Israel will likely continue, but even if successful, they would not produce regime change.

Eventually, Trump’s generals may advise that prolonged conflict is unsustainable, echoing the lessons of the 12-day war. For Trump, an unwinnable war would invite a familiar exit strategy: Declaring victory on Truth Social and shifting the narrative.

The challenge then would be how to negotiate a ceasefire. Having been misled twice by the smokescreen of negotiations, Tehran could use this double betrayal to harden its position. If the regime survives, it could exploit US desperation for renewed talks to extract concessions. In that sense, diplomacy’s collapse today may set the stage for Iran to negotiate from a position of strength tomorrow.

The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera’s editorial stance.



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