

Netanyahu's Long Game to Reorder the Middle East



by Akram Zaoui

- As the inspirator of the ongoing war in the Middle East, Netanyahu's actions must be read through decades of political action.
- US participation in the war marks the apex of years of manoeuvring in Washington to reshape the region.
- Goals sought include obliteration of regional strategic threats and normalisation with Arab countries from a position of undisputable strength.

Many observers have pointed to Netanyahu's **role** in triggering the outburst now engulfing the Middle East. At 76, the longest-serving Israeli premier confronts his political legacy. Since first coming to power three decades ago, he has spent **more than half of that time in office**, repeatedly surviving Israel's fractious politics while reshaping the country as a **polity**.

More than a matter of political survival, the current war represents the culmination of a long trajectory Netanyahu has built throughout his political life. Three dimensions underpin this trajectory.

First, his preference for coercion over genuine negotiation and his willingness to leverage US military power to confront perceived regional threats.

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Second, his ability to manoeuvre within American politics, culminating in the understanding he has reached with Donald Trump and that underpins the war.

Third, the pursuit of three interconnected objectives: **preventing** the creation of a Palestinian state; **eliminating** the regional strategic threat represented by Iran and its allies; and **normalising** relations with Arab states.

Netanyahu's relationship with Trump marks the apex of a decades-long endeavour of shaping US policy in the Middle East

The gravedigger of Accords

Netanyahu's political career has been defined by resistance to meaningful compromise, marked by a blend of pressure, tactical manoeuvring and backtracking.

While he signed agreements with the Palestinians such as the 1997 **Hebron Protocol** and the 1998 **Wye River Memorandum** – both during his first mandate as prime minister, these functioned as tactical moves intended to make ostensible concessions while deepening Israeli control over the West Bank.

His actions over the past thirty years offer a compelling account of systematic opposition to Palestinian statehood. As leader of the opposition when prime minister Yitzhak Rabin pursued the Oslo Accords, Netanyahu mobilised right-wing forces against the peace process, contributing to the charged political climate in which Rabin was ultimately assassinated in 1995. A decade later, he **resigned** as finance minister from Ariel Sharon's cabinet in protest at Israel's withdrawal from Gaza. Following the civil war that pitted Fatah against Hamas, he **doubled down** on a policy of **engagement** with the latter aimed at weakening the Palestinian

Authority and undermining prospects for a Palestinian state.

Further, on key regional matters, Netanyahu has shown appetite for radical solutions under the American security cover and sought to steer Washington toward action aimed at eliminating Israel's adversaries. A key example is his support for an American intervention in Iraq, as epitomised by his 2002 op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*, "**The Case for Toppling Saddam**". His **embrace** of the "maximum pressure" campaign launched by Donald Trump in 2018 falls within the same pattern.

An Israeli Premier on Capitol Hill

The United States has been Israel's strategic partner since the country's early years, but Netanyahu's personal experience has enabled him to gain a particularly deep understanding of the workings of the US political system. In total, he has **lived** close to **twenty years** in the country, from parts of his boyhood to his serving as Israel's deputy chief of mission in Washington and ambassador to the United Nations.

Such knowledge has enabled him to capitalise on US political polarisation, routinely antagonising Democratic administrations and leveraging deep connections with the Republican party. His **2015** and **2024** addresses to Republican-dominated Congresses – he is the foreign leader who has addressed Congress **the most**, surpassing Winston Churchill – both occurred amid high tensions with the Obama and Biden administrations. Such past bickering with the Democratic presidents certainly helped Netanyahu curry favour with Donald Trump.

Netanyahu's relationship with the latter – he is by far the foreign leader who has met him most frequently during his second presidency, with seven meetings – thus marks the apex of a decades-long endeavour of shaping US policy in the Middle East.



But the manner in which Netanyahu has swayed Trump into engaging in military intervention warrants close scrutiny, for Trump is **arguably** the president who has enjoyed the greatest leverage vis-à-vis Israel. Further, the American President has denounced **forever wars**, expressed **preference** for a deal with Iran and pursued an “America First” foreign policy.

Yet Trump is waging a war in which he and his administration openly align with Israel, stating that the new Iranian leadership should “**treat the United States and Israel well**”, and **saying** that he would decide together with Netanyahu when the war will end.

This shift can be understood as the product of Netanyahu's manoeuvring, through which he has leveraged two key dynamics shaping Trump's second mandate.

One notable feature of Trump's **inaugural address** was its religious register: recalling the assassination attempt he survived during the campaign, he declared that he had been “saved by God to make America great again”. This claim conveyed a broader sense of mission that permeated his presidency. In this context, Israel – a symbolically potent issue in US politics – and Iran, associated in both the president's **mind** and the American psyche with a sense of national humiliation since the 1979-1981 hostage crisis (and failed rescue mission), provided two domains for Trump to achieve what he had promised in his inaugural speech: that his election would be “the greatest and most consequential election in the history” of the United States, inspiring respect all over the world.

A second element is a renewed strain of American expansionism, closely tied to the pursuit of natural resources, combined with strong confidence in US military might as an efficient instrument of foreign policy. The intervention in Venezuela illustrated this logic in practice: a swift operation removed

a hostile leader and installed a government more amenable to US interests, particularly in the oil sector, without dismantling the regime or engaging in nation-building. Trump **himself** pointed to the Venezuelan episode as a possible template for dealing with a post-war leadership in Iran.

From the ashes of the conflagration, Netanyahu seeks to remake the Middle East around three converging outcomes

Netanyahu's war to end all wars

The ongoing war in the Middle East has engulfed more than **a dozen countries**, killed thousands and displaced **hundreds of thousands** fleeing the **most intense air war in decades**. From the ashes of the conflagration, Netanyahu seeks to remake the Middle East around three converging outcomes.

The first concerns the elimination of the idea of a Palestinian state – an objective for which the current war, the consolidation of the alliance with the United States, and support from other Western countries provide direct cover. In the Palestinian Territory, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has **described** measures and violence against civilians as “rais[ing] concerns of ethnic cleansing”. In the West Bank, a July 2025 Knesset resolution and two October 2025 bills supporting the annexation of the territory were followed by a February 2026 security cabinet decision altering construction and land-ownership rules in favour of settlers, pointing to an unfolding process of **creeping annexation**.

The second concerns the gradual escalation against the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance”, of which the current war represents the **culmination**. Benefiting from clear intelligence, technological and air superiority over its adversaries, Netanyahu has progressively altered the rules



of engagement with this coalition, crossing successive operational and psychological thresholds. The April 2024 strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus marked the beginning of a campaign that soon expanded to targeted assassinations of senior figures – including Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran (July) – as well as direct Israeli strikes on Iranian territory in October 2024 and, ultimately, the June 2025 Twelve-Day War.

The third and final dynamic concerns normalisation with Arab states, chief among them Saudi Arabia. Hope has been expressed in **Israeli** circles that the current war could incentivise regional states to seek closer cooperation with Israel as they attempt to shield themselves from Iranian projectiles and consider **possible retaliation**. This, in turn,

would foster alignment between Israel and Gulf states, contribute to break Israel's isolation in the region and beyond, and revive the Abraham Accords.

In conclusion, the current outburst should be understood, in part, as Netanyahu's attempt to secure his place among the most consequential figures in the history of the Zionist movement, alongside its founder, Theodor Herzl, and Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. In the face of pushback from **regional states**, whether the three objectives enumerated above will be achieved, thus securing Israeli and US dominance in the region for **years to come**, remains to be seen. Amid such grand manoeuvring, humiliation, and "**death and destruction**", peace remains unlikely.

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