

# Regime change is a pipe dream. A stress test on Iran is what we've got so far

In 2017, Tehran unveiled a “Doomsday Clock” counting down to Israel’s supposed disappearance by 2040. Today, however, Iran stands cornered.



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If Tehran escalates recklessly, it risks regional conflagration and domestic implosion | (c) Copyright Thomson Reuters 2026

**T**he Middle East endures yet another battle in the long, drawn-out war between Iran and the US-Israel axis. They have been locked in confrontation—the Shia Revolution—since 1979, but this is the first time the conflict appears to be aimed at the heart of the Iranian state itself. The joint US-Israel front has not shied away from signalling that even the Supreme Leader [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#) is not beyond their target. This is an extraordinary political and strategic risk, one that could trigger

profound long-term repercussions across the region. Iran's nuclear programme and its containment have been contentious for decades, but this moment feels like *aar-paar ki ladai*—a decisive reckoning.

Is this driven by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's long-standing obsession with neutralising Iran? How did he persuade US President Donald Trump to edge toward what looks like a "final" confrontation? Why are major Arab states and Turkey largely indifferent to Iran's plight? And has Tehran, through ideology and miscalculation, brought this moment upon itself?

## From friends to foes

When Israel was established during the first [Arab-Israeli war of 1948](#), Iran was neither involved nor invested in the Palestinian cause. Tehran remained detached even as Egypt, Jordan and Syria fought Israel in 1956, 1967 and 1973. Additionally, Iran was the second Muslim-majority country, after Turkey, to recognise Israel in 1950, the same year as India.

The dramatic shift from quiet partnership to entrenched hostility underscores a central truth of international relations: ideology and regime character often matter more than geography or historical continuity.

Under the pro-Western monarch Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who consolidated power after the US and UK-backed coup of 1953, Iran pursued rapid industrialisation and urban modernisation. Fluent in several European languages, the Shah imagined himself a modern [Cyrus the Great](#), steering Iran along a secular and Western-aligned path.

He found common cause with Israel, united by mutual distrust of Arab nationalism—especially Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabism—and fear of Soviet communism. Though formal diplomatic relations were absent, Israel maintained a mission in Tehran under commercial cover, and intelligence cooperation flourished.

Iran became Israel's principal oil supplier in the 1960s and 1970s. The two jointly constructed the Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline, moving Iranian crude from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. Iran facilitated the airlift of over 1,20,000 Iraqi Jews to Israel during Operation Ezra and Nehemiah (1951–52) and later collaborated secretly on Project Flower in 1977, a missile development initiative.

Bilateral ties spanned intelligence, energy, trade and technology, supported by pragmatic leadership in both capitals. After the 1979 Revolution, however, Iran sued Israel over pipeline assets, winning a [\\$1.1 billion arbitration award in 2015](#) that remains unpaid—symbolic of a relationship transformed from cooperation to litigation and enmity.

## All is not well for Iran

Everything changed with the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Former Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the Shia clergy captured a broad-based uprising against the Shah and infused it with a radical theocratic ideology. The US was branded the “Great Satan” and Israel the “Little Satan,” reframing foreign policy as civilisational struggle.

The roots of resentment ran deep: the 1953 coup that removed Mohammad Mosaddegh—who had nationalised the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company—left an enduring scar on Iranian political memory. Anti-Americanism, anti-Zionism and, at times, antisemitic rhetoric became pillars of state ideology.

Iran institutionalised its regional resistance strategy through proxy forces. Hezbollah, created by the Revolutionary Guards in 1982 after Israel invaded Lebanon, became Tehran's most potent non-state ally. Quds Day was inaugurated to symbolically commit the regime to Israel's elimination.

In 2017, Tehran unveiled a “[Doomsday Clock](#)” counting down to Israel's supposed disappearance by 2040, echoing remarks attributed to Ayatollah

Khamenei. Rhetoric, symbolism and proxy warfare fused into a coherent doctrine: Israel's destruction was not merely policy—it was principle.

Today, however, Iran stands cornered. China and Russia offer rhetorical support but no military shield. Many of Tehran's regional proxies have been degraded over the past two years, and Hezbollah's capacity has been severely constrained. The strategic depth Iran once enjoyed is thinner than at any time in decades.

In response, Tehran appears willing to widen the theatre—pressuring Gulf monarchies that host American forces or have normalised ties with Israel. Its message is clear: if Iran bleeds, the region must feel the pain.

Yet the most consequential arena may not be Gaza, Lebanon or the Gulf—but Iran itself. The regime faces a convergence of external military pressure and an internal legitimacy crisis. Years of economic sanctions, youth unrest, women-led protests and generational disillusionment have hollowed out the revolutionary narrative.

A weakened regime may clamp down harder, invoking nationalism to suppress dissent. But it may also expose fractures within the elite and embolden civil society demanding accountability and reform. The 1979 Revolution will not end overnight.

Regime change is a pipe dream, and I don't think Trump or Netanyahu are with such a plan. They have just shaken the foundations by assassinating the Supreme Leader. But this confrontation marks more than another chapter in the US-Israel-Iran standoff.

It is a stress test for the Islamic Republic's ideological and governing capacity. If Tehran escalates recklessly, it risks regional conflagration and domestic implosion. It will have to recalibrate and carry on with a diminished image. Iran is at a crossroads, and no one knows what will come of it after this battle.

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(Edited by Saptak Datta)