

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Israel-US Strategic Cooperation Against Iran: Limits and Divergences

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S*ummary*

The conflict with Iran is unlikely to produce a decisive military outcome, given that Israel and the US retain different strategic lenses vis-à-vis the regional security situation.

Israel and the US launched a war against Iran based on strategic convergences around regime change, degradation of Iran’s nuclear, military and missile capabilities, and non-state networks. The failure to achieve these objectives alongside Iran’s blockade on the Strait of Hormuz, retaliatory strikes on Gulf states and the ability to influence Lebanon’s future, exposed differences between Israel and the US over the means, timing and acceptable costs of pursuing the said goals.

Following the 17 June 2026 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Washington and Tehran, the US restrained Israel’s direct involvement in Iran, limiting its role to intelligence cooperation and allowing calibrated military efforts in Lebanon to weaken Hezbollah. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu noted that joint military efforts succeeded in deterring Iran’s immediate nuclear threat, severely damaging Iran’s missiles, military and non-state networks and vowed to hold security zones in Lebanon, Gaza and Syria indefinitely to ensure the Jewish state’s security.¹

The US has pressed for diplomacy over the nuclear issue while continuing its war of attrition against Iran, with the battleground shifting to the Strait of Hormuz amid disputes over control of the vital waterway, triggering renewed strikes targeting military and critical infrastructure.² Israel welcomed the MoU’s collapse, advocating continued full-scale joint war efforts to translate military gains into strategic outcomes. Therefore, the war has reflected divergences in interpretation of the Iranian challenge between Israel and the US over Lebanon, the Strait of Hormuz, and the nuclear and missile programme.³

US’ Changing Priorities

President Trump, after launching the war, anticipated a swift and decisive victory, seeking access to its oil and other resources, influence over Iran’s leadership transition, and cultivation of pro-Western ‘moderates’ favouring change from within the Islamic regime to avoid a power vacuum, instability or civil war.⁴ In the absence

¹ Nava Freiberg and Lazar Berman, [“Netanyahu distances himself but avoids criticizing US-Iran deal, claims war’s main goals have been achieved”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 16 June 2026.

² Sarah Shamim, [“US-Iran Memorandum Of Understanding Expires: How And Why It Fell Apart”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 17 August 2026.

³ Washington pursued a separate bilateral track with Tehran to quickly halt military operations and reopen the Strait of Hormuz, deliberately excluding Israel from MoU negotiations amid concerns over disclosure of sensitive terms, derailing the diplomatic effort. Matt Bradley, [“Israel Cut Out Of Iran Deal As Trump Keeps Deriding Netanyahu In Public”](#), *NBC News*, 17 June 2026; Majid Bozorgmehri, [“The Ongoing War Between Iran, The US And Israel: A Brief Analytical Assessment”](#), *European Center for Populism Studies*, 23 April 2026.

⁴ Philip H. Gordon, [“How The Iran War Will Change The Middle East”](#), *Brookings*, 10 June 2026.

of decisive victory, Washington pursued containment, deterrence, coercive diplomacy and strategic bargaining, combining military, economic and political pressure, including infrastructure disruption, sanctions and phased concessions, diplomatic timelines and inspections, to compel renewed negotiations over ceasefires, maritime access and the nuclear programme.⁵

Washington situates Iran within a broader strategic environment, assessing the potential costs across other theatres and dynamics involving China, Russia and its Gulf allies.⁶ Therefore, Washington seeks to avoid prolonged, large-scale military engagement, particularly ground operations amid the upcoming mid-term elections, Congressional scrutiny, budgetary pressures costing US\$ 45.1 billion between 28 February and mid-September 2026 and public opposition, including from Trump’s Make America Great Again (MAGA) base, to new wars.⁷ Rising perceptions that Trump was manipulated into a costly “war of choice” have reframed the Netanyahu government as a liability, intensifying demands to re-assess military aid to Israel.⁸

Trump’s military objectives evolved from regime change and unconditional surrender to securing the Strait of Hormuz and nuclear non-proliferation, creating ambiguity that enabled him to declare victory despite a lack of transformational change.⁹ Nevertheless, the failure compelled Washington to prioritise containing the conflict’s spillover, particularly by reopening the Strait of Hormuz, preserving global oil market stability and deterring retaliation against the energy facilities of the Gulf States.¹⁰ Disruptions to international shipping, which have heightened inflationary pressures, have pushed Brent crude prices above US\$ 100 per barrel. The tensions over the Strait of Hormuz and Iran’s retaliatory attacks on US allies have undermined

⁵ Eric Lob, [“The Diverging U.S. And Israel Goals In Iran Are Making The Endgame Even Murkier”](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 March 2026; Caolan Magee, [“Why Is The US Attacking Southern Iran’s Civilian Infrastructure”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 17 July 2026.

⁶ Majid Bozorgmehri, [“The Ongoing War Between Iran, The US And Israel: A Brief Analytical Assessment”](#), no. 3.

⁷ In the US, around 63 per cent reportedly disapproved of the war and a 17 September 2026 *Fox News* poll found 71 per cent believed Trump government lacked a plan to end the conflict. Jason Lange, [“Trump’s Approval Holds At Record Low As US Support For Iran War Falls, Reuters Ipsos Poll Finds”](#), *Reuters*, 25 August 2026; Victoria Balara, [“Fox News Poll: 71% Think Trump Administration Lacks Plan To End Iran War”](#), *Fox News*, 17 September 2026; Annie Grayer and Lauren Fox, [“Iran War Has Cost \\$45.1 Billion, Pentagon Tells Congress”](#), *CNN*, 19 September 2026.

⁸ Around 60 per cent of Americans held unfavourable views of Israel, and 74 per cent of younger Americans sympathise more with Palestinians than Israelis. Laura Silver, [“Negative Views Of Israel, Netanyahu Continue To Rise Among Americans – Especially Young People”](#), Pew Research Center, 7 April 2026; Giorgio Cafiero, [“Why Diverging US-Israel Goals Complicate How The Iran War Ends”](#), *The New Arab*, 28 March 2026.

⁹ Grace Wermenbol, [“The US-Israeli War Alliance Under Pressure”](#), German Marshall Fund, 20 March 2026.

¹⁰ Daniel B. Shapiro, [“From A Gap To A Chasm: Diverging US And Israeli Interests In The War With Iran”](#), Atlantic Council, 10 June 2026.

Washington’s power projection, testing the reliability of its security guarantees and ability to safeguard maritime access.

The war has reduced Iran’s incentives to offer nuclear concessions as the naval blockade strengthens its bargaining position, and preserving nuclear capabilities provides a potential deterrent in the future. The US seeks destruction, removal or down-blending of a 440 kg highly-enriched Uranium stockpile outside Iran, a 20-year suspension of enrichment activities and stringent restrictions on nuclear facilities and sanctions relief tied to verifiable compliance. These objectives remain unfulfilled through both military and diplomatic means.

With limited leverage following the failure to guarantee maritime access and prevent attacks on Gulf States, Washington may increasingly favour a limited agreement involving Iran’s commitment not to develop nuclear weapons, negotiations on exporting or down-blending highly-enriched Uranium, a time-bound enrichment suspension and phased implementation of sanctions relief.¹¹ However, without reaching common ground, the ongoing low-intensity conflict could continue. Moreover, Trump considers Iran’s ballistic missiles a critical challenge but not an existential threat to Israel, and seeks to prevent the issue from complicating nuclear negotiations.¹²

Israel’s Objectives

Israel conceptualises Iran as an immediate, geographically proximate and multi-dimensional challenge, encompassing ideological hostility, missile and cyber capabilities and an allied network, calling any delay in tackling this threat inherently risky. Israel views even a ‘near-nuclear’ Iran as capable of altering the tactics of allied groups, constraining the operational freedom of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and eroding deterrence. Israel’s approach stems from a low threat-tolerance threshold arising from limited strategic depth and acute vulnerability to missiles, drones and infiltration attempts, favouring proactively neutralising immediate and long-term threats.¹³ Israel endeavours to exploit Iran’s diminished military status and fractured support networks through sustained mowing-the-grass operations, degrading

¹¹ Giorgio Cafiero, [“Why Diverging US-Israel Goals Complicate How The Iran War Ends”](#), no. 8.

¹² [“The Iran War: Part II – Israel And The United States Between War And Diplomacy”](#), Brandeis University, 28 July 2026.

¹³ Daniel B. Shapiro, [“From A Gap To A Chasm: Diverging US And Israeli Interests In The War With Iran”](#), no. 10.

defensive capabilities, dismantling its nuclear and ballistic missile sites and severing ties with allied groups.¹⁴

Israel’s strategic objective is to remove the Islamic regime, leave Iran weakened and fragmented, preclude future threats to the Jewish state and reshape the balance of power. While the US has avoided uncontrolled escalation that could create a power vacuum and refrained from attacks on Iranian energy infrastructure, thereby limiting disruptions to global energy markets, Israel has pursued a more direct regime decapitation strategy, including high-profile assassinations and strikes on critical economic infrastructure such as oil refineries, storage facilities and pipelines.

By killing senior leaders, Israel aims to disrupt Iran’s command-and-control and political decision-making, generate internal instability and create conditions for regime collapse, despite the risks of regional and international instability. For Israel, returning to negotiations before resolving fundamental issues risks allowing Iran to rebuild its capabilities and reassert regional influence. The Netanyahu government has therefore sought to sabotage negotiations and derail any agreement.¹⁵

For Israel, the economic costs of the Strait of Hormuz’s closure are less consequential than for the US. While Trump is increasingly focused on the conflict’s economic implications, Netanyahu remains focused on security. Consequently, re-opening the Strait of Hormuz is a low priority for Israel, which is more concerned with Iran leveraging the waterway for strategic concessions and bargaining advantage.¹⁶

On the nuclear issue, Israel objected to deferring negotiations under the June 2026 MoU, given the US’ priority of re-opening the Strait of Hormuz. According to the Israeli perspective, the war should have facilitated a re-negotiated nuclear agreement on terms heavily favouring the Israel–US axis. While broadly aligned with US’ non-proliferation objectives, Israel favours more stringent restrictions than those under the 2015 nuclear deal, including permanently preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons; the removal of highly-enriched Uranium; comprehensive limits on

¹⁴ Eric Lob, [“The Diverging U.S. And Israel Goals in Iran are Making the Endgame Even Murkier”](#), no. 5.

¹⁵ Israel assassinated Ali Larijani on 17 March, targeted Asaluyeh’s petrochemical complex on 6 April and intensified strikes on Lebanon on 8 April to sabotage the Iran-US negotiation process. After the June MoU, Israel again expanded strikes on Lebanon, reflecting its opposition to de-escalation. [“Israel Says Iran’s Security Chief Larijani Is Killed”](#), *Reuters*, 17 March 2026; Philip H. Gordon, [“How The Iran War Will Change The Middle East”](#), no. 5; Jason Burke and William Christou, [“Israel And Hezbollah Renew Ceasefire After Deadly Flareup Disrupts Opening Of Iran Talks”](#), *The Guardian*, 20 June 2026.

¹⁶ Daniel B. Shapiro, [“From A Gap To A Chasm: Diverging US And Israeli Interests In The War With Iran”](#), no. 10.

enrichment; dismantling key nuclear facilities at Isfahan, Natanz and Fordow and intrusive monitoring.¹⁷

Israel maintains that any resolution should constrain Iran’s ballistic missiles and support for non-state allies, regarded as integral components of Iran’s broader security threat. For the Netanyahu government facing elections, a limited direct role enables it to provide intelligence support to the US while reducing wartime disruption to civilian life and the economy.¹⁸ Lastly, a contained but adversarial Iran may serve the Israel–US axis by reinforcing Gulf states’ security dependencies and facilitating incremental normalisation with the Jewish state.¹⁹

The Lebanon Factor

Washington views Lebanon within broader regional dynamics, seeking to prevent a large-scale Israel–Hezbollah conflict accelerating state collapse, civilian casualties, refugee flow, disruption in the eastern Mediterranean region and wider escalation involving multiple actors. Trump has pressed Israel for restraint, favouring a shorter and less damaging war, criticising the IDF’s disproportionate military action and suggesting assigning Syria a greater role in managing the Lebanese conflict. Washington deemed Lebanon’s inclusion essential in the comprehensive de-escalation framework while favouring Hezbollah’s weakening and conditionally accepting the IDF’s occupation in South Lebanon.²⁰

For Israel, confronting Iran and weakening its deterrence architecture are inseparable from degrading Hezbollah, requiring operations against the group to remain outside any ceasefire framework. The Netanyahu government firmly resists any US–Iran arrangement that could constrain its operational freedom and escalatory posture, particularly where negotiations appear to prioritise broader US interests over Israeli security concerns.²¹

Domestically, the Netanyahu government’s war against Iran and Lebanon remains popular. Rocket attacks, border incidents, killings, hostage crises and the memory

¹⁷ Eic Lob, [“The Diverging U.S. And Israel Goals In Iran Are Making The Endgame Even Murkier”](#), no. 5.

¹⁸ [“The Iran War: Part II – Israel And The United States Between War And Diplomacy”](#), no. 12.

¹⁹ Majid Bozorgmehri, [“The Ongoing War Between Iran, The US And Israel: A Brief Analytical Assessment”](#), no. 3.

²⁰ [“US-Israel Differences Over Iran: Strategically Parting Ways Or A Temporary Divergence?”](#), Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 23 June 2026.

²¹ Ibid.; Eric Lob, [“The Diverging U.S. And Israel Goals In Iran Are Making The Endgame Even Murkier”](#), no. 5.

of strategic surprise since 7 October 2023 have reduced public patience for perceived security failures. Netanyahu has faced criticism from both supporters and opponents for accepting US-imposed constraints that limit Israel’s sovereign decisions to undertake ‘defensive’ military action. Israel was central to the opening phase of the war but has largely remained on the sidelines since the June 2026 MoU. For Netanyahu, continued military operations and territorial presence in Lebanon demonstrate tactical autonomy while addressing strong domestic support for eliminating Hezbollah’s threat and securing northern Israel.²²

Conclusion

The US has emphasised coercive diplomacy, employing military, political and economic pressure while seeking to avoid uncontrolled escalation, a power vacuum, energy disruptions and damage to the Gulf alliance structure. Israel has prioritised immediate threat reduction, sustained pressure and the long-term degradation of Iran’s capabilities to hasten regime change. These differences reflect distinct strategic perspectives and operational realities rather than a fundamental rupture in the alliance.

The conflict is therefore unlikely to produce a decisive military outcome, with the two allies retaining different strategic lenses. Likely trajectories include negotiations producing partial de-escalation, limited restrictions on nuclear activities and phased sanctions relief. Moreover, prolonged, managed low-intensity confrontation involving intermittent strikes and allied groups’ activities remains likely, shaped by resource allocation constraints, global economic and energy stability, domestic political considerations, strategic prioritisation, great power dynamics and alliance management. The IDF may also undertake unilateral measures, including intensified campaigns in Lebanon and sabotage operations in Iran, if Washington offers concessions to Tehran deemed insufficient by Israel. The eventual outcome depends on Iran–US dynamics, whether they lead to negotiations or protracted conflict, and the extent to which Israel and the US can reconcile differing assessments of acceptable outcomes.

²² Grace Wermenbol, [“The US-Israeli War Alliance Under Pressure”](#), no. 9.

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