



Why Did Trump Go to War with Iran? It Wasn't Just Bibi

by Prof. Eitan Shamir

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The popular premise that Donald Trump decided to go to war with Iran because Benjamin Netanyahu asked him to is a misleading distortion. Trump's decision was the product of a 40-year personal grudge, a hard lesson learned from Kim Jong-un's nuclear immunity in Hanoi, and a cold-eyed calculation about China's cheap Iranian oil lifeline. Trump saw an opportunity to shatter the Iran-Russia-China-North Korea axis in a single blow and to remind the world that American power is by no means in decline. Netanyahu gave the door a push, but it was already wide open.

When Israel struck Iran on February 28, 2026, the world was not surprised. The logic was clear, even if the timing was not. For Israel, an Iran on the verge of nuclear capability represents an existential threat, one its security doctrine has long deemed intolerable. What sharpened the calculus was the activity Israeli intelligence had observed in the months following Israel's June 2025 operation against Iran. Rather than accepting the damage it had suffered as a strategic setback, Tehran moved with haste to restore and expand its capabilities across all three pillars of its power projection. Its nuclear program, including weapons development, resumed and accelerated. Its missile program was reconstituted, and many more launchers and missiles were produced. On the proxy front, Iran moved swiftly to refinance Hezbollah and reorganize its shattered infrastructure in Lebanon. The June strikes, in other words, had not broken the ambitions of the

Iranian regime; they lent those ambitions even greater urgency. For Israeli planners, the Iranian threat after the June strikes was quickly growing rather than diminishing and had to be stopped.

What proved far harder to explain was the actions of the United States.

Washington's decision to join the military campaign against Iran instantly became the subject of intense debate among analysts. A single explanation quickly came to dominate the discussion: that Donald Trump had been persuaded to enter the fray by Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, who had purportedly exploited their personal bond to lure Trump into taking steps that serve Israeli interests. Netanyahu allegedly played on the president's susceptibility to flattery and attraction to the drama of historic moments. The scarcely concealed subtext was that the president had been managed, and the Israeli tail had wagged the American dog.

This explanation has a certain surface appeal. Netanyahu is known to be one of the most skilled political communicators of his generation. He has a long history of framing Israeli interests in terms designed to resonate with American audiences, and American presidents in particular. The case he would have made to Trump almost certainly combined appeals to strength, legacy, and the visceral image of a nuclear-armed theocracy. That this persuasion happened, and that it mattered, is not in doubt.

But the "Bibi convinced him" narrative, taken as a sufficient explanation, rests on a false assumption: that Donald Trump entered those conversations with no strategic interests of his own. It argues that Trump was, in effect, a passive supporter of another leader's agenda.

That assumption is almost certainly wrong. Trump is many things, but he is not devoid of convictions about American power. He came to office twice with a consistent, if unconventional, worldview: that American strength must be visible and credible, that adversaries are more likely to respond to pressure than to diplomacy, and that deals should be made from positions of dominance, not restraint. Whatever Netanyahu said to Trump, he was not speaking into a vacuum. He was speaking to a president who already had his own reasons to regard a nuclear Iran as a problem worth solving. Trump's reasons were rooted not in

Israeli security calculations, but in his own conception of what American leadership should look like.

The more interesting question, then, is not whether Netanyahu influenced Trump. The question is what Trump wanted, independent of Israel, and why the war served those interests.

A personal grudge, decades in the making

To understand Trump's decision, it helps to start not with geopolitics, but with temperament and with a grievance that stretches back decades.

Donald Trump has never hidden his contempt for Iran. As far back as the 1980s, he expressed the view that the Islamic Republic had humiliated the United States, taken advantage of American weakness, and paid no meaningful price. That instinct hardened into policy during his first administration. He pulled out of the JCPOA nuclear agreement, dismissing it as one of the worst deals ever negotiated. He reimposed and escalated sanctions under a "maximum pressure" campaign designed to bring Tehran to its knees. In January 2020, he ordered the killing of Qasem Soleimani, the architect of Iran's regional proxy network – a strike most of his advisors considered too dangerous, but that Trump considered long overdue. These were hardly reluctant decisions extracted from Trump by his advisors; quite the opposite. They were expressions of a worldview he had held for years.

The personal dimension deepened in Trump's second term. Iranian operatives were linked to assassination plots against Trump that were deemed by US intelligence to be credible and serious. Trump, who processes politics through the lens of personal loyalty and enmity, did not view these plots as an abstraction. They represented a direct attack. Speaking to ABC News, he framed the elimination of the Iranian threat in the most personal terms imaginable. "I got him before he got me," he said. "I got him first."

That sentence repays attention. This is the language not of grand strategy or alliance management but of a man who is keeping score. He understands this conflict not solely as a national security question but as a personal reckoning. When the decision to act against Iran reached the table, Trump was not being asked to take on a distant adversary. He was being given the opportunity to settle

a grudge that had been accumulating for the better part of 40 years, from the American humiliation by the Islamic regime in 1979 up to the regime's direct threats against his person while he was in the Oval Office.

The lesson of Pyongyang

The second thread running through Trump's thinking about Iran is less visceral than personal grievance but perhaps more strategically consequential. It traces back to one of the most striking moments of his first presidential term: the collapse of the Hanoi summit with Kim Jong-un in 2019.

Trump had invested enormous political capital in his personal diplomacy with North Korea. He met Kim three times, exchanged what he described as "beautiful letters," and genuinely believed the force of his personality and the weight of American power could produce a deal. Then it all fell apart in Hanoi. Kim walked away, and there was nothing Trump could do about it.

That experience left a mark. For a president who prizes leverage above all else, Hanoi was a painful illustration of the consequences of its absence. North Korea's nuclear weapons immunized it against him. The lesson was that no American president, however bold and willing to project strength, can compel a nuclear-armed adversary to do anything it does not want to do. Pyongyang's bomb neutralized every card in the American hand.

Trump understood this lesson viscerally. As he watched Iran accelerate its nuclear program in the months after the June strikes, it could not have been far from his mind. A nuclear-armed North Korea was a problem he had inherited and could not solve. The problem of a nuclear-armed Iran was still solvable, if just barely, but the window was beginning to close.

The calculation was stark. Kim Jong-un, erratic and isolated as he is, leads a regime with limited reach and narrow ambitions beyond its own survival. Iran is a different proposition entirely. It is a revolutionary state with a vision of vast conquest and a 40-plus-year record of killing Americans, exporting violence, financing proxy armies across four countries, and explicitly calling for the destruction of a close American ally. North Korea is immune to American pressure because it possesses nuclear weapons, but it is, at least, an isolated rogue state. A

nuclear-armed Iran means a transformed Middle East in which a highly aggressive Tehran can act with impunity behind a nuclear shield.

Oil and the shadow of China

The third dimension to Trump's calculus operates at the level of great power competition, specifically with regard to oil and who controls it.

For the past several years, Iran has served as a critical lifeline for China's energy economy. Despite American sanctions, Beijing has continued to purchase Iranian crude at heavily discounted prices, providing Tehran with the hard currency it needs to fund its nuclear program, missile development, and network of proxies. The relationship is symbiotic: Iran gets financial oxygen, China gets cheap oil, and they serve their common interest in undermining the American-led sanctions architecture. Washington has watched this arrangement with growing frustration. Trump, who has never been subtle about his view of China as America's defining strategic adversary, was watching closely.

Neutralizing Iran was not, then, only a Middle Eastern story. It was a move on a much larger board. A post-war Iran whose regime is severely weakened or whose oil sector is subject to new political arrangements would represent a significant tightening of the noose around China's energy supply. Cutting Beijing off from discounted Iranian crude, or placing Iranian oil within a framework more amenable to American and allied interests, would impose real costs on the Chinese economy and complicate Beijing's long-term strategic planning.

But the significance extends beyond oil alone. Over recent years, Iran has become a load-bearing pillar in an emerging axis of revisionist powers. An informal but consequential alignment has taken shape among Tehran, Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang, which are united by their shared interest in eroding American primacy. Iran offered Moscow and Beijing a forward position in the Middle East and provided a perpetual source of regional instability that tied down American attention and resources.

Striking Iran meant fracturing this architecture at one of its key nodes. A weakened Iran could no longer serve as Russia's arsenal, China's discounted fuel supplier, or the financial patron of proxy forces from Lebanon to Yemen. The axis would

not collapse but would lose a critical branch, and the others would feel that loss. For Trump, who spent both his presidential terms defining American strategy around great power competition, the opportunity to degrade this network with a single decisive action was not incidental to his thinking; it was central to it.

Trump has always seen competition in transactional, resource-based terms. He thinks in terms of leverage, who controls what, and what that control is worth. Iranian oil flowing freely to China in defiance of American sanctions was a standing rebuke to American power. It was also a concrete economic subsidy to Washington's principal rival, channeled through a network of states openly committed to American decline. From Trump's perspective, this was not a situation to be managed indefinitely. It was a problem to be solved, and the solution aligned with everything else pushing him toward confrontation with Iran.

In this light, the war can be seen as about more than the Middle East, and certainly much more than Israeli interests. It was about dismantling the coalition that had spent decades betting that American power can be outlasted.

Showcasing capabilities and the new world order

The fourth reason for Trump's decision to act has less to do with Iran specifically than with what striking Iran would demonstrate to the world.

Trump has never been a believer in quiet diplomacy or gradual pressure. He believes in decisive, highly visible, unmistakable displays of power that reorder how adversaries calculate risk. The war against Iran was exactly that kind of moment.

Tehran was the stage, not the audience. The audience was Moscow, Beijing, and every other capital that has spent years drawing the conclusion that American power is in managed decline, and that while the United States is rich enough to dominate the world, it is no longer willing to pay the costs of doing so. The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan fed this narrative, as did Washington's prolonged, inconclusive support for Ukraine. To Trump, a world that had grown accustomed to American hesitation needed to be reminded what American resolve actually looked like.

Iran provided the opportunity. The Islamic Republic had defied the United States for four decades, survived maximum pressure, outlasted multiple

administrations, and continued to build toward nuclear capability in the apparent confidence that Washington would always flinch. The devastating strike on Iran answered that confident defiance with a declaration that the era of American hesitation was over.

By projecting decisive force into one of the most complex and contested regions on earth while simultaneously managing the diplomatic and military logistics of a major operation, the United States demonstrated that it is not a superpower in decline. This sent a signal directly to Moscow. Vladimir Putin built his entire Ukraine strategy on the assumption that the West lacked the stomach for confrontation.

The signal to China was equally clear. Beijing spent years war-gaming the question of whether the United States, if pushed, would sustain commitment, absorb costs, and fight or find reasons to stand down. The Iran strike provided an answer that Beijing must now consider with regard to a larger-scale future scenario in Taiwan. The United States will indeed fight if pushed; it can indeed project overwhelming force; and there are lines that, if crossed, will carry serious consequences.

Trump understood, perhaps better than most of his critics, that credibility is not built through sanctions or strongly worded communiqués. It is built through action. In his framing, the Iran operation reasserted America's place at the top of the international order.

The open door

Rarely in foreign policy does a single decision flow from a single cause. The case for American intervention against Iran was neither built in a day nor the product of one man's persuasion. It was the product of personal, strategic, economic, and geopolitical motivations that had been accumulating for years and that finally converged in a moment that made action feel not just justifiable but almost inevitable.

The immediate triggers are important. The June 2025 Israeli operation had gone with a smoothness that surprised even its architects. It demonstrated that Iranian air defenses and command structures were more brittle than its adversaries had assumed, and that a window of military opportunity was genuinely open. The popular uprising that followed, and the regime's brutal response, reframed the entire project by providing it with a moral dimension: the Iranian people were

rising up against 40 years of theocratic repression, and the regime was slaughtering them in order to survive. The humanitarian framing was not cynical, but it was politically invaluable, as it provided Trump with a narrative that transcended the cold arithmetic of deterrence and nuclear timelines. He was on a mission to stop a massacre.

Whatever his detractors may say, Trump has always had an instinct for the moment. He recognized, in the convergence of a militarily vulnerable Iran, a collapsing regime, and a watching world, something rare in geopolitics: an opportunity that would not come again. He brought to bear his personal grievance against the Iranian regime, the North Korea lesson, the competition with China, the desire to shatter the Iran-Russia-China-North Korea axis, and the hunger for a power demonstration that would rewrite the world's assumptions about American will. All that was needed was the right moment, and that was provided by the June operation and the uprising in the streets of Tehran.

The strike was a gamble, and the verdict is not yet in. It remains to be seen whether a weakened Iran helps stabilize the Middle East or a more vengeful one emerges from the rubble, and it will take time to determine whether the desired secondary effects on China, Russia, and the broader axis are realized. What looks like a decisive strategic masterstroke today could look very different in five years. It is equally true that what looks today like reckless overreach could prove to have been the moment that changed the trajectory of the century for the better.

What remains clear, however, is that the "Bibi convinced him" explanation, however politically convenient, mistakes the nature of what happened. Netanyahu's case landed, as it was designed to, with a president already primed to receive it. He may have pushed at the door, but the door was already wide open.

Prof. Eitan Shamir serves as the head of the BESA Center and as a faculty member in the Department of Political Science at Bar-Ilan University. His latest book is The Art of Military Innovation: Lessons from the IDF, Harvard University Press, 2023 (with Edward Luttwak).