

## From Toppling the Regime to Seeking an Exit: What Does Trump Want from the War with Iran?



The U.S.–Israeli war against Iran has entered a new phase of strategic confusion, marked by intensifying contradictory statements, mixed signals, and ambiguous messaging about the trajectory of the confrontation and its political and temporal limits. Since this round of fighting erupted, the situation has appeared to swing sharply between the prospect of de-escalation and waves of escalation.

In his latest muddled remarks on the course of the conflict, U.S. President Donald Trump said the war against Iran may be nearing its end, stressing that there is “almost nothing left” inside the country that could be targeted. His comments were reported by Axios on Wednesday, March 11.

From the early days of the war, the American target bank appeared to undergo deep tremors and significant shifts. What began with rhetoric about uprooting the Iranian regime eventually gave way to scenarios resembling a “Venezuelan model,” before settling in practice on more modest objectives namely weakening Iran’s missile and nuclear capabilities.

In effect, the strategy evolved into what might be described as trimming Iran’s “strategic claws” rather than pursuing a comprehensive resolution.

In this context, Trump now appears more preoccupied than ever with finding a politically marketable exit to the war, especially after its economic and logistical costs exceeded initial estimates.

Tehran's strategy of attrition and scorched-earth tactics has compounded the problem, revealing clear miscalculations by U.S. intelligence regarding Iran's strength and military capabilities following the June war.

This raises a central question: what concrete achievements could the U.S. president present as sufficient accomplishments to allow him to climb down from the war without appearing defeated or retreating while still marketing a political "victory" ahead of the midterm elections scheduled for next November?

### Claims of Early Victory: Contradiction and Confusion

Statements by Trump and members of his administration regarding the outcome of the war with Iran reflect clear contradictions and confusion in both political and military messaging. From the very beginning, Trump promoted a narrative of a swift and decisive victory, claiming Washington had already achieved its full objectives in the confrontation. Yet this rhetoric has repeatedly been punctuated by striking inconsistencies.

Contrasting sharply with Trump's confident tone, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth offered a markedly different account one that almost directly contradicts the president's narrative. He warned that strikes on Iran could escalate further.

Hegseth also confirmed that the U.S. military has presented Trump with "many options" to continue the war. This suggests that Washington contrary to the president's rhetoric of finality still treats the conflict as an open-ended file, one that remains susceptible to further escalation rather than a battle whose chapters have already closed.

### Why the Rush to Declare Victory?

Analysts attribute Trump's rush to declare victory prematurely despite the confrontation remaining open to escalation and arguably growing more intense than in its early days to domestic pressures rather than battlefield realities.

Circles close to the administration fear that prolonging the war, alongside rising oil prices, could trigger severe political and economic backlash that would directly affect Trump's popularity and domestic standing. American public opinion remains highly sensitive to the financial and social costs of wars.

At the same time, the administration's positions reveal a conspicuous absence of strategic clarity and a growing loss of direction in the war effort. When the most fundamental question is asked what exactly does the United States want from this war? there appears to be no clear or decisive answer within Trump's team.

Instead, contradictions emerge even in defining the objectives themselves: Is the aim deterrence? The dismantling of Iran's nuclear and missile programs? Forcing

new negotiating terms? Or simply producing the image of a swift political victory?

## The Difficulty of Toppling the Regime

From the first day of the war, Trump and his administration raised the banner of regime change in Iran as the ultimate objective of the confrontation. U.S. rhetoric went beyond conventional military messaging to address the Iranian public directly joined by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urging Iranians to rise up against the regime and “liberate” the country from clerical rule.

In the opening hours, this objective appeared more attainable particularly after the assassination of Iran’s supreme leader and several prominent figures within the political and military elite. These developments reinforced the impression that the conflict might be, as Trump suggested, a swift resolution rather than a long and complex war.

But battlefield developments quickly undermined those assumptions. Instead of collapsing or fracturing, the Iranian system demonstrated a notable ability to absorb the shock and reorganize its hierarchy of power. A new supreme leader was rapidly chosen and endorsed across political and military circles, while Iran managed to restore a degree of military and political balance.

As the days passed, regime change gradually shifted from a central pillar of American rhetoric to a remote possibility, amid growing signs of Iran’s resilience and capacity to regain the initiative.

U.S. intelligence assessments reinforced this shift. According to three informed sources cited by Reuters, Iran’s leadership remains largely cohesive and is not facing imminent collapse.

With the original objective of the war eroding and the battlefield becoming more complex amid Iran’s recovery, Trump now appears increasingly focused on crafting a politically marketable exit one that allows him to redefine the war’s goals and present them to the American public as a success upon which further progress can be built.

## Searching for an Exit

In an article published in The Washington Post, American columnist and foreign policy specialist David Ignatius highlighted growing concern within decision-making circles in both Israel and the United States about the open-ended escalation of the war with Iran. Discussions have increasingly turned toward the need for political pathways that could halt the confrontation before it inflicts further damage on the region and the global economy.

Ignatius quoted a senior Israeli official familiar with wartime planning and strategy as saying that discussions are underway about alternatives to Trump’s

call for “unconditional surrender,” reflecting mounting doubts about the viability of maintaining such an ambitious objective.

As a result, broad segments of the American media have begun redefining what “victory” might mean in the ongoing war with Iran. It has become increasingly clear that the goal of overthrowing the regime faces substantial military and political obstacles, not to mention its regional and international repercussions.

With that scenario fading, debate within analytical and media circles has shifted toward identifying an alternative set of objectives that could be presented as sufficient achievements to justify ending the war even if the regime remains intact.

At a minimum, such goals would involve weakening Iran, destabilizing its cohesion, and trimming its strategic capabilities.

Within U.S. media discussions, several potential objectives have been floated that Trump might seek to frame as a politically marketable victory. These include preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, destroying a significant portion of its missile arsenal, weakening its network of regional allies, and reducing its ability to threaten navigation in the Gulf.

Some proposals go even further, suggesting the possibility of special operations targeting key centers of power within Iran’s leadership including the newly appointed supreme leader.

On this basis, Trump may be searching for an alternative formula for victory one that allows him to climb down from the “war tree” without appearing to retreat. He could declare that sufficient strategic objectives have been achieved and then bring the confrontation to a halt before its costs escalate further, at a time when military, economic, and political burdens continue to mount.

The troubling paradox, however, is that Tehran now appears to be the party raising its conditions for ending the war. Iranian leaders seem to have quickly recognized the scale of the predicament facing Washington and Tel Aviv under the growing costs of a wide-ranging confrontation.

This shift makes Trump’s effort to engineer a swift exit or climb down from the war tree far more difficult, leaving the situation open to a wide range of possibilities.