

Israel's challenge is stopping Iran's recovery

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 09.04.2026

"They had an impressive ability to take punishment. They gave us their word that they wouldn't be shooting at ships anymore, and we honor that."

These words were spoken by Donald Trump, not in recent days, and not in connection with Iran. They were said in May of last year, regarding the Houthis in Yemen, shortly after the president announced the end of the military operation against them. At the time, he responded to Oman's mediation initiative and decided to cease fire without removing the threat. In February of this year, in the wake of the war with Iran, the Houthis resumed attacks on Israel.

President Trump does not need this lesson from the Houthi episode to understand whom he is dealing with on the Iranian side. He himself has repeatedly accused the regime in Tehran of lying and breaking promises. The representatives who will arrive today for talks in Islamabad represent that same regime. Some of the faces have changed, but the ideological outlook remains as it was. They will sit at the negotiating table with a sense of confidence, encouraged by their success in withstanding the American-Israeli war machine, in turning the Strait of Hormuz and the vulnerability of the Gulf states into effective leverage on Washington, and in casting doubt on the prospects of regime change.

Tehran knows that none of this compensates for Iran's losses or conceals the weaknesses exposed during the war. After the previous blow in Operation Roaring Lion, it suffered another severe surprise attack, this time while braced for war. It lost its supreme leader and a sizable portion of its political and security leadership. Its defense arrays and formidable intelligence services were exposed as porous in the face of American-Israeli capabilities. It lost strategic, military, infrastructural, and economic assets; damaged its relations with regional states; remained in striking isolation without any external support; and struggled to mount a meaningful military response against American and Israeli forces, whether through its own capabilities or via proxy actors. The war deepened the economic pit in which it had already been mired beforehand. In many areas, Iranian systems were set back by years.

Despite all this, Iran arrives at the negotiating table not from a position of surrender, but with bargaining leverage. It has managed to optimally combine the use of its remaining capabilities with the constraints and concerns in Washington, thereby maximizing pressure on the White House. Tehran is well aware of four major American concerns: a prolonged war, the introduction of ground forces, rising energy prices, and the possibility that enriched uranium remains in Iranian hands.

What is Iran trying to achieve now? In simple terms: conditions that will ensure the regime's survival and enable Iran's rehabilitation and rebuilding.

Iran is demanding guarantees against the resumption of war, the establishment of a new order in the Strait of Hormuz that would increase its economic control there, the lifting of economic sanctions, and an arrangement that leaves enrichment capabilities in its hands. It opposes restrictions on its missile program, and will not commit to practical steps that would endanger the existence of its proxy organizations.

Once the fire has ceased, the regime's leaders in Tehran view negotiations more as an opportunity to extract the resources and conditions necessary for recovery than as a source of pressure against them.

From Israel's perspective, even though it did not achieve all its aims, its strategic position today is far better than it was on the eve of the war: Iran's strategic capabilities have suffered a severe though not irreversible blow; the regime's stability has been shaken, even if it remains standing; Israel has once again demonstrated its military strength to the region and the world; and it has positioned itself as a leading strategic partner of the United States, not as a dependent or a protégé.

The primary challenge Washington will face in any arrangement with Iran is preventing the regime's recovery. The easing of military pressure alone will provide the conditions for this, certainly if the current economic sanctions are lifted.

The second challenge is preventing restrictions on Israel's freedom of action against Iran or against the proxy organizations it operates. The regime's attempt to incorporate Lebanon into the current ceasefire points in this direction. Israel must insist on preserving its freedom of action against any enemy and any threat,

in every front, including Hezbollah.

Another challenge is the nuclear issue. Its placement third does not reflect its importance. This is not only about removing and destroying the enriched uranium in Iran's possession, but also about preventing enrichment at any level on Iranian soil and establishing effective oversight mechanisms that will permanently prevent the possibility of producing or acquiring nuclear weapons.

After witnessing Iran's performance in the current war, and previously in Operation Roaring Lion and the "Night of Missiles," there is no need to argue for the necessity of restrictions on its missile program. A state that has turned missiles into a thriving industry, for itself and for its proxy organizations, and that deliberately, systematically targets population centers across the region cannot be left with capabilities that enable it to continue doing so.

Another challenge is ending Iran's support for its proxy organizations. This, too, is linked to the resources that Iran will have at its disposal to rebuild its capabilities, and constitutes an additional argument against lifting economic sanctions.

Trump understands that any negotiation with representatives of the regime is not interpreted merely as a concession on the aspiration to topple it, but also as strengthening its legitimacy and potentially paving the way for its reinforcement. Despite his declarations, it is reasonable to assume that the president also believes that as long as this regime exists, it will not change its ambitions or alter its course. On the contrary, the current war will serve as proof for those within it who believe that a military nuclear capability is essential for ensuring its survival, and, as a result, it will spare no effort to achieve that goal.

To preserve the chances of regime change, Iran's severe economic condition must be maintained.

The Iranian protesters, who are still waiting for a green light from the president, may ultimately act on their own when they recognize the opportunity, so long as the regime's distress persists. At the very least, that is something Israel must ensure.

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