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Iran simmers as US talks near and Trump's deadline looms: 'The ground could erupt'
With new nuclear talks set for Thursday in Geneva and US forces massed in the region, Iran faces renewed student unrest and mounting internal pressure as officials insist they 'will not surrender' under American threats

[Lior Ben Ari](#) | 14:03

Oman, which is mediating between the United States and Iran, confirmed Sunday that the next round of talks, the third so far, will be held on Thursday in Geneva. Omani Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi expressed hope the upcoming discussions would provide "a positive push toward another step to conclude the deal."

The talks come amid what appears to be the peak deployment of US military forces ahead of a potential strike on Iran. If no breakthrough is achieved, President Donald Trump may carry out his threats against the ayatollah regime. On Thursday, Trump set a deadline of "10 to 15 days" for an agreement, which would place the apparent cutoff at March 3. However, Trump has not yet decided how to proceed and could order a strike sooner or wait beyond that date.



Ali Khamenei, Donald Trump (Photo: Anonymous/Getty Images, Lev Radin/ Shutterstock) [by Taboola](#)

Ahead of the renewed negotiations, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu convened Israel's security Cabinet Sunday evening after holding a smaller security consultation earlier in the day. In recent weeks, Israeli officials have repeatedly voiced concern that Washington may ultimately compromise, particularly given Iran's refusal to discuss limits on its missile program, viewed in Israel as an immediate threat, and instead settle for a narrower agreement focused solely on Iran's

nuclear program.

Those concerns may be reinforced by Trump's recent statements, which have not mentioned Iran's missile capabilities and instead stress only the need to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Iran has declared it is prepared to accept significant limitations in the nuclear sphere but has rejected US demands for a complete ban on uranium enrichment.

Iranian and American officials have in recent days discussed the possibility of an interim nuclear agreement ahead of a comprehensive deal. US envoy Steve Witkoff, who is leading the American side, was reported by CBS over the weekend to favor separating the nuclear issue from Israel's demand to include missile restrictions in the negotiations.

Witkoff himself expressed surprise overnight that Iran had not capitulated despite US threats and the largest American military buildup in the Middle East since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, including hundreds of aircraft, two aircraft carriers and 12 missile destroyers. In an interview with Fox News, he said Trump was "curious" why Iran had not surrendered despite the show of force.

US envoy Steve Witkoff

(Video: Fox News) [Go to website for video rdb](#)

"I wouldn't use the word frustrated because he knows he has many alternatives," Witkoff said. "But the president is curious why they have not capitulated. Under this kind of pressure, with the amount of naval power we have there, why didn't they say, 'We declare we don't want a weapon, and this is what we're prepared to do'?" [Iran's foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi](#), who is negotiating opposite Witkoff, responded Sunday on X. "Curious to know why we do not capitulate? Because we are IRANIAN," he wrote, alongside an image of Iran in the colors of its national flag.

Seyed Abbas Aragchi @araghchi · 5m
Curious to know why we do not capitulate? Because we are IRANIAN.



(Photo: X)

Earlier, Araqchi told CBS that “a diplomatic solution is still possible” and said prospects for an agreement were good. He added that Tehran continues working on elements to be incorporated into a potential deal, amid a report by Axios that Washington expects an Iranian counterproposal within 48 hours.

“If the United States seeks a solution regarding Iran’s nuclear program, the only path is diplomacy,” Araqchi said. “We have proven that in the past, and I believe there is still a good chance. There is no need for military buildup, and it cannot help. It cannot pressure us.”

Student protests and fears of escalation

The negotiations and Trump’s military threats come as signs emerge of renewed social and political unrest inside the Islamic Republic.

The current tensions follow last month’s mass protests and their violent suppression by regime forces. At the time, Trump warned he would strike Iran if protesters were killed and told demonstrators that “help is on the way.” He has not fulfilled that promise but has continued to threaten military action while demanding an agreement that would at least curb Iran’s nuclear program.

Clashes between protesters and Basij at Iranian universities



Protests in Iran

Reuters reported earlier this month, citing Iranian sources, that regime officials fear renewed unrest, particularly in the event of a US strike, which could threaten the regime’s survival.

Human rights organizations say at least 7,000 Iranians were killed in the crackdown, though the true number is widely believed to be higher. Trump claimed over the weekend that 32,000 were killed.

In recent days, chants against the regime have been heard during 40-day mourning ceremonies for those killed, a significant milestone in Shiite tradition. Since Saturday, new protests have erupted, this time led by students at universities.

Videos from Sharif University and Amir Kabir University in Tehran showed clashes between anti-regime students and members of the Basij militia who arrived to disperse them. Pro-regime students joined the confrontations. According to media outlets affiliated with the regime, one student was injured in the eye by stones thrown by others. Some footage showed objects flying through the air as pro-government demonstrators waved Islamic Republic flags.

Goldie Ghamari, a Canadian human rights activist of Iranian origin, told Ynet she believes the situation will escalate.

“Students are calling for the end of the terrorist Islamic Republic occupying Iran. They are waving the lion and sun flag with the crown,” she said, referring to the pre-1979 emblem associated with the ousted shah.

At Sharif University, she noted, protesters used the institution’s former name, Aryamehr, as it was known before the Islamic Revolution. “Today students called for the original name to return. This is a significant escalation, and we have not seen



anything like it before,” she said.

Sima Shine, a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies and former senior Mossad official, said the unrest shows that “the ground is simmering.”

“Nothing has calmed down in Iran; it has only gotten worse,” she said. “What we are seeing at universities has appeared in recent days, but we also saw it during the 40-day memorials. The universities were closed and classes were held online for a long time. Now they have reopened, so there is an opportunity.”

She cautioned that it remains unclear whether the protests will spread, given lingering fear after the high death toll. “But there is no doubt this once again proves the ground is simmering and the public is very angry at the regime,” she said.

Shine added that one of the regime’s concerns in the event of a US strike is that public unrest could erupt simultaneously. “They would have to deal with something from within and something from outside,” she said.

Regime narrative and Ramadan pressures

Iranian state-affiliated media sought Sunday to portray the campus protests as student initiatives expressing revulsion toward the United States and Israel. The Mehr news agency published images of students burning US and Israeli flags.

Shine rejected that narrative. “The protests have been going on for several days, so we clearly know they are not regime-driven,” she said. “The regime does not want to start killing again. They understand what that would do, especially with Trump threatening them and the fear of a strike. I think for now the regime is trying to contain and calm the situation.”

The renewed unrest coincides with the start of Ramadan, a significant month in Iran and across the Muslim world. While Ramadan includes elements of prayer and fasting that can have a calming effect, it also highlights Iran’s severe economic hardship. The month is marked by daily family meals to break the fast, placing additional financial strain on households already grappling with inflation and crisis.

“It’s both,” Shine said when asked whether Ramadan could inflame tensions. “We cannot truly assess from outside. This is a country of 90 million people. We see anger in areas that are more Kurdish. We have no real way of knowing whether there will be another moment when everything converges and spills into the streets. But the main point is that the ground is very unsettled, and what happened with the number of dead and the expectations surrounding Trump — all of it together is very much simmering and could erupt.”

<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/bkiohc00dwg#autoplay>

Khamenei, planning for possible assassination, appoints Larijani to key role – report NYT details succession plans, says Iran views US strikes as ‘inevitable and imminent’; official says US willing to hold another round of talks Friday if Iran submits proposal soon

By [Tol Staff](#) and [Agencies](#) Today, 5:54 pm



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (left) seen during an address in Tehran on February 17, 2026. (Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader via AP); Iranian Secretary of Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani seen in Beirut, Lebanon, August 13, 2025. (Lebanese Parliament / AFP)

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has put in place detailed plans for his succession and emergency chains of command should he, or other top leaders, be killed in potential US or Israeli strikes, The New York Times reported Sunday, also detailing how he elevated longtime loyalist Ali Larijani to manage the crisis.

The United States and Iran last week resumed Oman-mediated talks in Geneva aimed at potentially reaching an agreement, after Washington dispatched two aircraft carriers, many jets and a massive amount of weaponry to the region to back up its warnings.

Also Sunday, senior US officials told the Axios news site that America is willing to send negotiators for further talks with Iran in Geneva this Friday, if Tehran presents a new draft proposal for a nuclear deal within 48 hours.

Officials were cited as saying that this is likely the last chance for diplomatic resolution before Washington launches a major military operation.

According to the [New York Times](#) report, at the height of nationwide protests last month and amid rising US threats of military action, Khamenei tapped Larijani — a former Revolutionary Guards commander and veteran politician — to a central governing role, effectively placing him at the helm of state affairs and undermining the powers of President Masoud Pezeshkian.

Citing interviews with senior Iranian officials, members of the Revolutionary Guards and former diplomats, the Times report said that Larijani has since overseen the recent brutal crackdown on protests, managed sensitive nuclear diplomacy with Washington, and coordinated with allies and neighbors including Russia, Qatar and Oman.



In this photo released by state-run Oman News Agency, Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, left, shakes hands with Iran's Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani during their meeting in Muscat, Oman, February 10, 2026. (State-run Oman News Agency via AP)

He was also said to be leading wartime planning as Iran braces for possible US strikes. The report said that Iran was operating on the assumption that US strikes were “inevitable and imminent.” As such, Iranian forces were on the highest level of alert and prepared to resist. Iran has been placing its missiles near the Iraqi border, where they can target Israel, and along the Persian Gulf, where they threaten US military bases in the region. Iran has also repeatedly conducted missile tests and drills in the key Hormuz Straights as it gears up for war.

Internal control

The report also detailed the preparations Iran was making to ensure there was no internal loss of control in the event of war.

The officials said that if hostilities break out, special forces units of the police, intelligence agents and battalions of the plainclothes Basij militia, a subsidiary of the Guards, will deploy across cities, setting up checkpoints to stop protests and possibly identify those working for foreign agencies.

On Sunday, the opposition outlet Iran International reported that Iranian students were holding fresh waves of nationwide anti-regime rallies, commemorating those killed in recent protests and voicing opposition to the Islamic Republic.

According to the report, demonstrations have taken place at the University of Tehran, Sharif University of Technology, Shahid Beheshti University, Ferdowsi University, Khajeh Nasir University, and the University of Art.

Iran International, a media outlet based outside the country and branded a “terrorist” organization by Tehran, shared a video on social media of students holding up the flag at Sharif University, as well as videos of rallies at other institutions of higher learning.

A video geolocated by AFP of what appeared to be the same demonstration at Sharif University showed a large crowd around the flag-waving students chanting “long live the shah” and other anti-government slogans.

Members of the Basij paramilitary force have reportedly entered some campuses in an effort to identify protesters.

Others staged competing pro-regime protests as students rallied on Saturday at the start of the new university semester to mark the 40th day since the deaths at the peak of the protests on January 8 and 9, in line with Shiite mourning tradition.

Lessons from 12-day war

Much of Khamenei’s preparations come as a result of the lessons learned by Iran in the wake of the 12-day war fought with Israel in June, when Israeli strikes killed much of the Iranian military leadership in the opening hours of the conflict, and amid fears that the Americans will try and kill the supreme leader.



As such, Khamenei has taken a series of steps to try and ensure the continuity of the regime and of the military leadership, including naming four layers of succession for each of the military command and government roles that he personally appoints.

Khamenei also instructed all people in leadership roles to name up to four replacements, the Times report said.

This handout picture provided by the Iranian foreign ministry shows Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi mourning next to the coffin of Iranian Revolutionary

Guards commander Hossein Salami during a state funeral procession in the capital Tehran on June 28, 2025. (Iranian Foreign Ministry / AFP)

He has also delegated responsibilities to a close inner circle that could make decisions in the event that he is out of contact or killed, chief among them Larijani.

Other senior leaders mentioned include top military adviser and former commander-in-chief of the Guards, Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi; Brig. Gen. Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, a former Guards commander and current speaker of parliament; and Khamenei's chief of staff, the cleric Ali Asghar Hejazi.

The Times said Ghalibaf has been designated Khamenei's de facto deputy to command the armed forces during war.

The report said Khamenei had identified three potential successors while he was in hiding during the war with Israel, but they have not been publicly named.

The report noted that while Larijani would be tasked with the de facto running of the country, he would not be considered a successor for the role of supreme leader, as he is not a senior Shiite cleric.



An Iranian woman walks past a mural of an Iranian flag in Tehran on February 22, 2026. (Photo by ATTA KENARE / AFP)

Larijani in charge

Nevertheless, analysts said that Khamenei "fully trusts" Larijani to manage the crisis and lead should Khamenei be killed.

"The supreme leader fully trusts Larijani. He believes Larijani is the man for this sensitive juncture because of his political track record, sharp mind and knowledge," Nasser Imani, a conservative analyst close to the

government, told the Times. "He relies on him for reports on the situation and pragmatic advice. Larijani's role will be very pronounced during war."

The report highlighted how Larijani's ascension has come at the expense of Pezeshkian, detailing how the president had to request that Larijani lift the internet blockade and grant permission to Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi to establish contact with US President Donald Trump's chief negotiator, Steve Witkoff.

Last chance talks

Witkoff and fellow negotiator Jared Kushner have been waiting for a detailed offer from Tehran since their last talks with Araghchi on Tuesday.

A senior US official told Azios that the two Americans plan to be in Geneva on February 27 if the Iranians send their proposal early this week.

"If Iran gives a draft proposal, the US is ready to meet in Geneva on Friday in order to start detailed negotiations to see if we can get a nuclear deal," the official said.

The official also said that the Trump administration and Iran could also discuss the possibility of an interim agreement before a full nuclear deal is agreed.

However, officials warned this could be the last chance for a deal.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/khamenei-planning-for-possible-assassination-appoints-larijani-to-key-role-report/>

Solution to Iran crisis is regime change, ousting Khamenei, Saudi royal family source tells N12

A Saudi royal family source told N12 that the solution for Iran is no longer a limited military strike but a fundamental regime change, starting with the ousting of Supreme Leader Khamenei.



By JAMES GENN FEBRUARY 22, 2026 22:35 Updated: FEBRUARY 22, 2026 22:52

A crowd gathers for a mass funeral of protesters killed by the Iranian regime's violent clampdown of anti-regime protesters, in Tehran, January 14, 2026; illustrative. (photo credit: Stringer/Getty Images)

The solution for Iran is no longer a limited military move, but a large, fundamental change, including the ousting of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a Saudi royal family source told N12 News on Sunday.

Khamenei and the regime "must be eliminated one by one," and "the only solution is to change the [regime in Iran](#) in one way or another," the source said.

"If the regime in Iran is overthrown, a strong government must rise that knows how to concentrate power in a strong and secure way, and not repeat the model of a weak technocratic government such as exists in Iraq," the source added.

"After the [anti-regime Iranian] [protesters](#) lost faith in [US President Donald] Trump, the solution is to eliminate the top leadership one by one, starting with Khamenei, so that there will be no leaders left, and then hold elections," they continued.

Crown Prince Reza "[Pahlavi](#) is apparently not acceptable to the majority of the public inside Iran," the source said.



Anti-regime protesters hold banners in support of Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, denouncing the Islamic Regime as murderers, during a protest on the sidelines of US-Iran nuclear talks, Geneva, Switzerland, February 17, 2026; illustrative. (credit: Sedat Suna/Getty Images)

There is a feeling of missed opportunity on the streets of Iran, which has stemmed from not only the intense repression by the Islamic Regime, but also the lack of external support, according to the source.

"Trump missed the opportunity to eliminate the heads of the regime's security apparatus who suppressed the past protests, and by doing so, he lost the trust of the protesters," the source said.

Saudi royal source discusses US, Israel's strategic mistake

This was "the strategic mistake of the US and Israel - the lack of understanding of the social dimension inside Iran and the

failure to build an alternative to the regime," the source added.

"If Trump wants to fulfil his promise to protect the protesters - how will he do that if he doesn't eliminate those who killed them? A surgical action is required to hit essential infrastructure, alongside the security commanders who acted against protesters," the source stated.

"The protests currently happening in Iran are economic in motivation and limited in nature. If pressure increases, they will grow, but will also be suppressed. They are not as large as the media presents," the source believes.

"We see the regime as a regional threat. If Iran does not produce nuclear weapons within five years, it will do so afterwards," they continued.

Iran builds 'target bank' of US, allies, facilities, infrastructure in region - report

N12 noted that an ultra-conservative Iranian news outlet, Vatan-e-Emrooz (Homeland Today), presented a list of US targets and Iran's plan for escalation, including a "target bank" that includes US bases, economic infrastructure, and other Middle East countries, including Jordan.

An Iranian response will be "rapid and coordinated," according to the local outlet cited by N12. It would be executed in multiple arenas simultaneously, aiming to create a situation where the confrontation will rapidly expand. This expansion will include Iran's proxy axis involvement, damage to shipping routes, and threats to oil and energy facilities, according to the report. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-887557>

When could Trump decide to strike Iran? These are the four most likely options - analysis
US President Trump is struggling with what may be the largest decision of his presidency, amid vast domestic and global pressures and counter-pressures pushing him in opposite directions.

By **YONAH JEREMY BOB** *FEBRUARY 22, 2026 20:53* *Updated: FEBRUARY 22, 2026 22:52*



Illustrative image of US President Donald Trump and Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (photo credit: LIGHTSPRING/SHUTTERSTOCK, Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader/WANA (West Asia News Agency) via REUTERS, REUTERS/BRENDAN MCDERMID)

Given that no analyst on the planet thought the drama with Iran would still be ongoing in February, let alone almost March, there are four generally expected scenarios for when the next Iran war might start if no deal is struck.

Option number one

United States President Donald Trump might attack Iran between Sunday and Thursday.

This would occur **if Trump had already decided to attack Tehran but had waited for certain pieces to fall into place militarily, as well as for a clear enough sign that negotiations with the Islamic Republic would not yield sufficient fruit for him to back down.**

It could also occur on **Thursday if Iran makes an offer that day that Trump immediately rejects.** This seems less likely than option number two, if for no other reason than US officials have said there will be a US-Iran [meeting on Thursday](#), and the chances are that Trump would want some time to survey the latest Iranian offer.



An Iranian newspaper with a cover photo of U.S. President Donald Trump, in Tehran, Iran, February 17, 2026. (credit: MAJID ASGARIPOUR/WANA/REUTERS)

Option number two

Trump might attack Iran around the beginning or middle of next week.

This is **the most likely option.** Last week, he gave a **two-week deadline to the Islamic Republic** to reach an agreement with him, after which he said he would attack. Since then, that deadline has waxed or waned in his statements, and there was another US official who noted that Trump is rarely “scientific” about his deadlines, using them often more as a guiding principle to get to where he wants to arrive when he wants to get there.

If Trump decides to give Iran Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei the full two weeks and takes some time to digest a new offer from Tehran this coming Thursday, but ultimately decides it is insufficient, then he would

attack around then.

Option number three

The American military could attack almost immediately after March 19, post-Ramadan.

The Muslim month of Ramadan started last week and finishes on March 19. Trump may not want to start a regional war during Islam’s holiest month. Starting a war then could harm the readiness of Sunni Muslim allies in the region for the expected counterstrike by Khamenei against them. In addition, Trump’s thoughts are never far from political consequences.

Attacking during Ramadan could play into Khamenei’s narratives of a foreign force trying to invade the Middle East and move the focus away from the regime’s crimes against its own people as it slaughtered them in massive numbers starting in January.

If Iranians are considering splitting from the regime, attacking during Ramadan could complicate their thinking. Therefore, waiting until after Ramadan has some real logic to it.

However, option number two seems slightly more likely because the current stand-off has already dragged on since late December, the costs of maintaining so many American forces in the region are escalating, and as much as Trump may want to weigh his options and have Ramadan out of the way as a factor, his instinct to make relatively quick decisive determinations will at some point probably reassert itself over what has been an uncharacteristically long and deliberative decision-making process for the US president.

Option number four

The least likely scenario: Washington could attack in the more distant future.

This is the least likely of the four options because it is costing America billions of dollars to keep two aircraft carriers, over a dozen destroyer warships, and hundreds of other aircraft in the Middle East and on alert to start a giant war at any moment.

Some of these military elements arrived in the region in early January, some in mid-January, and the last elements will arrive in the coming days.

Virtually no analysts believe Trump will keep such a large “armada” in place past mid-March without using it to go to war or disbanding it upon reaching a deal. But points to keep in mind are as follows:

- Every single analyst has been wrong to date about the predictions that Trump would have attacked or reached a deal long before now.
- Iran is extremely skilled at drawing out negotiations.
- Trump is struggling over possibly the largest decision of his presidency, with vast domestic and global pressures and counter-pressures pushing him in opposite directions.

All of these issues mean that Trump could get stuck in a holding pattern, continuing to hope that some clearer and better solution will present itself rather than a full war or a deal that will be perceived as weak.

Originally, Israeli analysts were split about whether Khamenei would order an attack on Israel in response to a US strike. Some believed that he would order a counterattack no matter what, while others thought that if Jerusalem were clear about staying out of the fray, the Islamic Republic might only counterattack against US bases and ships in the region.

As time has drawn on, Israeli leaders have made more noise about joining an American-led strike on the regime. This has also increased the probability that Tehran will attack Israel, either in response or in anticipation of expected IDF involvement.

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/WhctKLbvVZHqZwpwGZWsJRmzCjCqwHRxKMMWXDRhqWRjVNlcDhdqWhkSZRxGmNBclLxbzKQ>

'This isn't a token strike,' analysts say as US prepares for a major confrontation with Iran

US military buildup in the Middle East signals a possible strike on Iran's regime, with analysts suggesting it could lead to regime collapse within weeks.

By GABRIEL COLODRO/THE MEDIA LINE FEBRUARY 22, 2026 21:14 Updated: FEBRUARY 22, 2026 21:19



The world's largest aircraft carrier, the U.S. Navy nuclear-powered Ford-class aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) arrives in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, December 1, 2025. (photo credit: Seaman Abigail Reyes/U.S. Navy/Handout via REUTERS)

“As I understand it, this is the biggest military buildup in the Middle East since 2003,” Col. Richard Kemp, a former British Army commander, told The Media Line. He paused on the comparison. The amount of force now in place, he said, is greater than what was visible during the 12-day war in June 2025. “It’s very significant military power,” he added.

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For weeks, the word “imminent” has circulated in Washington and across the region. But timelines remain unclear. It could unfold quickly. It could take longer. Kemp’s focus was less on rhetoric and more on the military posture taking shape around Iran.

“I think it’s likely there will be a military strike, but I don’t think you’d say it’s inevitable,” he said. “I think it’s very likely.”

The 2003 comparison is not just a line for emphasis. The footprint on the ground and at sea has grown noticeably in recent weeks.

There are now four American carrier strike groups either in the wider Middle East or moving toward it. That alone changes the equation. In the surrounding waters, roughly a dozen guided-missile destroyers are spread out, some near the Strait of Hormuz, others operating closer to the Red Sea.



Col. (ret.) Richard Kemp, former commander of British Forces in Afghanistan. (credit: MARC ISRAEL SELLEM)

The United States already had a large presence in the region. More than 40,000 personnel are stationed across military bases and naval assets. With the arrival of the most recent carrier group, several thousand more service members are being added to that total.

The air posture has shifted as well. Long-range B-52 bombers and B-2

stealth aircraft have been placed on higher readiness. Additional fighter jets, including F-16s, F-22s, and F-35s, have been moved forward. At Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, alert levels have been raised. The adjustments are not only about striking capacity. They also reflect concern over what might follow.

Taken together, the concentration is difficult to dismiss as routine.

The 12-day war in June 2025, which began on June 13, had a defined military purpose. Kemp described that round as focused primarily on Iran's ballistic missiles and on its nuclear program. Israel led the bulk of that campaign, striking air defenses and missile-related targets. The United States joined toward the end. The fighting was intense but limited in scope. It was not framed as an effort to dismantle the regime itself.

Trump would likely prefer to force Tehran into concessions

Kemp commented that [President Donald Trump](#) would likely prefer to force Tehran into concessions without resorting to open war. "I think he would prefer Iran to buckle under the military pressure that's been building up around them and make significant concessions, particularly on the nuclear program, but also on ballistic missiles and potentially on sponsoring terrorist proxies in the region as well," he said. "He would like to be able to stand up and say, 'I have resolved this through negotiations rather than through military force.'"

But Kemp expressed doubt that Iran would offer concessions that are both meaningful and durable. "Nothing that Iran agrees to or says can be trusted," he said. "They'll just use it as a tactic to buy time for themselves."

If diplomacy fails, the forces now deployed suggest preparation for something more than a limited strike designed to send a message. Kemp explained that the buildup must be understood in two layers. One layer concerns offensive capability. The other pertains to the protection of American personnel and regional allies.

"One is what you need to actually damage Iran, bring down the regime, destroy the key components in Iran that are used offensively against other countries in the Middle East, of course, Israel particularly," he said. "The second element is defensive."

[American forces stationed across the Gulf](#), including in Qatar, would be exposed to Iranian missiles and allied militias in the event of military action. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates would have to consider their own vulnerability. Israel would almost certainly be a primary target of retaliation. Kemp noted that defending "such a wide range of targets" requires substantial resources, not only aircraft and ships but also layered missile defenses and regional coordination.

Kemp also suggested the possibility of preemptive or parallel action against Iranian proxies. Hezbollah in Lebanon has been significantly weakened since last year, he said, but it still retains the ability to launch missiles into Israel. The Houthis in Yemen remain capable of long-range attacks. "They would have to be dealt with either before a US strike in Iran, or at the same time," he said. "We're talking about a much more intensive attack."

The question of duration is central. Would a new confrontation resemble the compressed timeline of June 2025, or would it evolve into something longer?

"I would say much longer than a couple of days," Kemp said. "It could run into weeks. It could well be a fairly long, sustained bombing campaign against Iran."

He stressed that planners would assess results continuously. Objectives would be defined in advance, but the campaign's length would depend on whether those objectives were being met. "They won't probably know now how long it's going to last," he said. "It depends on the effect."

Brig. Gen. Amir Avivi, founder of the Israel Defense and Security Forum, framed the moment in even starker terms. He told The Media Line strategic debate has already moved beyond nuclear facilities.

"The objective of the 12-day war was to destroy their nuclear capability and stop the rapid buildup with ballistic missiles," Avivi said. "Now we are talking about taking down the regime. It is something completely different."

In his view, Tehran misread the aftermath of June 2025. Rather than de-escalating, Avivi said, Iran continued to channel resources into missile development and into sustaining its regional network of proxies, despite domestic hardship. "There is no way to stop this threat and the instability in the Middle East without dismantling this regime," he said.

Avivi suggested that under certain conditions, including accurate intelligence and rapid targeting of command structures, the regime could be brought down within weeks. "I think in two weeks it could be done," he said, while acknowledging that much depends on internal dynamics inside Iran.

He argued that the real variable is not only missiles or aircraft, but the public itself. Iran is under economic strain, he said, and dissatisfaction has not disappeared. Should outside military action align with renewed unrest,

the regime would be confronting pressure internally as well as externally.

Kemp, while more cautious, also indicated that leadership targets would likely be central if the objective extends to regime collapse. “If the objective is to topple the regime, then one of the primary targets has to be the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps],” he said.

He did not rule out unconventional elements. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we see troops on the ground,” Kemp said. “I don’t mean large scale. I’m talking about special forces commandos, maybe, to directly take out the Ayatollah and some of the other leadership. I don’t think we should exclude the possibility of that happening, as well as the air campaign.”

Boots on the ground

Avivi rejected the idea that a regime-focused campaign would necessarily require large foreign ground forces. If there are “boots on the ground,” he said, they would not belong to American or Israeli troops.

“The boots on the ground are the Iranian people,” he said.

In his view, sustained military pressure from the outside could intersect with growing frustration inside the country. Economic hardship, infrastructure shortages, and political repression have eroded confidence in the leadership, he argued. If the regime’s military backbone weakens, domestic unrest could do the rest.

“You need to eliminate the leadership,” he said. “You need to break their military capability completely.”

Asked about proxy escalation, Avivi said the likelihood is “very high” if Hezbollah, the Houthis, and other aligned groups interpret the confrontation as existential. He added that he had spoken recently with senior Israeli military leadership and described a sense of readiness and alertness. “There is no 100%,” he said, acknowledging that ballistic missiles would likely strike Israel and present serious challenges.

The difference from June 13, 2025, is therefore not only the scale of American hardware now visible in the region. It is also the objective being articulated by some of those assessing the situation.

“The primary target,” Kemp said, “is going to be the leadership and the effort to try and bring the regime down.”

Whether the objective can be achieved primarily from the air, requires limited ground operations, or results in order or prolonged instability remains uncertain. What appears less uncertain, in their assessment, is that the current posture is not designed for symbolism.

“It’s needed in order to sufficiently damage the regime,” Kemp said. “Not a token strike.”

<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-887549>

IDF escalates strikes on Hezbollah as fears grow of Iran-directed assault on Israel Army steps up efforts to degrade terror group’s missile capabilities, no longer assessing proxy will stay out of fight should US strike Tehran, amid heavy Iranian pressure and \$1 billion for rehab

By [Emanuel Fabian](#)

Today, 3:13 pm



A bulldozer clears debris near heavily damaged buildings in the village of Bednayel in Lebanon's eastern Bekaa Valley region on February 21, 2026, following Israeli strikes. (AFP)

The Israeli military in recent weeks has stepped up airstrikes against Hezbollah in Lebanon, with assessments indicating that the Iran-backed terror group may join Tehran in a new conflict against Israel.

Strikes carried out by the Israeli Air Force on Friday night targeted three Hezbollah command centers belonging to the terror group’s missile force in eastern Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley, killing eight terror operatives,

including a top commander.

The Israel Defense Forces said in a statement that Hezbollah’s missile force had recently been working to improve its ability to launch rockets at Israel.

The strikes, according to military sources, were intended to degrade Hezbollah’s rocket and missile capabilities in case the group should try to resume hostilities.

With tensions between Washington and Tehran threatening to bring war back to the region, the military has identified preparations by Hezbollah — particularly by its rocket and missile forces — to strike Israel if the US military attacks Iran, the sources said.

According to Israeli assessments, Iran has recently been pressuring Hezbollah to fight alongside it in the event of a war with Israel. During the 12-day war with Iran in June, Hezbollah secretary general Naim Qassem received several requests — not orders — from Iran to join the conflict, but declined, according to IDF officials.



Flames and smoke rise from a building that was hit by an Israeli airstrike in Ain Qana, southern Lebanon, February 2, 2026. (AP Photo/Mohammed Zaatari)

In the event of a conflict between the US and Iran, Tehran can be expected to activate its proxy forces arrayed around the region against Israel, including Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthis and militias in Iraq, according to the recent Israeli assessments. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps would also launch attacks.

Hezbollah is widely considered to be Iran's most prized proxy, built up over decades as a strategic deterrent for Tehran situated on Israel's northern border, and ties between the terror group and the

Islamic Republic are thought to go deeper than the handsome funding Iran provides.

The refusal in June showed that Hezbollah had managed to carve out some measure of independence and the military previously assessed that Hezbollah was less likely to act against Israel, instead being focused on trying to restore its capabilities following the 2024 war.

However, with Iranian pressure and around a billion dollars in funding handed over in the past year, the Israeli defense establishment now assesses that Hezbollah could join Iran in a new conflict against Israel.

There are also signs that Tehran is now exerting greater control over its proxy. On Saturday, Saudi outlet Al-Arabiya reported that IRGC officers have effectively taken charge of Hezbollah in anticipation of a war with the US and Israel.

The IRGC officers, some of whom recently arrived in Lebanon from Iran, were tasked with rebuilding Hezbollah's military capabilities, Al-Arabiya said, citing sources close to Hezbollah.



Mourners carry the coffins of three Hezbollah terror operatives killed in Israeli strikes during their funeral procession in the village of Nabi Sheet in eastern Lebanon, February 21, 2026. (AP Photo/Bilal Hussein)

The Iranian officers have also been personally briefing Hezbollah operatives across Lebanon, said the unnamed sources cited by Al-Arabiya.

They added that IRGC officers were meeting with members of Hezbollah's missile unit at a site in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley that was bombed by Israel on Friday.

Israel has consistently targeted what it says are Hezbollah attempts to rebuild its force following a November 2024 ceasefire that ended a year of conflict between Israel and the terror group.

Such strikes have been carried out on a near-daily basis, with the IDF saying it has killed over 400 Hezbollah operatives and members of allied terror groups in that time. **An excavator clears rubble of buildings destroyed in IDF airstrikes in the village of Ali al-Nahri in the center of Lebanon's eastern Beqaa Valley region on February 21, 2026. (AFP)**

However, Friday night's strike against the Hezbollah missile force operatives was among the deadliest since the start of the ceasefire.

The IDF said the strike "eliminated a large number of operatives belonging to the missile array of the Hezbollah terror



organization,” and the terror group confirmed the deaths of eight operatives, including a senior officer.

Hezbollah identified one of the operatives, Hussein Mohammed Yaghi, as a “commander,” indicating he was a senior official in the terror group. Hezbollah rarely refers to its operatives slain in Israeli strikes as commanders, saving the designation only for a handful of senior officers in the terror group killed by the IDF.

There has been no indication from Iran or Hezbollah that any of those killed were members of the IRGC.

Friday’s strike comes after a series of other Israeli attacks in Lebanon in recent weeks, including raids on [weapon depots, missile launchers, and other military sites](#) belonging to the terror group on Thursday, on [February 15](#), and on [February 5](#); and the elimination of at least eight other [Hezbollah operatives](#), two [Palestinian Islamic Jihad](#) operatives and two Hamas members since the start of the month.



The Iran-backed group is considered by the IDF to have been heavily degraded, mostly as a result of the two months of open warfare between September and November 2024, but also from the near-daily Israeli strikes after the ceasefire took effect.

According to Israel, 70-80% of the group’s rocket fire capabilities have been destroyed.

Smoke rises from the site of an Israeli airstrike that struck the hillsides near the southern Lebanese village of Al-Katrani on January 11, 2026. (Rabih DAHER / AFP)

However, the terror group is still believed by the military to be a potent force, with its rocket and missile capabilities especially concerning.

The IDF has estimated that Hezbollah still possesses several thousand rockets — the vast majority of them short-range projectiles like mortars. Most of Hezbollah’s weapons are located in areas north of the Litani River, the army says, after the military destroyed the terror group’s infrastructure closer to the border, meaning they are too far away to threaten Israel.

But the group still has several hundred medium- and long-range missiles that can reach deep into Israel, according to the military.

Therefore, the IDF has been operating to thwart any attempt by Hezbollah to build up its capabilities in all areas of Lebanon, not just in the south.



This handout image released and taken by David Parody on February 20, 2026, shows the US aircraft carrier USS Gerald Ford heading through the Strait of Gibraltar as seen from Gibraltar. (David PARODY / DM Parody / AFP)

Since January, the IDF has been on high alert and has carried out various preparations over concerns that Tehran or its proxies could attack in response to US military strikes on Iran, which US President Donald Trump has threatened to carry out.

Preparations have largely focused on the military’s air defense array, attack plans, intelligence, and the Home Front Command, according to the IDF.

In recent weeks, Trump has amassed military forces in the region and repeatedly threatened to use them against Iran, first over the Islamic Republic’s brutal crackdown on anti-regime protesters last month and more recently over its nuclear program.

Israeli leaders have said the country will launch strikes on Iran should it be targeted by Iran in response to American actions.

IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Eyal Zamir on Thursday said the military’s “eyes are open in every direction, and our finger is tighter on the trigger than ever.” <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-escalates-strikes-on-hezbollah-as-fears-grow-of-iran-directed-assault-on-israel/>

Israel's health services prepare for war amid Iran tensions

Health funds have developed a comprehensive plan to adapt medical services during emergencies, focusing on clinics with proper shelter or proximity to protected areas. By [DR. ITAY GAL](#) FEBRUARY 22, 2026 22:10



Meuhedet Health Fund (photo credit: KOBİ GIDEON/FLASH90)

Amid escalating tensions with Iran in the past few weeks, Israel's health services have begun preparing for war by taking proactive measures to ensure continuity of care during potential missile strikes. Health funds have developed a comprehensive plan to adapt medical services during emergencies, focusing on clinics with proper shelter or proximity to protected areas. Clinics lacking protection will close under the plan, with patients redirected to nearby secure facilities.

[Telehealth services](#) will also be expanded to facilitate remote care, particularly for vulnerable populations such as the elderly and those with chronic illnesses. Telemedicine consultations, which are typically used for routine visits, will now be the primary mode of care if citizens are required to stay at home.

A main challenge will involve patients who rely on electrical equipment, such as ventilators, heart failure pumps, and oxygen generators, the report noted, adding that around 2,400 complex ventilated patients in Israel have been provided with personal generators capable of supplying power for up to 72 hours.

In the event of power outages caused by a potential war, these patients will be contacted to ensure they have access to charging stations or alternative power sources.

In addition, the health system has mapped patients who rely on electrical equipment and has provided backup generators for [ventilated patients](#).

Regional centers have been established to ensure patients can access essential equipment. Health services are also preparing for evacuations, coordinating with local authorities to transfer residents to hotels or reception centers, and setting up temporary medical facilities in high-evacuation areas such as the Dead Sea.



A view shows an Aventa-M medical ventilator next to a bed inside a pavilion of Crocus Expo exhibition centre, turned into a temporary hospital amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, on the outskirts of Moscow, Russia May 11, 2020 (credit: REUTERS)

These preparations follow lessons from the 2025 missile strike on Soroka Medical Center, prompting updated emergency protocols and improved systems across hospitals.

Any movement to underground facilities will occur only under explicit instructions

Preparations are underway and will be divided into three phases, Head of the Emergency Preparedness Division at [Clalit Health Services](#),

Dr. Eran Metz, told *Maariv*.

First, each clinic's protection level has been assessed. Clinics that do not meet the required protection standards will close during emergencies. Second, a map of alternative clinics will be created to ensure patients know where to go if their regular clinic is closed. Most patients will be directed to clinics within the same city or nearby settlements. The third phase will involve using alternative buildings for clinics that lack permanent protection, with improvements to enable safer operations.

Hospitals review backup systems to ensure preparedness

In addition to Soroka, Rambam Hospital in Haifa, which has operated an underground emergency hospital for years, has held internal discussions on bed distribution and the activation of support systems. Hospitals in northern and central Israel have also reviewed their electrical, water, and oxygen backup systems to ensure they can function in enclosed conditions during a crisis.

Any movement to underground facilities will occur only under explicit instructions from the Home Front Command and the Health Ministry's emergency operations center, based on current security assessments.

Health officials have stressed that, for now, the public is encouraged to continue seeking medical treatment as usual, including scheduled surgeries, check-ups, and hospitalizations. There have been no widespread cancellations of medical services, and the healthcare system continues to operate fully while maintaining readiness for any emergency scenario. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-887467>

Russia will respond if Estonia hosts NATO nukes – Kremlin

Moscow is not threatening the Baltic state, but will aim its nuclear weapons at it if NATO nukes are deployed there, Dmitry Peskov has said

22 Feb, 2026 20:01



FILE PHOTO. © Sputnik / Natalya Seliverstova

Russia will aim its nuclear weapons at Estonia if NATO nukes are deployed there, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said, after the Baltic nation's foreign minister stated that Tallinn would not be opposed to hosting nuclear weapons.

European members of the US-led bloc have discussed expanding their nuclear deterrence as part of a massive military buildup, which has been justified by what Western officials describe as the 'Russian threat' – a claim that Moscow has dismissed as “nonsense.”

“We do not threaten Estonia, or any other European country,” Peskov told journalist Pavel Zarubin on Sunday. “But if nuclear weapons are deployed on Estonian territory and are aimed at [Russia], then our nuclear weapons will be aimed at Estonian territory,” he warned, adding that Tallinn “should have a solid understanding of it.”

Earlier this week, Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna said Estonia is not against the idea of hosting NATO nuclear weapons, adding that the country will be ready if the bloc decides to deploy them there.

Estonia has been one of Ukraine's top supporters and has pushed for increased defense spending in Europe, citing the supposed threat of a Russian attack. Last year, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova called Estonia “one of the most hostile countries,” and accused it of “spreading myths and falsehoods” about Russia.

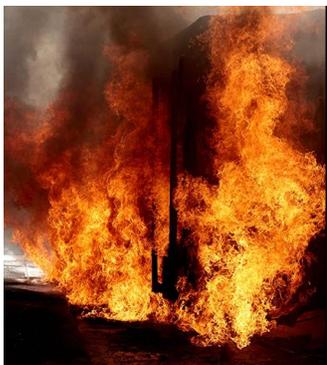
Estonia is not the first European NATO member to express a desire to acquire nuclear weapons one way or the other. Earlier this month, Polish President Karol Nawrocki suggested that Poland should develop its own nuclear weapons program.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz told the Munich Security Conference in mid-February that he had discussed EU-level nuclear deterrence with French President Emmanuel Macron. Earlier, a senior MP from his party said Berlin should have access to French and British nuclear weapons. <https://www.rt.com/russia/632908-russia-estonia-nato-nuclear-weapons/>

Mexico kills leader of its largest cartel in military raid as riots erupt, US hails ‘great development’

Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, head of the Jalisco New Generation cartel, dies after a shootout in western Mexico; supporters torch vehicles and block highways as Washington says US intelligence aided the operation

[News Agencies](#)|14:23



Mexico killed one of the world's most wanted drug traffickers, Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, known as “El Mencho,” in a military operation in the western state of Jalisco, triggering violent unrest by cartel supporters across several regions.

Oseguera, 59, a former police officer who led the powerful Jalisco New Generation cartel, was fatally wounded during a shootout in the town of Tapalpa, Mexican authorities said. Four suspected cartel members were killed in the exchange of fire.

Riots in Jalisco, Mexico, after killing of cartel leader (Photo: Ulises Ruiz / AFP)by [Taboola](#)

“El Mencho” and two other cartel members were seriously wounded and airlifted to Mexico City. Oseguera died of his injuries during the flight, officials said. Three soldiers were wounded and taken to a hospital in the capital.

The United States had previously offered a \$15 million reward for information leading to Oseguera's capture. He was accused of trafficking massive quantities of cocaine, fentanyl and methamphetamine across the southern US border.

Mexico's embassy in Washington said US intelligence contributed to the success of the operation.

The killing immediately sparked chaos in areas under the cartel's influence. Mexican media published images of burning vehicles and roadblocks set up by rioters in the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Guanajuato, Michoacan and Tamaulipas.



Riots in Jalisco (Photo: Ulises Ruiz / AFP)

Heavy smoke was reported over the tourist city of Puerto Vallarta in Jalisco. There were also reports of gunfire by cartel supporters at Guadalajara International Airport.

Jalisco Gov. Pablo Lemus Navarro urged the state's roughly 8 million residents to remain at home "until the situation is back under control." Public transportation services were suspended, and residents were advised to avoid highways due to "violent incidents" that spread to at least five areas in the state.

The operation comes amid tensions between Mexico and US President Donald Trump's administration over Mexican drug cartels and cross-border smuggling, and ahead of the upcoming World Cup tournament that Mexico will co-host this summer with the United States and Canada.

US Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau called Oseguera's killing "a great development for Mexico, the US, Latin America, and the world. The good guys are stronger than the bad guys." In a post on X, Landau added that he was watching the scenes of violence from Mexico "with great sadness and concern."

<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/bjtomydze>

Crazy person': Would-be assassin shot dead at Trump's Florida home now identified as Austin Tucker Martin

By [Joe Kovacs](#)

February 22, 2026



Austin Tucker Martin

PALM BEACH, Florida – The would-be assassin [shot dead by law enforcement](#) early Sunday at President's Donald Trump's home in Palm Beach, Florida, has now been identified as 21-year-old Austin Tucker Martin from Cameron, North Carolina.

The Associated Press [reports](#): "He had been reported missing by his family a few days ago, and investigators believe he headed south and picked up the shotgun along the way."

Tucker "Austin" Martin was reported missing by his family in Carthage, NC this morning. The same name has been dropped as the deceased shooter at Mar-a-Lago. pic.twitter.com/x5FXWNAxYL

— Kim "Katie" USA (@KimKatieUSA) [February 22, 2026](#)

The box for the gun was recovered in his vehicle, said Secret Service spokesman Anthony Guglielmi said.

"The man drove through the north gate of Mar-a-Lago as another vehicle was exiting and was confronted by Secret Service agents," Guglielmi added, [according](#) to AP.

"The agents confronted the armed man, and he was fatally shot. Investigators are working to compile a psychological profile and a motive is still under investigation."

MISSING PERSON
Tucker Austin Martin



Was last heard from on Feb 21st at 7:51pm!
Drives a 2013 Silver Volkswagen Tiguan
Approx 6 foot tall and lives in the Carthage NC area

If you have seen or know his whereabouts please call

 **Carthage Police**
910-947-2231

BREAKING: Man IDENTIFIED as 21-year-old, Austin Tucker Martin, who breached the secure perimeter of Mar-a-Lago and attempted to kill President Trump.

Tucker was reported missing by his parents and was LAST SEEN on February 21st at 7:51 pm
pic.twitter.com/AZNVrvMsr3

— The Patriot Oasis™ (@ThePatriotOasis) [February 22, 2026](#)

In North Carolina, the Moore County Sheriff's Office posted a [statement](#) on Facebook about the intruder, indicating: "The Moore County Sheriff's Office confirms that on February 22, 2026, at approximately 1:38 a.m., a relative of 21-year-old Austin Tucker Martin approached a deputy at a local business and reported him missing. He was subsequently entered into a national missing person database.

"Following that report, federal authorities informed the Sheriff's Office that they are conducting an active investigation in Florida involving Martin. At their request, the missing person case information has been turned over to federal investigators. The Moore County Sheriff's Office had no prior history involving Martin before the missing person report."

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said on X: "In the middle of the night while most Americans were asleep, the United States Secret Service acted quickly and decisively to neutralize a crazy person, armed with a gun and a gas canister, who intruded President Trump's home.

"Federal law enforcement are working 24/7 to keep our country safe and protect all Americans. It's shameful and reckless that Democrats have chosen to shut down their Department."

In the middle of the night while most Americans were asleep, the United States Secret Service acted quickly and decisively to neutralize a crazy person, armed with a gun and a gas canister, who intruded President Trump's home. Federal law enforcement are working 24/7 to keep our...

<https://t.co/MYTsHqR4cx>

— Karoline Leavitt (@PressSec) [February 22, 2026](#)

White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy Stephen Miller [noted](#): "Democrats voted to defund Secret Service, Homeland Security Investigations (who partner with Secret Service) and all the intelligence and law enforcement functions that support Secret Service. Never before in history has federal law enforcement been purposefully defunded."

"At 1:30 this morning, the security detail detected that an individual had made his way into the inner perimeter of Mar-a-Lago," said Palm Beach County Sheriff Ric Bradshaw. "A deputy and two Secret Service agents on the detail went to that area to investigate.

"They confronted white male that was carrying a gas can and a shotgun. He was ordered to drop those two pieces of equipment that he had with him, at which time he put down the gas can, raised the shotgun to a shooting position.

"At that point in time, the deputy and the two Secret Service agents fired their weapons and neutralized the threat. He is deceased at the scene."

WATCH:

Palm Beach County sheriff on man killed at Mar-a-Lago: "At 1:30 this morning, the security detail detected that an individual had made his way into the inner perimeter of Mar-a-Lago ... they confronted a white man that was carrying a gas can and a shotgun. He was ordered to drop...

pic.twitter.com/U4VbA5rhy3

— Aaron Rugar (@atrupar) [February 22, 2026](#)

FBI Director Kash Patel [indicated](#): "FBI is dedicating all necessary resources in the investigation of this morning's incident at President Trump's Mar-A-Lago – where an armed individual was shot and killed after unlawfully entering the perimeter. We will continue working closely with Secret Service as well our state and federal partners and will provide updates as we are able."

U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi [said](#): "I have been speaking with President Trump and coordinating with our federal partners throughout the morning regarding the intrusion and shooting at Mar-A-Lago. Grateful that @potus and our law enforcement agents are safe." <https://www.wnd.com/2026/02/crazy-person-armed-intruder-shot-dead-trumps-florida/>

OP ED

California Politicians Propose Law Hiding Corruption from the Public

Sat, 21 Feb 2026 6:33 PM PST by Daniel Greenfield



California's 'train-to-nowhere' program started with a \$10 billion budget in 2009 which shot up to \$135 billion with no end in sight. The Trump administration has tried to cut off billions in federal funds for the money pit on rails and there are signs that even state voters are growing sick of it.

But California Democrats had an answer.

Around the same time that the CEO of the California High-Speed Rail Authority, was arrested on suspicion of domestic battery after an appearance with Gov. Gavin Newsom celebrating the progress of the 'train-to-nowhere', Democrats were moving forward a bill to ban the public from getting crucial information about the project whose budget is more than 5 times that of NASA.

The cost of returning to the moon is estimated at under \$100 billion. California is spending more than that on a rail project that still hasn't gotten anywhere and which no one is interested in.

California Democrat legislators had already become infamous for covering up their own corruption. The California legislatures claimed that [disclosing how much](#) they were spending on defending their members against investigations would "violate attorney client privilege".

The California State Senate [had refused to release records](#) of federal law enforcement subpoenas and search warrants, claiming that "the public interest served by not making the record public clearly outweighs the public interest served by disclosure of the record."

The public interest in this case is that of members of the legislators being raided by the FBI.

The secrecy around the California Capitol Annex for legislators, where costs shot up from an estimated \$543 million to around \$1.2 billion, has become equally infamous. The project's leaders found an innovative way to keep the public from learning about what was going wrong by forcing [over 2,000 people](#), including senior government officials, to sign non-disclosure agreements. Who weren't they allowed to disclose it to? The general public. Obviously.

Only in California would top legislators sign NDAs so the public won't find out that they're shipping granite to Italy at a cost of [over \\$5 million](#) to build a lavish palace for themselves.

Assemblywoman Blanca Pacheco claimed that, "while I believe transparency is critical to maintaining public trust and did not sign this agreement lightly, it was necessary in this instance to protect sensitive information related to the project's security." Like the security of the two million pounds of granite being shipped to Italy from California which Assemblywoman Lia Lopez actually claimed [was done to](#) reduce the "spending of taxpayer dollars."

Using the same facade of legality to ban the public from learning about their abuses, California Democrats introduced California Bill 1608 under the innocuous title of 'Office of the Inspector General, High-Speed Rail' which bars disclosing details about investigations into the project.

Buried in te technical verbiage, the renewed office of the Inspector General for High Speed Rail would be exempted "from all contract requirements of the Public Contract Code that require oversight, review, or approval by the Department of General Services or any other state agency" for "a contract up to \$1,000,000 in value." The new office will be doing the one thing the train project already does all too well: spend insane amounts of money without any oversight.

When million dollar spending by an inspector general's office is treated as chump change, that's a symptom of how a \$10 billion project somehow turned into a \$135 billion project. But this is a bill that casually mentions "additional activities, not to cumulatively exceed five hundred million dollars (\$500,000,000), that maximize the efficiency of delivering the project."

The project has been underway for 17 years and was due in 2020. But surely dumping another \$500 million into the hole on wheels will "maximize the efficiency of delivering the project."

Why specifically \$500 million? KCRA's Ashley Zavala, one of the few indefatigable investigative reporters left in the local media, [has suggested that the](#) entire bill is meant to cover up a \$537 million 'change order' to the contract as part of a settlement.

But who knows because the whole point of the exercise is hiding things from the public.

By the time you get to Sec. 10 (b), California Dems write in this truly extraordinary piece of legislative legerdemain ordering that "none of the following items or papers of which these items are a part shall be released to the public by the Inspector General or the employees of the Inspector General" which include "papers,

correspondence, or memoranda pertaining to any audit or review”, internal staff discussions and “any record of an investigation conducted under this division” unless the Inspector General decides to issue an official report if he determines “it necessary to serve the interests of the state.” It’s an official bill banning disclosures of abuses in the single most wasteful and corrupt government project in California history.

The public gets no say in any of this. Instead, the whole thing is routed through a government official who gets to determine what if anything is released, and only if he “has substantiated a violation of laws, rules, or regulations, or mismanagement, gross waste of funds, abuse of authority, or a substantial and specific danger to the public health and safety.”

Notably, it needs to be a “gross abuse of funds”, not a plain old abuse of funds and a “substantial” danger to public health and safety, not just an ordinary sort of danger.

A \$135 billion train, a \$1.2 billion capitol annex and FBI raids all form part of the same picture.

“This is a good thing for the public,” Assemblywoman Lori Wilson insisted. “We want maximum transparency and maximum accountability for this project.”

And nothing says maximum transparency like a literal ban on government transparency.

What is ominous about this is that the new bill no longer even uses the ‘fig leaf’ terminology of the “public interest”, but instead substitutes a different term; “the interests of the state.”

The “interests of the state”, a phrase more commonly associated with Communist dictatorships, recurs throughout the bill, such as “the Inspector General determines it necessary to serve the interests of the state” or “ individuals attempting to harm the interests of the state”.

California’s ruling class is starting to admit, in legalese if not in its press releases, that the public interest and the interests of the state are not the same, and that the latter preempt the former.

The absurdity of claiming that hiding FBI investigations of their members of the cast of Italian bricks for their political palace is in the public interest was a bit much. Like hiding abuses in their \$135 billion ‘train-to-nowhere’, that’s not in the public interest, but in the interests of the state.

[Daniel Greenfield](#) is a [Shillman Journalism Fellow](#) at the [David Horowitz Freedom Center](#). This article previously appeared at the [Center's Front Page Magazine](#).

<https://bkdvk-zgpvh.campaign-view.com/ua/viewinbrowser>



BS”D

STEP BY STEP

STEP BY STEP: Good news is that many friends and supporters of Lev U’Neshama (Heart and Soul) donated towards the Education Fund project to provide basic school supplies for actually 350 children within our Lev U’Neshama families.

We are grateful that the school supply part of our effort has been successful.

According to the Israel Population and Statistics office, Tzfat’s population is about 40,000, and one third live at the poverty level. We do what we can so at least the children within our struggling LUN families can get the things they need.

Every week we are providing new sport shoes and eye exams/eyeglasses to the children on our request list. However, previous donations are rapidly dwindling. I am reaching out now before the fund has been emptied and we will have to say “no” to additional requests.

We work with two local shoe merchants who give Lev U’Neshama a discount but they advised us the cost of the shoes has increased. Also, we work with an accredited optician in town who also gives us a discount but his cost is stable.

Lev U’Neshama is an Israeli registered non-profit charity organization, volunteer run, no business expenses whatsoever and every \$ goes into our programs.

Shoes: \$45 per pair regular and \$60 for First Steps, baby shoes.

Eye Exam/Eyeglasses: \$60 per child.

Your support is urgently requested.

Or use the Zelle US to US bank transfer system (contact me at mortsmo@aol.com for bank information.

US Donors may also send checks made payable to

Simcha Smolensky, my son, who is also a volunteer. Send to:

Rabbi Simcha Smolensky, 6739 N Mozart St Chicago IL 60645

Your support will be appreciated.

Yaffa Smolensky