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Israel's attack on Iran: the end of a proxy war, the beginning of conventional warfare

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During the night of 12–13 June, Israel launched a military strike against Iran, which – according to official statements – is intended to result in the destruction of the country's nuclear programme. In the following days, several hundred targets were attacked, including nuclear facilities, military installations, and sites belonging to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Numerous members of Iran's security leadership were killed. Depending on the source, the number of Iranian fatalities ranged from 220 to 400.

In response, Iran launched missile and drone strikes against Israel, where – despite relatively effective defence – more than 20 civilians were killed. The United States supported Israel with intelligence and logistics but avoided direct involvement in offensive operations. Tehran announced its readiness to hold talks with Washington on a political settlement regarding its nuclear programme, but set a condition that Israel must halt its operations.

The attack forms part of Israel's post-7 October 2023 policy, following the Hamas assault, which is aimed at neutralising threats posed by Iran's regional allies (including in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen). However, it is more a demonstration of strength and a belief in the emergence of a unique 'window of opportunity' to politically eliminate its principal regional adversary than a response to any immediate threat from Tehran. Israel's objectives include not only the destruction of Iran's nuclear programme but also bringing about regime change or, at least, severely destabilising the current government. However, as Israel lacks the capacity to achieve these goals on its own, it is seeking to draw the United States into offensive operations.

The course of the attack…

The targets of the strikes include air defence systems, military bases, airports, facilities linked to the nuclear programme (Natanz, Isfahan, Fordo, Arak), production plants, ballistic missile launchers and storage sites, critical infrastructure (refineries, natural gas extraction and processing installations, fuel depots), the headquarters of security institutions, and civilian buildings in which senior members of the security services resided.

Israel has killed, among others, the senior commanders of the Iranian armed forces and the IRGC, as well as several dozen other high-ranking officers, including Ali Shamkhani – an influential adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader who oversaw negotiations with the United States. In addition, many scientists involved in Iran's domestic nuclear programme have been killed. The attacks are being carried out primarily through airstrikes (by aircraft and

missile fire), but also involve local agents and Israeli intelligence operatives active on the ground.

Iran's retaliatory actions have primarily consisted of waves of missile attacks targeting sites in Israel. Their effectiveness has been limited by factors such as the efficiency of Israel's air defence systems (supported by the US through Patriot and THAAD systems) and the interception of missiles and drones over Jordanian territory. Despite issuing repeated threats, Iran has neither attacked US military bases in the region nor attempted to block trade routes (such as the Strait of Hormuz), as it has sought to avoid internationalising the conflict.

As a result of the strikes, Israel gained operational freedom in Iranian airspace over large areas of the country (including the capital), eliminated key figures within the security establishment, and significantly weakened Iran's offensive capabilities. However, the extent of damage to nuclear facilities remains difficult to assess due to their largely underground location.

…and its motives

Justifying the offensive against Iran, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasised that it was driven by the emergence of a 'direct' and 'existential' threat to Israel's security. The main reasons are the possibility of the militarisation of Iran's nuclear programme and the development of its ballistic missile programme. Regarding the former threat, the Prime Minister cited his country's intelligence assessment, according to which Tehran could be ready to conduct its first nuclear tests within 6 to 13 months.

Israeli leaders have been warning of the possibility of military action against Iran's nuclear programme since the mid-2000s. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has devoted a significant part of his political activity to this issue – for example, in his speech at the United Nations in September 2012, he warned that Iran could acquire nuclear weapons within approximately a year.

The timing of the attack likely does not stem from the actual advancement of Iran's nuclear programme. According to US intelligence assessments presented in March by the Director of National Intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, Iran's military nuclear project has effectively been suspended since 2003. However, at the same time, Tehran has recently increased its stockpile of enriched uranium well beyond the needs of a civilian nuclear programme (see Appendix).

Thus, Israel appears to be acting not out of direct threat, but from a position of strength, while also capitalising on a favourable regional and international situation.

Since the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack, Israel has:

- neutralised most of the military potential of the organisation in the Gaza Strip (while committing war crimes on a mass scale);
- in autumn 2024, significantly weakened the Lebanese Hezbollah, including the killing of its leader, Hassan Nasrallah;
- largely (though not completely) destroyed the offensive potential of the Yemeni Houthi movement;

- by striking Hezbollah, contributed to the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria (December 2024), thereby eliminating a key Iranian ally in the region;
- carried out an airstrike on Iran, destroying part of its air defence batteries (October 2024).

Consequently, Iran's offensive potential – particularly in terms of the support it could receive from regional allied organisations such as Hezbollah or the Houthi movement – has been significantly weakened.

Israel's decision to launch the attack was accelerated by the US-Iranian negotiations which have been taking place in Oman since April this year, aimed at resolving the issue of Iran's nuclear programme through diplomatic means. From the outset, Israel expressed dissatisfaction with these talks, as it viewed their potential success as a threat to its own interests. This is because the Israeli authorities do not believe in the effectiveness of diplomatic mechanisms (as evidenced by their strong opposition to the JCPOA agreement in 2015 and their lobbying for its termination by the US in 2018).

The current Israeli offensive against Iran aims to: reduce its ballistic missile production capabilities, politically weaken the regime in Tehran by eliminating key leadership figures, trigger social unrest, internationalise the conflict (particularly by drawing the United States into it), and ultimately bring about a regime change in Iran.

Iran is in crisis

The Israeli attacks are taking place at an extremely unfavourable moment for Iran, which is effectively deprived of allies in the region and, consequently, has seen its deterrence capabilities (including retaliatory strikes) reduced to a minimum.

The Iranian nuclear programme itself has raised controversy for many years. Tehran has repeatedly violated its obligations to, among others, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), but over the past two decades, it has also frequently – without factual confirmation – been accused of being only months or weeks away from producing a nuclear weapon.

It appears that Iran's policy in this regard is to reach a point where the production of such a weapon (both the warhead itself and the means of its delivery) would depend solely on a political decision, not technical limitations. Effectively, this means that – without actually working on acquiring a nuclear weapon, as per the above-mentioned assessment by US intelligence agencies – Iran is actively developing its capabilities to rapidly obtain one should it choose to do so. Its nuclear programme thus becomes an element of national prestige, a tool of deterrence against adversaries, and a bargaining chip in relations with the outside world.

In March, the Donald Trump administration, under the threat of force, compelled Tehran to enter negotiations aimed at a political resolution of the issue (which, despite many promising signs of success, were interrupted by the Israeli attacks).

Iran's internal crisis remains a serious problem. It has many aspects: economic (including blockade and sanctions, high inflation, severe energy shortages), social (recurring social protests), and political (for example, since 1989, real power has been held by the now 86-year-old Ali Khamenei, which limits the system's ability to adapt to new challenges).

Militarily, the war has revealed significant weaknesses in Iran's defence system (especially its air defences), the extent of the country's infiltration by Israeli intelligence services, limited capacity for providing a symmetrical response to enemy attacks, and the lack of prospects for military support from regional actors. In the current situation, the most existential threat to the Islamic Republic is the prospect of direct US intervention. Tehran appears to be carefully averting this risk – for example, by refraining from attacks on US bases in the region and trade routes in the Persian Gulf – and is probing the possibility of talks with Washington, conditional on a halt to Israeli strikes.

The ability to maintain both state and regime stability constitutes another existential threat to the Iranian authorities. In this context, the challenges include: a war that is, in effect, being lost, thus raising the issue of internal legitimacy; evident unrest within the elite (linked, among other things, to the scale of its members' elimination); the prospect of further destruction exacerbating the socio-economic situation; the threat of Israeli intelligence operations supporting anti-regime opposition; and social unrest.

The US perspective

The Trump administration did not demonstrate a firm commitment to preventing Israel from initiating a military confrontation with Iran and may even have given the authorities in Jerusalem the 'amber light' during the final stages of preparation. This occurred despite the fact that the bombings interrupted US–Iran negotiations, and Trump appeared to favour resolving the issue through peaceful means and avoiding the entanglement of the United States in a potential war, although his statements on the matter are contradictory. The US president repeatedly expressed hope for a swift nuclear agreement with Tehran. Avoiding confrontation with Iran also aligned with the goals of a growing faction within the Republican Party advocating a reduction in US involvement in armed conflicts on other continents.

Washington still hopes for continued negotiations with Iran. It declared no involvement in the bombings and warned Tehran against retaliatory strikes on US military bases in the region. The US also reportedly restrained Israel from attempting to assassinate Khamenei. Trump argues that a weakened Iran may be more inclined to sign a new agreement and suggests that the Israeli attack aligns with US plans – possibly for reasons of reputation, as the President does not wish to appear manipulated by Israel.

At the same time, the United States continues to increase its military presence in the region to further step up negotiating pressure while maintaining readiness for a possible escalation. Additionally, it is actively involved in the defence of Israeli territory against Iranian missile attacks, supports Israel with reconnaissance and intelligence, and supplies it with ammunition.

Within the Republican camp, a dispute is ongoing regarding the future of US engagement in the Middle East, resulting in Washington's ambiguous response to recent events. The conduct of negotiations by Steve Witkoff, the removal of Michael Waltz from the position of National Security Advisor, as well as Trump's own preferences, indicated that the administration would focus on a peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue. However, the initiation of military action by Israel may lead to the strengthening of the faction advocating the use of armed force and a crackdown on the regime in Tehran.

Outlook

According to statements by the Israeli authorities, continued military action against Iran should be expected in the coming days and likely weeks. At the same time, however, the complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear programme and the effective elimination of Iran as a key regional player solely through Israeli means appear unlikely.

The stance of the United States will be crucial to how events unfold. Israel is pushing for direct American military involvement – US forces in the region are being gradually reinforced, providing Washington with the resources needed to actively join the war should the White House make that decision. Aware of the risks posed by drawing the US into the conflict, Tehran is avoiding escalation: there have been no attacks on US bases or strikes against ships or energy installations in the Persian Gulf. Despite its difficult situation, Iran is probing the possibility of resuming talks with the US, making them conditional on a halt to Israeli attacks and asserting that it has no interest in a military nuclear programme.

The regime's resilience to internal shocks remains unclear. Although patriotic mobilisation and consolidation around the authorities currently prevail, the war undermines the rationale behind their existing policies. Growing tensions should be expected both between society and the regime and within the ruling elite itself (due, among other factors, to the elimination of key figures). A further deterioration of the economic situation is also inevitable, which will deepen social instability.

APPENDIX

Iran's nuclear programme

Work on the programme began in the 1950s as part of cooperation between the Imperial State of Iran and the United States but was suspended following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. A military-oriented nuclear programme was developed in the 1990s – its existence was revealed in 2002. A year later, Iran began negotiations with the United Kingdom, France, and Germany (EU-3) and established cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regarding the oversight of the peaceful development of its nuclear programme. In the following years, the programme continued in violation of commitments, which led to a series of UN Security Council resolutions, starting in 2006, imposing successive sanctions on Iran.

In 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was ultimately adopted, with its signatories – aside from Iran – being the permanent members of the UN Security Council, as well as Germany and the EU. The agreement provided for a 15-year period of limited and IAEA-supervised development of Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for the gradual lifting of sanctions. However, in 2018, the United States unilaterally terminated the deal, which effectively blocked the sanctions relief process. In the following years, Iran gradually withdrew from implementing the agreement and eventually suspended it altogether in 2020, following the assassination of Qasem Soleimani – a prominent IRGC commander – by the United States.

In recent months (including on 12 June), the IAEA has repeatedly accused Iran of, among other things, a lack of cooperation, concealing its activities, installing more efficient enrichment centrifuges, enriching uranium to 60% (instead of the 3.76% stipulated by the

JCPOA, and technically close to the 90% threshold required for weapons-grade material), and repeatedly exceeding the limits on stored enriched uranium. These findings have been repeatedly criticised by the European signatories of the agreement.

On 7 March, President Donald Trump demanded that Iran engage in direct nuclear negotiations, giving it two months to do so and suggesting the use of force in the event of negotiation failure. The first round of US–Iran talks took place on 12 April in Muscat (Oman), and the sixth round was scheduled for 15 June. The American side's assessment – particularly that of the President – regarding the prospects for success has changed several times, though optimistic tones have also been voiced (despite Israel's unequivocally negative stance on the negotiations as such).

Parallel to the nuclear programme, Iran also pursued a ballistic missile programme, which determines its ability to deliver potential nuclear warheads. This programme was likewise a reason for the imposition of sanctions.

Iran is also subject to a range of other EU and international sanctions, related, among other things, to systemic human rights violations and the supply of missiles and drones to Russia for its aggression against Ukraine.