



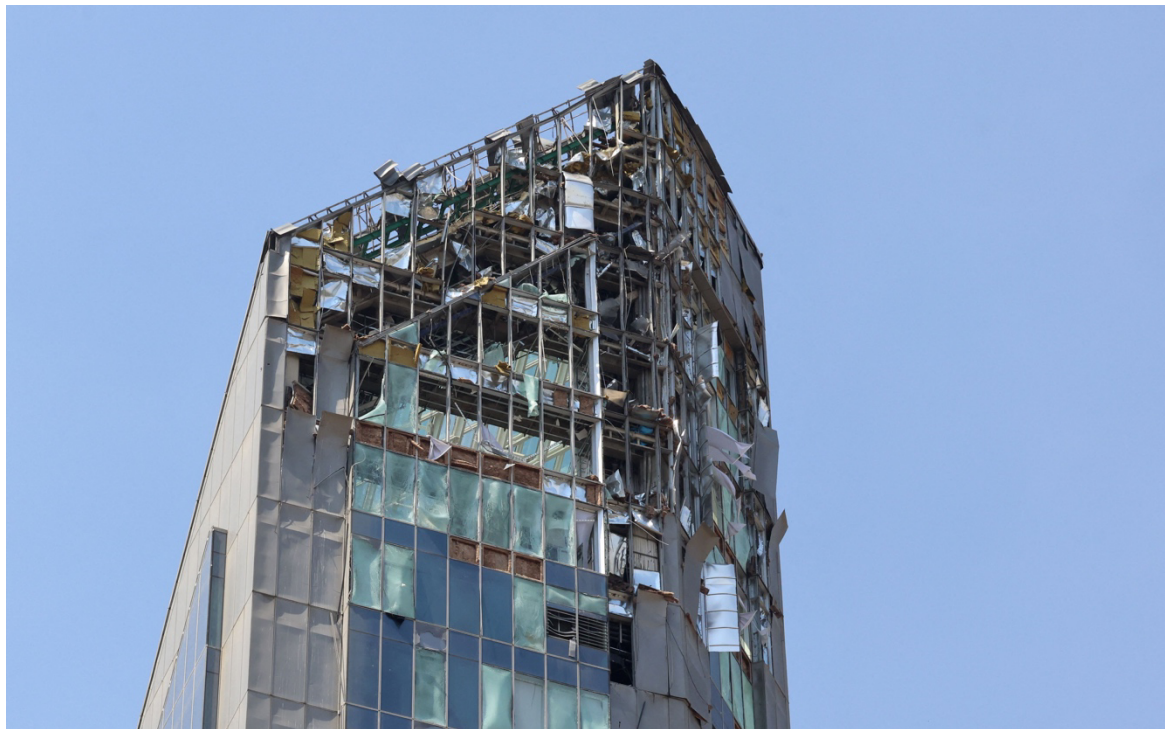
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## **Special Briefing: Israel strikes Iran's nuclear program**

**Alex Vatanka, Paul Salem, Charles Lister, F. Gregory Gause, III, Brian Katulis, Karen E. Young, Colby Connelly, Iulia-Sabina Joja, John Calabrese, Mohammed Soliman, Ross Harrison, Fadi Nicholas Nassar**

***June 13, 2025***

On the night of June 12-13, the Israeli military launched a heavy barrage against Iranian targets associated with its nuclear program as well as killed several top military and security officials. MEI's experts react to the Israeli strikes and the consequences for the wider region.



*Photo above: Building in Tehran damaged by Israeli airstrikes on June 13, 2025. Photo by Atta Kenare/AFP via Getty Images.*

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## **Escalate or stand down: Iran's calculations as it responds to the Israeli strikes**

**Alex Vatanka**  
***Senior Fellow***

Recent remarks by President Donald Trump casting doubt on the prospects of a diplomatic resolution in US-Iran nuclear talks suggest that both he and Israel concluded Iran needed a major shock to compel meaningful concessions — either halting uranium enrichment or offering counter-proposals acceptable to US-Israeli terms. That shock now appears to have been delivered.

Trump continues to frame diplomacy as his preferred path, while Israel acts as the enforcer, delivering the blows as Trump offers Iran a way out. Both warn that further attacks are possible,



a strategy clearly intended to concentrate minds in Tehran. The precedent of Israel's decapitation campaign against Hezbollah in 2024 looms large here: It was not until the elimination of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and much of the group's leadership that rocket fire ceased.

That lesson is likely not lost on Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's ultimate decision-maker, who may now face a choice between capitulation and martyrdom. Khamenei must also reckon with a significantly diminished senior military leadership. Whether the regime will choose escalation or opt to stand down remains an open question.

Not since the 1979 revolution has Iran's leadership suffered such devastating losses in such a short period of time. The confirmed deaths of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) chief and multiple senior commanders mark a historic blow. Israel's recent operations — especially the 2024 assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran — have demonstrated its overwhelming intelligence dominance. Mossad appears to operate with near-total freedom inside Iran, including in the capital.

Iran's continued inability to protect its top military and nuclear officials is staggering. It raises serious questions: Is this the result of systemic incompetence, or a deeper inability to confront an Israel emboldened by US backing and intelligence superiority?

In Tehran, senior officials quickly issued the expected vows of "historic revenge." But public sentiment is skeptical. Many Iranians doubt the regime's ability to follow through, especially after repeated humiliations in the 14 months since Israel first struck Iran's embassy in Damascus in April 2024, killing several key commanders of the IRGC.

Official messaging reflects this internal tension. Military-linked figures close to the supreme leader, such as Speaker of Parliament Mohammad Qalibaf, focus on retaliation, with Qalibaf [saying](#), "Israel started this, but we will finish it." Meanwhile, others work to reassure the public that the situation is under control. But it very clearly is not. Tehran is deeply worried about the risk of renewed protests, driven by public outrage over national security failures and perceived impotence.

Israel likely factored Iran's domestic fragility into its calculations, aiming not only to degrade its military capabilities but also to deepen the regime's internal crisis.

Across the region, governments have formally condemned Israel's actions. Some of this is sincere, but much of it reflects a desire to avoid entanglement in a rapidly escalating confrontation between two major regional powers. With Iran and Israel separated by roughly



1,000 miles, many states lie within the potential range of escalation. In the short term, their cautious, calculated statements underscore the deep regional anxiety over being drawn into the conflict's next phase.

In the longer term, however, a weakened and toothless Iran creates new challenges for many Middle Eastern states, and certainly for much of the Arab world. As Iran's influence wanes, anxiety is likely to grow among key regional powers like Turkey and Saudi Arabia about the prospect of an Israel that emerges as the Middle East's unchallenged hegemon.

## **Strategic scenarios after the Israeli strike on Iran**

**Paul Salem**  
***Senior Fellow***

The Middle East has entered a dangerous and uncertain moment. Much now depends on the next moves by Israel, Iran, and the United States.

On the Israeli side, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has positioned himself as a central actor in any deal — or no deal — with Iran. He may choose to pause after this large-scale operation, absorb Iran's initial retaliation, and allow a brief window for renewed diplomacy. The goal would be a deal that includes zero uranium enrichment and full dismantling of Iran's nuclear infrastructure. Alternatively, Israel could pursue sustained military operations, as it has done with Hezbollah in Lebanon, to further degrade Iran's nuclear program and weaken its leadership and decision-making apparatus.

For Iran, the calculus is more constrained. While it must respond — and already has — its overriding interest is to avoid a full-scale conflict it cannot win. The imbalance in military power with Israel and the United States is stark. While Iran can inflict damage, Israel's defenses and those of its partners are likely to largely neutralize most attacks. Striking US assets would trigger a forceful American response — an outcome Tehran seeks to avoid. Attacking targets in the Gulf would alienate key regional partners, undermining Iran's long-term position.

Iran's leadership is likely focused now on regime survival, and Israel has made it clear that the strategy of obfuscating and playing for time in fruitless negotiations has run its course. They may recognize that the only figure capable of restraining Netanyahu is Donald Trump, and that the wiser path may be to signal readiness to reengage diplomatically after a brief cooling-off period. In early April, Trump gave Iran 60 days to reach a deal. The Israeli strike comes as that



deadline expired. Trump has already linked the attack to his deadline, and warned Iran to take advantage of a “second chance” or face more dire consequences. The Israeli strike gives Washington new leverage to push for a zero-enrichment deal.

Whether Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is prepared to make the kind of painful concession his predecessor made to end the Iran-Iraq war — what Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called “drinking the poisoned chalice” — remains to be seen. However, this is, after all, the first strike of such magnitude on Iranian soil since that war.

To be sure, there is a real risk of escalation that could drag in the US and destabilize the Gulf. But, to borrow US Democratic Party strategist Rahm Emanuel’s phrase, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” This moment, perilous as it is, also offers a narrow opening to revive diplomacy toward a quick and satisfactory deal that takes the specter of an Iranian nuclear weapons program off the table. That opening should be rapidly and intensively tested.

## **As the region faces the risk of major escalation, events draw Israel and Syria closer together**

**Charles Lister**

***Senior Fellow, Syria Initiative***

This is the moment the world has been anticipating with great concern for a long time. Over the past year, Iran’s defensive and offensive capabilities have been revealed to be far less capable than many had expected, which in theory would temper fears of where things could now be headed. However, if Israel is to be taken at its word that Friday morning’s strikes were the first round in an all-out Israeli campaign against Iran’s nuclear and missile programs, the Iranian regime is now facing a potentially existential, life-or-death moment. That paints the strikes in a whole new, unprecedented light and makes the risk of a major spiral of escalation far more real than what we’ve seen play out before.

For the United States, its military and diplomatic presence across the region will now be directly in Iran’s crosshairs. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has made no secret of their potential intent to strike at US interests in the event of such an acute challenge to their security, and precedent suggests that when Iran feels the need to put deterrent pressure on Israel, it sees Americans as soft targets. While there will be concern about the Gulf, the most acute threat will be in Iraq and Syria, where several thousand US troops remain deployed — all in



range of Iranian proxy projectiles. A resumption of Houthi targeting of US vessels off the coast of Yemen also seems but a matter of time.

As with previous Israeli sorties toward Iran, Friday's strikes appear to have consistently exploited the use of Syrian airspace, for direct overflight and for refueling. Syria's transitional government has no capacity to prevent this if it wanted to, but its willing engagement in covert dialogue with Israel in recent weeks — amid continued overt military tensions — makes this issue especially complex and potentially significant. While Israel's use of Syrian airspace almost certainly neither required nor received any form of Syrian permission, Iran and its regional proxies will look at things differently, having already labeled the new government in Damascus an ally of America and, by extension, of Israel.

For now, Syria will do what it has adeptly done over the past six months: keep quiet and carry on. In that time, more than 40 Iranian-linked weapons shipments destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon have been intercepted and seized by Syrian government forces, and that trend will undoubtedly continue. Whether Israel wants to accept it or not, local and regional events appear to be increasingly narrowing the gap between Jerusalem and Damascus.

## **Too clever by half: Trump and the Israeli strikes on Iran**

**F. Gregory Gause, III**  
*Visiting Scholar*

The Trump administration appears to want to have its cake and eat it, too, when it comes to the Israeli strikes on Iran. Unfortunately, it will end up with its credibility damaged and American interests exposed.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio emphasized in the first official response to the attacks that the United States was not involved in the campaign. While that might be technically true, it is also clear from President Donald Trump's own statements that the United States was informed by Israel about its plans. His Truth Social post on Friday morning said that Iran can expect more attacks from Israel, implying at least some coordination with Jerusalem on war plans. We will learn more over the coming days and weeks about any actual American cooperation with Israel's military and intelligence services.

The Trump administration clearly wants to avoid having American interests damaged in the Iranian response to Israel's attacks. However, Tehran is not buying what Washington is selling



on this. *The New York Times* reports that Iran's foreign ministry said the attack could not have happened without "coordination and authorization" from the United States. The ministry said the United States, as Israel's main supporter, would also be responsible for the consequences. Given the close ties between the United States and Israel, it is unlikely that any of the major actors in the Middle East really believe that the United States was not somehow involved in Israel's actions, or at least approved of them.

If we take the administration's protestations of non-involvement at face value, the only conclusions to be reached is that the United States has little to no influence over Israeli decisions that could seriously imperil American interests. President Trump has publicly said over the last months that he warned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu against striking Iran while the US was negotiating with it. In the eyes of much of the world, this can only mean that Israel can ignore the United States, its major ally and patron, with impunity.

The Trump administration seems to think it can have it both ways on the Israeli strikes on Iran, enjoying the geopolitical benefits of a defanged Iranian nuclear infrastructure while avoiding the negative consequences of direct involvement in the operation. That is too clever by half. The more likely outcome is increased threats to American interests in the region and widespread doubts, among friends and foes alike, about American power and credibility.

## **What Israel's surprise military attack on Iran means for US policy in the region**

**Brian Katulis**  
**Senior Fellow**

The United States so far has been mostly a bystander in Israel's bold and risky "Operation Rising Lion" against nuclear and military sites in the Islamic Republic of Iran, but it is still just the early hours of this military campaign.

US President Donald Trump came back into office saying he wanted to end wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, but thus far he has not had much success on either of these fronts. Israel's actions threaten to upend efforts to de-escalate regional tensions and end conflicts in the short run, as the risks of Iranian retaliation — either directly against the United States or its partners — is very high.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio issued a [statement](#) in the opening stage of this military operation making clear that this was a unilateral action by Israel and the United States was not



involved. Trump [said](#) this morning that the United States supports Israel in its campaign, and then urged Iran to strike a deal before it is “too late” for the regime.

How the Iranian regime decides to react and what America’s other regional partners, particularly the Arab Gulf states, chose to do in the coming days will shape the trajectory of events across the region. The United States has the largest military footprint of any external actor in the Middle East, as the top general in the US Central Command, Michael “Erik” Kurilla, [underscored](#) in a Congressional hearing earlier this week.

Actors in the region are driving events, but the United States is likely to get drawn in more deeply. Trump 2.0’s record on handling the broader Middle East has been very mixed in its first few months, as this [assessment](#) highlighted, and the administration is taking [unpredictable actions](#) at home and in other regions around the world. This is a recipe for elevated risks to America in the short run, but much depends on how Iran and other regional actors respond to Israel’s strikes.

## **Price of oil and Gulf states on the fence after Israeli strikes on Iran**

**Karen E. Young**

***Senior Fellow, Economics and Energy Initiative***

Many energy analysts will ask if Israel’s ongoing attacks on Iran change the decoupling pattern, observed since the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, of oil price and conflict risk in the region. Most analysts continue to see direct attacks between Israel and Iran as short-term price risks and spikes and not long-term changes to price outlook, with Brent crude still in the \$60-65/barrel range through the end of the year. But this all depends on how Iran decides to respond, specifically regarding transit routes and Gulf energy infrastructure as well as the duration of this new chapter in the conflict. For comparison, the upward spike in prices yesterday (June 12), in the range of 10-12%, is on par with the [proportion of the price surge](#) that occurred directly after the 2019 Iran-backed Houthi drone attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure at Abqaiq. In the current case, no Iranian or Gulf oil infrastructure has yet been hit.

We do not know the extent of coordination, disapproval, or approval by President Donald Trump’s administration of Israel’s actions. It is feasible that Trump sees Israel as carrying out necessary measures that can still get him a compliant Iran — through negotiation or capitulation. His insistence that negotiations can continue this weekend in Oman illustrates the president’s view that this is just part of a deal. For Trump, the Middle East is abstract and far



away; but for Israel and Iran, this attack is existential. Trump's two-track approach, which delegates military action to Israel and diplomacy to the United States, will be immediately stressed. Gulf states will question America's resolve to defend them and to defend Israel. And Israel will be compelled to take extreme measures to defend itself. But we also do not know how domestic politics in Iran will unfold and whether there is sentiment or movement to destabilize the regime, making any concurrent negotiations moot.

For the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, this crisis will require continued open lines of communication and careful diplomatic signaling. It is possible we will see a rapid change in Gulf state orientation, depending on the Iranian regional response and the extent of the damage to the regime.

## **Energy markets on edge amid concerns over potential supply disruptions**

**Colby Connelly**  
***Senior Fellow***

Oil prices reacted sharply to news of Israeli strikes on Iran, but benchmark prices have settled somewhat since as markets anxiously await Tehran's next move, likely trying to gauge the likelihood, however small, that Tehran seeks to obstruct or halt energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz, as it has long threatened to do. At present, it appears likely that the situation would have to deteriorate significantly for this to take place, but the possibility will continue to loom large and keep markets on edge.

Up until an escalation appeared imminent, prices had been softening for months on the back of weaker demand prospects and added supply from OPEC+, which comprises the 12 members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and 10 non-OPEC petroleum producers (most notably Russia). Yet around 80% of spare capacity within OPEC+ sits in the Gulf region and is mostly held by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In times of a potential supply disruption outside of the Gulf, this capacity has the effect of softening upward price pressure. Yet if the ability to ship oil out of the Gulf is constrained or halted altogether, this capacity cushion of over 5 million barrels per day (bpd) could become increasingly immaterial, likely leading to major price spikes.

Saudi Arabia will be somewhat more resilient than other Gulf producers due to its ability to tap available capacity in its 5 million bpd East-West pipeline to reroute some of its exports through the Red Sea, and it may also boost output at its west coast refineries. However, even if it were



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to reroute some of its current exports, its ability to bring its spare capacity into play would still be constrained. The UAE can similarly redirect around 1.5 million bpd of crude to Fujairah (and thus past the Strait) via its Habshan-Fujairah pipeline. Yet neither of these alternate routes can handle the totality of either country's existing export levels, and this may have a limited impact if supply from other producers that lack such routes is affected as well. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, and Oman collectively produced over 19.5 million bpd of crude and exported over 5 million bpd of refined products in May. This is before considering the risk of losing as much as 1.7 million bpd in crude exports from Iran itself. Similarly, Qatar, Oman, and the UAE represent over 20% of global liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports, and any major loss of these supplies will be equally as disruptive to gas markets.

Still, the likelihood of major damage to energy infrastructure or a sizeable disruption to the energy trade does not appear imminent, for now. Iran represents a major source of inexpensive oil for China, meaning that an Israeli move to limit Iranian oil exports would be felt well beyond Tehran. Additionally, the Trump administration's clear preference for lower oil prices will probably see the US discourage Israel from an approach that puts energy flows at risk. However low the current probability of Gulf supply outages may be, any significant degree of supply loss would see a sizeable spike in global energy prices. Even without a total halt to outflows, the ensuing price hike could potentially wreak havoc on regional economies that will scarcely be able to benefit from high prices if their exports remain subdued or shut-in. In a worst-case scenario, ongoing escalation in the Gulf would risk catastrophic damage to key infrastructure on which regional producers are dependent for billions of dollars in revenue. The fact that energy assets may not be directly targeted does not eliminate the risk that they could become collateral damage in a major conflict. Should the conflict escalate, the potential for an economic calamity — both regionally and globally — will remain as high as that of a political one.

## **For Saudi Arabia, worries about Iranian retaliation and a difficult decision on security**

**F. Gregory Gause III**  
*Visiting Scholar*

The Israeli attack on Iran could not have come at a worse time for Saudi Arabia. Riyadh had sought over the past five years to lessen tensions with Iran, as it prioritized Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's ambitious domestic economic development plan, Vision 2030. The plan relies on Saudi Arabia growing its role in global trade, finance, and tourism, none of which can be accomplished if the Persian Gulf is a war zone. The plan also relies on foreign

investment coming into the kingdom, but capital is a coward. It shies away from areas of conflict.

The immediate worry for Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Gulf monarchies as well, is that they will become targets for Iranian retaliation. The Iranian defense minister threatened just that earlier this week. All the Gulf monarchies host American forces and some have American bases on their territory. Iran is unlikely to believe American protestations that it was not involved in the Israeli attack. Moreover, Iranian missile strikes against Israel in 2024 proved ineffective, while its attack on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019 took half of the kingdom's production off the market for weeks. If Iran wants to demonstrate to the world that attacks on it come at a price, Gulf state oil facilities will be tempting targets.

The longer-term issue for Saudi Arabia is that, while the Israeli strikes might set back the Iranian nuclear program temporarily, Iran will likely come out of the conflict fully committed to developing nuclear weapons. That will confront Riyadh with the difficult decision about whether it should pursue nuclear weapons as well — a course of action that the United States would oppose but that the Saudi leadership might see as essential for its security.

## **Russia juggles backing Iran, mediating with the West, and preserving oil revenue**

**Iulia Joja**  
**Senior Fellow**

The recent confrontation between Israel and Iran comes at a complicated moment for Russia's geopolitical maneuvering, especially in the Middle East. Longtime rivals in the global oil market, Iran and Russia rely heavily on energy exports to major importers like China and India. Surging oil prices in the aftermath of "Operation Rising Lion" will bring a short-term windfall for Moscow, bolstering a war economy heavily reliant on energy revenue. But any sustained destabilization in the Middle East — particularly involving Iran — threatens to upset Russia's precarious balancing act.

Moscow's strategy hinges on walking a tightrope: preserving its strategic partnership with Tehran while insistently positioning itself as a potential mediator between Iran and the United States. Yet this balancing act is becoming harder to sustain. On June 12, Russia, alongside China, voted against an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) [resolution](#) condemning Iran's nuclear noncompliance — underscoring Moscow's continued diplomatic shielding of Tehran.



But Israel's military campaign against Iranian nuclear and military infrastructure and personnel — and [evidence](#) of US foreknowledge, as well as suggestions of possible [indirect](#) support — now threatens to disrupt this axis. Iran may be forced to redirect resources to domestic defense, slowing the pipeline of military support to Russia. And while Russian President Vladimir Putin will not publicly abandon Tehran, the Kremlin has no appetite for a direct confrontation with Israel or the United States. Moscow's room to hedge and maneuver is shrinking.

The stakes are high. Iran has been a critical enabler of Russia's war on Ukraine, supplying suicide drones and sanctions evasion expertise, including through the formation of so-called ghost fleets to carry oil and other key exports. But with Iran potentially forced to divert attention inward, focusing on its own national defense in the face of Israeli strikes, the flow of support to Russia could decrease. While Moscow's drone stockpiles remain significant, any disruption in Iranian supply lines could degrade Russia's strike capabilities over time.

When diplomacy with Iran eventually resumes, Russia's credibility as a broker, already tarnished, should be treated with deep skepticism. For now, Putin must navigate a tightening strategic bind — one where Tehran's growing vulnerabilities may become Moscow's new liabilities.

## **For China, far-reaching implications and a turn to a familiar playbook**

**John Calabrese**  
***Senior Fellow***

The Israeli strike against Iran, confirmed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a "targeted military operation to roll back the Iranian threat," marks a dangerous new chapter in the long-simmering tensions between these two regional rivals. As the world braces for Iranian retaliation and the United States under the Trump administration signals a desire to distance itself from direct involvement, all eyes are on how other global powers, including China, will react, and what is at stake for Beijing as the conflict escalates.

For China, the implications are far-reaching and complex. Beijing's interests in the Middle East are anchored by its dependence on energy imports, its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure scheme, and its desire to be seen as a responsible global power. While it maintains a strong partnership with Iran, China has also cultivated pragmatic ties with Israel and sought to build goodwill across the Arab world, positioning itself as a champion of diplomatic solutions over military confrontation. This balancing act has become even more pronounced

since the Gaza war erupted in October 2023, with Beijing publicly criticizing Israeli actions while quietly keeping channels open with all sides.

In the immediate aftermath of Israel's strike, China is likely to respond with a familiar but carefully calibrated script. Publicly, Beijing will call for restraint and an immediate cessation of hostilities, urging all parties to return to the negotiating table. Chinese officials will stress the need for a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue, reiterating their opposition to the use of force. This approach is consistent with China's longstanding position that the Iranian nuclear issue should be resolved through political and diplomatic means, not military action.

At the same time, China will almost certainly express support for Iran's sovereignty and security, condemning violations of international law and warning against actions that could further destabilize the region. However, Beijing will be careful not to encourage Iranian retaliation, recognizing that a wider war would threaten its own interests by disrupting energy supplies and jeopardizing regional stability. China's vote against last week's International Atomic Energy Agency resolution finding Iran in non-compliance with its non-proliferation obligations underscores its willingness to shield Tehran diplomatically, especially at the United Nations.

Behind the scenes, China will likely engage in quiet diplomacy, urging both Iran and Israel to de-escalate. While Beijing's public rhetoric will emphasize neutrality and dialogue, it will privately communicate its concerns to both sides, seeking to prevent the crisis from spiraling out of control.

Despite the risks, China is unlikely to abandon its partnership with Iran. Ongoing trade and reports of Iranian procurement of missile components from China suggest that Beijing will continue to provide Tehran with economic and technological lifelines. At the same time, China will avoid being seen as directly fueling the conflict, mindful of the need to maintain stable relations with Israel and the wider Arab world.

Regional instability threatens to disrupt not only energy supplies but also the broader BRI, undermining China's economic ambitions in the Middle East. The crisis also highlights the limits of China's influence: While Beijing can shield Iran diplomatically and provide economic support, its ability to restrain Tehran's military responses or broker a quick resolution is limited.

## **Israel's AI-enabled strike on Iran: A technological and strategic turning point**



**Mohammed Soliman**  
***Senior Fellow***

The Israeli strikes on Iran represent a watershed moment in the evolution of warfare in the Middle East. For the first time, a regional power not only coordinated a full-spectrum preemptive attack using airpower, cyber, and covert operations, but also deployed AI-enabled targeting and autonomous systems at scale to execute a highly precise, multi-domain assault. This operation, dubbed "[Rising Lion](#)," was strategic, surgical, and deeply integrated, opening a new chapter in the future of modern warfare.

What distinguishes this operation from past Israeli campaigns was not just the breadth of targets — ranging from the [Natanz](#) enrichment facility to missile sites and senior Iranian officials — but the technological muscle behind it. Israeli officials have [confirmed](#) that more than 200 aircraft dropped over 330 munitions on 100 targets, achieving real-time coordination and minimizing collateral damage. This level of synchronization is virtually impossible without AI-assisted battle management systems, real-time intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) fusion, and autonomous asset deployment.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the strike was the covert [establishment](#) of a Mossad-operated drone base inside Iranian territory, reportedly near Tehran. This base played a pivotal role in the early stages of the operation, with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) launching overnight to neutralize surface-to-surface missile launchers, radar systems, and air defense networks. These strikes from within were not high yield in firepower but strategically designed to dismantle Iranian defenses, create temporary blind spots in radar coverage, and confuse ground coordination during the critical opening moments of the Israeli air campaign. The base was established through gradual smuggling of drones, surveillance gear, and command modules via Mossad intelligence networks, and is believed to have operated with local assistance from sleeper cells or sympathetic insiders. The fact that such a base could remain operational and undetected until the attack suggests not merely a security lapse but a level of structural penetration of Iranian state institutions.

Further evidence of Israeli electronic and intelligence superiority emerged from their use of jamming systems and previously tested air corridors, made possible through partial complicity or evasion of regional air traffic control systems. While this is conceivable for stealth aircraft, it is almost impossible for refueling tankers — suggesting either pre-cleared aerial routes or degraded radar visibility due to internal disruption.

This integrated operation targeted Iran's strategic triad: nuclear infrastructure, ballistic missile systems, and senior leadership. The convergence of cyber, kinetic, and autonomous strikes



reflects a new playbook for 21st-century warfare, where manned and unmanned systems are fused under a single operational tempo governed by machine learning and predictive analytics. The diffusion of AI-assisted warfare is no longer hypothetical — it is unfolding in real time in the Middle East.

## **Iran isn't Hezbollah**

**Ross Harrison**  
***Senior Fellow***

In what appears to be a bold attempt to cripple Iran's nuclear program in its June 13 attacks on Iran's nuclear and military facilities across the country, Israel seems to be applying tactics drawn from its 2024 playbook for dealing with Hezbollah. Last year, Israel employed remote explosives and a series of targeted assassinations to severely weaken Hezbollah's leadership structure and its military capabilities.

Now, based on preliminary reports, Israel appears to be pursuing a similar strategy with Iran — aiming to achieve the same strategic effect through the assassination of key figures, including Iran's top military commander, Brig. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, and the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Gen. Hossein Salami, as well as several prominent nuclear scientists.

While such actions may deal a blow to Iran's capabilities, the analogy to Hezbollah is deeply flawed. Iran is a modern nation-state with far more institutional resilience, strategic depth, and far greater capacity to absorb and respond to attacks than the militia Hezbollah.

There are several reasons why this approach is unlikely to succeed in the Iranian context. First, despite the erosion of the regime's legitimacy over the past decade, an external attack is likely to rally national support around the government. The highly nationalistic Iranian people are likely to view the strike as an unprovoked assault on their national sovereignty and an affront to their country's dignity. Therefore, any Iranian retaliatory moves are likely to be supported and perhaps even cheered by a wide swath of Iranians.

Second, the narrative that Israel is the aggressor and Iran is a victim could prevail, both within Iran and possibly across the region and the international community. This perception is especially potent given that Iran was engaged in diplomatic negotiations with the United States to limit its nuclear program. While talks seemed to be at a standoff, it appears that not all diplomatic options had been exhausted with Washington before Jerusalem launched such a brazen attack. Given this, Israel's actions may not only damage its own legitimacy but also



undermine broader regional support from the Gulf Arab countries, which increasingly see Israel as a threat to regional stability. This, added to the carnage in Gaza and Israeli incursions in Lebanon and Syria, risks painting Israel, and not Iran, as a dangerous regional hegemon.

Third, and most crucially for US interests, this escalation may foreclose any opportunity for diplomatic engagement with Iran, undercutting the Iranian president, Masoud Pezeshkian, who ran for office on a platform of rapprochement and could now play a political price for that stance. If there was any window — however narrow — for a reset or recalibration of US-Iran relations, it has likely been slammed shut, at least for now.

Israel and the United States must recognize that dealing with a nation-state like Iran requires more than tactical military victories. Unlike Hezbollah, which operated largely in an international vacuum, Iran is embedded in a complex web of regional and international relationships.

As the Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz famously said, war is the continuation of politics by other means. It remains unclear whether Israel's military actions are guided by any coherent political endgame — one that is achievable, constructive for Israeli security, and mindful of broader regional stability. Absent such a strategy, the risks of escalation without resolution loom large.

## **Lebanon's government must act to prevent a new Israel-Lebanon war**

**Fadi Nicholas Nassar**  
***Senior Fellow***

All remains quiet on the Lebanon-Israel front, for now. Despite rhetoric from Beirut condemning Israel's unilateral strikes on Iran, Hezbollah has so far taken no steps to retaliate on Tehran's behalf. For an organization forged to be the tip of Iran's spear, this current posture of restraint underscores the severity of its decimation. Hezbollah's military infrastructure in South Lebanon has been significantly degraded. There is little appetite for war in Lebanon after more than a year of conflict with Israel inflicted billions in losses on a country already mired in crisis and ended in the group's strategic defeat. Hezbollah now finds itself in the uncomfortable position it has long aimed to put its foes in — losing legitimacy if it responds and credibility if it does not.

Yet the current calm should not be mistaken for stability. Israel's strikes on Iran, which mirror its playbook in decapitating Hezbollah last year, mark a decisive shift in Israel's security doctrine that Lebanon's new leadership cannot afford to ignore. Israel is in control of the escalation



ladder, and the recent strike in Beirut, on the eve of Eid al-Adha, was a warning that without full implementation of the November cease-fire and Hezbollah's complete disarmament, preemptive military escalation remains firmly on the table. While Lebanon's cautious leadership may be tempted to wait until the broader geopolitical security balance is negotiated, it cannot afford to fall into the familiar trap of Lebanese passivity.

For Lebanon's new government, this moment is extremely perilous. It cannot afford a conflict with Israel or a protracted internal conflict with Hezbollah. Still, in the urgency of the moment lies a narrow opening to remove the country from the path of direct fallout from a broader regional war that could risk its ruin. Lebanon's President Joseph Aoun has long vowed to pursue the path of negotiation to disarm Hezbollah without incurring the risk of civil strife. Now, he can leverage the shifting security realities and internal mood to avert conflict at all costs to convince Hezbollah to demilitarize in the capital. If legitimately pursued as key to safeguarding Lebanon's interests, it is a move that could bolster sufficient local buy-in. Beirut need not walk this tenuous road alone. Washington can offer robust support for this initiative as a key, irreversible step toward disarmament to hold off a pre-emptive Israeli strike. On the flip side, Washington and its regional allies can telegraph to Tehran that military escalation from Lebanon has already proven that it will only end in more losses for Iran and Hezbollah. None of that can happen unless Lebanon's new leadership avoids following the disastrous path of its predecessors and fulfills its responsibility to prioritize the protection of the country's interests and safety of its people.

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