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A Brief Overview of Iranian and Israeli Strategies following Operations Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer

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“Operation Rising Lion,” the codename for Israel’s combined military and intelligence attack that began on 13 June 2025 against Iranian nuclear, military, and individual targets, has consigned the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) to a dire strategic dilemma. The IRI’s quandary became much greater after the United States launched “Operation Midnight Hammer” against Iranian nuclear sites on 22 June. If not calculated correctly, Tehran’s decisions are likely to prompt a change of the clerical-governing *nezam* (system/regime) and deliver a victory for Israel’s longstanding strategy of eliminating its greatest strategic threat. This article, after a brief review of the geostrategic policies of the IRI and Israel, will analyze both countries’ options going forward as well as examine what role the United States might play should the Iranian *nezam* decide to retaliate against U.S. targets or interests.

Grand Strategy of the IRI

As this author has argued elsewhere in *MCU Insights*, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the IRI has followed a grand strategy “shaped by an intertwined, and seemingly self-contradictory combination of historical, geopolitical, denominational, ethnolinguistic, political and military factors based on Thucydidean realism, albeit laced with Shi’ite esoterica.”¹ The last factor has been dominant in determining the Iranian *nezam*’s grand strategy toward Israel. In summation, leaders in Tehran have consistently called for the destruction of the State of Israel by various means, while always trying to keep their homeland out of direct confrontation with Israel or its main ally, the United States. One of the instruments the IRI cultivated from the early 1980s was what it refers to as the “Axis of Resistance”—more commonly known as Iran’s proxies. It was through these proxies that the IRI, indirectly, achieved their most devastating attack on Israel on 7 October 2023.

Israel’s Strategic Calculations on the IRI

The modern idea of Israel was formed based on the nineteenth-century Zionist ideology of reviving Jewish nationalism and framing the Jews as a distinct people constructed around the Biblical narrative of the 12 tribes of Israel. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, in major part, was directly related to the Holocaust, the attempt to realize the Nazis’ stated goal of elimination of the Jewish people. As such, one of the fundamental underpinnings of the strategy of Israel is safeguarding the Jewish people from credible threats of annihilation. This is central to understanding Israel’s relations

with the IRI. Currently, the IRI is the only country or political entity (nonstate actor) that has consistently and officially called for the destruction of Israel and that has been diligently working on the means to attain this goal. Other threats, sometimes manifested by Tehran's proxies, in direct confrontation with Israel, such as the conflicts with Hezbollah, or acts of terror by Hamas or others, such as the 7 October 2023 attacks, are deemed to be manageable threats. Direct attacks using conventional weapons by the IRI, as was the case in October 2024, are also mitigatable. However, a political system with clear intentions of seeking Israel's destruction and the means to do so is what leaders in Jerusalem have not accepted as a manageable threat, and it is this threat that serves as the core reason for the massive attacks that were launched in June 2025 on Iranian targets.

Events Leading to "Rising Lion"

Throughout 2024, Israel systematically and methodically eliminated Iran's proxies. They killed Ismail Haniyeh, the political leader of Hamas, inside an Iranian military guesthouse, exposing the ability of Israeli intelligence to penetrate the *nezam's* inner sanctums. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) also killed Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah—the IRI's most loyal, capable, longest serving proxy.

The IRI's response in April, dubbed "True Promise," in concert with several of its proxies, involved launching unmanned attack drones and ballistic missiles on Israeli targets. However, this failed to cause any significant damage, mainly due to Israel's multilayered air defense capabilities and efforts by other countries, including the United States, to destroy the incoming projectiles.

In mid-April, Israel launched a very limited strike against one of the IRI's S-300 long-range air defense systems in Isfahan. The Center for Strategic and International Studies described this action as walking a "tightrope between escalating the conflict further and inaction, while also signaling to Tehran that it could conduct precision strikes against strategic locations—such as Iran's Natanz nuclear enrichment facility and its broader air defense system."² Then, in early October, under the moniker "True Promise 2," the IRI, with no involvement from its proxies, launched nearly 200 ballistic missiles at Israel, targeting mainly military installations but causing minor damage. Israel's response, named "Operation Days of Repentance," came in late October with a variety of stand-off and stand-in capabilities, targeting mis-

sile production facilities, air defense capabilities, and other military assets, but not nuclear sites.

Looking back at the 2024 direct military engagements between the two adversaries, a few points stand out. First, with the successful escalation of what Israel calls the "campaign between wars" and by targeting the IRI's proxies, the authorities in Tehran were forced to conduct an involuntary reassessment of their longstanding grand strategy of keeping their homeland away from direct conflict with Israel or the United States.³

Second, the IRI's longhand strategy of relying on proxies is no longer an operational option. Most of their proxies have either been destroyed or deterred or have decided not to follow Tehran's call. Syria, the IRI's most important state ally and base of operations against Israel, has been taken out of the game with the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Currently, only the Houthis (officially known as Ansar Allah), who control the Yemeni government and parts of Yemen, remain active. However, unlike the IRI's other proxies, the Houthis were neither formed by nor always follow the dictates of their Iranian allies.

Third, in the absence of the longhand strategy, the IRI decided to take on Israel directly to preserve a modicum of respectability and showcase the range, accuracy, and numbers of its ballistic missiles and drones—the two most formidable military hardware assets in the Iranian arsenal.

Fourth, Israel's multilayered attacks against the IRI's proxies and on the Iranian homeland have exposed several fundamental weaknesses in the Islamic *nezam's* overall strategic calculations:

- Catastrophic intelligence failures, both at home and among the proxies.
- Limitation of the effectiveness of ballistic missiles and drones as the main tool of warfare against an adversary armed with multilayered defensive measures and domestic and foreign supplies of munitions.
- Serious gaps in the IRI's homeland air defense systems, leading to questions on the reliability of Russia as a strategic partner and provider of its most advanced air defense systems.
- Lack of international support, including diplomatic niceties, especially from its two powerful strategic partners—China and Russia.

Fifth, given the limitations and failures noted above, the

authorities within the IRI decided not to continue engaging Israel directly. Consequently, they withheld executing Operation True Promise 3, which had been promised right after Israel's late October 2024 attacks on the IRI, until 13 June 2025 as a response to Israel's Operation Rising Lion.

The Nuclear Dimension

Shortly after returning to the White House in January 2025, U.S. president Donald J. Trump issued a National Security Presidential Memorandum articulating that "it is the policy of the United States that Iran be denied a nuclear weapon and intercontinental ballistic missiles." Initially, the intent of this policy was to enact "maximum pressure" on the IRI.⁴ Later, to achieve the policy's goal, the United States favored a negotiated settlement, albeit with a 60-day deadline, to ensure that the IRI did not have access to nuclear weapons.

At first, the IRI's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was reluctant to engage in talks with the Trump administration, mainly because it was Trump who, during his first administration (2017–21), withdrew the United States from the international nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).⁵ In the IRI's mind, Trump was not deemed to be trustworthy. Moreover, the IRI had Trump on their hit list for ordering the killing of Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) major general Qassem Soleimani, the celebrated commander of the Qods Forces, in 2020.

Nevertheless, strategic pragmatism and survival instincts overpowered the sense of betrayal and desire for revenge, prompting Tehran to open indirect talks with Washington through the mediation of the Sultanate of Oman. For its position, the IRI insisted on the right to enrich uranium—ostensibly at a level lower than 5 percent—and on the reversal of the sanctions imposed by the United States. Washington's position, as the talks progressed, seems to have hardened to prohibiting any enrichment inside the country. The sixth round of these talks was scheduled in Muscat for 15 June; however, it was cancelled after the Israeli attacks on 13 June, a day after the deadline set by Trump.

Since 2002, the IRI's nuclear program, inclusive of negotiations to limit its scope and purpose, has been a lifeline for its grand strategy of safeguarding its regime and providing it legitimacy in the international arena. This same rationale, as this author had argued in these pages, was one of the primary reasons for the IRI's willingness to enter negotia-

tions on curtailing its nuclear activities, which culminated in the JCPOA, more than a decade ago.⁶

With serious reservations, Israel had accepted the JCPOA as a partial and temporary stopgap to the IRI's enrichment program, despite its limitations of not covering the delivery or weaponization systems and technologies. However, the IRI and its proxies remained the most clear and present danger to the overall security of Israel.

U.S.-IRI Talks and Israeli Calculations

The 7 October 2023 attacks on Israel, carried out by two of the IRI's proxies, became the watershed moment for Israel to address these threats, and it employed a series of military and intelligence operations to decimate much of the IRI's proxy forces. Former Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett, during his short tenure (June 2021–June 2022), coined the "Octopus Doctrine," which recognizes the proxies of the IRI as the tentacles and the IRI as the head of the octopus trying to crush Israel. On 1 October 2024, after the second direct Iranian attack on Israel, Bennett, harkening back to this doctrine, wrote on X that his country had "its greatest opportunity in 50 years to change the face of the Middle East [by destroying] Iran's nuclear program."⁷

Unlike in the case of the JCPOA, Israel seems determined not to allow a negotiated settlement. The JCPOA negotiations resulted in allowing the IRI to preserve its nuclear enrichment facilities and programs and to continue producing low-enriched uranium. While the U.S.-IRI talks were ongoing, the position of Israel was the total dismantlement of the IRI's nuclear program. To the IRI, this option was unacceptable, tantamount to surrender and national humiliation. Also, as noted above, authorities in Tehran believe that their nuclear program is a main pillar for both the *nezam*'s and the state's security.

Therefore, it is not surprising that amid Israeli attacks and counteraccusations by the IRI's highest authorities of U.S. support—and even involvement—in these operations, both conservative and more moderate media outlets in the IRI have called for the resumption of talks. In a frontpage article on 16 June, the conservative daily, *Jomhouri-ye Islami*, an outlet closely associated with Khamenei, argued that while it might come as a strange proposition to some, talks must continue with the United States because "halting the talks is what Israel wants." Despite the destruction of the above-ground structures of Iran's main nuclear enrichment facility

in Natanz and the elimination of several prominent nuclear scientists and military personnel involved in the IRGC's strategic weapons systems, one of the most anti-American media outlets of the IRI is encouraging nuclear negotiations as a safeguard of the *nezam*. The *nezam* is facing its most dire test of survival in the face of the unprecedented Israeli onslaught that has resulted in successful operations to eliminate a large number of the IRGC military leadership, intelligence personnel, and nuclear scientists.

“Midnight Hammer”

Absent any serious attempt by the IRI authorities to engage in negotiations—which would have signaled a humiliating defeat for the IRI—the United States decided to launch an operation on 22 June. The scope was intentionally limited to damaging or destroying nuclear sites in Fordo, Natanz, and Isfahan. The central target was the Fordo enrichment facilities, which are dug into a mountainside and therefore immune from damage by conventional weapons, save the GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator that only the United States has and can deploy.

From the available news, it appears that the IRI is contemplating, or at least threatening, several responses to the U.S. strike, including but not limited to the closing of the Straits of Hormuz, withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—ostensibly signaling Iran's intention to have nuclear weapons—and attacks against U.S. bases and interests. Israel has been able to withstand what the IRI has

launched so far, and it does not seem that there are any surprise weapons that can escalate hostilities against Israel.

There are many strategic dilemmas for the Iranians, the regional states—including Israel—and the United States as this war unfolds. The various players need to think about their options should the IRI *nezam* collapse or withstand the current war with the nuclear option intact or at least not fully or verifiably dismantled. For the United States, it is imperative to have a comprehensive strategy to stabilize Iran if the United States determines that additional action is needed, or the region could spiral into wider chaos.

ENDNOTES

1. Amin Tarzi, “Israel-Iran Conflict: A Change in Iran's Strategic Assessment?” *MES Insights* 15, no. 5 (October 2024). In 2025, this journal was renamed *MCU Insights* to reflect the evolving nature of the content and the university.
2. Alexander Palmer et al., “Assessing Israel's Strike on Iran,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 3 May 2024.
3. Tarzi, “Israel-Iran Conflict.”
4. Donald J. Trump, “National Security Presidential Memorandum/NSPM-2,” White House, 4 February 2025.
5. Daniel Brumberg, “Back to the Future: Trump's Emerging Iran ‘Strategy,’” *MES Insights* 8, no. 5 (October 2017).
6. Amin Tarzi, “The Safeguard of the Iranian Regime: Nuclear Weapons Program,” *MES Insights* 4, no. 5 (November 2013).
7. Naftali Bennett, post on X, 1 October 2024.