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# Israel's Attack on Iran (2): Balance of Power and Tehran's Options

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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### Unit for Political Studies

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# Table of Contents

Israel’s Preparations for War ..... 1

The Balance of Power and Iran’s Response ..... 2

Conclusion ..... 3

As Israel guards its monopoly over nuclear arms in the Middle East, its political and security cabinet decided on 9 June to launch a war on Iran, in coordination with the administration of US President, Donald Trump. At dawn on 13 June, it launched its war of aggression with the aim of obliterating Iran's nuclear project, destroying its missile programme and weakening or even, ultimately, toppling the regime.

Several factors helped create the conditions that allowed Israel to take this decision and obtain Washington's approval. Among them, the key factor was Iran's loss of many of the pillars of its former strength, in a string of rapid developments, some resulting from Israeli actions or its exploitation of the situation in the wake of the 7 October attacks. The most prominent of these developments were the following: First, the clear and decisive neutralization of the strength of Hezbollah, whose arsenal constituted a strategic reserve for Iran to deter Israel from attacking Iranian nuclear facilities; second, the loss of Iran's military presence in Syria; third, the fall of the Assad regime; fourth, Israel's neutralization of the military power of Hamas; and fifth, Trump's return to power, seven years after he withdrew the US from the Iranian nuclear agreement, officially the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) during his first term.

Israel's decision to go to war was the culmination of a nearly three-decade campaign of systematic incitement against Iran and its nuclear project. It bears mentioning that as part of Israel's policy of keeping its position as the sole nuclear-armed state in the region, Israel destroyed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981 and a nuclear facility in Syria in 2007.

## Israel's Preparations for War

Israel had made great efforts on various levels to ready itself for an attack on Iran. In recent months, it finished acquiring (from the Trump administration) the munitions and weapons it would need to strike deep inside its foe's territory-notably air-to-air refuelling aircraft. Yet its preparations far predate this. For more than three decades, Israel has been restructuring its armed forces to adapt to the evolving nature of modern warfare as well as the changing nature of the enemies it faces, in light of peace agreements with various Arab countries, some of which officially abandoned the military option as concerned retaking Israeli-occupied Arab and Palestinian territories.

In this context, Israel decided to transform its military into a "small, smart army," in the words of former chief of staff and prime minister Ehud Barak. It focused on developing the air force, equipping it with the latest military aircraft and drones while developing the military intelligence wing, various security agencies, military cyber systems, and, more recently, its Artificial Intelligence (AI) capabilities, allocating huge budgets for these operations. For 50 years now, the Israeli Air Force, which has over 90,000 regular and reserve personnel, has accounted for more than half of Israel's total military budget. This process of restructuring extended Israel's strike power to the "second circle" of countries beyond its immediate neighbours, those whose borders lie more than 1,000 kilometres from its own-including Iran.

## The Balance of Power and Iran's Response

The military balance of power between Israel and Iran is heavily tilted in favour of the latter. Israel has hundreds of the world's most advanced fighter and bomber jets, modern aerial refuelling planes, hundreds of advanced drones, numerous satellites, and long-range precision missiles. It also has a modern navy and numerous advanced submarines capable of launching strikes against Iranian ports and targets inside Iran. It also has at its disposal several of its own advanced anti-missile systems, in addition to the THAAD anti-ballistic missile defence system supplied, along with operating crews, by the US.

Israel also has several hundred nuclear, hydrogen, and neutron bombs, as well as the capacity to launch a second nuclear strike, thanks to its six German-made Dolphin-class submarines, which are equipped to launch long-range missiles carrying nuclear warheads. It also has a fortified command centre, deep under a hill in West Jerusalem near the Israeli Prime Minister's residence, that protected against nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, enabling it to manage a nuclear war if one were to take place.<sup>1</sup>

By comparison, Iran's military capabilities have been severely curtailed by a decades-old sanctions regime. It lacks a modern air force, and its aircraft-most of which date back to the Shah's reign-cannot reach Israel. Its air defence systems are for the most part manufactured locally, and are limited in their capabilities. It does have a small number of ageing Russian S-300 and S-400 long-range surface-to-air missile systems, but these struggle to intercept state-of-the-art Israeli aircraft. This means that Iran's response to Israel must rely instead on the long-range missiles it has developed at home over recent decades. However, these projectiles are fairly inaccurate and pose little real threat to Israeli strategic infrastructure, such as nuclear facilities, power plants, airports, and ports.

By contrast, Israel is capable of targeting Iranian nuclear facilities and strategic infrastructure over an extended period, as long as it enjoys the support of the Trump administration and continues to obtain the necessary equipment and munitions to carry on bombing targets. The Israeli Air Force appears to have secured relative dominance over Iranian airspace, and many Israeli drones are now capable of flying over Tehran and other areas of Iran at any time, gathering intelligence and launching strikes against specific targets.

Israel is unlikely to limit its strikes to Iranian nuclear and military infrastructure. Rather, it can be expected gradually to extend its target bank to include Iranian economic infrastructure such as gas and oil facilities, power plants, factories, ports, and airports. Israel is making every effort to obtain the Trump administration's approval to target all of Iran's strategic economic infrastructure. It is also seeking to drag the US into the fray, as a direct and active belligerent, to ensure that every component

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<sup>1</sup> Mahmoud Muhareb, *Israel's Nuclear Policy and its National Security Decision-making Process* (Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), in Arabic, p.60-61.

of the Iranian nuclear project is eliminated. The Israel military cannot on its own reach Iran's most heavily fortified underground facilities, such as the Fordow site near Qom.

That said, Iran is putting up staunch resistance, primarily with its missiles. Yet it faces another major challenge: that of maintaining domestic cohesion and dealing with the massive economic impact of the war, which will deepen as the conflict continues. Tehran can be expected to do everything in its power to avoid a military clash with the US, meaning it is unlikely to target American military bases or interests in the region, close the Strait of Hormuz, attack oil tankers, or hit the oil fields of its Arab neighbours. Such moves would give the US administration a justification for getting involved directly in the war, which is Israel's primary goal.

Accordingly, Iranian decision-makers will face several challenges and difficult decisions over the coming weeks, including whether to resume negotiations with Washington regarding Tehran's nuclear programme or allow international observers to monitor these activities-or whether to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Iran is unlikely to withdraw from the treaty or the negotiations. Yet the most important dilemma it faces is whether or not to embark on the production of a nuclear weapon. According to the available data, Iran possesses enough 60%-enriched uranium to manufacture approximately 10 atomic bombs. Even if the war were to drag on, it could enrich this to the necessary 90%, weapons-grade uranium within weeks. The key question in this regard is how long it would take Iran to produce its first nuclear bomb, mount it on a missile, and prepare it for launch. This would serve as a deterrent against Israel, or at least restore the balance of deterrence, given that the use of nuclear weapons is near-unthinkable. The issue is therefore complex and has little chance of completion.

Israel is likely to attempt to place the question of Iran high on the Trump administration's agenda, urging it to stage a direct military intervention to prevent the country from acquiring a nuclear weapon. It may also attempt to make the fate of enriched uranium a central issue for Washington, to pressure Iran to abandon its atomic programme as part of any solution.

## Conclusion

Israel is seeking to continue its war against Iran until it achieves its goals-providing it has the support of the US administration. It will continue to strike Iranian nuclear facilities in order to inflict as much damage as possible. It will also seek to broaden its targets to include economic infrastructure, particularly oil and gas facilities and power plants, in order to weaken and humiliate the Iranian regime both domestically and in the region in the hope of precipitating its downfall. Whatever the scenario, Israel is doing its utmost to persuade the US to get involved directly in the war, believing that this would guarantee an end to the Iranian nuclear project.