

Operation Rising Lion: Insights from Israel's 12-Day War Against Iran





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I. Executive Summary

A synchronized opening strike combining fighter jets, traveling some 1,000 miles, and on-the-ground intelligence assets hitting senior military commanders and nuclear scientists all within minutes. Israeli warplanes flying uncontested over the skies of Tehran and then refueling freely above Syria before returning to base. Drones loitering for hours, hunting Iranian missile launchers, eliminating hundreds of them—more than half of Iran’s arsenal—in less than two weeks. All this might have seemed unthinkable just a year prior: the distance too far, Iran’s defenses too advanced, the threat of retaliation by its proxies too grave, its nuclear facilities too deeply buried, Israel’s arsenal too small for success. Yet, Israel did it, pulling off an operational masterpiece. Operation Rising Lion, Israel’s June 13-24, 2025, campaign against Iran reset the Middle East’s strategic landscape.

Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told us that he personally chose the name “Operation Rising Lion” after a biblical prophecy that the people of Israel would rise like lions from adversity.¹ And rise they did during those 12 days, displaying intelligence and military capabilities that exceed those of any other American partner. More than just operational excellence, however, Israel achieved major strategic effect—advancing not just its own but also American national security.

Securing and building on these impressive accomplishments, however, requires understanding why the war was necessary in the first place and what it achieved. But, as we realized during a week-long fact-finding trip to Israel, the understanding of the 12-Day War among Israel’s political, military, and intelligence leadership differs in several significant ways from how it is seen in Washington, specifically when it comes to its strategic necessity, operational objectives, outcomes, and what happens next.

In this report, beyond presenting an operational and tactical account of Israel’s remarkable military success against Iran, we seek to provide insights into Israel’s strategic thinking that led to Operation Rising Lion and an assessment of regional security dynamics after its conclusion. U.S. and Israeli interests already align. Ensuring that their regional strategies and operational plans do as well, especially when backed by Israel’s potent military capabilities, is the best way to advance those interests.

A. A 12-Day War, 30 Years in the Making, Started on October 7

One fundamental difference between Israel and Washington is captured by the very name bestowed upon the conflict in the United States: the 12-Day War. The American news media often portrays it as a direct and short bout of fighting between Israel and Iran, one that started with a bolt from the blue.² In Israel, however, Operation Rising Lion was described to us as just the latest engagement in a much broader and longer conflict. It might have lasted only 12 days, but it was three decades in the making.³

Israel’s political and military leaders described the operation to us as the culmination of Iran’s decades-long pursuit of Israel’s elimination. Over the last thirty years, this goal moved from the centerpiece of the Islamic Republic’s ideology, to a strategic plan, to, in recent years, an operational capability.⁴ Iran’s plan to destroy Israel had three elements: a nuclear weapons capability; ballistic missile arsenals; and a “ring of fire” made up of terrorist proxies surrounding Israel. Particularly in the last 15 years, Iran had made significant advances in all three areas, putting it potentially ahead of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s self-proclaimed schedule, advertised on a giant countdown clock in Tehran, that “Israel won’t exist” by 2040.⁵

Hamas’s horrific October 7, 2023, attack on Israel was the result, though not the full expression, of Iran’s long-term planning for the annihilation of Israel.⁶ But rather than weaken, let alone destroy Israel, it instead set the stage for Israel’s systematic dismantling of Iran’s regional strategy. In the immediate aftermath of October 7, Israeli leadership realized that the conflict could only conclude with a direct confrontation with Iran.⁷ Iran was, as Israel had started calling it, the “head of the octopus.”⁸ And so long as the head remained untouched, Israeli officials understood, there would always be another tentacle, or seven, lashing out at them. That was a threat that, after October 7, Israel was no longer willing to tolerate.

By the end of 2024, acting sequentially, Israel had effectively lopped off one Iranian tentacle after another—degrading Hamas and Hezbollah; eliminating Syrian conventional capabilities after the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime; and directly targeting Iran’s most advanced air defenses.⁹ In doing so, Israel had created the opportunity to act against the head of the octopus itself. Not only was Hezbollah no longer firing upon Israel, but its second-strike capability—the threat that it would darken the skies over Israel with thousands of rockets and missiles in retaliation for any Israeli strike on Iran—was eliminated. So, too, was any obstacle that Syrian air defenses could pose to Israeli jets en route to Iran, opening a path to Iran that was not only free of military risks but also, by allowing them to bypass Jordan, political ones. With one part of Iran’s three-pronged strategy, its proxies, eliminated, Israel was now free to address the remaining two: its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs.

B. Thinking Bigger, Quickly: From Surgical Strike to Comprehensive Campaign

Herein lies a second major difference in how we heard Operation Rising Lion discussed in Israel—it was not just about Iran’s nuclear program. The existential threat posed to Israel by Iran’s expanding ballistic missile program played just as big a role in the rationale for the operation—and an even bigger one in shaping it—as its nuclear weapons work. In fact, military and political leaders we spoke with suggested that the missile threat might have been enough to trigger Israeli action on its own.

By the end of 2024, although Israel had cleared a path over Syria to act against Iran directly, Tehran was trying to slam shut the window of opportunity for Israeli operations by accelerating its nuclear weapons research and ballistic missile production. The head of the octopus was exposed but rapidly growing new tentacles. Iran’s October 1, 2024, ballistic missile attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli response on October 26, 2024, in which it struck air defense, nuclear, and ballistic missile sites, proved to be a fateful hinge point and the genesis of Operation Rising Lion.¹⁰

Already in early 2025, U.S. intelligence assessed Iran was researching a cruder, but still testable and deployable, nuclear weapon that would not require enriching uranium up to 90 percent.¹¹ Following Israel’s October 26 retaliation, this work appeared to have accelerated further. According to Israeli intelligence officials—and they told us that these findings were shared with and agreed on by the United States—elements within Iran’s nuclear weapons group had begun to look for ways to get closer to the ability to assemble a working nuclear device, without actually contravening the Supreme Leader’s fatwa against building such a weapon. Though it remains unclear how much time Tehran actually needed to complete a workable weapon, and how quickly it was surmounting the final technical hurdles, its program had become so advanced and opaque that Israel, especially post-October 7, 2023, assessed it could not afford to gamble on detecting the proverbial “turn of the final screw” as Iran assembled a bomb.

The October Israel-Iran exchange of fire was perhaps even more consequential when it came to Iran’s ballistic missile program. Israel, with significant assistance from the United States, intercepted many of the 200 missiles Iran fired and prevented any Israeli fatalities. This successful cooperation was made possible by the 2021 switch, shifting Israel from U.S. European to Central Command (CENTCOM). Nevertheless, dozens of missiles struck Israeli bases and open areas, and definitely stressed Israeli and U.S. missile interceptor stockpiles—necessitating the rushed deployment, a few weeks later, of the first U.S. land-based Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery to Israel along with nearly 100 U.S. troops.¹²

The attack highlighted to Israeli leadership, as they put it to us, that the distance from Iran to Israel was not 1,000 miles but rather the 9 minutes it takes for a ballistic missile to reach Tel Aviv. This made clear the cost and limitations of playing defense against Iran’s missile threat. In response, therefore, Israel struck an Iranian facility housing planetary mixers used to create solid fuel for ballistic missiles. Israel’s then-defense minister suggested the strike had degraded Iran’s ability to produce long-range missiles by over

90 percent. Unfortunately, the reality proved far different.¹³ Rather than slow down Iran's missile work as intended, it kickstarted it.

Iran rapidly moved to expand medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) production, with the goal of manufacturing over 1,000 missiles per year. This would have enabled it to triple its total missile stockpile, from some 2,000 missiles capable of reaching Israel at the end of 2024 to over 8,000 missiles within two years.¹⁴ At the same time, it also was pursuing upgrades to the precision of its munitions to an accuracy of plus or minus five meters.

This expansion of Iran's missile capabilities represented an existential threat to Israel in its own right. With the ability to launch far more intense and sustained barrages, Iran could severely tax Israel's capacity to intercept incoming threats, strain its supply of interceptor missiles, and risk significant psychological and material damage. For Israel's political and military leaders, no longer willing to watch enemies amass deadly capabilities, it was a threat that demanded action.

It was this realization that the Iranian threat was bigger than just its nuclear program that spurred a major operational redesign, in just a matter of months, giving rise to Operation Rising Lion.¹⁵ Israel initially conceived of its operation against Iran's nuclear program as a series of pinpoint surgical strikes targeting only Iran's enrichment facilities at Natanz and Fordow. In the face of an escalating Iranian arms race, it reimagined its planning, moving from a limited strike to a comprehensive campaign. This new operational plan—first conceived in the spring of 2024 but only coming together in the last months of the year—hinged on achieving air superiority and utilizing it to neutralize a much bigger portion of Iran's nuclear program, eliminate high-value individuals, and destroy critical elements of Iran's ballistic missile capabilities.¹⁶ It required Israel to do something it had never done before: take on a major regional power, over a thousand kilometers away from its border. More targets meant more sorties. To carry them out, the Israel Air Force (IAF) undertook the ambitious task of preparing its entire fleet for extended, long-range missions. Initially, planners did not envision the use of F-16s, given their more limited range and payload compared to the F-15I. However, as the campaign's scope expanded, Israeli planners added F-16s to strike packages, offering additional flexibility and sortie capacity.¹⁷

From the outset, however, Israeli planners were looking to June 2025 as the best window for launching this ambitious operation. They had to balance the time needed to adapt the force and develop new capabilities to meet operational demands against the risk of losing the window of opportunity. Not only were they racing against Iran's nuclear weapons research and ballistic missile production but also against the threat of Iranian preemption. Israeli intelligence indicated that Iranian officials, well aware of their sudden vulnerability and the very real potential of an Israeli attack, were seriously debating launching between 700 and 1,000 ballistic missiles in a preemptive strike against Israel. There was a real concern that hundreds of missiles might rain down on Israeli bases, cratering runways, destroying jets, and effectively neutering Israel's air force.¹⁸

Despite this sense that they were racing against time, Israeli planners were also mindful of the need to complete their preparations. Contrary to reporting in the United States, we were told Israel had never planned to begin its operation in April or May 2025. In fact, Israeli commanders told us that some of the capabilities they needed for Operation Rising Lion did not come online until just days before the first jets took off.¹⁹

Once the jets launched, what unfolded was the most ambitious and effective Israeli air campaign in the Jewish state's history—or the history of any military other than our own—with unprecedented scale, precision, and tempo against a nation 75 times larger in geographical size. Within minutes of the campaign's opening, Israel had removed multiple senior military leaders, throwing the regime's command and control into disarray and demonstrating the strategic value of airpower and decapitation strikes. Over

twelve days, the IAF neutralized Iran's integrated air defenses; struck critical military and scientific leadership, and nuclear targets; and preserved freedom of action for follow-on operations—all without losing a single manned aircraft. Rising Lion's success demonstrated that Israel possesses the operational skill, technological edge, and strategic resolve to independently execute a long-range campaign that solidified its position as the dominant military power in the region and advanced not just its own national security but that of the United States as well. Meanwhile, Israel's incredible achievements were enabled by ever closer cooperation with the United States, both at the strategic and, perhaps even more crucially, operational level, particularly as a result of Israel's inclusion in CENTCOM.

C. Outcomes: Decision Making, Not Engineering

Operation Rising Lion, together with Operation Midnight Hammer, achieved decisive strategic effects against Iran's most threatening weapons programs. But how those effects are understood and discussed is yet another difference between Israel and the United States. Whereas in Washington the debate about effectiveness is treated largely as an engineering problem—what is the extent of physical destruction to Iran's nuclear facilities?—Israel treats it as a psychological one as well.

Leaders we met with did not dispute that Iran could rebuild its nuclear program, though they suggested the time it would need to do so was identical to the time it would take for them to start all over from scratch. They argued, however, that Operation Rising Lion has, at least for now, impacted Iranian leadership's calculus about *whether to rebuild*. The intent, as one high-level official told us, was not simply to *destroy things*, but to *break spirits*.²⁰ And break spirits they apparently did. Israeli intelligence officials told us that Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei suffered from a deep depression during, and even in the days after, the war, shaken by the loss of close confidants and by the realization that his commanders—who had assured him of victory over Israel—had deceived him.²¹

Whereas Israeli officials expressed some degree of confidence that the psychological impact of Operation Rising Lion on Iran's leadership and nuclear scientists would serve as an added deterrent, at least for the immediate future, they were far more concerned about Iran's ballistic missile program and air defenses.²² If Tehran is able to reconstitute these, the deterrent effect of those 12 days in June will diminish. Behind either a wall of air defenses or a missile shield, Iran will feel that it can again begin advancing towards a nuclear weapons capability with impunity. For Israel, thus, the fundamental achievements of Operation Rising Lion are not measured in damage done during the conflict but in the realization of new strategic possibilities created by it.

D. Down, But Not Out: The Current State of the Iranian Threat

For Israel, just as Operation Rising Lion started not on June 13 but more than 30 years ago, it did not end on June 24 and continues still. This is the final difference between Israeli and U.S. understandings of the war. While the war with Iran has dropped from American, and Israeli, too, for that matter, headlines, it is far from over for Israel's political leaders and military commanders. Nor will it be over, they made clear to us, so long as the Islamic Republic rules in Tehran.

Iran's losses during the war have forced its leadership to confront difficult choices about whether and how to reconstitute its air defenses, missile production, nuclear program, and terrorist networks. The threat of further Israeli, or U.S., military action certainly weighs on the minds of Iranian decision-makers. Just as significant a consideration are the trade-offs between external power projection and internal stability, Iran lacks the financial means to both rebuild its strategic ambitions and invest in improving living conditions for its people. And the latter are growing increasingly dire. Severe water shortages, energy crises, and a collapsing health sector have deepened public dissatisfaction and weakened the regime's grip on power. The regime's survival now hinges on its ability to navigate these competing demands.

Indications suggest that, so far, Iran is trying to walk a fine line between rebuilding, avoiding provoking Israel, and maintaining its grasp on power. It has begun to take tentative steps towards reconstituting its capabilities, alarming Israeli officials, but without yet doing anything so threatening as to provoke renewed Israeli strikes. Already, reports indicate that Iran has begun rebuilding some of the missile production facilities destroyed during the war, imported precursor chemicals for ballistic missile fuel from China, and might have imported Chinese air defense systems as well.²³ So, too, has it resumed working on new nuclear sites despite Israeli intelligence suggesting it has not yet made a decision on whether to restart enrichment.²⁴ At home, a growing dissatisfaction is increasingly evident, despite the regime's attempts to rally its people around a nationalist message.²⁵

Nor has the threat of Iran's proxy network disappeared. Despite Israel's successful campaigns against Iran's network, the Houthis remain a powerful and resilient force while other proxies like Hezbollah, though severely weakened, continue to persist and pose ongoing threats. Israeli leaders made clear to us that, though they do not yet understand the group's center of gravity, they intend to find it and go after it, just as they did with Hezbollah.

E. The Way Forward: A New Campaign Between the Wars

What Operation Rising Lion achieved was a strategic resetting, a reassertion of Israeli strength and diminution of Iranian power, but one that will not last without concerted political will and military might to maintain it. In the same way that Israel successfully prevented the strengthening of Iran in Syria and the transfer of advanced capabilities to Hezbollah through a decade-long "campaign between the wars," so, too, is it necessary for the United States and Israel to develop a joint strategy—encompassing preemptive military force, alongside diplomatic, intelligence, and economic measures—to maintain active pressure on Iran to deter and prevent it from rebuilding its military and nuclear capabilities. This new campaign between the wars should include both defensive and offensive elements, seek to broaden participation and cooperation to include other regional actors, and build pressure on Iran by denying it the ability to access funding, resources, or material from its global partners.

i. Double Down on Defense

The conflict with Iran has transformed from the kinetic operations of June to an arms race: Iranian missiles against Israeli, and U.S., missile interceptors.²⁶ Operation Rising Lion gave Israel and the United States a head start to find new air defense solutions that bend the cost curve and solve the production bottlenecks that plague current systems. This time must be used productively. Neither Israel nor the United States can afford to rest on the laurels of their success in defending against Iranian missiles in 2024 and 2025.

To secure the gains won by Operations Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer, both nations must work together to win this arms race. It is imperative the United States and Israel should double down on defense by expanding interceptor production and investing in joint research and development of next-generation air defense capabilities.

Through fortifying the defense industrial base, addressing capability gaps, and encouraging integrated cooperation across these sectors, both countries can jointly sustain a competitive advantage, effectively address emerging threats, and facilitate enduring security throughout the region. New Israeli technologies—the Iron Beam directed energy system coming online to defend against short-range threats and a soon-to-be-operational Iron Dome 2.0 that can intercept an even wider range of aerial threats, more cheaply—provide near-term solutions. These investments in advancing air defense capabilities would have strategic repercussions beyond Israel. By offering to share them with Middle Eastern partners who make peace with Israel, the United States could build not just a new regional order, but also an integrated air and missile defense system that would increase the security of, while reducing the need for, U.S. deployments to the CENTCOM area of operations. And any new technologies developed with Israel could

also be integrated into either the Golden Dome project or the air defenses of U.S. bases abroad—helping keep America and American troops safe.

ii. Stay on Offense

The post-kinetic phase of Operation Rising Lion should not end just with enhanced defenses; the United States and Israel have an opportunity to press their advantage. To safeguard the strategic gains achieved in June, it is essential to remain on offense by denying Iran any opportunity to rebuild its nuclear and missile capabilities, while also working to degrade the remaining Iranian threat network—particularly the Houthis—and prevent Hezbollah’s resurgence in Lebanon. All while preparing for the very real possibility of the next war against Iran.

A sustained campaign between the wars, echoing Israel’s previous operations in Syria to disrupt Iranian support for Hezbollah, would be crucial for preventing Iran from rebuilding its strategic capabilities. This should start with both countries devoting additional collection resources and creating joint intelligence cells to track Iran and its proxies. It is crucial that the United States and Israel know whether, where, and how, Iran is rebuilding its air defenses, ballistic missile production and launch capabilities, and nuclear program. This should be matched by a joint policy process to establish clear redlines and responses if, and undoubtedly when, Iranian activities again start posing an unacceptable threat.

A similar process should focus on dismantling what remains of Iran’s “ring of fire”—the Houthis—while ensuring the rest of Iran’s proxies do not rearm. By preemptively targeting supply routes, weapons depots, and command centers, the United States and Israel could degrade Iran’s logistical and operational networks and send a clear signal of deterrence, making it more difficult and costly for Tehran to reestablish a threatening perimeter around Israel.

Ensuring Israel has the capabilities it needs to conduct future successful operations would also serve as a powerful deterrent while ensuring that, in either the ongoing campaign against Iranian reconstitution or potential future conflict, Israel will continue being able to defend itself, and U.S. security interests, by itself. The United States should expedite the delivery of KC-46 refuelers which provide better defenses, extended range, and greater fuel capacity, essential for supporting long-range missions deep into hostile territory such as Yemen or Iran. Although the first delivery of these tankers, purchased by Israel in 2020, is finally expected in 2026, the sooner Israel gets these, the better. The United States should also ensure the prepositioning of vital munitions and interceptors in the U.S. stockpile in Israel, WRSA-I, to prevent shortages in future conflicts. This should be more feasible, and beneficial for U.S. military planners, given Israel’s move to CENTCOM and thus the availability of munitions securely stored in Israel for U.S. operations in the Middle East.

iii. Deepen Regional Cooperation

Israel’s degradation of Iran’s proxies, nuclear program, and ballistic missiles has also created opportunities to build out broader and deeper regional security cooperation that can better defend and prevent Iran from building back. This can take the form of expanding the U.S. partnership with Israel, with even greater intelligence sharing and a new Memorandum of Understanding, due in 2028, that focuses on joint weapons development and production. It could also include expanding U.S. basing in Israel, which, compared to other regional bases, would provide greater freedom of action for American forces, robust air defense capabilities, and a unique geographic position at the intersection of multiple operational theaters.

Greater regional cooperation should also include working with Arab partners to reshape the strategic landscape of the Middle East through multidomain regional cooperation. This vision extends beyond the demonstrable successes with regional air defense against Iranian attacks targeting Israel. There is also immense potential to embrace broader collaboration in maritime security, counterterrorism, artificial

intelligence, and cyber resilience. Finally, the United States, Israel, and America's Arab partners should pursue deeper, mutually beneficial economic partnerships designed to strengthen regional prosperity while constraining Tehran's capacity for malign activity

iv. Block Iran's Global Networks

Iran's ability to rebuild will greatly depend upon its access to funding, resources, and material from its global partners. The less it is able to access assistance from its network of U.S. competitors and adversaries—China, Russia, North Korea—the more its rebuilding of air defense, ballistic missile, and nuclear capabilities will be impeded. The United States should, therefore, continue leading and expanding an international diplomatic campaign to isolate Iran politically and economically.

That process has already started with the snapping back of United Nations sanctions on Iran. But it is now vital that the United States work with its European and other partners to ensure that these sanctions—as well as existing U.S. measures—are fully enforced. This might require the use of both sticks and carrots, particularly with China, which both purchases 90 percent of Iran's still substantial oil exports and could provide it with the means.

This ongoing pressure would help ensure that the strategic gains made during Operation Rising Lion are preserved, reducing the likelihood of Iran regaining the capacity to project power through its proxy network. With further concerted economic and political pressure from the United States, Israelis also argued that the regime's grip on power might finally be pried loose.

Israel rose like a lion to defend not just itself, but the United States and the broader Middle East against a potent adversary. The intelligence dominance, operational ingenuity, and tactical lethality Israel demonstrated over 12 days in June puts it in a class of its own among U.S. partners. With greater military cooperation, regional strategic coordination, intelligence sharing, and economic pressure on Iran, the gains of Operation Rising Lion can be secured and built on, preventing Iran from reconstituting its nuclear and missile program, giving the Middle East a new opportunity for peace.

II. Strategic Context

The 12-Day War was 30 years in the making. For decades, Iran worked toward Israel's destruction along three lines of effort: expanding its nuclear program; building and refining its ballistic missile arsenal; and funding and arming a terrorist network surrounding the Jewish state. Hamas's surprise October 7, 2023, assault, and ensuing attacks by Iranian proxies, launched a seven-front war that proved the seriousness and severity of Iran's strategy for wiping Israel off the map. Over twenty months of fighting, Israel devastated Tehran's proxy network and weakened its air defenses but also twice faced massive aerial barrages from Iran. All these events set the stage for Operation Rising Lion. But it was Iran's move to accelerate nuclear weapons research and ballistic missiles production in late 2024 that ultimately led Israel to launch the operation.

A. An Existential Threat 30 Years in the Making: Iran's Plan for the Destruction of Israel

Enmity against the United States and Israel is at the core of the Islamic Republic of Iran's founding. Its first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, frequently referred to the United States as the "Great Satan" and Israel as the "Little Satan," a framing that Iranian officials have continued to this day. In December 2000, Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, called Israel a "cancerous tumour" that "must be removed from the region."²⁷ In 2014, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei posted, "This barbaric, wolflike & infanticidal regime of #Israel which spares no crime has no cure but to be annihilated."²⁸ In 2018, Ali Shirazi, Khamenei's liaison to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), said that "Iran has the capability to destroy Israel and given the excuse, Tel Aviv and Haifa will be razed to the ground."²⁹ In 2019, Brigadier General Hossein Salami, the IRGC deputy commander, stated that Iran was "planning to break America, Israel, and their partners and allies. Our ground forces should cleanse the planet from the filth of their existence."³⁰

This was not mere rhetoric but a statement of intent. For some three decades, Iran has been devising, refining, and executing a three-part strategy for the elimination of Israel. It started with its nuclear weapons program in the 1990s. In the 2000s, Iran began to acquire and produce ballistic missiles. In the last two decades, it expanded and extended the reach of its proxy network. Iran's confidence in these capabilities was such that it gave itself a deadline. Since 2017, Tehran's Palestine Square has had a clock that counts down to the year 2040, based on Khamenei's prediction that Israel will cease to exist by that year.³¹ Slightly less confident in its abilities, the Iranian parliament, in 2021, proposed a bill that would ensure the destruction of Israel by 2041.³²

i. Nuclear

Israel was first to sound the alarm as Iran's nuclear program evolved from a civilian research project under the Shah into the current regime's pursuit of nuclear weapons capability. By the end of 2024, Iran was perched at the very threshold of that capability and looking for shortcuts to cross it.

a. History

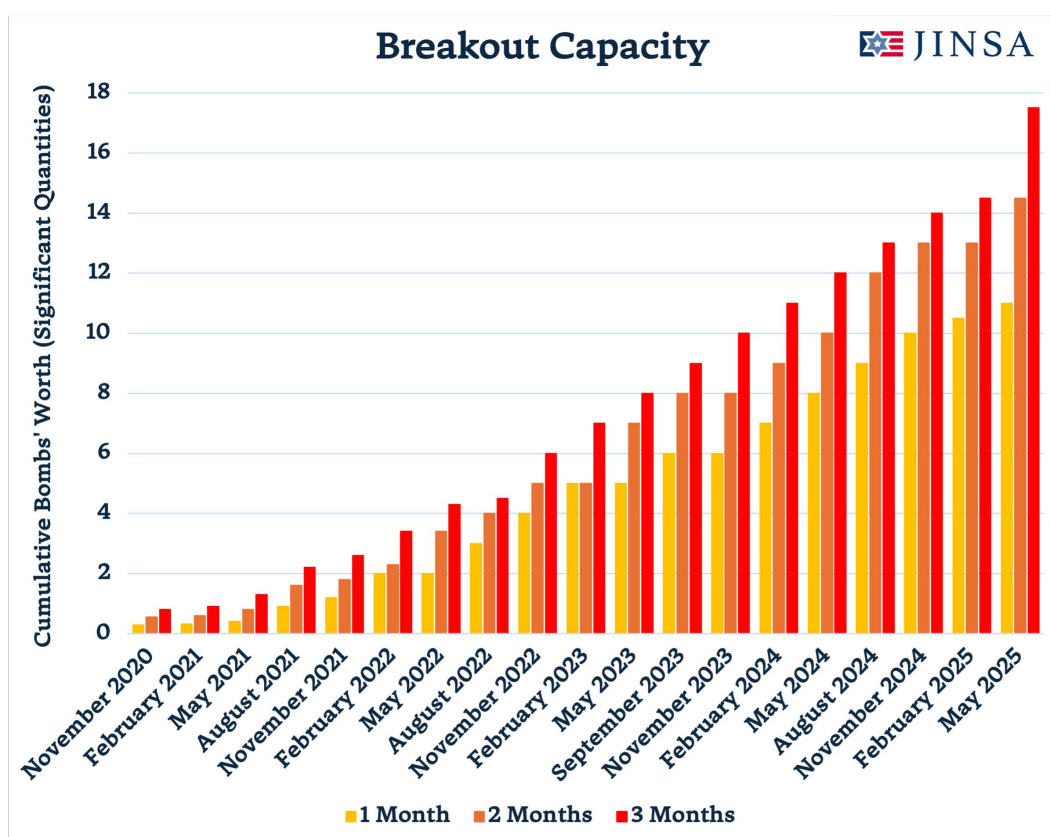
For more than thirty years, Iran has pursued nuclear weapons, repeatedly attempting to hide its progress from the world. It began in the 1990s, with the goal of building five nuclear weapons by 2004, under what it called the AMAD Plan.³³ Israel alerted U.S. officials of this nuclear work as early as 1995. In 2002, Iranian dissident groups revealed that Iran had expanded beyond just weapons research and built covert facilities, in violation of its International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, at Natanz to enrich uranium and at Arak to produce heavy water for a reactor.

Though Iran temporarily suspended enrichment and broke up the AMAD Plan starting in 2003, in the wake of U.S. invasions of neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq, it resumed enriching in 2005 and reconfigured its weaponization efforts under new clandestine organizations. It built another enrichment facility secretly at Fordow, which was exposed by the United States, Britain, and France in 2009. Israel's 2018 heist of Iran's nuclear archives revealed extensive evidence of the extent of Tehran's weaponization efforts, its progress

since the breakup of AMAD, and its concerted campaign to deceive the IAEA and the world about these illegal activities.³⁴

b. Recent Developments

Most of Iran's nuclear progress was temporarily paused by the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). It restarted once President Donald Trump withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 and especially following President Joe Biden's election. Iran grew its enrichment capacity at unprecedented rates while also taking steps to make its progress harder to detect and its overall infrastructure more difficult to destroy militarily. From late 2020 until Operation Rising Lion, Iran's "breakout capacity" to produce multiple bombs' worth (known as a significant quantity, or SQ) of 90 percent enriched weapons-grade uranium grew exponentially, from one SQ in three months to a dozen in one month, as it deployed thousands of evermore advanced centrifuges and accumulated 20 and 60 percent enriched uranium stockpiles. Iran's breakout time to produce its first SQ shrunk from more than one year in 2018, to 3-4 months when President Biden took office, to mere days by the start of 2025.³⁵



In the wake of October 7, regime officials also spoke increasingly openly of their ability and intent to quickly complete a nuclear device if they chose to do so. It was not just talk. During congressional testimony in March 2023, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley revealed that "Iran has taken actions also to improve its capabilities to produce a nuclear weapon. From the time of an Iranian decision, Iran could produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon in less than two weeks and would only take several months thereafter to produce an actual nuclear weapon."³⁶ Warnings from U.S., Israeli, and European intelligence agencies starting in mid-2024 also indicated that Iran was likely taking necessary steps to hasten the final assembly of a nuclear weapon if and when the order came to do so. An Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) report in June 2024 notably did not contain language that had been in previous intelligence assessments since 2019, including the annual intelligence assessments

released in February 2024, which had stated Iran was not actively pursuing key nuclear weapons-development activities.³⁷ Instead, the June 2024 ODNI report concluded that Iran had “undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so,” while noting “a notable increase this year in Iranian [officials’] public statements about nuclear weapons, suggesting the topic is becoming less taboo.”³⁸ By March 2025, however, the ODNI had again changed its assessment to assert that Iran was “not building a nuclear weapon.”³⁹

ii. Ring of Fire

As a key component of Iran’s plan to eliminate Israel, the regime funded and armed a network of regional militant groups dedicated to Israel’s destruction. This “ring of fire,” including cells of Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Houthis, and other terror groups, worked to overwhelm Israel’s defenses and threaten its security.⁴⁰ As the mastermind of this plan, IRGC Quds Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani reportedly proclaimed, “I have assembled for you six armies outside of Iran’s territory, and I have created a corridor, 1,500 kilometers [932 miles] long and 1,000 kilometers [621 miles] wide, all the way to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.”⁴¹ By funding, arming, and coordinating fighters throughout the region, Iran built Soleimani’s vision, assembling the six armies that, after Hamas’s terrorist attack on October 7, 2023, would eventually join and expand the fighting into a multifront war.

In Gaza, Iranian support enabled both Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to develop significant arsenals and operational capabilities. Iran provided \$100 million per year to Palestinian groups in Gaza as of 2020, which may have risen to as high as \$350 million by 2023. This Iranian funding enabled Hamas to build a force of around 30,000 fighters and over 20,000 rockets, while Palestinian Islamic Jihad amassed about 12,000 fighters and 8,000 rockets by 2022.⁴²

In Lebanon, Iran’s backing of Hezbollah transformed the group into a formidable force with 150,000 rockets and missiles, including advanced and precision weaponry, which served as a second-strike deterrent against Israel conducting direct operations targeting Iran’s nuclear program. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah claimed in 2016 that “Hezbollah’s budget, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, comes from the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁴³ In 2020, the State Department estimated Iran provided Hezbollah with \$700 million annually.⁴⁴

Between 2012 and 2020, Iran spent over \$16 billion supporting the Assad regime and its proxies and militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.⁴⁵ In Yemen, Tehran’s assistance has empowered Houthi rebels to extend their reach, allowing them to launch attacks against regional rivals and shipping lanes. While their relationship began around 2009, it expanded after the collapse of the Yemeni government in 2011, with Iranian support helping the Houthis seize control of the capital Sanaa in 2014.⁴⁶ The Houthis withstood a Saudi and Emirati-led military campaign from 2015-2022 to restore the United Nations-recognized government thanks to Iranian arms, training, and financial assistance. Now, armed with Iranian-designed weapons produced with Chinese-supplied components and guided by intelligence provided by Iran and Russia, the Houthis have been able to disrupt global shipping through the Red Sea and regularly launch drones and ballistic missiles at Israel, over a thousand miles away.⁴⁷

Nor were these just disparate groups. During the May 2021 war between Israel and Gaza, Iran set up a joint operations room in Beirut for IRGC, Hamas, and Hezbollah officials to plan and coordinate actions against Israel. Just how dangerous that could be became apparent in the aftermath of Hamas’s October 7, 2023, attack.

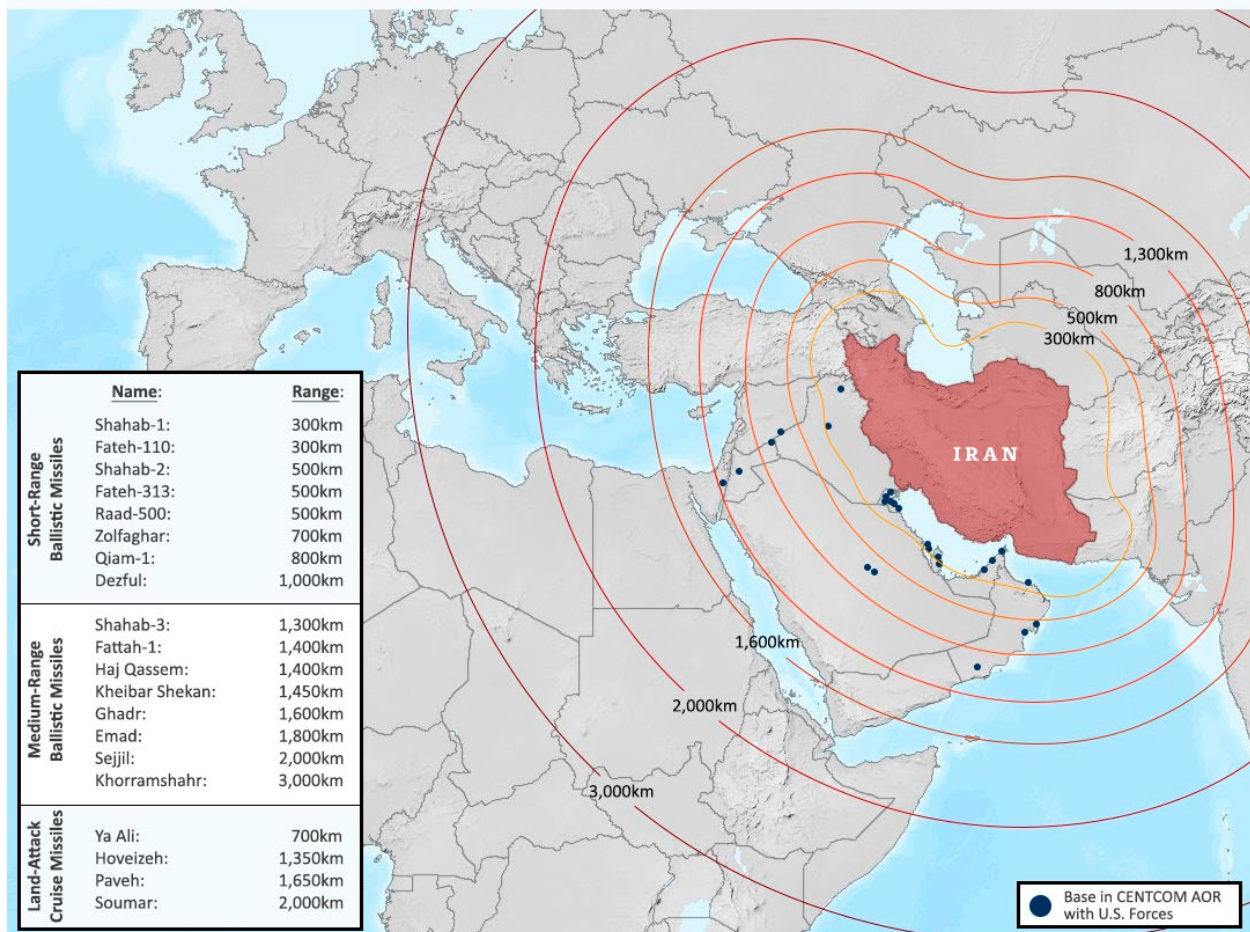
iii. Ballistic Missiles

Over the past several decades, Iran made substantial strides in developing one of the largest and most sophisticated ballistic missile arsenals in the Middle East. This rapid advancement was meant not only to bolster Iran's strategic deterrence, but it also heightened regional anxieties about Tehran's long-term ambitions.

Iran's determination to acquire and produce missiles grew out of its war with Iraq in the 1980s, when Tehran found itself ill-prepared to retaliate against relentless Iraqi missile attacks on Iranian cities. Recognizing the urgent need for a similar level of offensive ability, Iran sought to achieve self-reliance in missile production, initially acquiring short-range, Soviet-designed Scud missiles and expanding its technical expertise through reverse engineering and international partnerships—especially with North Korea, and to some extent, Russia and China.⁴⁸

By the early 2000s, Iran was producing a range of missiles domestically, including not only short-range ballistic missiles but also medium-range models, which substantially expanded its power projection. The Shahab-3, first tested in 1998, was based on North Korea's No-Dong and had a range of up to 1,300 kilometers.⁴⁹ A significant milestone in Iran's missile development came with the first test of the solid-fueled Sejil missile in 2009, which offered a 2,000 kilometer range.⁵⁰ In 2017, Iran tested its longest-range and heaviest missile to date, the Khoramshahr-4, which was based on the North Korean Musudan and has a range of 3,000 kilometers and a 1,500 kilogram payload.⁵¹

Ranges of Iranian Ballistic and Cruise Missiles



Amid the rapid expansion of Iran's ballistic missile program, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, adopted in 2015 as part of the JCPOA, required Iran to refrain, for eight years, from undertaking any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches. Iran repeatedly violated this prohibition, right up until its expiration in 2023, by continuing development and testing of missiles suspected of nuclear delivery capability as well as by providing them to regional proxies, effectively extending its reach and influence throughout the region. Iran also established an extensive network of underground silos and production facilities, often hidden within mountainous terrain, designed to withstand air strikes and enable rapid, undetected launches.⁵² Before Operation Rising Lion, Iran possessed approximately 2,500 total medium-range ballistic missiles that could hit Israel, with eight variants types capable of carrying munitions weighing between 750 and 1,500 kilograms.

B. A 12-day War, Started on 10/7

In the immediate aftermath of October 7, 2023, Israeli leadership realized that the conflict could only conclude with a direct confrontation with Iran.⁵³ It was Tehran whose funds, arms, and training enabled Hamas's attack. Iran was, as Israel had started calling it, the "head of the octopus."⁵⁴ And so long as the head remained, Israeli officials understood, there would always be another tentacle, or seven, lashing out at them.

While Iran had fulfilled Soleimani's plan to create "six armies," they proved not to be the unstoppable forces that he had envisioned.⁵⁵ By the end of 2024, acting sequentially, Israel had effectively dismantled one Iranian-backed army after another—degrading Hamas and Hezbollah; eliminating Syrian conventional capabilities after the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime; and directly targeting Iran's most advanced air defenses—removing one part of Iran's three-pronged strategy, its proxies, and creating the opportunity to address the remaining two, its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. Simultaneously, Iran was trying to slam shut the window of opportunity for Israeli operations by accelerating its nuclear weapons research and ballistic missile production. The head of the octopus was exposed but was rapidly growing new tentacles.

i. *The Existential Threat Almost Realized*

Having built up the capacity and capabilities of its proxies along Israel's southern and northern borders, Iran's joint operations room in Beirut developed operational plans for a joint offensive that would unleash all of its proxies against Israel at once. Ultimately, the plan did not unfold as Tehran had hoped. Hamas went it alone on October 7, 2023, in the hopes that other Iranian groups would then join in. They did, but not fully. The lack of a coordinated offensive sealed their, and Iran's, fate. But the realization of how much worse October 7 could have been, of how great a threat it had allowed to surround it, fundamentally transformed Israel's threat tolerance: never again would Israel watch as enemies built up capabilities that could threaten its actual existence as a nation.

a. Iranian Operational Plans for Joint Offensive

In the lead-up to October 7, 2023, Iran stood poised to unleash a synchronized, unprecedented offensive. Operational plans envisioned Iranian proxies striking simultaneously from Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and beyond, creating even greater death and destruction than Hamas's invasion. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) found a 2013-2017 strategy document in Gaza detailing Hamas's plan for what later became the October 7, 2023 attack and a memo from 2019 that stressed the importance of a joint defense pact with Iran's Revolutionary Guards Quds Force and Hezbollah before launching a multifront war against Israel.⁵⁶ The IDF also discovered in Gaza a June 2022 letter from Yahya Sinwar, Hamas's leader inside the Gaza Strip, to Hamas's Qatar-based political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, proposing three war strategies.⁵⁷ The first option—the most extensive and the one that Nasrallah supported—involved Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Iranian proxies using their full capabilities to attack Israel on Jewish holidays, albeit without direct Iranian involvement. The second plan had Hamas leading an assault with Hezbollah using a quarter to a third of

its capabilities, alongside support from terrorists in the West Bank, to pressure Israeli emigration, withdrawals from the West Bank, and Palestinian prisoner releases. The third option proposed a conflict led by Hamas and Iranian proxies in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria but with Hezbollah staying out, at least initially.

As fortunate as Israel was that these plans were never realized, their existence demonstrated how great the threat against it had become, even while Israel believed it had been deterring its adversaries.

b. Hamas Goes it Alone

Indeed, given the planning toward a joint offensive against Israel that was going on between Iran and its proxies in the years leading up to October 7, 2023, it is striking that, ultimately, Hamas did not coordinate its attack with Tehran. While the reasoning behind this decision is not yet fully clear, Israeli intelligence officials believe that Hamas's leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, believed that the offensive should be initiated by Sunni Palestinians, not Shiite Lebanese or Iranians, as winning a Palestinian state was at stake and he wanted to lead the effort himself.⁵⁸ He also apparently assessed that the broader Iran-led axis was at such a high state of readiness that the rest would be compelled to join once the attack began.

On this critical point, he was both right and wrong. Iran's proxies did join the war soon after October 7, 2023, but, other than Hamas, none of them went all in. Iran never came to its proxy's aid yet twice attacked Israel directly when its own interests were directly threatened. Thus, rather than merely being contained to fighting in Gaza, the conflict soon transformed into a broader, but uncoordinated, war. Israel faced attacks from seven fronts, albeit with differing intensity and timelines throughout the war.

c. The Fateful Decision Not to Join Hamas

Counterintuitively, Hezbollah and Iran's calculated choice to refrain from full engagement in the conflict following October 7, 2023, directly led to Israel's sustained military campaign against Iran. Had Iran and its proxies immediately joined the war in full, unleashing their combined might against Israel, the conflict might have unfolded much differently, to Israel's detriment. But Iran's decision to stay out of the war, at least until much later, and the proxies' limited engagement on behalf of Hamas, allowed Israel to prioritize and sequence threats, degrading Iran's threat network one by one, until only Tehran (and the Houthis) was left.

Once Hezbollah began launching missiles on October 8, 2023, Israel realized that it would have to take action to remove the threat in Lebanon. The only question was when, with Israeli political and military leadership engaged in heated discussions over whether to act against Hezbollah first before moving against Hamas in Gaza. However, because Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah made the fateful decision to refrain from launching a major ground incursion into Israel with thousands of Radwan Force fighters and unleashing its full arsenal of 150,000 missiles and rockets in a direct, sustained assault, Israel was ultimately able to focus on Gaza first. It was then able, on its own terms, not under fire, to initiate a relentless campaign—employing pager and cell phone attacks, airstrikes, and ground operations—that devastated Hezbollah's leadership, fighters, and military infrastructure, effectively neutralizing it as a deterrent to Israeli operations against Iran.

These events also underscored a fundamental truth: Iran's proxies existed to protect the regime in Tehran, not the other way around. Iran's network of proxies served to deter threats and shield the Iranian homeland from direct conflict. When push came to shove, these groups were expended in battles far from Tehran, demonstrating their primary function as buffers for Iran's security interests rather than true beneficiaries of Iranian protection.

d. Iran's Ballistic Barrages

Tehran's eventual transition from indirect aggression to direct confrontation proved to be both too little, too late to help save Iran's allies but enough to convince Israel that Iran's ballistic missiles capabilities had advanced to a level at which they now represented a grave threat that could no longer be tolerated.

In April 2024, an Israeli airstrike in Damascus killed Iranian General Mohammad Zahedi, the IRGC commander responsible for coordinating with proxies in Syria and Lebanon. In authorizing the strike, Israeli commanders failed to appreciate, in what Israeli intelligence now describes as a miscalculation, that the building they targeted, while in their understanding merely a Syrian structure in proximity to the Iranian embassy where Zahedi was holding meetings, was in fact considered by Tehran to be a part of its consulate and, therefore, Iranian territory. Israel thus unwittingly crossed an Iranian redline. Tehran retaliated much more severely than Israel ever anticipated when it struck Zahedi: on the night of April 13, 2024, Iran fired approximately 170 attack drones, 120 medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs), and more than 30 cruise missiles in its first-ever direct attack against Israel.⁵⁹ A historic U.S.-organized coalition involving U.S., Israeli, European, and Arab forces cooperated to intercept all of the cruise missiles and drones outside of Israeli airspace, with only 4-10 ballistic missiles hitting in Israeli territory. Israel responded with a calibrated strike targeting an S-300 air defense battery at the Isfahan nuclear site, demonstrating its ability to hit sensitive Iranian targets undetected with stand-off munitions while deliberately avoiding broader escalation to prevent a wider regional conflict. The strike was designed to put in the forefront of Iranian leadership's minds the sobering fact that Israel could hold any Iranian target at risk.

Learning from its April attack, Iran's subsequent offensive against Israel on October 1, 2024—following the targeted killings of Hamas Politburo Chairman Ismail Haniyeh in July and Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in September—involved only MRBMs, but almost twice as many of them.⁶⁰ Of the roughly 200 missiles Iran launched in total, 180 reached Israeli airspace, and dozens of missiles struck Israeli bases and open areas, according to officials with knowledge of the incidents.⁶¹ When Israel responded on October 27, it demonstrated that it could neutralize most of Iran's air defense infrastructure, including destroying its remaining S-300s as well as facilities involved in producing fuel for ballistic missiles.

With U.S. assistance, Israel was able to avoid significant damage from either of these two Iranian attacks. But the significant increase in impacts inside of Israel between the April and October attacks made clear that Tehran's persistent efforts to expand its capacity and capabilities were stretching Israeli defenses to their breaking point. Any greater increase in the quantity or quality of Iranian ballistic missiles and Israel would not be able to rely on air defense alone, even with U.S. support, to keep its citizens and infrastructure safe.

e. Change in Threat and Risk Tolerance

The aftermath of Hamas's October 7, 2023, terrorist attacks and the thousands of missiles and rockets that Hezbollah fired since have left profound upheaval across Israel, forcing thousands of civilians to flee their homes and seek refuge within their own borders. It also catalyzed a dramatic shift in Israel's threat tolerance. No longer willing to accept the existence of hostile forces—whether entrenched along its borders or operating at a distance of thousands of kilometers in Iran—Israeli leadership resolved to recalibrate its defense doctrine.

For twenty years, Israel watched its adversaries grow their arsenals and expand their presence on its borders. Israel responded when attacked, believing that it could and did maintain the deterrence, but otherwise routinely chose not to act against this build-up in order to avoid escalation. An example one IDF commander gave us, in describing the pre-October 7, 2023, mindset, was that on October 6 there were Hezbollah positions directly on the Israeli border that the military did not act against, assessing that Nasrallah was not looking to start a war.

Now, however, Israeli leaders told us that they would no longer seek to judge their adversaries' intentions, only their capabilities. They can no longer tolerate the build-up of means with which to threaten the Jewish homeland, whether on its borders or thousands of kilometers away. At the same time, the IDF has also increased the risks that it is willing to undertake to eliminate those adversary capabilities. This transformation in strategic posture fundamentally altered Israel's approach, fueling a campaign to not just contain but remove the threat from Iran's proxies and Iran itself.

ii. Opening the Way to Iran

Israel's military campaign against Iran and its proxies beyond Gaza, beginning in September 2024, paved the way for Israel to launch its historic June 2025 attack. By degrading Hezbollah's capabilities, striking weapons left from Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and eliminating Iran's most capable air defenses, Israel achieved what the IDF identified as a key center of gravity for a successful strike on Iran—air superiority.

a. Defeating Hamas

After the horrors of October 7, 2023, Israel focused its military efforts on defeating Hamas in Gaza and recovering the hostages. By early fall 2024, with the conclusion of the Rafah operation, Israel had rendered all 24 of Hamas's battalions combat ineffective.⁶² After reaching a height of five divisions operating in Gaza, the IDF began drawing down its southern Gaza presence to "look northward," according to then-Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant. On September 18, the 98th Division redeployed from Gaza to northern Israel and entered Lebanon on September 30. By October 7, 2024, the IDF had also redeployed the 36th and 91st Divisions from Gaza to expand its Lebanon ground invasion.⁶³

b. Degrading Hezbollah

Once Israel had sufficiently degraded Hamas, Israeli leaders turned north. Hezbollah, after a year of continuous missile and rocket attacks, believed that it was locked into a predictable tit-for-tat pattern with Israel.⁶⁴ When a rocket attack on July 27, 2024, that hit the Israeli Druze village of Majd al-Shams killed 12 people, including children, Hezbollah had already launched roughly 6,100 rockets, missiles, and drones at Israel since the war began, according to JINSA's Iran Projectile Tracker.⁶⁵ But the attack triggered Israel to dramatically change its approach.

Israeli operations against Hezbollah intensified in the summer and fall of 2024, including a targeted strike on July 30 that killed senior commander Fuad Shukr, severely disrupting Hezbollah's leadership structure.⁶⁶ Following Hezbollah launching hundreds of missiles and drones at Israel, on August 25, Israel conducted precision attacks against Hezbollah launch sites, thwarting a larger attack and effectively degrading the terrorist group's offensive capabilities.⁶⁷ Israel's pager attack on September 17 marked a dramatic escalation and signaled Israel's intent to break the cycle of tit-for-tat exchanges with Hezbollah. Most critically, in a single day, September 23, Israel eliminated some 70 percent of Hezbollah's launch capabilities, striking roughly 6,000 launcher tubes. Four days later, it killed Nasrallah in a massive strike on his bunker.⁶⁸ By September 30, Israel expanded its campaign to include ground operations.

By the time that Hezbollah agreed to a ceasefire in November 2024, it had launched nearly 18,000 rockets, missiles, and drones since the war began.⁶⁹ However, Israel's elimination of most of its leadership and at least 70 percent of its missile launch capabilities effectively reduced the threat it posed as an Iranian second-strike capability—to all but zero.⁷⁰

c. Clearing Syria

In the months leading up to the operation, Israel dismantled Hezbollah's anti-air capabilities, executed over 70 special operations to prepare for a possible ground maneuver into Lebanon, and destroyed the remaining air defense batteries in Syria within 72 hours of Bashar al-Assad's fall in December 2024. These decisive actions, as well as Iran losing Assad's partnership, better positioned Israel to maintain strategic dominance over Syria and allowed Israel to utilize Syrian airspace during the 12-Day War.

Timeline of Major Events Leading up to Operation Rising Lion



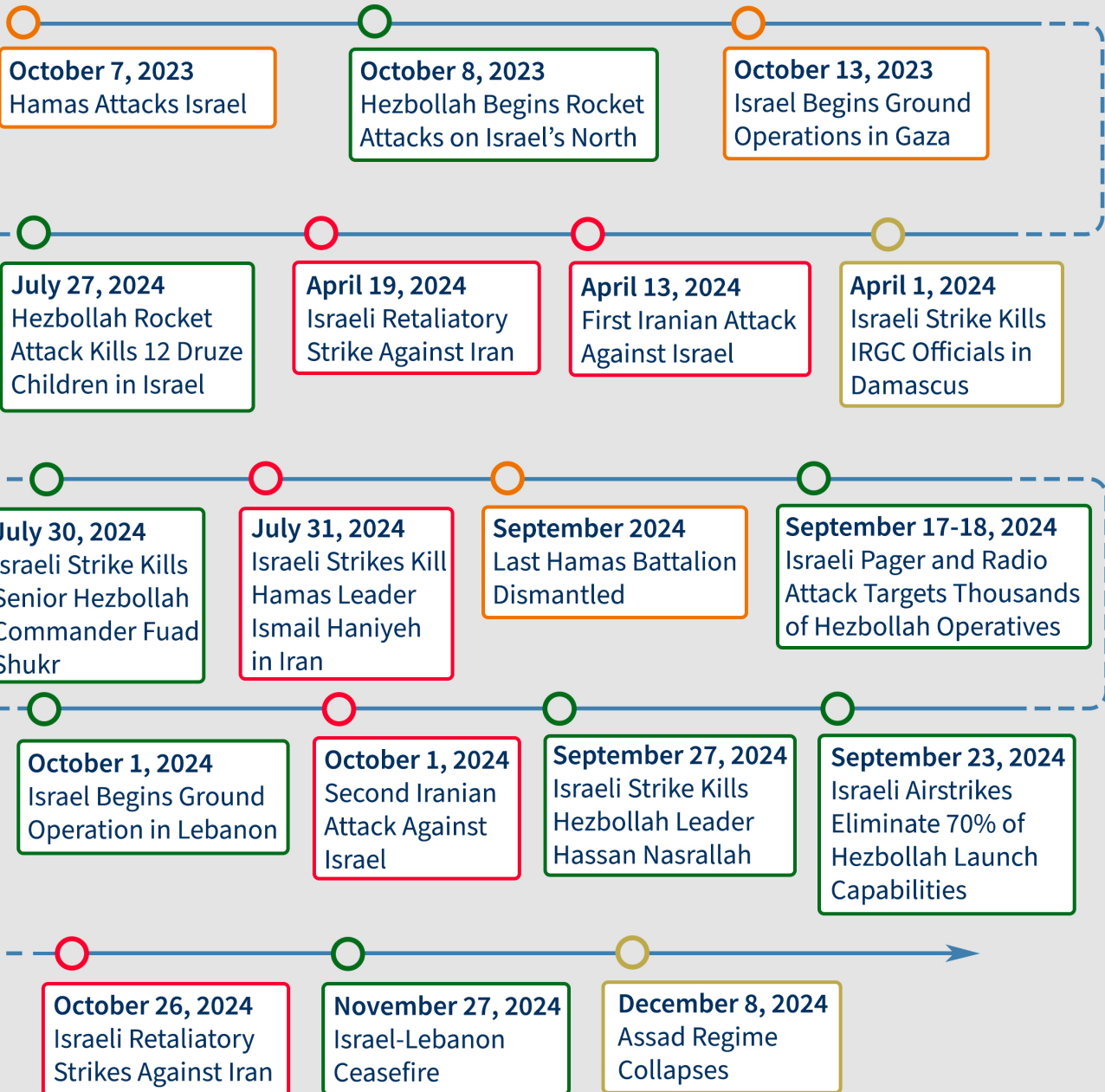
Theater of Operations:

□ Syria

□ Iran

□ Lebanon

□ Gaza



d. CENTCOM-Enabled Defense Cooperation

Israel's transition to the area of operations for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in 2021—a move which JINSA had called for since 2018—enabled unprecedented U.S.-Israel bilateral coordination.⁷¹ The ultimate expression of that coordination was not just the deployment of U.S. assets to bolster Israeli defenses but also the indispensable U.S. role in mobilizing on very short notice an unprecedented informal multinational coalition to defend Israel from Iran's April and October 2024 attacks.⁷² The coalition importantly included four Arab participants, two of whom, Jordan and Egypt, had full diplomatic relations with Israel, while two others, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, did not. The U.S.-led coalition appeared to be available again in October, but Iran's decision to only launch ballistic missiles limited the ability of coalition partners other than the United States to join the air defense effort.

This close coordination between Israeli and U.S. defense forces during Iran's initial two direct attacks proved invaluable, as these joint operations honed their ability to orchestrate integrated missile defenses and rapid responses—skills that became critical when both allies were challenged to withstand twelve consecutive days of Iranian aggression.

iii. *The Urgency of Now*

With the diminishment of Iran's ring of fire and air defenses between Israel and Tehran, and working missile defense cooperation with the United States, Israel created for itself the opportunity to act against Iran. But it was Tehran's decision to accelerate its nuclear and ballistic missile programs that introduced the urgent need to do so.⁷³

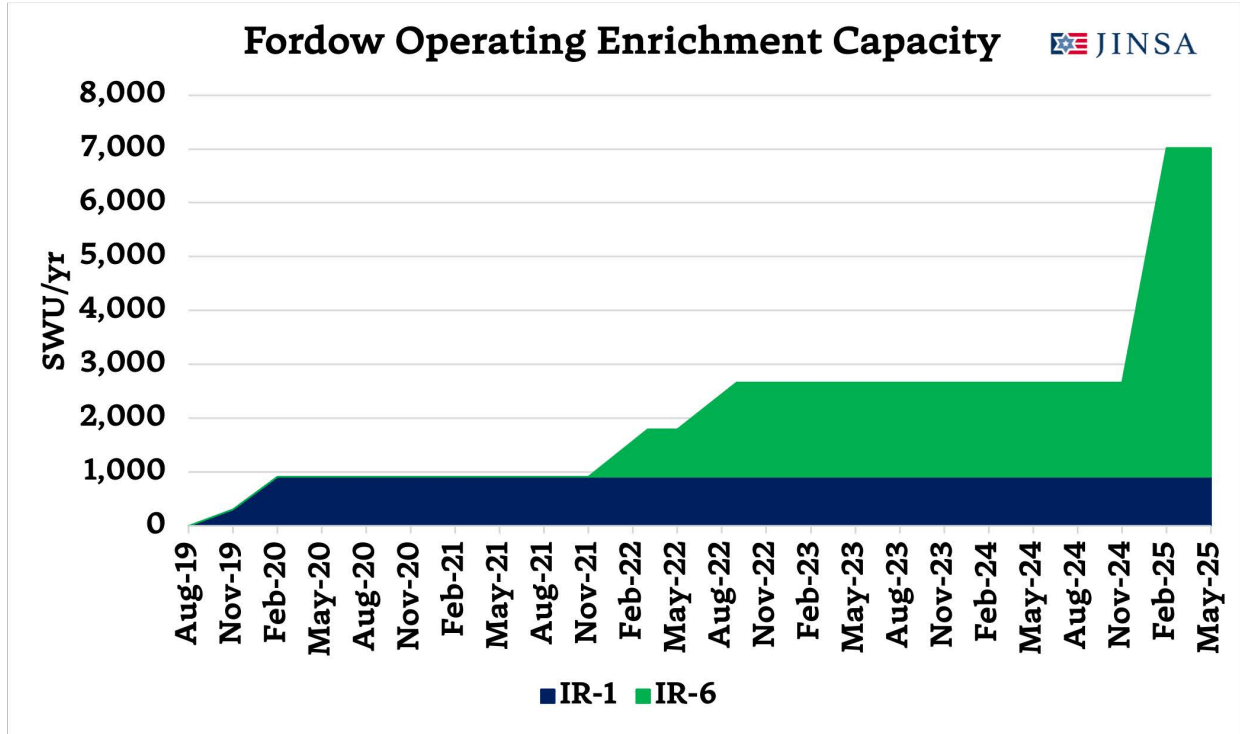
a. Nuclear Advances

Already in early 2025, U.S. intelligence assessed Iran was researching a cruder, but still testable and deployable, nuclear weapon that would not require enriching uranium up to 90 percent.⁷⁴ Following Israel's response to the Iranian October 1, 2024, ballistic missile attack, this work appeared to have accelerated further. According to Israeli intelligence officials—and they told us that these findings were shared with and agreed on by the United States—elements within Iran's nuclear weapons group had begun to look for ways to get closer to the ability to assemble a working nuclear device, without actually contravening the Supreme Leader's fatwa against building such a weapon. This work apparently took the form of research into fusion, thermonuclear weapons, a more advanced and powerful type of bomb than the fission type weapons the United States used in World War II.⁷⁵ Israeli sources told us that both they and their U.S. counterparts agreed that the Iranian pursuit of a fusion device was a dead end. Where they disagreed, however, was about whether this research was also advancing Iran's ability to build a fission weapon; the Israelis believed it did, the Americans demurred.

Though it remains unclear how much time Tehran actually needed to complete a workable weapon, and how quickly it was surmounting the final technical hurdles, its program had become so advanced and opaque that Israel assessed it could not afford to gamble on detecting the proverbial “turn of the final screw” for Iran to assemble a bomb. Nor could Israel afford to waste the unique operational window of opportunity created by its recent dismantlement of Iran's proxies and air defenses.

These developments provided the backdrop for the momentous events immediately preceding Operation Rising Lion. President Trump's unrealized 60-day deadline for a deal passed simultaneously with the U.S.-backed IAEA censure resolution that found Iran in breach of its nonproliferation safeguards, following years of the regime stonewalling inspectors at nuclear sites. That same day, mere hours before Israeli attack waves were airborne, Iran announced in retaliation that it would ramp up uranium production dramatically at Fordow and open a third major enrichment plant, presumably fortified deep enough underground to resist even U.S.-made bunker busters. Combined with Iran's threats to leave the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) if sanctioned for its IAEA non-compliance, these moves reinforced Israel's already-appreciable sense of urgency for action. While Iran had maintained the enrichment capacity of its rudimentary IR-1

centrifuges for several years, it steadily increased enrichment capacity for its newer and more advanced IR-6 centrifuges, which can enrich four times the rate of the IR-1 model, starting in November 2021 and made a dramatic surge beginning in November 2024. By May 2025, Iranian IR-6s had reached 7,000 SWU per year, a measurement of the effort required to enrich a certain quantity of uranium to a certain concentration.⁷⁶



b. Ballistic Missile Acceleration

When the war began, Iran maintained a stockpile of over 2,000 missiles capable of reaching Israel. As the October 1, 2024, attack demonstrated, even with Israel’s highly capable air defenses, these missiles represented a significant strategic threat. It was a lesson that was not lost on Iran. It rapidly moved to expand MRBM production, with the goal of manufacturing over 1,000 missiles per year, which would enable it to triple its total missile stockpile to 8,000 missiles in two years. At the same time, it also was pursuing upgrades to the precision of its munitions to an accuracy of plus or minus five meters.⁷⁷

This expansion of Iran’s missile capabilities represented an existential threat to Israel in its own right. With an even larger arsenal and increased production rates, Iran would possess the ability to launch far more intense and sustained barrages, devastating Israeli infrastructure, military installations, and population centers. This would severely tax Israel’s capacity to intercept incoming threats, strain its supply of interceptor missiles, and risk significant psychological and material damage. For Israel’s political and military leaders, no longer willing to watch enemies amass deadly capabilities, it was a threat that demanded action, even had Tehran not simultaneously accelerated its work on nuclear weaponization.

c. Threat of Iranian Preemption

Compounding this urgency, Israeli leaders feared that its window of opportunity might soon close. Israeli intelligence indicated that Iranian officials, well aware of their sudden vulnerability and the very real potential of Israeli attack, were seriously debating launching a preemptive strike. They had even developed operational plans for such a strike, entailing launching between 700 and 1,000 ballistic missiles at Israel—

more than three times as many as it had fired in the October 2024 attack and a quantity that would surely overwhelm even the best joint Israeli-U.S. defenses. A preemptive Iranian war would have not just devastated Israel but potentially constrained Israeli offensive options, forcing Israeli forces to operate under greater duress and preventing them from being able to hit all of the targets needed to neutralize the Iranian threat.

Indeed, we heard from multiple Israeli military commanders that their biggest fear in the lead up to Operation Rising Lion was that they might be too late, that Iran may have been anticipating the strike and might have beaten them to the punch. The possibility that hundreds of missiles might rain down on Israeli bases, cratering runways, destroying jets, and effectively neutering Israel's most potent weapon against Iran—its air force—led the IDF to take drastic measures. The intelligence community was tasked with monitoring Iranian decision-making to provide Israel with the longest advance notice possible, ideally at least four hours. IAF pilots were instructed to be ready to get airborne before Iranian missile salvos could inflict major damage.

This convergence of threats underscored the fleeting nature of Israel's operational advantage: military planners recognized that any significant delay would provide Tehran with time to restore its operational capabilities, reinforce its network of proxies, and potentially seize the initiative. Acting decisively within this narrow window of opportunity was imperative.

III. Operation Rising Lion: Successes & Outcomes

Operation Rising Lion represented the most ambitious and effective Israeli air campaign in the Jewish state's history with unprecedented scale, precision, and tempo against a nation 75 times larger in geographical size. Over 12 days, the IAF neutralized Iran's integrated air defenses; struck critical military and scientific leadership, and nuclear targets; and preserved freedom of action for follow-on operations—all without losing a single manned aircraft. The operation showcased how years of planning, close U.S.–Israeli coordination, and the integration of advanced platforms with legacy systems could deliver decisive results against a larger adversary. Rising Lion's success demonstrated that Israel possesses the operational skill, technological edge, and strategic resolve to independently execute a long-range campaign that solidified its position as the dominant military power in the region.

A. Thinking Bigger, Quickly: From Surgical Strike to Comprehensive Campaign

The advance planning and execution of Operation Rising Lion reflected 20 years of preparation and evolving capabilities within the Israel Defense Forces. Yet, after the dramatically changed environment in the Middle East—first after the October 7, 2023, attack and then the degradation of Iran's threat network—Israel began to think bigger.

Israel initially conceived of its operation against Iran's nuclear program as a series of pinpoint surgical strikes targeting only Iran's enrichment facilities. In the face of an escalating Iranian arms race, hard-earned lessons from the October strike, shifting Israeli risk tolerance, newly acquired operational capabilities, and strategic hopes for U.S. support collectively shaped the evolution of Operation Rising Lion from a limited strike into a comprehensive campaign. This new operational plan—first conceived in the spring of 2024 but only coming together in the last months of the year—hinged on achieving air superiority and utilizing it to neutralize a much bigger portion of Iran's nuclear program, eliminate high-value individuals, and destroy critical elements of Iran's ballistic missile capabilities. It required Israel to do something it had never done before, take on a major regional power, over a thousand kilometers away from its border.

From the outset, however, Israeli planners were looking to June 2025 as the best window for launching this ambitious operation. They had to balance the time needed to adapt the force and develop new

capabilities to meet operational demands against the threat of Iranian preemption or loss of the window of opportunity. Contrary to reporting in the United States, we were told Israel had never planned to begin its operation in April or May 2024. In fact, Israeli commanders told us that some of the capabilities they needed for Operation Rising Lion did not come online until just days before the first jets took off.

i. Rethinking the Nuclear Puzzle

The first key to expanding Israel's operational plan came from approaching the challenge of preventing Iran's nuclear breakout.

Previous plans had focused on the center of gravity of Iran's nuclear program: the enrichment facilities at Natanz and Fordow that were needed to produce the fissile material for a bomb. That some of these facilities, particularly Fordow, were deeply buried and fortified led to debates—much like those that occurred in the United States after the war's conclusion—about what sort of weapons might reach those targets, how much physical damage they might do, and whether those effects would be worth the risks.

Eventually, however, Israel began to look at the problem differently, understanding that they had been staring at just one small part of the vast infrastructure that made up Iran's nuclear program. Yes, the halls full of centrifuges themselves might have been hard to reach, but those halls were not the entirety of the enrichment plants; they were not self-sufficient. To spin the centrifuges, electricity is needed. They needed technicians to operate them, who in turn needed air to work underground. And both the technicians and the uranium needed to be able to get in and out of the facilities to be of any use. Targeting the power, ventilation, and access for the enrichment plants could render them inoperable just as much as hitting the centrifuges themselves.

Although Natanz and Fordow produced the weapons-grade uranium vital to nuclear weapons, they were not the only facilities required for Iran's nuclear program. In order for them to enrich the uranium, it first had to be turned from its natural form into a gas, uranium hexafluoride. To enrich the uranium hexafluoride, centrifuges had to be manufactured. Once enriched, the gas had to be converted into a metal. That metal, in turn, had to be shaped before it could be used in any possible nuclear device. None of those pre- and post-enrichment processes were conducted in Fordow's fortified chambers. Those capabilities were in above-ground, easily targeted infrastructure. Destroying these above-ground nuclear process facilities would mean that, even if Iran's centrifuges still spun, its ability to enrich uranium or do anything with the uranium it had enriched would be greatly limited.

Even taken together, every facility where some element of nuclear work was conducted did not add up to the sum of Iran's nuclear program. Ultimately, it encompassed not just hardware, but software—the know-how that Iran had accumulated on how to build and operate an enrichment program as well as the research it was doing into weaponization, and the scientists who possessed that know-how. Without them, Iran would have a much more difficult task in rebuilding whatever damage Israel could do to its nuclear facilities.

This expanded understanding of Iran's nuclear program made it simpler in some ways to block Iran's path to a bomb; it presented Israel with more and usually softer targets than Natanz and Fordow. But it also significantly expanded the target list, from just those two facilities to many more as well as well-guarded nuclear scientists. This in turn was the foundation for Israel to rethink its plans for a limited strike and start considering how to carry out a broader campaign.

ii. Preparing Capabilities, Closing, and Contingencies

More targets meant more sorties. To carry them out, the IAF undertook the ambitious task of preparing its entire fleet for extended, long-range missions—a challenge that demanded not only technical upgrades but also a fundamental change in training and doctrine. The campaign's evolution required adapting the

composition and sequencing of Israeli air assets that it would use. Initially, planners did not envision the use of F-16s for deep penetration missions, given their more limited range and payload compared to the F-15I. However, as the campaign's scope expanded, Israeli planners added F-16s to strike packages, offering additional flexibility and sortie capacity.⁷⁸

Israel's previous degradation of Hezbollah capabilities and the collapse of the Assad regime also enabled Israeli planners to rethink the length and breadth of its operations in Iran. With each sortie averaging five hours, initial plans called for one sortie per day, but the diminishment of threats along Israel's northern border enabled the IAF to increase its planned operational tempo to two sorties daily, doubling both mission frequency and target engagement rates.⁷⁹

At the same time, from the outset, Israeli leaders understood the importance of shaping both the tempo and the closure of the campaign. Israel recognized early that sustaining the operational tempo beyond two weeks would become increasingly challenging, especially as Iran possessed the means to adapt to a protracted conflict. This awareness drove Israeli strategists to prioritize planning for the campaign's conclusion from the outset.⁸⁰

To enhance its chances of being able to carry out the full 14-day operational plan, Israel also prepared for the worst. Israel's expected losses of aircraft were minimal, with projections indicating only small numbers of downed planes, though this would mark a substantial capacity loss for a small country. More worrying was the specter of Iran's vast missile arsenal, with its ability to launch concentrated salvos that could reach and damage critical military sites and civilian infrastructure. Civilian casualties, although unfortunate, were anticipated to be in the hundreds—a sobering but deliberate consideration given the nature and scope of the campaign. From an operational perspective, however, Israel's planners focused on how Iran's missiles could disrupt the IDF's operational tempo and effectiveness.

To mitigate these risks, Israel instituted robust contingency planning. In anticipation of the possibility that an Iranian missile could strike and disrupt the IDF's top leadership, Israel established shadow leadership positions and alternate command centers across secure, undisclosed locations.⁸¹ These backup command nodes were maintained at full operational readiness and equipped to assume command and control (C2) responsibilities at a moment's notice. Key personnel, in particular reservists who had held senior positions when they were active-duty, held these shadow roles, to ensure continuity of decision-making processes and operations. This network of redundant leadership and infrastructure ensured that, even in the event of a decapitating strike, the IDF could sustain operational tempo and direct the campaign without interruption, preserving Israel's strategic initiative at every stage of the conflict. Although Israel did not need to activate this shadow command structure, its foresight to create this mechanism stands in stark contrast to Iran's loss of C2 after Israel decapitated its senior leadership in the early minutes of Operation Rising Lion.

iii. Hopes for U.S. Coordination

However good Israel's capabilities and plans were, it knew that it needed U.S. backing, if not participation, for the operation to be successful. How and when to obtain an American greenlight consumed as much time and energy for Israel's political leadership as planning Operation Rising Lion did for its military commanders. Much like the military plans, the political component of the operation came together at the last minute, or even later. It was a calculated leap of faith: Israel prepared to strike, trusting that U.S. support would materialize as needed.

Central to Israeli planning was the concern over the prospect of a "bad deal" with Iran. Israeli officials feared that negotiations would drag on indefinitely, eroding the window for meaningful action. They understood that, while the nature of the Iranian threat, far removed from the American homeland, meant that the United States did not need to act immediately, Israel did. This also meant that, with talks ongoing,

a U.S. decision on whether to support Israel's operation was unlikely to be made until it was absolutely necessary. In fact, Trump's decision to issue a 60-day deadline for talks in his letter to Khamenei drove Israeli timetables, although an Israeli official claimed it was merely coincidental that Operation Rising Lion began the day after this expired.⁸² The ongoing scheduling of continued negotiations with Iran helped lull Iranian officials into a false sense of security, reducing their vigilance just before the outbreak of the 12-day war.

Facing the urgent need to act and to secure U.S. support, but realizing that the two would have to happen at almost the same time, one Israeli official described the process as jumping from a flaming cliff into a pool without knowing if there was water in it but trusting that once you jump, it will fill up with water because, if you do not jump, you know you will burn anyway.⁸³ This trust proved worthwhile when, despite reports of tensions between Trump and Netanyahu during a phone call on June 9, according to Israeli accounts of the call, Trump gave tacit approval for Operation Rising Lion. Officials told JINSA that the leaked reports of the call were entirely false and not part of any coordinated deception, even though they did invariably aid Israeli misdirection.⁸⁴

Even then, once Trump signaled his support, Israeli officials understood that the early success of Operation Rising Lion would be pivotal—U.S. participation in the operation would come only in the event of a spectacular Israeli victory where the United States would join in or a devastating failure necessitating U.S. intervention to rescue Israel. According to an Israeli official, Trump did not authorize the several-day-long assembly process for the GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrators (MOPs) that would eventually be dropped by American B-2 strategic bombers on Fordow until after the Israeli strike had already begun.⁸⁵ It is possible that the delay was strategic, aiming to avoid tipping off foreign intelligence, but it was more likely due to waiting to make a decision about launching U.S. strikes until the outcome of Israel's operation was clearer. The impressive effectiveness of Israel's opening strikes convinced the Trump administration to pursue direct U.S. military action against Iranian nuclear sites and fueled U.S. public support for Israeli operations early in the war.⁸⁶ Once the operation was underway, the timeline from the completion of MOP assembly to Trump's final authorization for the U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear sites was brief—perhaps only five to ten hours, according to one estimate—possibly indicating that the assembly time heavily shaped the timetable for the U.S. strikes.⁸⁷

B. Elements of Operational Success

The unprecedented outcomes of Rising Lion were made possible by four reinforcing elements of operational success: flawless execution in the air; intelligence dominance; sustained air superiority; and an integrated approach to missile defense. Together, these factors enabled Israel to dismantle Iran's defenses, suppress its ability to adapt, and strike with freedom deep inside contested territory. Each element reflected years of investment and doctrinal refinement, but their convergence in June 2025 produced a campaign that exceeded expectations and set new standards for modern air warfare.

i. *Flawless Operation: No Equipment or Personnel Losses or Malfunctions*

Operation Rising Lion was unprecedented in both scale and precision for the IAF. Over twelve days, the IAF flew more than 1,400 long-range sorties—each lasting roughly four to four-and-a-half hours—against targets up to 1,000 miles away without losing a single manned aircraft, sustaining battle damage, or suffering a major mechanical failure. This record was the product of nearly two decades of planning and nine months of intensive refinement.

The IAF employed a diverse fleet of F-35s, F-15Is, and upgraded F-16s, none of which suffered mechanical breakdowns in combat. Pilots in these aircraft dropped 3,709 bombs on 2,879 Iranian targets over the course of 1,495 manned strike sorties, with another 778 bombs delivered in concurrent operations over Gaza and Lebanon.⁸⁸ The IAF sustained high sortie rates by rapid turnaround cycles—F-15Is carried full

strike loads without refueling, while F-16s and F-35s refueled over friendly-controlled corridors before reentering contested airspace.

This was all the more impressive because Israel was using 50- to 60-years-old “Ram” refueling aircraft, which are based on Boeing 707 airframes, to achieve their objectives. However, Israeli pilots described these as precarious platforms to use and maintain.⁸⁹ Once aircraft returned from long-range missions, they were refueled, rearmed, and redeployed, often within 90 minutes. In some cases, pilots flew two sorties per day, instead of the usual one per day in past operations.⁹⁰

The large operational theater introduced challenges and risks because of long-distance flights, complex fuel and armament configurations, and surge planning under tight timeframes. However, Israel maintained continuous operations, even under fire, with runways rapidly cleared and repaired, ensuring that not a single mission was aborted due to incoming attacks. Drones played a critical role in mitigating the threat to Israeli pilots while ensuring persistent offensive operations in Iran. Israel lost 10 drones—eight to Iranian surface-to-air missile (SAM) fire and two to failed communications—but none of the two SAM launches against manned aircraft came close to hitting their targets.⁹¹

Even with the best planning and execution, one senior IAF officer described Operation Rising Lion—executed without a single loss or malfunction—as having benefited from some sort of “divine intervention.”⁹²

ii. Intelligence Dominance

Israel’s operational precision did not occur in a vacuum—it rested on a foundation of unmatched intelligence dominance, the focus of Israel’s campaign planning for decades. Israeli planners entered the war with an unparalleled understanding of Iran’s air defenses, command structure, and decision-makers’ patterns of life, which enabled the IAF to dismantle most of western Iran’s integrated air defense network in the opening hours and strike key leadership targets with precision.

While intelligence collection occurred over the course of many years, with Israel expanding its operation to a broader campaign, Israeli leaders realized that they needed to collect new intelligence on targets rapidly. Their ability to acquire the needed intelligence to plan, in a matter of months, an operation with many more targets over a much greater area enabled Israeli forces to neutralize the upper echelons of Iran’s senior military leadership in the first four minutes of Operation Rising Lion, cripple western Iran’s radar coverage, and achieve near-complete air freedom for the remainder of the campaign.⁹³ Israel eliminated nearly 30 senior Iranian military leaders and nuclear scientists—roughly 17 of them on the first day of the war alone—including IRGC Commander General Hossein Salami, Iranian Army Chief of Staff General Mohammad Bagheri, and Hatem al-Anbiya Headquarters (the Iranian Armed Forces unified combatant command headquarters) chief General Gholam Ali Rashid, along with his successor General Ali Shadmani. Of particular importance to limiting Iran’s ability to mount attacks or defend in the air domain, Israeli strikes on the first day of the war killed the IRGC’s Aerospace Commander General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, Iran’s Air Defense Commander General Daous Shihyan, Commander of the Surface-to-Surface Missile Array General Mohammad Bagheri, and Commander of the IRGC Drone Unit General Taher Pour.

Israel’s knowledge of Iran’s leadership was not just deep, it was ongoing. In what almost proved to be a disaster at the outset of the campaign, the IRGC Air Commander, one of the military commanders targeted in the opening strike, suddenly left his house. Israeli intelligence, however, was able to track his movement in real time—to a meeting with his officers, hastily convened due to concerns about Israeli activity. In a testament to their operational adaptability and coordination, Israel was able to delay Operation Rising Lion’s first strikes, which were to be delivered simultaneously from the air and on the ground, for several minutes so that planes already en route to Iran could update their targeting to instead hit the meeting site. As a result, Israel was able to eliminate multiple officers of the IRGC air forces with a single strike.

Eliminations of Senior Officers and Scientists in Iran



Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

Name	Role / Title	Date Eliminated
Hossein Salami	Commander-in-Chief, IRGC	6/13/2025
Amir Ali Hajizadeh	Commander, IRGC Aerospace Force	6/13/2025
Taher Pour	Commander, IRGC UAV Force	6/13/2025
Daoud Shihyan	Commander of Air Defense	6/13/2025
Mohammad Bagheri	Commander, Surface-to-Surface Missile Arm	6/13/2025
Mohammad Kazemi	Head, IRGC Intelligence Organization	6/15/2025
Mohammad Hassan Mohaqiq	Deputy Head, IRGC Intelligence Organization	6/15/2025
Mohsen Bagheri	Head of Intelligence, IRGC Quds Force	6/15/2025
Abu al-Fazl Nikoui	Deputy Head of Intelligence, IRGC Quds Force	6/15/2025
Amin Pour Joudaki	Commander, Second UAV Brigade, IRGC Air Force	6/21/2025
Mohammad Said Izadi	Head of the Palestine Branch, IRGC Quds Force	6/21/2025
Behnam Shahriari	Commander, Unit 190, IRGC Quds Force	6/21/2025

Khatam al-Anbiya

Name	Role / Title	Date Eliminated
Gholam Ali Rashid	Head, Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters	6/13/2025
Ali Shadmani	Head, Emergency Response Headquarters	6/17/2025

Military (Artesh)

Name	Role / Title	Date Eliminated
Mohammad Hossein Bagheri	Chief of Staff, Iranian Armed Forces	6/13/2025
Gholam al Marhab	Chief of Intelligence, Directorate of Iran's Armed Forces	6/13/2025
Mehdi Rabani	Deputy Head of Operations Directorate, General Staff	6/14/2025

Scientists

Name	Role / Title	Date Eliminated
Akbar Matlabi Zahabeh	Chemical Engineering Expert	6/13/2025
Saeed Barji	Materials Engineering Expert	6/13/2025
Fereydoon Abbasi	Nuclear Engineering Expert	6/13/2025
Mohammad Mehdi Tehranchi	Physics Expert	6/13/2025
Amir Hassan Fakhahi	Physics Expert	6/13/2025
Abd al-Hamid Minoushehr	Reactor Physics Expert	6/13/2025
Mansour Asgari	Physics Expert	6/13/2025
Ahmad Reza Zolfaghari Daryani	Nuclear Engineering Expert	6/13/2025
Ali Bakhouei Katroumi	Mechanics Expert	6/13/2025
Seyyed Esaar Tabatabaei Kamsheh	Nuclear Scientist	6/21/2025
Ali Bakhoui Katroumi	Nuclear Scientist	6/21/2025
Mohammad Reza Sedaghi	Nuclear Scientist	6/24/2025

Real-time intelligence sharing with CENTCOM enhanced this advantage by providing both sides with near-continuous situational awareness of Iranian force movements and air defense activity. Persistent drone coverage over Iran, combined with human penetration of sensitive command nodes, allowed Israeli forces to anticipate and counter Iranian attempts to reposition air defenses—destroying reinforcements en route to Tehran before the military could deploy them. Mossad operations complemented the air campaign by undermining Iranian morale. Penetrations into secure facilities, the use of advanced weapons deep inside Iranian territory, which we were told Israeli operatives intentionally left behind to further demonstrate their capabilities, and the visible reach of Israeli assets convinced Iranian leadership that their defenses had been compromised at every level. Within hours of the first strikes, Tehran arrested over 1,200 civilians, a sign of regime panic and uncertainty over the extent of Israeli infiltration.⁹⁴

This intelligence dominance ensured not only the success of Rising Lion but also the preservation of Israel's capacity for follow-on contingencies.

iii. Surprise

Operation Rising Lion commenced with a stunning blow: a surprise assault that crippled Iran's missile infrastructure and decimated much of its senior military command. This early momentum gave Israel an invaluable advantage, one that shaped the war's trajectory.

Deception played a critical role in Israeli planning: for two weeks prior, nightly maneuvers kept Iran guessing. Even so, in the days before the war started, Israeli officials were concerned that Iran would discover Israel's intentions and preemptively attack. In the two weeks before launching Rising Lion, Israel conditioned Iranian forces to expect nightly alerts that ended without strikes, dulling the Islamic Republic's readiness.⁹⁵ The top tier of the Iranian regime remained so unprepared that, according to Israeli intelligence, one senior commander, trapped under rubble, initially believed an earthquake must have struck rather than an Israeli attack.⁹⁶ In large part because of this deception, once Operation Rising Lion began, Israel killed all of the key IRGC Air Force commanders within four minutes of the initial attack.

Another source of surprise was Israel's ability to use and sustain drones over the skies of Iran. Drones loitered for up to 15 hours, hunting missile launchers and air defense systems, forcing Iran to expend interceptors and exposing otherwise concealed threats. Israel's ability to use drones enabled it to have persistent intelligence and strike capabilities that Iranian operations evidently had not anticipated. All the while, their incessant whine reminded Iranians of the drones' presence and their inability to counter them.

The full extent of Israeli penetration on the ground in Iran also took Tehran by surprise. Mossad agents reportedly snuck special weapons into Iran on a large scale—deploying these assets throughout Iran and launching them towards attack targets with remarkable precision and effectiveness.⁹⁷ For example, Iranian intelligence forces uncovered several highly sophisticated, customized Spike missile launchers with automation and remote control capabilities, enabling Israeli operators to initiate strikes from afar, evade counterattack, and maintain relentless pressure on Iranian positions even deep behind enemy lines.⁹⁸

iv. Air Superiority

Israel's rapid ability to achieve air superiority over Iran was decisive for the outcome of the war. It stemmed from its early effective targeting of Iranian air defenses and the innovative deployment of the F-35.

Before the war began, Israeli operations shaped the battlespace by degrading Iranian air defenses. Although Israeli planners were initially concerned about facing Iran's domestically produced air defense platforms, Israel swiftly developed new tactics, techniques, and procedures based on real-time intelligence and operational lessons to effectively counter and neutralize these threats.⁹⁹ Israeli forces conducted strikes from long ranges and multiple directions, using drones and F-35s to target Iranian air defense

infrastructure. By the middle of the conflict, Iranian SAMs between the Iraq border and Tehran had mostly stopped operating due to coordinated air defense suppression missions.

Israeli pilots also prepared for dogfights against Iranian F-4s, MiG-29s, and F-14s, which would have posed a risk to Israeli aircraft and hindered the IAF's ability to establish air superiority. Instead, Iranian fighters did not present a challenge, opting to fly only when Israeli aircraft were absent or operating outside targeted areas. In a surprising defensive move, Iran placed vehicles on runways out of fear that Israel might land at and occupy its air bases.¹⁰⁰

Israel's air dominance was also critical to enabling U.S. Operation Midnight Hammer. While U.S. plans originally called for the American strike package to arrive in Iran from the southeast, coming in over the Persian Gulf, they were changed, in coordination with the IDF, to instead follow the route flown, and cleared, by the IDF, coming from the west. This ensured that U.S. warplanes avoided any Iranian air defenses and were able to deliver bombs on target uncontested. In fact, the IAF flew several additional missions against targets expressly requested by U.S. CENTCOM specifically to prepare the way for American B-2s.

a. The Role of the F-35

The integration of the F-35 was a game changer for Israel achieving air superiority over Iran. No Israeli aircraft entered Iranian airspace at any point unless it was led by F-35s, which could include the F-35 escorting formations of F-15s and F-16s from dozens of miles away; as one Israeli pilot told JINSA, they would not have wanted to fly in Iran without the F-35s there.¹⁰¹

Over the past eight years, Israeli pilots have consistently led the way in showcasing the F-35's extraordinary capabilities, setting new benchmarks for operational effectiveness and tactical innovation. Israeli pilots were the first to use the F-35 in combat in May 2018, and, in March 2025, became the first to fly it in combat missions using the so-called "beast mode," carrying external underwing munitions.¹⁰² Israeli pilots have accumulated more combat F-35 flight hours than any other air force. Israel has built a fleet of 44 F-35 jets—including two squadrons and a flight trainer—with five additional jets expected in the next two to three years. Since October 7, 2023, the average flight hours per jet soared from 440 to 2,250, reflecting the intense pace and critical role of these advanced fighters in Israel's air operations.¹⁰³

A core advantage was the F-35's advanced information sharing: its sensor data can be transmitted instantly to other Israeli jets, which "lock on" to F-35 radars for synchronized attacks. This advanced sensor suite also meant that F-35s could operate at greater distances and did not require tight formation flying, as their extended detection range allowed for broader coverage. Rather than relying on visual contact or closely coordinated flight patterns, the F-35 was able to guide and direct other aircraft across the battlespace, maximizing both survivability and strike effectiveness. Israel's capacity to update F-35 electronic warfare systems in real time—drawing directly on recent combat experience in Lebanon and Syria—ensured that the fleet was always one tactical step ahead of Iranian defenses.

Initially, Israeli planners were uncertain about the profiles and operational characteristics of many indigenous Iranian SAM systems, which stood in contrast to Russian systems that Israel had previously studied and operated against.¹⁰⁴ Some Iranian systems relied solely on optical tracking, complicating detection and countermeasures. Israeli planners also recognized that Iran demonstrated an ability to adapt, especially in its responses to attacks in April and October 2024. However, the F-35 also possessed the unique ability to detect air defense systems even when those defenses operated in survivability mode and remained invisible to standard intelligence. When Iranian radar or missile sites activated, the F-35 could immediately spot them, effectively serving as an airborne early warning or electronic warfare aircraft. It would then relay targeting information to other jets, such as F-16s and F-15s, enabling rapid and precise strikes against defenses that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.¹⁰⁵

Ultimately, operational experience proved that the F-35 met—and often exceeded—expectations. The jets detected and targeted surface-to-air missile sites with remarkable ease, and their sophisticated targeting systems performed flawlessly in the dynamic battlespace. The combination of multi-role capabilities, real-time intelligence sharing, and networked combat effectiveness established the F-35 as a critical centerpiece of Israeli air operations.

b. Refueling

Refueling tankers were critical to Israel's ability to sustain operations over Iran. Yet Operation Rising Lion's requirements stretched the capabilities of Israel's current fleet of seven "Ram" tankers. These aircraft have limited refueling capacity, speed, and defensive systems.¹⁰⁶ Had the conflict persisted longer, had Israel not achieved swift air superiority over Iran, or had Israeli pilots faced contested refueling operations over Iraqi and Syrian airspace, Israel's restricted aerial refueling resources could have constrained its operational effectiveness. Israeli fighter pilots told us they felt safer flying over the skies of Tehran than trying to keep the aging tankers, which had to be maintained mid-flight, in the air.

Although Israeli improvisation and resourcefulness enabled successful operation for now, the IAF sorely needs KC-46 aircraft refueling tankers, and refueling could become a bottleneck issue in future conflicts.

v. *Offense as Air Defense*

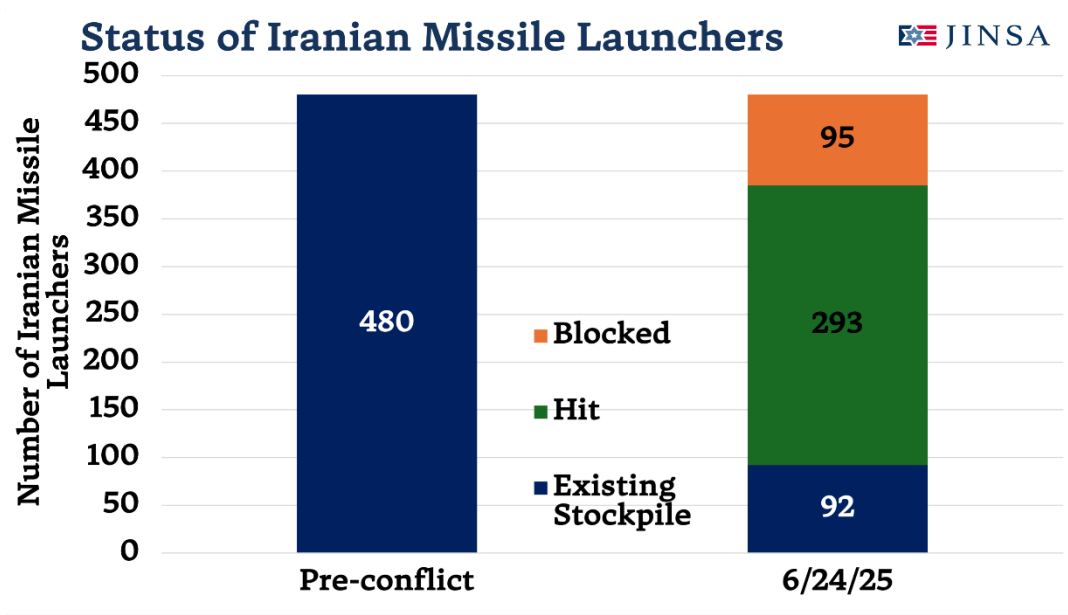
In contrast to Iran's attacks in April and October 2024, Israeli aircraft effectively neutralized Iranian missile launchers as they prepared to fire, significantly reducing the threat posed to Israel. As the war began, the IDF launched a rapid and urgent campaign to preempt Iran's missile capabilities—a strategic race to dismantle launchers and stockpiles before Tehran could fire barrages of missiles that would potentially exhaust U.S. and Israeli interceptor stockpiles and force a reevaluation in Jerusalem and Washington about whether to continue fighting.

Operation Rising Lion commenced with a preemptive strike targeting Iran's missile capabilities and senior military leadership, providing Israel with an early advantage that significantly influenced the course of the war. Although Iran initially planned to launch between 700 and 1,000 ballistic missiles, prompt and effective IAF operations against Iranian missile bases required Tehran to reduce its immediate response to just 100 drones and resulted in an 18-hour delay before the first major wave of ballistic missile launches following Israel's initiation of Operation Rising Lion.¹⁰⁷

With air superiority secured, Israel was able to expand its targeting of Iranian missile launchers, severely reducing Iran's capacity to conduct attacks. Israel hit 293 out of Iran's 480 missile launchers, destroying 198 of them, and blocking 95 inside of tunnels, with Israeli operations returning every 12 hours to ensure those launchers remained unusable.¹⁰⁸ In particular Israeli drones scoured the Iranian landscape for missile launchers, provided continuous surveillance, and delivered rapid, targeted strikes that further undermined Iran's ability to orchestrate sustained barrages. Israeli drones succeeded in hitting 200 missile launchers, accounting for nearly half of all neutralized launchers during the conflict.¹⁰⁹

Israel's air superiority and intelligence capabilities enabled it to capitalize on Iran's reliance on mobile missile launchers that enabled it to fire and relocate but had cumbersome fueling procedures. While Iran has constructed extensive underground missile complexes, these had limited operational usefulness because they could only launch a single missile at a time, restricting any chance for coordinated barrages.¹¹⁰ Consequently, Iran depended on mobile transporter erector launchers (TELs), frequently disguised as civilian vehicles, which had to move from concealed shelters into exposed locations before launching. This transition made them prime targets for Israeli counterattacks. Moreover, Iran's liquid-fueled missiles, like the Emad and Ghadr MRBMs, require lengthy fueling at the launch site. Israeli forces

seized upon these moments of vulnerability, detecting and neutralizing launchers before they could fire, thereby undermining Iran’s offensive capabilities.



Due to IAF strikes, Iran’s response during the conflict was fragmented and less effective than originally anticipated. Although Iran launched nearly twice as many ballistic missiles at Israel over the course of the 12-Day War compared to its previous two attacks combined, the longer duration of the conflict resulted in a daily average of approximately 48 missiles—a decline of 63 percent and 76 percent relative to the one-day April and October 2024 attacks, respectively. During the twelve days of fighting in June, Iran deployed approximately 550 percent more drones overall than in its April 2024 attack; however, the daily average was 93 drones, representing a 45 percent decrease from April.

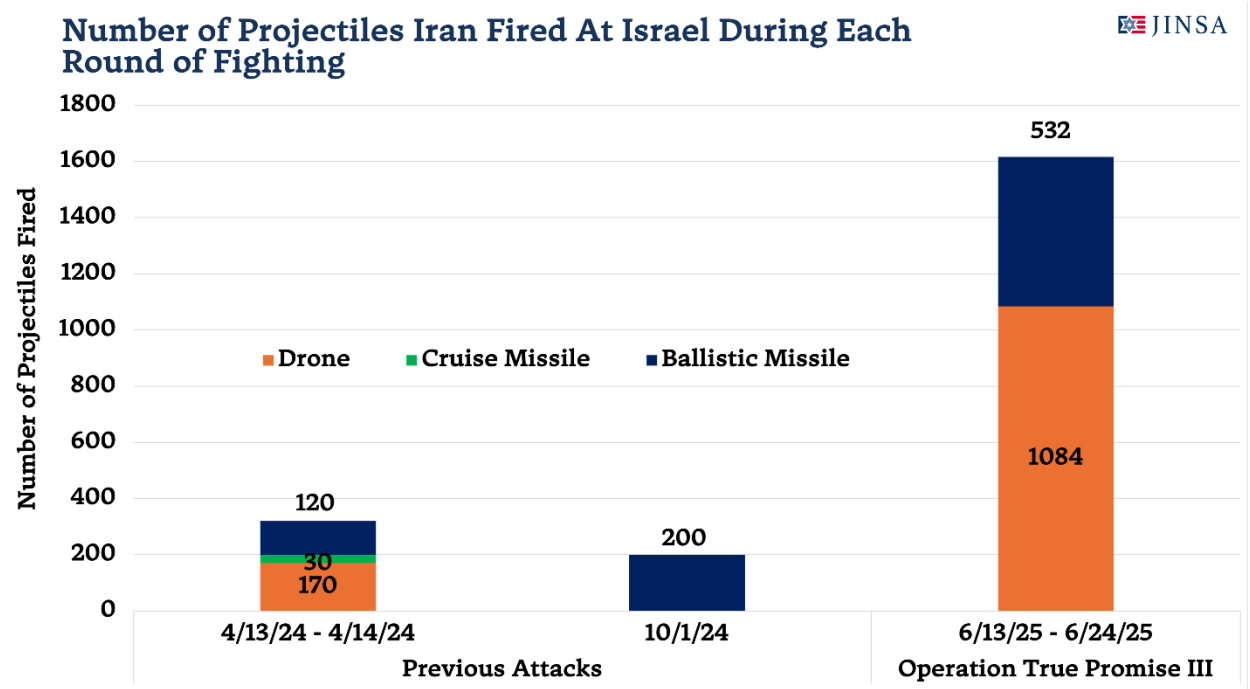
vi. New Offensive Capabilities

Israel unveiled several critical technological breakthroughs during the conflict. In particular, Israel launched cruise missile systems that had previously been highly sensitive and closely guarded secrets. This weapon’s precision and range allowed for devastating strikes deep within Iranian territory, enabling Israel to maintain constant pressure without the need to reestablish air superiority.

vii. Evolving Air Defenses

U.S. and Israeli forces intercepted most Iranian missiles, but 49 struck populated areas, infrastructure, and bases in Israel. Israeli officials reported that 532 Iranian missiles threatened Israeli territory with 36 hitting populated areas, 13 damaging bases or infrastructure, and air defenses stopping 273 missiles. Based on these figures, of the 322 missiles that threatened Israeli population centers, bases, or infrastructure, U.S. and Israeli air defenses had an 85 percent interception rate. The joint efforts at defeating Iranian drones had even greater success. Of the 1,084 drones launched by Iran, the IDF shot down 473, coalition partners destroyed 160, two reached Israeli territory, and the rest crashed before entering Israel. Israeli helicopters and ground-based electronic warfare systems played major roles in taking down drones.

Israel’s continued investment in advancing air defense technologies was instrumental in countering Iranian missiles and drones throughout the conflict. Israeli officials told JINSA that Israel introduced significant upgrades to the Iron Dome enabling the system to neutralize missiles weighing between 700 and 1,000 kilograms—a remarkable advancement for a short-range air defense platform beyond its original design parameters.¹¹¹ The IDF also implemented newly developed long-range and electronic warfare air defense solutions, further reinforcing the multi-layered protection of urban areas and critical infrastructure. These operational outcomes highlighted the technical complexity and adaptability of both U.S. and Israeli air defense systems during sustained and resource-intensive engagements, as detailed in JINSA’s report, *Shielded by Fire*, on the successes and vulnerabilities of air defense cooperation during the 12-Day War.¹¹²



viii. CENTCOM: Brothers in War

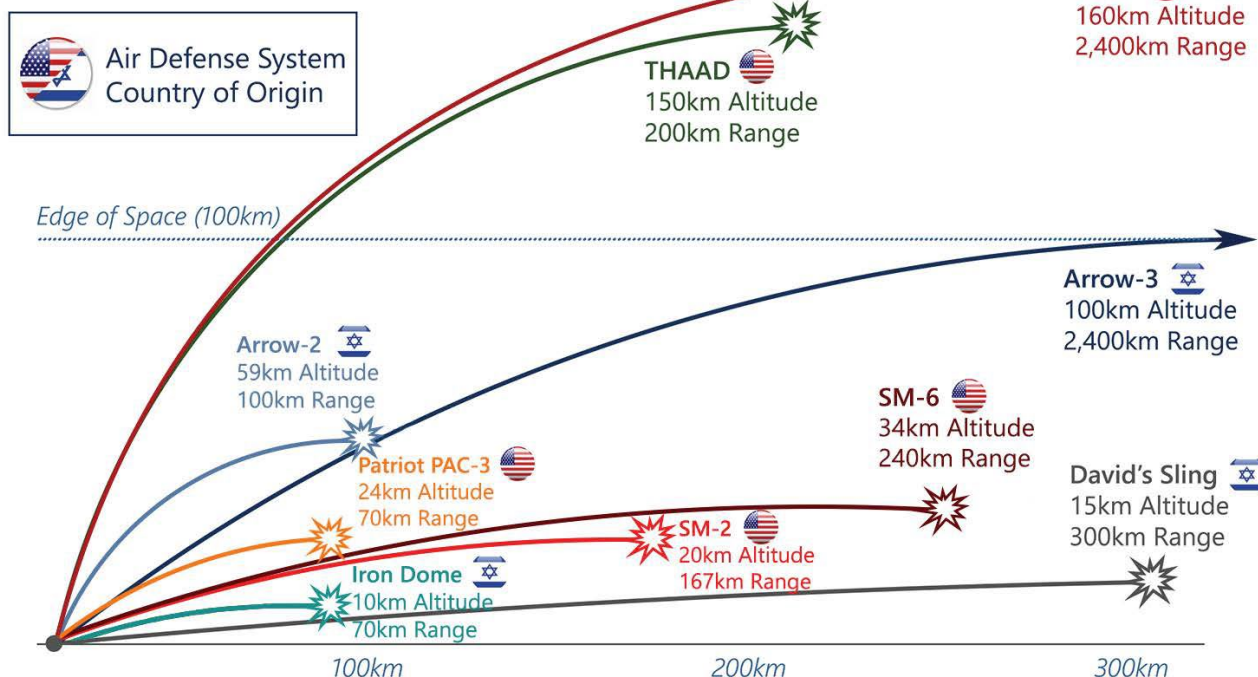
In 2021, Israel was shifted from the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) to CENTCOM, following President Trump’s decision to implement this change before leaving office—a change JINSA had supported since 2018.¹¹³ This realignment facilitated the unprecedented levels of U.S.-Israeli military cooperation during Operation Rising Lion.

Years of joint exercises, integrated planning cells, and streamlined command relationships, allowed the exchange of liaison officers to key headquarters, and enabled CENTCOM and the IDF to share real-time intelligence, coordinate strike packages, and integrate air and missile defense operations to maximize each side’s strengths. This close cooperation ensured overlapping air defense coverage, seamless incorporation of U.S. strike capabilities into Israel’s campaign plan, and the rapid execution of the critical U.S. strikes against three Iranian nuclear facilities during Operation Midnight Hammer.

a. Integrated Air Defense

The June 13-24 war demonstrated the effectiveness of joint Israeli and U.S. air defense during extended periods of high-volume attacks by Iran. Over almost two weeks, the integrated air defenses of both nations performed at high operational tempos, countering multiple waves of Iranian ballistic missiles and drones. In addition, Arab and European nations contributed in a limited capacity to drone interceptions, with most coordination concentrated between Israeli and U.S. forces. Through this cooperation, Israel and the United States achieved high interception rates throughout the war.

Ranges of Deployed U.S. and Israeli Air Defenses



U.S. air defense cooperation with the IDF increased the ability to detect, identify, track, and intercept Iranian attacks. In coordination with Israel's air defense systems, the United States enhanced defenses by deploying two Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries—likely marking the first dual U.S. deployment of this kind in another country—and positioning Aegis-equipped Navy destroyers in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, and Arabian Sea.¹¹⁴ U.S. land, air, and sea assets expanded the range of interceptors, helping Israel neutralize Iranian missile and drone attacks. THAAD batteries provided high-altitude defense against ballistic missiles, while Aegis-equipped destroyers with SM-2, SM-3, and SM-6 interceptors targeted incoming threats.¹¹⁵ The United States reportedly used 150 THAAD interceptors and 80 SM-3 interceptors in defense of Israel, a clear signal of U.S. support considering that this would amount to roughly 25 percent of the U.S. THAAD interceptor stockpile.¹¹⁶ U.S. and Israeli systems complemented each other, covering different airspace segments to create layered defenses. Notably, THAAD and SM-3 can intercept missiles at altitudes 50 kilometers and 60 kilometers higher than Israel's Arrow-3, and both Arrow-3 and SM-3 have a 2,400 kilometer range, exceeding THAAD by over 2,200 kilometers.

From the opening hours of Rising Lion, U.S. air and missile defense assets closely integrated with Israeli platforms. Exercises conducted three weeks before the war proved critical to achieving this integration.¹¹⁷ Joint planning and intelligence-sharing linked Israel's early-warning systems and Arrow, David's Sling, and Iron Dome batteries with two U.S. THAAD batteries in Israel and Aegis destroyers offshore.

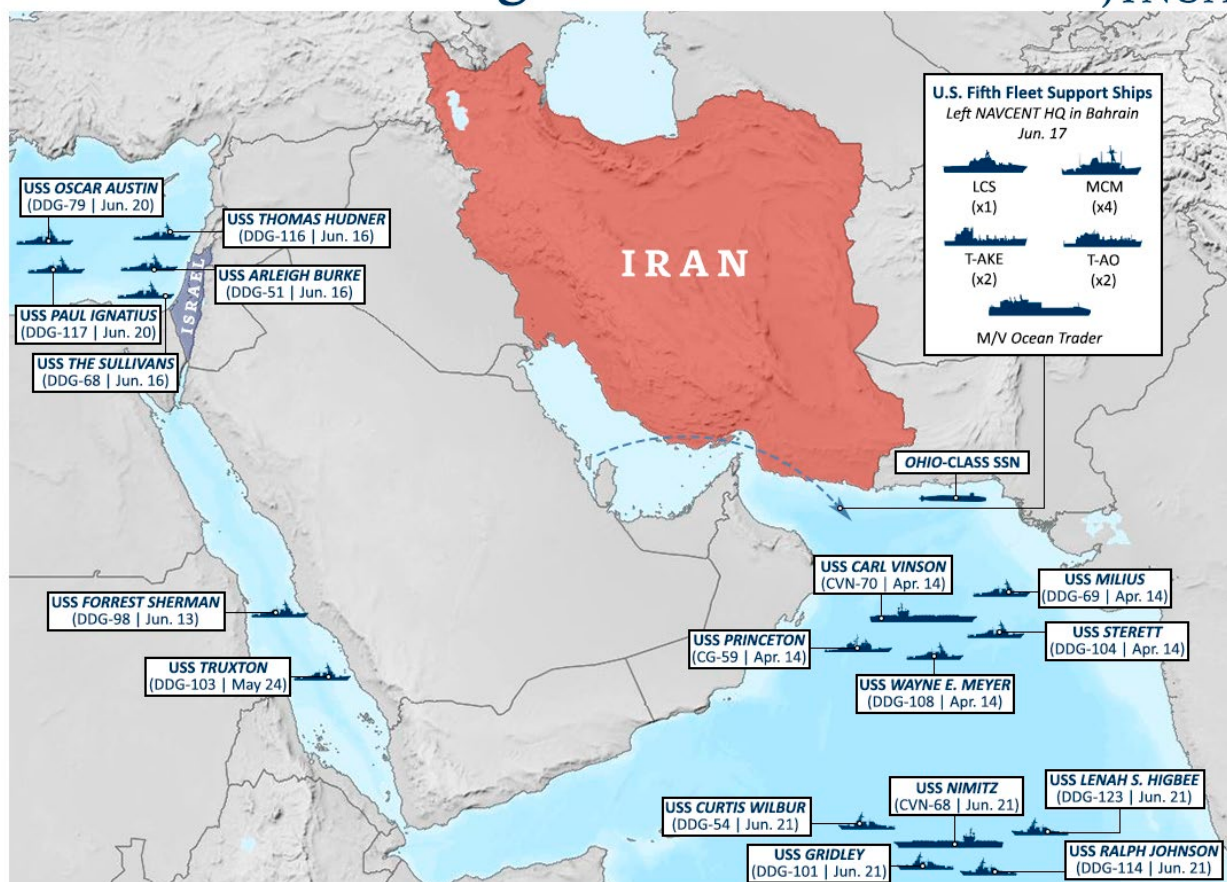
During the conflict, personnel from both nations worked shoulder to shoulder. Daily coordination meetings improved the integrated air and missile defense system, with IAF liaison officers at Shaw Air Force Base and U.S. Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT) personnel in Israel enabling both nations to share a unified operating picture for joint actions. This layered defense relied heavily on a mix of preplanned and real-time assignments to specific batteries based on the territory they protected. Most missile intercepts were preassigned: defensive batteries knew their zones and targets in advance, ensuring rapid, localized

responses. At the same time, a subset of batteries received dynamic, real-time targeting instructions to counter unexpected launches or adapt to shifting threats.

Arrow's radar system was pivotal, providing comprehensive situational awareness and tasking the appropriate air defense system or battery for each incoming missile. Arrow rapidly assigned interception duties to the best-positioned system. Depending on the nature of the threat, batteries employed either a shoot-look-shoot or shoot-shoot-look strategy: launching interceptors sequentially or simultaneously, then reassessing and responding as needed.

The entire intercept assignment and coordination process typically unfolded within a 10-minute window. Upon missile detection, each air defense system immediately developed its own intercept trajectory, while simultaneously coordinating with other batteries and platforms to ensure comprehensive coverage and avoid redundancy. Advanced technologies like LINK-16 enabled instant data sharing and synchronization.

U.S. Naval Force Posture in the Middle East During June 13-24 War



Source: Fox News and JINSA Research.
All locations are approximate based on public reporting.

Dates reflect approximate known arrival into theater.

Though maritime integration lagged behind land-based cooperation, data-sharing maintained a unified operating picture between Israeli and U.S. naval forces. This tightly choreographed approach maximized the effectiveness and adaptability of the joint air defense network.¹¹⁸ In scenarios where a naval target faced imminent threat, operational protocols delegated full control of air defense engagements to the Navy, allowing immediate and autonomous response to protect high-value maritime assets. In all other cases, the IAF assigned overall intercept responsibility for incoming threats, while the Navy retained authority to select the most appropriate interceptor from its arsenal.

Unlike October 2024, when Iran used only medium-range ballistic missiles, the June 13-24 war involved limited Arab and European air defense efforts. Arab states participated in defending Israel while diplomatically distancing themselves from Israel's direct attacks on Iran, aiming to avoid provoking retaliation. Saudi Arabia and Jordan allowed foreign aircraft for air defense as they had in April 2024, according to Israeli officials who spoke with JINSA, and Jordanian systems shot down drones and rockets crossing their airspace, and France also intercepted fewer than 10 drones.¹¹⁹ American pilots increased strategic depth due to their extended airspace access in the region, including over Jordan and Saudi Arabia, to search and shoot down Iranian projectiles before they reached Israeli airspace.¹²⁰ Strategic depth under CENTCOM also mattered—control of Iraqi airspace enabled Israeli tankers, combat search-and-rescue units, and patrol aircraft to operate where needed, shielded from Iranian counterfire. America's Arab partners' limited response carried political and security risks but also highlighted gaps in regional missile defense and emphasized the need for advanced, integrated air defense systems.¹²¹

b. Joint Planning for U.S. Strike

Coordination between Israel and CENTCOM extended beyond defense action to include offensive planning against Iran's strategic infrastructure. In the months before the war, Israeli and U.S. planners developed a shared target framework by fusing intelligence on Iran's nuclear and military facilities into a prioritized strike list.¹²² On June 22, a U.S. strike package of more than 125 aircraft, including seven U.S. B-2 bombers, dropped 12 GBU-57 MOP bunker busting bombs on Fordow and two MOPs on Natanz, shortly followed by a U.S. submarine hitting the Isfahan nuclear site with over 30 Tomahawk cruise missiles. While CENTCOM's original plan for Operation Midnight Hammer originally envisioned an approach from the south, Israeli commanders helped plot the optimal route by suggesting that an approach from the west would be more secure for the U.S. bombers due to Israel's control of the skies.

Meticulous U.S.-Israel planning ensured the B-2 bombing run was tightly coordinated, with final synchronization conducted three days before the operation began. In the days preceding the strike, Israeli attacks disabled significant portions of Natanz, degraded elements of the Isfahan complex, and dismantled much of western Iran's radar network, clearing ingress routes for U.S. bombers and complicating Iranian defensive coordination. CENTCOM also requested that the IAF strike two additional SAMs shortly before the operation began to help protect U.S. aircraft, and Israel provided battle damage assessments (BDA) to confirm conditions for the U.S. strikes.¹²³

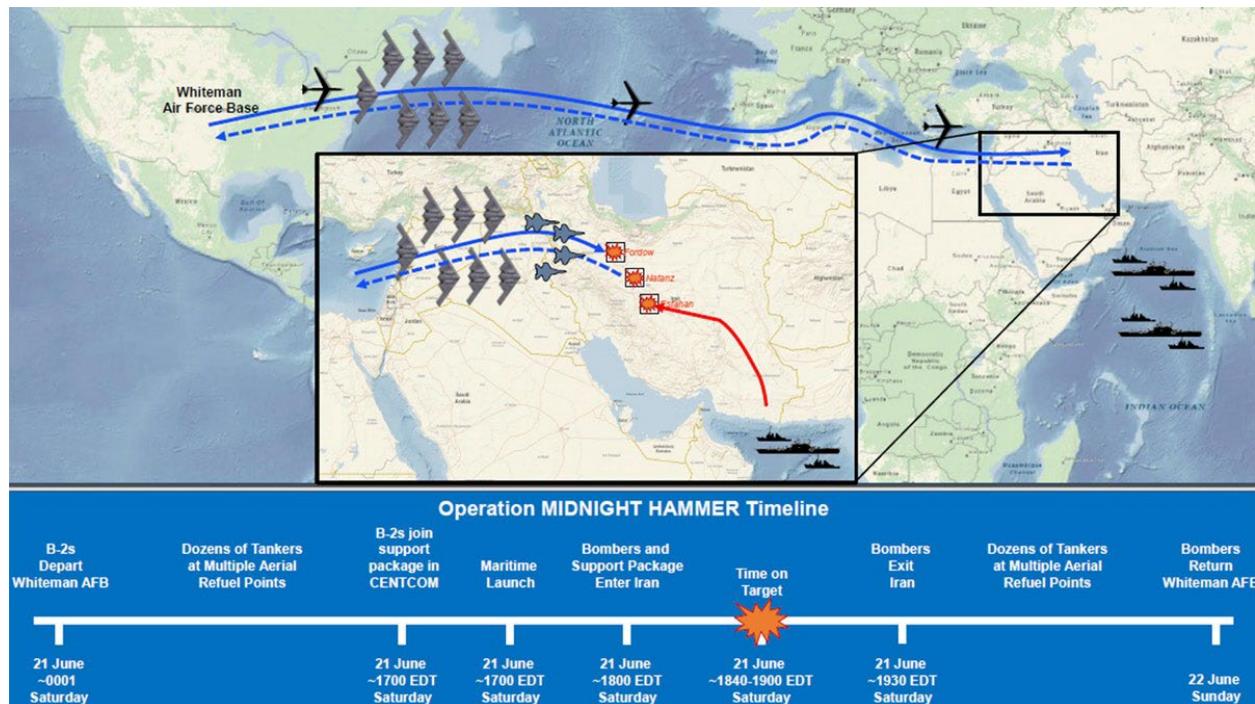
c. The Importance of U.S. Operation Midnight Hammer

Operation Midnight Hammer was the United States' first direct, kinetic strike on Iran's nuclear program, timed to exploit the operational conditions that Israel's Operation Rising Lion created. Yet, its significance extended well beyond immediate battlefield effects or tactical milestones. The operation carried immense strategic weight: it served as a bold demonstration of enduring U.S. commitment to defeating shared threats alongside its partners, and to the restoration of American credibility after periods of uncertainty.

For more than two decades, four successive U.S. presidents have publicly vowed to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, and the decision to employ American military force in Operation Midnight Hammer stands as the most unequivocal fulfillment of that enduring promise. By leading the complex precision attack on Iran's most fortified nuclear facilities, Washington sent an unambiguous signal—to adversaries and partners alike—that it remains willing to exert decisive power in defense of collective security. The orchestration and execution of Midnight Hammer showcased the depth of military integration possible under the CENTCOM framework, reinforcing the message that sustained U.S.-Israeli cooperation magnifies both nations' deterrence and operational reach.

More importantly, the operation's messaging reached far beyond the region. For American allies wrestling with doubts about Washington's staying power or resolve, Midnight Hammer was a visible commitment:

the United States would not allow adversaries to cross red lines with impunity, nor would it cede the strategic initiative to revisionist powers. For its adversaries, particularly in Tehran, the combination of intelligence coordination, technological superiority, and willingness to act against a known strategic threat forced a fundamental reassessment of the risks associated with further nuclear escalation.



Source: Pentagon¹²⁴

Ultimately, the true importance of Midnight Hammer lay in the strategic space it reopened—not simply through the physical damage inflicted, but by reasserting U.S. leadership, reassuring friends, and compelling foes to recalculate their ambitions. In doing so, the operation helped restore the credibility of American deterrence, reaffirming the value of robust partnerships and the readiness to employ exceptional capabilities when vital interests are at stake.

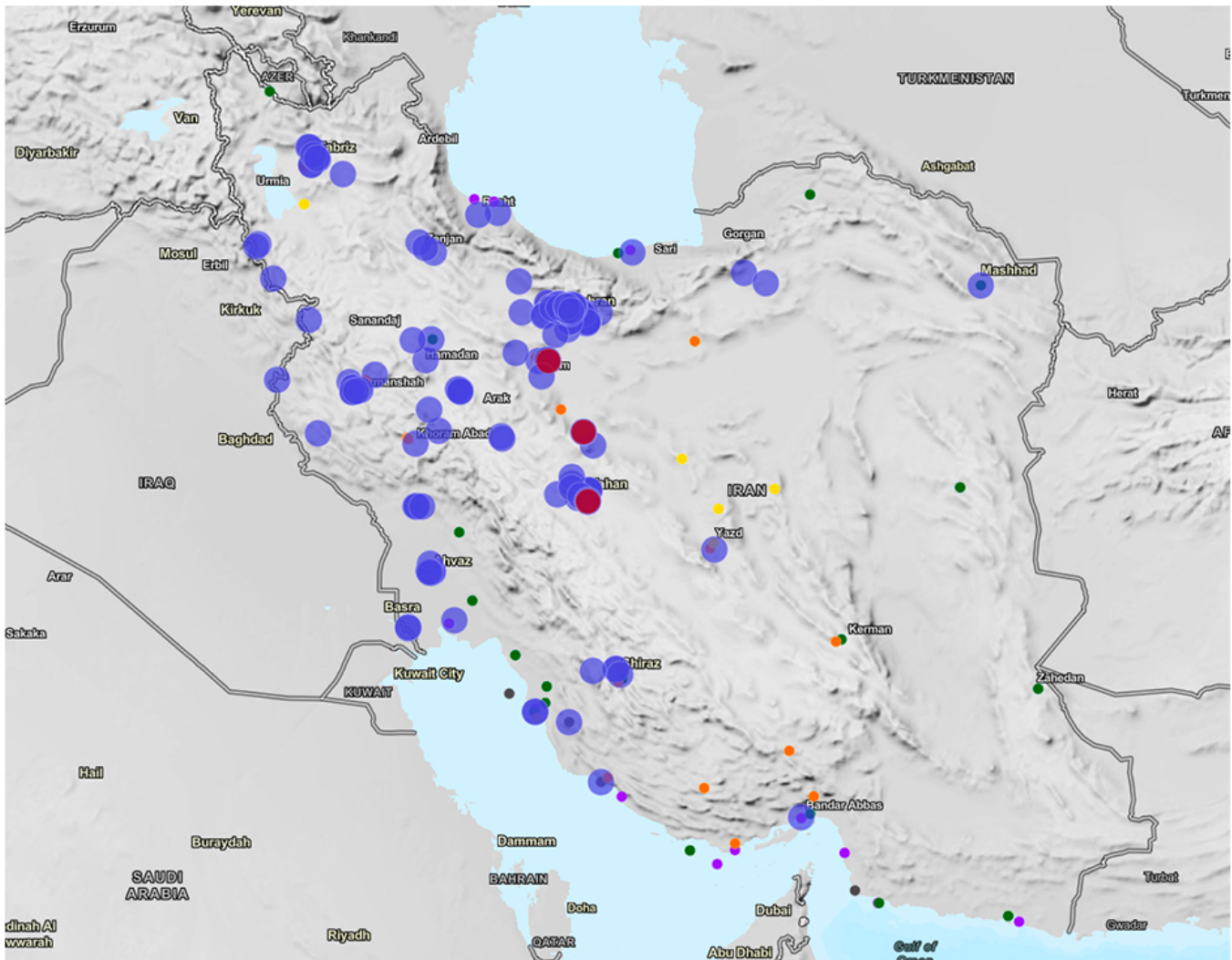
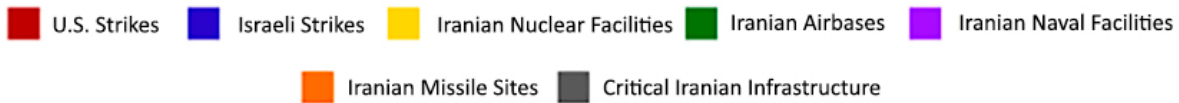
C. Operational Outcomes

Operations Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer produced decisive, measurable impacts on Iran’s most threatening strategic programs, with effects extending beyond the immediate battlefield. Through a combination of precision strikes, sustained air and missile defense integration, and coordinated U.S.–Israeli planning, the campaign degraded core elements of Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities while demonstrating the credibility of combined deterrence. While Israel could not eliminate Iran’s nuclear and ballistic programs outright, both were set back by years—creating a window of strategic opportunity for Israel and the United States to consolidate gains, harden defenses, and shape Tehran’s future decision-making under conditions of reduced military capacity.

i. Nuclear Program: Decision Making, Not Engineering

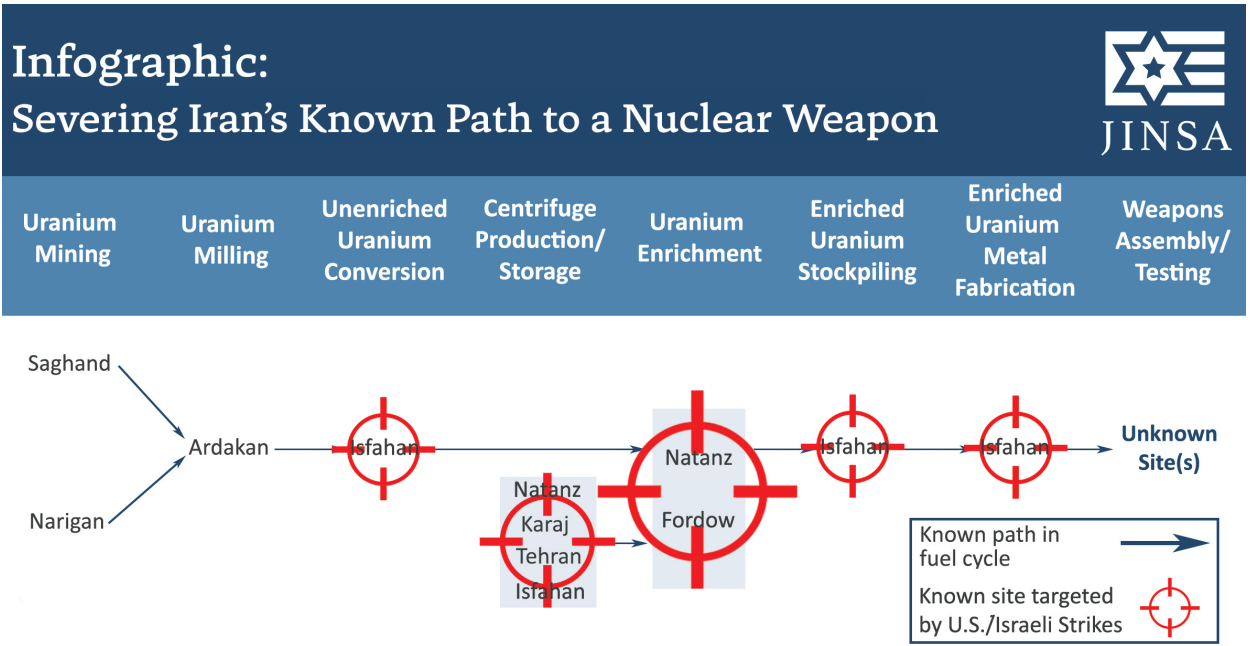
Operation Rising Lion achieved a substantial rollback of Iran’s nuclear program—not by eliminating every component, but by destroying the infrastructure and human capital required to move from threshold status to weaponization. Israeli and U.S. strikes destroyed the Natanz enrichment complex, severely damaged Fordow, obliterated uranium conversion- and metallurgy-related sites at Isfahan, and targeted centrifuge production, conversion facilities, testing sites, universities, and archives across the country. Israeli strikes also reportedly killed all senior nuclear scientists, except for one, delaying any reconstitution effort by an estimated one to two years under normal conditions—or one year if Tehran initiates a crash program.¹²⁵

U.S. and Israeli Strikes Against Iranian Targets



The post-operation BDA indicated Iran still possesses roughly 400 kilograms of 60 percent enriched uranium, but without functioning enrichment facilities, associated infrastructure, or key scientific personnel, this material cannot be quickly upgraded to weapons-grade.¹²⁶ Nor could it be used for the type of crude nuclear device the U.S. intelligence community warned of previously, as long as Iran does not rebuild its uranium conversion facility at Isfahan.¹²⁷ Initial Israeli intelligence assessments suggest medium confidence in knowing the location of Iran’s remaining enriched uranium stocks, further constraining Tehran’s options.¹²⁸ The more pressing question is not how long reconstitution will take, but whether Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, will decide to proceed. Signals in late 2024 indicated organizational changes within the weaponization program—meetings with the missile program and other developments that could only be explained as preparations for eventual weaponization—but there was

no “smoking gun” that a decision had been made to cross the threshold. Israeli leaders concluded that, if Iranian leadership made the decision, the regime could reach a nuclear weapon far faster than before.¹²⁹ Postwar, Tehran’s leadership remains divided: some urge pursuing a nuclear deterrent, while others favor prioritizing conventional force buildup.¹³⁰ The regime has abandoned Natanz, is investigating damage at Fordow, and is attempting to recover equipment from tunnels in Isfahan—but has not begun rebuilding enrichment capacity.¹³¹ Some secure underground facilities, such as Natanz and Isfahan tunnels, remain intact, serving as reminders of the limits of current Israeli strike capabilities. Israeli officials warn that Iran’s most dangerous strategy could be to hold out the promise of a new nuclear deal, demand up front sanctions relief for coming to the table, and then use talks as a delay tactic while quietly developing capabilities in locations beyond U.S. and Israeli reach.¹³²



ii. *Ballistic Missile Project: Threat Remains, Deterrence Critical*

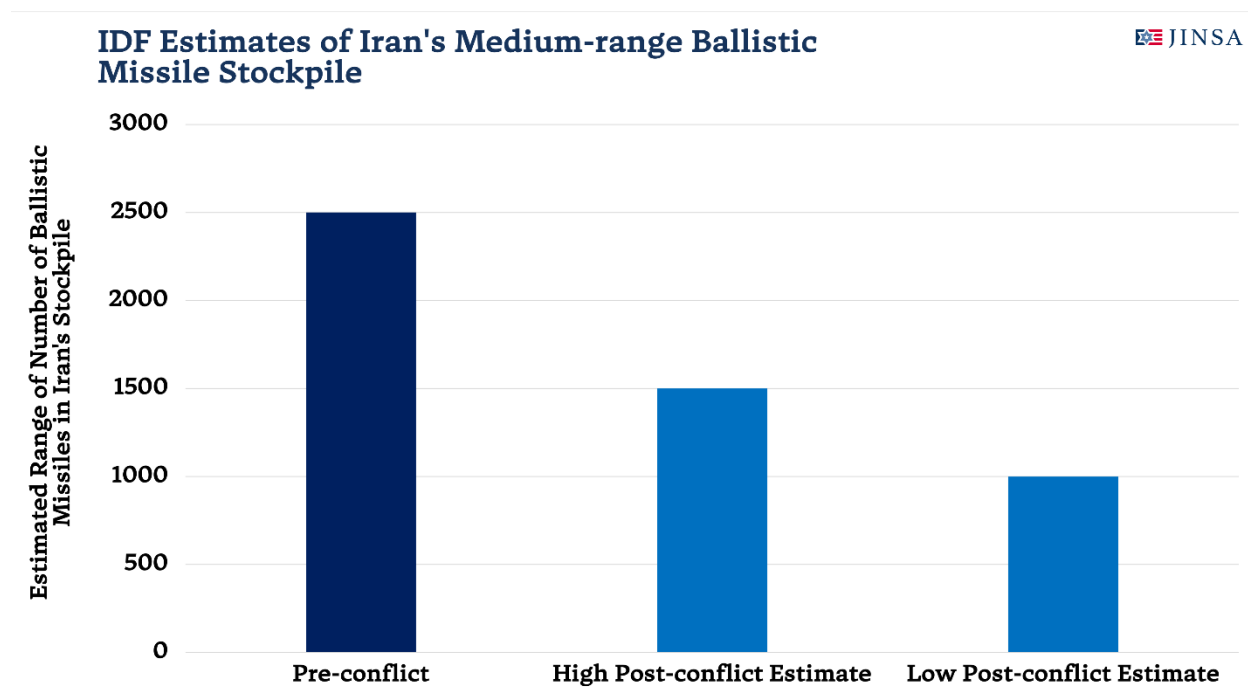
Iran’s ballistic missile program—previously one of the largest in the world and the largest in the Middle East, with a pre-war estimated 3,000 missiles—was a central target of Operation Rising Lion.¹³³ Before the war, Tehran was on pace to produce up to 300 missiles per month by March 2026—a capacity that, within three years, could have yielded an arsenal of 10,000 missiles capable of hitting Israel.¹³⁴ Such a stockpile could overwhelm Israeli defenses leaving Tel Aviv facing a threat environment comparable to Seoul’s exposure to North Korea’s missile arsenal. Israeli strikes severely degraded this manufacturing base, reducing production capacity and delaying the program by an estimated 1.5 to 2 years.¹³⁵ Israel destroyed key missile plants, assembly lines, and precision manufacturing facilities. Iran also depleted its stockpiles by 500-plus missiles via launches toward Israel during the conflict.¹³⁶ Yet Iran’s residual arsenal remains significant, and the regime is already seeking to reconstitute its base. Recent reporting of satellite imagery indicated that Iran has begun efforts to rebuild its solid fuel missile production sites at Parchin and Shahroud; however, it still lacks the planetary mixers necessary for solid fuel missile development after Israel destroyed them.¹³⁷ In the weeks following the June 24 ceasefire, reports indicated that Iran was seeking out China’s assistance to boost its production base and possibly by importing Chinese systems.¹³⁸ Iran reportedly requested for China to provide it with several thousand tons of materials used in the production of ballistic missiles, including ammonium perchlorate, which it could also distribute to its regional proxies, such as the Houthis. Israeli and U.S. defense officials are debating how to prevent the Islamic Republic from rearming, recognizing that it will be easier to block missile plant reconstruction than to repeat the suppression of Iranian air defenses. Beijing’s apparent willingness to sell

Iran missile production equipment—and potentially advanced air defense systems—represents a major strategic risk for both Israel and the United States.

Israel's leadership views this delay as vital breathing space to expand and modernize its layered defense architecture, including the planned November 2025 deployment of laser interceptors and a next-generation Iron Dome capable of intercepting ballistic missiles at a tenth of current per-shot costs.¹³⁹ Nonetheless, Israeli officials caution that Iran's capacity for rapid regeneration means deterrence will hinge on sustained pressure, close U.S.-Israel coordination, and readiness for a potential "second round"—possibly within the next two to three years.

iii. Rebuilding Iranian Air Defenses: With a Little Help from Their "Friends"

Iran's ability to reconstruct its air defense network in the aftermath of Operation Rising Lion will be fundamentally constrained or enabled by its reliance on foreign technology. Although Iran possesses sophisticated optical tracking capabilities, its defensive reach remains limited due to a lack of high-powered, advanced radar—technology that Russia has declined to export but that China may be willing to provide. This current technological gap hampers Iran's efforts to shield vulnerable military infrastructure from future strikes. China reportedly provided Iran with air defenses after the war, but Chinese officials have publicly and privately denied that it has helped Iran reconstitute its military capabilities.¹⁴⁰



IV. Down, But Not Out: The Current State of the Iranian Threat

The evolving strategic landscape in the Middle East demands that Iran's leadership make a fundamental decision on whether to prioritize rebuilding its air defenses, missile production, nuclear capabilities, or terrorist networks. or focus on desperately needed economic recovery—a process complicated by the regime's likely reliance on delaying nuclear negotiations to gain time and concessions. This dilemma carries profound implications for regional security, as Israel remains intensely vigilant for any Iranian efforts to restore missile production, enhance air defenses, or accelerate nuclear ambitions, all of which could provoke another round of conflict should Tehran's military regeneration proceed unchecked. Moreover, Israel is closely watching Iran's attempts to reconstitute its network of proxy groups, particularly as the degradation of Hezbollah and other actors has increased Israel's willingness to act with less fear of reprisal.

A. The Choices Facing Iran

The potential for renewed Israeli or U.S. strikes looms large in the calculations of Iran's leadership. Equally pressing are the difficult choices between projecting power abroad and ensuring domestic stability. With limited financial resources, Iran cannot both restore its strategic military capabilities and address the worsening conditions faced by its citizens. Mounting issues—such as acute water shortages, persistent energy blackouts, and an unraveling health care system—have fueled public discontent and further eroded the regime's authority. Ultimately, the regime's survival will depend on its ability to balance these competing priorities and respond to the increasingly urgent needs of its population.

i. *Guns, Nukes, or Butter?*

Current reports indicate that Iran is balancing efforts to rebuild, avoid direct confrontation with Israel, and maintain its position of authority. Iran has started to restore some of its capabilities, which has drawn attention from Israeli officials, but has not undertaken actions likely to trigger further Israeli military responses at this time.

a. Missile Program

In the wake of Israel degrading most of Iran's missile stockpile and launch capabilities during the war, Tehran may devote significant attention to rebuilding its missile capacity. Israeli operations against Iranian missile storage and production sites set back Iran's missile project by 1-2 years, according to one estimate from an Israeli official who spoke with JINSA. Despite sustaining attacks, Iran retained a substantial portion of its missile arsenal. According to IDF assessments, Iran's missile stockpile decreased from approximately 2,500 missiles prior to the conflict to an estimated 1,000–1,500 missiles, while its launcher capacity was reduced from 480 launchers to about 100.¹⁴¹

Iran, having suffered major losses to its missile arsenal and launch capacity, will urgently seek to rebuild and expand its missile stockpile. As a temporary solution, Tehran may pursue the purchase of Russian, Chinese, or North Korean missiles and drones, many of which are based on platforms already familiar to Iranian forces. Reports suggest Iran has tried to acquire Iranian drones manufactured in Russia, causing some tension between Tehran and Moscow, who heavily relies upon them for its war against Ukraine. Reports also indicate that Iran has started reconstructing missile production facilities damaged during the war, imported precursor chemicals for ballistic missile fuel from China, and may have also imported Chinese air defense systems.¹⁴² Ultimately, a mix of domestic production and foreign acquisitions may define Iran's efforts to restore its missile and drone capabilities.

b. Terror Networks

In parallel, the regime will likely attempt to revive its international network of proxy actors. Although Israel has dealt significant blows to Iran's proxy network, the Houthis remain a formidable and persistent adversary, and groups like Hezbollah, while greatly diminished, still represent an ongoing threat. This

setback leaves Tehran with little choice but to allocate additional resources toward rebuilding its proxies and restoring lost deterrent capacity. The need to replenish Hezbollah's arsenal and infrastructure places yet another strain on Iran's already overstretched finances, complicating the regime's strategic calculus. Iranian-backed groups may escalate aggression against U.S. forces and partners in the Middle East. Israeli officials emphasized to us that they are committed to identifying the Houthis' strategic vulnerabilities, just as they did with Hezbollah, and will take decisive action once they discover them.

Iranian-backed groups may also escalate aggression against U.S. forces and partners in the Middle East. Since Hamas's October 7, 2023, terrorist attack, Iran-backed groups have launched at least 217 attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, including six during the opening days of the Israel-Iran war.¹⁴³

Simultaneously, IRGC networks may seek to increase espionage and terrorist activity worldwide, with a particular focus on Israel and Jewish sites. Iran may also expand its efforts to kill U.S. and Israeli leaders, reminiscent of the threats and plots targeting President Trump and senior U.S. officials following the 2020 killing of General Soleimani. Simultaneously, IRGC networks may seek to increase espionage and terrorist activity worldwide, with a particular focus on Israel and Jewish sites.

c. Nuclear Program

Iran's leadership now faces a dilemma: should they return to secret nuclear facilities or pursue a different path—perhaps unilateral dismantlement, a negotiated settlement, or simply remaining a threshold state as before. Iran has continued to investigate the level of destruction at facilities such as Fordow and has been trying to dig out tunnels in Isfahan where enriched uranium and centrifuges remain buried, but has abandoned the Natanz complex.¹⁴⁴ However, satellite imagery in September indicated construction at the Pickaxe Mountain facility south of Natanz, a secretive site deep underground—possibly even deeper than Fordow—that may house centrifuge and/or enrichment capabilities.¹⁴⁵ Iran's track record of nuclear activity indicates that it may lean toward greater concealment, making intelligence collection more difficult. On October 29, Rafael Grossi, the head of the IAEA, stated that Iran was not actively enriching uranium but recent activity had been observed at its nuclear facilities and 60 percent enriched material was still present in Iran.¹⁴⁶

d. Economic Constraints on Regime Stability

Meanwhile, economic realities severely constrain Tehran's ability to pursue both its missile and nuclear programs. Iran faces acute infrastructure crises, highlighted by the recent closure of government offices due to a lack of water and persistent electricity shortages—problems reminiscent of less developed nations. These hardships force the leadership to continually choose between spending on proxies, missiles, and air defense versus investing in domestic infrastructure and addressing the everyday needs of their population.

The regime, more vulnerable than before, must also weigh whether continuing its nuclear program and external aggression is worth the growing risk of internal instability. Ultimately, the Iranian regime's survival is its overriding concern. Years of Iranian regime spending on its nuclear program and proxies have come at the expense of building a sustainable economy. Mounting dissatisfaction grows as acute domestic crises intensify. Iran faces a severe water shortage; depleted reservoirs and recent government office closures highlight the desperation. Amid these developments, dissenting voices have emerged within Iran, with the Reformist Front publicly declaring on August 17 that the nation's survival depends on sweeping reforms, reconciliation, and a return to the people—a stance underscored by demands for amnesty, political freedoms, and voluntary suspension of uranium enrichment in exchange for sanctions relief.¹⁴⁷ Cities across the country must frequently ration water and interruptions of energy and goods have contributed to public frustration and economic paralysis. Frequent power outages in Iran have disrupted mobile networks and limited access to the internet, phone calls, and text messaging.¹⁴⁸ At the same time, the health sector nears collapse—an estimated 80 percent of pharmacies teeter on the brink of bankruptcy

because currency devaluations, state-imposed price controls, and supply chain breakdowns batter their operations.¹⁴⁹ These hardships strain daily life for millions of Iranians and erode the regime's ability to project power abroad. As domestic pressures mount, Tehran's leadership must make increasingly painful choices between serving the people's needs and pursuing strategic ambitions.

An increasing segment of the population has expressed dissatisfaction with the regime and has openly declined to adhere to its morality laws, a core tenant of the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology. Thus far, the regime has neither demonstrated the capacity nor the willingness to provide a widespread response to deter this resistance.

ii. Deal or Delay?

At this critical juncture, Iran's intentions regarding its nuclear program remain unclear. On one hand, Iranian leadership faces mounting pressure—both internal and external—to reach a diplomatic settlement that could alleviate sanctions and economic hardship. Yet, deep-seated distrust toward Western counterparts, particularly the United States, tempers any optimism for a swift or sincere agreement. The regime has a history of engaging in negotiations not solely to reach an accord, but as a means to postpone punitive measures such as snapback sanctions, all the while quietly advancing its nuclear capabilities out of sight from American and Israeli intelligence. Iran could use a similar strategy to delay snapback of UN sanctions past the expiration date in October when signatories to the JCPOA could invoke them.

B. Not Over Yet: Israel's Continued Vigilance

The 12-Day War shifted the strategic balance, placing time on the side of Israel, the United States, and its partners, rather than Iran. This period of relative calm is a rare opportunity, but it demands prudence and deliberate action rather than complacency. Israel will seek to maintain clear air superiority over Iran and prevent any attempts at nuclear reconstitution. Simultaneously, a comprehensive diplomatic agreement for Iran to eschew its nuclear ambitions remains the ideal outcome, but Israel may need to conduct further military operations if Iran remains uncooperative or attempts to hide its nuclear activities.

i. Triggers for Returning to Iran

As Iran seeks to rebuild, Israeli leaders will need to consider a range of potential triggers before launching another conflict with Iran. While Israel will closely monitor Iran's efforts to rebuild and modernize its air defenses, which may play a factor in Israeli planning and a decision to start another war, this effort will not likely by itself be the main reason for another war. Instead, Iran's attempts to restore its ballistic missile program or revive its nuclear ambitions present the most direct and existential threats to Israel. Israel's leadership has repeatedly drawn clear red lines, issuing sharp warnings about these dangers. In addition, Iran may seek to reverse engineer U.S. and Israeli munitions and other weaponry that have landed on its soil, using these materials to enhance its own military capabilities. Tehran will also closely study U.S. and Israeli offensive and defensive operations and technologies as it prepares to rearm and adapt its strategies for future conflicts. If Tehran takes significant steps to restore missile capabilities or advance its nuclear program, Israel could escalate tensions and initiate decisive military action, determined to prevent Iran from shifting the regional balance of power.

a. Air Defenses

As Israel weighs the prospect of initiating another conflict with Iran, the question of Tehran's evolving air defense capabilities looms large.¹⁵⁰ While the acquisition or rebuilding of air defenses—particularly those bolstered by indigenous innovation—represents a significant strategic development for Iran, Israeli decision-makers remain cautious about treating it as a direct trigger for war.¹⁵¹ One Israeli official who spoke with JINSA doubted that Iran will receive new air defense systems from Russia, expecting Tehran to instead rebuild its own defenses.¹⁵²

b. Ballistic Missiles

Just as Israel began the war in June to prevent Iran from tripling its stockpile of ballistic missiles, should Tehran attempt to rebuild or expand its nuclear program, Israel may be compelled to initiate another conflict. This time, however, Israel will almost certainly focus on thwarting Iran's efforts to acquire a new, even larger arsenal of missiles and launchers—one capable of mounting a war far deadlier and more protracted than the twelve days of fighting witnessed earlier in the year.

While air defenses intercepted the vast majority of threats to Israeli populated areas, bases, and infrastructure, Iranian attacks occasionally overwhelmed air defenses, and Iranian adaptations to launch more frequent but smaller missile attacks, coupled with the use of longer-range, heavier, and more precise missiles, enabled Iran to sneak projectiles past robust air defense systems.¹⁵³ The use of cluster munitions also increased the level of destruction in Israel. Iran's launch of solid-fueled missiles may have also made air defense more difficult by enabling mid-air maneuvers that reduced speed to make it more difficult to predict trajectories and conduct interceptions.¹⁵⁴ Iran will have learned many lessons from its missile attacks that it could employ in a future war to even greater devastating effects.

c. Nuclear Program

By initiating Operation Rising Lion and expanding its operation from discrete strikes to an extensive campaign, Israel unmistakably demonstrated its resolve to prevent Iran from advancing its nuclear program. Statements from Israeli political and military leaders since the war have left no doubt about the nation's readiness to act decisively if Tehran attempts to revive its nuclear ambitions. Israel has continued to demonstrate its willingness to take any necessary measures to safeguard its security and deter Iranian efforts to advance its nuclear program.

ii. *Not Just Iran*

Beyond Iranian territory, Israel will also likely continue to counter Iran's ongoing support for proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. Although Iran's proxies have suffered significant losses and setbacks, they continue to operate and exert influence throughout the region. Their ongoing presence poses enduring risks to stability and underscores the necessity for continued vigilance and strategic response from Israel and its allies. A priority for Israel is to prevent Iran from rebuilding its ring of fire proxy network, including Hezbollah, which has previously posed security concerns for Israel and influenced its actions regarding Iran. Israel has carried out limited strikes against the Houthis, but since these have not deterred the group, a broader and more comprehensive campaign may be required to address their ongoing threat. While Israel will closely watch Iranian territory, preventing it from rebuilding its ring of fire will be critical for lasting security and stability throughout the region. Ongoing Iranian support for proxy groups or continued assaults against Israel by these proxies may potentially trigger additional Israeli operations.

a. The Houthis

The Houthis remain a resilient threat in the Middle East, standing as Iran's last significant proxy force mounting regular kinetic strikes that put infrastructure and populations at risk. Despite mounting pressure and the attrition of other Iranian-aligned groups, the Houthis continue to wield significant influence, launching attacks against both Israel and commercial shipping lanes. The Houthis not only serve Tehran's strategic interests but also perpetuate insecurity and uncertainty across the Red Sea and beyond.

Their continued capacity to threaten maritime traffic has wide-reaching implications. The Red Sea serves as a critical artery for international trade, and Houthi assaults on vessels have forced nations and corporations to reconsider the safety and viability of these routes. Targeted attacks against Israeli assets and allies only underscore the group's dedication to Iran's regional agenda, seeking both to challenge Israel directly and to intimidate its partners. The Houthis remain a persistent challenge for regional security—and Israel in particular—that will require further military operations to degrade and deter. For example, in August, after the Houthis launched a cluster munition at Israel for the first time—possibly borrowing

lessons from Iran's use of cluster munitions in its attacks against Israel during the 12-Day War—Israel responded by escalating its campaign—striking a fuel depot, power plants, and the presidential palace in Sanaa.¹⁵⁵

b. Hezbollah

While Israeli operations have succeeded in degrading Hezbollah's capabilities, the terrorist group remains a potent threat to Israel's north. Even in its weakened state, Hezbollah remains more powerful than the Lebanese Armed Forces and continues to pose a persistent threat to regional stability. Israel, in close partnership with the United States, has actively engaged in efforts to disarm Hezbollah, recognizing that such a process is gradual and demands sustained commitment. Israel has clearly signaled not only its determination but also its operational capability to disrupt any attempt by Iran to reconstitute Hezbollah as a significant deterrent force, particularly through the rebuilding of its missile arsenal. In both public statements and coordinated military actions, Israeli leaders have emphasized that any Iranian efforts to equip Hezbollah with advanced missile systems will be met with rapid and forceful response. This resolve is rooted in the recognition that a resurgence of Hezbollah's missile capacity would fundamentally threaten the security balance of the region by reestablishing a credible deterrent against Israel's northern flank.

V. The Way Forward: A New Campaign Between the Wars

Operation Rising Lion created a strategic recalibration by reinforcing Israeli strength while reducing Iranian power. However, sustaining these outcomes will require ongoing political resolve and military capability. Similar to Israel's decade-long "campaign between the wars," which curtailed Iran's entrenchment in Syria and restricted advanced transfers to Hezbollah, the United States and Israel should establish a joint strategy involving preemptive military action along with diplomatic, intelligence, and economic tools to maintain effective pressure on Iran that will help deter and prevent it from restoring its military and nuclear programs. The renewed campaign should incorporate both defensive and offensive measures, aim to expand regional cooperation, and increase constraints on Iran by limiting its access to funding, resources, and materials from international partners.

The war highlighted not only the necessity for increased joint U.S.-Israel cooperation, but also the importance of preparing for future conflict, as the threat is far from over. In this current period of transition, with Iran rebuilding and reassessing its strategies, the United States must remain decisively engaged. The partnership between the U.S. and Israel must extend well beyond immediate military needs, embracing a holistic approach that includes military, diplomatic, intelligence, and economic tools. By strengthening the defense industrial base, closing persistent capability gaps, and fostering integrated cooperation across all sectors, both nations can work together proactively to maintain a decisive edge, respond effectively to evolving threats, and promote lasting security throughout the region.

A. Double Down on Defense

The conflict with Iran has shifted from the direct military operations in June to a competitive arms buildup, pitting Iranian missiles against the missile defense systems of Israel and the United States. Thanks to Operation Rising Lion, both the United States and Israel now have an opportunity to innovate new air defense strategies that address cost efficiency and resolve the production limitations impacting current technologies. While their joint air defense efforts were overwhelmingly successful during the 12-Day War, both nations should leverage this period to advance their defensive capacities and capabilities. Resting on the accomplishments of defending against Iranian missile attacks in 2024 and 2025 would have dangerous ramifications during the next war.

Maintaining the advantages gained through Operations Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer requires a collaborative approach to the ongoing arms buildup. It is critical that the United States and Israel double down on defense by expanding their defense industrial bases to improve the quantity and quality of defensive systems in their arsenals. By reinforcing the defense industrial base, closing existing capability gaps, and fostering integrated cooperation across defense sectors, both countries can preserve a technological edge, counter evolving threats, and achieve lasting regional security.

The rapidly changing security environment in the Middle East highlights the urgent need for U.S.-Israel co-production of air defenses like Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow. It is crucial that the United States and Israel ramp up interceptor manufacturing and investments in joint research for next-generation air defense systems. The June conflict saw unprecedented rates of interceptor use by both nations, underscoring the importance of building stockpiles large enough to sustain large air defense operations without depleting inventories faster than they can be replenished. Working together to strengthen supply chains and advance air defense technology is essential for maintaining a strategic edge and stability in the region.

The sheer volume of interceptors deployed by the United States during hostilities demonstrated the scale of Israel's reliance on U.S. capacity. Without U.S. support, Israel could have faced greater casualties and depleted more of the Arrow interceptors. Israel's recent operational experience underscores the necessity of expanding its own stockpiles of air defense interceptors. With American assets—such as interceptors and advanced sensor platforms—in place, Israel was able to conserve some of its own Arrow missile stockpiles. During the June conflict, U.S. and Israeli air defense systems—including Israel's Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow, as well as U.S. SM, THAAD, and Patriot interceptors—were employed at high rates over a period of less than two weeks. To maintain strategic readiness, it is necessary for the United States and Israel to expand their production of interceptors so that they can conduct high-intensity operations without depleting large shares of their stockpiles.

The United States and Israel will require expanded stockpiles and production facilities, in particular, the co-development of next generation platforms, such as Arrow-4, Arrow-5, and Iron Dome-2. The acceleration of joint research and development, especially for unique and cutting-edge weapons, is essential—not only to overcome material shortages but also to leverage the technological ingenuity of both nations. By uniting their industrial capabilities, the U.S. and Israel can ensure the timely procurement of advanced platforms, such as the next-generation Iron Dome, and facilitate the rapid integration of emerging directed energy technologies like high-energy lasers and microwaves.

Israel's new technologies—such as the Iron Beam directed energy system for short-range protection and the soon-to-be-launched Iron Dome 2.0, which will intercept a broader spectrum of aerial threats at a lower cost—offer immediate solutions. Investing in these advancements would yield strategic benefits extending beyond Israel's borders.

Sharing these innovations with Middle Eastern nations that pursue peace with Israel could help build a new, cooperative regional framework and facilitate an integrated air and missile defense network. Such efforts would enhance security across the region while decreasing the reliance on U.S. military deployments within the CENTCOM area. Furthermore, newly developed technologies in partnership with Israel could be integrated into the Golden Dome initiative or used to safeguard U.S. bases overseas, enhancing the protection of American personnel and interests.

B. Stay on Offense

After Operations Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer, the United States and Israel should go beyond simply strengthening defenses. Their successes during the 12-Day War now present them with an opportunity to further extend their gains long into the future. Both nations must remain on the offensive to prevent Iran from restoring its nuclear and missile capabilities. At the same time that they actively weaken the remaining Iranian threat network, especially the Houthis, and block Hezbollah's resurgence in Lebanon, they must also prepare for the likelihood of future conflict with Iran.

Building on the successes during the 12-Day War, the United States and Israel should stay on offense to prevent Iran from rebuilding its ring of fire. Similar to Israel's previous operations in Syria aimed at interrupting Iranian support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, a sustained, preemptive campaign between the war could help impede Iran's efforts to rebuild its proxy armies. Although Israel's prior campaign between the wars began only after Iran had equipped Hezbollah to function as a second-strike deterrent, undertaking preemptive measures now may prevent Iran from reestablishing such a deterrent force in the future.

Maintaining a steady campaign during periods between major conflicts will first require both countries to dedicate more intelligence-gathering resources and set up joint intelligence teams focused on monitoring Iran and its proxy groups. The United States and Israel must stay informed about if, where, and how Iran is rebuilding its air defenses, missile production and launch sites, and nuclear infrastructure. These intelligence efforts should be paired with a coordinated policy framework to define clear boundaries and responses should Iranian activities again reach intolerable levels.

Equally, both countries should prioritize dismantling the remnants of Iran's "ring of fire," focusing on the Houthis, and ensuring other Iranian proxy groups are unable to rearm, restricting Iran's ability to regain regional influence. Preemptively striking supply chains, arms storage sites, and command centers can disrupt Iran's logistical and operational abilities, sending a strong deterrent message and making it more challenging and costly for Tehran to reestablish a threatening presence around Israel. These actions could weaken Iran's logistical and operational networks, increasing the challenge and cost for Tehran to reestablish influence in areas surrounding Israel.

While Israeli operations were effective, they also underscored gaps in capabilities. Providing Israel with the necessary capabilities to conduct effective future operations will not only reinforce deterrence but also guarantee that, whether combating Iranian reconstruction efforts or facing possible future wars, Israel can defend itself—and U.S. interests—independently.

The United States should fast-track the delivery of KC-46 aerial refueling tankers and ensure essential munitions and interceptors are prepositioned in its stockpile in Israel (WRSA-I) to avoid shortages in upcoming conflicts. Upgrading from outdated Ram tankers to KC-46s would boost flexibility, survivability, and coordination with U.S. forces, helping Israel respond swiftly to threats. While Israel is set to receive the first of four KC-46s that it has ordered by the end of 2026, delivering these refuelers beforehand would strengthen deterrence and fill crucial capability gaps.

The United States has also not yet provided critical assets such as the KC-46 refueling tankers, Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Munitions (JASSMs), and specialized munitions for penetrating deep underground targets have not been fully provided, leaving Israel reliant on piecemeal solutions. Notably, Israel lacked the MOPs that the U.S. used against the Fordow and Natanz sites and B-2 aircraft, the only platform certified to drop those munitions. Israeli planners had hoped the United States would use the MOPs to target Iran's vast missile stockpiles, but Trump remained fixed on holding the MOPs for nuclear-related targets alone, underscoring the Trump administration's narrow operational focus and Israel's capability limitations.

C. Deepen Regional Cooperation

As Iran looks to rebound, it is essential for the United States, Israel, and America's Arab partners to work together. By deepening cooperation in areas such as security, intelligence, and economic development, these nations can build stronger foundations to address threats, respond to crises, and foster long-term growth.

The current moment is ripe for the United States, Israel, and Arab partners to reshape the strategic landscape of the Middle East through multidomain regional cooperation. This vision extends beyond the demonstrable successes with regional air defense against Iranian attacks targeting Israel. This may include expanding the U.S. partnership with Israel, involving increased intelligence sharing and a new Memorandum of Understanding due in 2028 that addresses joint weapons development and production. It could also involve collaboration with Arab partners to reshape the strategic environment of the Middle East through multidomain regional cooperation. Such efforts go beyond previous results in regional air defense against Iranian attacks targeting Israel. There is also potential for further cooperation in maritime security, counterterrorism, artificial intelligence, and cyber resilience.

i. Bolster U.S. Basing in Israel

Expanding U.S. basing in Israel would offer strategic advantages that are difficult to achieve elsewhere in the region. While other host nations often place restrictions on what activities U.S. forces deployed within them can conduct, Israel would provide greater freedom of action for American forces, robust air defense capabilities, and a unique geographic position at the intersection of multiple operational theaters. Unlike Gulf bases, which remain vulnerable, as demonstrated by Iran's attack on al Udeid following Operation Midnight Hammer, Israel's security environment and advanced defense systems present a more resilient platform for U.S. operations.

ii. Advance Regional Integration

Repeated successes with IAMD during Iran's attacks against Israel have underscored the value and potential for regional air defense cooperation. Yet, this is only one component of potential regional cooperation. There is also potential for U.S. partners to expand joint efforts to secure maritime routes, sharing best practices and intelligence against piracy and blockades; executing collective counterterrorism operations that leverage regional expertise to disrupt networked threats; and developing comprehensive cyber strategies to defend critical infrastructure and counter malign actors.

While Arab nations did intercept a limited number of Iranian drones during the war, there remains significant potential to transform the IAMD network into a more comprehensive, integrated, and formalized arrangement—one that links U.S., Israeli, and Arab assets into a coherent framework. By doing so, regional partners can collectively address advanced threats, streamline information sharing, and coordinate operational responses in real time, thereby strengthening strategic deterrence and overall resilience.

Strengthening U.S.-Israel relations, while advancing normalization with Arab partners, is crucial to promoting regional stability. Negotiating the next 10-year MOU with Israel, which outlines the long-term U.S. commitment to the Jewish state's security, should prioritize joint production, technology transfer, and targeted funding—not only for air defense, but across the entire security spectrum. Investments in advanced technologies, artificial intelligence, and increased production capacity will yield benefits beyond IAMD, bolstering collective capabilities in cyber and counterterrorism.

iii. Intelligence Cooperation and Opportunity

The United States and Israel have a tremendously mature intelligence sharing relationship that benefits both nations. However, there is an opportunity that is being missed by not recognizing the global presence of Israeli intelligence capabilities and their ability to contribute well beyond the Middle East. The Five Eyes intelligence sharing relationship that was born out of World War II is a good example of how broader intelligence sharing benefits America's closest intelligence partners. Establishing a Five Eyes-like framework with Israel and key U.S. partners would not only enhance understanding of regional threats but also allow the group to leverage Israel's global intelligence presence for more robust intelligence sharing and coordinated operations against common adversaries. With U.S. support for such an arrangement, intelligence cooperation with Israeli agencies like the Mossad, Unit 8200, and Shabak could benefit the United States and all partners involved.

iv. Economic Cooperation

To further tilt the balance of economic influence away from the Iranian regime, it is imperative that the United States, Israel, and America's Arab partners pursue deeper, mutually beneficial economic partnerships designed to strengthen regional prosperity while constraining Tehran's capacity for malign activity. For example, connecting India, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel via advanced trucking corridors that circumvent strategic chokepoints, such as the Bab el Mandeb, which Iran has repeatedly threatened to close, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) has the potential to transform not only economic connectivity, but also the wider strategic landscape of the region. By investing in and accelerating the realization of IMEC and similar corridors, America's regional partners can push financial growth, while minimizing Iran's ability to cause economic disruption.

D. Block Iran's Global Networks

Iran's ability to rebuild will hinge on its access to external funding, resources, and materials from its network of global partners. Tehran's domestic industrial base and financial reserves, already depleted by years of sanctions and the costs of the 12-Day War, are insufficient on their own to regenerate advanced air defense, ballistic missile, or nuclear capabilities. Its recovery therefore depends on foreign support, particularly from China, Russia, and North Korea, which have each played unique roles in sustaining and advancing Iran's military programs. The less access Iran has to their technical assistance, weapons components, and financial lifelines, the slower and more limited its reconstitution will be.

The United States must continue to lead and broaden a comprehensive diplomatic campaign designed to isolate Iran politically and economically. The recent reimposition—or “snapback”—of United Nations sanctions on Iran provides an important foundation. But enforcement, not symbolism, will determine its effectiveness.¹⁵⁶ Robust enforcement mechanisms—including tighter monitoring, coordinated intelligence sharing, and the imposition of secondary sanctions—are essential to ensure that Iran remains unable to access critical resources and circumvent international restrictions. By systematically targeting illicit financial flows, weapons shipments, and technology transfers that sustain Tehran's military capabilities, the United States and its allies can maximize the impact of these renewed sanctions. This approach, coupled with enhanced diplomatic engagement to encourage broader international compliance, will be crucial in constraining Iran's ability to rebuild and rearm, thereby preserving the strategic advantages gained and supporting regional stability. The United States should therefore work closely with European allies and other partners to ensure that these measures, alongside existing U.S. sanctions, are implemented fully.

Washington must be prepared to use a mix of “sticks and carrots,” especially with China, which now purchases roughly 90 percent of Iran's oil exports and provides critical access to global shipping, banking, and technology networks. Without Chinese compliance, sanctions evasion will continue to blunt the

pressure campaign. The United States and its allies should therefore combine tighter monitoring and secondary sanctions on illicit Iranian oil shipments with positive inducements to encourage Beijing's cooperation, such as assurances of global energy stability through alternative suppliers.

This sustained economic, diplomatic, and political isolation is essential to preserve the strategic gains achieved during Operation Rising Lion. The campaign not only degraded Iran's arsenal but also exposed its vulnerability to coordinated regional defenses and U.S.-Israeli intelligence superiority. Keeping Tehran under pressure will prevent it from reconstituting its power projection tools—its missile stockpiles, drone infrastructure, and proxy funding pipelines—and will limit its ability to destabilize neighboring states through militias in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

Such sustained external pressure could also erode the regime's internal cohesion. Economic deprivation, political isolation, and continued military humiliation could deepen public discontent and fissures among Iran's elites, making the regime more brittle over time. While regime change cannot be a declared U.S. objective, policies that weaken Tehran's coercive capacity and legitimacy serve both American and regional security interests.

Iran is now a wounded tiger that, despite its setbacks, remains a dangerous threat. Only through robust military, diplomatic, intelligence, and economic cooperation can the United States, Israel, and regional partners prevent Iran from growing as an even greater threat in the region. As Iran works to recover from its recent setbacks and actively rebuilds its capabilities, the United States, Israel, and Arab partners must recognize that this moment demands renewed commitment to their own adaptation and revitalization. By embracing this opportunity to modernize and strengthen their partnerships, regional actors can better prepare for the next war.

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