

Israel must retain the right to strike Iran first in this battle for survival

written by Prof. Zaki Shalom | 24.07.2026

Israel must seriously consider pre-emptive and, under exceptional circumstances, preventive action against Iran. It should coordinate closely with Washington, but no foreign government can be allowed to exercise a veto over Israel's survival.

Israel's defence doctrine was founded on a stark truth. A small state lacking strategic depth and facing persistent existential threats cannot allow its enemies to determine when and under what conditions war begins.

When hostile regimes repeatedly declare their intention to destroy Israel, the country has both the right and the duty to act before emerging threats become catastrophic. In certain circumstances, Israel must choose the timing, arena, and scale of military action, even when the enemy has not yet launched a direct attack.

The 1956 Sinai War demonstrated the logic of preventive action. Israel acted against the background of the massive Czechoslovak arms deal with Egypt and an impending shift in the regional balance of power. Although Egypt was not preparing an immediate offensive at that moment, Jerusalem regarded the developing threat as intolerable.

The 1967 Six-Day War was a more conventional case of pre-emption. Egypt had closed the Straits of Tiran, concentrated large forces in Sinai, and created a direct military crisis. On June 4, the Israeli Cabinet decided to go to war. The following morning, the Israeli Air Force struck enemy airfields and secured operational superiority.

In both cases, taking the initiative gave Israel decisive strategic and operational advantages. The consequences of surrendering that initiative became evident in 1973. Despite Chief of Staff David Elazar's demand for a pre-emptive strike, Israel refrained from attacking Egyptian and Syrian air bases, partly because of intense American pressure.

The decision not to strike first was not the only cause of Israel's initial failures in the Yom Kippur War. It did, however, demonstrate the danger of allowing the adversary to determine the opening conditions of war.

In later decades, a more restrained doctrine took root. It was shaped by diplomatic constraints, legal considerations, and changing IDF operational concepts. The pursuit of decisive victory – *hachra'ah* – gradually gave way to containment, limited attrition, and the degradation of enemy capabilities.

Israel increasingly relied on air power, long-range fire, intelligence, and advanced technology. This sometimes came at the expense of decisive ground operations and territorial control. Large-scale force was increasingly viewed as legitimate only after Israel had suffered substantial damage, faced a clear provocation, or obtained conclusive evidence of an imminent attack.

Such restraint can produce diplomatic benefits. It helps Israel gain international support and present itself as a defensive actor. Yet it also creates a serious vulnerability.

When Israel's enemies believe it will not act until they cross a rigid threshold, they operate just below that threshold. They accumulate weapons, improve their strike capabilities, and gradually condition Israel to accept an increasingly dangerous reality. Over time, this process weakens deterrence, reduces sensitivity to warning signs, and erodes national resilience.

Recent statements by Israel's political and military leaders concerning Iran reflect this reactive approach. They emphasise retaliation more than independent initiative.

Defense Minister Israel Katz stated that renewed war with Iran could occur if the United States decided to act and Israel joined it, or if Iran fired directly at Israel. He also said that Israel would respond forcefully to an Iranian missile attack and would act if it received clear intelligence regarding Iranian intentions.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly warned Tehran that any attack on Israel would provoke a far more powerful response. He has stressed that those who harm Israel will be struck with greater force.

IDF Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir similarly stated, following Iranian missile fire

toward Aqaba, that Israel was maintaining high readiness and was prepared to return immediately to combat against anyone who harmed it.

These declarations do not prove that Israel has ruled out pre-emptive or preventive action in classified discussions. Katz has also said that the IDF was instructed to prepare for an independent Israeli operation in Iran.

Nevertheless, the public rhetoric creates a restrictive impression. It suggests that Israel will act only if Washington initiates military action, Iran attacks Israel directly, or intelligence reveals an imminent Iranian barrage.

This framing weakens the political and conceptual legitimacy of an independent Israeli initiative. It encourages the public and the international community to regard prior Iranian aggression as a necessary condition for Israeli action.

Iranian missile launches toward the Jordanian port of Aqaba since July 19, 2026, illustrate the risks of this approach. Aqaba lies only a few kilometres from Eilat. American defence systems intercepted the missiles over Jordan, while fragments reportedly fell inside Israeli territory.

Even when Israel is not formally identified as the target, firing ballistic missiles near Eilat endangers Israeli lives. It also demonstrates Tehran's willingness to expand the theatre of conflict and gamble on escalation.

Iranian decision-makers were aware that missiles could deviate from their intended course, interceptors could fail, and debris could fall inside Israel. Failure to respond strategically to such conduct may encourage Tehran and weaken Israeli deterrence.

This does not mean that Israel should immediately launch a comprehensive war. Diplomacy, international pressure, and alliance-building remain essential. Israel must, however, reject any formula under which it may act only after suffering a direct and serious attack.

Nor should Israel be required to wait until it detects the final operational preparations for an Iranian launch. By then, Israel may have lost the advantages of surprise, timing, and operational freedom.

The distinction between pre-emption and prevention is important. A pre-emptive strike is intended to thwart an imminent attack. Preventive action seeks to stop a

dangerous future change in the balance of power.

Yet the boundary between them is not always clear when confronting a regime that openly threatens Israel, rebuilds missile and nuclear capabilities, and directs regional proxies. In either case, action must be based on reliable intelligence, operational feasibility, urgency, and a careful comparison between the costs of action and the risks of inaction.

Relations with the United States require a clear distinction between strategic coordination and existential dependence.

American strategy may emphasise limited counterstrikes, force protection, and diplomatic pressure designed to return Iran to negotiations. Israel's objectives are broader. It must prevent an Iranian nuclear and ballistic breakthrough, weaken Tehran's ability to rebuild its proxy network, and end a prolonged war of attrition.

Regime change in Tehran may serve Israel's interests, but Israel cannot present it as a military objective that it can guarantee through unilateral action.

Israel must also resist any Iranian attempt to connect nuclear negotiations with Washington to regional ceasefires or Israeli withdrawals. Tehran must not be allowed to use negotiations over its nuclear programme to restrict Israeli action against Hamas in Gaza or Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Jerusalem should coordinate with the White House as closely as possible. But it must also state clearly that Israel retains the right to defend its essential security interests. No foreign power can hold a veto over the country's survival.

Seeking a strategic decision does not justify attacks on civilians. Nor does it release Israel from international law or the ethical obligations of the IDF.

A campaign against Iran may nevertheless require strikes against dual-use infrastructure that directly supports military operations. Such targets could include energy systems supplying military bases, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps supply routes, command facilities, railways, bridges, and arms-production or missile-transport infrastructure.

Targets that make a direct and substantial contribution to enemy military operations may be lawful, subject to the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution. Israel must make every reasonable effort to minimise civilian

casualties. Yet no high-intensity war can be entirely free of collateral harm.

Time is now a central strategic consideration. Israel may still possess a window of operational freedom, reinforced by a degree of tacit alignment with Gulf states that also regard Iran as a major threat.

Such windows do not remain open indefinitely. Governments change, regional coalitions weaken, and diplomatic delay gives nuclear and missile programmes time to become more dispersed, protected, and difficult to destroy.

Israel's leadership must therefore prepare the public for the possibility of independent action before Iran launches a direct attack. Public preparation is not a substitute for responsible decision-making. It is part of the political and strategic foundation required for it.

A doctrine of pre-emption is not a licence for unlimited war, nor does it make diplomacy irrelevant. It requires precise intelligence, a rigorous examination of alternatives, and a sober evaluation of risks and possible gains.

For Israel, however, waiting for a direct attack can be a dangerous gamble. It may force the country to confront an existential threat at a time and under conditions chosen by the enemy.

Restraint is not always synonymous with responsibility. At critical moments, excessive restraint may amount to a failure to neutralise a growing threat while effective action is still possible.

Published in The Jewish Chronicle, July 24, 2026.

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