



The Iranian Nuclear Threat Against Israel

Why Israel Had to Act Against Iran – and Why It Must Complete the Job

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Executive Summary

- At this moment, Israel is acting to remove the threat of Iran's nuclear program and ballistic missile arsenal. The situation is still developing and detractors seek to draw attention to possible detrimental consequences of Israel's action. It is therefore worth clarifying what the consequences of *inaction* would be, and what the grave reality of a nuclear Iran would look like.
- Regarding the timing to act now, Iran was about to take the final steps toward having a nuclear bomb. In the past months it has leaped forward in uranium enrichment, bringing it within days of enough weapon's grade uranium for a bomb, and enough for nine bombs



with three weeks. In the days preceding the operation, the IAEA declared that Iran was not complying with its nuclear nonproliferation obligations. The window of opportunity for action was rapidly closing.

- The fundamental reasons why a nuclear Iran would be an existential threat to Israel and a severe threat to global security, can be summarized as the following:
 - **The threat of outright nuclear attack on Israel** - The possibility of a surprise Iranian nuclear attack on Israel cannot be dismissed. The regime may act in ways not necessarily bound by Western notions of rationality — including the use of nuclear weapons even at the cost of self-destruction. Even if the regime is rational enough to avoid steps that would lead to its own destruction, if it were to assess that it could destroy Israel without endangering its survival, then it might indeed choose to launch a surprise attack on Israel with the aim of annihilation.
 - **The possible use of a nuclear weapon in the event of regime collapse or other scenarios** - In a scenario where the regime is on the verge of collapse, there is a real possibility that it would launch a nuclear attack on Israel, as the regime's survival would no longer be a constraint. Additionally, errors stemming from the deep mutual distrust between the two countries could result in a nuclear exchange that neither side intended. The regime might also transfer a nuclear bomb to a terrorist organization, which would then use it against Israel without Iran taking responsibility.
 - **Nuclear escalation as a tool for Iranian regional hegemony** - Iran would use the threat of nuclear escalation to gain leverage in its regional struggles, and would intensify efforts to assert hegemony over the broader Middle East. It would limit U.S. freedom of action in the Middle East. This would also place intense pressure on regional states to align with Iran or adopt conciliatory policies toward it.
 - **Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East** - A nuclear Iran would create a strong incentive for other regional powers to pursue nuclear capabilities or weapons of their own, which would create a highly unstable regional nuclear arms race and severely undermine the NPT.
 - **Undermine US-led global order** - A nuclear Iran would represent a significant strengthening of the anti-Western axis of China-Russia-Iran. Given Washington's longstanding opposition to a nuclear Iran, a successful Iranian effort to become a nuclear state would cause great damage to the credibility of the U.S. worldwide.



Introduction

At the moment, Israel is undertaking a military operation with the goal of removing the threat of Iran's nuclear program and ballistic missile arsenal. Israel's initial successes have made this a historic moment, although it is yet unclear how the conflict will develop. This operation has been decades in the making, as Iran gradually developed its nuclear capabilities from a single relatively primitive enrichment facility at Natanz, to accumulating enough enriched uranium for a small arsenal, to taking, in recent months, concrete steps to weaponized this arsenal.

After having lost its primary proxy force of Hezbollah, Iran's strategic situation has been greatly degraded over the past nine months. This is likely the reason it chose to move forward with the second leg of its strategy – its military nuclear program. Israel's window of opportunity for action was limited, as Iran worked to rebuild its air defense systems, which were significantly downgraded by Israel's strike last October. Iran has also been acting to rebuild Hezbollah, and greatly expand its missile arsenal, in order to threaten and deter Israel.

Some analysts over the years have sought to downplay the extent of the threat of a nuclear Iran. In reality, even a minimal arsenal in the ayatollah regime's hands would have grave implications for Israel, the region and the world.

Regarding the decision to act now, Iran appeared about to take the final steps toward having a nuclear bomb. In the past months, it doubled its amount of 60% enriched uranium, a degree of enrichment which has no purpose other than for a weapon. This brought it within days of enriching enough weapon's grade uranium for a bomb, and enriching enough for nine bombs with three weeks.¹

In the days preceding the operation, the IAEA declared that Iran was not complying with its nuclear nonproliferation obligations, citing repeated failures by Iran to provide information about undeclared nuclear materials and activities at unreported sites, and Iran's intent to launch a new enrichment center in a secure location. Iran responded by threatening to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.² A few days prior to that, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi highlighted the discovery of man-made uranium particles at three undeclared sites (Varamin, Marivan, Turqzabad), noting that Iran has not provided satisfactory explanations as to their presence. During a Senate hearing on June 12, U.S. Defense Secretary Hegseth confirmed that there are clear indications that Iran is moving

¹ <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/analysis-of-iaea-iran-verification-and-monitoring-report-may-2025/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/12/world/middleeast/un-iaea-iran-nuclear-program.html>



toward a nuclear weapon.³ The IDF Chief of Staff, Eyal Zamir, declared that Iran's nuclear weapons program had "reached the point of no return."⁴

Given the significance of the current moment, it is worth clarifying what is truly at stake and why, despite all the risks involved, Israel had to act, and must continue to act until it fully achieves its war aims. To understand why a nuclear Iran would be an existential threat to Israel and a severe threat to global security, this paper examines the following scenarios and possibilities: the threat of an outright nuclear attack on Israel; the threat of nuclear escalation as a tool for Iranian regional hegemony; the threat of nuclear proliferation across the Middle East; and the undermining of the US-led global order.

The Threat of Outright Nuclear Attack on Israel

- The possibility of a surprise Iranian nuclear attack on Israel cannot be dismissed. The ideology of the Iranian regime is, above all, Islamist-revolutionary. Its profound hatred of Israel is one of its core tenets. The veneration of the figure of the martyr (*shahid*) is deeply embedded in Iran's Shiite culture, and the same assumptions of rationality that applied to the Soviet Union during the Cold War cannot be relied upon in this case.
- Revolutionary Iran's first Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, stated: "We do not worship Iran; we worship Allah. For patriotism is another name for paganism. I say, let this land burn. I say, let this land go up in flames, as long as Islam emerges victorious in the rest of the world."⁵ In 2001, Iranian President Rafsanjani stated: "The use of a nuclear bomb against Israel would destroy Israel completely, while the use of it against the Islamic world would only cause damage... Such a scenario is not inconceivable."⁶
- These types of statements illustrate the ideological potential of the Iranian regime to act in ways not necessarily bound by Western notions of rationality — including the possible use of nuclear weapons, even at the cost of self-destruction.
- Some scholars of Iran have argued that when the ideological imperative of the revolution directly contradicted a vital national interest, the regime has shown caution and opted for the national interest. This is because the survival of the regime is considered a prerequisite for the revolution's continued success, and preserving the regime justifies compromising on other ideological components.

³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/06/hegseth-tells-congress-indications-iran-moving-toward-nuclear-weapon>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZTMLZ64KCK>

⁴ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/an-immediate-operational-necessity-why-israel-finally-attacked-irans-nuclear-facilities/>

⁵ Gold, D. (2009). *The Rise of Nuclear Iran: How Tehran Defies the West*. Simon and Schuster., 23.

⁶ MEMRI, (2002, January 2) "Former Iranian President Rafsanjani on Using a Nuclear Bomb Against Israel" *Iran, Special Dispatch* No. 325.



- But even if the regime is rational enough to avoid any step that would lead with certainty to its own destruction, it could only be deterred from launching a surprise nuclear attack on Israel if doing so would pose an existential threat to the regime itself. That means that the threat of massive civilian casualties is itself not a sufficient deterrent — only a credible threat to the regime's survival. Consequently, if a nuclear Iran were to assess that it could destroy Israel without endangering the regime's survival, then even a rational Iran might, indeed, choose to launch a surprise attack on Israel with the aim of annihilation.

Additional Scenarios for the Use of a Nuclear Weapon Against Israel

- Deterrence is never perfect, and even during the Cold War there were numerous cases in which the delicate balance nearly collapsed, and the world approached the brink of nuclear conflict. Human beings sometimes make mistakes, despite the rational logic of mutually assured destruction. There is always the risk of miscalculation due to a misreading of the adversary's intentions—an error that could stem from the deep mutual distrust between the two countries, and result in a nuclear launch that neither side actually intended.
- The balance of terror between Iran and Israel would be even less stable than that which existed between the U.S. and the USSR. The geographical distance between the U.S. and the Soviet Union allowed both sides the opportunity to confirm that alerts were not false alarms. In contrast, Iran and Israel are geographically much closer. There is a fundamental lack of the basic trust necessary for a hotline between leaders to serve as a reliable and stabilizing mechanism.
- There remains the possibility that the Iranian regime might transfer an operational nuclear bomb to a terrorist organization which would then use it against Israel without Iran taking responsibility. Beyond that, there is the fear that effective control over the nuclear arsenal could slip out of the regime's hands and fall into the hands of an unaccountable group—a risk that is especially acute in the event of regime collapse.
- Additionally, in a scenario in which the regime was on the verge of collapse, there is a real possibility that it would launch a nuclear attack on Israel, as the regime's survival would no longer be a relevant constraint.

The Threat of Nuclear Escalation as a Tool for Iranian Regional Hegemony

- Iran would use the threat of nuclear escalation to gain leverage in its regional struggles, and would intensify efforts to assert its hegemony over the broader Middle East. Iran would leverage its nuclear capability to deter Israel from escalating during conventional



conflict. Iran could launch missile or drone attacks on Israel and then threaten that any Israeli retaliation might provoke nuclear escalation.

- Tehran would also likely adopt a more aggressive posture in the Persian Gulf and beyond, working to destabilize regimes across the region. A nuclear capability would limit U.S. freedom of action in the Middle East—particularly military operations in the Strait of Hormuz and across the region—because any use of force could risk escalation into nuclear war.
- This strategic shift would place intense pressure on regional states to align with Iran or, at the very least, adopt conciliatory policies toward Tehran.
- While it is possible that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states may respond by strengthening their security ties with the U.S. to balance against Iran, an American failure to uphold its commitment to prevent a nuclear Iran would undermine confidence in U.S. security guarantees. These countries may formally accept U.S. security assurances but in practice avoid any steps that could provoke Iran.
- Achieving a nuclear bomb would significantly bolster the Iranian regime's long-term survivability—both domestically and externally. Internally, the bomb would serve as a symbol of national pride and a testament to Iranian technological achievements, potentially garnering broader public support for the regime. Externally, it would function as an insurance policy against efforts to undermine or militarily intervene against the regime.

Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East

- A nuclear Iran would create a strong incentive for other regional powers to pursue nuclear capabilities or weapons of their own. Chief among these are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, with the possibility of others following suit. Each new entrant into the nuclear club increases the risk of nuclear use—whether through miscalculation, accident, or escalation.
- Similarly, it is likely that a nuclear Iran would export its nuclear expertise to other countries seeking similar capabilities.
- This trend could severely undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), demonstrating that it is possible to acquire nuclear weapons despite prolonged opposition from the international community.

Undermining of US-led global order

- A nuclear Iran would represent a significant strengthening of the anti-Western axis of China-Russia-Iran. In a situation where Iran acquired nuclear weapons, both China and



Russia would have an interest in deepening cooperation with Iran and strengthening the ayatollah regime as the representative of the anti-Western axis in the Middle East.

- There would be great damage to the credibility of the U.S. worldwide, since Washington has declared for decades that a nuclear Iran is unacceptable and that all options are on the table. It is likely that this would affect the global image of the U.S., making its future threats less credible.
- The overall instability in the Middle East might also impact energy prices globally, as well as the prices of commodities passing through the region.

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