From Proxy War to Nuclear Brinkmanship

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Headline

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Working Group

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Overall Summary (approx 120 characters, incl spaces → serves as social media caption & summary on the website)

One-Sentence Summary of Each Event You Report On (Bullet points OR full sentences, has to be consistent within one post. Will be posted on 2nd slide of the Instagram post)

Article (Minimum 1000 Maximum 2000 words)

On June 12, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) launched 200 aircrafts (including F-35I, F-16) and several uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) against 100 targets in the Islamic Republic of Iran, beginning 'Operation Rising Lion'. The Main aim of the operation was to inflict damage on the Iranian nuclear programme and the Iranian military, indeed the primary targets were the atomic sites of Natanz, Isfahan, Fordow, Arak, as well as the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) headquarters in Tehran, Kermanshah, and Khorramabad, resulting in 78 civilian fatalities and 329 injures. Alongside physical damage to nuclear sites, several top military commanders were killed during the first wave of strikes. After a few hours on June 12, Iran, in retaliation, responded by launching 'Operation True Promise III', warning Israel of a 'harsh punishment'. Iran fired over 100 ballistic missiles and nearly 100 Shahed drones toward Israel, targeting military bases in Tel Aviv and Amman; however, many of them were intercepted by the Israeli Iron Dome System. Iran's retaliatory strike was limited by the damage caused by the IDF's strikes, which successfully degraded Iran's retaliatory capabilities by destroying and damaging its missile launchers and silos.

Alongside hitting infrastructure, Israel conducted decapitation strikes against Iran's leadership. In the meantime, Iran, after absorbing the initial surprise attack, retaliated with a massive barrage of ballistic missiles and armed drones aimed at Israeli cities and military sites. It's estimated that Tehran launched between 370 and 550 ballistic missiles and over 1,000drones over the course of the conflict while Iranian cyber units struck at Israeli infrastructure, attempting to disrupt power grids and communication. However, the vast majority of Iranian missiles and drones were intercepted before the impact, thanks to Israel's multi-layered air defence shield.

After days of Israel and Iran launching strikes, the United States (U.S) intervened in the conflict on June 21, significantly escalating the campaign against Iran's nuclear programme. In an operation codenamed Midnight Hammer, US Air Force B-2 stealth bombers struck Iran's most heavily fortified atomic sites, dropping 13 Massive Ordnance Penetrators (MOPs), which are bunker-buster bombs, on the underground Fordow facility. Additional guided bombs and cruise missiles were also dropped on Natanz and Isfahan. Iran responded with a retaliatory act on June 23, firing 14 ballistic missiles at Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, which hosts US Central Command's regional hub. US and Qatari missile defences intercepted the attack, and reports

emerged that Iran had warned in advance President Donald Trump to avoid life losses. The day after, on June 24, an Iran-Israel ceasefire agreement was agreed between Iran and Israel, mediated by the US and Qatar, to prevent further escalation in the region.

For many years, Israel and Iran have been engaged in a tense but indirect rivalry, primarily manifested through proxy groups and covert operations. This approach has enabled both states to pursue their strategic objectives without escalating tensions to full-scale war. A mutual deterrence dynamic sustained this shadow conflict: Israel's advanced military capabilities and undeclared nuclear arsenal served to dissuade Iran from direct attacks, whilst Iran's expansive missile force and regional proxies posed a threat of widespread retaliation if Israel were to attack Iranian territory. These dynamics gave rise to strategic ambiguity, whereby deniable actions and indirect clashes in regions such as Syria and Lebanon, as well as cyberspace, maintained tensions at a level that did not reach the threshold of open warfare. However, this equilibrium began to deteriorate between 2024 and 2025 amid escalating hostilities, including Israeli strikes on Iranian personnel and intensified proxy conflicts.

The escalation and twelve-day confrontation between Israel and Iran represented a peak following years of rising tensions over Iran's nuclear program and proxy conflicts across the region. On June 12, the United Nations-backed atomic watchdog passed a resolution declaring Iran in non-compliance with its obligations regarding the promotion of nuclear non-proliferation. This determination was made after the International Atomic Energy Agency's inspections were unable to determine whether Iran's nuclear programme was 'exclusively peaceful.' Iran had reportedly amassed roughly 400 kg of uranium enriched to 60% purity, far beyond any civilian energy need, setting off alarm bells that it was approaching weapons-grade capability. As a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran is permitted to use peaceful nuclear technology but is forbidden from pursuing nuclear weapons. Iranian officials insisted their program was 'peaceful', but Israel viewed the advanced enrichment as an existential threat, especially after the collapse of the 2015 nuclear deal. In this context, Israel justified the military operation as an act of self-defence, as outlined in articles 2(4) and 51 of the United Nations Charter, in response to the perceived threat of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. Israel explicitly accused Iran of having the 'ability to destroy Israel' and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu authorised a preemptive military operation to "remove the Iranian threat" before Tehran could edge any closer to a nuclear weapon. The twelve-day war served to eliminate the long-standing ambiguity that had previously existed about proxy warfare between Iran and Israel, eliminating any possibility of plausible deniability.

At the heart of the Iran-Israel confrontation lies a deeper regional power struggle: not just between two states but between competing visions for the Middle East. Over the past two decades, the region has hardened into two

informal blocs: on the one hand, a coalition increasingly centred around Israel, the U.S., and Sunni Arab states, and on the other hand Iran's network of proxies and allies. Together, these actors constitute the Axis of Resistance, a transnational coalition resisting Israeli and Western influence. Yet that axis may be fragmenting.

The fall of Bashar al-Assad in early 2025 marked a profound rupture in the strength of Iran's allies. Although the new transitional administration in Damascus remains ambiguous in its orientation, the trajectory of Syria's foreign policy is far from settled. Crucially, the prospect of escalating conflict with Israel, particularly in flashpoints like Suwayda, may influence how the Syrian leadership recalibrates its regional alignment. If direct military confrontations continue or intensify, Damascus may perceive alignment with Iran and the Axis of Resistance as a necessary strategic choice, both for military backing and deterrence purposes. Faced with external threats during a period of internal instability, the Syrian leadership might conclude that only Iran can offer immediate support and shared interest in confronting Israeli pressure. However, Damascus leadership may also view Iranian ties as drawing Syria into broader regional wars it can ill afford during a fragile political transition. Therefore, Syria's future could swing either way: toward de-escalation and normalisation like Arab neighbours or deeper entanglement with Iran amid cross-border tensions with Israel. Should Damascus shift toward detente with Sunni states or Turkey, it would leave Iran geopolitically exposed, stripping away a vital logistical corridor to Hezbollah and undermining its deterrent posture in the Levant.

At the same time, Iran's network of regional proxies was absent. This absence may reflect Israeli pre-emptive operations that weakened their capabilities, or internal recalculations among proxies about the cost of joining a losing war. Either way, it marked a clear deviation from Iran's traditional model of indirect confrontation, leaving Tehran more isolated than at any point in the past two decades.

In contrast, the opposing coalition, consisting of Israel, the U.S., and increasingly assertive Sunni Arab powers like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, and Egypt appears more cohesive than ever. Shared anxieties over Iranian expansionism and nuclear capability have driven former adversaries into cooperation, both overt and tacit. This includes intelligence sharing, joint air defence drills and high-level diplomatic engagement. This in turn has normalised the idea of a functional Arab-Israeli security axis. What once seemed politically unviable has become a strategic necessity.

Nevertheless, alliance cohesion has limits, particularly when nuclear weapons are involved. Iran's steady progress toward nuclear breakout capability, and the visible inability of the international system to contain it, has raised alarms in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has publicly declared that if Iran obtains a nuclear weapon, it would match it "without delay." Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's longstanding ties with Pakistan and past cooperation suggest it could potentially acquire

the necessary materials without developing its own nuclear program from scratch. Such a development would not only collapse the already fragile detente between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also create more mistrust into any future attempts at regional diplomatic normalization. More broadly, it can prompt other states to reconsider their nuclear ambitions. Thus, any power competition over nuclear capabilities would further undermine the global non-proliferation regime.

The twelve-day confrontation between Iran and Israel in June 2025 represents a watershed moment in Middle Eastern geopolitics. It not only shattered long-standing norms around proxy warfare and strategic ambiguity but also accelerated the region's slide toward direct interstate confrontation. With Operation Rising Lion and Operation True Promise III, both states abandoned the grey zones of sabotage. They instead opted for overt military action, including targeted strikes on strategic infrastructure and leadership figures.

While Israel may have achieved short-term tactical success, such as damaging Iran's nuclear infrastructure and eliminating key scientific and military figures, the broader strategic picture is far less clear. Iran's retaliatory capacity was degraded, but not eliminated. In addition, Iran's proxies remained on the sidelines which underscored both their diminished operational capacity and a weakening of Iran's regional influence.

Simultaneously, the regional power map is hardening into sharper blocs. The alignment of Israel with Sunni Arab states has deepened which is driven by a shared fear of Iranian nuclearization. In addition, the fall of Assad has left Syria's regional alignment in flux, with rising tensions along the Israeli border potentially pushing Damascus closer to Iran for security and support. Nevertheless, such a move risks entangling Syria in broader regional conflicts at a time when its transitional leadership may seek stability and normalization with neighboring Arab states. Therefore, Syria's ambiguous position remains a wild card.

The spectre of nuclear proliferation looms larger than ever. Iran's enrichment activities and perceived progress toward weapons capability have already triggered statements from Saudi Arabia leadership pledging to match Tehran "without delay." This may set a regional arms race in motion, threatening the already fragile non-proliferation regime.

Ultimately, this confrontation has not resolved the Iranian nuclear crisis, it has reframed it. Deterrence has been tested, not restored. The regional order is not reset, but destabilised. What comes next will depend less on further strikes and more on whether diplomacy, containment, or escalation defines the post-conflict phase.