

The Lying Lion and the Hapless President – Has Netanyahu Put Trump in a Bind?

by Riccardo Alcaro

At last, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has crossed the Rubicon and unleashed the war on Iran it has relentlessly sought for thirty years. The onslaught on Iran's leadership and nuclear programme is the latest act in a strategy to redraw the regional balance of power from the Levant to the Persian Gulf following Hamas's attack on 7 October 2023. Although Israel's offensive has been in the offing for quite some time, the manner and timing of it was dictated by the uncertainty and confusion of the US Administration under President Donald Trump.

Last act of a tragedy

Israel's response to the 7 October shock has sprung out from a resolve to make full use of its technological and military superiority, as well as the political capital of Western governments' solidarity, to change the rules of the game, in Palestine and beyond. Its actions, entirely based on military strength, have been unfolding in ever-widening circles.

While decimating Hamas – and pulverising and starving Gaza in the process – as well as turning the screw on Palestinians in the West Bank, Israel has proceeded to strike all its enemies in the region. In Lebanon, it did away with the leadership and severely downgraded the fighting capacity of Hezbollah, the pro-Iran armed group that used to control the south of the country. After Iran's ally Bashar al-Assad's fall in Damascus, it bombed what was left of Syria's military assets and occupied a larger area of that country. In Yemen, it has repeatedly pounded the Iran-backed Houthis with heavy bombings. And now it has struck at the head of the 'axis of resistance', the Islamic Republic of Iran itself.

The blow has been massive. Israel has mauled the high command of Iran's regular forces as well as of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the paramilitary organisation that controls the Islamic Republic's

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regional and security policy.¹ The list of the top brass killed is jaw-dropping: among the dead are armed forces chief Mohammed Baqeri, IRGC commander-in-chief Hossein Salami, and Amir Ali Hajizadeh, head of the IRGC Aerospace Force, in charge of Iran's ballistic arsenal. Prominent nuclear scientists have also been targeted, as has Ali Shamkhani, the top diplomatic advisor of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, though he seems to have survived the attack.² Israel has hit dozens of targets across Iran, including nuclear facilities, air defences, command and control centres, military stations and arms production plants, and oil and gas fields.³ The damage suffered by Iran's nuclear programme has yet to be assessed; it is anyway going to mount as Israel continues to strike.

In its early days, the operation seems to be a dazzling military success, which has left the clerical regime shaken and the leadership initially paralysed. The blow suffered by Iran's air defences and missile launch sites has downgraded the potential of its response. The escalation has just started, but Israel

seems ways ahead of a deeply wounded Islamic Republic.

Israel's calculus

Netanyahu has depicted the attack as a preventive action against the existential, and supposedly imminent, threat posed by Iran's nuclear programme.⁴ As usual with the Israeli prime minister, the gap between his words and reality is very wide indeed.

Iran has neither nuclear weapons nor an active nuclear weapon programme. What it has is a vast civilian nuclear industry, which has been the source of legitimate concern for over twenty years because of its potential diversion to military use. The main bone of contention has been Iran's capacity for uranium enrichment, which is a sensitive activity because it can be used for both civilian and military purposes, depending on the level of enrichment. Such concerns grew more acute after the UN atomic agency released a report detailing Iran's repeated failures to comply with its cooperation and transparency obligations, prompting a formal censure by its board.⁵

Still, less than two months ago Trump's Director for National Intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, confirmed the US intelligence's long-held assessment

¹ Francesca Regalado et al., "These Are Iranian Generals and Scientists Killed by Israel", in *The New York Times*, 13 June 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/13/world/middleeast/iran-military-generals-killed-israel.html>.

² Rebecca Rosman et al., "Israel Says It Killed 9 Iranian Nuclear Scientists, and Braces for Attacks from Iran", in *NPR*, 14 June 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/06/14/nx-s1-5433317>; "Iranian Supreme Leader's Advisor Ali Shamkhani Not Dead", in *IntelliNews*, 16 June 2025, <https://www.intellinews.com/iranian-supreme-leader-s-advisor-ali-shamkhani-not-dead-386194>.

³ Lana Lam, Sofia Ferreira Santos and Jaroslav Lukiv, "What We Know as Israel-Iran Conflict Intensifies", in *BBC News*, 16 June 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdj9vj8g1g2o>.

⁴ Aaron Boxerman and Isabel Kershner, "Netanyahu Says Israel Will Fight Iran as Long as Necessary", in *The New York Times*, 12 June 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/12/world/middleeast/netanyahu-iran-israel-strikes.html>.

⁵ International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors, *NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Resolution adopted on 12 June 2025, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/25/06/gov2025-38.pdf>.

that Iran's leadership put an end to an embryonic nuclear weapon programme in 2003 and has since never taken the decision to build the bomb.⁶ US intelligence reportedly believe that, should that decision come, Iran would have needed up to three years to get the bomb – a timeframe that the current attack will further expand.⁷

The reality is that Iran has tried to use the nuclear programme as leverage in dealing with its adversaries, first and foremost the United States, rather than as a basis for a deterrent. This logic as much underlay its decision to enter the 2015 nuclear deal known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the Obama Administration as it does its readiness to strike a new deal with Trump, despite the fact that it was Trump himself who unilaterally left the JCPOA in 2018. Israel's strike came less than three days before US and Iranian negotiators were supposed to meet for a sixth round of talks in Muscat, Oman.⁸

⁶ Tulsi Gabbard, *Opening Statement - Congressional Testimony: Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, US Senate, 25 March 2025, p. 5, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/unclassified_2025_at_report_0.pdf; Amir Daftari, "Tulsi Gabbard Says Iran Not Believed to be Building a Nuclear Weapon", in *Newsweek*, 27 March 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/tulsi-gabbard-iran-nuclear-weapon-2051523>.

⁷ Katie Bo Lillis and Zachary Cohen, "Israel Says Iran Was Racing toward a Nuclear Weapon. US Intel Says It Was Years Away", in *CNN*, 17 June 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/17/politics/israel-iran-nuclear-bomb-us-intelligence-years-away>.

⁸ Jana Choukeir and Ahmed Elimam, "Oman Confirms Next Round of US-Iran Nuclear Talks amid Fears of Regional Risks", in *Reuters*, 12 June 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/oman-confirms-next-round-us-iran-nuclear-talks-amid-fears-regional-risks-2025-06-12>.

Most likely, Israel's attack was meant to kill US-Iranian diplomacy for good. The targeting of Shamkhani, who oversaw the nuclear negotiation with the Trump Administration, is strong evidence that this was indeed a deliberate goal. In the wake of the attack, Iran called the negotiation with Washington "meaningless".⁹ This was not because Tehran had lost any interest in diplomacy, however narrow that path seems. Instead, it stemmed from the Trump Administration's inconsistent conduct, which makes it hard for now to understand under what terms a negotiation – as opposed to capitulation – could continue.

Trump in a bind

Initially, the US Administration tried to put some distance between itself and Israel, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio describing Israel's action as "unilateral", while warning Iran not to retaliate against US personnel in the region.¹⁰ But President Trump, who just a few hours before the attack had struck a more optimistic note on the outcome of the talks (in one of his numerous oscillations on the matter), then started sounding more threatening, exhorting Iran to go back to the negotiation table before there is "nothing left" of it.¹¹ At

⁹ Ashleigh Fields, "Iran Calls US Nuclear Talks 'Meaningless' after Israel Attack", in *The Hill*, 14 June 2025, <https://thehill.com/?p=5350536>.

¹⁰ Qasim Nauman, "U.S. Says It Was Not Involved in Israeli Strikes on Iran", in *The New York Times*, 12 June 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/12/world/middleeast/trump-rubio-israel-iran-strikes.html>.

¹¹ @realDonaldTrump, "I gave Iran chance after chance to make a deal", *Truth Social* post, 13 June 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DK1r-8exG9I>; Laura Rozen, "Trump Says US

the time of writing, the US president has issued an evacuation 'call' to the ten-million-plus inhabitants of Tehran.¹²

Trump seems to assume, or has been led to believe by Netanyahu, that the attacks will frighten the Islamic Republic into accepting the maximalist demand of dismantling its uranium enrichment programme. His assumption must have been strengthened by the fact that Israel has surgically eliminated all senior figures who were allegedly advocating for a hard line on uranium enrichment. The US president is thus convinced that this erratic behaviour – at first saying it was not involved in the decision, then hinting that it was all part of a masterful ruse to lure Iran into a false sense of security – will not affect the Iranian leadership's choices; the fear of being destroyed will suffice.

The problem with this strategic reasoning is that it is based on assumptions of Iran and Israel's behaviour that Washington does not control.

If Trump had stopped Israel from attacking before the next negotiation round in Oman, he could have reasonably claimed to have exhausted the diplomatic option – even if that would have remained a matter of contention. In doing so, he would have reinforced his claim to be a peacemaker

after the impasse on Ukraine. It would have also lent some more credence to his reputation as a resolute leader ready to resort to violence to discipline the United States' foes, which his reluctance to pressure Russia has tarnished. Most importantly, he would have given the impression to be in control.

Instead, Trump must now deal with a wounded regime, which is certainly disoriented but also very much mistrustful and, at least for now, driven by a desire for vengeance and retribution. By allowing Israel to strike before the failure of the talks, Trump has once more confirmed the widespread perception of America's persistent weakness vis-à-vis Israel. Most critically, it has reduced the room for manoeuvre of the United States, which is now compelled to react to events rather than shape them.

Iran's choices

At the moment of writing, Iran's response has just started to take form. It can unfold in three dimensions – military, nuclear and regional.

The military response is about retaliating against Israel. Structural capacity and Israeli defences (bolstered by American ones) rather than deliberate restraint by Iran seem to have limited the impact of the missile barrages on Tel Aviv and other targets.¹³ Iran's goal is not just to re-establish a minimum of deterrence, as was the case with the two limited retaliatory strikes that Iran

⁸ Iran to Meet this Week, Iran 'Not There' Yet on Deal", in *Diplomatic*, 9 June 2025, <https://diplomatic.substack.com/p/trump-says-us-and-iran-to-meet-thursday>.

¹² "Trump Says Everyone Should Immediately Evacuate Tehran", in *Reuters*, 17 June 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/trump-says-everyone-should-immediately-evacuate-tehran-2025-06-16>.

¹³ Tom Bennett, "'It's Heavy on the Heart': Israelis Survey Damage in City Hit by Iranian Missile", in *BBC News*, 15 June 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx270vklvv7o>.

carried out against Israel in April and October 2024; Tehran wants to inflict harm on Israel. But there is a catch: the more the military confrontation goes on, the easier it is for Netanyahu and his powerful supporters in the United States to make the case that direct US involvement is needed.

Iran is wary of entering a war with the United States and has for now avoided hitting US forces in spite of past threats to do so.¹⁴ But this may change if the United States does join the Israeli air campaign. Nor is it wise to rule out entirely a scenario in which the Iranians determine that directing their allies in Iraq and Yemen to attack US targets is the best way to press the Americans to rein in Israel. While extremely risky, the Iranian leadership may find some comfort in Trump's well-known reluctance to get involved in another Middle Eastern war after promising otherwise to his electorate, which is bitterly split on the matter.¹⁵ Still, for a president so desperate to appear tough and resolute as Trump is, it would be impossible to resist pressure to punish attacks on US personnel. In this scenario too, a US military involvement is not entirely in Washington's hands.

The second front of Iran's retaliation is the nuclear dimension. Iran may not just further constrain UN inspectors'

access to its nuclear facilities,¹⁶ but also bar them altogether as the conflict intensifies. If Iran sees no path towards de-escalation, it can announce it will start preparations to leave the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the legal basis upon which its nuclear programme has become a matter of international dispute. Irrespective of whether Iran goes that far, its nuclear programme is destined to enter a grey area so as to give the leadership more leeway to decide whether to go nuclear or not.

The flipside of a thicker shadow on Iran's nuclear programme is that it would boost calls for an attack by the United States, which has made an Iranian atomic bomb an insurmountable red line for the last six US Administrations. Nonetheless, doubts abound among military experts that a US attack could destroy the nuclear programme, although it would certainly deal a lot of damage to it.¹⁷ The United States would then have to engage in repeated strikes over the years as Iran reconstructs its nuclear facilities. In this scenario too, then, the United States would be drawn into a war at a time and in a manner chosen by others.

The final dimension of Iran's response concerns the region. In recent years, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have sought détente with

¹⁴ "Iran Threatens to Strike US Bases in Region if Military Conflict Arises", in *Reuters*, 11 June 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-threatens-us-bases-region-if-military-conflict-arises-2025-06-11>.

¹⁵ Guy Chazan, "Donald Trump's Anti-War Pledge Tested as Israel's Attack on Iran Splits Maga Base", in *Financial Times*, 14 June 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/3431e349-94d3-4250-a21d-a91f635af2b4>.

¹⁶ "All Extra IAEA Monitoring in Iran to Be Suspended : Iran MP", in *Tehran Times*, 15 June 2025, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/514381>.

¹⁷ Francois Murphy and John Irish, "Would Military Strikes Kill Iran's Nuclear Programme? Probably Not", in *Reuters*, 15 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/would-military-strikes-kill-irans-nuclear-programme-probably-not-2025-04-15>.

Iran after suffering sabotage of trade routes in the Gulf of Oman and a direct attack on Saudi oil plants in the wake of Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have publicly denounced the Israeli aggression.¹⁸ While they would not be displeased to see Tehran subdued, they fear they would either be again on the line if the conflict escalates further or suffer the insecurity consequences of a destabilised Islamic Republic.

Most likely, Iran does not intend to undermine newfound good relations with its Arab neighbours. However, should it find itself in a desperate situation in the near future, the Iranian leadership might conclude that détente with Arab Gulf countries has not yielded the security benefits Tehran was after and that no option remains but to raise the costs for all. The way to do so would be to externalise the conflict, attacking commercial traffic in Gulf waters and directing the Houthis to hit both Saudi and Emirati targets. In the worst-case scenario, Saudi oil facilities could be struck again, the Strait of Hormuz would be mined and even Dubai would be in the crosshairs. It goes without saying that this scenario would also see the United States deeply engaged militarily.

May Netanyahu's victory be Trump's defeat?

In principle, a way out of the conflict and the collapse of nuclear diplomacy still exists. Iranian foreign minister

Abbas Araghchi, minutely recalling all the times Israel has tried (often successfully) to derail nuclear negotiations over the years, has given Trump an opening.¹⁹ The president could regain control of the situation if he imposed a time limit on US support for Israeli strikes so as to give himself the breathing space to engage the Iranians again in negotiations. However, he would also have to send a clear signal to the Iranians that he is not after their total capitulation but, as he put it some time ago, a "verifiable nuclear peace deal".²⁰

In practice, there is little hope that Trump is capable of an act of statesmanship like this. Although he always said he wanted a deal with Iran, during his first term he resorted only to coercive measures, and in his second he has allowed Israel to derail diplomacy when the conditions for a deal were still present.²¹

The reality seems to be that Netanyahu has not only humiliated an enemy but put his main ally in a bind. His bet is that a hapless Trump will join in the fight to defeat, destabilise and perhaps topple the Iranian regime. For the United

¹⁸ Amira El-Fekki, "Arab World Reacts to Israel's Strikes on Iran", in *Newsweek*, 13 June 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/arab-world-reacts-israels-strikes-iran-2084948>.

¹⁹ @websterkaroon, "Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi's comments to Foreign Ambassadors in Tehran", X post, 15 June 2025, <https://x.com/websterkaroon/status/1934175105850179895>.

²⁰ Michael D. Shear, "Trump Torpedoed the Iran Nuclear Deal. Now He's Calling for Another One", in *The New York Times*, 5 February 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/05/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

²¹ Riccardo Alcaro and Ludovica Castelli, "Ten Years Later Is Not Too Late: The Strategic Premises of a New Nuclear Deal with Iran", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 25/34 (June 2025), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/20192>.

States, it would mean to get involved in a massive and costly military operation, which could bind it to the Middle East longer and more deeply than it would have an interest in. But for Israel, which is already engaged in multiple theatres, that would be a boon. At stake is a regional system based on Israel's military supremacy enabled by continuous US support.

It is a high-risk bet, not least because so far Israel's unquestionable superiority has not produced any long-term political solution, but on the contrary has sown uncertainty and insecurity. It is also a high-cost bet, because Israel has broken the most basic principle of international law by attacking another state lacking an imminent threat, and it may have dealt a potentially fatal blow to the non-proliferation regime – either because Iran somehow manages to resist the bombing and eventually go nuclear or because other countries determine that nuclear weapons rather than diplomacy are a more effective deterrent.

The name chosen by Israeli planners for the campaign against Iran, *Rising Lion*, is telling. Although 'lying' lion would have been more accurate given the false claim that Israel was under imminent threat, Netanyahu may indeed believe to have turned Israel into a lion, the supposed 'king' of the Middle Eastern 'jungle'. But the 'jungle' is on fire, and the backdrop of Netanyahu's triumph may be the ashes of a shattered regional order.

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