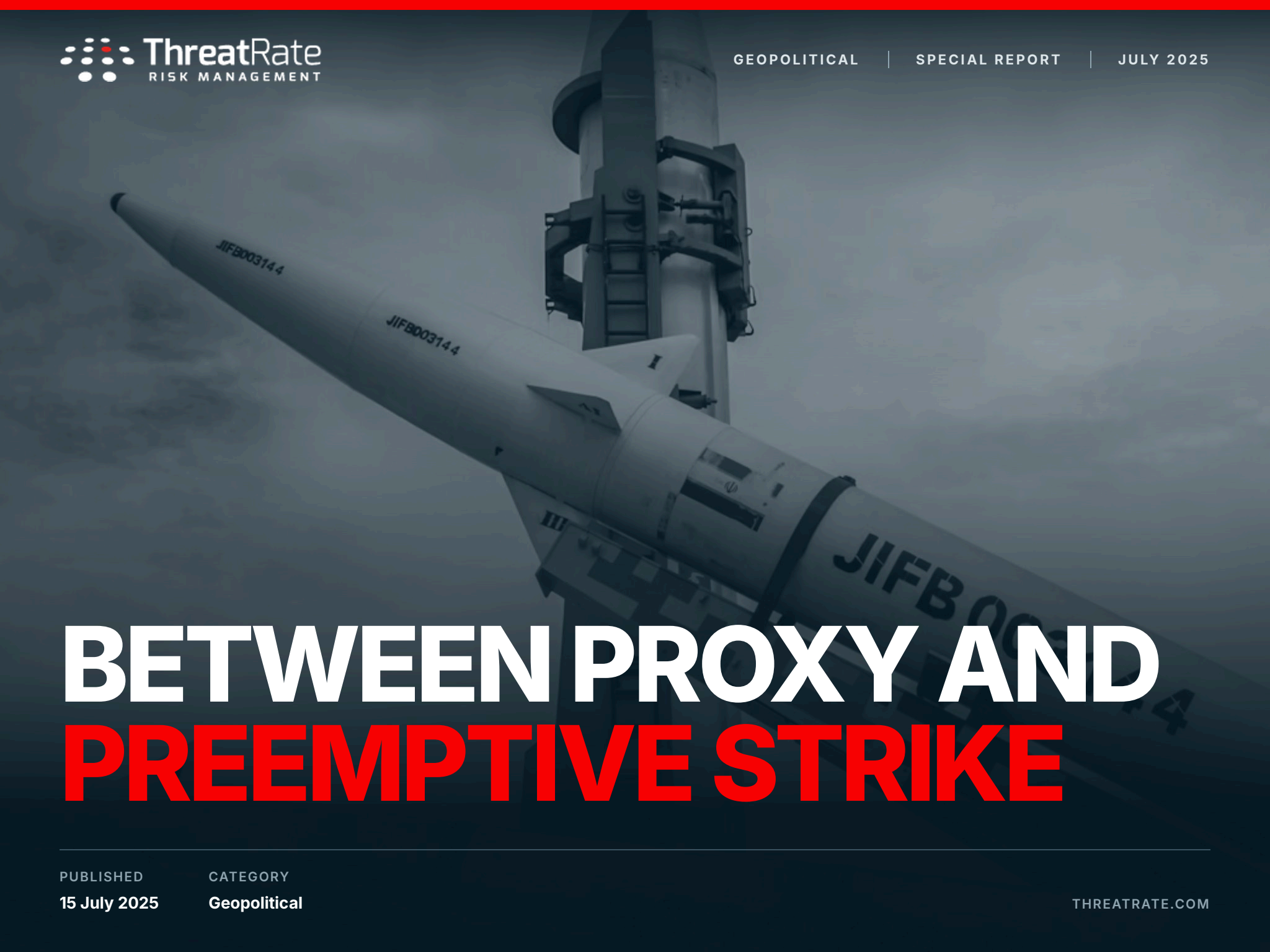


BETWEEN PROXY AND PREEMPTIVE STRIKE

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Between Proxy and Preemptive Strike

Background

The origins of the Israel–Iran confrontation trace back to Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, which overthrew the pro-Western Shah and installed an anti-Israel theocracy under Ayatollah Khomeini. Ideologically, the new regime cast Israel as an illegitimate "usurper" of Palestinian lands, embedding hostility toward the Jewish state into its foreign policy. Over the following decades, Iran's leaders cultivated a strategy of asymmetric warfare, seeking to challenge Israel's conventional military superiority through a network of allied militias and clandestine operations rather than through direct state-on-state confrontation.

Central to this strategy has been Iran's support for proxy forces. In Lebanon, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force provided Hezbollah with training, advanced weaponry, and funding, enabling it to become the most potent non-state actor on Israel's northern border. In the Palestinian territories, Iran backed Hamas – most notably its Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades – with tens of millions of dollars annually, along with weapons smuggled through tunnels, and specialized urban-assault training. These relationships have waxed and waned – for instance, funding was cut off when Hamas opposed Assad in Syria in 2012 and then restored in 2017 – but they remain a cornerstone of Tehran's regional posture.

Throughout the 2010s and into the 2020s, this proxy network engaged Israel through rocket barrages from Lebanon and Gaza, border infiltrations, and cyber-espionage, punctuated by targeted killings of IRGC officers and Israeli airstrikes on weapons convoys in Syria. Tensions escalated incrementally until 2024 saw direct skirmishes between Iranian forces and the Israeli Defense Forces. Those clashes culminated in June 2025 with the outbreak of open war, marking a dangerous new phase in the decades-long Iran–Israel rivalry.

Israel and the Iranian nuclear program

In the wake of the 2002 revelations of previously undeclared uranium-conversion facilities at Arak and enrichment centrifuges at Natanz, the International Atomic Energy Agency's Board of Governors convened in September 2003 to address Iran's clandestine program. Expressing deep concern over Iran's failure to declare material, facilities, and activities relating to its enrichment efforts, the IAEA demanded that Tehran sign and implement the agency's protocols while suspending all uranium enrichment and reprocessing at Natanz and elsewhere. Iran initially acceded, agreeing to halt its enrichment work as a confidence-building measure and to grant environmental sampling and broader inspection access under the Additional Protocol.

As Iran's cooperation remained uneven, the United Nations Security Council stepped in with binding measures. On December 23, 2006, it unanimously adopted Resolution 1737, establishing a dedicated

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sanctions committee and imposing penalties on Iran for failing to suspend its enrichment program. The resolution banned the supply of nuclear-related equipment and technology, froze assets and restricted travel of individuals and entities tied to Iran's nuclear activities, and mandated that all member states exercise vigilance that could support proliferation-sensitive work.

Diplomatic efforts culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, agreed in July 2015. Under its terms, Iran committed to reducing its stockpile of enriched uranium to no more than 300 kg of UF_6 enriched to 3.67 percent, decommissioning two-thirds of its centrifuges, and converting the Arak heavy-water reactor to a design less suitable for weapons production. In exchange, multilateral and UN sanctions were lifted on January 16, 2016, and independent analysts estimated that these restrictions extended Iran's "breakout time" – the period needed to produce enough weapons-grade material – to roughly one year.

Israel, however, was a vocal opponent of the JCPOA. In late September 2018, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed the UN General Assembly, unveiling what he described as secret Iranian nuclear archives and warning that sunset clauses in the deal would allow Iran to resume weapons-capable enrichment once key restrictions expired. His presentation underscored Jerusalem's view that diplomatic guarantees alone could not eliminate the existential threat posed by a nuclear-armed Iran.

Beyond public diplomacy, Israel has employed covert means to disrupt Iran's nuclear progress. In 2010, the Stuxnet computer worm – widely attributed to a joint US–Israeli operation – infected Natanz centrifuges, causing them to spin erratically and self-destruct while reporting false readings to operators. A decade later, an explosion at Natanz's centrifuge assembly hall in July 2020 set the program back by an estimated one to two years. In November 2020, Mossad operatives were linked to the targeted killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the chief architect of Iran's nuclear effort, depriving Tehran of its senior technical mastermind.

Following the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, Iran moved swiftly to expand its enrichment activities, producing uranium at concentrations as high as 60 percent – just below the roughly 90 percent threshold for weapons use – and building a stockpile sufficient for multiple nuclear weapons. At the June 2025 IAEA Board of Governors meeting, Western powers prepared to submit a resolution formally declaring Iran in breach of its NPT obligations, citing unresolved uranium traces at undeclared sites and an increased enrichment rate that could reduce breakout time to mere months despite previous one-year estimates.

Through it all, Israel's security doctrine has maintained a clear red line: no hostile state may develop nuclear weapons aimed at its territory. Rooted in what became known as the Begin Doctrine – first articulated after the 1981 Operation Opera strike on Iraq's Osirak reactor – Israel reserves the right to take unilateral military action to preempt nuclear threats. Drawing on the precedent set in Operation Opera, when fighter jets destroyed Iraq's nearly complete reactor to forestall Saddam Hussein's bomb ambitions, Israel continues to train for potential strikes, coordinate intelligence with the United States, and issue repeated public warnings that it will act decisively should Iran's program cross its irrevocable thresholds. On September 6, 2007, the Israel Air Force carried out an airstrike on Syria's nascent nuclear facility, obliterating the site in what Israel later termed Operation Orchard.

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Israel and the Iranian nuclear program

Long-standing tensions with Iran over its nuclear program erupted into all-out war on June 13, 2025, when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – facing internal political vulnerability threatened by coalition dissent and public backlash over Gaza – seized a rare strategic opening to reassert his leadership. After enduring criticism following the October 7, 2023, attack, Netanyahu launched Operation Rising Lion, a massive air campaign aimed at crippling Iran's nuclear program and undermining the regime both to eliminate what Israel deems an existential threat and to reinforce national unity and strengthen his own political position.

The twelve-day war saw Iran's missile and drone barrages kill twenty-nine Israelis and wound more than 3,000, causing severe damage largely to civilian infrastructure, while Israeli airstrikes on military, nuclear, and government targets inflicted approximately 610 fatalities and over 4,700 injuries as well as heavy structural damage. On June 22, the United States launched Operation Midnight Hammer, involving B-2 stealth bombers, heavy bunker-buster munitions, and Tomahawk missiles fired from submarines, which leveled Iran's Natanz enrichment site and severely damaged the Fordow and Isfahan facilities – strikes the Pentagon says set Iran's nuclear program back by up to two years, even as some installations remain intact. In the conflict's wake, Iran halted IAEA inspections, tightened domestic security, and threatened further retaliation, while European mediators, though urging a return to negotiations, conceded that diplomatic avenues are constrained.

What's next: likely scenarios

With direct hostilities paused, the most probable outcome is a protracted stalemate in which Iran pursues clandestine enrichment, Israel maintains readiness for preemptive strikes, and both sides continue to leverage regional proxies. Iran is likely to intensify support for its allied militias in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, using low-intensity clashes to signal resolve and erode Israel's sense of security. Israel, in turn, will sustain covert operations – cyber-attacks, targeted assassinations, and strikes on weapons convoys – to delay Iranian progress without triggering full-scale escalation. Diplomatic efforts by European and Gulf intermediaries may secure intermittent cease-fires, but absent a comprehensive framework addressing both Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional security concerns, any pause in fighting will likely be fragile. A return to formal talks seems unlikely until after Iran's leadership feels sufficiently deterred yet capable of negotiating from a position of domestic strength, a balance that may take months or even years to achieve.

Conclusion

The Israel–Iran confrontation, rooted in ideological enmity and compounded by nuclear anxieties, has evolved from indirect proxy clashes into overt warfare, demonstrating the limitations of diplomacy and sanctions in preventing escalation. Iran's reliance on clandestine enrichment and proxy warfare, coupled with Israel's Begin Doctrine–inspired readiness to act unilaterally, has created a cycle of confrontation that neither side can decisively break through conventional means. As the dust settles on Operation Rising Lion and Operation Midnight Hammer, both capitals must reckon with the high human and material costs of open conflict. Looking ahead, the region faces a delicate period in which the threat of renewed hostilities

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looms large, underscoring the urgent need for a sustainable security arrangement that addresses nuclear proliferation, proxy violence, and the deeper political grievances at the heart of this enduring rivalry.

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