

„MIDNIGHT HAMMER OPERATION” AND THE POSSIBLE AMERICAN DETERRENCE ARCHITECTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract: This study examines the strategic significance of **Operation “Midnight Hammer” (June 21–22, 2025)**, the US’ covert air campaign directed against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. Conceived as a high-precision strike employing B-2 Spirit stealth bombers and advanced bunker-penetrating munitions, the operation marked a turning point in the US deterrence posture in the Middle East.

Beyond its immediate military objectives, namely neutralizing the **Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan** nuclear sites, the action served as a deliberate demonstration of the US ability to project power rapidly, unilaterally and with technological superiority.

The analysis explores how the operation exposed critical deficiencies in Iran’s air defense system, reshaped regional threat perceptions and triggered a complex set of military and diplomatic reactions across the Gulf region. By framing the event as a **strategic surprise**, analyzed through the lens of a **Black Swan moment**, the study highlights its broader implications for the global competition for power, particularly in relation to the Russian Federation, the People’s Republic of China and the evolving dynamics of nuclear deterrence.

The study also reflects on the economic, political and security consequences of the operation, including energy-market volatility, the risk of regional escalation and the recalibration of alliance structures. Ultimately, the paper argues that “Midnight Hammer” signals a **doctrinal shift** in how the US manages crises, - from sustained presence and coalition-building to decisive, technologically enabled surprise strikes pursued in alignment with national interests (in this case, its alliance with Israel), - raising profound questions about the future of regional stability and international security.

Keywords: strategic surprise, *Midnight Hammer*, Iran, US, Middle East, doctrinal shift, *Black Swan*, *Fordow*, *Natanz*, *Isfahan*.

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PROLEGOMENA

The “Midnight Hammer” military operation, conducted during the night of June 21–22, 2025, stands as one of the most spectacular and significant recent examples of how the US projects its military power and reshapes its deterrence posture in the Middle East. Conceived and executed under conditions of maximum secrecy, the mission sought to neutralize Iran’s nuclear infrastructure through an unprecedented combination of

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stealth technology, precision strikes and strategic deception measures. It represents not only an operational evolution, but also a doctrinal shift within a global context marked by instability, nuclear proliferation and great-power competition.

This military episode unfolds within a geopolitical landscape dominated by intensifying rivalries among the US, the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China and regional actors in the Middle East. The timing of the strike, the techniques employed and the communication strategy (including the surprise announcement made by President Donald Trump), reveal an American approach that blends elements of hard power, strategic surprise and coercive diplomacy. The operation delivers a dual message: a determination to prevent nuclear proliferation and an intent to restore US deterrence credibility, which had eroded over the past decade amid protracted conflicts and political hesitation.

“Midnight Hammer” transcends the mere tactical dimension of an air strike. It serves as a show of force, a test of Iran’s response capabilities and a warning to global competitors regarding Washington’s readiness to resort to rapid, lethal and unilateral action. At the same time, the operation reignites strategic dilemmas concerning energy security, the stability of the Strait of Hormuz, the role of proxy actors and the risk of conflict spillover in an already structurally unstable region.

This study aims to analyze the event through the lens of its geopolitical, doctrinal, regional and global implications, as well as in relation to the evolving dynamics of international relations in 2025. In a world where a conflict can unfold within 18 hours of flight time and a single presidential post, understanding the architecture of both American and regional deterrence becomes essential for anticipating future security developments.

I. Military Operation *Midnight Hammer* – the US strategy of total surprise or *Black Swan*



Figure 1 – “Operation *Midnight Hammer*” Plan¹

In the early hours of June 21–22, 2025, at 02:00, the US launched an air offensive against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure in an operation code-named “Midnight Hammer”. The decision stemmed from a blend of tactical considerations, the need to restore US deterrence credibility and mounting pressure from emerging threats in the Gulf region.

The military operation was conducted covertly by the Pentagon and authorized by President D. Trump, with the objective of neutralizing three strategic Iranian nuclear targets: Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan². The climax of the mission was the deployment of seven *B-2 Spirit* stealth bombers³, capable of penetrating sophisticated air defense systems without detection.

¹ Adapted from ZDG, *Statele din Golf, în stare de alertă maximă după ce SUA au lovit siturile nucleare ale Iranului*, 22.06.2025, available at <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-externe/statele-din-golf-in-stare-de-alerta-maxima-dupa-ce-sua-au-lovit-siturile-nucleare-ale-iranului/> and from Donald STANDEFORD, *Operation Midnight Hammer: US Strategic Strike on Iranian Nuclear Facilities*, 22.06.2025, available at <https://www.ssj-news/p/operation-midnight-hammer-us-strategic>, accessed on November 15, 2025.

² Digi24, *SUA au bombardat trei instalații nucleare ale Iranului. A fost convocat Consiliul de Securitate al ONU*, 22.06.2025, available at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/mapamond/sua-au-bombardat-trei-instalatii-nucleare-ale-iranului-donad-trump-iranul-batausul-din-oriental-mijlociu-trebuie-acum-sa-faca-pace-3294419>, accessed on november 17, 2025.

³ Strategic long-range attack aircraft, designed to penetrate hostile airspace through stealth technology. Its features include a flying-wing configuration, radar-absorbent coating, turbofan engines, and the ability to carry both conventional and nuclear ordnance. **Performance characteristics:** * Speed: high subsonic; * Service ceiling: approximately 15,240 meters; * Range: about 11,112 km without refueling, and over 18,520 km with a single in-flight refueling; * Payload capacity: around 18,143 kg of armament, including 28

The bombers took off from a base in Missouri, simulating a flight path toward the Pacific to mislead Iranian intelligence services. In reality, the strike group crossed the Atlantic eastward, maintaining minimal communications, refueling mid-air and synchronizing their attack with US submarines that launched more than 30 Tomahawk cruise missiles. Alongside fighter aircraft used as decoys, the entire operation was designed to maximize the element of surprise and simultaneously degrade Iran's early-warning systems.

This tactic marked a return to the paradigm of the decisive strike, in which speed, secrecy and strategic penetration capability grant the US both operational and psychological superiority, reasserting its position of power in regional negotiations and reinforcing its image as an *international guardian*.

I.1. Stealth technology: the B-2 Spirit and massive penetrator munitions

A core component of the mission was the *B-2 Spirit* strategic bomber, an emblem of US air superiority⁴. The seven aircraft involved in the operation flew undetected, supported by aerial refueling and encrypted coordination. Although the strike itself took place overnight from Saturday into Sunday, the operation actually began on Friday night when the aircraft departed the US from **Whiteman Air Force Base** in **Missouri**⁵; ; some planes flew west toward the base on **Guam** in the Pacific to create a tactical diversion intended to confuse Iranian authorities, while the others headed east with minimal communications to avoid detection on a flight of about 18 hours⁶. This was the second-longest raid conducted by these aircraft, after missions flown following the attacks of 11 September 2001.

both conventional and nuclear bombs; * Cost: regarded as the most expensive aircraft in the world, with an estimated unit cost of 2.5 billion USD (Partially adapted from publicly available data, including Wikipedia, *Northrop Grumman B-2 Spirit*, March 19, 2023, available at https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northrop_Grumman_B-2_Spirit, accessed on November 16, 2025).

⁴ *The B-2 Spirit first flew in 1989 and officially entered US Air Force service in 1997. Designed to penetrate deep into hostile airspace, the B-2 has been deployed in Iraq, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Libya. Currently, the US operates 19 B-2 Spirit bombers, which remain a core element of America's strategic deterrence. However, these aircraft are gradually being phased out and replaced by the B-21 Raider, the first sixth-generation bomber ever built.* July 15, 2024, available at URL: https://www.defenseromania.ro/cate-bombardiere-b-2-spirit-mai-au-sua-si-de-ce-acestea-nu-mai-sunt-o-solutie-pe-termen-lung-desi-sunt-esentiale-intr-un-viitor-razboi_629251.html, accessed November 16, 2025.

⁵ Făclia, *Cel mai amplu raid cu bombardiere B-2 din istoria SUA*, 22.06.2025, available at <https://ziarulfaclia.ro/cel-mai-amplu-raid-cu-bombardiere-b-2-din-istoria-sua/>, accessed on November 17, 2025.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

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According to Fox News⁷, a total of six GBU-57A/B Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) bombs, commonly called *bunker busters*, each weighing approximately 13,600 kg, were released from long-range B-2A “Spirit” *stealth* bombers against the Fordow nuclear facility, while 30 land-attack cruise missiles (TLAMs) BGM-109 “Tomahawk” were launched from US Navy submarines at the Natanz and Isfahan nuclear sites. These bombs are specially designed to penetrate deep, reinforced concrete structures such as the underground Fordow complex near Qom, Iran. (see *Map* below).



Figure 2 – Map of Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan nuclear facilities (Iran)

The military operation demonstrated both the US strategic strike capability, through surgical precision and the determination to annihilate Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, even that protected by deep fortifications, but also Iran’s willingness to make major investments in ensuring its energy and military autonomy.

The initial damage assessment, presented by the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dan Caine, showed that all three targets were “severely damaged or completely destroyed,” a fact confirmed by US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth⁸. D. Caine avoided commenting on the

⁷ Beth BAILEY, „Why only bunker buster bombs could reach Iran’s underground Fordow nuclear facility”, June 18, 2025, available at <https://www.foxnews.com/world/how-bunker-buster-bombs-work-how-could-destroy-irans-fordow-nuclear-site>, accessed on November 17, 2025.

⁸ B.E., Cum au efectuat SUA operațiunea Midnight Hammer din Iran: 14 bombe anti-buncăr, peste 120 de avioane și zeci de rachete de croazieră, June 22, 2025, available at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/mapamond/cum-au-efectuat-sua-operatiunea-militara-30>

possibility that Iran would retain any nuclear capability, but confirmed the effectiveness of the American tactic. General D. Caine presented the chronology of Operation “Midnight Hammer” at the Pentagon⁹:

** The B-2 Spirit aircraft took off from the US on Friday night, entering Iranian airspace after 18 hours of flight. The bombers did not depart from Guam (Western Pacific) or from the Diego Garcia base in the Indian Ocean. In fact, BBC reported before the Pentagon press briefing that the Indian Ocean base had not been used in the operation.*

** When the B-2 bombers reached their designated positions, completely undetected by Iranian radar, an American submarine launched over two dozen Tomahawk cruise missiles at key surface-level targets within Iran’s Isfahan nuclear complex.*

** The B-2s were escorted by multiple fourth- and fifth-generation fighter jets, likely F/A-18s and F-35s, which cleared the way for the strike. The missions were flown at high altitude.*

** At 02:40 a.m. (Iranian time), the lead B-2 bomber released two bunker-busting bombs over the Fordow nuclear complex. Subsequently, the other bombers struck their assigned targets between 02:40 and 03:05 a.m. (Iranian time).*

** The munitions used were GBU-57 MOPs.*

** After completing the attack, US aircraft withdrew “without the Iranians firing a single shot, neither on entry nor on exit.”*

** The US military assesses that the damage inflicted on Iran’s nuclear program is permanent.*

During this time, US President D. Trump monitored the progress of the operation from the White House “Situation Room”. According to media reports, the planning phase had lasted several months, coinciding with diplomatic efforts through which Washington sought to persuade Tehran to abandon its uranium-enrichment program.

However, during that same period, Israel (a close US ally and an undeclared nuclear power) was conducting an air campaign against Iran, driven both by Tehran’s ambition to become a recognized nuclear state and by its support for Hamas.

Since the Israeli military does not possess bunker-busting bombs¹⁰ powerful enough to penetrate Iran’s deeply buried nuclear facilities,

din-iran-12-bombe-anti-buncar-si-30-de-rachete-de-croaziera-lansate-de-pe-submarine-3294695, accessed on November 16, 2025.

⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰ Bunker-buster bombs are designed to explode twice: first to penetrate the surface, and a second time after the weapon has reached a certain depth. They are used to reach military headquarters, bunkers and other installations buried deep underground, hence their name. The Israeli military possesses a number of bunker-buster type bombs, but not the GBU-57, a 14-ton weapon so heavy that it can only be delivered by the US fleet of heavy bombers. This munition can penetrate to approximately 61 m below the surface before detonating. It

particularly the Fordow enrichment plant¹¹, US involvement suddenly took on a dual significance: it was both a strategic act of deterrence and an implicit extension of Israeli military objectives.

I.2. The Israeli Air Force’s Strategic Strike on Iran’s Nuclear Facilities – June 13, 2025

On the morning of June 13, 2025, Israel launched one of the largest air operations in the history of its confrontation with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The motivation, publicly stated by IDF Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir, was unequivocal: Iran’s nuclear program had reached a “point of no return”¹², necessitating an immediate military intervention to safeguard the existence of the State of Israel.

The operation began with a massive wave of airstrikes, during which 200 Israeli fighter aircraft struck over 100 strategic targets across Iranian territory. The targets included:¹³ * the capital city, **Tehran**; * the uranium enrichment facility at **Natanz**, the cornerstone of Iran’s nuclear program; *

is the first time the US has used such a weapon in an attack. Testing of the bomb began in 2004, amid heightened concerns about weapons of mass destruction. According to Northrop Grumman, the B-2 is the “backbone of stealth technology.” The aircraft takes off from Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri and was first publicly revealed in November 1988. The US also used B-2 bombers in 2024 to strike the Iran-backed Houthi groups in Yemen, targeting underground weapons caches. It is unclear how many of these munitions the US has in its inventory; in 2009, Boeing delivered 20 of them to the Air Force, a stock level that remained valid in 2015. Dahlgren estimated that there are approximately 30 of these weapons in the US arsenal. – Antena3, *Ce este GBU-57, arma cu care Trump a lovit Iranul. Este pentru prima dată când armata SUA folosește bomba*, 22.06.2025, available at <https://www.antena3.ro/externe/ce-este-gbu-57-arma-cu-care-trump-a-lovit-iranul-este-prima-data-cand-armata-sua-foloseste-bomba-750153.html>, accessed on November 16, 2025.

¹¹ **Fordow** is considered the most important uranium-enrichment facility in Iran, located deep inside a mountain to protect it from strikes. It is believed that only the US military possesses bombs capable of striking this target, and that multiple munitions would need to be delivered against the same location to reach the facility. **Natanz** is home to Iran’s largest uranium-enrichment complex, which is said to have been damaged by several Israeli strikes.

Isfahan is thought to house weapons-grade nuclear material in a complex located outside the historic capital of Isfahan. If that site were destroyed, Iran’s nuclear program could be set back by years, unless there are undetected, parallel facilities. – digi24, *Cum au efectuat SUA operațiunea Midnight Hammer din Iran: 14 bombe anti-buncăr, peste 120 de avioane și zeci de rachete de croazieră*, 22.06.2025, available at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/mapamond/cum-au-efectuat-sua-operatiunea-militara-din-iran-12-bombe-anti-buncar-si-30-de-rachete-de-croaziera-lansate-de-pe-submarine-3294695>, accessed on November 17, 2025.

¹² Aljazeera, *Israel carries out strikes targeting Iran’s nuclear, military sites*, 13.06.2025, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/13/sounds-of-explosions-heard-in-irans-capital-tehran>, accessed on November 17, 2025.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

a nuclear research center in **Tabriz**; * and other critical military sites throughout Iran.

A second wave of attacks, separated in time from the first, concentrated exclusively on Tabriz, intensifying pressure on Iran's military and research infrastructure. According to Iran's Fars News Agency, "unofficial statistics" reported over 70 dead and 320 injured¹⁴, reflecting the scope and severity of the Israeli strikes.

Despite the unprecedented intensity of the attacks, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that no elevated radiation levels were detected at Natanz¹⁵, suggesting that the core nuclear facilities had not sustained damage leading to radioactive emissions.

In parallel with the air raids, Israel carried out clandestine operations targeting senior Iranian military officials and nuclear scientists, signaling an integrated strategy designed to paralyze Iran's nuclear and military capabilities both in the short and medium term.

It is notable that President D. Trump stated he was informed in advance of the Israeli Air Force strikes on Iranian targets. In addition to the US, the United Kingdom also voiced its support for Israel's position.

Meanwhile, US and British fighter aircraft joined the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in intercepting Iranian drones, while air raid sirens were activated at several military bases in Iraq. According to IDF spokesperson Brigadier General Effie Deffrin, "in the past few hours, Iran has launched over 200 drones toward Israel and all defense systems have been activated to intercept the threats."

US bases in Iraq were placed on high alert, as American and British forces became directly involved in defending Israel against Iranian retaliation. The US Embassy in Israel ordered all American government employees and their families to shelter in place until further notice.

Benjamin Netanyahu declared that the war with Iran would be long-lasting, stating that the first strike had been successful, but warning that "the war will be long, longer than we are used to." The Prime Minister urged the Israeli population to arm itself with "patience, faith and confidence in victory."

Structured and executed in phased operations, the campaign served both as a display of aerial power and a preventive strategic decision, intended to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power capable of altering the security balance in the Middle East. The regional and international consequences of these attacks were expected to unfold rapidly, escalating tensions and testing the already fragile stability of the region.

¹⁴ Aljazeera, *Israel attacks Iran: What we know so far*, 13.06.2025, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/13/israel-attacksiran-what-we-know-so-far>, accessed on November 17, 2025.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

The nations publicly supporting Israel's government included the US, the United Kingdom, Italy, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Azerbaijan and the United Arab Emirates.

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Returning to the connection between Israel's actions against Iran and the potential link to Hamas, a clear causal relationship exists, - indirect, but strategically significant. Although the strikes did not specifically target a Hamas presence in Iran, the relationship between Tehran and Hamas has deep strategic implications.

Despite being a Sunni organization, Hamas has maintained over two decades of cooperation with Shiite Iran, which has provided financial support, military know-how, equipment and training through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps / IRGC - Quds Force, as well as strong political and diplomatic backing.

Thus, for Israel, striking Iran also implicitly meant weakening Hamas, since Iran's military infrastructure is what sustains the Hamas - Hezbollah - Houthis network, logistically, politically and technologically.

I.2.1. Israel – Iran (2024)

The history of Israel's battlefield confrontations with Iran is far from new. One of the most consequential recent clashes between the two states occurred in April 2024, when Israel launched retaliatory strikes on April 19, 2024, following Iran's direct attack on April 13, 2024¹⁶.

That Iranian strike marked Tehran's first direct assault on Israel, using drones and missiles in retaliation for a strike on its consulate in Damascus, which was attributed to Israel. Following the assassination of a Hamas leader - unconfirmed and unacknowledged by Israeli authorities - Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei¹⁷, threatened “severe punishment”¹⁸.

In the months leading up to Israel's 2024 action, intelligence indicated that Hamas leaders, including Ismail Haniyeh, held repeated meetings with Iranian officials, among them Ayatollah Khamenei himself.

¹⁶ Florin MARINESCU, *Cine face parte din „axa rezistenței” împotriva Israelului promovată de Iran?*, 07.08.2024, available at <https://www.g4media.ro/cine-face-parte-din-axa-rezistenței-împotriva-israelului-promovata-de-iran.html>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

¹⁷ Sayyid Ali Khamenei has been the Supreme Leader of Iran since 1989, succeeding Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. Born in Mashhad in 1939, Khamenei was initially a prominent Shiite cleric. He served as President of Iran in 1980, before being chosen as Supreme Leader following Khomeini's death. Although he did not hold the highest religious title of Grand Ayatollah at the time, bearing instead the more modest title of Ayatollah, Khamenei rose to power through the support of conservative clerics and the armed forces.

¹⁸ Florin MARINESCU, *op.cit.*, *loc.cit.*

During that period, Iran sought to coordinate an anti-Israel front, strengthen the so-called “**Axis of Resistance**”¹⁹ and unify Hamas, Hezbollah and the militias operating in Iraq and Yemen.²⁰ It is highly probable that Israeli intelligence agencies (*Mossad, Aman and Shin Bet*) were aware of such meetings and operational planning. The main objectives behind Israel’s 2024 offensive on Iran were twofold:

Offensive, to neutralize Iran’s capacity to fuel the wars in Gaza and Lebanon, through strikes on critical military infrastructure and IRGC logistical hubs;

Defensive, to prevent the transfer of Shahed drones (via Syria), ballistic missiles, rocket-production technologies for Hamas, and electronic components for Hezbollah.

Additionally, the operation carried a psychological dimension - to send a clear message that Hamas could not rely on Iran’s protection.

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Therefore, to the question “Was there US - Israeli coordination in Operation *Midnight Hammer* (June 21 - 22, 2025)?”, the answer is nuanced: while Operation *Midnight Hammer* (the US strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities) was an independently planned American action, Washington and Jerusalem were fully aligned in their shared objective of **limiting Iran’s regional power**. In strategic doctrine, this alignment is known as strategic convergence (the coordination of interests without formal joint participation in the same operation). Even though there were no combined strikes, both actions targeted the same actor and sought to degrade Iran’s military resilience. These conclusions are reinforced by the statement of US Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth²¹, who declared that the President had authorized a “precision operation to neutralize threats to our national interests posed by Iran’s nuclear program and to defend our forces and our ally, Israel.”²²

¹⁹ The “Axis of Resistance” against Israel, comprising Iran and its allies across the Middle East, lost two key figures on July 30 and 31, 2024: Ismail Haniyeh, the political leader of Hamas, and Fouad Chokr, the military commander of Hezbollah. – Florin MARINESCU, *op.cit.*, *loc.cit.*

²⁰ BOURSORAMA, *Qui compose "l'axe de la résistance" à Israël promu par l'Iran?*, 07.08.2024, available at <https://www.boursorama.com/actualite-economique/actualites/qui-compose-l-axe-de-la-resistance-a-israel-promu-par-l-iran-217f5547ec854354c29442304672b963>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

²¹ Ciprian DUMITRACHE, *SUA au folosit prima dată în istorie 14 bombe GBU-57 MOP care "forează" în stâncă, în cea mai amplă desfășurare de bombardierele B-2 din istorie*, 22.06.2025, available at https://www.defenseromania.ro/sua-au-folosit-prima-data-in-istorie-bomba-de-13-tone-gbu-57-mop_634268.html, accessed on November 18, 2025.

²² US Department of war, *Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dan Caine Hold a Press Conference*, 22.06.2025, available at <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4222543/secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-and-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen/>, accessed November 18, 2025.

I.3. Mossad’s Intimidation and Deterrence Operations in Iran

Following Israel’s surprise attack on Iran on June 13, 2025, Israeli intelligence operatives launched an intimidation campaign aimed at destabilizing Tehran’s theocratic regime. Persian-speaking Mossad agents reportedly contacted over 20 Iranian generals from the inner circle of Supreme Leader Ayatollah A. Khamenei, delivering a 12-hour ultimatum to distance themselves from the regime²³. This psychological campaign was directly tied to the broader “Operation Leon Rising”, involving strikes on nuclear sites, weapons production facilities and missile launchers across Iran, designed to prevent the country from developing a nuclear weapon. The effort began with the activation of clandestine intelligence teams, weapons caches and other pre-positioned assets previously placed inside Iran²⁴.

Although a cease-fire between Israel and Iran took effect on June 24, 2025, following mediation by D. Trump and Qatar, the truce remains fragile, lacking firm guarantees and carrying a high risk of renewed conflict. The persistently high tension between the two states continues to raise doubts about their intentions. It is plausible that Iran could resume retaliatory actions in response to Mossad’s pressure on its senior officials, potentially launching mirror attacks on high-value Israeli targets (HVTs) such as key infrastructure points or government officials.

Media reports indicate that Iran still possesses additional nuclear sites, allowing it to continue uranium enrichment in secret until achieving its ultimate objective.

²³ *The Washington Post obtained an audio recording and transcript of a four-minute phone call. “We have all the information about you. It’s clear you don’t understand what situation you’re in; I’m telling you we hit all the leaders, we blew them up, they’re all dust and slag now,” is the warning addressed to a general in the Revolutionary Guards. “You have 12 hours to save yourself, your wife and your child. Otherwise, you’re next on our list. We’re closer to you than your jugular vein. Get this to your head. God protect you,” the voice instructed him. According to the ultimatum, he had 12 hours to make a video disassociating himself from the Iranian government. “How do I send it to you?” the general asked. “I’ll send you a Telegram ID,” the agent replied. The general is believed to still be alive, according to one source. However, the purpose of the operation was more likely to cause confusion at the top of Tehran, said another. – Warren STROBEL, Souad MEKHENNET, Yeganeh TORBATI, Israeli warning call to top Iranian general: ‘You have 12 hours to escape’, s.a., available at <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/israeli-warning-call-to-top-iranian-general-you-have-12-hours-to-escape/arAA1Hg7Xi?ocid=hpmnsn&cvid=a8646e926fc34bb3923b2f13245493eb&ei=18>, accessed November 18, 2025.*

WP a decis să nu facă public numele generalului iranian. - https://www.comisarul.ro/articol/generali-iranieni-au-fost-sunati-de-agenti-ai-moss_1585883.html.

²⁴ Comisarul, *Generali iranieni au fost sunați de agenți ai Mossadului după atacul asupra Israelului: „Avem toate informațiile despre tine. Ai 12 ore”*, 24.06.2025, available at https://www.comisarul.ro/articol/generali-iranieni-au-fost-sunati-de-agenti-ai-moss_1585883.html, accessed on November 18, 2025.

Iran also provides financial, logistical and military support to the Houthi movement, which controls significant portions of Yemen, including coastal regions near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The Houthi rebels have conducted missile, drone and naval mine attacks against commercial vessels transiting this strategic maritime route. Throughout 2024 and 2025, numerous incidents in the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb have been attributed to the Houthis, forming part of the broader Middle Eastern conflict, including Israel - Iran tensions.

Unlike the Strait of Hormuz, which is directly controlled by Iran, Tehran does not need to hold physical control over Bab el-Mandeb, located between Djibouti, Eritrea and Yemen. By leveraging proxy actors such as the Houthis, Iran can generate insecurity and instability in the region.

Approximately 10% of the world's maritime oil trade passes through Bab el-Mandeb. Instability in this corridor can raise global oil prices and disrupt supply chains.

Iran can therefore exploit this indirect influence as a geopolitical instrument of pressure on the West and its allies. However, the Western naval presence, particularly that of the US, France, and the United Kingdom, while limiting Iran's regional influence, simultaneously represents a set of potential high-value targets for Iranian proxies.

On the other hand, countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt have been closely monitoring the region due to their energy and security interests. It is well known that, with the exception of Egypt²⁵, which maintains a more cautious and divergent stance toward Israel, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are supportive of the Israeli state²⁶.

On June 30, 2025, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ruled out any talks with Iran aimed at de-escalating the conflict, telling US media that the war would "last as long as necessary." B. Netanyahu did not, however, exclude the possibility of assassinating Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah A. Khamenei. Earlier, on June 17, Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz had publicly warned Khamenei in a statement: "Be careful not to share the fate of the Iranian dictator Saddam Hussein!"²⁷.

At 86 years old, Ayatollah A. Khamenei witnessed the elimination of his top military and security advisers following Israeli air raids on June 27,

²⁵ The Egyptian-Israeli relationship is a pragmatic one, with both having a tense relationship with Hamas and both maintaining a partial blockade on Gaza. Security interests are shared, particularly with regard to Islamist extremism, creating a de facto cooperative relationship, but Egypt prefers the role of mediator rather than an ally or direct supporter of Israel.

²⁶ States supporting the Israeli government: USA, UK, Italy, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Azerbaijan, United Arab Emirates.

²⁷ Yonah Jeremy BOB, *Israel Katz threatens Khamenei: Be careful you don't end up like Saddam Hussein*, 17.06.2025, available at <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-858037>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

2025. In the hours immediately after the attacks on Iran's infrastructure, several members of Khamenei's inner circle were assassinated or gravely wounded in their residences in Tehran, including:

- ⊕ Major General Hossein Salami, Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran's elite force;
- ⊕ Major General Mohammad Bagheri, Chief of the General Staff of Iran's Armed Forces;
- ⊕ Amir Ali Hajizadeh, Head of the IRGC Aerospace Division, responsible for Iran's ballistic missile program;
- ⊕ Mohammad Kazemi, Chief of Intelligence within the IRGC;
- ⊕ Fereydoon Abbasi-Davani, nuclear physicist and senior figure in Iran's nuclear program;
- ⊕ Ali Shamkhani, former Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, critically injured.

These events further deepened the **leadership crisis** within Iran's military and security establishment, amplifying internal instability at a time of mounting regional tension.

In this context, Ayatollah A. Khamenei faces serious difficulties in appointing successors to the positions left vacant by those who were eliminated, as many of the proposed candidates have reportedly refused the appointments. Meanwhile, Iran's population has rallied behind Khamenei, protesting against Israel's actions and expressing strong solidarity with the Supreme Leader following the Israeli strikes.

Those killed or injured were part of Khamenei's inner circle of roughly 15–20 advisers, which includes IRGC commanders, clerics and senior politicians. This advisory group usually meets informally and ad hoc in a compound owned by Khamenei in Tehran. Its members are known for their unwavering loyalty to him and to the ideology of the Islamic Republic.

The physical removal of Ayatollah Khamenei does not appear imminent, as he is reportedly sheltered in a secure bunker and there is no solid evidence to suggest that he has been or is currently targeted. However, should he be eliminated, Iran's Constitution stipulates the immediate establishment of a leadership council composed of the President, the head of the judiciary and senior clerics, who would temporarily assume authority until a successor is chosen by the Assembly of Experts.

- * **Short term:** A. Khamenei is expected to remain in power under tight protection, while the regime attempts to manage post-attack chaos and restore internal control.
- * **Medium term:** The regime may accelerate succession procedures, aiming to select a successor perceived as legitimate to preserve continuity and stability.
- * **Long term:** Should A. Khamenei's son, Mojtaba Khamenei, assume power, Iran would enter a critical phase, potentially marked by mass protests reminiscent of those in 2022, internal tensions between the

IRGC and the clerical establishment and the emergence of a shadow leadership structure.

Although Mojtaba Khamenei possesses political influence and support from the IRGC, his father has sought to avoid the perception of a clerical monarchy, which is why his son is not among the three officially designated successors. The main point of rupture for the regime would likely emerge from a succession perceived as undemocratic or hereditary, which could ignite a new wave of instability in Iran.

II. Iran's Limited Defensive Capability and Risk Assessment

One of the most significant factors behind the success of the US military operation was Iran's inability to respond. According to official statements²⁸, the Iranian Air Force did not scramble a single fighter jet and the air defense systems failed to detect any of the American bombers²⁹.

The fact that Iran's surface-to-air missile systems were never activated suggests either a major malfunction in the country's radar and command-and-control systems, or an exceptionally advanced level of American electronic countermeasures.

For Iran, this failure reflects both a lack of anticipatory capability and weaknesses in defensive preparedness and regional power projection. The event may have deep repercussions for the regime's credibility, particularly in the eyes of the domestic public, the Iranian diaspora, and state and non-state actors that rely on strategic cooperation with Tehran.

It is likely that this failure will lead to an accelerated reform of Iran's air defense system, as well as a reassessment of how Iran manages strategic tensions with the US and its Gulf allies.

II.1. Iran's Missile Attack on US Military Bases as Retaliation Against the US

On June 23, 2025, Iran launched approximately a dozen short- and medium-range ballistic missiles targeting the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the largest US military installation in the Middle East, hosting over 10,000 American troops³⁰. According to US and Iraqi officials, Iran issued a prior warning about the strike, allowing Patriot missile defense systems to

²⁸ "It appears that the Iranian surface-to-air missile systems did not detect us", said (06/22/2025) the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dan Caine: "Throughout the mission, we maintained the element of surprise." – Chris PANELLA, *The top US general says it appears Iran never saw the B-2 bombers that hit it. Here's why they could go in undetected*, 25.06.2025, available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/top-us-general-iran-didnt-see-b-2-bombers-why-2025-6>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Aljazeera, *Iran attacks US airbase in Qatar: What we know so far*, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/23/iran-attacks-us-air-base-in-qatar-what-we-know-so-far>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

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intercept nearly all incoming projectiles, except one. No casualties or injuries were reported as a result of the attack on Qatar³¹.

The Al Udeid Air Base holds exceptional strategic importance for the US military posture in the Middle East. It hosts the Forward Headquarters of US Central Command (CENTCOM)³², whose main command is based in Tampa, Florida, responsible for coordinating US military operations across the entire region. The base also houses the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) of CENTCOM and the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing of the US Air Force, often described as the regional epicenter of power projection. Beyond serving as a rotational hub for fighter aircraft, Al Udeid also provides critical logistical facilities, aerial refueling infrastructure, and medical units. It has played an active role in supporting US operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria³³. According to the US Department of State, since 2003, Qatar has contributed approximately \$8 billion in investments to develop and expand the base. Notably, President D. Trump visited Al Udeid on May 15, 2025, one month before the attack, as part of his Middle East tour³⁴.

In the Middle East, the US operates 19 military bases, of which eight are permanent installations, with roughly 50,000 US troops stationed across key countries including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates³⁵. There are also significant US military presences in Syria, Turkey, and Israel. The most important American military bases in the region are described in the following section:

³¹ Sean SEDDON, Gabriela POMEROY, *What we know about Iran's attack on US base in Qatar*, 24.06.2025, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdjxdgjpd48o>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

³² Jawhar FARHAT, *Al Udeid Air Base: The Largest US Military Installation in Middle East*, 16.04. 2024, available at <https://greydynamics.com/al-udeid-air-base-the-largest-us-military-installation-in-middle-east/>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ A.C., Donald Trump vizitează cea mai mare bază militară a Statelor Unite din Oriental Mijlociu, 15.05.2025, available at <https://www.radar.ro/2025/05/15/donald-trump-viziteaza-cea-mai-mare-baza-militara-a-statelor-unite-din-orientul-mijlociu/>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

³⁵ AGERPRES, SUA au aproximativ 40.000 de militari în baze din Oriental Mijlociu, 24.06.2025, available at <https://agerpres.ro/politic-extern/2025/06/24/sua-au-aproximativ-40-000-de-militari-in-baze-din-oriental-mijlociu--1462254>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

STATE	BASE / LOCATION	DETAILS
Qatar	Al Udeid Air Base ³⁶	The largest US base in the region and the Forward Headquarters of CENTCOM; hosts approximately 10,000 military personnel
Bahrain	NSA Bahrain (Naval Support Activity) ³⁷	Headquarters of US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) and the Fifth Fleet; employs about 9,000 military and civilian personnel
Kuwait	Ali Al Salem Air Base, Ahmed Al Jaber Air Base, 25th Commando Brigade, 94th Yarmouk Brigade, Camp Arifjan, Udairi Range, Khabari Military Border Crossing Point ³⁸	Major logistical and air hub, employing around 13,500 military and civilian staff
United Arab Emirates	Al Dhafra Air Base, Jebel Ali Port, Fujairah ³⁹	Air, naval and logistical hubs, with 3,500–5,000 personnel
Saudi Arabia	Eskan Village (near Riyadh) ⁴⁰	Training base (details not fully disclosed)
Jordan	Muwaffaq Salti Air Base (Azraq), Tower 22 ⁴¹	Serves as a logistical and training base, hosting

³⁶ Aljazeera, *What to know about the US's Al Udeid airbase in Qatar after Iran's attack*, 23.06.2025, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/23/hld-irans-attack-on-al-udeid-air-base-in-qatar-all-you-need-to-know>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

³⁷ Military Installations (an official Defense Department website), *Naval Support Activity Bahrain*, s.a., available at <https://installations.militaryonesource.mil/in-depth-overview/naval-support-activity-bahrain>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

³⁸ Global security, *US Military Facilities in Kuwait - An Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier*, s.a., available at <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/kuwait.htm>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

³⁹ Amos News, „*China are baze militare secrete în Emiratele Arabe Unite*”, presa franceza, 30.04.2023, available at <https://www.amosnews.ro/china-are-baze-militare-secrete-in-emiratele-arabe-unite-presa-franceza/>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

⁴⁰ Eskan Village has been hosting US forces in Saudi Arabia for over 30 years and holds a unique status in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For the past 14 years, Eskan has served as a base of operations for USAMAG and other US military organizations. – US Army, *USAMAG lowers colors for last time on Riyadh's Eskan Village*, 06.04.2022, available at https://www.army.mil/article/255408/usamag_lowers_colors_for_last_time_on_riyadhs_eskan_village, accessed on November 18, 2025.

⁴¹ Tower 22 occupies a strategically important position in Jordan, at the northeastern most point where the country's borders meet with Syria and Iraq. Little is known about the base publicly. However, it is located near the Al Tanf garrison across the border in Syria, where

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		between 2,800 and 3,000 troops
Iraq	Al-Asad Air Base, Union III, Bismaya Base ⁴²	Functions as a training hub for anti-ISIS operations, with approximately 2,500 troops
Syria	Al-Tanf, al-Omar, al- Shaddadi ⁴³	Operates as a counterterrorism base network, hosting around 900 US military personnel
Turkey	Incirlik Air Base ⁴⁴	A NATO installation (details not fully disclosed)
Israel	Nevatim Air Base ⁴⁵	Missile defense systems and serves as a key strategic airbase supporting regional US - Israeli defense cooperation.

The US maintains an extensive network of air, naval, and ground bases across the Middle East, essential for power projection under CENTCOM, supporting military operations in Syria and Iraq, ensuring

a small number of US troops are stationed. Al Tanf has played a key role in the fight against the Islamic State group and has become part of the US strategy to limit Iran's military buildup in eastern Syria. Tower 22 is close enough to US troops at Tanf to provide them with support, counter potential Iranian-backed militants in the area, and monitor remnants of the Islamic State in the region. – Reuters, *What is Tower 22, the site of a deadly drone attack on US troops in Jordan?*, 28.01.2024, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/what-is-tower-22-the-site-of-a-deadly-drone-attack-on-us-troops-in-jordan/>, on accessed November 18, 2025.

⁴² Responsibility for the security of Camp Union III in Baghdad was officially transferred from Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) to the NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI) on 1 August 2025. To symbolise this transfer, the NATO flag was raised over Camp Union III. This transition is in line with the agreement between the US and the Government of Iraq on the repositioning of Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF OIR) troops in Iraq. The repositioning of CJTF OIR will not change the mandate of the NMI. The NATO Mission in Iraq will continue to provide non-combat strategic advice and capacity building, as requested by the Government of Iraq. NATO, *NATO mission iraq assumes authority over union iii*, 11.08.2025, available at <https://jfcnnaples.nato.int/nmi/news-room/news/2025/nato-mission-iraq-assumes-authority-over-union-iii->, accessed on November 18, 2025.

⁴³ Alireza AKBARI, *American bases in the region are under fire from resistance groups*, 24.10.2023, available at <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/490539/American-bases-in-the-region-are-under-fire-from-resistance-groups>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

⁴⁴ Incirlik Air Base, s.a., available at <https://www.incirlik.af.mil/>, accessed on November 17, 2025.

⁴⁵ Geoff BRUMFIEL, *Satellite images show dozens of Iranian missiles struck near Israeli air base*, 04.10.2024, available at <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/04/nx-s1-5140058/satellite-images-dozens-iranian-missiles-struck-near-israeli-air-base>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

regional defense (through systems such as Iron Dome, drones, Patriot, and THAAD), and sustaining logistical and global coordination (fleets, transport, and aerial refueling).

II.1.1. Economic Repercussions – Global Oil Prices

On June 23, 2025, US President D. Trump announced via social media a “complete and total ceasefire”⁴⁶ between Israel and Iran, expressing hope that the measure would become permanent.

In this context, oil prices dropped by more than 7%, following Iran’s limited, targeted missile attack on US bases in Qatar⁴⁷. The price of West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude fell by 7.2%, settling at \$68.51 per barrel, marking the sharpest daily decline since April and one of the steepest in the past three years.⁴⁸ Likewise, Brent crude⁴⁹ closed at \$71.48 per barrel, also down 7.2%, representing its largest drop since August 2022⁵⁰.

At the time of Iran’s retaliation, several Middle Eastern states fully or partially closed their airspace due to the escalating conflict, as follows⁵¹:

⁴⁶ Anushree JONKO, Sanstuti NATH, *Israel-Iran War Highlights: White House Dismisses Intel Reports Saying US Did Not Destroy Iran's Nuke Sites*, 25.06.2025, available at <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/israel-iran-war-live-updates-us-president-donald-trump-announces-ceasefire-between-israel-and-iran-tehran-reject-truce-tel-aviv-news-8744764>, accessed on November 17, 2025.

⁴⁷ Arathy SOMASEKHAR, *Oil settles down 7% after Iran attacks US military base in Qatar, not tankers*, 23.06.2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/oil-hits-five-month-high-after-us-hits-key-iranian-nuclear-sites-2025-06-23/>, accessed on November 19, 2025.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ *Brent Crude* is a type of oil extracted primarily from fields located in the North Sea, near the coasts of the United Kingdom and Norway. The name comes from the Brent oil field, discovered by Shell in the 1970s. Brent is one of the most widely used global benchmark standards for determining oil prices. Essentially, the “price of Brent Crude” refers to the cost per barrel of oil matching the quality and characteristics of crude extracted from the North Sea region. **Other major benchmarks** include: * WTI (West Texas Intermediate) – the key reference for the US oil market; * Dubai/Oman – the main benchmark for oil traded in Asian markets. **Characteristics of Brent Crude:** * It has a relatively low sulfur content (classified as “light sweet crude”), making it easier and cheaper to refine; * It is extracted mainly offshore (from marine platforms); * It is heavily traded on international exchanges and serves as the global reference for oil prices. The last time US crude traded below 70 USD per barrel was on June 12, one day before Israel began its strikes on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. This drop marked a sharp reversal from the trend at the end of the previous week, when on June 22, oil prices rose by 6%, peaking at 78.50 USD per barrel. Since the outbreak of hostilities, the price of oil has increased by over 10%, reaching its highest level in five months, amid fears of potential disruptions to global oil supply..

⁵⁰ Arathy SOMASEKHAR, *op.cit., loc.cit.*

⁵¹ A.I., *Qatar și-a închis spațiul aerian după ce a fost anunțat de Iran că va ataca baza Al Udeid. La fel au facut UAE și Bahrain*, 25.06.2025, available at <https://www.antena3.ro-externe/qatar-anunta-ca-isi-inchide-spatiul-aerian-americanii-avertizati-sa-ramana-in-locuinte-750340.html>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

- * Qatar⁵² – airspace closed after Iran’s strikes on Al Udeid Base (June 23);
 - * United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq – airspace closed on June 23;
 - * Israel, Jordan, Lebanon – implemented phased airspace closures following missile attacks, though some restrictions were lifted quickly.

A wider military conflict in the Middle East—Involving Iran, Israel, and the US—could severely destabilize global emerging markets, particularly in terms of oil and gas supply. A significant surge in energy prices would adversely affect the European economy, already vulnerable due to its partial dependence on external resources and the financial burden of supporting Ukraine. Such a scenario could drastically weaken the European Union’s political and economic capacity to sustain long-term support for Ukraine.

III. Global Implications

The “Midnight Hammer” military operation is not merely another episode in the US–Iran confrontation; it represents a strategic declaration of intent. The message is directed not only at Tehran, but also at Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang—signaling that the US is prepared to use force, swiftly and lethally, to prevent nuclear proliferation or to restore the balance of power in key regions.

The secrecy of the planning process, the exclusion of certain senior officials from the decision-making stage, and the announcement of the operation via a social media post by President D. Trump underscore a personalized and unpredictable approach to American military decision-making.

Moreover, this marks a paradigm shift in how the US practices deterrence—not solely through permanent presence and alliances, but through the capability to launch unilateral, rapid, and decisive actions. This evolving approach carries direct implications for Europe, including Romania, with regard to America’s strategic posture in the global arena.

In an era where a conflict can unfold within an 18-hour flight cycle and a single presidential post, the necessity for enhanced vigilance, interoperability, and resilience becomes evident. In the 21st century, control of surprise and technological superiority stand as the most decisive forms of power—and currently, the US dominates this mode of strategic thinking on the battlefield.

The US surprise airstrike on Iran’s nuclear sites at Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan represented a direct escalation of American involvement, strategically aligned with Israel, and signaled a major shift in regional dynamics.

⁵² Doha’s Hamad International Airport serves approximately 100,000 people every day.

Iran's immediate response unfolded on two fronts:

- * Militarily, through two waves of ballistic missile attacks on Israel, resulting in dozens of injuries—a demonstration of its retaliatory capability;
- * Diplomatically, through the dispatch of Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi to the Russian Federation for consultations, where Moscow harshly condemned the American strikes.

In the event of future US military incursions into Iranian territory, Iran's probable courses of action could include the following:

Table 1 – Possible future Iranian retaliatory measures against the US

Type of Response	Level of Reaction	Details
Direct Military	<i>Limited missile strikes on US bases; closure of the Strait of Hormuz</i>	The IRGC considers strikes on US bases legitimate; closing the Strait of Hormuz would destabilize global oil markets.
Regional Proxies	<i>Houthi / Hamas</i>	Iran could escalate the conflict through its allies in Yemen and Lebanon, using proxy warfare to avoid direct confrontation.
Cyber and Asymmetric	<i>Cyberattacks, sabotage of infrastructure</i>	Unconventional responses, including cyber operations and sabotage, are anticipated and highly likely.
Diplomatic and Legal	<i>Appeal to the UN; blocking of nuclear exports</i>	Iran is expected to present the US action as aggression before the UN Security Council, seeking international legitimacy under legal frameworks.

The global economic implications would likely include a sharp increase in oil prices and heightened financial market volatility resulting from the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Both the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China have signaled a closer alignment with Iran, openly condemning US military action.

In the medium term, the US is expected to face domestic political constraints, as the military intervention has drawn criticism from both the Senate and Congress, with questions raised over its constitutional legitimacy. The Trump Administration has stated that it does not rule out dialogue, but any talks would be conditional on Iran refraining from retaliatory actions.

Moreover, the US strike has fueled domestic nationalism in Iran, strengthening the regime's internal cohesion. Tehran is likely to seek indirect means of response through proxy actors and unconventional methods, aiming to restore the balance of power, preserve regional prestige, and protect its nuclear program, while avoiding a direct war with the US.



Figure 3 – Ayatollah Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i⁵³

Ayatollah A. Khamenei has announced the designation of three potential successors⁵⁴, to assume leadership in the event of his death or incapacity. The names of these individuals have not been disclosed publicly, as they were selected in secret by a religious assembly composed of approximately 88 clerics, and placed on a list prepared for the Assembly of Experts, the body responsible for appointing a new Supreme Leader should Khamenei leave office.

Notably, the list does not include his son, Mojtaba Khamenei, suggesting a preference for an institutional rather than dynastic succession. Nonetheless, media speculation has identified three senior clerics as potential candidates:

- ✓ Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i⁵⁵ – A senior cleric and the current head of Iran's judiciary, Mohseni-Eje'i has built a strong career in the justice system and previously served in the Ministry of Intelligence. He is regarded as an experienced and powerful choice, with solid administrative and institutional credentials;
- ✓ Mohsen Qomi⁵⁶ – An influential cleric, member of the Assembly of Experts, and an active figure in representing the Vilayat-e Faqih (the

⁵³ The Office of the Supreme leader, *The Leader of the Islamic Revolution has appointed a new Chief Justice*, 01.07.2021, available at <https://www.leader.ir/en/content/25067-Appointment-of-HIWM-Mohseni-Eje-i-as-the-Chief-justice-of-Iran>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

⁵⁴ Toi staff, *Iran's Khamenei said to pick three potential successors as he hides in bunker*, 21.06.2025, available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/khamenei-said-to-pick-three-potential-successors-as-he-hides-in-bunker/>, accessed on November 17, 2025.

⁵⁵ Date of birth: September 29, 1956, Position: Chief Justice of Iran, Previous mandate (2005–2009): Minister of Intelligence. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202504241891>.

⁵⁶ Date of birth: 1960 (age 65), Position: Member of the Assembly of Experts of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Political affiliation: Islamic Coalition Party.

doctrine of clerical governance). He holds key positions in religious policy and is considered one of the candidates with significant regime backing;



Figure 4 -
Ayatollah Mohsen
Qomi

- ✓ Mohsen Araki⁵⁷ – A member of the Assembly of Experts, close to Khamenei, and active in theocratic decision-making structures. His profile is seen as a strong alternative, with notable ideological authority and religious prestige⁵⁸.



Figure 5 -
Ayatollah
Mohsen Araki

What stands out as a “Black Swan” in US international politics is the rhetorical paradox of President D. Trump, who repeatedly emphasized his reluctance toward military or political involvement in foreign conflicts, particularly referencing the war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, while simultaneously authorizing the largest offensive military action against Iran in support of Israel’s military operations and ideological values.

⁵⁷ Date of birth: 1956, Najaf, Iraq, Position: Member of the Assembly of Experts and also of the Expediency Discernment Council; one of the students of Islamic thinker Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr.

⁵⁸ Other possible successors: Alireza Arafi and Hashem Hosseini Bushehri – Katherine DONLEVY, Steven NELSON, *Iran’s Supreme Leader picks ‘3 stooges’ to replace him as fear of assassination surges: report*, available at <https://nypost.com/2025/06/21/world-news/irans-ayatollah-ali-khamenei-picking-supreme-leader-successors/>, accessed on November 19, 2025.

This divergence in strategic vision between the European and Israeli theaters produced a **Black Swan event**, characterized by:

- * Extreme unpredictability – The US action defied conventional predictive models, surprising analysts and allies alike;
- * Massive impact – The destructive consequences are substantial, with medium- and long-term effects anticipated on the social, economic, and political systems of the Middle East. These include the potential for military escalation, realignment of alliances, and deep economic repercussions;
- * Retroactive rationalization – Analysts are now attempting to reconstruct explanations for the event, seeking to fit it into a coherent narrative that could have been foreseen and rationalized, even though such analysis is retrospective and reactive, reflecting the shock it generated within the international community.

III.1. Regional Reactions – Fragile Balance and Escalation Risk

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, entered a state of maximum alert, anticipating potential retaliatory strikes from Iran⁵⁹. Simultaneously, US military commands across the region ordered the dispersal of units and the reinforcement of protection measures for personnel stationed at bases in Bahrain⁶⁰, Kuwait, Qatar, and Iraq. In parallel, regional leaders launched rapid strategic risk assessments, focusing on regional stability, global energy flows, and the security of critical maritime infrastructure in the Strait of Hormuz, a chokepoint through which over 20% of global oil trade passes.

According to US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, the US does not seek a large-scale war with Iran, and “private messages” have been sent to Tehran’s leadership encouraging a return to the negotiation table. However, he emphasized that if Iran chooses retaliation, the US is prepared to strike harder and on a wider scale, clarifying that “the US is not at war with Iran, but with its nuclear program.”⁶¹

This combination of discreet diplomacy and coercive diplomacy, or hard power expressed through public warnings, reflects a dual strategy by the Trump administration: both to deter escalation in the region and to assert Washington’s dominance within the Middle East security architecture.

⁵⁹ Menna ALAAELDIN, Pesha MAGID, Maha El DAHAN, *Gulf states on high alert after US strikes Iran's nuclear sites*, 22.06.2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/-middle-east/bahrain-kuwait-prepare-possible-iran-conflict-spread-2025-06-22/>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

⁶⁰ Bahrain is home to the headquarters of the US Navy’s 5th Fleet, with US bases also located in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, as well as in neighboring Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

⁶¹ Agencies and Toi staff, *Hegseth says US strikes ‘obliterated’ Iran’s nuclear ambitions; now Iran should negotiate*, 22.06.2025, available at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/mapamond/jd-vance-a-explicat-doctrina-trump-la-o-cina-republicana-in-ohio-3299317>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

IV. The “Trump Doctrine”

By ordering the B-2 bomber units on June 22, 2025, to strike Iran’s nuclear sites, President D. Trump abandoned his long-held reluctance to use military force, effectively drawing the US into an external conflict and generating confusion among his “America First” supporters and voters (see Figure 6).

According to Vice President J.D. Vance, the American military operation in Iran has been designated the “Trump Doctrine.” This doctrine calls for the use of “overwhelming military power” while avoiding prolonged wars: „*What I call the Trump Doctrine is quite simple. First, you define a clear American interest, in this case, - ensuring that Iran cannot possess a nuclear weapon. Second, you try to resolve the issue aggressively through diplomacy. And third, when diplomacy fails, you use overwhelming military force to solve it, and then withdraw quickly before it turns into a long war.*”⁶²

However, analysts caution that it is too early to determine whether Trump’s Iran strategy will prove a long-term success or failure.

J.D. Vance presented the strikes on Iran as part of what he termed a “new foreign policy doctrine.”⁶³ According to the US official, the Trump Doctrine consists of the following elements:

- * Articulation of a clear American national interest;
- * Efforts to resolve conflicts through diplomacy;
- * Use of overwhelming military force if diplomatic efforts fail;
- * Collapse of the impact zone, ending operations before the conflict can escalate or drag on.

President Trump’s decision to intervene in the Israel - Iran conflict came shortly after Supreme Leader A. Khamenei declared that Iran would not abandon its uranium enrichment capability. Soon after the US attacks, Trump announced a ceasefire, and on June 26, he reiterated that the US would never allow Iran to possess a nuclear weapon. Iranian officials, meanwhile, maintained that their nuclear program serves exclusively peaceful purposes.

The unexpected US military intervention in Iran, coupled with the prospect of a prolonged conflict, has angered many members of the isolationist wing of the Republican Party, including some of Trump’s prominent supporters.⁶⁴.

⁶² Agencies and Toi staff, *op.cit.*, *loc. cit.*

⁶³ Digi24, *JD Vance a explicat „Doctrina Trump” la o cină republicană în Ohio*, 25.06.2025, available at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/mapamond/jd-vance-a-explicat-doctrina-trump-la-o-cina-republicana-in-ohio-3299317>, accessed on November 19, 2025.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem.*

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Public opinion surveys reflect deep concern among Americans about the medium- and long-term repercussions. According to a Reuters poll conducted on June 30, approximately 79% of Americans surveyed stated they were worried that US civilians could be targeted by Iran in retaliation for the American airstrikes.

IV.1. International Perspectives

For many international observers, the new doctrine appears to be an attempt to impose structure and coherence on a foreign policy that often seems impulsive and unpredictable. Aaron David Miller, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, disputes the notion that the Trump administration’s approach constitutes a true doctrine in conceptual terms, arguing instead that US actions are driven largely by instinct rather than strategy.

In contrast, White House spokesperson Anna Kelly stated that President D. Trump and Vice President J.D. Vance form “*the perfect team*,” as they share a common vision for US foreign policy based on the principle of “peace through strength.”⁶⁵

Melanie Sisson, a senior foreign policy fellow at the Brookings Institution, argued that J.D. Vance is attempting to appease Trump’s right-wing base while also defining how and why the administration can take military action without it serving as a *prelude to war*.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Steve HOLLAND, David BRUNNSTROM, *The latest US foray into military action has a name: The Trump Doctrine*, 26.06.2025, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/latest-us-foray-into-military-action-has-name-trump-doctrine-2025-06-26/>, accessed on November 18, 2025.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

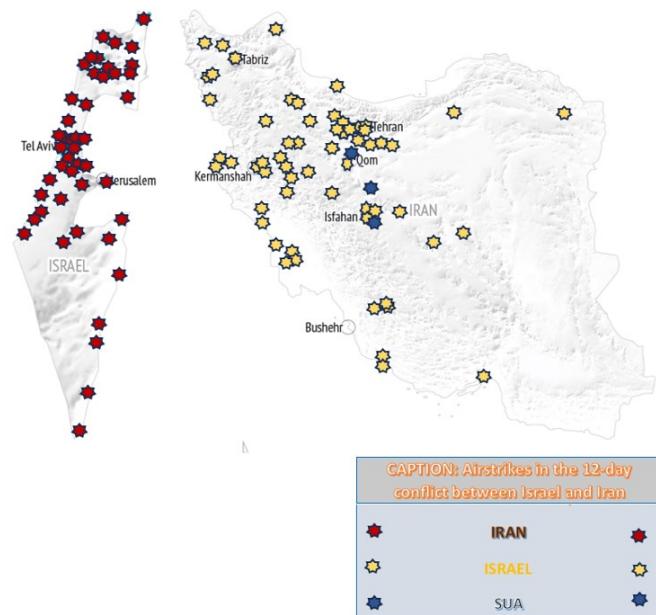


Figure 6 – Airstrikes in the 12-Day Israel–Iran Conflict⁶⁷

Clifford May, founder and president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) in Washington, believes that Trump's doctrine is effective, describing Vance's summary as an accurate reflection of the president's approach to the Middle East conflict. In his view: "Most foreign analysts, and certainly most historians, might consider the term 'doctrine' premature.⁶⁸ But if President Trump continues to rely on this successful use of American force, it would be an extraordinary doctrine for him to claim as his own."⁶⁹

According to Rebecca Lissner, an expert at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), "It is far too early to declare whether this has been a brilliant success or a massive strategic failure [...] we need to see how diplomacy unfolds and where it ultimately leads in terms of containment, transparency, and the survival of Iran's nuclear program."⁷⁰

Throughout both his presidential campaign and his time in office, D. Trump repeatedly argued that the 'stupid wars' fought by the US in Iraq and

⁶⁷ Adapted from Ellie GERANMAYEH, European Union Institute for Security Studies, *Israel and Iran on the brink: Preventing the next war*, 03.10.2025, available at <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/israel-and-iran-brink-preventing-next-war>, accessed on November 17, 2025.

⁶⁸ Steve HOLLAND, David BRUNNSTROM, *op.cit., loc.cit.*

⁶⁹ Author unknown, *Cea mai recentă incursiune a SUA în acțiuni militare are un nume: Doctrina Trump*, 26.06.2025, available at <https://www.geopolitic.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Cea-mai-recent%C4%83-incursiune-a-SUA-%C3%AEn-ac%C8%9Biuni-militare-are-un-nume.pdf>, accessed on November 19, 2025.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem.*

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Afghanistan had mired the country in costly quagmires, pledging to avoid further military entanglements abroad. For the most part, he acted in line with this principle, though there were notable exceptions, including:

- * The order to assassinate ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (2019);
- * The targeted killing of IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani (2020);
- * The use of US force against Houthi rebels launching attacks from Yemen (2025)⁷¹.

CONCLUSIONS

✚ The Israel–Iran conflict escalated rapidly, evolving into a war involving the US, with strategic airstrikes and major military, civilian, legal, and economic consequences. Following the escalation in the Middle East, the price of oil surged by 13%, reaching 78 USD per barrel.

✚ So far, both sides have intensified their offensives:

➤ Israel launched large-scale air operations (Operation “Rising Lion”) targeting Iran’s nuclear and military sites, accompanied by covert Mossad actions inside Iran. The country has reported over 950 fatalities and tens of thousands displaced, including a mass exodus from Tehran toward the north.

➤ Iran retaliated with hundreds of missiles fired at Israel, some targeting civilian infrastructure (e.g., Soroka Hospital), signaling an indiscriminate revenge campaign.

✚ The US involvement has triggered global alarm from both the UN and the European Union, highlighting the potential for regional spillover and prolonged conflict. At present, there is a high risk of regionalization, characterized by humanitarian movements, international reactions, and proxy influence networks. Nevertheless, a narrow diplomatic window remains open, though de-escalation prospects are uncertain.

✚ Several alternative or unconventional interpretations have emerged regarding US intervention:

➤ The US did not intend to cause devastating, long-term damage to Iran’s uranium enrichment infrastructure, its strikes were symbolic rather than total;

➤ The operation served as a demonstration of unwavering support for Israel, a key strategic ally;

➤ The use of overwhelming force was meant to project American power and resolve globally.

✚ The US operation also relied on the assumption that Iran’s retaliation would be limited, unlikely to inflict significant human or material losses. However, the economic repercussions, particularly from a potential closure of the Strait of Hormuz, could indirectly favor Trump’s economic

⁷¹ Steve HOLLAND, David BRUNNSTROM, *op.cit.*, *loc. cit.*

strategy toward Europe. A weakened European economy, strained by rising energy costs, might in turn reduce the EU's capacity to sustain Ukraine, potentially accelerating the end of the Russia–Ukraine conflict.

⊕ The American military action may well crystallize into a formalized “Trump Doctrine”, marking the president’s strategic imprint on the history of modern conflicts.

⊕ D. Trump has consolidated his image as a strong, unpredictable leader, firmly in control of US foreign policy, intervening only when he deems peace achievable and when a strategic partner with shared interests and vision, such as Israel, is involved.

⊕ Following the US “Midnight Hammer” operation, Iran suspended its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), executed alleged Western collaborators, and intensified internal repression. While there are no immediate signs of regime collapse, the strikes have deepened public discontent, already fueled by economic crisis and recent protests (similar to those of 2022), raising the risk of renewed unrest should the regime be perceived as vulnerable or weakened.



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