



## Introduction

The nuclear issue between Israel and Iran has been a constant confrontation in the chronic conflict between the two countries. This conflict took an extraordinary upturn after the attacks of 7 October 2023, in which the terrorist group Hamas killed nearly 1,500 people in the Israeli zone near the Gaza Strip.

Prime Minister Netanyahu declared that his country was fighting on seven fronts, referring to the territories of Gaza and the West Bank, to which should be added Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran and the region of Yemen controlled by the Houthi movement<sup>1</sup>. In all these areas of operations the Israelis have been able to engage their enemies without needing direct assistance for offensive actions, although they have been supported by their allies when Iran has attacked Israel with missiles, rockets or drones.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding Iran's nuclear programme, there is no hard evidence that it has a military component, but Israel has always expressed its fears due to Iran's constant obstruction of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections.

On previous occasions Iran has accused Israel of carrying out attacks and sabotage against its nuclear and missile programmes, as well as against key scientific and military personnel involved in these programmes. On this occasion, however, Iran's nuclear facilities were redundant and were actively defended as well as passively protected.

Israeli weapons technology did not possess the capability to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, unless it used its own nuclear weapons, a possession that has not been demonstrated by clear evidence either. Therefore, after a series of unsuccessful negotiations, the US decided to engage in the nuclear component of the conflict to destroy Iranian facilities.

This paper will explore the reasons that could lead Iran to pursue a nuclear programme and those that motivate Israel to prevent it from doing so, regardless of international agreements, such as Iran's membership of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It will also analyse the possible consequences of the Israeli and US attacks on Iranian facilities and the repercussions they may have had on Iran, both regionally and

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<sup>1</sup> Phonetic expression of the term, which in English is written as "Houthi".

<sup>2</sup> For an update on the evolution of the conflict, it is recommended to read the IEEE analysis document: Israel versus its external and internal rivals. The Gaza Conflict. [https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/israel\\_frente\\_a\\_sus\\_rivales\\_externos\\_e\\_internos](https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/israel_frente_a_sus_rivales_externos_e_internos)

domestically. However, given the evolving situation, this analysis is an assessment of first impressions, subject to the evolution of events.

### **Israel and the Begin doctrine**

Israel is perceived as a country with structural weaknesses due to its geographical location and small size and population. It therefore needs to possess a technological advantage that puts it on a superior footing vis-à-vis its likely adversaries. In the event that conventional superiority could be exceeded, nuclear capability would be sufficient to deter any hostile actor. However, if any of its enemies were to acquire nuclear weapons, nuclear parity would prevent the Israelis from being able to rely on this deterrent.

Israel will therefore not tolerate, if it can, a potential adversary equipping itself with nuclear capabilities, seeking to prevent it in every possible way, in what is known as the "Begin Doctrine". This dates back to 1981, when Prime Minister Menahem Begin took the decision to destroy the Iraqi nuclear facilities of Saddam Hussein's regime<sup>3</sup>. In 2004 the Israelis again discovered that the Syrian regime of Bassir al Assad was building a nuclear facility in the Deir al-Zour area. Following a follow-up programme in 2007 under the Ehud Olmert administration, the Syrian reactor was also destroyed, a fact that Israel did not acknowledge for more than a decade<sup>4</sup>.

Iran has also been a problem for Israelis since the birth of the Islamic republic in 1979, with the then supreme leader, Imam Khomeini, declaring that Israel was an illegitimate regime and should be eliminated. This argument has also been maintained by the current leader, Imam Khamenei<sup>5</sup>.

The discovery in 2002 of Iran's nuclear programme once again put the Israelis in a compromising position, given the Islamic Republic's openly hostile attitude towards the state of Israel. Although there is no incriminating evidence, Iran has accused Israel of acts of destruction and sabotage of facilities, as well as the assassination of scientists

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<sup>3</sup> AMOS, Yadlin: "The "Begin Doctrine": The Lessons of Osirak and Deir ez-Zor". INSS Insight No. 1037, 21 March 2018. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-begin-doctrine-the-lessons-of-osirak-and-deir-ez-zor/>

<sup>4</sup> ARI GROSS, Judah. "Ending a decade of silence, Israel confirms it blew up Assad's nuclear reactor". The Times of Israel, 21 March 2018. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ending-a-decade-of-silence-israel-reveals-it-blew-up-assads-nuclear-reactor/>

<sup>5</sup> JAMENEI, Ali. "Elimination of Zionist regime via a democratic solution accompanied by resistance". Khamenei.ir, Dec 1, 2023. <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/10342/Elimination-of-Zionist-regime-via-a-democratic-solution-accompanied>

and military personnel associated with Iran's nuclear or missile programme. One of the most powerful and media-accused actions was the 2010 attack with the *Stuxnet* computer worm against uranium centrifuge facilities, causing severe damage to Iran's nuclear programme, which had been promoted by President Ahmadinejad<sup>6</sup>. Between 2010 and 2012 several Iranian nuclear scientists were assassinated<sup>7</sup>, with this trend diminishing after Ahmadinejad was replaced by Hassan Rohani, who began to negotiate a possible nuclear deal.

Although in 2015 the P5+1 group<sup>8</sup> succeeded in getting Iran to accept the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Prime Minister Netanyahu announced in 2018 that Iran had covered up its nuclear programme before the deal was reached. The prime minister publicly displayed information that had apparently been obtained by the Israeli secret services and which showed documentation associated with a military nuclear programme<sup>9</sup>. This discovery was followed by further Israeli actions against Iran's nuclear programme.



Illustration 1. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu details the investigation into Iran's nuclear plans during a press conference at the Ministry of Defence in Tel Aviv, 30 April 2018. Source: Woods, Mike. "Netanyahu tries to split Trump from Europe on Iran deal". RFI, 02/05/2018. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/20180501-israel-s-netanyahu-looks-sway-trump-european-position-iran-deal>

<sup>6</sup> Reuters. "Iran blames internet 'enemies' for centrifuge failures". November 29, 2010. <https://www.reuters.com/article/technology/irn-acusa-a-enemigos-de-internet-por-fallas-en-centrifugas-idUSSIE6AS0UC/>

<sup>7</sup> CASTRO, JI. (2013). Communication (beyond breakdown) when relations fail: The power boundaries between Iran, Israel, the US and the nuclear issue. *Electronic journal of international studies (REEI)*, (26), 9-22.

<sup>8</sup> US, Russia, China, UK, France and Germany.

<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister's Office. "PM Netanyahu reveals the Iranian secret nuclear program". 30.04.2018. [https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event\\_iran300418](https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event_iran300418)

The year 2020 was notable for an unattributed attack on the Fordow uranium enrichment plant, but above all for the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, considered to be the most important Iranian scientist in the Iranian nuclear programme and who had been singled out by Netanyahu in his 2018 statements<sup>10</sup>. The year 2021 saw an attack on the Natanz enrichment plant, which Iran also attributed to Israel<sup>11</sup>. This whole series of actions seems to have been aimed at delaying a possible Iranian military programme as much as possible. However, Israeli capabilities had not been able to destroy the Iranian programme in the same way that they had previously succeeded in Iraq and Syria.

The 7 October 2023 attacks were followed by a series of exchanges of attacks between Iran and Israel, most notably in the nuclear field the April 2024 crisis, which began with the Israeli attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus, killing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard generals leading Iranian operations in the Levant<sup>12</sup>. The Iranian response was a wave attack against Israel with rockets, drones and missiles, which was contained with US cooperation and that of several countries in the region. However, the Israeli counter-reaction was very timely, destroying an anti-aircraft battery at the Iranian base in Isfahan<sup>13</sup>.

Despite the content of the Israeli action, a number of clear messages were implicit in it. The first was that Israel possessed the capability and willingness to attack Iranian territory conventionally if necessary. Second, Israel was demonstrating that Iran's anti-aircraft defences were ineffective against attack. Finally, the selection of the target to be destroyed in the Iranian nuclear programme's hometown demonstrated Israeli resolve to attack the programme should it go ahead.

In February 2025, US and Israeli interests were further aligned during Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to the White House. Apart from the controversial statements of wanting to relocate Palestinians out of Gaza, on the nuclear front President Trump was pleased

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<sup>10</sup> BBC News World. "Iran: what's known about the assassination of the top scientist in Iran's nuclear programme that Tehran accuses Israel of". 27 November 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-55107832>

<sup>11</sup> GAMBRELL, Jon. "Iran blames Israel for sabotage at Natanz nuclear site" AP News, April 12, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/world-news-israel-iran-62a7aa3182992ed0f97b5486d71280c2>

<sup>12</sup> WINTOUR, Patrick. "Iran vows revenge after two generals killed in Israeli strike on Syria consulate". The Guardian, 1 Apr 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/01/israeli-airstrike-on-iranian-consulate-in-damascus-kills-irgc-commander>

<sup>13</sup> VV.AA. "Assessment of Israeli Strike on Iran near Esfahan". Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), April 23, 2024. <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/assessment-of-israeli-strike-on-iran-near-esfahan>

to have withdrawn from the JCPOA and imposed sanctions on Iran during his first term in office. In addition, both presidents were determined to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.<sup>14</sup>

In early March, President Trump sent a letter to Khamenei expressing his intentions to reach a nuclear deal, giving him a two-month deadline. Although the contents of the letter were not disclosed, in subsequent statements the president declared that "I hope they will negotiate, because if we have to intervene militarily, it will be terrible". Khamenei showed his contempt for the US missive and warned that Iran could strike a reciprocal blow. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, however, softened the leader's remarks by claiming that Iran could maintain indirect relations with the Americans<sup>15</sup>. In this context it is possible that Khamenei's statements were more directed at his domestic audience than at his US interlocutors.

During April and May, senior US and Iranian representatives held a series of indirect talks, the results of which did not seem to satisfy either side. Meanwhile, the US exerted pressure through increased sanctions<sup>16</sup>. To make matters worse, the IAEA issued a report at the end of May stating Iran's failure to allow the agency's inspections and declaration of nuclear materials. Although it found no evidence of a military nuclear programme, the IAEA acknowledged that Iran was accelerating its production of enriched uranium to levels approaching what could be considered weapons-grade.<sup>17</sup>

### Operations Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer

Tensions had escalated to very high levels by June 2025. The IAEA had rebuked Iran for failing to meet its nuclear obligations and the Netanyahu government survived an attempted vote to dissolve the Israeli parliament in the midst of a controversial bill for ultra-Orthodox Jews to perform military service.<sup>18</sup> In this environment of Iranian non-

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<sup>14</sup> Times of Israel. "Full text: Trump, at press conference with Netanyahu, says US 'will take over' Gaza". February 6, 2025. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-trump-at-press-conference-with-netanyahu-says-us-will-take-over-gaza/>

<sup>15</sup> DAVENPORT, Kelsey. "Trump Sends Iran Letter Amid Military Threats". Arms Control Today. April 2025. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-04/news/trump-sends-iran-letter-amid-military-threats>

<sup>16</sup> PLEITGEN, Frederik; TAWFEEQ, Mohammed. "US-Iran latest nuclear talks end with limited progress, as Tehran sources express skepticism". CNN, May 24, 2025. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/05/23/middleeast/iran-doesnt-believe-a-nuclear-deal-is-likely-sources-say-intl>

<sup>17</sup> IAEA. GOV/2025/25: NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran, 31 May 2025. <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/25/06/gov2025-25.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> AP News. "Israel attacks nuclear program in Iran, drawing waves of missiles". June 13, 2025. <https://apnews.com/live/israel-iran-attack>

compliance and Israeli internal crisis it was logical for the Netanyahu government to take a step forward, not only to disrupt Iran's nuclear programme, but also to unify Israeli political and social forces.

The step was not long in coming, and from 13 June Operation *Rising Lion*, with its evocative biblical name, began, attacking more than 100 targets with the supposed aim of degrading Iran's nuclear programme, although in reality it was much broader. The attacks covered Iran's military leadership, air defence systems, missile launch programme and certain critical energy infrastructures .<sup>19</sup>

With regard to the nuclear programme, several key scientists were eliminated, as well as surface-level facilities at the Natanz uranium enrichment plant. Although the Fordow enrichment plant was also attacked, it did not suffer significant damage . Israel also attacked the uranium conversion plant at Isfahan, which supplied uranium configured for enrichment at Natanz and Fordow. Although there is no record, it appears that the Parchin test site was also attacked .<sup>20</sup>



Figure 2. Sequence of Operation *Rising Lion*. Source: Davis, Katie, "Years in the making. How Israel decapitated Iran's military & nuke programme in just ONE NIGHT as years of planning revealed by IDF insiders" The Sun, 13 Jun 2025. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/35386615/israel-iran-military-killing-generals-airstrikes-mossad/>

<sup>19</sup> DOLZIKOVA, Darya; SAVILL, Matthew. Operation Rising Lion: The First 72 Hours. RUSI, 16 June 2025. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/operation-rising-lion-first-72-hours>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

The fact that Iran's nuclear programme has been downgraded does not mean that it has been eliminated, but rather that it has been greatly slowed down. However, it could be reconstituted and continue, because the know-how, technology and many materials could still be operational within Iran's nuclear capabilities .<sup>21</sup>

Trump reportedly had a conversation with Netanyahu on 9 June where the latter may have told him of his intentions to carry out Operation *Rising Lion*. After the operation, the US president remained publicly ambivalent, perhaps waiting to see if Iran would agree to return to the negotiating table on terms favourable to the Americans, but when these failed to materialise, it was time to take the decision to attack .<sup>22</sup>

Trump faced the fundamental questions of whether the attack would be effective and whether the consequences could drag the US into a protracted war. To the former, his advisers answered in the affirmative, but the latter was beyond his control. Nevertheless, the US president decided to carry out the attack just one day after the two-month deadline he had given the Iranians .<sup>23</sup>

On 21 June, the US complemented Israel's action with Operation *Midnight Hammer*, which targeted the enrichment facilities at Natanz and Fordow, which Israel had been unable to destroy due to lack of capabilities. The Americans also attacked the nuclear facilities at Isfahan, where Israel had caused considerable damage.

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<sup>21</sup> Because this paper focuses on the Iranian nuclear programme, other Israeli strikes against other conventional targets are not described.

<sup>22</sup> LIPTAK, Kevin; HERB, Jeremy; HOLMES, Kristen. "How Trump quietly made the historic decision to launch strikes in Iran". CNN, June 22, 2025. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/22/politics/trump-iran-strike-decision-inside>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

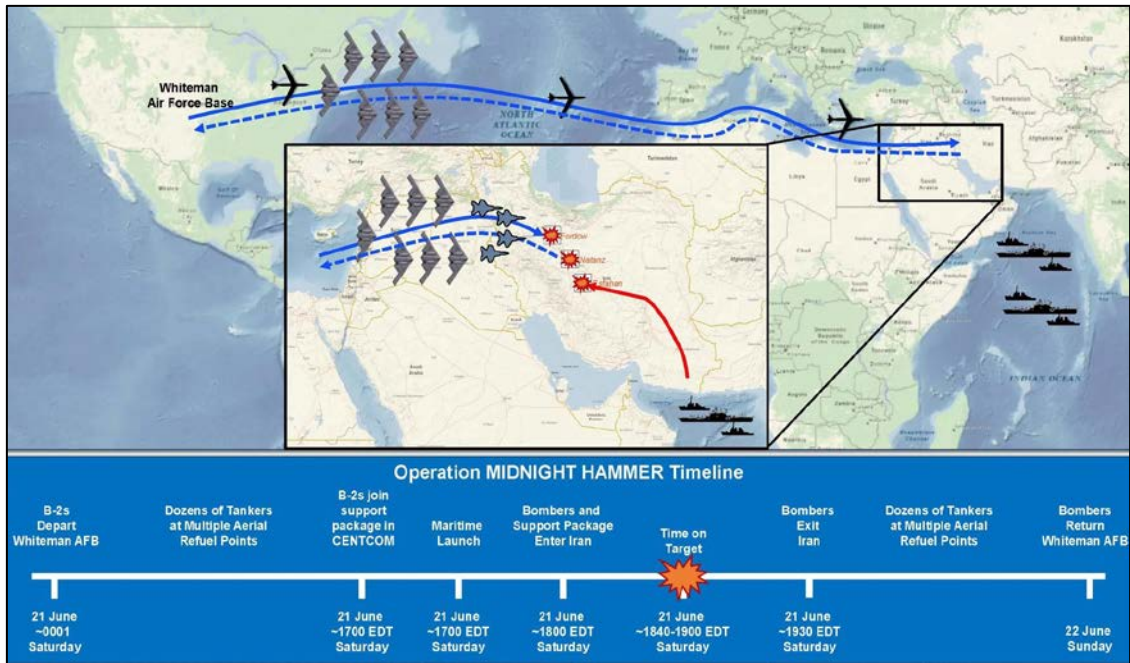


Illustration 3. Sequence of Operation *Midnight Hammer*. Source: Sorace, Stephen: Sorace, Stephen. "A full breakdown of Operation Midnight Hammer, the 'largest B-2 operational strike in US history'". Fox News, June 22, 2025. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/full-breakdown-operation-midnight-hammer-largest-b-2-operational-strike-us-history>

US capabilities to destroy targets at great depth by conventional means are unique and can only be accomplished by the GBU-57 bomb, which can only be launched from the B-2 bomber. The main strike force, consisting of these aircraft, departed directly from the US and was tasked with the deep degradation of the underground facilities at Natanz and Fordow. Meanwhile, a submarine deployed in the Indian Ocean launched two dozen Tomahawk missiles at the Isfahan nuclear facilities .<sup>24</sup>

The Iranian response to the US attack was rather tepid, with only a barrage of rockets fired at the US base at Al Udeid in Qatar. The base had been alerted in advance and anti-aircraft defences managed to neutralise most of the attack, with no casualties.<sup>25</sup> . Iran was apparently unwilling to escalate the conflict and the reaction was possibly just a way to please its domestic audience.

<sup>24</sup> SORACE, Stephen. "A full breakdown of Operation Midnight Hammer, the 'largest B-2 operational strike in US history'". Fox News, June 22, 2025. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/full-breakdown-operation-midnight-hammer-largest-b-2-operational-strike-us-history>

<sup>25</sup> SCHIFRIN, Nick; WARSI, Zeba; BARNHART, Eliot. "How Iran's response to U.S. strikes signaled a desire to de-escalate". PBS News, Jun 23, 2025. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-irans-response-to-u-s-strikes-signaled-a-desire-to-de-escalate>

## The Iranian position in the context of negotiations and events

Following the Israeli and US attacks, President Pezeshkian ordered a suspension of cooperation with the IAEA, further limiting the work of its inspectors. However, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi stated that Iran is willing to continue negotiations with the US, although it may take time for talks to resume .<sup>26</sup>

Iran's position of ambiguity possibly seeks internal compensation between power factions, as well as justification in the eyes of public opinion. It also sends a message of appeasement in the international arena, but in no way panders to the demands of its interlocutors, possibly seeking some favourable leverage in future talks. Iran's pragmatism and rationality is noteworthy, and it is likely to return to the negotiating arena, where it is very good at . The fact that Iran has not abandoned the NPT reinforces the rationality theory.

Looking back, Iran has been in similar situations before. Suffice it to recall the US hostage crisis of 1981, released after economic pressure from President Reagan when the Iranians were in the midst of a confrontation with Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime<sup>27</sup> . Another similar moment occurred during the so-called *Tanker War*, which during the aforementioned Iran-Iraq conflict in 1988 led the Iranians to attack Kuwaiti oil tankers moving through the Gulf. The US reacted by destroying part of the Iranian war fleet in Operation *Prying Manthis* and Kuwaiti vessels continued to operate through the Strait of Hormuz<sup>28</sup> . It should not be forgotten that after President Ahamadinejad's two terms in office Iran was choked by sanctions, which brought it to the negotiating table that led President Rohani to sign the JCPOA .<sup>29</sup>

These three significant examples suggest that Iranians in times of pressure yield in the short term, but continue to strive for their goals over the long term .<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> GAMBRELL, Jon. "Iranian President orders suspension of cooperation with UN nuclear watchdog" AP News, July 2, 2025.

<sup>27</sup> BANKS, David E. The diplomatic presentation of the state in international crises: Diplomatic collaboration during the US-Iran hostage crisis. *International Studies Quarterly*, 2019, vol. 63, no 4, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> KITTRIE, Orde F.; BOWMAN, Bradley; TALEBLU, Ben Behnam. Detering Iran's Dash to the Bomb. *Foundation for Defense of Democracies Monograph*, 2024.

<sup>29</sup> SANGER, David E. "CIA Director Says Iran's Economic Peril Helped Drive Nuclear Deal," The New York Times, April 8, 2015. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/09/world/middleeast/cia-director-says-irans-economic-peril-helped-drive-nuclear-deal.html>)

<sup>30</sup> There are numerous instances in which Iran has opted for conciliatory positions in the short term. One of the best compilations can be found in the aforementioned Detering Iran's Dash to the Bomb, which can be found at <https://app.askprospero.org/books/fdd-monograph-detering-irans-dash-to-the-bomb.pdf>.

## Conclusions

In a short-term view, the Twelve-Day War has put Iran on the ropes in a context of conjunctural weakness, leading to a withdrawal that could lead to advantageous conditions for Israelis and Americans. This can be seen as true, given the regional context in which Iran has lost much of its support in the Middle East. In the much longer term it will be necessary to study developments, in which Iran's geopolitical position puts it at an advantage.

Given the first-impression nature of this paper, it must be recognised that the Iranians have seen their missile and nuclear capabilities severely damaged. Coupled with the aforementioned loss of regional support, Iran is likely to have lost a great deal of leverage that will make it even more dependent on the Chinese primarily and the Russians secondarily.

There is no record of the complete destruction of Iran's nuclear programme, even if it has been severely degraded. It is possible that many materials were previously evacuated from the sites attacked and that Iran has the capability to reconstitute its nuclear programme. If such a capability exists, the more fundamentalist sectors of the regime could press for Iran to cross the nuclear threshold and acquire a military capability.

If this were to happen, it would change the security dynamics in the Middle East. Putting Iran in an absolutely critical situation could therefore be counterproductive. A solution based on negotiation in exchange for sanctions relief and economic incentives should be put in place. In the meantime, the Iranian regime would continue to evolve.

As for Israel, it will never consent to live under existential threat. As soon as it perceives this possibility, its reaction is likely to be to seek the destruction of such a threat by all possible means, including military ones. However, the Israelis must add in their lessons learned that their population is vulnerable to attack and that, although on this occasion it has been conventional, the nuclear probability would be catastrophic. Regardless of the military measures determined by their government, the instruments of diplomatic, economic, informational and social power, among others, should be used to seek a situation in which coexistence is the goal to be achieved.

The Americans have come out of the conflict with Iran much stronger, bearing in mind that since the evacuation of Afghanistan in 2021 their image had been in question. In the so-called twelve-day war they have demonstrated unique capabilities and that their position of global leadership will be very difficult to challenge. However, recent engagements have shown that short operations are the ones that must prevail in the future to avoid the overextension and attrition that the Americans have suffered in the first two decades of the century.

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