

The Strike on Iran and the NPT Regime: Live Weapons and Political Tricks

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Abstract

The Iran nuclear issue has been on the international agenda for more than 20 years. Traditionally, diplomatic methods to resolve the issue have been

avored, but June 2025 was a turning point, starting with the unprecedented Israeli-American attacks, followed by growing Western political and economic pressure. This article examines the motives for the June attack and assesses its regional and international implications, especially for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime.

Keywords: Iran, Iran nuclear issue, U.S., Israel, NPT, JCPOA, UN Security Council.

On 13 June 2025, Israel launched massive airstrikes on Iran, targeting its military, nuclear, and energy infrastructure, as well as senior military officers and nuclear scientists. This happened on the eve of an already scheduled round of U.S.-Iranian talks, which would have been the sixth in 2025, intended to settle disagreements over the Iran nuclear issue. The declared objective of the Israeli operation, code-named ‘Rising Lion,’ was the Iranian nuclear program’s physical elimination. Iran retaliated with missiles and drones against Israeli targets. Thus, the exchange escalated into a 12-day war, which the U.S. joined in the early hours of 22 June, bombing nuclear facilities in Fordo, Natanz, and Isfahan. A truce was announced two days later, on 24 June. This article investigates the attack’s motives, and its ramifications for the region, the world, and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the regime based on it.

THE HISTORY OF IRAN’S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Iran commenced its nuclear program in 1957, with the construction of a nuclear research reactor provided by the U.S. under the Atom for Peace program. In early 1970, Iran ratified the NPT, which entered into force later that year.

Then three important events happened in 1974. *First*, Iran announced its nuclear energy plan for more than 20 power plants and a complete nuclear fuel cycle by 1994, based on cooperation with Germany and France. *Second*, at the UN General Assembly, Iran and Egypt proposed establishing a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle

East (an idea first raised by the Shah of Iran in 1969). As a result, UNGA Resolution 3263 (XXIX) was overwhelmingly approved, with only Israel and Burma (currently Myanmar) abstaining. *Third*, India conducted its first nuclear test, declared to be for peaceful purposes.

The Indian test, which came as a surprise to the international community, likely did little to provoke Iran's already existing interest in nuclear technology. Much more important was Israel's acquisition, by the end of the 1960s and with significant covert support from France, of nuclear weapons production capability. The Shah apparently sought to hedge against this risk by developing Iran's own nuclear capabilities and by diplomacy (a nuclear-free Middle East).

By the mid-1970s, Tehran's nuclear intentions—particularly its plans to master the complete nuclear fuel cycle—began to worry the U.S. In 1975, the U.S. intelligence community described Iran as a threshold state (Congressional Research Service, 2019).

The 1979 Islamic Revolution and subsequent severance of Iran's ties with the West, as well as the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980, triggered a deep economic and financial crisis and temporarily halted Iran's nuclear program. However, over time, the continuing war with Iraq—and especially Iraq's massive use of chemical weapons against Iranian troops—prompted Tehran to pursue nuclear research with possible military dimensions. In the 1990s, Iran accelerated these efforts, raising concerns in Israel, the West, and the Middle East. In 2003, the IAEA reported that Iran had conducted undeclared nuclear activities in the 1980s–early 2000s. While it is difficult to determine exactly whether Iran's activities at the time were consistent with its NPT obligations, some of the conducted experiments could have raised questions. Yet Iran was nowhere close to crossing the nuclear threshold.

At that time, France, Germany, the UK, and the European Commission were already in consultations with Iran on its nuclear program, and Iran began taking steps to reassure the world community about the peaceful nature of its nuclear plans. These steps included a unilateral suspension of uranium enrichment—abandoned when the European-Iranian talks failed to produce an agreement—and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's fatwa prohibiting the development, stockpiling,

and use of nuclear weapons. A 2007 U.S. intelligence report concluded that Iran's nuclear weapons program had been paused since 2003 (Treverton, 2013). In 2006, Iran resumed negotiations with world powers, with the addition of the UK, Russia, China, and the U.S. And in 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian Nuclear Program (JCPOA) was concluded, establishing a series of limitations on Iran's legitimate nuclear activities and providing for the removal of the UNSC and other nuclear-related sanctions, as well as for Iran's reintegration into the international economic system.

The JCPOA was initially implemented smoothly, but in 2018 President Donald Trump withdrew from it, and the E3 (France, Germany, and the UK) reneged on their respective obligations. Contrary to Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu's alarmist declarations and occasional sensational "discoveries" by Israeli intelligence, there continued to be no evidence of Iranian nuclear activities with a military purpose. Yet the Biden administration failed to reinstate the JCPOA or resolve the crisis, as it had (before the 2020 election) promised to do (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

Upon returning to the White House in 2025, Trump promised to quickly "solve" the Iran nuclear issue. The U.S. issued an ultimatum and undertook indirect consultations with Iran. But Israel launched an attack without waiting for the results of these efforts—or perhaps to pre-empt their possible progress. Since Israel and the U.S. adhere to a 'no surprises' principle in security and foreign affairs, Israel likely received a green light from Washington to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, and then convinced the Americans to join in the last phase of the operation.

A STICK, BUT NO CARROT

Throughout the history of the so-called Iran nuclear issue, diplomatic methods have traditionally been prioritized. Exceptions include the U.S.-Israeli Stuxnet virus attack on enrichment facilities in 2010 (Winer, 2019) and Israeli assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists. Nevertheless, the U.S.-Israeli military strikes mark a fundamentally new stage in the dispute, a turning point for it and the broader nuclear non-proliferation regime.

While attacks on nuclear facilities are a relatively common practice for Israel (against Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007), they are unprecedented for the U.S.—in part because they entail a nuclear-armed NPT state party attacking the nuclear facilities of a non-nuclear-armed NPT state party. The U.S.'s entry into the war caught the world by surprise: Netanyahu had been pushing Washington to use military force since the 2000s, but never succeeded before. But in June 2025 the U.S. intervened, literally on the eve of a truce, probably in part because of Israel's battlefield woes. In order to turn the tide of the war, Netanyahu may have asked (demanded?) that Trump join the operation.

The question about the rationale for the strikes remains open. If the strikes were provoked solely by the Iranian nuclear program, then what was the actual purpose of the talks and the goal of reaching an agreement on the nuclear program? If the strikes pursued broader aims, then they must have been designed to undermine Iran's internal stability (overthrow the regime or even partition the country into several small entities). The latter, if materialized, would have seriously affected the geopolitical situation not only in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, but also globally (N.B. the recent formation of the China-Russia-Iran "triad" which manifested itself, for example, in the trilateral nuclear talks in Tehran on 22 July 2025, the first since the Twelve-Day War). Thus, the strikes targeted not only Iran, but also, in a different way, this triad. In parallel, the media were flooded with propagandistic claims that Russia and China had abandoned Iran (Adoni, 2025).

The Israeli-American aggression violated international law, specifically the UN Charter, the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material and Nuclear Installations, and UN Security Council Resolution 457 (1981). It is noteworthy that the attacks were preceded by the IAEA Director-General's report "Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in the light of UN Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)" (IAEA, 2025a), issued on 31 May 2025, which expressed "serious concern" about the "significantly increased production and accumulation of highly enriched uranium by Iran,

the only non-nuclear-weapon State to produce such nuclear material.” While the report was designed primarily to justify the E3’s snapback in the UNSC three months later, Israel used its ambiguous conclusions to justify launching the 12-day war (Haaretz, 2025).

In 1981, Iraq’s reactor was struck by Israel before it was fueled and activated. In contrast, the nuclear facilities struck in Iran were operational. The targets—enrichment plants at Fordow and Natanz, the Arak Nuclear Complex, the Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center, and the under-construction Khondab heavy-water research reactor—were probably selected in the hope that striking them would cripple the Iranian nuclear program without causing an environmental or radioactive disaster. Nuclear power plants and research reactors were therefore spared. And although the final damage estimates have not yet been made public (and may never be), the attacks were probably limited and conducted within a controlled escalation strategy that the U.S. hoped would soften Tehran’s position in negotiations.

Assessments of the campaign’s results, and of the damage inflicted on Iran and Israel, vary and are distorted by the fog of war. Trump says that Iran’s program has been destroyed (CNN, 2025), while Tehran speaks of significant and serious damage to its nuclear facilities (CBS News, 2025). All sides—the U.S., Israel, and Iran—have declared “victory” in the conflict (Borger, 2025). Ironically, these parallel victory narratives may reduce the likelihood of further hostilities in the near future.

After the June attack, Tehran reiterated its commitment to the NPT and the safeguards agreement with the IAEA (Iran Nuances, 2025), as Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi stated that the Supreme National Security Council of Iran (Ibid.) would now respond to IAEA monitoring requests on a case-by-case basis, taking security considerations into account.

THE AFTERMATH

One way or another, the fragile truce that ended the 12-day war survived for five months. It could have opened some opportunities for the resumption of diplomacy, and some modest attempts at that were

indeed made. But they were hindered by new assaults against Iran, this time diplomatic and political.

The first was a ‘snapback’ operation, triggered by the E3 with U.S. support in late August 2025, a couple of months before UNSC Resolution 2231’s formal expiration. Initially the E3 described the initiation of snapback as a ‘bargaining chip’ to win further restrictions on Iran’s nuclear activities. Iran views snapback sanctions as similar to an armed attack, which will sideline the E3 in the nuclear talks (Araghchi, 2025). Russia and China tried to prevent the snapback, proposing to extend Resolution 2231 (and thus the JCPOA itself) for six months to win more time for a political solution (Polyanskiy, 2025)—but to no avail. The E3 brushed aside this opportunity and pressed forward, cutting legal, political and moral corners. The snapback thus generated deep legal confusion. Russia and China deem it “legally and procedurally flawed” (IAEA, 2025b). Yet the EU and the U.S. insist that sanctions had been reinstated fully and legitimately (Tehran Times, 2025), and at the end of September, the Council of the European Union reimposed the sanctions that had been suspended under the JCPOA (European Council, 2025). The UN, for its part, states that, on 27 September, all provisions of Resolutions 1696 (2006), 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), 1835 (2008), and 1929 (2010) were reapplied (United Nations, 2025).

The second major blow to Iran, still in the making, is the preparation for the UNSC’s consideration of an alleged Iranian violation of the NPT. The “logic” is that Iran was in violation of its Safeguards Agreement with IAEA and hence in violation of the NPT itself. This became clear with the release of a new report from the IAEA Director-General, and the adoption of Resolution GOV/2025/71 on 20 November 2025 by the IAEA Board of Governors (IAEA, 2025c). While the snapback alleged noncompliance with the JCPOA, Iran is now accused of noncompliance with the Safeguards Agreement that it concluded with the IAEA—and thus of noncompliance with the NPT itself—even though it is U.S.-Israeli attacks that have greatly complicated the implementation of the IAEA safeguards.

After the attacks, Enrique Mora (the EU’s former coordinator for the JCPOA) said that “nuclear diplomacy [with Iran] is dead” and

described the U.S. bombing as “the day [when] a nuclear Iran was irreversibly born” (Mora, 2025). Indeed, revival of diplomacy has been attempted (e.g., by Egypt and the signing of the Cairo Agreement in September), but whenever there appears to be progress (e.g., an IAEA visit to Tehran), some new impediment arises.

IRAN'S OPTIONS

Iran now faces difficult choices regarding its core interests. These decisions are further complicated by the heterogeneity of the Iranian leadership: there are conservative and liberal factions favoring better relations with the West, supporters of faster reorientation towards the East (China and Russia), those who prioritize the solution of domestic socio-economic problems, and those who promote strengthening the army and the security apparatus. Thus, while Iran is under pressure to change its nuclear policy, the direction of that change is unclear.

There is growing domestic pressure to curtail international cooperation and acquire a nuclear deterrent. Soon after the 12-day war, the Iranian parliament began drafting a law on withdrawal from the NPT. This work reportedly reached its final stages in November 2025 (Iran Wire, 2025). Yet recent statements by senior officials indicate that no decision has yet been made (Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2025). Moreover, the *fatwa* against nuclear weapons remains in force.

Iran has limited its cooperation with the IAEA but is open to consultation on renewing cooperation. Much of what we hear from Tehran today is likely political signaling and internal political maneuvering. But there is a serious risk of Iran leaving the NPT. This would not automatically mean the termination of the safeguards agreement, or the immediate launch of a nuclear weapons program. But it would severely damage the NPT's authority and might provoke several other nations (especially in the Middle East) to also withdraw.

Thus, the June attack, and the subsequent snapback by the E3 and accusations by the IAEA have seriously endangered the NPT and the broader non-proliferation regime. The situation becomes even more grotesque when the demand on Iran to forgo its rights under the NPT

is being pushed for by one state (Israel) which categorically refuses to join the NPT regime, and in concert with a nuclear-armed state's (the U.S.) demands that Iran refrain even from activities permitted by the NPT regime.

The U.S.'s deliberately unrealistic demands ('zero enrichment'), which were not originally part of the JCPOA, and ultimatums (Ravid, 2025) are pushing Iran to realize that the NPT is not a guarantor of security and question the feasibility of its participation in the treaty. Iran may therefore conclude that it has nothing to lose if it transitions from nuclear latency (technical ability to develop nuclear weapons) to nuclear ambiguity (neither confirming nor denying possession of nuclear weapons). This may well entail dispersal, concealment, and closure to inspection of nuclear facilities.

THE UPCOMING NPT REVIEW CONFERENCE

Negotiations are heavily influenced by the geopolitical context in which they take place. Two nuclear-weapon states, of which one is an NPT depositary, have decided to eliminate nuclear infrastructure and scientists of a non-nuclear-weapon state that is a party to the NPT. This grossly violates the Treaty's fundamental principle and philosophy—member states' inalienable right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Aside from the Iran nuclear issue, there are other indications that the NPT is not in good health. States increasingly act without considering the consequences for it. Many state parties accuse the nuclear-weapon states of failing in their disarmament obligations under Article VI (Cesar, 2023). Experts, politicians, and in some cases even national leaders suggest the acquisition of nuclear weapons by certain non-nuclear weapons countries (Graefrath and Raymond, 2025). Western states increasingly view non-proliferation institutions and negotiations as instruments of pressure on opponents (CENESS, 2024). There is a growing dismissal of diplomacy and common-interest-based compromise.

It is thus very possible that the upcoming April-May 2026 NPT Review Conference will end in bitter disagreements over several serious substantive issues, including the Iran nuclear issue.

It is therefore crucial to carefully but urgently defuse the Iranian nuclear crisis (its complete resolution is hardly possible within such a limited time span), to begin identifying possible compromises and to exclude further escalation by any side—especially any further attacks on nuclear facilities or assassinations of nuclear scientists. Alternatives to Western demands such as ‘zero enrichment’ should be sought, and Western efforts to exclude certain JCPOA participants (Russia and China) from future negotiations should be rejected. If some progress can be made by the time of the Review Conference, its atmosphere and chances of constructive conclusion would be significantly improved.

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