

## The untold story of the Iran war: How Israel did the unthinkable

In early January, after meetings at the Prime Minister's Office's 8th floor and at the Kirya in Tel Aviv, it was clear: Israel had crossed the Rubicon. There was no way back. Meticulous planning, and a masterful deception campaign aided by the US, fooled Iran into thinking it was safe.

by [Itay Ilnai](#) Published on [06-22-2025 07:33](#) Last modified: 06-22-2025 08:47



Israeli aircraft before the launch of Operation Rising Lion | IDF Spokesperson's Unit

In early January, an Israeli official met with Minister of Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer on the eighth floor of the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem. A week later, the same official met with then-Chief of Staff Herzl Halevi on the 14th floor of the Kirya in Tel Aviv. From both meetings, the official emerged with a clear realization – Israel had crossed the Rubicon: An attack on Iran was only a matter of time.

Six months later, the synergy between the eighth and 14th floors – the political and military echelons – enabled the launch of a [preemptive strike on Friday, June 13](#). The military option against Iran, which had been on the table for at least a decade, came to fruition with perfect timing and political approval. Boom.

Plans for a confrontation with Iran, specifically targeting its nuclear facilities, had been in development within the defense establishment for years, shaping the IDF's force buildup over the past two decades. Yet, in typical Israeli fashion, those plans were discarded at the last moment to make way for a bold, creative, and swiftly crafted new strategy.

"In reality, we began the operational planning for the strike in its current form only in October 2024," said an official privy to the details. "That's when we realized the IDF needed to prepare not just for a pinpoint strike in Iran but for an entire campaign."

Until recently, even senior defense officials considered the idea of attacking Iran far-fetched, a plan destined to remain theoretical. However, three months in the fall of 2024 completely changed that perspective.

In September, "Operation Pagers," the air campaign to neutralize Hezbollah's rockets, and the successful eliminations of the group's leadership, including Hassan Nasrallah, turned Hezbollah into a weakened force. "We always said Israel doesn't share a border with Iran, but Iran has a border with Israel – Hezbollah, standing at the fences, ready to respond fiercely if we attacked," said a former military official. "Once that border was erased, a new game began."

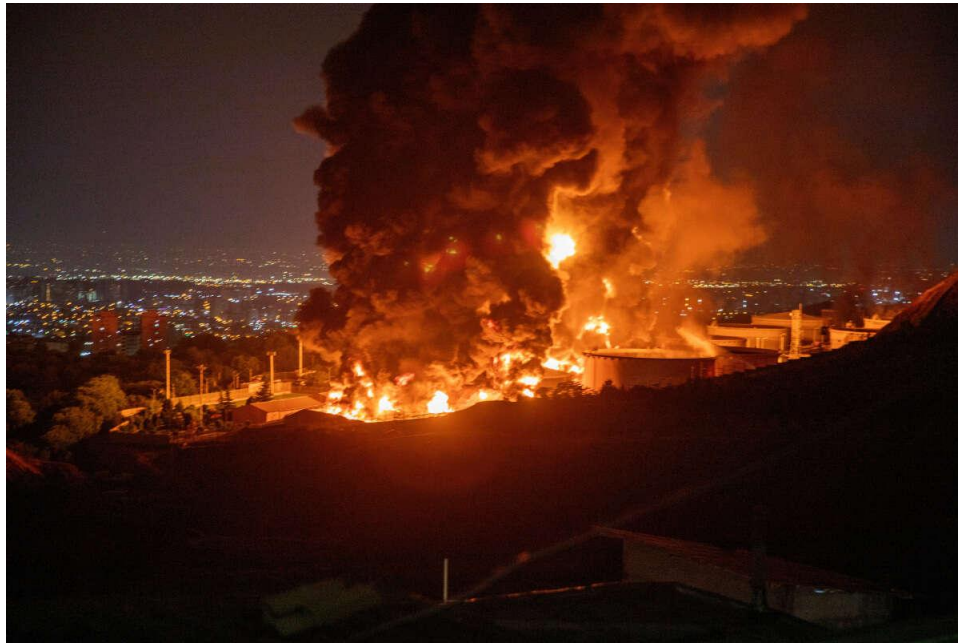
In October, the Israeli Air Force executed "Operation Days of Repentance," which included widespread strikes on Iran's air defense systems for the first time, fueling the pilots' appetite for more. In November, Donald Trump's election to a second term in the White House further emboldened strike advocates, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. By December, Israel's top echelons no longer debated whether the strike would happen – only when.

As the IDF finalized the details of the impending attack on Iran, planners realized they needed to replicate the Lebanon strategy – a concentrated, surprising blow to throw the enemy off balance, a sort of "Dahieh Doctrine 2.0," referring to the systematic bombardment of the Hezbollah stronghold in Lebanon during the 2006 war and later. "In the military, they call it a 'decapitation operation,'" said an official in the know. "The difference is that with Hezbollah, it took ten days; with Iran, we did it in the opening strike, within one hour."

From the shift in the Military Intelligence Directorate's approach to the Israeli Air Force teams crafting the attack and the politico-media deception that lulled Iran before zero hour, this is how Israel prepared for war with Iran.

## **The hard nut to crack**

The IDF indeed trained for striking Iranian nuclear facilities for years, but simultaneously also reached the understanding that such a strike would delay the Iranian bomb by only a few years and would drag in its wake a complex war against Hezbollah.



Fire and smoke rise into the sky after an Israeli strike on the Shahrn oil depot on June 15, 2025 in Tehran, Iran (Getty Images / Stringer/ Getty Images)

Accordingly, during Gadi Eisenkot's tenure as chief of staff, intelligence engagement with Iran was relatively sparse, and Military Intelligence Directorate directed most of its resources northward, to Lebanon. This approach was also aided by the Obama administration's nuclear agreement, which was signed half a year after Eisenkot entered his position and made it somewhat difficult for the Iranians to break through to the bomb. "Eisenkot's conception was that the nuclear agreement would delay the Iranian nuclear program, so there was no need to hurry," said a former senior officer.

Trump's withdrawal from the deal in mid-2018 brought Military Intelligence Directorate back to the drawing board. "Six months after the deal's cancellation, when Aviv Kochavi became chief of staff, the IDF began an intelligence shift from Lebanon to Iran," said the same officer. One of Kochavi's first decisions was establishing the Strategy and Third Circle Division, tasked with focusing on non-bordering states, namely Iran.

By late 2021, when Kochavi appointed Aharon Haliva as head of Military Intelligence Directorate, the first discussion Haliva held was on "Iran's nuclear program." "Even then, we realized our intelligence approach wasn't on track," said a participant in that meeting. In the following years, Military Intelligence Directorate underwent a structural shift, redirecting resources and personnel toward Iran. The "Northeast" arena in the Research and Analysis Division, covering Iran, Syria, and Iraq, was split, creating a dedicated Iran arena led by a colonel. This joined an existing Iran-focused unit in the Operations Division, and later, the Israeli Air Force established its own Iran arena.

"What you're seeing now is the result of those years of effort in the Iran arenas of Military Intelligence Directorate and the Israeli Air Force," said a source we spoke with. "A lot of money went into it, and those units proved their worth."

The target validation process in Iran carried out by Military Intelligence Directorate and the Israeli Air Force focused on three legs of the nuclear program – the missile array, enrichment facilities, and the "weapons group" (mounting a nuclear device on a ballistic missile). Accordingly, Military Intelligence Directorate collected more and more intelligence on launchers, warehouses, and factories in the Iranian missile array, and the Israeli Air Force planned focused strikes against enrichment facilities. At a fairly early stage, the IDF reached the understanding that it was possible to effectively strike from the air the enrichment facility in Natanz, but not the one in Fordow, which was dug much deeper.

Missile systems and enrichment facilities presented their own difficulties, but the intelligence community identified the weaponization group as the toughest challenge. "Unlike enrichment facilities and missile factories, which operate in large complexes, the weaponization project uses smaller facilities and doesn't require extensive infrastructure," explained a knowledgeable source. "Plus, with weaponization, you're fighting knowledge. How do you eliminate knowledge accumulated over years?"

The deeper intelligence delved, the clearer it became that the "bottleneck" was the scientists themselves. "We realized we needed to focus on the human factor," said the source.

In 2021, Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, head of Iran's nuclear program, was assassinated in a sophisticated operation on Iranian soil. "A beautiful operation," said someone familiar with many such missions. "The problem is, Iran has many scientists and scientific knowledge. Eliminating one, no matter how senior, doesn't stop the program." Indeed, Iran pressed forward. Military Intelligence Directorate, seeing this, devised a new plan – targeting multiple nuclear scientists simultaneously.



The Soroka Medical Center following the barrage on Thursday, June 19, 2025 (AP)

The idea of assassinating scientists sparked healthy competition between the IDF and the Mossad. The Mossad proposed using drones, while the IDF advocated striking the scientists

from the air with advanced munitions launched from long distances. Initially, the plan was to target the scientists during a joint meeting, but it later shifted to striking them individually at their homes in Tehran.

When the IDF's plan, a joint effort of Military Intelligence Directorate and the Israeli Air Force, was presented to Netanyahu, he was enthusiastic. "The surgical and simultaneous nature of it sparked his imagination," said someone present in the room.

Consequently, Unit 8200 began constant tracking of numerous Iranian nuclear scientists, knowing their locations at all times. In the past six months, work on the operation intensified, with Military Intelligence Directorate's Research and Analysis Division nuclear experts meeting twice weekly to narrow down the target list. "It was like playing 'Super Goal,'" said a military source. "From a large pool, they selected the top scientists in each field – the ones Iran's weaponization program couldn't function without. The Research and Analysis Division honed this plan day and night."

By early 2025, with the "dream team" of targets finalized, a joint Military Intelligence Directorate–Israeli Air Force team turned the ambitious plan into an operational one. Then, someone in Military Intelligence Directorate had another idea.

## **"All of Them at Once"**

The success of the September 2024 strike on Hezbollah, which destabilized the group and effectively decided the campaign, inspired Military Intelligence Directorate. Weeks later, those working on Iran began discussing replicating the Lebanon strategy in Iran.

"Taking out their entire military leadership in one blow," said a source in the intelligence community.

Unlike the scientist operation, where the target list was narrowed over time, here Military Intelligence Directorate expanded it. What began as a plan to eliminate one or two senior Iranian officials grew to include the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' air force, the Guards' overall commander, Iran's chief of staff, and his deputy.

"When the idea came up, no one believed Military Intelligence Directorate could pull it off simultaneously," said a knowledgeable source. But Military Intelligence Directorate persisted, forming a dedicated team that worked around the clock. The team's findings were presented to the head of Military Intelligence Directorate, Maj. Gen. Shlomi Binder, and later shared with Israeli Air Force officials.

In recent months, Binder, Israeli Air Force commander Maj. Gen. Tomer Bar, and operations chief Maj. Gen. Oded Basiuk held numerous meetings to synchronize the operation down to the smallest details. Over time, the three generals and their teams grew confident that the ambitious plan could succeed.



Unlike the scientists, targeted in their homes, the "generals operation" was planned for a joint meeting of Iran's security elite. To ensure they gathered in one location, a sophisticated deception operation – details of which will remain classified for years – was executed.

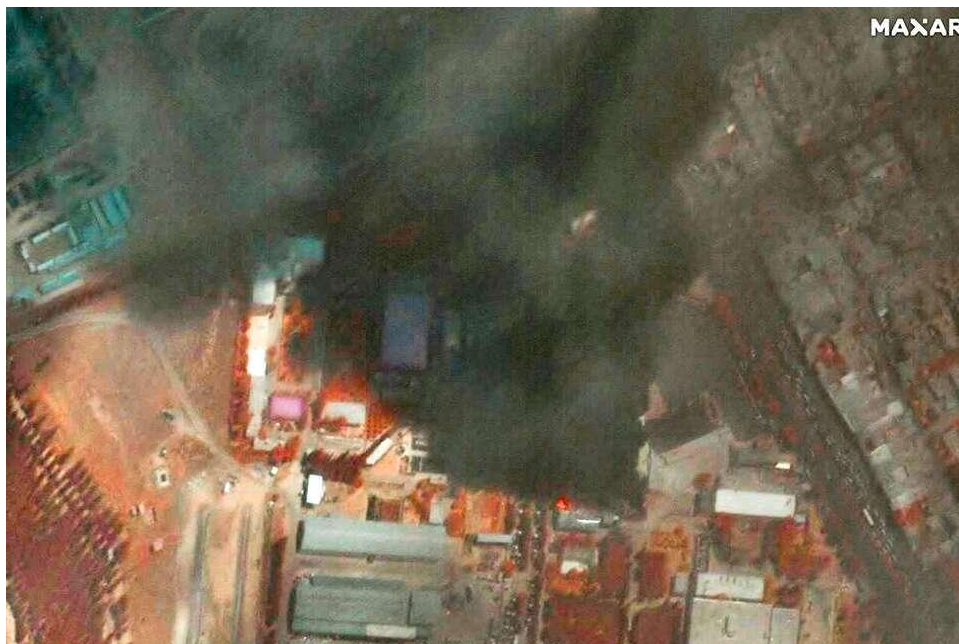
Remarkably, the scientist and generals operations matured almost simultaneously. The small team of three generals, fully aware of both plans, realized this in the final weeks. The opening strike was ready.

### **"A series of complex operations"**

Beyond the "decapitation operation," Israel's war plan included other components. The most discussed recently is air superiority. This, too, was addressed only recently.

As plans to strike enrichment facilities developed, it was clear the Israeli Air Force needed a clear path to Natanz and Fordow. The Iran arena in the Research and Analysis Division allocated vast resources to mapping Iran's air defense systems, which were plentiful.

At one point, Unit 8200 established a dedicated team focused solely on achieving air superiority, comprising Military Intelligence Directorate and Israeli Air Force personnel. "The mission of 'paving the way' to Iran took priority over everything else in Military Intelligence Directorate in the three years before October 7," said a source familiar with the Intelligence Directorate.



The Israeli strikes on Iran, June 2025 (AFP)

As Iran's air defenses were mapped, Military Intelligence Directorate and the Israeli Air Force concluded they could not only clear the path to nuclear facilities but also to Tehran and beyond. The phrase "air superiority in Iran" began as a whisper and grew into enthusiastic discussion.

Six months before October 7, 2023, the Israeli Air Force formed a small team of aircrew, mostly reservists, to plan the path to air superiority. The team received an ever-growing list of air

defense battery locations and critical intelligence from Unit 8200's secret unit. "Israel put all its intelligence efforts into this, and when Israel focuses on something, it delivers incredible results," said a source in the know.

Previous Israeli Air Force plans for Iran were scrapped and rewritten. "Iran has dozens of surface-to-air missile batteries in a first layer along its borders and a second layer around high-value targets," the source continued. "It required a phased approach, a series of highly complex operations to neutralize the defenses, hoping it would work."

The air superiority team presented the plan to the air force commander, who understood the risks but was willing to lose a few planes to achieve the mission. "The goal was no losses, but the air force commander's policy allowed for some losses while continuing the plan," the source said.

"Fortunately, we succeeded far beyond expectations, with no planes lost. I think it worked because the enemy didn't expect Israel to strike like this. They lacked drills that prepared them for the moment."

Skeptics in Military Intelligence Directorate doubted the air force's ability to achieve air superiority without losses. "When we started, it seemed impossible," said another source familiar with the operation. "Iran's air defenses are both high-quality and numerous. You need to neutralize them quickly, or Israeli pilots start falling in Iran."

Ultimately, the mission was accomplished in just 36 hours with no losses. On the first night, 30 Iranian air defense batteries and a double-digit number of radars were destroyed. "The greatest air superiority operation in history," said someone familiar with the details.

The Mossad joined in recent months, deploying drones operated by local agents to target additional air defense batteries.

While the scientist and generals operations could have proceeded without air superiority, the air force's control of Iran's skies greatly facilitated strikes on Natanz, missile sites, and other nuclear facilities. It also enabled extensive hunting of ballistic missile launchers, as dismantling Iran's air defenses allowed more drones to operate freely from Israel to Tehran.

"This means you can strike munitions wholesale, from Tehran westward, drastically reducing missile launches toward Israel," said a knowledgeable source. "Instead of hundreds of missiles on day one, we faced dozens. That's a game-changer, reducing pressure and strain in Israel."

Another component, built meticulously over time, was defense. "You can't attack without defense," said Brig. Gen. (res.) Ran Kochav, former air defense commander and Arrow unit head in 2006. "Preparations for war with Iran on the defensive side began 20 years ago. That was the reference threat we trained for, building a multi-layered air defense system and conducting joint exercises with US Central Command."

Indeed, Israeli Air Force officials confirm that both air defense and air superiority are two components that could not have been achieved without full cooperation from Washington. Which brings us to the last component in Israel's war plan against Iran. "The Americans," said an

official well-versed in the war plan. "The plan was indeed built without them, but it was impossible to execute it without getting tailwind from them."

## Deep in the know

Shortly after Trump's January 2025 inauguration, messages from his circle reached Netanyahu, indicating he wouldn't strongly oppose turning the "military option" operational if nuclear talks with Tehran stalled. Trump reportedly lifted restrictions on intelligence sharing, including access to US satellites and radar systems.

While Trump didn't commit to joining the strike, several Israeli officials confirm he was "deep in the inner circle." "Full coordination," one described it. Trump also participated in the deception operation in the days leading up to the surprise attack.

From late May, two weeks before the strike, a "perception operation" began to lull Iran into believing Israel wouldn't attack soon. Orchestrated by the Prime Minister's Office, it included feeding information to Israeli journalists, particularly those not aligned with Netanyahu. The operation centered on nuclear talks between the White House and Tehran, creating the appearance of a US-Israel rift.

On May 28, Ben Caspit reported in *Maariv* that Dermer and Mossad chief David Barnea traveled to Washington in a "desperate last attempt to block a dramatic announcement of an interim nuclear deal between Iran and the US." Caspit noted his sources were "quite insistent." In reality, their discussions with US officials focused on final strike preparations.

On June 9, Moriah Asraf reported on *Channel 13* that Dermer and Barnea were preparing another trip to meet Steve Witkoff. In the following days, "insistent" sources continued to push the narrative to Israeli journalists that the US nuclear deal was a done deal, that Dermer and Barnea were desperate for US attention, and that Trump firmly opposed an Israeli strike. "This information was spoon-fed to journalists, unlike similar cases in the past," said one journalist.

On June 10, *Channel 12's* Yaron Avraham reported that in a call, Trump told Netanyahu he "hadn't given up on negotiations" with Iran and demanded he "take the strike off the table." Two days later, as air force jets headed to Tehran, Asraf reported that Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir and air force commander Bar "stood on their hind legs" and told Netanyahu Israel couldn't act alone against Iran.

Trump, for his part, issued vague statements, insisting, "I don't want Israel to attack Iran." He sent his ambassador in Jerusalem, Mike Huckabee, to tell Yedioth Ahronoth that "the president would be pleased if the Iran issue ends peacefully." This headline appeared on the newspaper's front page on Friday, June 13, after the strike had already begun.

Other newspapers that morning highlighted Trump's supposed opposition. Even the Haredi paper *Hamevaser*, the Agudat Yisrael outlet, reported Trump saying, "As long as there's a chance for a deal, I don't want Israel to attack."



These headlines, printed before but published after the strike, testify to the success of the media perception operation. It was so effective that even unusual moves, like evacuating American diplomats' families from Middle East embassies in the days prior, didn't alert Iran to the impending attack.

## **"Perception Maneuvers"**

An *Israel Hayom* investigation found that some misleading messages to the Israeli media came directly from Netanyahu's spokespeople. The Prime Minister's Office didn't deny quotes attributed to Trump-Netanyahu talks, aiming to project a US-Israel dispute. An Israeli official familiar with the office said, "Israel surprised Iran with psychological maneuvers." He added, "The goal was to make Iran's leadership think there'd be no attack, or if there was, it wouldn't be imminent."

"Deception, as a rule, doesn't turn black into white. For that you need an operation on the scale of decades, like what Iran did to us with the concept of ' Hamas is deterred.' Within the timeframe for the attack on Iran, there wasn't time for such an operation. Therefore, the deception exercise was activated under the classic principle of taking a gray area and then as needed clarifying or darkening it."



The Israeli strikes on Iran, June 14, 2025 (Social media)

Were the misleading, some might say false, messages from the Prime Minister's Office a step too far? Was it manipulative use of journalists, violating Israel's media ethics? Schleifer responds with a marriage analogy: "If all men and women told 100% of the truth 100% of the time, there'd be no married couples left. Each side has its interests, but there's also a shared interest in cooperation. Whoever executed this deception knew how to exploit that."

"In the past five years, lying has become a legitimate tool for politicians," said Avi Benayahu, former IDF spokesperson. "When Trump, Putin, Erdogan, or Bibi lie, we're no longer shocked. Yitzhak Shamir once said it's permissible to lie for state security. If a leader feels it's okay to lie for political matters, it's certainly okay for matters at the core of state secrets. Still, Netanyahu didn't exactly lie this time – at most, these were white lies."

Former minister Nachman Shai, also a former IDF spokesperson, said, "I tried not to use the media for my purposes, but it's been years since I was in that role, and there's been some decline. With fake news dominating, lying has become routine. What was once taboo is now standard. Truth is a lower priority. Can I say no one in the Prime Minister's Office manipulates journalists or media players to spread disinformation? I wouldn't rule it out. The media is more open to these influences than ever."

In this context, it should be emphasized that from all our investigations, the "influence operation" that preceded the attack on Iran did not come from the direction of the IDF spokesman or any other element in the military.

### **"The Stack Model"**

Contrary to media reports claiming a "golden intelligence" tip about Iran assembling a nuclear bomb within weeks prompted the strike, military sources say the "stack model" – a convergence of circumstances – enabled it. "It was a maturation of military capabilities and US support," one said. "We reached the best historical conditions for a strike. It was the optimal timing."

Another source familiar with the military and diplomatic arenas added, "No Hamas, no Hezbollah, Trump in office, Iran isolated, and Israel mentally prepared for destruction and killing. It was right to strike now because the geo-strategic and domestic conditions allowed it."

Someone who apparently wasn't very bothered by the accumulation of these circumstances is Argentina's President Javier Milei, who landed in Israel for a state visit last Monday. On his last day here, Milei visited the Western Wall with Netanyahu. Netanyahu used the opportunity to insert between the stones of eternity a note with a quote from Psalms: "Like a lion shall rise and as a lion shall lift itself up." Several hours later, President Milei would take off back to Argentina, and Israeli Air Force aircraft would take off toward Iran.

The next morning, Friday, June 13, Netanyahu ensured his note was publicized in the media. "He understands perception operations," smiled a source familiar with his media tactics. "Netanyahu gave himself PR for 'I knew before everyone,'" added Benayahu. "That's fine – a prime minister can do PR. By the way, I think this is the first time a prime minister, not the IDF or its computer, named a military operation."

An *Israel Hayom* investigation confirms that, unusually, the operation's name, "Rising Lion," was set by the political echelon.

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<https://www.israelhayom.com/2025/06/22/the-untold-story-of-the-iran-war-how-israel-did-the-unthinkable/>