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IRAN IN THE CROSSHAIRS

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In chess, there is a position known as zugzwang: it is your move, yet any move you make will worsen your position. If Iran had the option not to move, it might at least preserve a chance for a draw. But the rule is clear — the player whose turn it is must move.

Today, Iran stands precisely at that point.

If Iran retaliates — by launching missiles or drones at Israel, targeting U.S. assets in the Gulf, or activating its proxy forces — it will trigger a far more devastating counterstrike. A large-scale war would further cripple the economy and could transform internal fragility into fragmentation.

If it does not retaliate, its deterrence erodes. The Iranian leadership would lose prestige in the eyes of its own public and its regional proxy network. Given domestic unrest, anti-regime mobilization, and the fragility of its allied militias, that risk is hardly acceptable.

Iran has been in the crosshairs for years, and the main reasons are clear:

First: According to reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran has increased its stockpile of enriched uranium and approached what is described as the “nuclear threshold.” For Israel, the issue is not whether Iran has built a bomb, but whether it possesses the capacity to do so. The mere existence of that capability is classified within Israel’s security doctrine as an existential threat.

Second: Iran’s long-range ballistic missiles and advanced drone capabilities go beyond classical deterrence. Its strategy is not purely defensive; it is built on the capacity to strike distant targets. However strong Israel’s air defense may be, Iran’s expanding missile inventory keeps the balance under constant threat.

Third: Hezbollah, Hamas, Shiite militias across Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen function as Iran’s asymmetric extensions. This network has enabled Tehran to exert regional pressure without engaging in direct conventional war. Yet the same network now constrains Iran: activating these proxies would widen the war; refraining from doing so would weaken its authority over them.

Fourth: Iran is not merely a military actor but a central node in global energy geopolitics. The Strait of Hormuz — through which roughly one-fifth of global oil trade passes — is often described as the world’s energy artery. Iran’s capacity to disrupt that passage makes it an economic threat as much as a military one.

Diplomacy, meanwhile, has become largely rhetorical. For Washington, negotiations increasingly serve as political groundwork for claiming that “every effort was made.” The United States did not deploy substantial military assets to the Gulf for symbolic purposes. Iran, for its part, seeks to buy time through talks, hoping to secure support from Russia and China. For Washington and Tel Aviv, however, time is perceived as working in Iran’s favor. Thus the operation is framed as “preemptive” — an attempt to neutralize the threat before it fully matures.

If Iran halts its nuclear program, it loses its strongest strategic leverage. If it accelerates it, the justification for attacks intensifies. If it activates its proxies, regional war spreads. If it refrains, its deterrence deteriorates. More importantly, the United States is no longer focused solely on dismantling Iran’s nuclear capacity. The broader objective appears to be weakening the regime itself and paving the way for a more compliant political order aligned with Western trade and security structures.

That is precisely what *zugzwang* means.

This is no longer merely an Israel–Iran confrontation; it is a process of redesigning the Middle Eastern power architecture. Iran is in the crosshairs because the nuclear threshold, missile capability, and proxy network that sustain its regional balance are deemed unsustainable by the U.S.–Israeli bloc.

In this equation, China and Russia are influential yet cautious actors. For Beijing, Iran is a critical link in energy security; stability and controlled tension are preferable to open war. China is more likely to rely on economic ties and diplomatic maneuvering than military engagement. For Moscow, Iran serves as a useful counterweight that keeps Western attention divided. Russia may offer vocal political backing and sustain military-technical cooperation, but direct confrontation with Israel or the United States remains unlikely. Neither Beijing nor Moscow seeks Iran’s total collapse — yet neither is prepared to let a regional fire escalate into a global war. Their support will therefore remain limited, calculated, and rooted in self-interest, with channels potentially open to any future Iranian political configuration.

The real question is no longer how Iran will respond, nor how forcefully the U.S.–Israeli bloc will strike.

The question is: how does Iran exit this pressure structure?

Because this crisis is not merely about bombs dropped or missiles launched. It is about narrowing a regime's strategic maneuvering space to the point where the final move becomes inevitable. For Washington and Tel Aviv, "threat neutralization" is no longer sufficient; the broader aim is recalibrating the regional balance of power.

The tragedy of zugzwang is this: a player realizes defeat not when the losing move is made, but when the obligation to move becomes unavoidable.

Iran stands at that moment.

And this may mark not only a turning point for Iran, but the redrawing of the Middle East's power map.

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