

## **Enigma of Seeing**

Brigadier Sarbottam Sinha (Retd)

Recent episodes of missile warfare, such as the exchanges between Israel and Iran and the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, have generated widespread concern across civil societies worldwide. The prevailing sentiment has been one of alarm, particularly over the devastation inflicted on civilian life and infrastructure. As a veteran, the author became a distant spectator of these wars through live television coverage, observing with horror and reflection. The experience led him to conclude that in today's world, there is no organisation or pre-eminent power possessing the moral authority to restore balance to growing chaos. The United Nations, once seen as the guardian of global order, appeared defunct and bereft of moral influence. At times, it even seemed as though the world was teetering on the brink of another world war.

The author retired from the Indian Army Infantry (Gorkha Rifles) in 1994 after more than 34 years of service. He has now been in retirement for over 30 years. When the full-scale missile war between Israel and Iran began on 13 Jun 2025, it was broadcast live by the Indian TV channel TV9 Bharatvarsh. He remained glued to the television screen for the next 12 days, witnessing a war unlike any he had ever seen before. He was both fascinated and bewildered by what unfolded live on television.

His conception of war was shaped by a long career in the Indian Army, during which he took part in most of India's post-independence conflicts: the 1962 India–China War; the 1965 Indo–Pak War; the 1971 Bangladesh War in the western theatre; counter-insurgency operations in Nagaland; and the overseas peacekeeping mission in Sri Lanka that unexpectedly turned into an insurgent war. These experiences had reinforced the view that war was always a contest between two combatants. Even insurgencies, in his perspective, were struggles fought between armed insurgents and the security forces. Within the Indian Army, this understanding was encapsulated in the doctrine of 'Winning the hearts and minds of the people' (WHAM) where the essence lay in blending military force with psychological operations.

The 12-day Israel–Iran aerial war, watched live on television, proved to be a complete reversal of his earlier understanding of war. For the author's generation of soldiers, the belief had always been that, like other professions, the conduct of war was governed by certain ethical values, such as those enshrined in the Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law. In stark contrast, the Israel–Iran missile exchanges appeared to disregard all such ethical considerations.

The full-scale war between Israel and Iran began when Israel, in a surprise move, attacked Iran's nuclear sites. Its initial success was largely attributed to the work of Mossad, whose intelligence operations had already incapacitated several of Iran's top generals and scientists through a series of targeted assassinations before the missile exchanges commenced. Years earlier, the author had asked a colleague—a researcher at the Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, who had attended a conference on asymmetric warfare in Israel—about the difference between counter-insurgency operations as conducted by the Israeli and Indian armies.

The colleague had replied, “India believes in WHAM, whereas Israel emphasises the decapitation of top opposing generals”. What remained most difficult to grasp was the extraordinary depth of Mossad’s penetration into Iran’s security establishment—so extensive that its moles could direct precision-guided missiles launched from Tel Aviv to strike a scientist or general in a specific room of a high-rise building in Iran.

Both Israel and Iran kept firing missiles, drones and rockets initially at each other’s military targets but as days went by the missiles did not distinguish between military and civilian target. The TV anchor kept giving running commentary as if a cricket match was being played. In between missile duels, there were pauses, which were filled by retired service officers and civilian strategists and former ambassadors who gave their expert opinions and predictions. All of them took themselves very seriously as if their opinion could affect the course of events.

TV9 Bharatvarsh had deployed a reporter and a cameraman in Israel to cover the missile war live. The reporter soon got used to the screeching sound of approaching missile and air raid alarm and the time it took to run to the nearest air raid shelter. During pauses, the reporter gave an account of damage done by the missile attack. Israel generally targeted Iran’s military and nuclear sites but Iran’s missiles hit both military and residential complexes. At one stage, Israel’s missile interceptors could not destroy Iran’s supersonic missiles mid-air. Their supersonics inflicted very heavy damage on Israel’s civilian residential infrastructure. The Indian TV reporter would focus on debris of residential buildings, billows of grey smoke rising from them, strewn personal belongings of residents, and toys of small children. They were heart-breaking pictures of horrors of war. Surprisingly, no images of wounded or dead soldiers—Israeli or Iranian—were seen

There were no on-the-spot reporters from the Iranian side; instead, the situation was described through TV9 anchors and defence experts. Advisories were announced for Iranians to vacate battle zones, which appeared to be part of Israeli propaganda aimed at creating panic. Television coverage showed miles-long queues of cars as civilians fled the conflict areas, along with occasional images of multi-storied Iranian homes destroyed by Israeli missile strikes. While no footage was shown of Iranians moving into underground bunkers, there were images of people taking cover in metro stations beneath the city.

Among Indian defence personnel, there has long been a high regard for the professionalism of the Israel Defence Forces, a perception reinforced by Israel’s spectacular missile raid on Iranian nuclear sites prior to the full-scale war. The prevailing view was that Iran would be no match for Israel, especially with the tacit backing of the United States. The author too shares that belief, but the events of those 12 days proved otherwise. Iran mounted a determined and competitive response, maintaining morale even after the assassination of several top generals. In the final days before the ceasefire, Iranian supersonic missiles struck heavily at Israel’s infrastructure, residential complexes, and even damaged Mossad’s headquarters. Israel’s air defence systems failed to intercept these missiles, raising questions over whether Iran possessed an unexpectedly large stockpile or whether Israel had exhausted its supply of interceptors. Whatever the cause, Iran’s use of supersonics

inflicted serious damage on Israeli infrastructure in the last two to three days of the conflict, while Russian and Chinese support for Tehran remained largely ambivalent.

The missile war lasted for 12 days, during which it became evident that something fundamental had changed in the way wars were fought. Not a single foot soldier was seen, nor a single gunshot heard from either side, which turned the entire experience into a riddle. In earlier wars, the expectation had been to hear of one side or the other capturing vital ground, cities, ports, or destroying enemy garrisons; none of these reports surfaced. Instead, the headlines focused on the destruction of nuclear sites, military and civilian infrastructure, and the suffering of civilians—developments that stood in stark violation of the Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law.

The author closely followed on television the progress of Israel's offensive against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, launched in response to the brutal terrorist attack of 07 Oct 2023, when Hamas breached the Gaza–Israel barrier, massacred more than 1,200 people, and took over 250 hostages. The objectives of both sides appeared stark. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Israel's war aims: the release of all hostages, the military defeat of Hamas, and its surrender. Hamas, on the other hand, continued to adhere to its charter, which calls for the obliteration and dissolution of Israel through jihad.

The prolonged Gaza war, still ongoing, has become a vicious existential struggle for both Israel and Hamas. It is being waged with little regard for human suffering. The death toll of Gazans has already crossed 61,000, though how many among them were Hamas fighters and how many were innocent civilians remains unclear. Images show starving civilians—children and women scrambling desperately for food packets dropped from the air—amid scenes of hunger, death, and hopelessness. One image depicts an Israeli hostage, frail and reduced to bare bones, digging his own grave. Gaza itself lies in ruins. At the same time, Hamas tunnels and firing positions have been reported near hospitals, schools, and residential complexes, drawing Israeli missile strikes and endangering civilian lives. Such images may form part of a broader psychological war, yet to an observer familiar with modern conflict, the scale of innocent lives lost and the plight of Israeli hostages is deeply unsettling.

International outcry against Israel's campaign has grown, even as the memory of the brutal 07 Oct 2023 Hamas attack on Israeli civilians—leaving more than 1,200 dead and hundreds taken hostage—continues to weigh heavily on Israel's national psyche. For Israelis, the conviction has hardened that they will never be safe unless Hamas is destroyed. More than 50 countries have urged Israel to halt its offensive and agree to a ceasefire, but Israel insists that hostilities will cease only when all hostages, alive or dead, are released. The fighting, therefore, continues with no clear resolution in sight.

Another day passes; the author and his walking companions decide to attend a seminar on the Gaza war, organised by a leading think tank, where experts will examine the immense challenges of finding a resolution to this tragic conflict.

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