

Operation Rising Lion: Reshaping the Power Dynamics in a Volatile Region

Introduction

In the early hours of 13 Jun, Israel began a series of air and precision strikes on Iranian military and nuclear targets, culminating in the killing of top army generals and nuclear scientists. The attacks, dubbed Operation Rising Lion, had been widely suggested as threats but few expected them to take place as Iranian nuclear talks with the United States (US) were underway, with the next round of talks being scheduled for 15 Jun in Oman.

Israel launched Operation Rising Lion pre-emptively to 'Roll back the Iranian threat to Israel's very survival'. Some 200 Israeli Air Force jets struck dozens of nuclear and military command targets deep inside Iran.¹

Targets included nuclear enrichment facilities, ballistic missile production sites, and the homes and offices of senior Iranian military and political leaders. Major General Hossein Salami, Commander-in-Chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, were killed in the strikes.²

Among the scientists reported killed were Dr Fereydoun Abbasi-Davani, former head of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran and a leading nuclear physicist, and Dr Mohammad Mehdi Tehranchi, a prominent academic and advocate of Iran's advanced scientific and Artificial Intelligence (AI) capabilities.³

Iran, of course, retaliated on 14 Jun with ballistic missile strikes on Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

No Longer a Shadow War

This is the moment that has been anticipated with great concern for a long time. Over the past year, Iran's defensive and offensive capabilities have been revealed to be far less capable than many had expected, which in theory would temper fears of where things could now be headed. However, the Iranian regime is currently facing a potentially existential threat. It makes the risk of a major spiral of escalation far more real than what has been played out before.

The strikes also appear to have exploited the use of Syrian airspace, for direct overflight and for refuelling. Syria's present government has no capacity to prevent this, even if it wanted to, but its willing engagement in covert dialogue with Israel in recent weeks amid continued overt military tensions makes this issue complex and potentially significant. Can the dots of Syrian complicity be connected to the meeting of the Syrian leader Ahmed al-Sharaa in Riyadh with President Donald Trump on 14 May?⁴

Modern Warfighting Technologies

What distinguishes this operation from previous Israeli campaigns is not just the breadth of targets ranging from the Natanz enrichment facility to missile sites and senior Iranian officials, but the technologically behind the strikes. More than 200 aircrafts dropped over 330 munitions on 100 targets, achieving real-time coordination and minimising collateral damage. This level of synchronisation would be only possible with AI-assisted battle management systems, real-time intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance fusion, and autonomous asset deployment.⁵

As per reports, Mossad-operated drone base inside Iranian territory, near Tehran. This base played a pivotal role in the early stages of the operation, with unmanned aerial vehicles launching overnight to neutralise surface-to-surface missile launchers, radar systems, and air defence networks.⁶ These strikes from within were not high yield in firepower but strategically designed to create temporary blind spots in radar coverage and confuse ground coordination during the critical opening moments of the Israeli air campaign. The base was established through gradual smuggling of drones, surveillance gear, and command modules via Mossad intelligence networks, and is believed to have operated with local assistance from sleeper cells or sympathetic insiders. This is similar to the Ukrainian drone strike on Russian strategic assets.

Further evidence of Israeli electronic and intelligence superiority emerged from their use of jamming systems and previously tested air corridors, made possible through partial complicity or evasion of regional air traffic control systems. While this is conceivable for stealth aircraft, it is almost impossible for refuelling tankers, suggesting either pre-cleared aerial routes or degraded radar visibility due to internal disruption.⁷

This integrated operation targeted Iran's strategic triad: nuclear infrastructure, ballistic missile systems, and senior leadership. The convergence of cyber, kinetic, and autonomous strikes reflects a new playbook for 21st Century warfare, where manned and unmanned systems are fused under a single operational tempo, governed by machine learning and predictive analytics. The diffusion of AI-assisted warfare is no longer hypothetical; it is unfolding in real time.

Options

How the Iranian regime decides to react and what America's other regional partners, particularly the Arab Gulf states, chose to do in the coming days will shape the trajectory of events across the region. The US has the largest military footprint of any external actor in the region.

An option could involve a return to clandestine warfare, reminiscent of the 1980s, with bombings targeting the US and Israeli Embassies and military installations.

Iran's leaders cannot afford to appear weak in the face of Israeli military pressure, raising the prospect of further escalation including attacks on Israel or even the option of testing a nuclear device and building a nuclear bomb. As per some experts, Iran could

also withdraw from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, signalling the acceleration of their nuclear enrichment programme.

On the Israeli side, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has positioned himself as a central actor regarding Iran. He may choose to pause after absorbing Iran's retaliation and allow a brief window for renewed diplomacy. The aim would be a deal that includes zero uranium enrichment and full dismantling of Iran's nuclear infrastructure. Alternatively, Israel could pursue sustained military operations, as it has done with Hezbollah in Lebanon, to further degrade Iran's nuclear program and weaken its leadership and decision-making apparatus.⁸

For Iran, the calculus is more constrained. While it must respond and already has, its overriding interest will be to avoid a full-scale conflict it cannot win. The imbalance in military power with Israel, backed by the US' presence in the region, is stark. Further, striking US' assets would trigger an American response which is avoidable.⁹ Attacking US targets in the Gulf would also alienate key regional partners, undermining Iran's long-term position. Iran's leadership is, therefore, likely to focus on regime survival; the path may be to signal readiness to re-engage diplomatically after the tempers have cooled. There is a precedent as Ayatollah Khomeini had taken a strategic decision to end the Iran–Iraq War, which he termed "Drinking the poisoned chalice".¹⁰

Secretary of State Marco Rubio emphasised in the first official response to the attacks that this was a unilateral action by Israel, and the US was not involved in the campaign. However, Iran is not buying that argument. *The New York Times* reports that Iran's Foreign Ministry said the attack could not have happened without "Coordination and authorisation" from the US and "As Israel's main supporter, (the US) would also be responsible for the consequences".¹¹

It is unlikely that the US will be able to benefit both ways from the Israeli strikes on Iran, by enjoying the geopolitical benefits of a defanged Iranian nuclear infrastructure while avoiding the negative consequences of direct involvement in the operation.¹²

Conclusion

The Israeli strike against Iran, confirmed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a "Targeted military operation to roll back the Iranian threat", marks a dangerous new chapter in the long-simmering tensions between these two regional rivals.

The assault on Iran could turn out to be a devastating blow against the regime in Tehran. However, it also brings to the fore a bewildering range of outcomes, including some that can directly affect not only Israel and the US, but the Gulf countries.

The real risk lies in escalation of the conflict, which could drag the US and destabilise the Gulf with consequent reverberations across the globe. Should the conflict escalate, the potential for an economic calamity due to its impact on crude oil prices both regionally and globally will be high.

This cycle of violence indicates that while nothing is ever the same, yet nothing changes. As Clausewitz famously said, “War is the continuation of politics by other means”. The political endgame of the Israeli military action now remains to be unveiled. More so is the achievable and mindful of broader regional and global stability. Absence of such a strategy risks escalation without resolution.

Endnotes

¹ Helen Regan, Lauren Izso, Tamar Michaelis, Nadeen Ebrahim, and Kara Fox, “Israel Hits Iran’s Nuclear Program and Military Leadership in Unprecedented Strikes”, CNN, 13 Jun 2025, accessed 18 Jun 2025 <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/12/middleeast/israel-iran-strikes-intl-hnk>

² Ibid

³ Jonathan Sacerdoti, “Israel’s Shadow War on Iran Has Burst into the Open”, *The Spectator*, 13 Jun 2025, accessed 15 Jun 2025 <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/israels-shadow-war-on-iran-has-burst-into-the-open/>

⁴ Middle East Institute, “Special Briefing: Israel Strikes Iran’s Nuclear Program”, *MEI*, 2025, accessed 16 Jun 2025 <https://mei.edu/publications/special-briefing-israel-strikes-irans-nuclear-program>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ “Mossad Set up Drone Base in Iran, UAVs Took out Missile Launchers Overnight”, *Times of Israel*, 2025, accessed 16 Jun 2025 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/mossad-set-up-drone-base-in-iran-uavs-took-out-missile-launchers-overnight/>

⁷ Middle East Institute, “Special Briefing”

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ A Savyon, “Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s 1988 ‘Poisoned Chalice’ Speech Accepting UN Security Council Resolution 598 Ending The Iran-Iraq War – Will Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei Make A Similar Decision?”, *MEMRI*, 18 Jun 2025, accessed 19 Jun 2025 <https://www.memri.org/reports/iranian-ayatollah-ruhollah-khomeinis-1988-poisoned-chalice-accepting-un-security>

¹¹ Christal Hayes, “US Says It Was Not Involved in Israel’s Military Strikes in Iran”, 13 Jun 2025, accessed 18 Jun 2025 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cm2kd2k3mv7o>

¹² Middle East Institute, “Special Briefing”

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