

Operation Rising Lion: Strategic Motives Behind Israel's Strike on Iran

Introduction and Strategic Significance

In a bold and unprecedented move, Israel launched a comprehensive military strike on Iran on Friday bearing the name Operation Rising Lion. It marks a significant escalation in the long-standing hostilities between the two nations and signals a new phase in regional security dynamics. Far from being a symbolic gesture, the strike had multiple tactical and strategic objectives—from neutralising Iran's nuclear infrastructure and military capabilities to altering the political calculus in the Middle East.¹

Historical Context and Strategic Doctrine

The animosity between Israel and Iran is rooted in both ideological and geopolitical considerations. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has made no secret of its opposition to Israel's existence, backing militant groups like Hezbollah and Hamas while pursuing a nuclear program widely perceived by Israel as a direct existential threat.²

Israel's strategic doctrine—especially under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—has emphasised pre-emption over deterrence. Known as the Begin Doctrine, which promotes the use of force to prevent hostile nations from acquiring nuclear weapons, Israel has previously acted on this premise with the 1981 bombing of Iraq's Osirak reactor and the 2007 airstrike on Syria's Al-Kibar facility. Operation Rising Lion represents the most significant application of this doctrine in the 21st Century.³

Operation Rising Lion

Israel has launched a massive and coordinated military operation against Iran, aimed at preempting what it describes as an imminent nuclear threat. Over 200 Israeli fighter jets, including F-15s, F-16s, and F-35s, carried out airstrikes targeting key locations such as Tehran, Natanz, Isfahan, Arak, Kermanshah, and Tabriz. These strikes resulted in more than 330 bombs being dropped and led to the confirmed deaths of several top Iranian officials, including Major General Hossein Salami, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC); General Mohammad Bagheri, Iran's Chief of Armed Forces; Deputy Commander Gholamali Rashid; and former national security advisor Ali Shamkhani. Additionally, six Iranian nuclear scientists were also killed. Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad, played a critical role—reportedly jamming Iranian radar systems, conducting sabotage operations, and establishing a drone base inside

Iran. In retaliation, Iran launched over 100 drones toward Israel, many of which were intercepted over Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.⁴

Primary Reasons

Pre-Emptive Counter-Nuclear Strike. Israel sought to delay or degrade Iran's nuclear program by targeting key enrichment facilities like Natanz and Fordow, along with nuclear scientists and military infrastructure—actions aimed at preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.⁵

Neutralising Military Threats. The operation also aimed to damage Iran's ballistic missile sites, air-defence systems, and military leadership, weakening its capacity to strike Israel or its allies.⁶

Targeting Regime Leadership and Intelligence Decapitation. By assassinating high-ranking commanders and nuclear scientists, Israel aimed to deliver a strategic blow to Iran's decision-making and technical capacity.⁷

Political Motivations and Regime-Change Aspirations. Under domestic political pressure—especially after Gaza war—Prime Minister Netanyahu may have seen the strike to bolster his political standing, while publicly signalling a broader ambition to destabilise or change Iran's regime.

Disruption of Impending Diplomatic Deal. Because a new United States (US)–Iran nuclear deal appeared imminent, Israel may have sought to disrupt negotiations, arguing that only military action could halt Iran's nuclear trajectory.⁸

Existential Defence Posture. Israel's leadership has consistently viewed a nuclear-armed Iran as an existential threat. Netanyahu described the operation as necessary to safeguard Israel and its neighbours from a 'Clear and present danger'.

Neutralising the Nuclear Threat

A core objective of the operation was to degrade Iran's nuclear enrichment capacity. Despite the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran's nuclear ambitions have continued to progress, with uranium enrichment reaching weapons-grade levels at facilities such as Natanz and Fordow.⁹

Intelligence reports suggest that Israel's Friday strike involved precision-guided munitions and cyberattacks aimed at disrupting the control systems of these facilities.¹⁰ Unlike previous sabotage efforts, this strike was overt, signaling a departure from covert operations to direct confrontation. From a strategic standpoint, the move can be interpreted as a last-resort measure to halt or delay a nuclear-armed Iran—an outcome Israeli leadership consistently describes as an existential threat.¹¹

Broader Military Objectives

While the nuclear program was a primary target, Israel also sought to undermine Iran's broader military infrastructure. The operation included attacks on ballistic missile sites capable of targeting Israeli cities, air-defense systems guarding strategic Iranian facilities, and the IRGC command centers in Tehran and other locations.¹² These targets align with Israel's broader goal of eroding Iran's ability to project power across the region, especially through proxies in Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza. Moreover, by degrading command-and-control capabilities, Israel aimed to impair Iran's response coordination, buying time for diplomatic and military maneuvering post-strike.¹³

Strategic Decapitation and Psychological Impact

Another crucial element of Rising Lion was the reported assassination of senior nuclear scientists and IRGC commanders. This reflects a strategy of strategic decapitation—crippling the enemy not just by targeting infrastructure, but by removing individuals central to operational continuity and ideological resolve.¹⁴

The psychological impact of such assassinations is profound. It not only demoralizes the Iranian establishment but also sends a stark warning to others involved in the nuclear and military programs: no one is untouchable.

Domestic Political Considerations

Internally, the Israeli government has faced significant criticism in recent months due to the prolonged conflict in Gaza and growing public dissatisfaction with Netanyahu's leadership. A high-stakes operation like Rising Lion can serve dual political functions: rallying nationalistic sentiment around security threats and diverting attention from domestic political instability and judicial reforms.

Netanyahu's long-standing positioning as the defender of Israeli security gains renewed credibility through a decisive strike. Whether intentional or opportunistic, the operation allows him to reframe the national discourse around existential security imperatives.

Diplomatic Disruption and Strategic Messaging

At the time of the strike, indirect talks between the US and Iran were making progress toward reviving aspects of the JCPOA. Israel has long viewed the deal as inadequate, believing it offers temporary relief in exchange for long-term risks.

By launching a military offensive, Israel aimed to derail the ongoing negotiations, forcing Western powers to reconsider their diplomatic engagement with Tehran. The message is clear: any agreement that does not fully dismantle Iran's nuclear

capability is unacceptable to Israel. This aligns with Israel's broader strategy of undermining Iran's diplomatic leverage by showcasing its willingness to act unilaterally and decisively.

Regional Signaling and Strategic Realignment

Beyond Iran, Operation Rising Lion sends a strong signal to regional actors and global powers. To the Arab Gulf states wary of Iran's rise—such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE—it reinforces Israel's commitment to containing Iranian influence. This could bolster quiet security partnerships and intelligence-sharing arrangements under the Abraham Accords framework.

To the US, the strike reiterates Israel's red lines on Iran's nuclear program and demands greater alignment between Israeli security concerns and American diplomacy. Conversely, to Tehran's allies—such as Hezbollah and militias in Iraq and Syria—the operation is a deterrent message: continued support for Iran could invite wider conflict.

Risks and Global Implications

While tactically successful, the operation is not without risks. Iran's response—whether direct military retaliation or asymmetric proxy warfare—could trigger a broader regional war. Already, heightened alerts have been issued in Northern Israel and at embassies worldwide. Furthermore, the strike risks further destabilizing global energy markets, especially if Iran targets shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz. From a diplomatic standpoint, Israel's unilateral action may strain relations with key allies advocating for de-escalation and non-proliferation.

Strategic Options for Iran

Now, Iran is weighing its strategic options. Militarily, it possesses more than 3,000 ballistic missiles and maintains a force of over 6,10,000 active personnel, with new leadership already appointed. Iran could also activate its proxy networks, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen, and Iraqi militias—all equipped with significant missile and drone capabilities. Economically, Tehran could leverage its control over the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint responsible for 30 per cent of global oil trade. Lastly, Iran may target US military bases in the region, despite Washington's denial of involvement, prompting the evacuation of US personnel from parts of West Asia. As tensions escalate, Iran faces a dangerous paradox: the desire for revenge against the need for regime survival, with a full-scale war carrying potentially existential consequences.¹⁵

Conclusion

Operation Rising Lion represents a pivotal moment in the Israel–Iran conflict, driven by a matrix of motives—security imperatives, domestic politics, diplomatic disruption, and regional signaling. It reflects the limits of deterrence in the face of perceived existential threats and underscores Israel’s readiness to act decisively, even at great geopolitical risk.

While the long-term impact of the strike remains to be seen, it is already reshaping strategic assumptions across the region. What follows may either be a dangerous escalation or a renewed urgency for diplomacy. One thing is clear: the status quo in the Middle East has been irrevocably altered.

That said, the need for diplomatic off-ramps is now more critical than ever. International actors—including the United Nations Security Council, the European Union, and neutral mediators like Oman or Switzerland—must explore de-escalation mechanisms, confidence-building measures, and backchannel diplomacy to prevent the current flashpoint from spiraling into a full-scale regional conflict. Re-engaging frameworks for nuclear negotiation, establishing third-party verification regimes, and initiating humanitarian coordination channels could offer the first steps toward containment and eventual dialogue. In an environment charged with vengeance and vulnerability, restraint and diplomacy remains the only sustainable path forward.

Endnotes

¹ Patrick Kingsley and Ronen Bergman, “Israel Strikes Iran, Escalating Conflict over Nuclear Program,” *The New York Times*, 14 Jun 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com>.

² Najmeh Al-Kassam, “What We Know about Israel’s Rising Lion Operation in Iran,” *Financial Times*, 14 Jun 2025, <https://www.ft.com>.

³ Jeffrey Heller, “Israel’s Attacks on Iran Hint at a Bigger Goal: Regime Change,” *Reuters*, 14 Jun, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israels-attacks-iran-hint-bigger-goal-regime-change>, 14 Jun 2025.

⁴ *Israel Attacks Iran | Air India Crash | US Invites Asim Munir | Vantage This Week | Palki*, YouTube video, [11:54:55]. Published 15 Jun 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jbbz7AknS3M>

⁵ *Washington Post*, *Reuters*, and *NPR*. “Israel’s Operation Rising Lion Seen as Effort to Rally Public Amid Domestic Crisis”, 14 June 2025.

⁶ *AP News*, *Business Insider*, and *The Guardian*. “Israel’s Operation Rising Lion: Strategic Motives and Global Repercussions”, 14 June 2025.

⁷ *Business Insider*, *Time*, and *The New Yorker*. “Analyzing Israel’s Strike on Iran: Political, Strategic, and Regional Implications”, 14 June 2025.

⁸ *The Washington Post*, *New York Magazine (Intelligencer)*, and *The New Yorker*. “Strategic Calculations Behind Israel’s Operation Rising Lion”, 14 June 2025.

⁹ Uri Friedman, “What’s Israel’s Real Endgame with Attacking Iran?” *New York Magazine – Intelligencer*, 14 Jun 2025, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/why-did-israel-attack-iran.html>.

¹⁰ Associated Press, “What to Know about Israel’s Major Attack on Iran,” *AP News*, 14 Jun 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/5adea3ffa51264e0c7c803d8acfd338>.

¹¹ BBC News, “Israel-Iran Conflict: Iran’s Nuclear Facilities Among Targets in Israeli Strikes,” 14 Jun 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east>.

¹² David E. Sanger and Julian E. Barnes, “Israel’s Calculated Gamble: Why Now, and What Next?” *The Washington Post*, 14 Jun 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

¹³ Yaakov Katz, “Inside Israel’s Strategy: Disruption, Deterrence, and Decapitation,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 Jun 2025, <https://www.jpost.com>.

¹⁴ Farnaz Fassihi, “Iran Responds to Israeli Strike as Nuclear Talks Falter,” *The Guardian*, 14 Jun 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/14/israel-iran-strike>.

¹⁵ *Israel Attacks Iran | Air India Crash | US Invites Asim Munir | Vantage This Week | Palki, ibid*

Maj Gen Sanjeev Chowdhry (Retd) is a veteran with over 37 years of commissioned service. A graduate of the DSSC Wellington, and College of Defence Management during his career, the General officer has served in all types of terrain and environment while on command, staff, and instructional duties. He specialises in the subject of Net Assessment and is presently the Director Editorial at the USI.

Article uploaded on 17-06-2025

Disclaimer : The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India.