Op Rising Lion: Israel may have an edge, but peace will still be elusive in West Asia

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Iran is more likely to develop nuclear weapons than ever, and it's unlikely that Israel will be able to secure a favourable neighbourhood until the core issue of Palestine is resolved through a mutually acceptable political solution



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. File image/ AP

It was in the early hours of June 13, 2025, that Israel launched a blistering preemptive attack on Iran, codenamed Operation "Rising Lion," targeting the latter's nuclear

sites and military installations with the aim of eliminating the existential threat and thus plunging West Asia into a fresh cycle of violence. Giving details of the strikes, an Israeli Defence spokesperson revealed that over 200 fighter jets, including F-35 stealth fighters and F-16 jets, were employed to engage 100-odd targets.

Commenting on the operations, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a video statement said, "This operation will continue for as many days as it takes to remove the present danger to Israel's very survival." Netanyahu further added that Israeli aircraft struck at the heart of Iran's nuclear enrichment and weaponisation facility at Natanz (the plant produced uranium enriched up to 60 per cent) and Tabriz.

Tehran was caught by surprise and did not expect Israel to attack while its representatives were engaged with the US in talks to reach an agreement on the nuclear programme. Consequently, Iran suffered heavy losses, and as per the experts estimates, almost 15 per cent of its missile arsenal was destroyed, including critical air defence systems. Additionally, its several top military commanders and scientists were killed during the opening strike, including Armed Forces Chief of Staff Mohammad Bagheri, 'Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Chief Hossein Salami and Chief IRGC Central Command, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, besides aerospace-nuclear scientist Fereydoon Abbasi.

Reacting to the Israeli massive strikes, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei declared that Tehran's response would not be 'half measured' and Israel would not be allowed to engage in 'hit and run' attacks without consequences. As an immediate response, Iran retaliated with drones and launched hundreds of missiles in waves at Israel. Its long-feared retaliatory capabilities appeared to be subdued as most of the missiles were either intercepted or fell short. However, some did penetrate the Israeli air defence, causing damage to the residential buildings, besides resulting in civilian casualties. This did have a psychological impact, as the Israeli public has not been used to such strikes for quite some time.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio was quick to clarify that Israel has undertaken unilateral action against Iran and America was not involved. However, in an interview with *ABC*, President Donald Trump described Israeli attacks as 'excellent' and cautioned, "There are more to come – a lot more" unless Iran agrees to a deal. "Iran must make a deal before there is nothing left and save what was once known as the Iranian Empire," he further added. For the US, weakened Tehran is crucial to achieving the desired end state, which encompasses the installation of favourable dispensation. America has provided unstinted support to Israel, even to the extent of helping Tel Aviv to shoot down Iranian missiles, as per *Reuters* and *Associated Press* reports.

Over the week, conflict has intensified, with both sides continuing to trade missile barrages against each other. On June 15, Israeli fighter jets targeted Iranian oil installations at Shahran and gas fields in South Pars (the world's largest), which forced the production to stop. A series of strikes were also conducted on the headquarters of the Iranian Defence Forces and Quds Force.

In retaliation, Iran fired a fresh salvo of missiles targeting Israeli key infrastructure sites, including oil refineries at port Haifa and Ben-Gurion airport. Israel has been able to inflict heavy losses on Iran and claims to have destroyed around 120 surface-to-surface missile launchers, constituting around one third of Tehran's total holdings. Iran has an inventory of around 3000 ballistic missiles, of which several hundred have already been fired. Israel has been able to establish air superiority, enabling it to conduct air operations with impunity. However, it is costing Tel Aviv hundreds of millions of dollars a day, an economic burden which it can't sustain for long. Besides the recurring civilian casualties, 24 have been killed and over 200 wounded in the Iranian strikes.

While the global polity favours an early end to the ongoing conflict, however, no concrete initiatives have come about so far. India too has urged Iran and Israel to stop fighting, as Delhi has close relations with both the countries. Israel has refused

to de-escalate the situation, with Netanyahu stating, “The issue here is not de-escalation but stopping Iran from developing nuclear capability.” Iran’s stance is that it will not negotiate a ceasefire while under attack or if America directly enters the fray.

Iran finds itself isolated as no ally has come to support it physically. In fact, Tehran had high expectations from Moscow and Beijing. Even the response of the Islamic world has been muted. Iran’s proxies – Hamas, Houthis and Hezbollah – have been considerably weakened by Israeli operations over the last one and a half years. Due to the adverse air situation, Iranian losses have been rather heavy both in terms of equipment and human life (639 killed and almost twice the number wounded). Khamenei is facing the toughest challenge in his three-decade rule in the wake of converging domestic and international threats. As per media reports, he has handed over military powers to the armed forces.

Iran has reached out to the US president to force Israel to cease fire. Its foreign minister, Abbas Araqchi, said on X, “If President Trump is genuine about diplomacy and interested in stopping the war, next steps are consequential.” While leaving the G7 Summit on June 16, Trump confirmed that he had received signals through intermediaries that Iran wants to de-escalate. He told the reporters that ‘a real end’ is better than a ceasefire. He called to Khamenei to surrender unconditionally. Referring to Trump’s warning, Khamenei said, “Those who know Iran’s history, know that Iranians do not answer well the language of threat”. Later, in a stern message, the Supreme Leader stated, “They should know that Iran will not surrender, and a US strike will have serious, irreparable consequences.”

Netanyahu has claimed that his country was on a path to victory. Just hours after Trump’s warning to Tehran, Israel has launched powerful airstrikes that rocked Tehran, marking a steep escalation. Incidentally, Trump has laid down a timeline of two weeks to take a decision on US entry in the ongoing conflict. America has

around 40,000 troops in West Asia, besides its heavy naval presence. Additional warfighting resources have been moved by the US into the region. After the US warning call to the civilians to move out of Tehran, thousands have fled the city.

After a week-long military campaign, the Israel-Iran conflict is at an inflection point. It is apparent that Israel by itself is not capable of taking out Iran's nuclear facilities. Going by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Chief Rafel Grossi, underground facilities at Natanz and Fordow, as well as the heavy water reactor at Arak (Khondab), have not been destroyed. It is only the US Air Force that has the capability to hit these installations with B2 stealth bombers. Trump has given Iran an off-ramp to yield. In case Tehran obliges, then Trump will have a rethink; or else US involvement in the conflict is certain, which will prove disastrous for Iran, besides widening the ambit of conflict with serious ramifications.

To even out, Tehran could resort to blocking the Persian Gulf, particularly Kharg Island – Iran's main export terminal – and the Strait of Hormuz, from where 21 per cent world's LNG and 14 million barrels of crude pass every day. The impact of the conflict is already being felt across the globe with the closure of airspace over West Asia and the threat to the sea lanes of communications in the Red Sea, affecting trade and travel. The crude oil prices have risen by around 9 per cent since the start of the conflict and could spike further if the tensions heighten.

The geopolitical architecture of West Asia is set for a tectonic shift, and America could emerge as a key player. It is to be seen whether Iran will ultimately be prevented from going nuclear or Tehran becomes even more determined to produce the atomic bomb. As per Professor Matthew Bunn, Harvard Kennedy School, the probability that Iran will have a nuclear weapon ten years from now is higher now than it would have been without the strike.

Historically, while Israel won all the wars since its establishment in 1948, peace has eluded it. Through Operation “Rising Lion”, Israel will be able to ensure a conducive neighbourhood is unlikely until the core issue of Palestine is resolved through an amicable political solution.

The writer is a war veteran, currently Professor of Strategic and International Relations. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost’s views.