

WARTIME

INTELLECTUAL DIPLOMACY

**- WHAT TRAJECTORY DO YOU
ANTICIPATE FOR CEASE FIRE?**

**- HOW WOULD YOU ASSESS
BOTH SIDES PERFORMANCES
DURING THE RECENT CONFLICT?**



In the wake of a recent and intense conflict between Iran and Israel, the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East remains precarious. As both sides navigate the aftermath of their military engagements, questions loom about the durability of the current ceasefire and the implications of this short but fierce war. In this review, we turn to our international experts to gain insights into these pressing issues. We explore whether the ceasefire has a chance of holding amidst underlying tensions and analyze which side emerged with the upper hand in this complex confrontation. Join us as we delve into the dynamics of this conflict and its potential ramifications for regional stability.



JIN LIANGXIANG

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ABOUT HIM

Jin Liangxiang, Senior Research Fellow at the Center for West Asian and African Studies and Associate Professor in Institute for International Strategic Studies, SIIS.

He is specialized in the Middle Eastern international relations, and is particularly engaged in the field of Iran's foreign policy and domestic politics. He has also conducted some research on international relations on China's neighboring areas.

He has visited more than 20 countries and regions, most of which are Middle East countries and China's neighboring countries. He has been a frequent visitor of numerous influential academic institutions and conferences. He was a visiting fellow of the Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace (-2002 2003), Fredrich Ebert Stiftung New York Office (2006), the Baker Institute (2011) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) of the U.S. (2013).

The Iranian side certainly outperformed the Israeli side.

It is true that the Israeli side did cause huge damage to Iran. A number of Iranian high-level commanders had been assassinated, some military infrastructure had been damaged, and some civilian facilities had also been damaged. One of the main reasons why Israel succeeded in doing this is that they did not observe basic human ethics. They launched the strike in a preemptive way while negotiation was still going on. They could explode communication devices. And Israel is the only entity in the world that had employed assassination as a national strategy. There were shameless deceptions.

The retaliation on the Iranian side is impressive. It is the first time since the 1948 that Israel has been struck by missiles from a country sharing no border. Israel's defense system was nullified before Iran's missile rains. As a result of Israel's system to hide the damage, the real damage on the Israeli side is not fully known to the world. Nevertheless, it is noticed some of Israel military facilities and oil refineries had been seriously damaged in addition to some human losses.

It is not easy for Iran to achieve the victories. Iran had been able to supplement the positions shortly after the martyrdom of high-level commanders, and had been able to launch retaliation the very same day, which suggests that Iran's political system is effective and efficient. And ruling elites are loyal to the system.

Iran is huge country with a territory 100 times that of Israel and with a population 10 ten times of Israel. If the war continues for another 5-3 days, Iran's win could be even bigger as Iran is far more resilient than Israel.

None of the three sides want to continue the war, but Netanyahu is vulnerable in domestic politics while Trump is unpredictable. The ceasefire could be expected but the situation is still fragile.

A circular portrait of Rabia Akhtar, a woman with short dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark blazer over a patterned top. The background of the portrait is a warm, golden-yellow gradient with a subtle dot pattern. The portrait is set within a red circular frame that is part of a larger red graphic element extending across the top of the page.

RABIA AKHTAR

CENTRE FOR SECURITY,
STRATEGY AND POLICY RESEARCH

I saw Iran's military and strategic performance in the recent conflict reflecting a complex blend of capability, restraint, and calculated signaling.

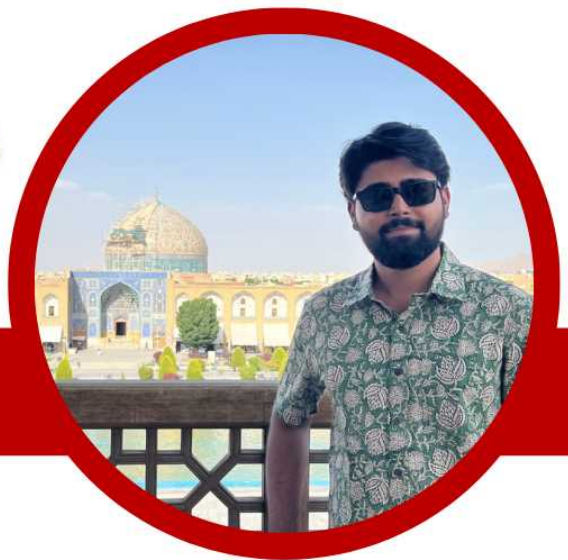
Tehran demonstrated its capacity to coordinate multi-domain responses, drawing on proxy networks, ballistic missiles, and UAVs, while deliberately calibrating escalation to avoid triggering a full-scale war with Israel or the United States. To my mind, this suggests an increasingly coherent doctrine of asymmetric deterrence, aimed at preserving regional influence while retaining plausible deniability. However, at the same time, the confrontation exposed critical vulnerabilities in Iran's air defense architecture and limitations in its capacity to absorb precision strikes. Strategically, Iran sought to move deterrence from rhetorical posture to operational demonstration yet without crossing thresholds that could risk regime survival. Whether such calibrated ambiguity can be sustained in a future crisis remains uncertain. Should the ceasefire fail, the risk is not just renewed conflict, but the potential normalization of missile exchanges as instruments of statecraft. More significantly, Iran may respond by inching closer to a nuclear breakout capability. It might not do so through overt weaponization, but by shortening timelines to hedge against future threats. This would certainly heighten regional proliferation anxieties and place unprecedented strain on the non-proliferation regime.

ABOUT HER

Rabia Akhtar was a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center. She is also the director of the Centre for Security, Strategy and Policy Research at the University of Lahore. Akhtar is also the director of the School of Integrated Social Sciences at the University of Lahore. She holds a PhD in Security Studies from Kansas State University and is a Fulbright alumna (2015-2010). Akhtar received her Masters in International Relations from Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad and her Masters in Political Science from Eastern Illinois University. Akhtar is also the editor of Pakistan Politico, Pakistan's first strategic and foreign affairs magazine. Akhtar is a member of Prime Minister's Advisory Council on Foreign Affairs.

HARSHIT SHARMA

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ABOUT HIM

Harshit Sharma is a Research Assistant at NatStrat. His research interests include West Asia and the larger Islamic world. He did his Masters in Diplomacy, Law, and Business from the Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University. He has completed his undergraduate degree in History (Hons.) from the University of Delhi. He is currently learning Persian from Iran Culture House.

During the recent twelve-day war sparked by an Israeli strike on Iran and later joined by the United States the world witnessed an unprecedented direct exchange of aerial strikes between Iran and Israel.

Iran demonstrated credible deterrence capabilities by deploying advanced, domestically developed ballistic missiles that managed to challenge Israel's sophisticated air defense systems. However, the scale of destruction was lower than anticipated, largely due to Israel's heightened preparedness following Iran's earlier missile and drone attacks in April and October 2024. Notably, Iran also exercised considerable restraint and refrained from deploying its full military capabilities.

A key takeaway for Iran is the urgent need to strengthen its defensive posture both through domestic advancements and deeper partnerships with countries like Russia. A notable success for Tehran was its ability to rally domestic support and avoid internal unrest by invoking national unity during the external threat.

Meanwhile, a hardline camp in Israel is now advocating a 'Hezbollah model' approach pushing for continued strikes regardless of ceasefires. Should this strategy prevail, Iran may respond with less restraint, seek greater regional coordination against Israel and the U.S., and perhaps even accelerate its nuclear enrichment programme as a means of deterrence.

A circular portrait of Ali Rastbeen, an older man with white hair, wearing a dark suit, light blue shirt, and patterned tie. The portrait is set against a light background and is framed by a thick red border. A red horizontal bar extends from the right side of the portrait, ending in a white circular cutout.

ALI RASTBEEN

PARIS ACADEMY OF GEOPOLITICS

The current ceasefire between Iran and Israel remains extremely fragile. It is a tactical truce, driven more by the need to contain regional escalation than by any real willingness to resolve deep-rooted tensions.

As long as key disputes (such as Iran's nuclear program, Israel's deterrence strategy, and broader geopolitical rivalries) are not addressed within a credible de-escalation framework, the risk of renewed confrontation remains high.

As for which side gained the upper hand, the answer depends on the analytical lens. Israel, supported by U.S. technological capabilities, maintained apparent military superiority. However, Iran demonstrated its ability to retaliate and endure, consolidating its image within the "axis of resistance" and reinforcing its symbolic capital among regional public opinion. Thus, while tactical advantage may seem to lie with the Israeli-American side, Iran can claim longer-term strategic gains in this short but revealing conflict.

ABOUT HIM

Ali Rastbeen is a geopolitical scientist specializing in Iran and strategic and energy issues in the Middle East. He is founder and president of the Academy of Geopolitics of Paris and director of publications of the journal *Géostratégiques*. He is also President of Horizons University, a higher education institution. He is the author of numerous books and articles on geopolitics and geostrategy and regularly gives and organizes conferences on the most burning geopolitical events of the contemporary world.

DEEPIKA SARASWAT

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ABOUT HER

Deepika Saraswat is an Associate Fellow at the West Asia Centre, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. Her research focuses on Iran's foreign policy and geopolitical developments in West Asia and Eurasia. Saraswat has a PhD in Political Geography from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. She was a Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs from March 2018 to October 2021. Saraswat is the author of *Between Survival and Status: The Counter-Hegemonic Geopolitics of Iran* (ICWA & Macmillan, 2022).

Israel's surprise attack on Iran's nuclear and military facilities, and targeting its top military brass, underscored that Iran's telegraphed missile strikes in April and October 2024 had failed to reinforce Iranian deterrence.

The threat of the direct US involvement on the Israeli side has constrained Iran's military options vis-à-vis Israel. While Israel, confident of the US support, has drawn on its superior intelligence and technological capabilities to drive the escalation against Iran, putting the latter in a defensive posture. Despite the initial shock, Iran restored its military command and opted for a measured and non-escalatory response against Israel. Iranian forces also demonstrated the ability to deliver a symmetrical response to some extent, which appears to be aimed at escalation control. After Israel targeted the South Pars gas field, Iran delivered strikes against the Haifa refinery. However, the US entered the conflict with escalation dominance. Its preference for calculated strikes limited to Iran's nuclear facilities, followed by overtures for de-escalation, led Iran to opt for a largely symbolic response. Though Iran had long declared that an attack on its nuclear sites would invite an escalatory response, such as closure of the Strait of Hormuz or attacks on the US bases in the Persian Gulf States, Tehran's preferences were determined by the imperative of state survival and preserving relations with its neighbors.

A circular portrait of Adlan Margoev, a young man with dark hair, wearing a suit and tie, set against a grey background. The portrait is framed by a red circular border.

ADLAN MARGOEV

MOSCOW STATE INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Iran's nuclear facilities were largely damaged, but the potential is still there. Despite the fact that outside observers cannot accurately assess the situation under ground, it looks like Iran can restore much of its enrichment capacity within several months. The IAEA had pressed Iran on clarifying issues of the past nuclear activities that took place more than 20 years ago and issued both a report by Director General and a resolution that accused Iran of noncompliance despite the fact that there were no indication that the current nuclear activities were diverted to military purposes. By legitimizing Israel's and US's concerns and following attacks on Iran, the IAEA received the opposite result: it has completely lost its verification capabilities in Iran and had to withdraw inspectors, with no information as to where 400 kg of highly enriched uranium is and how many centrifuges can still operate today, and where is the new Iranian facility that Tehran was about to declare.
2. Almost 30 IRGC generals lost their lives in the first days of Israel's aggression. However, the structure is functioning; there is no indication that the military refused to implement commands, and – despite nearly full control of Israel over Iran's skies – Iran had the missile potential to continue counterattacks. The damage on the Israeli side was obvious and could not be ignored by the Israeli government or society.
3. If anybody came to the streets, it is only to protest against the attacks by Israel and the United States ahead of the sixth round of nuclear talks. Around 950 people, most of whom are civilians, were reported to be killed in these attacks. The prominent critics of the government in Iran faced the same risk to their life as its strongest supporters, which made them consolidate as patriots and move the political debate aside.

As one can see, Israel achieved none of the supposed goals of its military operation. This leads to two conclusions: one positive, and one negative. First, Iran's survivability and resilience is far stronger than had been assessed by the attacking side. Second, once it has resorted to force with little tangible outcome, Israel will be even more determined to resume active measures, through limited subversions, hostilities of larger scale, and social unrest, in order to seek the destruction of Iran's nuclear program and destabilization of its government.

ABOUT HIM

Adlan Margoev is a Russian expert on Iran and nuclear nonproliferation, and a PhD candidate and Research Fellow at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University). After graduating from the MA Dual Degree Program in Nonproliferation and Terrorism Studies established by MGIMO University and the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, he directed the Russia and Nuclear Nonproliferation Program and edited the *Yaderny Kontrol* monthly at the Russian nongovernmental organization PIR Center. He is a member of the Youth Chapter of the Russian Pugwash Committee and an affiliate of the Arms Control Negotiation Academy.

NAADE ALI

MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE



ABOUT HIM

Naade Ali is currently serving as a Research Assistant to Dr. Marvin G. Weinbaum, Director for Pakistan and Afghanistan Studies at The Middle East Institute. He has over five years of involvement working with international organizations and think tanks in different capacities as a political researcher, policy advisor, peace strategist, and human rights practitioner with a demonstrated interest and experience in human and national security, democratization, conflict resolution, and political culture. Prior to joining MEI, Ali worked with Media Foundation 360, a think tank dedicated to strengthening democratic practices in Pakistan. Ali holds a Master of Science in International Relations: Global Governance and Social theory from the University of Bremen, as well as a graduate training certification in Multilateralism from the United Nations Office at Geneva.

The Iran-Israel war served as a profound test of Iran's strategic calculus, deterrence architecture, and the operational preparedness of its military, revealing both strengths and weaknesses. To evaluate the Iranian military's performance during the conflict, one must compare the objectives achieved by Iran's Operation True Promise III with Israel's Operation Rising Lion. Israel's surprise offensive exposed key vulnerabilities in Iran's military operational capabilities. In multi-layered conventional warfare, Israel demonstrated both air superiority and territorial advantage, not only by penetrating Iranian airspace but also by successfully assassinating senior commanders on the ground. This highlights the failure of Iranian military intelligence to counter the effectiveness and depth of Israel's espionage network within Iran, as well as the inability of the Iranian Air Force to defend its own skies.

However, Iran's ability to swiftly fill the leadership vacuum and initiate a rapid response mechanism is a noteworthy strength. From a military perspective, Iran's retaliatory strikes managed to challenge the myth of Israel's impenetrable Iron Dome by targeting and hitting high-value installations. That said, the absence of air-to-air combat or fighter jet engagement revealed limitations in Iran's air force, reinforcing the perception that it is not adequately equipped to defend Iranian skies in direct aerial warfare.

On a strategic level, Iran has long maintained deterrence through a policy of strategic ambiguity, i.e. balancing its support for the Axis of Resistance with parallel diplomatic engagements. This dual-track approach allowed Iran to maintain leverage and unpredictability. Supporting the Axis of Resistance has been a strategic necessity for forward defense and regional deterrence, while regional diplomacy was a strategy of choice.

However, Israel's recent aggression has disrupted this ambiguity. It has forced Iran into a position where confrontation with Israel is both a strategic necessity and a choice, thereby reducing Iran's ability to simultaneously pursue rapprochement with the United States. Before the conflict, Iran and the U.S. were reportedly close to finalizing a deal. Israel's actions have effectively sabotaged those diplomatic efforts and positioned itself as the key actor shaping the terms of any future U.S.-Iran negotiation. Given that Iran's President recently declared that Tehran will not halt uranium enrichment and is prepared for any war Israel might wage, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's earlier statement to Trump that Tel Aviv would strike if Iran resumed nuclear activity takes on new relevance. If the ceasefire collapses, Iran's strategic environment will grow increasingly complex. The current U.S.-Israel approach does not appear aimed at regime change but rather at enforcing behavior change through force and destruction.

Countries like Pakistan are attempting to mediate and push for diplomacy. This is evident by the recent private meeting between Pakistan's Army Chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, and U.S. President Trump, as well as the upcoming visit of Iran's President to Pakistan on July 26. Meanwhile, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dar, is currently in the U.S. for talks with Secretary of State Marco Rubio. By directly engaging in the conflict, the United States has effectively abandoned any pretense of neutrality as a mediator between Iran and Israel. If Israel were to launch Operation Rising Lion 2.0, the U.S. would likely re-engage militarily. A renewed phase of the conflict would further destabilize the region, with significant implications for neighboring countries.

This raises critical questions: Could the Iran-Israel conflict evolve into a broader great-power rivalry between the U.S. and China? Might friendly neighboring states like Pakistan or Turkey consider providing military support to Iran in the event of an intensified conventional war with Israel? Equally important is how Iran can prevent a collapse of the current ceasefire and deter future Israeli aggression. What steps can Tehran take to strengthen its air power, overhaul its intelligence network, and develop strategic defense partnerships with friendly countries? Of course, Iran would have to offer something in return, but what those incentives might be remains an open question.



MUJAHID ABU AL-HAIL

HEAD OF THE IRAQI MEDIA
NETWORK

First: Assessment of the performance of both sides (Iran and Israel) in the recent conflict:

- **Iran:**
 1. The Islamic Republic of Iran did not rely heavily on proxies (Hezbollah, Hamas, Iraqi and Yemeni groups), as it did in previous conflicts; rather, it employed its missile capabilities and direct drones against Israel, which confused the enemy's calculations and ended its aggression in the region.
 2. Iran demonstrated its ability to coordinate multi-front attacks, but in a calculated manner to avoid entering into a full-scale war.
 3. It was not deterred by the losses it suffered in military infrastructure and some targets within Iran due to precise Israeli strikes.
 4. It succeeded significantly in establishing the image of «regional deterrence» before its domestic audience.
- **The Zionist entity in Israel:**
 1. It used all its air and intelligence power, executing qualitative strikes against major figures and first-class leaders who have an impact on global media, whether in Lebanon, Gaza, or within Iran, to gain alleged victories through media coverage.
 2. The Israeli entity benefited from advanced air defense systems (Iron Dome, David's Sling) that intercepted a significant percentage of missiles and drones; however, it incurred substantial economic and military losses in return.
 3. The Israeli government faced a challenge in managing a politically and economically pressured domestic front, with increasing international pressure to stop the escalation, in addition to the end or death of the idea of attracting Jews to Israel as it was no longer safe after the recent strikes carried out by Iranian drones and missiles.
 4. Israel was unable to demonstrate its capability to strike deep into Iran, thus it sought assistance from U.S. President Donald Trump to strike strategic targets (as in the attacks on Isfahan, Natanz, and Fordow), but it avoided expanding the scope of direct war with Iran.

Second: The expected path for a ceasefire:

- A fragile ceasefire is likely, mediated internationally (by the United Nations or regional parties such as Qatar or Turkey), along with some understandings on important files.
- Mutual de-escalation: reducing Israeli strikes outside its borders, and Iran controlling its armed groups.
- A package of humanitarian aid or facilities for Gaza and Lebanon to alleviate popular pressure.
- Tension will remain due to the roots of the crisis (the Iranian nuclear issue, Iranian presence in Syria, the Hamas and Hezbollah file), so the pattern of «limited short wars» will continue instead of slipping into a full-scale war.
- Mediation efforts regarding the Iranian nuclear program may resume, but with limited success unless significant concessions are made by both sides that reflect on those confrontations.

ABOUT HIM

Mujahid Abu Al-Hail is an accomplished academic and cultural figure from Iraq, holding a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Sociology from the University of Baghdad, as well as a Ph.D. from the Lebanese University focusing on the state and political parties in Iraq. He also possesses a Master's equivalent in Philosophy and Islamic Sciences from Al-Mustafa International University. His professional career includes significant roles such as the editor-in-chief of the Iraqi Network Magazine, deputy director of Iraqi Radio, and director of the Media and Communications Authority's Visual and Audio Organization. In addition to his academic and professional achievements, Abu Al-Hail has made substantial contributions to Iraqi literature and media. His initiatives include founding the Iraqi Date Palm for Creativity, launching the IMN international channel, and establishing a digital media department within the network.

PAVAN CHAURASIA

INDIA FOUNDATION



ABOUT HIM

Pavan Chaurasia is a Research Fellow at India Foundation. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Delhi University and furthered his education with a postgraduate degree and M.Phil. from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. He obtained his PhD from the School of International Relations (SIS) at JNU. He cleared the National Eligibility Test (NET) in 2017 and was awarded the Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) by the University Grants Commission (UGC) from 2018 to 2023. His expertise lies in the fields of International Relations, India's Foreign Policy, Indian Constitution and Public Policy, and Indian Political Thought.

The recent military conflict with Israel did not happen abruptly and was in the making for a long time.

In crude terms, Israel outdid Iran's military capability in unparalleled terms. The twelve days confrontation exposed considerable weaknesses in Iran's military capabilities. The air defences, comprising Russian-supplied S300- systems, proved mostly inadequate against Israeli and U.S. precision strikes, resulting in significant damage to nuclear facilities and military infrastructure, and causing the deaths of many Iranians, including prominent commanders. On the other hand, Iran's retaliatory missile and drone assaults inflicted minimal damage in Israel, resulting in 28 civilian fatalities, suggesting that its ballistic missiles encountered difficulties breaching Israel's formidable defences. The disintegration of Iran's counter-intelligence and diminished proxy network—Hamas, Hezbollah, and Syrian allies—further revealed strategic vulnerabilities, as these entities failed to offer substantial assistance.

However, this assertion needs to be understood in a proper context. Several decades of sanctions have considerably weakened Iran's economic and military capability. It could not buy the latest fighter jets or technologies that could give it certain leverage against its regional enemies. Therefore, Iran could not do much as its air power was no match to Israel's latest defence technology. Yet its focus on building its ballistic missiles stockpiles for several decades paid Iran handsomely as it was only through its non stop missiles attack that Israel too faced some burns from its attack on Iran.

To be true, I don't think the ceasefire with Israel will hold for very long as neither Israel nor the US seems to be fully convinced that Iran's nuclear capability has been completely destroyed, despite media posturing by President Trump. It needs to be understood that the involvement of the US in attacking Iran has somewhat altered the regional dynamics of West Asia. Despite criticism of the attack on Iran by certain West Asian countries, their orientation towards the US (and thereby, Israel) will not change much. In fact, the regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Turkey would like a weakened Iran that would strengthen the Sunni power regionally and globally. Already Iran's closest allies like Syria and Russia have been weakened and its proxies like Hezbollah and Houthi's do not stand a chance against the might of US and Israel. China, another ally of Iran, is known to play safe and will continue to do so. In a nutshell, Iran will have to defend itself on its own if the next wave of attacks take place. It has already lost its regional ally Syria last year and no other country has stood by it in these troubles. The Iranian regime has to find new friends and to convince its own people that it is still capable of defending itself, itself.



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