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The “12-Day War” and the transformation of Middle Eastern geopolitics

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On June 13, 2025, Israel launched a military strike against Iran. At the time, nuclear negotiations between Iran and the United States were ongoing, with talks scheduled to be held in Oman on June 15. For Iran, an attack at this juncture was an unexpected development, and Israel’s preemptive strike amid active diplomatic efforts came as a major shock.

It is believed that Israel was motivated to seize the moment and attack Iran’s nuclear facilities—long considered a strategic threat—before Iran could restore its air defense systems, which had been destroyed during military clashes between the two countries in April and October 2024.

The two countries have long had an adversarial relationship, and while skirmishes had previously occurred in neighboring states, the two military clashes in 2024 marked the first time they directly exchanged fire. Although these engagements represented an important turning point, the attacks were deliberately limited in scope. Both sides appeared intent on containing the escalation by keeping the intensity of the strikes within certain bounds. Nevertheless, the clashes undeniably lowered the threshold for launching full-scale direct attacks in the future.

Having initiated a preemptive strike, Israel proceeded with extensive and sustained attacks using missiles, drones, and fighter jets, while also leveraging an espionage network it is believed to have built within Iran over many years. Israel reportedly assassinated more than ten senior officials, including leaders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and nuclear scientists. Iran launched a counteroffensive by firing several hundred missiles at Tel Aviv, Haifa, and other Israeli cities. Amid the ongoing exchanges, the airspace not only over Iran and Israel but also over Iraq and Syria—countries located between them—was closed, bringing regional air traffic to a near standstill. The evacuation of Japanese nationals residing in Iran and Israel began via land routes

around June 19.

Initially, U.S. President Trump adopted a stance of tacitly approving of Israel's attack on Iran, but perhaps inspired by Israel's spectacular battle results, on June 19 Trump captured the world's attention by announcing the U.S. would make a decision on whether to attack Iran within two weeks, and indeed, on June 21 the U.S. military proceeded with airstrikes targeting Iran's nuclear facilities. In response, on June 23, Iran fired ballistic missiles at al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East, but it notified the U.S. government in advance and 13 of the 14 missiles were intercepted, with no casualties confirmed.

Although there were concerns about a possible closure of the Strait of Hormuz, both Iran and Israel halted attacks on June 24 following appeals from President Trump, effectively bringing the "12-Day War" to an end. The conflict inflicted significant damage on both sides, with over 900 confirmed fatalities in Iran and 28 in Israel.

The extent to which the attacks curtailed Iran's nuclear development—their original objective—remains unclear. However, from Israel's perspective, the destruction of numerous strategic sites and the elimination of multiple key personnel with full U.S. support were major accomplishments; therefore, the strategy is viewed as a success.

What Israel had been viewing as a menace up to now was not only Iran's nuclear and missile capabilities, but also the existence of Iran-aligned non-state organizations known as "proxy forces" or the "axis of resistance." However, Gaza's Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah were severely weakened in fierce battles with Israel during the Gaza war that began in October 2023. Hezbollah's diminished capabilities ultimately contributed to the collapse of Syria's Assad regime in December 2024. As a result of this, Iran lost the "land corridor" linking Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Yemen's Houthis continue to launch missiles at Israel, but their effects are limited, and the Shiite militias within Iraq, fearing retaliation from the U.S. military, have also confined themselves to carrying out extremely small-scale attacks. It is thus clear that in the Middle East region, Iran and its allied forces are on the back foot.

For Arab nations that had long viewed Iran as a threat, the current situation is not necessarily unwelcome. Over the past two decades, Gulf Arab states in particular have regarded Iran's growing influence in the Arab world—exercised through its Shiite networks—as a challenge to the regional order. This perception also underpinned the break in diplomatic relations between

Saudi Arabia and Iran, which lasted from 2016 to 2023. Although diplomatic ties have improved in recent years, many Arab nations are still likely to welcome the outcome of the Israeli attack—namely, the diminished prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

While such pragmatic calculations may be understandable at the political level, there is a risk that anti-U.S. and anti-Israel sentiment will intensify among ordinary citizens as a result of the recent conflict. Since the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023, more than 50,000 Palestinians have been killed. Israel's intense military campaign, combined with the U.S. refusal to intervene or restrain it, has fueled deep and growing resentment.

In this latest conflict, Israel justified its unilateral attack on Iran by citing its own threat perception. Moreover, not only did the U.S. refrain from trying to prevent the attack, it actively joined the use of military force — disregarding international law and bypassing the United Nations Security Council. This approach has undoubtedly shaken global trust in the superpower.

There is also a risk that this erosion of trust could undermine Arab nations' confidence in the U.S. and provide propaganda material for anti-American extremist groups. The outcomes of both the Gaza war and the 12-Day War currently give the appearance of Israel being the sole victor, but whether this will bring lasting stability to the Middle East remains highly doubtful.

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