

The 12-Day War: Strategic Doctrine, Legal Ambiguity, and the Fragility of Peace Between Israel and Iran

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Abstract

This paper, based on offensive realism and deterrence theory, critically examines the preemptive strike of Israel against Iran's nuclear facilities on June 13, 2025. It attempts to analyse Israel's preemptive strike as an offensive manoeuvre and strategic positioning aimed at maintaining its supremacy in the region. The study utilises the qualitative research approach to analyse the strategic, legal, and diplomatic implications of the operation. It also examines the tenuous ceasefires that followed the operation. Conceptual/library research approach of the statements of the actors, media reports, and academic literature forms the basis of this paper, which also attempts to analyse the role of the U.S. as a strategic amplifier of the crisis. Through the application of the realist theory, combined with the power of discourse, the study provides a multidimensional view of the conflict in June 2025, shedding light on the ways in which the strategic theory, law, and politics intersect in the decision-making process. This study provides a comprehensive set of policy recommendations, categorised into four strategic clusters, namely, creating legal and normative restraints on the use of force, developing regional security architecture and institutional innovation, establishing crisis management and de-escalation mechanisms, and improving informal diplomacy and confidence-building, to address the strategic, legal, and political issues that arose in the context of the 12-Day War.

Keywords: Preemptive strike, offensive realism, deterrence theory, preventive warfare, proxy wars, nuclear proliferation

Introduction

The Israeli-Iranian rivalry, rooted in historical grievances and philosophical differences, is one of the most unstable conflicts in world politics. This competition escalated to a new level of intensity when Israel launched a preemptive attack, dubbed Operation Rising Lion, on June 13, 2025, which targeted over 250 Iranian strategic sites, such as its nuclear enrichment facilities located in Natanz and Isfahan, its missile sites, and IRGC command centres (Cicurel, 2025; ELIAMEP, 2025). This attack, which Israel claimed to be a defensive measure against Iran's nuclear program, has been seen by many as a preventive measure intended to avoid a possible future conflict rather than a preemptive one to deter an imminent attack.

Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, termed the strike "a grave error" and retaliated by using ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to strike Israeli cities, being

careful to avoid a head-on clash with the US military (Khamenei, 2025; Rios et al., 2025). This highlights the precarious balance of power in the Middle East and revived the debate over the legality of the use of anticipatory self-defence, as provided for by Article 51 of the UN Charter, which traditionally permits the use of force only as a response to an “armed attack” (Kutty, 2025; Schmitt, 2025b).

The role of the U.S. in the operation, limited to defensive assistance but involving the sharing of intelligence and strategic deployment, adds complexity to the conflict (Tarzi, 2025; Foreign Affairs Forum, 2025). The operation interrupted nuclear negotiations and escalated proxy wars, revealing the deficiencies in regional security arrangements (Pasquarette, 2025; Shadi, 2025; ELIAMEP, 2025). The success of Operation Rising Lion, therefore, underscores the strategic dilemma posed by the relationship between national security concerns, international law and stability.

This study seeks to analyse the strategic reasoning behind Israel’s preemptive attack, weigh its legal and moral consequences, and examine the impact of U.S. participation. Using offensive realism and deterrence theory, it frames the conflict within broader global politics and normative structures.

The importance of this investigation, however, rests with its ability to illuminate the intricacies of anticipatory self-defence in a nuclearising Middle East. Israel’s claim of self-defence based on Article 51 of the UN Charter challenges accepted norms of self-defence, especially in the lack of an immediate threat, as argued by Kutty (2025) and Schmitt (2025b). Further, the involvement of the U.S. raises questions of complicity, especially in light of shared intelligence and strategic positioning, as argued by Tarzi (2025) and Foreign Affairs Forum (2025).

The paper proceeds by establishing the historical and ideological context of the conflict between Israel and Iran, followed by a discussion on the issue of proxy warfare, nuclear proliferation, and strategic doctrine. It then moves on to the legal and ethical arguments on the issue of anticipatory self-defense, followed by an analysis of U.S. involvement, regional responses, and assesses the fragile ceasefire dynamics that followed the 12-Day War and their sustainability. The paper concludes with policy recommendations on how to strengthen legal restraints, regional security architecture, crisis management, and informal diplomacy

Research Objectives

This study seeks to:

- i. Analyse the strategic rationale behind Israel's preemptive strike that resulted in the 12-day War with Iran.
- ii. Examine the use of proxy warfare, nuclear weapons, and strategic military doctrine as elements of the conflict.
- iii. Evaluate the legal and ethical implications of anticipatory self-defence.
- iv. Investigate the impact of U.S. involvement and its impact on regional dynamics.

- v. Assess the fragile ceasefire dynamics that followed the 12-Day War and their sustainability.

Review of Related Literature

Historical and Ideological Foundations of Israel-Iran Rivalry

After the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948, the secular Pahlavi monarchy in Iran had maintained relatively cordial relations with the Jewish state, primarily because of their shared animosity towards Arab nationalism (Furlan, 2022). However, the Islamic Revolution in 1979 significantly changed Iran's foreign policy, as Ayatollah Khomeini chose to sever ties and name Israel a 'Zionist entity' (Mousavian & Chitsazian, 2020; Itzchakov, 2023). Marking the beginning of long-term confrontations and strategic posturing global politics.

The 2000s witnessed further escalations, especially in response to Israeli military actions in Lebanon and Gaza. Israel military action in Lebanon and Gaza such as the 2006 Lebanon War and Gaza Wars only served to further cement the hatred between Iran and Israel, as Iran sought to portray itself as a champion of Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation while Israel became more and more apprehensive of the Iranian posturing and threat. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was a major opportunity seized by Iran's expansionist policies (Takeyh, 2006), which Israel saw as an existential threat, particularly in relation to Iran's nuclear ambitions

The pattern of conflict, as seen in the past, also changed between 2020 and 2025. During this time, tensions were heightened, particularly because of some key events. The assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani by a US drone strike in January 2020 saw heightened retaliatory threats by Iran against both the US and its regional allies, including Israel (Jerusalem Post Staff & Reuters, 2023). After the incident, Iranian leaders increased their rhetoric against Israel, considering it a major enemy and vowing to retaliate against what they perceived to be Israeli aggression.

Furthermore, the ongoing Israeli military operations targeting Iranian interests in Syria, with the aim of preventing further entrenchment of the Iranian military presence, resulted in a number of escalating confrontations (Gross & Associated Press, 2021). In 2021 and 2022, several airstrikes were reportedly carried out by Israel targeting Iranian interests in Syria, as well as munition convoys meant for Hezbollah. Meanwhile, Iran continued to assert its influence in the region, not only supporting Hezbollah but also the resistance movements in Gaza (Motamedi, 2024), where military battles, as seen in the escalations of the Gaza War, were considered part of the resistance against Israeli hegemony

Tensions between Israel and Iran were significantly high in April 2024, as Iran conducted its first direct military strike against Israel from Iranian territory. Iran used 350 drones and ballistic missiles in this strike (Zanotti, 2024), which is believed to be retaliatory after Israel conducted a strike that killed high-ranking officials of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the city of Damascus, Syria.

The effects of all these tensions culminated in the 12-Day War of 2025, which was a notable war between the two countries. In this war, both countries clashed militarily, with Israel launching precise attacks against Iranian military positions due to the threat of missiles. The war also showed the zero-sum nature of the relationship between the two countries, as both countries tried to assert their dominance in the region.

Proxy Warfare and Strategic Alignments in the Israeli-Iranian Confrontation

Iran's regional strategy is based on proxy warfare in an attempt to assert its power in the region relative to the Israeli state. Hezbollah is its most powerful proxy force, which is supplied with arms, training, and funding by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This network has spread to Syria, Iraq, and Gaza, allowing Iran to fight Israel on multiple fronts without confrontation.

The Israeli response has been guided by its strategy of "campaigns between wars" (CBW). This is a strategy meant to weaken Iran without engaging it in a full-scale war. The operations of CBW have included Israeli airstrikes on Iranian arms convoys in Syria, cyberattacks on Iranian targets, and intelligence-based assassinations of key operatives (Ben Hour & Eisenstadt, 2018). This is not an Israeli tactical response to a threat but a strategy to prevent Iran from entrenching itself militarily in Syria and arming Hezbollah with advanced weaponry. Therefore, it is a counter strategy to a proxy threat that underlies Iran's military strategy. This is evident in how the Israeli defense officials and analysts describe CBW as a "counter-strategy" to be employed to disrupt Iran's proxy network and prevent its military entrenchment in Syria.

Strategic alignments further complicate this clash between the two countries. The Abraham Accords of 2020, in which Israel normalised relations with Arab countries such as the UAE and Bahrain (Ulrichsen, 2025), are an important geopolitical realignment. These states, which have long been wary of Iran's hegemonic ambitions, are now working with Israel on intelligence sharing, missile defense, and maritime security (Butt, 2025). This alliance demonstrates a wider regional consensus against Iran's hegemony, further isolating Iran and strengthening Israel's deterrence capabilities.

Collectively, these developments highlight the strategic importance of the rivalry between Iran and Israel. This is because proxy warfare ensures that the conflict between these two countries is not limited to them alone but also involves other countries in the Middle East. This means that anticipatory self-defence in such a scenario cannot be evaluated independently of the threat environment. The Israeli attack of June 2025, therefore, has to be seen not only as a reaction to Iran's nuclear program but also as part of a larger struggle against Iran's proxy network, which has the potential to undermine Israel's existence and regional and global security.

Nuclear Proliferation and Israel's Strategic Doctrine of Preemptive Deterrence

Iran's nuclear aspirations have made the competition much more hazardous. Since the withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, Iran has stepped up its enrichment activities. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA, 2025) has stated that the enriched uranium stockpile in Iran has reached the stage where it can be classified as 'weapons-grade.' This situation has become more than just a security threat for Israel; it has become an existential threat for the nation. The threat of a nuclear-armed Iran has forced the nation to take covert measures such as the Stuxnet cyber-attack against Iranian nuclear facilities and the assassination of its nuclear scientists (Haseeb, 2008; Bergman, 2018). These measures underline Israel's resolve to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities at the cost of worldwide dissension for the nation.

Israel's policy from 2020-2024 was an indirect approach, consisting of cyber attacks, strikes on military targets, and intelligence operations (Rasanah, 2024), which were intended to impede Iran's nuclear development without engaging in a full-scale war with the nation. Israel avoided direct attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities because of opposition from the U.S. (Feldman, 2023).

Israel's strategic behaviour can be understood in the context of offensive realism whereby states aim to maximise their power in order to guarantee their survival in an anarchic world (Mearsheimer, 2014). Israel's preemptive and secret strikes can be seen as part of this strategy because, in doing so, the state ensures that the adversary does not have the chance to upset the balance of power. This strategy can be further understood in the context of deterrence theory, which focuses on the role of threats in preventing adversaries from launching military strikes against the deterred state. Adamsky (2016) also illustrates how significant it is to have plausible countermeasure to stop hostility, which seems to be what Israel is doing. Milosavljević and Blagojević's (2024) quantitative modeling supports Israel's actions, suggesting that deterrence works best when it's conveyed clearly and reinforced by military power, as seen in Israel's preemptive attacks. Israel's anticipatory hits can thus be seen as part of its more extensive tactics that intend to prevent its rivals through such attacks.

Nevertheless, the concept gives rise to important legal and normative issues. According to Shah (2007), there is the concept of anticipatory self-defense, which is legally permissible under international law. There is also the concept of preemptive strikes, which is not legally legitimate. The actions of Israel, such as the 1981 Osirak nuclear reactor attack on Iraq, fall into the category of preemptive strikes. The paradox is thus the fact that preemptive action may ensure security, but at the same time, it is legally illegitimate.

Thus, all the aforesaid elements help to understand the role of the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region, which has forced Israel to adopt a doctrine based on the principles of offensive realism, even if it violates international law. The threat of destruction posed by the

Iranian nuclear program has forced Israel to choose survival over international law, which has resulted in the formulation of a strategic doctrine that is aggressive and controversial in nature.

Legal and Ethical Dimensions of Israel's Preemptive Warfare

The legality of Israel's preemptive strikes has been a major area of controversy within the international law community. Article 51 of the UN Charter recognises the legitimacy of the right to self-defense, its application to preemptive attacks is unclear (Gray, 2018). In the face of preemptive warfare, which involves aggressive action before a threat has materialised, there has been a concern that such action may violate the norms set by international law, which have traditionally focused on responses to real dangers.

In addition, Schmitt (2025a) also points out the ethical considerations of preemptive operations, with a focus on striking a balance between national security concerns and legal restraints. The ethical considerations of preemptive strikes are mostly centred around the morality of acting on perceptions and not certainties. The very act of engaging in preemptive warfare is likely to lead to several civilian casualties, and hence, there is a question of morality that is raised in this context. Thus, the ethical considerations of preemptive warfare also raise several pertinent questions like what constitute imminent threat, what are the criteria for moral legitimacy, what is the criterion for accountability, what are the obligation of states to the international community, and what are the mechanisms to prevent the misuse of preemptive warfare?

The consequences of preventive warfare go beyond the military outcome of the action. The implications of preventive warfare carry with them substantial threats to the integrity of international law. If the international community continues to use preemptive actions, the rules of warfare may be diminished, leading to an escalation of warfare and an increase in global insecurity. In terms of the actions of Israel, the legal and ethical considerations of the preemptive actions demonstrate the importance of a framework to address the nuances of warfare.

Through the use of legal legitimacy and ethical responsibility as frameworks for preemptive warfare, this study aims to highlight the need to establish overall guidelines that will clearly establish the circumstances that will warrant the use of preemptive warfare. As the international community continues to face the changing landscape of international security, it becomes imperative to balance the need for national security with the need to establish the foundation of international law, without compromising the very foundation of international stability.

U.S. Involvement and Geopolitics in the 12-Day War

The U.S. disengagement from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement by President Trump was a watershed moment in the rivalry between Iran and Israel. By removing an agreement that limited the Iranian nuclear program, the U.S. in effect gave Israel the green light to further escalate its military and intelligence operations against Iranian interests in Syria and

beyond. In fact, it has been contended that by disengaging from the JCPOA, the U.S. gave Israel the license to further enhance its cyber warfare capabilities, to further solidify ties with Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and to take a more aggressive approach to deterrence (Mohiuddin & Razali, 2025). In this respect, it can be contended that the U.S. disengagement from the JCPOA agreement did not simply escalate tensions between Iran and Israel, it also restructured the strategic landscape in favour of Israel while making Iran feel increasingly encircled.

Aside from this, American military aid has served to cement Israel's position of strength. American support, including advanced missile defense systems, guarantees Israel's qualitative military edge in the region. This allows Israel to take assertive action against Iranian-backed forces such as Hezbollah, but at the same time communicates to Iran that they are not just fighting against Israel but also against the implicit support of the most powerful military force in the world (Childs, 2019). This means that for Iran, they are in a situation of strategic isolation, thereby justifying their own aggressive actions and underpinning their rhetorics of defiance.

This gray area of distinction in terms of deterrence and complicity is one of the most important aspects to understand in relation to U.S. involvement in the region. On one hand, the U.S. justifies its involvement in the region by stating that it is providing assistance to Israel in order to deter Iranian aggressions and stop nuclear proliferation in the region. On the other hand, it is argued by experts in the region, such as Culbertson *et al* (2022) and Foreign Affairs Forum (2025), that strikes by Israel against Iranian assets are made possible due to U.S. support, it implies a level of complicity in such actions against Iran. This ambiguity undermines regional stability, as Arab states and Iran alike question whether the U.S. is acting as a stabiliser or as a partisan actor fueling escalation.

In the end, the involvement of the U.S in the conflict has raised issues of deterrence and complicity. The close association with Israel may drive other players in the region away from dialogue. Further, it undermines America's credibility in mediating and brokering peace in the Middle East, considering its apparent complicity in Israel's actions. This situation thus creates a cycle of retaliation and reprisals, which may not be easily resolved. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to conclude that U.S. involvement is not just a contributory factor but the very essence of the rivalry between Iran and Israel, informing military strategies and perceptions of deterrence and complicity.

Escalating Strains in the Israeli-Iranian Confrontation: From Diplomacy to Preemptive strike

Tensions between Israel and Iran have been escalating in the first quarter of 2025, and this can be attributed to a number of unsettling occurrences in the military, diplomatic, and strategic spheres. For example, the nuclear program in Iran was advancing at an alarming rate, and there were reports that the enriched uranium reserves in the country had reached critical levels, almost at the threshold of nuclear weapons. This situation was highly unsettling to Israel, especially at a time when

negotiations over the nuclear activities in Iran had hit a snag. Israel felt that a nuclear-armed Iran was an existential threat (Mills & Curtis, 2025; Rasanah, 2024). In this dangerous context, discussions on preemptive action assume greater degrees of urgency, particularly in terms of ethical considerations on the impact of military strikes against threats.

Intelligence reports by mid-2025 presented a bleak outlook. Reports by Israeli authorities indicated that Iran had stockpiled over 408.6 kilograms of uranium that was 60% enriched. This implied that they were technically ready to produce nuclear weapons. This was further supported by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report that indicated that the 60% enrichment was enough to produce several nuclear bombs once they were further enriched (IAEA, 2025). This was cited by Prime Minister Netanyahu as evidence of why Israel should be vigilant, as it necessitated counteractive measures. This rhetoric was well accepted by Israel's defense and political establishments, as it was indicated that Iran's enrichment levels have no civilian justification whatsoever.

The attempts to renew the JCPOA negotiations were terminated due to ongoing mistrust and the stalemate over sanctions relief and nuclear compliance (Albright et al., 2025). As the diplomatic efforts to renew the agreement are not yielding the expected results, the Israeli leadership felt that the only option was to take aggressive measures. As Einhorn (2014) points out, the unclear intentions of Iran regarding its nuclear ambitions and the sophisticated enrichment capabilities are increasing the likelihood of a preemptive attack by Israel.

It is evident that with the combination of nuclear escalation, strategic military manoeuvres, and perpetual proxy wars, coupled with diplomatic stalemates, tensions were high and volatile by June 2025, prompting Israel to launch a preemptive strike it deemed necessary for the preservation of national security. This chapter in the rivalry between Israel and Iran highlights a longstanding rivalry not only based on ideological differences but one that is constantly challenged by new and rising threats and geopolitical imperatives. The use of offensive realism and deterrence theory provides a new perspective in understanding strategic actions in the Israel-Iran relationship. Empirical and legal approaches provide a new dimension in addressing preemptive actions.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, two fundamental theories of international relations including offensive realism and deterrence theory are utilised to analyse the strategic motivations behind Israel's Operation Rising Lion and forecast its implications for international stability and international law are.

Offensive Realism

One of the major theories used here is that of offensive realism, as proposed by Mearsheimer (2014). He argues that in an anarchic world, all countries seek to maximise their power as a guarantee of survival. This theory has been supported by modern understandings of global conflict

(Blanton & Kegley, 2025). This theory, in essence, points to the underlying fear of all countries, especially in conflict-prone regions such as the Middle East. This theory can be used to understand the Israel-Iran conflict and the decision of Israel to strike first. This was because Iran's growing nuclear capabilities were perceived as an existential threat, and thus Israel had to make a strategic decision to prevent a balance of power shift.

In the June 2025 strike scenario, there are three offensive realism mechanisms that are at play. These are: (1) anticipatory force in an attempt to halt an adversary's upward trajectory in capabilities (nuclear enrichment), (2) a preference for capability-targeting operations that eliminate future threats, and (3) an attempt to induce balancing in the surrounding regions (arms procurements, alliance formations, and counter measures). These three mechanisms have observable implications: language that frames threats in existential terms, selection of strategic dual-use nuclear and delivery site targets, and observable post-strike adjustments in the surrounding regions' capabilities.

Nevertheless, literature also suggests some qualifications. Waltzian structural realism emphasises the maintenance of security rather than the maximisation of power (Waltz, 1979). Neoclassical realism emphasises variables intervening between structural incentives and their expression. These variables include perceptions of states and elites, as well as politics at home (Rose, 1998; Fearon, 1995). Empirical critics of offensive realism also suggest that it overestimates aggressive action and fails to take adequate account of institutional and normative constraints (Edinger, 2022; Tabak, 2025). To deal with these challenges, this research does not attempt to use offensive realism as an all-explaining theory. Instead, it employs it as an approach that emphasises structural pressure for power accumulation as an independent driver, but also tests this driver against other possible drivers of alliance formation through process tracing.

Deterrence Theory

This analysis is complemented by the theory of deterrence, which focuses on the strategic position adopted by nations to discourage adversaries from launching aggressive action against them. Focusing on the power of the threat of retaliation as a major factor, the theory of deterrence assumes significant importance in the military strategy of Israel (Adamsky, 2016). The preemptive strike by Israel in June 2025 was not only defensive in nature but also involved strategic considerations to convey a message to adversaries like Iran and its militias. By taking resolute military action against them, Israel was sending out a message that it was committed to deterring future aggression by its adversaries, as advocated by the logic of "strategic messaging through force" in the context of the ongoing conflict scenario (Freedman & Michaels, 2019). The Israeli strike was not only intended to disrupt the adversary's action but also to send a strategic message to Iran and its proxies regarding the rising nuclear issue.

However, deterrence has been found to suffer from various constraints. These include credibility problems, especially in extended deterrence, signaling ambiguities, difficulties in deterring through proxies, as well as domestic constraints on carrying out threats. These all contribute to a low fit in actual cases (Sagan 2020; Tarzi, 2025). The literature has also demonstrated that normative/legal influences can impact signaling, with states using actions that remain within or below legally disputed limits, thereby creating “costly ambiguity” that maintains crises in the short term but undermines long-term constraints (Schmitt, 2025a).

Collectively, offensive realism and deterrence theory provide a solid analytical framework. The two theories assist in understanding the context behind Israel’s strategic actions, interpreting Israel’s perceptions of threat, and analysing the rationale behind Israel’s military engagement. In general terms, offensive realism and deterrence theory provide insight into the complex balance between preemptive self-defence and regional stability.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is qualitative in nature, which is appropriate in analysing the strategic, legal, and diplomatic aspects of the June 2025 Israel-Iran conflict, specifically in relation to the events of Operation Rising Lion and the resultant ceasefire. This methodology is appropriate in analysing the complexities and motivations involved in strategic and legal issues in geopolitics. Secondary data were drawn from journals, textbooks, official statements by Israeli, Iranian, and U.S. authorities, official reports by the IAEA, as well as reports by various news agencies such as CNN, The Times of Israel, Al Jazeera, among others. The time frame of the conflict, which will be explored, will be from May to July 2025, to provide a sense of the conflict itself, as well as the aftermath, to provide a sense of the conflict’s context.

Conceptual/library research approach was employed to understand strategic narratives, legal arguments, and diplomatic actions and reactions. Analytical themes were derived from the concepts of offensive realism and deterrence theory: strategic rationale, legal justification, and geopolitical reaction. Although this analysis is supported by credible and verified sources such as CNN, IAEA and official IDF communiqués, among others, it is observed that as of October 2025, there is a lack of peer-reviewed literature on Operation Rising Lion. This is due to the normal publication lag in response to major geopolitical events. Therefore, this paper is an early contribution to the body of literature on the strategic and legal implications of the June 2025 Israel-Iran conflict, with transparent sources and methodology.

In such a setting, qualitative analysis provides certain advantages, such as yielding significant insights into how states deal with legal ambiguity and strategic uncertainty (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). However, certain limitations of such an analysis include subjective interpretivism and the dynamic nature of international politics, which may change the importance of such an analysis at a future date (Denzin et al., 2023). Nevertheless, by incorporating realist and deterrence-based theory with qualitative analysis, it allows for a multi-faceted analysis of Israel’s preemptive

strategy and its implications on world security. Ethical considerations were of prime importance in designing and conducting such a study. All sources were readily available and were not misrepresented or biased in any way.

Result of the Findings

Strategic Motivations for the Israeli Preemptive Strike against Iran

The motivation behind Israel's preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities during Operation Rising Lion on June 13, 2025, may be understood as an outcome of a combination of strategic imperatives and perceived existential threats. For instance, the intelligence gathering agencies had reported that Iran had begun enriching uranium for nuclear weapons, with the enriched uranium levels reaching those that could be considered as close as possible to the levels required for nuclear weapons (IAEA, 2025). From the perspective of offensive realism theory (Mearsheimer, 2014), the Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear and military installations, leading to the killing of crucial Iranian scientists and military personnel, was a strategic survival mechanism in an anarchic international system where states are required to be offensive in their actions to survive.

Nevertheless, systemic pressures alone cannot account for the preemptive strike. The existing animosity between Israel and Iran, based on their ideological differences, which have been in place since 1979, and their support for radical organisations like Hezbollah and Hamas, have also served to strengthen Israel's perception of Iran as a stalemate opponent. Neoclassical realism suggests that internal domestic politics, including electoral and nationalist pressures, often accentuate external threats, and states may be forced to adopt a more belligerent posture towards their opponents to boost their domestic popularity and political credentials.

Deterrence theory may also help to explain Israel's actions, by acting decisively, Israel attempted to reassert its deterrent potential, showing strength and determination to act if necessary to protect itself against threats. Israel's goal was to dissuade Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold by showing them that if they attempted to do so, Israel would overwhelm them. However, this leads to a paradox in deterrence theory, as Israel's actions may have temporarily bolstered their deterrent potential but also potentially undermined long-term stability by escalating tensions and justifying preventive warfare. Iran's use of proxy forces also makes it difficult to effectively use deterrence theory, as proxy attacks can come indirectly, making Israel's deterrent potential more difficult to achieve.

The strategic reasons for this strike can thus be seen as an amalgamation of offensive realism's notion of power maximisation, deterrence theory's logic of signaling, and historical-ideological factors related to Israeli-Iranian rivalry. Israel's actions cannot thus be seen as a mere reaction to Iran's uranium enrichment program but as part of a larger strategic agenda shaped by a history of animosity, proxy conflicts in the Middle East, and the failure of diplomacy and law to effectively address existential threats to a state's survival.

Legal and Ethical Dimensions of Anticipatory Self-Defense: Lessons from the 12-Day War

The legality of Israel's preemptive strikes during the 12-Day War is a case in point, as the tension between the need for strategic flexibility and the need for strict adherence to the law is evident in the debate surrounding the legality of Israel's strikes in the 12-Day War. While the UN Charter recognises the right of self-defense in Article 51, Gray (2018) points out the ambiguity in the article regarding the right of preventive/preemptive self-defense, which gives Israel a basis on which they could claim the legality of the strike, although Kutty (2025) and Schmitt (2025a) point out that the right of anticipatory self-defense violates international law in the absence of an immediate threat, the real issue is the balance between the need for flexibility in the law as the nature of modern warfare changes, as reflected in the Israel case, and the need for the law to remain rigid for international law to be taken seriously as the law of the land.

The ethics of preemptive warfare can also be better understood when the conflict between Israel and Iran is analysed. The 12-day escalation of the conflict can be seen as a result of offensive realism, where states, especially Israel, are compelled to engage in preemptive warfare for their security. However, as seen from the arguments of Schmitt (2025a), preemptive warfare can also lead to harm and loss of legitimacy. Furthermore, the theory of deterrence also presents a complex situation. Although Israel is engaging in preemptive warfare for the purpose of re-establishing deterrence against Iran's nuclear ambition, as argued by Blanton and Kegley (2025), preventive warfare can also lead to a situation where unilateral aggression is legitimised. Elgawari (2025) argues that there is a need for new legal frameworks. This is particularly relevant in the context of the 12-day war, where traditional legal frameworks may not be effective in dealing with new forms of warfare, especially cyber warfare and nuclear warfare.

From the realist's point of view, the actions of Israel are an expression of the prioritisation of the need for survival above the law. On the other hand, the normative perspective argues that the preemptive strikes by Israel are destabilising the world system by undermining the law. The ethical dilemma here is the balancing act required for the security of the nation and the maintenance of global stability. This is an expression of the larger problem that is posed by the prioritisation of the need for survival above the law.

Unless the law evolves and deals with the changing face of warfare, states will always tend to prioritise their own survival above the law.

The Role of U.S. Involvement in the 12-Day conflict

The role of the United States is another factor that adds another dimension to the complexities of the Israeli-Iranian conflict, as it highlights the tension between deterrence and complicity. The withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA under Trump's administration is an event that altered the dynamics in the region and strengthened the position of Israel while increasing the feeling of encirclement in Iran (Mohiuddin & Razali, 2025). The military aid provided by the

United States to Israel in the form of missile defense technology ensures Israel's qualitative edge in the region and allows for bold action against Iranian proxies in the region (Childs, 2019). However, this also poses a dilemma as the role of the United States in this conflict is seen as both providing defense support to Israel and as complicit in the aggression against Iran through its role in providing intelligence support for the attack (Culbertson et al., 2022; Foreign Affairs Forum, 2025). This highlights the broader debate about whether the support for Israel is providing stability in the region through the power of deterrence or whether it is undermining legitimacy through its role in unilateral aggression.

Such an ambiguous role also challenges the credibility of the United States as a mediator in the Middle Eastern crisis. From a deterrence theory perspective, the support for Israel enhances its ability to maintain its state and territorial integrity. However, from a normative perspective, such support for Israel may be seen as fuel for further escalation and undermine the ability to build trust among actors in the region. Constructivist theorists have also pointed out that the United States' support for Israel also perpetuates divisions in the region based on identity. This makes it even harder for the United States to have dialogue with Iran and its allies in the region. The geopolitical implications of this situation are significant because the United States' support for Israel not only enhances its ability to maintain its state and territorial integrity but also solidifies the retaliation cycle.

Regional Responses and Implications for Stability

Iran's reprisals using missiles and drones within the context of the 12 Day War employed coercive signaling alongside restraint, such as the apparent lack of reliance on proximate proxy actors such as Hezbollah. From the lens of offensive realism, the restraint by Iran can be seen as an attempt to maintain and, where possible, improve its relative position without risking a confrontation on multiple fronts that would undermine its structural position in the region. Offensive realism assumes that actors within the international system attempt to maximise power but avoid risks that would result in net loss; as such, by using military action but also holding back from using proximate proxies such as Hezbollah, Iran was balancing its display of commitment with the risks of an escalatory dynamic that would invite counter-retaliatory force beyond its capacity to counter (Mearsheimer, as explained by the lens of offensive realist theory).

The Western response entailed verbal backing of Israel, as well as repeated public calls to restraint. The latter response had mixed deterrent implications. High-profile leaders of Western countries verbalised concern over Iran's behaviour and its nuclear drive while repeatedly calling for de-escalation (CNN, 2025a, b; The Times of Israel, 2025). In terms of deterrence, this response makes Iran's potential future aggression more costly to Iran politically, thus buttressing Israel's security claims. However, the repeated calls to restraint created confusion over the conditions under which actual action would follow. In deterring potential adversaries, commitment to a cause should be clear and costly. Confusion over Western commitment may thus undermine long-term extended

deterrence credibility, even if it helps contain short-term crises. In the 12 Day War, the Western response to Iran likely contained the crisis in the short term by precluding rapid escalation. However, the response created confusion over whether future Iranian coercion would face material pushback.

The regional actors in the Gulf region responded by adjusting their respective security postures and by deepening cooperation, which are consistent with the predictions of offensive realism as well as the deterrence-based perspective. Saudi Arabia and the UAE publicly expressed alarm and stepped up coordination within the GCC framework, moving from hedging to more open balancing behaviour (Popalzay et al., 2025; Carroll, 2025). Offensive realism argues that balancing behaviour should be seen when proximate threats are on the rise, while deterrence theory argues that signalling and building capabilities in the local area should raise the costs for Iran to launch aggression.

Collectively, these interactions produce three findings in terms of regional stability: First, the signalling and restraint interactions maintained the status quo in the short term, as Iran retaliated but did not fully engage proxies, the West signalled but did not escalate, and the Gulf states chose restraint but also increased defences, consistent with deterrence in the face of limited crises. Second, the measured response may also create instability in the long term, as the logic of offensive realism encourages balancing behaviour in the form of arms purchases, increased security cooperation, and even formal alliances, which may militarise the conflict and create the risk of miscalculations. Thirdly, the credibility issue in the context of extended deterrence, where rhetoric is high but commitment is ambiguous, could actually stabilise the situation in the short run but undermine deterrence in the long run if the adversary perceives the costs of escalation as low.

Based on the theory of offensive realism and deterrence, the actions of the actors in the crisis were rational and logical, as they were sending a signal of their commitment without sacrifice, which maintained the status quo in the face of crisis but started the process of balancing that may result in increased conflict in the future if not addressed in the context of deterrence.

Fragile Ceasefire Dynamics and Future Implications

The ceasefire agreement mediated on 24th June 2025, after twelve days of escalated fighting between Israel and Iran, was a result of various factors, including military exhaustion, diplomatic necessity, and international intervention. Qatar played a crucial role in bringing about negotiations between the warring parties, who had both expressed a willingness to reduce tensions at this critical time. This was further necessitated by concerns of a wider war with global implications (Hamasaheed, 2025; Zeidan, 2025).

Throughout the negotiation process, both countries had to contend with a host of pressures from within and outside their borders. Israel had to contend with the exorbitant costs of the operation and the impending threat of retaliation from Iran. Iran, on the other hand, had to contend with a

series of military defeats and the growing dissent from within its population due to the loss of life among civilians (Chughtai, 2025; Hamasaeed, 2025). These practical considerations led to a tentative truce between the two parties, with both agreeing to call a halt to the conflict and engage in dialogue.

Even as the ceasefire is in place, there have been allegations and counter-allegations of breaches from both sides, just hours after the announcement (Rafizadeh, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025). The mutual distrust and lack of resolution of past grievances between Israel and Iran mean that the ceasefire remain fragile. The tit-for-tat strikes that took place during the conflict are evidence of both sides' willingness to go to war, and anything that happens may set the stage for further conflict.

Adding to this vulnerability is the lack of an effective verification process and a structured approach to sustained diplomatic efforts. Experts have cautioned that unless there is an effective international intervention, the ceasefire agreement may only be an interlude rather than a solution (Dorsey, 2025). Moreover, regional players such as Iranian militias may take advantage of any weakness in enforcement.

Long-Term Consequences of Operation Rising Lion

The immediate impact of Operation Rising Lion was felt, and the dynamics set in motion are likely to affect the regional order in the medium and long terms. The immediate impact was felt in the increased level of mistrust, the suspension of diplomatic efforts towards renewed JCPOA-style talks, and the increased level of proxy rivalry. The short-term impact of the operation is consistent with the concept of deterrence theory in the context of costly signal sending, as the operation was meant to degrade Iranian military capabilities and signal resolve, but it also sent counter-signals that created tactical tensions.

In the medium term, the operation may result in the normalisation of the anticipatory use of force and accelerate regional militarisation. As offensive realism theory suggests, if a state is seen to be willing to use force in anticipation without facing decisive international sanctions, other regional states are expected to react in a way that increases their security. This is done in anticipation of facing a potentially aggressive neighbour. There are already indications of this emerging in the recalibrating GCC and in calls for contingency planning and enhancement (Popalzay et al., 2025; Carroll, 2025). If this is the case, the overall level of militarisation and interoperability between the balances will be increased.

Legally and normatively, the strike stretches the Article 51 model and the understanding of "imminence." Repeated examples of anticipatory/preventive action may have an informal effect on the doctrine of self-defense, reducing the legal and political costs of other states engaging in similar actions. This creates a precedent that may undermine global restraint on the use of force and turn international law into a more flexible tool of powerful state strategic interests.

The 12-Day War is an important case in the strategic rivalry between Israel and Iran. Israel's preemptive strike was an instrumental move in response to existential threats perceived from adversaries, in the context of the theory of offensive realism and deterrence. However, it also posed critical legal and ethical issues regarding the legitimacy of anticipatory self-defence and the spectre of preventive warfare. In this study, through the application of qualitative analysis and the theories of offensive realism and deterrence, a multidimensional analysis of the case is presented, which reveals the strategic motivations and the interplay of law in the strategic rivalry between two of the most important actors in the world and in the region.

Conclusion

The conflict of June 2025, as personified by the Israel operation dubbed "Rising Lion" represents a new level of escalation in the historic strategic rivalry between Israel and Iran, providing a window into the complexities of modern international relations. The analysis has clearly demonstrated that the decision to act on the part of Israel was not merely a reactive move to the perceived threats of danger but rather a calculated move to maintain its position of regional hegemony and to assert its deterrence capabilities against Iran and its affiliates.

The coincidence between the progress made by Iran in the development of its nuclear capabilities and the support provided to its militant allies created a strategic necessity that forced the Israeli government to think and act militarily regarding this issue. The operation has also given rise to important legal and ethical dilemmas regarding the validity of the anticipatory self-defence action. The ambiguity in the definition of "imminence" has complicated the application of existing international laws on the issue, thereby challenging the normative boundaries of the rules on the use of force.

The role of the US has added another dimension of complexity to the strategic equation and raises questions complicity. Though it has strengthened the deterrence potential of Israel with the support of the US, it may lead to difficulties of tension with other actors in the region and may also affect the efforts of the international community to address Iran's nuclear ambitions through diplomacy. The fragile ceasefire is a demonstration of the precarious strategic power that exists in the Middle Eastern region, and the underlying tension of mistrust and grievances.

Ultimately, while Israel may have achieved security gains as a result of its preemptive attack, the long-term consequences of such an attack are highly uncertain. As the Middle East continues to navigate the complexities of nuclearisation, proxy wars, and strategic ambiguity, the 12-Day War should be seen as an opportunity for the region to learn from the past as it seeks to institutionalise restraint, diplomacy, and security cooperation. Though Israel may have gained a short-term security advantage, long-term security is a delicate balancing act between national security and international legal standards, where restraint, diplomacy, and cooperation are the key.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made;

- i. Establish legal and normative restraints on the use of force by preemptive strike protocols under international law, strengthening normative constraints on anticipatory warfare, and strengthening IAEA verification capacity in the Middle East.
- ii. Improve regional security architecture and institutional innovation by creating a comprehensive regional security framework, establishing a Middle East Deterrence Council (MEDC), and establishing the Middle East Security Dialogue Forum.
- iii. Create crisis management and de-escalation mechanisms through the establishment of a regional crisis communication protocol, and integrating artificial Intelligence early warning systems.
- iv. Strengthen informal diplomacy and confidence building by improving and strengthening track II dialogue initiatives. The United States and its partners should assist in the institutionalisation of Track II dialogue initiatives with impartial facilitators (e.g., Switzerland, Norway, and the UN) and thematic focus with feedback loops to Track I.
- v. Regional crisis communication Protocol through direct military-to-military hotlines should be established between Israel and Iran, as was done during the Cold War. The hotlines should have provisions for de-escalating, mediating, and verifying information in real-time.
- vi. Integrate AI-based early warning systems: the region should use artificial intelligence-based systems for early warning of military, cyber, and escalation risks. The information should be shared among regional actors in real-time.

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