



Beyond Victory: How Should Israel's War Against Iran Be Assessed?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The success of Israel's 2023–2026 campaigns against Iran, its proxies, and its allies should not be judged by simplistic measures of targets destroyed or by the continuing existence or otherwise of the Iranian regime, but by whether or not Iran's grand strategy has been disrupted. Rather than viewing Iran's nuclear program in isolation, we interpret it as one pillar of an integrated strategy that also included the "Ring of Fire" proxy network and long-range missile forces. Following the degradation of much of this regional architecture after October 7, 2023, Iran accelerated its nuclear and missile programs in an effort to restore its strategic position. The Israeli campaigns against Iran itself are therefore best understood as efforts to prevent Iran from reconstructing this integrated military architecture rather than as attempts to achieve either regime change or a decisive military victory. Israel's success should be measured by assessing whether this goal was achieved and by calculating how long it will take Iran to once again pose an existential threat to Israel.

Public discussions of war often resemble commentary after a sporting event. Politicians, journalists, and even military analysts are quick to declare winners and losers, asking whether one side has "won" or "lost" as though wars produce clear and immediate scorecards. This tendency reflects an understandable desire for simple answers, but misunderstands the nature of war and strategic competition.

Wars are not sporting contests with a final whistle and an accurate tally of points. They are political and strategic processes whose consequences unfold over time, often across multiple campaigns in an extended conflict and even successive conflicts. Military victories that appear decisive may later prove transient, while apparent setbacks can be reversed as states recover, adapt, forge new alliances, exploit technological change, or capitalize on unforeseen political developments. Successful prosecution of a war is not the same as successful prosecution of a political conflict. History offers countless examples in which the significance of a military campaign could be understood only years after the fact, once its longer-term strategic effects (i.e., the effect of the war's military result on the political situation) had become apparent. Judging victory immediately after the guns fall silent is therefore often premature.

This distinction points to a broader analytical problem: Operational success should not be confused with strategic success, and strategic success should not be confused with political success. Military operations are designed to destroy forces, seize territory, or degrade specific capabilities. Strategy, by contrast, employs those operational results to shape an adversary's long-term ability to achieve its political objectives while achieving one's own. Tactical and operational achievements matter only insofar as they advance that larger strategic purpose. The true measure of success, therefore, is not simply what was destroyed on the battlefield, but whether military action altered the adversary's capacity to pursue its overarching strategy.

These observations are particularly relevant to the ongoing confrontation between Israel and Iran. Since the Israeli and later joint Israeli-American campaigns against Iran in 2025 and 2026, much of the public debate has focused on whether Israel "won": Was the nuclear program destroyed? Was deterrence restored? Has Iran been sufficiently weakened? Did the Iranian regime fall? These are important questions, but they do not reach the heart of the matter.

We argue herein that the proper measure of Israel's campaign is not whether it achieved a decisive victory over Iran. Nor do we seek to explain American strategy, which undoubtedly reflected a broader set of regional and global considerations beyond those of Israel. Instead, the focus here is on Israeli strategy alone. From Israel's perspective, the central question is whether its military campaigns have disrupted Iran's long-term strategy of threatening and

ultimately seeking to eliminate the Jewish state. Viewed through that lens, the campaigns of June 2025 and March 2026 appear not as isolated military operations but as successive phases in a broader strategic contest whose outcome will ultimately be measured not by the language of victory or defeat, but by whether Iran can reconstruct the strategic architecture on which its regional ambitions have long depended.

Iran's grand design: An integrated approach to defeating Israel

To assess whether Israel has successfully disrupted Iran's strategy, one must first understand what that strategy actually was. Much of the public discussion has treated Iran's nuclear program as though it constituted Tehran's principal strategic objective. This perspective, however, mistakes a critical capability for the strategy itself.

A more persuasive interpretation is that Iran's nuclear program was only one component of a broader grand strategy that sought to alter the regional balance of power decisively in Tehran's favor and ultimately render Israel strategically untenable—in Iranian terminology, "to wipe Israel off the map". Rather than viewing the nuclear program, the ballistic missile force, and the so-called "Ring of Fire" as separate initiatives, they are better understood as **mutually reinforcing pillars of a single strategic design**.

The first pillar was the gradual construction of an extensive regional military network surrounding Israel. Over more than two decades, Iran invested enormous political, financial, and military resources into developing Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Shiite militias in Syria and Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and other aligned organizations across the region. It had begun to work on similar projects in Judea and Samaria and in Jordan. Collectively, these forces created what Israeli analysts have termed the "Ring of Fire": a multidirectional military architecture designed to threaten Israel simultaneously from several fronts.

The strategy was not simply to sustain continuous military, economic, and psychological pressure through rockets, precision missiles, drones, cyber capabilities, and maritime disruption. It also sought to create the conditions for large-scale, coordinated ground offensives into Israeli territory from multiple directions. The October 7 attack demonstrated how Iran's partners envisioned

combining mass rocket fire with cross-border invasion of large forces and the seizure of Israeli communities. In its fully developed form, the Ring of Fire appears to have been intended to replicate and expand that model on a much larger scale, potentially involving simultaneous incursions by multiple Iranian proxies along several fronts.

The October 7 attack should therefore be understood not merely as a Hamas operation but as the first large-scale demonstration of the operational concept embedded within Iran's broader regional strategy: the integration of mass missile fire, drone attacks, and coordinated ground incursions against Israel. Had the Ring of Fire matured as Tehran intended, similar offensives could have been launched simultaneously from Lebanon, Gaza, Syria, and potentially additional fronts. By acting prematurely, against the will of Iran, Sinwar effectively triggered the very regional confrontation that Iran had hoped to postpone until its integrated military architecture had fully matured. In doing so, he exposed and ultimately contributed to the dismantling of the strategic system that Tehran had painstakingly constructed over more than two decades.

The second pillar was the steady expansion of Iran's long-range missile arsenal coupled with the vast shorter-range rocket and missile arsenals of its proxies. These forces were intended to provide Tehran with the ability to strike Israel directly while simultaneously complementing the operations of its regional proxy network. Their role, however, extended well beyond increasing Iran's strike capability. Together with the enormous rocket and missile arsenals accumulated by Hezbollah and other proxies, Iran sought to create a volume and intensity of fire capable of overwhelming Israel's multilayered air and missile defense systems. The objective was not simply to inflict physical destruction but to achieve strategic paralysis: crippling critical military and civilian infrastructure, disrupting reserve mobilization and military operations, degrading the economy, undermining public morale, and constraining Israel's political and military decision-making. Such sustained, multidirectional barrages would provide the conditions for coordinated ground offensives by Iranian proxies from multiple fronts. In other words, the missile campaign was designed to suppress Israel's ability to respond effectively while the Ring of Fire land forces invaded its territory. The missile force was therefore not merely a supporting capability but an indispensable pillar of Iran's integrated strategy

for defeating Israel through a combination of strategic paralysis and coordinated conventional invasion.

The third pillar—and perhaps the most widely misunderstood—was the nuclear program. Much of the international debate has assumed that its principal purpose was to enable Iran eventually to launch a nuclear attack against Israel. Such an outcome, however, appears strategically improbable. As does the rest of the world, Iran believes Israel to have nuclear weapons. Therefore, any deliberate nuclear strike would almost certainly trigger devastating retaliation and threaten the survival of the Islamic Republic itself. A more plausible interpretation is that the nuclear program was intended primarily to generate strategic immunity rather than provide an offensive warfighting capability.

Israel's nuclear arsenal is widely believed to serve it as a "Samson Option" — that is to say, if faced with catastrophic defeat, Israel would employ it to "die with the Philistines". However, if that option were faced with a nuclear retaliation, Israel might hesitate, preferring a conventional warfare defeat that could enable the saving of part of its population over a nuclear holocaust that would kill most of it. Nuclear deterrence would not make Iran invulnerable, but would substantially increase the political and military risks associated with Israeli action. The Iranian nuclear option was thus not seen as its main offensive weapon but as a defensive backing for its conventional and proxy forces attacking Israel.

This is one of the reasons why Iran was in no hurry to create its first nuclear weapon. It had to complete its conventional offensive capability first. The other reason is that having only one nuclear weapon could entice an immediate attack to destroy it, whereas being able to manufacture many of them in a short time would protect that capability. The main goal was therefore to create the ability to manufacture many nuclear weapons quickly, and to begin a burst of production only after that ability was achieved. Meanwhile, the rocket and missile threat on Israel's civilians was meant to deter Israel from initiating a preventative war.

The significance of this interpretation lies in understanding the interaction among the three pillars. The proxy network created persistent military

pressure; the missile force enhanced the scale, reach, and credibility of that pressure; and the nuclear program protected both by raising the costs of preventive action. None of these capabilities was designed to operate independently. Their strategic value emerged from their integration into a single military-political architecture.

From Israel's perspective, the critical development was not simply that Iran's strategy had changed, but that Tehran appeared to be acting upon this new strategic reality. As long as Iran was still constructing the first two pillars of its grand strategy, the Ring of Fire and its long-range missile arsenal, it had little strategic incentive to rush toward completing the nuclear program. From this standpoint, Iran's willingness to accept constraints under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is understandable. Because the conventional military architecture upon which its broader strategy depended had not yet fully matured, postponing the completion of the nuclear pillar carried relatively little strategic cost while reducing the incentive to attack it, thus buying valuable time to continue strengthening its regional position.

That strategic calculus began to change after October 7, 2023. It crescendoed in December 2024 following the dramatic defeats of Hamas and then Hezbollah and the loss of the Syrian ally, which disrupted access through Syria to Israel and Lebanon. With much of the Ring of Fire drastically degraded, Tehran could no longer rely on its members to deter Israel from a direct preemptive attack on it.

According to Israeli intelligence assessments, Iran responded by accelerating efforts to strengthen the two remaining pillars of its strategy. These efforts reportedly included accelerated activity to create a nuclear weapons arsenal and a significant expansion of its long-range missile production. Taken together, these developments suggested that Tehran was attempting to compensate for the loss of its conventional deterrence by proxy by rapidly restoring the strategic immunity necessary to rebuild it. The rationale of the nuclear weapons program had shifted from existing to back a conventional offensive on Israel to deterring a possible Israeli attack on Iran. The rationale of the missile program had shifted from participating in that conventional offensive to also deterring an Israeli attack. Iran's offensive strategy had been dismantled, compelling it to replace it with a defensive strategy – at least for the time being, until it could create a new offensive strategy for annihilating Israel.

Viewed in this way, Iran's grand strategy was not centered on a single weapon system but on creating an integrated strategic environment in which Israel would gradually lose its freedom of action, confront mounting multidirectional military pressure, eventually find itself unable to prevent the continued expansion of Iranian regional power, and finally succumb to a multi-front offensive that would devastate it to the point of political extinction. If this interpretation is correct, then evaluating Israel's recent campaigns requires asking not whether they destroyed a particular facility or delayed uranium enrichment but whether they disrupted this integrated strategic design.

From Israel's perspective, the critical development was not simply that Iran's strategy had changed, but that Tehran appeared to be acting upon this new strategic reality. Furthermore, the existence of a large arsenal of long-range missiles (tens of thousands if the program was not halted), some of which could carry nuclear weapons, would create a new existential threat to Israel, if and when Iran recovered from its enforced defensive posture and renewed its offensive strategy. Conversely, behind this threat, Iran could rebuild and improve the conventional proxy military capabilities Israel had, at great cost, destroyed or dismantled since October 2023.

The Israeli campaign of June 2025 was therefore a direct response to the acceleration of Iran's nuclear weapons program and long-range missile production. Following that campaign, Israel's prime minister stated that a rebuilding of these programs would trigger another Israeli attack.

When Iran subsequently resumed these efforts after the initial Israeli strikes, Israel—joined by the United States—launched the broader campaign in March 2026. These operations were directed not merely against nuclear facilities or missile production sites (though they were directed at these first and foremost) but at subsidiary targets that would enable Iran to reconstruct its long-term military strategy against Israel.

Reassessing the 2025–2026 campaigns

Understanding Iran's grand strategy fundamentally changes how Israel's military campaigns should be evaluated. If Tehran's objective was not merely to acquire a nuclear weapon but to construct an integrated strategic system combining a proxy network, long-range missile forces, and a nuclear umbrella,

then Israel's operations cannot be assessed solely by the number of centrifuges destroyed, missiles eliminated, or facilities damaged. The more important question is whether those operations disrupted Iran's ability to implement its broader strategy.

The Israeli campaigns of June 2025 and March 2026 appear strategically coherent. They were not isolated preventive strikes against individual military capabilities but successive phases of a broader effort to dismantle the mutually reinforcing pillars of Iran's grand strategy. Following the severe degradation of the Ring of Fire after October 7, 2023, Israeli decisionmakers assessed that Iran was attempting to compensate by accelerating its nuclear and missile programs. Preventing Tehran from restoring those capabilities therefore became the logical continuation of the same strategic campaign.

This interpretation also explains why the success or failure of these operations cannot be measured by whether they produced regime change or permanently eliminated every aspect of Iran's military capability. Those outcomes, while desirable and even aspirational, were neither essential nor necessarily achievable. The more realistic strategic objective was to deny Iran the integrated military architecture required to pursue its long-term strategy against Israel. Whether Iran eventually develops alternative methods of projecting power remains an open question, but rebuilding the strategy it pursued over the previous two decades has become considerably more difficult and costly. The longer the delay imposed, the greater the measure of Israel's success, though measuring that success will be possible only in the future. A total success would occur only if the current regime falls and is replaced by one that eschews the objective of annihilating Israel and diverts its efforts away from creating the capabilities needed to achieve that objective toward others that do not threaten Israel. Otherwise, Israel might be required at some time in the future to once again destroy Iran's threatening capabilities.

What really matters

The war is unlikely to end with a decisive political settlement or ceremonial surrender, and Iran will almost certainly continue searching for new ways to restore its regional influence and military power. Measuring victory by these results is irrelevant. The more relevant question is whether Israel has

fundamentally disrupted the strategic architecture that underpinned Iran's program to annihilate the Jewish state.

Israel's security architects, ever since Jabotinsky wrote his article *The Iron Wall* in 1923, have always known that for Israel, its political conflict with the nations that surround it will not end in its completely defeating and imposing conditions on them. There will be no red flag on the Reichstag moment. Israel's victory lies in its survival and prosperity. Perhaps the hostile nations will eventually reconcile themselves to its existence and cease attempting to annihilate it. The measure of Israel's strategic success in each round of fighting is whether the threat has increased or been reduced, at least temporarily. Over the past 45 years, some of Israel's enemies have indeed reconciled with it. Others still seek its destruction. Some maintain hostility but prefer to focus on other national goals.

By that measure, the current war, unleashed by the Hamas offensive, containing separate but integrated episodes, and not yet over, has been successful so far. The adversaries participating in this particular war continue to exist and remain hostile, but Israel's strategic situation, and the trend it is developing, have improved immensely since the day before the Hamas offensive on October 7, 2023. At that time, the coalition of proxies and allies headed by Iran was developing an increasingly dangerous threat to Israel while not providing Israel with a *cassus belli* sufficient to preempt them. That changed on October 7.

Over the almost three years since, Israel has successively attacked and drastically reduced most of the components of the Iranian strategy to destroy it—first the most dangerous proxies and allies, and then the two pillars of Iran's long-range military capability as well. This does not mean the sources of that threat have disappeared; they certainly have not. But Iran's overall plan, and the political and military architecture it has expended much effort to build, have been devastated. As stated, so long as the current regime stays in power it will very likely, sooner or later, attempt to build a new offensive strategy against Israel, but that threat has been considerably reduced and delayed.

Israel undoubtedly hoped that sustained military pressure might contribute to internal instability in Iran and perhaps even create conditions that could

eventually topple the regime. Yet even if the regime survives – as Israeli leaders likely understood was the more probable outcome – the strategic rationale for the campaigns remains intact. Their purpose was not primarily to overthrow the regime but to deny any leadership in Tehran the integrated military capabilities required to implement the grand strategy that Iran had patiently constructed over more than two decades.

Measured by that standard, the campaigns of 2025 and 2026 should be understood not as isolated military victories or defeats but as significant phases in a continuing strategic contest whose ultimate outcome will depend on whether Iran can reconstruct that strategy or devise a new one – and whether Israel can continue to prevent it from doing so.

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