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### Israel Won the War It Fought. But Iran Emerged Victorious in the One That Mattered - Opinion - Haaretz.com

Moty Kanas, July 8, 2025

For years, Iran has been enriching uranium and threatening the region with nuclear weapons, resulting in all-out war last month. But what has been presented as one war, with Israel emerging victorious is misleading. The 12-day conflict was two wars: one which Israel won, and the other won by Iran.

Israel and the U.S. had a clear mission in their joint endeavor: To strike Iran's nuclear program and restore regional deterrence by crippling Iran's nuclear and ballistic infrastructure. Hit the facilities. Destroy the capabilities. Eliminate the threats. Annihilate expertise. Set back Iran's nuclear timeline by years.

Yes, these strikes were vital and effective in reaching their targets. But the timing was four years too late. Iran began enriching uranium to 60 percent in April 2021. In the four years since, Tehran has raced toward nuclear weapons capability, which largely went by without retaliation. Iran already built the very stockpile that would ensure their program's survival even after devastating attacks. That stockpile is 408 kilograms of uranium, enriched to 60 percent, just short of weapons grade.

Israel led the campaign while the U.S. landed the heaviest blows, with their awesome bunker-busting bombs. Coordination was tight. Intelligence was precise and even historic, proving the Israel-U.S. alliance is stronger than ever. The world watched with wonderment, glued to their screens, as the Natanz and Fordow enrichment sites were struck in what the U.S. called Operation Midnight Hammer and Israel dubbed Rising Lion. Missile factories and research sites destroyed. Key scientists and military leaders killed. Iran's nuclear infrastructure and missile programs suffered brutal hits.

But all of that was entirely replaceable. Iran seems to have kept what mattered: those 408 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60 percent. Enough to continue their nuclear program even without the old infrastructure, the Islamic Republic's sacrificial lamb or perhaps its Trojan horse.

Each side fought for different goals and claimed different victories. Israel did manage to achieve a few of its objectives: take out infrastructure, pull the U.S. onto their side and even wreck Iran's aerial defense.



Mourners chant slogans during the funeral ceremony of the Iranian armed forces generals, nuclear scientists and their family members who were killed in Israeli strikes, in Tehran, Iran, Credit: Vahid Salemi, AP

These objectives likely could not have been accomplished four years ago, when they could have actually far more effectively prevented Iran's nuclear program from enriching uranium. Only now, after the regional, strategic developments following October 7 were they feasibly attainable. First came the degradation of Iran's air defense systems after the April 2024 volley of attacks between the Islamic Republic and Israel. Then, Israel's victory over Hezbollah, taking out Iran's strongest proxy. Finally, came the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. Iran's protective shield was systematically dismantled, one piece at a time.

All this needed to happen in order for Israel to even attempt striking Iran's nuclear infrastructure. But doing so now was too late. The uranium is already enriched.

Iran fought a different war entirely. The Islamic Republic was likely not trying to win militarily – they were trying to survive politically while gaining strategic legitimacy. Turn losses into proof of importance. Make getting hit look like playing with the big kids, being respected by the world's superpowers. Yes, their nuclear infrastructure was severely damaged, but they had three outcomes in mind that to them were far more important than Fordow, than any general or even than strikes during a live TV broadcast.

In the meantime, Iran fought a second war – on the narrative front.

Domestically, Tehran censored footage of the destruction helped by their 95 percent shut down of the internet while exaggerating the success of its own attacks on Israel. To their public, they showed strength and control, thus preventing regime change.

Internationally, global calls for restraint gave Tehran something more valuable: legitimacy. The world treated Iran as a negotiating partner – not a rogue regime.

And so in addition to keeping its 408 kilogram of uranium safe from combined U.S. and Israeli attacks, they also managed to hold on to control while improving their standing on the global stage. Iran's ability to absorb punishment, control the story and avoid collapse may be its biggest win.

Plus, with its uranium stockpile likely dispersed and intact, Tehran no longer needs to rebuild everything – just maintain ambiguity. In this way, they can maintain their position as a partner that must be negotiated with. You don't need to test a bomb if everyone assumes you have one.



A man holds a picture of Iran's late head of the Revolutionary Guard's ballistic missile program, Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh during the funeral ceremony of him, some other Iranian armed forces generals, nuclear scientists and their family members, who were killed in a 12-day war with Israel, in Tehran, Iran, Credit: Vahid Salemi, AP

Iran can now mirror other regional powers, namely Israel: never confirm, never deny – just imply. This "threshold" position brings maximum strategic benefit with fewer consequences.

From Tehran's perspective, Iran may have emerged stronger: More legitimate at home, more respected abroad and closer to nuclear threshold status without crossing it. While the world watched explosions, Tehran quietly moved toward its real goal.

Their ultimate victory? Being treated as a nuclear power – without the risks of officially becoming one. In redefining what winning looks like, Iran may have changed the rules of modern conflict itself.

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