Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Richard Haass

The latest chapter in the conflict-torn Middle East is just beginning

In its airstrikes across Iran, Israel reportedly killed senior military leaders as well as prominent figures in the country's nuclear program.

It also appears that Israel further degraded Iranian air defenses, struck additional military targets, and attacked at least one nuclear-related installation – and possibly more.

Despite Israel's claim that it was acting preemptively, the attacks constitute a classic preventive action, mounted against a gathering threat, rather than an imminent danger.

The difference has legal and diplomatic implications, as preventive military attacks tend to be far more controversial, falling under the heading of wars of choice. Preemptive attacks are seen as a form of self-defense and tend to be accepted as necessary.

These are likely to be distinctions without meaningful differences for Israel, which has carried out such strikes (though more limited) against nascent Iraqi and Syrian nuclear programs in the past.

Moreover, acting against Iran plays well domestically: It is one of the few issues that most Israelis – deeply divided over the war in Gaza, the role of the courts in their democracy, and the country's secular-religious balance – can agree on.

A new assessment of Iranian capabilities

Why Israel chose to conduct this operation now has yet to be satisfactorily explained. According to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, "In recent months, Iran has taken steps that it has never taken before, steps to weaponize [its] enriched uranium."

But it will be important to see if the Israeli government had new intelligence or developed a new assessment of Iranian capabilities and intentions.

We know from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that Iran was actively producing highly enriched uranium and had not been forthcoming about its nuclear-related activities.

In recent weeks, however, US intelligence officials confirmed their assessment was that Iran had not yet decided to produce a nuclear weapon.

> Still, US officials have sought to distance America from the Israeli action

According to reports, largely based on statements from Israeli officials, the United States knew about the intended attack in advance and did not attempt to stop it.

While we will likely learn whether it truly gave a green as opposed to a yellow light, it seems all but certain that it did not flash a red one, as it has at other times over the years.

Still, US officials have sought to distance America from the Israeli action, stating that Israel acted unilaterally and making it clear that Iran should not attack US forces in response.

The degree to which the US is prepared to assist Israel in any future military actions against Iran, or in buttressing its ability to defend itself from Iranian retaliation, is unclear.

Prospects for reviving US-Iran nuclear negotiations, which President Donald Trump has suggested should continue, seem remote.

What else will Iran choose to do against Israel?

It is too early to offer a definitive assessment of this operation's success. That assessment will depend on several factors, beginning with the extent and consequences of the damage.

What was accomplished, how much time Iran would need to rebuild what it has lost, and how deeply Iran's military and nuclear leadership have been disrupted remain unknown.

A related question is whether and how the attack will affect the Iranian regime's hold on the country, which the Israeli attack may have been designed to weaken.

A second consideration is the scope of future Iranian retaliation. Iran's initial response was relatively modest: some one hundred drones launched toward Israel, against which Israel is well prepared to defend. But subsequently Iran launched several waves of ballistic missiles.

> An Iranian effort to interfere with the region's energy industry cannot be ruled out

The obvious question is what else will Iran choose to do against Israel and Israeli targets around the world. It is far from clear, though, that Iran has an attractive set of options, given its demonstrated vulnerabilities.

Also to be seen is whether Iran acts against the US, which withdrew many of its personnel from the region in anticipation of retaliation, or against one or more of its Arab neighbors.

Despite Iran's ongoing efforts to improve relations with the Gulf States, an Iranian effort to interfere with the region's energy industry cannot be ruled out.

That would jeopardize its standing in the Gulf but raise the price of oil (already up in the wake of Israel's attack), inflicting pain on the West and possibly increasing Iranian revenues at a time when sanctions relief, a subject of the nuclear negotiations with the US, is no longer imminent.

What could have been negotiated between the US and Iran?

There is also the prospect of additional Israeli military strikes against known and suspected nuclear sites, a step both Netanyahu and Trump have warned is coming. This, too, would require an assessment of what was accomplished and what the consequences might be.

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Iran, seeking to deter an attack like the one that just occurred, will have to decide whether to redouble its nuclear efforts, reconstitute its program in more difficult-to-destroy facilities, and continue to cooperate with the IAEA.

Adding to the complexity is whether outside partners – such as China, Russia, and North Korea, all of which have experience developing nuclear weapons – will lend assistance, and how both the US and Israel will respond if they do.

Before determining whether military action was the best available policy, we will also need to learn more about what could have been negotiated and verified between the US and Iran.

This could affect the political reactions in both Israel and Iran concerning whether the attacks could and should have been avoided.

For now, there are more questions than answers about what happened or what could happen next. The only certainty is that this latest chapter in the conflict-torn Middle East is just beginning.

Richard Haass, President Emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, senior counselor at Centerview Partners, and Distinguished University Scholar at New York University, previously served as Director of Policy Planning for the US State Department (2001-03), and was President George W. Bush's special envoy to Northern Ireland and Coordinator for the Future of Afghanistan.