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Middle power offensive air operations: Insights from Operation Rising Lion

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Unlike defensive air operations which are reactive, offensive air operations are undertaken where and when an air force chooses. Israel's 12-day air campaign (Operation Rising Lion) against Iran in mid-2025 is an excellent example. It provides both insights and cautions for middle power air forces contemplating sustained offensive air operations. This is especially as the Israeli Air Force (IAF) is well practiced in large preplanned air operations including in the 1967 Six Day War, the 1982 Bekaa Valley air war and the 2024 Bashan Arrow air war against Syria (Layton, 2018; Grant, 2002; Fabian, 2024).

Planning the Air War

Detailed operational planning for the 12-day air war started in May 2024 with the aim to execute in June 2025. However, the original contingency planning for the campaign started around 30 years ago. Initially, the long-term focus was to prevent Iran to develop nuclear weapons. However, Iran's attack on Israel in April 2024 (Operation True Promise 1) used ballistic missiles, which had a marked psychological impact on Israeli decision-makers. While the attack was ineffective, Iran's use of these weapons prompted Israel to change its Iran strategy. Destroying Iran's long range ballistic missile force and its manufacturing capabilities now became as important as the long-planned nuclear facilities strikes (Wald, et al 2025). Israel's revised strategy meant using not just the long-range F-15 aircraft but also the shorter-range F-16 and F-35 fleets, the small air-to-air refuelling force, and Heron and Hermes drones.

Israeli defence thinking has long stressed that achieving air superiority is a fundamental precondition for ongoing offensive air operations (Shapiro, 2025). Iran's air defence mainly relied on a large surface-to-air missile (SAM) force, comprised of some fairly-modern Russian equipment, such as the S-300PMU-1 (NATO SA-20), and numerous indigenously developed systems with strengths in optical but not radar guidance (Giustozzi, 2025; Wald, 2025). These SAM systems were often semi-fixed, poorly networked making cooperation problematic and with operators unskilled in avoiding being targeted using 'blinking' tactics and deception (Mehta, 2025).

Most of the IAF's air superiority effort accordingly went into the Suppression of Enemy Air Defences (SEAD) mission. This mission is a major IAF strength that has arguably become deeply embedded as a Service-cultural preference (Calitz, 2023).

Undertaking the Air War

In the 1973 Arab-Israeli war (Yom Kippur War), the IAF lost 109 aircraft to SAMs and Anti-aircraft Artillery (AAA). SAMs forced IAF aircraft to fly low, which led them into AAA coverage (Carter, 1998). In response, the IAF closely integrated the intelligence and the operational efforts involved in defeating SAMs. This included continually acquiring deep technical knowledge, accurately locating SAM systems in real-time and fielding specialized SEAD

munitions and electronic warfare systems. These lessons where carried into today.

In the 12-day air war, the lessons from over 50-years of dedication to SEAD was evident in the use of F-35s as electronic reconnaissance and warning aircraft (Wald et al, 2025), new long-range air-launched ballistic missile (ALBM) systems fired from F-15 and F-16 aircraft outside SAM range, covert ground forces using small drones and remotely-operated Spike anti-tank missiles to attack radar and SAM systems deep in Iran, and Heron drones undertaking 15 hours-a-day surveillance.

The result was that no IAF crewed aircraft were lost in the 12-day war, while some 80 of the 100 SAM systems in areas being attacked were destroyed, together with 70 associated air defence radars (Fabian, 2025). Moving replacement SAM systems from other parts of Iran simply saw them destroyed while enroute.

Two aspects stand out. The IAF demonstrated the emerging heterogenous air power model where crewed aircraft are elements within a careful blend of crewed aircraft, rockets, missiles and drones. Avoiding the loss of crewed aircraft was IAF's highest priority. As such, they were used only when essential with about 70% of the air operations' overall flying hours by drones (Ahronheim, 2025).

Within the span of 12 days, the IAF flew some 1400 long-range crewed aircraft sorties each lasting about four hours and demonstrating superb force generation capabilities (Wald et al, 2025). The first day reportedly involved some 200 of its overall 270 crewed combat aircraft fleet, matching the IAF's efforts in the first day of the Six Day War (Cooper, 2025). Preplanned air operations allow air forces to ensure their air and maintenance workforce are trained and in place at the right time, and that intermediate and deeper level servicings have been completed. A middle power air force can therefore produce much greater air power than might be expected, even if only for a short duration.

Insights and cautions

Israel's 12-day air war is thought provoking.

First, with SAMs becoming increasingly effective against hard-to-replace crewed aircraft (Layton, 2025), SEAD is becoming essential for middle power air forces to conduct ongoing offensive air operations. The IAF's professionalisation of SEAD missions shows what is achievable. While the IAF's solution is contextually unique, some aspects stand out. These include creating "a command centre for attacking SAM batteries", continually updating parametric data, constantly tracking regional threat SAMs, acquiring weapons that SAM threat systems cannot engage such as ALBMs and embracing multi-domain concepts such as covert close-in attacks (Calitz, 2025).

Second, some of Iran's key nuclear facilities could not be damaged by the IAF's weapons. Instead, the United States Air Force dropped GBU-57A/B bunker buster bombs on two nuclear facilities and Tomahawks were fired at a third. Israel began its self-described "existential" war arguably ill-equipped, simply hoping the United States would later join in. The three nuclear facilities were difficult targets, nevertheless that doesn't excuse avoiding them; the 30 year plan had a major known shortcoming.

Finally, Iran's in-service ballistic missile force was significantly damaged with the IAF's ability to attack mobile missile launchers most impressive (Almadon, 2025, Azulay, 2025). This was essential to reducing the missiles fired by Iran against Israel to a manageable amount. However, less weight of effort was then seemingly applied to the missile production facilities. These were quickly repaired and producing 300 ballistic missiles a month six months later (Institute, 2025). Supply chain networks are inherently difficult to inflict lasting damage upon and require time-consuming system analysis (Layton, 2023).

Middle power air forces have limited resources and for the IAF these went into gaining air superiority through SEAD, with consequently less allocated to the primary target sets.

Ambitions for offensive air operations by middle powers need to be very carefully balanced against the limited resources available and tempered accordingly.

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