

Might Over Law: Israel's Strike on Iran and the Future of Global Order

Written by Tewfik Hamel

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Israeli strikes on Iran, beginning on 13 June, were carried out amid heightened regional tensions and rekindle long-standing debates on the limits of force and the invocation of national security imperatives. Whether the operation involved a targeted attack on military infrastructure or a more indirect act of retaliation, it raises foundational questions about international legality, political legitimacy, and regional stability. Israel justifies such actions by citing an existential threat posed by Iran's nuclear program. However, this rationale places the operation outside the legal framework established by the United Nations and signals a broader strategic shift—one where unilateralism prevails over multilateral norms.

In this context, it is crucial to move beyond a purely security-based interpretation and critically examine the action through a dual prism: its legal validity under international law and its political-strategic legitimacy in today's fragile geopolitical landscape. The implications extend well beyond bilateral hostility; they touch on the erosion of collective security mechanisms and the normalization of force as a political tool. What is at stake is not merely one country's right to defend itself, but the very future of an international order grounded in law.

International law rests on a foundational principle: the prohibition of the use of force, enshrined in Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter. Only two exceptions to this rule exist: the right to self-defense in response to an armed attack (Article 51) and Security Council authorization. In the case of Israel's strike on Iran, neither of these conditions is met. Iran has not launched a direct attack on Israeli territory, and no UN resolution legitimizes the use of force against it.

Israel frequently invokes the notion of anticipatory self-defense, arguing that Iran's nuclear capabilities constitute an existential threat. However, this doctrine is controversial and widely disputed in legal scholarship. It relies on a presumption of future aggression rather than a present attack, thereby departing from the strict legal framework defined by the UN Charter. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, based on nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, serves as a stark reminder of how such logic can be dangerously misapplied.

Moreover, the Israeli strike constitutes a clear violation of Iranian sovereignty, which is protected under customary international law. According to the 1974 UN General Assembly Resolution 3314, such an act may be classified as aggression, especially when carried out without Security Council endorsement. This undermines the credibility of international institutions and weakens the rule of law in global affairs.

By bypassing legal channels, Israel also sidelines the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), whose role in monitoring Iran's nuclear program is central to diplomacy. Military action not only disrupts these mechanisms but also creates a precedent where states unilaterally decide what constitutes a "threat" and act accordingly. Under these conditions, Israel's legal justification appears not only tenuous but potentially unlawful, threatening to unravel international legal norms built over decades.

From a strategic standpoint, Israel presents its attack as an urgent necessity to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. This perspective is grounded in a forward-looking interpretation of security, where the mere capability of an adversary is framed as an intolerable risk. While the fear of a nuclear-armed Iran is shared by many in the region, the

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legitimacy of a preemptive strike depends on two criteria: proportionality and imminence. In the current situation, neither condition appears fully satisfied. Iran has indeed enriched uranium beyond the 60% threshold, but it has not built a nuclear bomb. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has not confirmed any intent or progress toward weaponization. Consequently, Israel's strike is based more on projected intent than on concrete evidence of an imminent threat. This erodes the legitimacy of the action, particularly when diplomatic alternatives still exist.

Strategically, the strike may also prove counterproductive. It risks consolidating the Iranian hardliners' grip on power while undermining the credibility of moderates who advocate for negotiation. It also increases the likelihood of Iran accelerating its nuclear ambitions—not slowing them—by demonstrating that diplomacy offers no protection from foreign aggression. Furthermore, it weakens regional and international mechanisms designed to contain such crises through dialogue and oversight.

In the broader geopolitical landscape, Israel's strike sends a signal of strategic unilateralism. It challenges not only Iran but also tests the limits of U.S. support, the patience of Gulf countries, and the effectiveness of international non-proliferation frameworks. The operation, far from being a defensive necessity, increasingly appears to serve as a means of asserting dominance, drawing red lines, and reshaping regional power balances.

This action risks escalating tensions across the region, particularly with Iran-backed actors such as Hezbollah or militias in Iraq and Syria. In this sense, Israel's claim to legitimacy—while rooted in genuine security concerns—does not hold up when weighed against the broader consequences for diplomacy, deterrence, and regional stability. Rather than ensuring security, the strike could prove to be a strategic miscalculation with far-reaching repercussions.

By acting without UN authorization, Israel reinforces a pattern where states bypass legal frameworks under the guise of national security, thereby contributing to the erosion of collective security systems. This development reflects a deeper crisis of multilateralism. With the UN Security Council often paralyzed by great-power rivalry and geopolitical deadlock, countries increasingly act unilaterally, justifying force as a defensive measure—even when the threat is speculative. Israel's strike, rather than being an exception, fits within a broader dynamic where law gives way to power and discretion supplants consensus.

Such precedents are not without consequence. Other regional powers—Turkey in Syria, Azerbaijan in the Caucasus, or Saudi Arabia in Yemen—may feel further emboldened to use force preemptively, citing national interest or perceived threats. The more these practices go unchecked, the more fragile international norms become. In this context, Israel's actions could accelerate a global shift toward a security paradigm governed by ad hoc coalitions and individual calculations rather than international law. What is especially troubling is the potential for these practices to spiral out of control. The weakening of legal deterrents increases the risk of escalation, miscalculation, and prolonged conflict. Moreover, unilateral actions undermine trust in institutions such as the IAEA or the UN itself, rendering future diplomatic efforts more difficult and less credible.

While Israel's concerns about Iran are not unfounded, resorting to military action outside legal channels compromises the very foundations of a stable international order. It promotes a system where might determines right, and where the legitimacy of action is judged solely by its effectiveness, not by its legality or broader impact. In the long term, this approach is unsustainable. No state, including Israel, benefits from the erosion of international norms that provide the framework for global stability. Without a recommitment to collective security principles, the international community risks drifting toward a fragmented world where the use of force becomes a first—not last—resort.

The Israeli strike on Iran stands as a dangerous precedent, both legally and strategically. By acting outside the bounds of international law, Israel undermines core principles of sovereignty and multilateral governance. Its reliance on contested doctrines of anticipatory self-defense sets a troubling standard, weakening the prohibition on the use of force and inviting other states to adopt similar justifications. Strategically, the action risks deepening regional instability, reinforcing hardline factions in Iran, and delegitimizing international oversight institutions. Rather than deterring conflict, it may catalyze further escalation and encourage nuclear proliferation as states seek to protect themselves against similar strikes.

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At stake is more than a bilateral dispute between Israel and Iran. What this strike represents is a broader assault on the norms and institutions that underpin global peace and security. The international community must respond—not merely through rhetoric, but through concrete efforts to reassert the primacy of law over force. Without such a response, the world risks descending into a new era of strategic unilateralism, where might makes right and the legal constraints on war become dangerously irrelevant.

About the author:

Dr. Tewfik Hamel is a researcher and lecturer specializing in strategic studies, military history, and geopolitics. He holds a PhD in history from Paul-Valéry University (Montpellier, France) and currently teaches in the Strasbourg Academy. He is also an associate researcher at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (France), the Initiative for Peace and Security in Africa (Senegal), and the Institute for Applied Geopolitical Studies (France). His recent work focuses on contemporary military doctrines, security dynamics in the MENA region, and the interplay between technology and warfare. He regularly contributes to academic and policy journals, including *Sécurité Globale* and *Revue de Défense Nationale*.