

Operation Opera and the 2025 U.S. Strike on Iran: Echoes Across Decades

by [Sammy Stein](#) (July 2025)



Four Israeli F-16s lined up before takeoff. The strike force comprised eight airplanes, in two flights of four. (Photo by Tsahi Ben-Ami)

As the world continues to analyse the impact of the recent U.S. Air Force strikes on Iranian nuclear sites, we would do well to remember an earlier pre-emptive strike—this one carried out by Israel over 40 years ago. Known as *Operation Opera*, it was a daring and controversial mission that changed the trajectory of Middle Eastern nuclear politics and still resonates in today's strategic calculations.

On 7 June 1981, Israeli fighter jets launched a surprise airstrike that destroyed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, located just 11 miles from Baghdad. The operation shocked the world and remains one of the most extraordinary military

missions in modern history.

Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, had entered into a deal with France in 1976 to construct the Osirak reactor. Though Iraq was a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), its commitment to peaceful use of nuclear technology was highly suspect. Under the agreement, the reactor was subject to monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), overseen by French technicians, and equipped with surveillance systems. France even committed to halting fuel supply if any misuse was detected.

However, the facade of peaceful intent quickly began to crack. In private conversations between 1978 and 1981, Saddam Hussein repeatedly expressed his desire to acquire nuclear weapons to use against Israel. While the Osirak reactor itself was technically unsuitable for producing weapons-grade material without major modifications, Israel could not ignore the strategic intentions behind the programme.

The Iranian Air Force had already bombed the facility once in September 1980, during the early stages of the Iran–Iraq War. That raid caused only minor damage but signalled growing regional alarm over Iraq's nuclear ambitions. Saddam's arrest of two senior Iraqi nuclear scientists in 1979 and 1980 further exposed dysfunction and paranoia at the heart of the programme. But Israel knew that even a mismanaged programme could eventually produce catastrophic consequences.

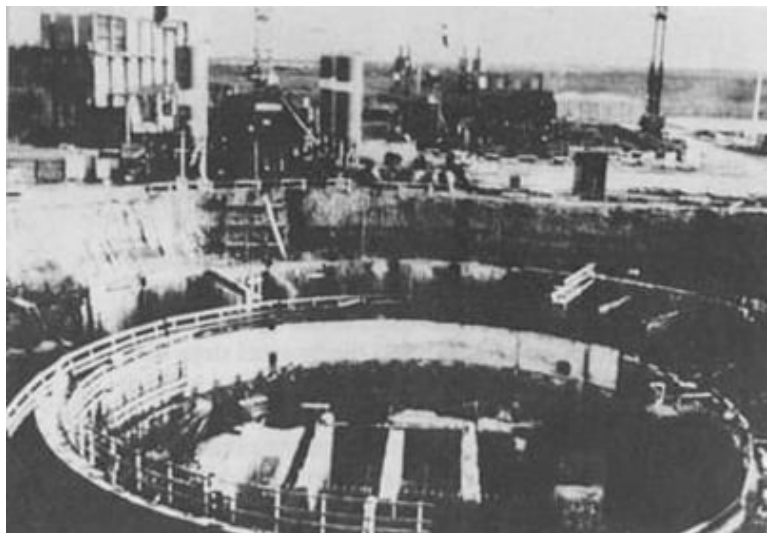
Faced with growing intelligence that the reactor would soon become operational, the Israeli cabinet authorised a pre-emptive strike. The mission was a logistical and strategic gamble: the target was nearly 1,000 miles from Israel, requiring Israeli jets to cross both Jordanian and Saudi airspace without clearance—ruling out mid-air refuelling.

Eight F-16 fighter jets were chosen for the mission, each armed with two 2,000-pound delay-fused bombs, and supported by

six F-15s for air cover. Among the pilots was 26-year-old Ilan Ramon, who would later become Israel's first astronaut and tragically perish in the Columbia space shuttle disaster in 2003.

To ensure success, the pilots trained for months without being told the nature of their target. They practised long-range flying, low-altitude navigation, and fuel management. Their aircraft were fitted with external tanks to extend range, which they jettisoned over the Saudi desert shortly before reaching the target—a risky manoeuvre, considering they were flying with live bombs mounted on the same wings.

The planes flew at an altitude of just 150 feet to avoid radar detection, maintaining strict radio silence. According to reports, King Hussein of Jordan, vacationing in Aqaba, saw the jets fly past his yacht and recognised them as Israeli. He reportedly sent a warning to Iraq, but a breakdown in communication meant it never arrived.



The Osirak reactor, prior to attack

As the jets approached the Osirak complex, the F-15 escorts broke off and climbed to 25,000 feet to establish air cover. The F-16s climbed sharply, then dived at over 600 mph onto the target in a textbook bombing run. Fourteen of the sixteen bombs hit the reactor dome, destroying it in just 80 seconds.

The Iraqi air defences were caught completely off-guard. Radar systems were inactive, and some gunners were reportedly eating in the cafeteria when the strike occurred.

Ten Iraqi soldiers and one French civilian were killed. Israel defended the strike as an act of pre-emptive self-defence, insisting that the reactor was only weeks away from becoming operational.

At the time, international condemnation was swift—even the United States, Israel's closest ally, issued a formal rebuke. Yet over time, many came to acknowledge the strategic wisdom of the operation. By acting when it did, Israel likely prevented a nuclear-armed Iraq and perhaps a much larger regional conflict.

Fast forward to 2025, and the United States has carried out a similar—though much larger in scale—operation against Iran's nuclear infrastructure. While the contexts are different, the strategic logic bears striking similarities.

The U.S. airstrikes followed months of intelligence reports indicating Iran had resumed enrichment of weapons-grade uranium, in violation of the 2015 nuclear deal. This came alongside escalating Iranian provocations: attacks on U.S. personnel in the Gulf, increased support for regional proxies, and aggressive posturing near the Strait of Hormuz.

Unlike the Israeli strike in 1981, which involved a single target and no forewarning, the American operation struck multiple fortified and underground sites across Iran. It employed stealth bombers, cyber attacks to disable radar and communications, and precision-guided munitions designed to penetrate hardened bunkers.

The international response this time has been markedly more restrained. While some voices expressed concern about regional escalation, many Western governments appeared to accept the logic behind the strikes. There is a growing recognition that

a nuclear-armed Iran poses a threat not just to Israel, but to global energy security and the stability of the wider Middle East.

Just as in 1981, the 2025 strikes were not about conquest, regime change, or retaliation—they were preventive, designed to forestall an imminent and potentially irreversible threat. And like Operation Opera, they may have bought valuable time, if not eliminated the danger entirely.

Operation Opera is now widely regarded as a milestone in Israeli strategic thinking: a clear demonstration of the doctrine that Israel will act alone, if necessary, to prevent existential threats. It took courage, intelligence, and political will to carry it out—and the world is arguably safer because of it.

Whether the U.S. strikes deployed in 2025 will be viewed the same way in decades to come remains to be seen. But they share the same essential truth: deterrence is not always achieved through words. Sometimes, it must be enforced through decisive action.

In remembering the Israeli pilots who flew into the heart of enemy territory over 40 years ago, we are reminded that history often rewards those willing to act when others hesitate. And as the world faces new and familiar dangers, we would do well to study the past—not just to remember it, but to learn from it.

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Vicci. Sammy is Chair of Glasgow Friends of Israel, which celebrated its tenth anniversary in May 2025.

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