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THE EVOLVING CONCEPTS OF WAR AND WARFARE: GENERATIONAL PARADIGMS AND IRAN-US (ISRAEL) WAR

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis evolusi konseptual perang generasi (1GW–5GW) dan menguji batas operasionalnya pada konflik konfrontasi langsung antarnegara. Menggunakan Kerangka Analisis Generasional empat dimensi dan metode studi kasus kualitatif, studi ini mengevaluasi operasi US–Israel (Operation Rising Lion) terhadap Iran serta balasan asimetrisnya (Operation True Promise). Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa meskipun strategi 5GW dan postmodern berhasil melakukan dekapitasi kepemimpinan dan manipulasi persepsi kognitif, pendekatan ini gagal memaksakan kapitulasi politik secara mutlak. Sebaliknya, balasan masif rudal balistik Iran membuktikan kekuatan penangkal kinetik dalam menetralkan dominasi non-kinetik. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan terjadinya konvergensi paradigma (paradigm convergence), yang pemaksaan nirkinetik tingkat tinggi dan daya tembak kinetik asimetris saling membatasi. Temuan ini meredefinisi dinamika perang modern antarnegara berdaulat.

Abstract

This study analyzes the conceptual evolution of generational warfare (1GW–5GW) and tests its operational limits in direct state-on-state confrontations. Employing a four-dimensional generational analytical framework and a qualitative case study method, this research evaluates the US–Israeli operations (Operation Rising Lion) against Iran and Iran's asymmetric response (Operation True Promise). The findings demonstrate that while 5GW and postmodern strategies successfully achieve leadership decapitation and cognitive perception manipulation, they fail to force absolute political surrender. Conversely, Iran's massive ballistic missile counter-strikes demonstrate the enduring power of kinetic deterrence in neutralizing non-kinetic dominance. The study concludes that a "paradigm convergence" has occurred, wherein high-level non-kinetic coercion and asymmetric kinetic firepower mutually limit each other. These findings redefine the dynamics of modern warfare between sovereign states.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept, definition, and ontology of war are inherently dynamic and remain subject to considerable scholarly controversy. As human societies evolve, so too does the conceptualization of war. In its traditional formulation, as codified by the Cambridge Dictionary of English, war denotes "armed fighting between two or more countries or groups" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). However, in both academic and colloquial discourse, the terms war, conflict, and clash are often used interchangeably, despite their distinct analytical implications. Philosophers, sociologists, military strategists, and political leaders frequently define war according to their respective disciplinary perspectives and ideological interests.

As the notion of war continues to expand, a central debate concerns the threshold conditions under which a clash or conflict may be designated as "war." Is physical engagement a necessary condition, or can unarmed, non-physical, or virtual methods such as cyber operations or economic coercion also legitimately constitute war? Moreover, despite claims of civilizational progress, a fundamental question persists: why does war remain one of the enduring realities of human history and civilization? As Heraclitus famously asserted, "War is the father and king of all" (Heraclitus, c. 540–c. 480 BCE). War is nearly as old as human society itself and serves as a cornerstone of international statecraft.

Politics constitutes a critical dimension of human life, and war is an integral component thereof. The most celebrated theoretical articulation of the relationship between war and politics is found in Carl von Clausewitz's dictum: "War is the continuation of policy by other means" (Clausewitz, 1976). Consequently, warfare may be defined as the systematic and purposeful application of military force across multiple domains—land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace—to challenge an adversary, secure strategic advantage, and achieve broader political and operational objectives. Although warfare has gradually evolved as society has evolved socio-politically and technologically, studying this evolution linearly remains complex (Lopez, 2020).

From Westphalian state sovereignty (1648) to industrial total war and Cold War proxy dynamics (4GW), warfare has continuously expanded. In fifth-generation

warfare (5GW) and postmodern warfare, digital networks, cognitive domains, and perception management become primary battlegrounds. Israel and the U.S. attack on Iran represents the operational continuity of 5GW and postmodern warfare.

While existing literature extensively covers fifth-generation warfare (5GW) in counter-insurgency and proxy conflict scenarios, limited scholarly attention has been paid to how 5GW and postmodern cognitive tactics operate in direct, high-intensity conflicts between sovereign nation-states. This study addresses this research gap by analyzing the 2025–2026 US-Israel-Iran conflict. Specifically, this paper addresses two primary Research Questions: (1) How were fifth-generation and postmodern warfare tactics (PMESII-PT, leadership decapitation, and cognitive operations) applied during Operation Rising Lion? (2) To what extent did kinetic ballistic missile responses alter the theoretical assumptions of non-kinetic 5GW dominance, leading to a paradigm convergence?

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Warfare is a complex phenomenon that has evolved across distinct geographical and technological dimensions. This study analyzes warfare through a four-dimensional generational framework and applies these principles to the recent US (Israel)–Iran war (2025–2026). The analysis draws on the foundational classifications of Echevarria (2005), Lind et al. (1989), and Bunker (1996), as synthesized by Krishnan (2022).

This study argues that generational shifts in warfare can be understood in four basic dimensions. First, the spatial dimension traces the physical-to-cognitive expansion of battlefields, moving from land, sea, and air maneuvering during the first three generations (1GW–3GW) (Guderian, 1996; Lind et al., 1989; MacGregor, 2005) into socio-political and institutional structures during fourth-generation warfare (4GW) (Hammes, 2005; Jonathan, 2023), and ultimately expanding into the human cognitive, digital, and perceptual domains characteristic of fifth-generation warfare (5GW) (Krishnan, 2022)."

Second, the targeting dimension highlights a structural shift in military objectives, evolving from traditional territorial capture and conventional force destruction in early generations (Panial, 2010) to eroding an adversary's societal cohesion and political will in 4GW (Lind & Thiele, 2016), and finally targeting institutional decision-making capabilities at

the individual and psychological levels in 5GW (Ehrhart, 2017).

The third dimension of this study analyzes the capabilities of centralized or state-managed 3rd-generation military forces at the cognitive level of fifth-generation warfare, including their cyber and AI capabilities (Krishnan, 2022).

The fourth and final dimension of this study examines and analyzes the recent US-Iran war in the context of generational warfare, especially how the US and Israel applied fifth-generation warfare tactics at the industrial level.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical case study approach. Empirical data were collected from peer-reviewed journals, official military reports, open-source intelligence (OSINT), and reputable international research institutions.

The 2025–2026 conflict—encompassing Operation Rising Lion, Operation Midnight Hammer, and Iran's retaliatory Operation True Promise—was analyzed against generational warfare theories. To mitigate reporting bias and wartime propaganda, empirical claims regarding strike casualties, missile counts, and operational infrastructure impacts were cross-verified through independent multi-source data triangulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Perspective of Evolution of generational warfare

The term 'war' conventionally evokes the image of armed confrontation between large groups possessing competing claims to legitimacy. However, in prehistoric times, global population was minimal—estimated at approximately four million individuals—such that clashes between groups or armies were likely limited in both frequency and intensity (Roser et al., n.d.). Archaeological evidence suggests that the earliest known conflict occurred in present-day Sudan roughly 13,000 years ago (Reuters, 2021), followed by another at Nataruk in Kenya approximately 10,000 years ago (Boot Camp & Military Fitness Institute, 2023). Little is known about the methods, strategies, or tactics employed in these early engagements. More broadly, no documented evidence systematically traces the evolution of strategic and tactical thought from these ancient conflicts through subsequent historical periods.

Establishing a clear, linear progression of generational warfare remains inherently problematic; any such delineation will inevitably be blurred. Some scholars interpret the development of warfare as integral to human progress, while others periodize societal evolution from agrarian to industrial to cybernetic and accordingly categorize warfare as agrarian, industrial, or cybernetic warfare. This typology diverges from other taxonomies based primarily on technological change and tactical innovation.

In terms of generational history, warfare can be examined through successive global historical epochs. In prehistory, society was predominantly tribal and reliant on hunting technologies; thus, warfare was correspondingly waged with hunting tools and instruments. In ancient civilizations, despite significant advancements in construction and engineering, warfare remained dependent on bows, swords, and close-combat weaponry. A defining feature of ancient warfare was the massive deployment of human manpower, though conflicts were largely local or regional in scope. The military expeditions of Alexander the Great marked a significant expansion, conquering approximately five million square kilometers in a brief period (Nonoumasy, 2023). In the medieval era, Genghis Khan achieved the largest contiguous land empire in history, covering roughly 23 million square kilometers through a distinctly different mode of warfare (Britannica, 2006).

During the medieval period, Eastern dominance in warfare gradually waned as the modern era emerged in the West, propelled by industrial technologies. Industrialization not only generated a new societal order but also engendered a novel form of warfare, enabling the West to subordinate the East with near-absolute authority. The industrial era transformed the structure and composition of armies, rendering them more professionalized within centralized state systems, particularly following the establishment of the nation-state after the Peace of Westphalia (1648) in Europe. Industrial-age armies grew significantly in size and lethality, incorporating diverse machine technologies. The two World Wars and the Cold War can be identified as the apogee of modern warfare, reflecting how shifts in philosophical, political, and social ideologies reshape warfare. Economic cost, too, critically determines the size, structure, and conduct of armed forces.

As the world enters a postmodern phase, warfare is once again transforming. It has generated a hybrid phenomenon that

synthesizes historical tactics with new theories and strategies, incorporating the PMESII framework (Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, and Infrastructure) as a comprehensive military paradigm in which each dimension constitutes a full-fledged domain of warfare (Kodalle et al., 2020). While progress in the theory and strategy of warfare remains historically contested, the generational study of warfare provides an indispensable analytical tool for understanding paradigm shifts in armed conflict.

First Generation of Warfare

The idea of warfare is inherently political, as it has long been accepted that "war is the continuation of politics by other means" (Clausewitz, 1976). Consequently, changes in the concept of the state have directly influenced the structure of warfare. The first nation-states emerged in 1648, following the Peace of Westphalia, which fundamentally altered decisions regarding the objectives and conduct of war. For the first time, war and warfare became subjects of public and representative debate.

On the battlefield, this generation of warfare was characterized by highly orderly formations and the extensive use of column tactics (Bunker, 1996). Unlike previous eras, war became state-centric rather than being commanded by a king or emperor alone. Conflicts were waged on behalf of sovereign states, which fought to define or establish their sovereignty. This period also marked the beginning of a clear separation between civilians and professional soldiers (Callahan, 2024; Yâmaner, 2003). Armies operated under centralized, hierarchical structures and were organized on the basis of uniforms and salaried systems (Najafov, 2025). For the first time, war was subjected to political oversight and debated within the public sphere.

Technologically, the smoothbore musket replaced swords and other edged weapons. However, the accuracy of these firearms remained limited, resulting in high casualty rates. This era also witnessed the early use of artillery with improved mobility, though huge manpower reserves remained a major determinant of military success (Najafov, 2025). Prominent examples of first-generation warfare include the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), French revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, US civil war and various eighteenth-century European conflicts, including, dynastic wars.

Second-Generation Warfare

Following the eighteenth century, the concept of second-generation warfare emerged alongside the idea of *total war* where societal mobilization is required (IEEE, 2015). In this form of warfare, entire populations, national economies, and industrial capacities are mobilized in support of the war effort. Civilians, therefore, become active participants, contributing all available resources to sustain military operations.

As a result, warfare became significantly more destructive, largely due to the blurring of distinctions between combatants and non-combatants. Moreover, international legal frameworks and institutions were still in their formative stages, resulting in minimal restrictions on the use of weapons and military tactics (De Baets, 2022). Within this context, belligerent states sought comprehensive control over territory, populations, and resources.

The First and Second World Wars represent the most extreme manifestations of this model of warfare. Elements of total war can also be observed in the processes of colonization across Asia and Africa. During this period, significant advancements were made in military technology, reconnaissance methods, and communication systems, including the use of radio and electronic networks at the operational level (LaMarche, 2018).

Trench warfare and extensive artillery support became defining features of the battlefield (National WWI Museum and Memorial, n.d.). Although front lines were largely maintained, there was an increasing emphasis on technological innovation, enabling smaller units to maneuver more independently. Two major paradigm shifts can be identified during this era: first, the emergence of urban warfare as a central feature of conflict; and second, the integration of new technologies such as railroads, telegraphs, aviation, and armored vehicles.

Air power gradually evolved into a critical component of military operations. During the First World War, its effectiveness was limited by constraints in range and accuracy. However, by the Second World War, air power had become a decisive factor in achieving victory across complex and multi-dimensional battlefields.

In addition to military transformations, political structures and ideologies also underwent significant change. Notably, Germany developed the concept of *Blitzkrieg* (“lightning war”), which revolutionized military thought, influencing both strategic philosophy and tactical execution. As

warfare expanded in scale and intensity, regional and global military alliances began to form.

Geographical positioning gained strategic importance, particularly for the establishment of air bases, military installations, and radar networks. Concurrently, new theories and debates emerged concerning the capacity of political powers to achieve global dominance. Collectively, these developments reshaped military doctrine and redefined the nature of warfare in the modern era.

Third-Generation Warfare

The concept of third-generation warfare was formally articulated by William S. Lind in 1989 (Bunker, 1996; Lind et al., 1989). This model of warfare builds upon the principles of maneuver warfare, representing an evolution of the *Blitzkrieg* concept, with an increased emphasis on speed, surprise, and stealth. The central objective of third generation is to disrupt and paralyze the enemy's command structure and operational capabilities rather than to engage in direct attritional conflict (Neculcea, 2020).

Advancements in mechanization and military technology significantly enhanced maneuverability across land, sea, and air domains. Concurrently, the concept of multilayered defense, or *defense in depth*, emerged as a key strategic approach (Neculcea, 2020). This doctrine prioritizes delaying the enemy's advance rather than preventing it outright, thereby buying time, inflicting additional casualties, and strategically trading space for operational advantage.

Geography assumed a critical role in the implementation of such strategies. States with limited territorial depth and smaller populations particularly in Europe were at a structural disadvantage. Consequently, collective security arrangements such as NATO were established to mitigate these vulnerabilities.

Significant transformations also occurred in military command structures. As military operations expanded across multiple regions, command systems became increasingly decentralized to enhance flexibility and responsiveness. Armed forces were reorganized into regional commands; for example, the United States Army established multiple unified combatant commands on a global scale. Moreover, states increasingly developed bilateral and multilateral command frameworks,

emphasizing joint and integrated military operations.

Despite these changes, the state remained the primary actor in warfare, and non-state proxies played a relatively limited role in determining war outcomes during this period. A defining feature of third-generation warfare is the emergence of nonlinearity in military operations (Najafov, 2025). This involves the erosion of clear distinctions between war and peace, as well as between military and civilian targets. Operations began to be conducted simultaneously across multiple domains, including political, economic, informational, and military spheres.

In this context, *gray zone* strategies—situated between conventional war and peace expanded significantly. These approaches aim to avoid direct large-scale confrontation, reduce the risk of escalation into total war, and exploit ambiguities within international law and agreements.

At the tactical and operational levels, land forces expanded in size and capability, incorporating greater numbers of tanks, armored vehicles, and high-mobility platforms (Msw. 2024). Major Powers maintained large standing armies, often numbering in the millions. A crucial development of this era was the advent of nuclear weapons, which fundamentally altered the nature of warfare. The arms race between NATO and the Soviet Union eventually led to the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), which reshaped strategic thinking by emphasizing deterrence over direct confrontation.

Ideology also emerged as a powerful instrument of warfare, particularly during the Cold War, as competing blocs sought to expand their influence globally. Key historical examples often associated with third-generation warfare include the German use of *Blitzkrieg* during World War II, the Six-Day War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the Kosovo War (Ameen, 2024; Riley, 2021; Twfiak, n.d.) Furthermore, many strategic doctrines developed during the Cold War period are integral components of third-generation warfare.

Fourth Generation of Warfare

The concept of fourth generation warfare emerged after 1989, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent rise of a new political geography. In this context, decentralized conflict became a new strategy, capitalizing on weakened state structures (Freeman, 2017). Under decentralized conflict scenarios, violence and clashes are carried out by multiple, fluid, and

autonomous groups. These conflicts do not operate under any unified command, such as that of a regular army or even traditional guerrilla groups. Many groups function independently with only very loose coordination. Simultaneously, multiple groups may operate within a single state without formal coordination yet pursue the same objective.

Various militant organizations including Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda, and different factions in the Syrian civil war and The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka are primary examples of fourth generation warfare dynamics (EBSCO Research. n.d.). In this paradigm, the role of the nation-state diminishes, and non-state actors become the main protagonists. To fill political and ideological voids, various networked ideological movements become primary contributors to conflict. Asia and Africa emerged as the main geographical theaters for these ideological groups. Western and U.S. foreign and defense policies simultaneously focused on these regions, and their interventions further fueled this type of warfare.

In fourth generation, warfare, the fundamental focus is not defeating an opponent's military capabilities; rather, the aim is to undermine an adversary's societal cohesion and political will (Hammes, 2005). A mixture of social, economic, and military strategies and techniques is applied to achieve warfare objectives. Whereas quick military victory was the main objective in previous generations, under fourth generation warfare, long-term engagement became the new norm (Murden, 2007). Success is measured not by military victory but by the ability to erode an opponent's resolve and legitimacy.

Network-centric and asymmetric warfare became the core doctrines (Antulio, 2005). Network-Centric Warfare (NCW) shifts the focus from traditional, platform-centric approaches to a more interconnected, data-driven model of warfare. Unconventional strategies and tactics became the main tools of asymmetric warfare, especially for the weaker party. Because of the blurred distinction between military and civilian targets, the battlefield became increasingly unclear and undefined. Continuous cyber-attacks on various entities including military and civilian infrastructure have created further confusion regarding both the nature of the battlefield and its legal status. Many civilian organizations or technology companies, such as Google,

Apple, and Amazon, began operating in both civilian and military domains by providing services to the U.S. and Israeli militaries (Coveri et al., 2025).

Attack on enemy society and its culture emerged as a new domain (EBSCO Research. n.d.). Through social and cultural engineering, adversaries seek to pressure the opponent into submission or surrender without fighting. At the operational level, targets included not only military sites but also fixed communication installations, seats of government, power plants, knowledge production centers, and selected industrial sites. Joint operations were designed more effectively. At the psychological level, fourth generation warfare operates through all available networks political, economic, social, and military to convince enemy decision-makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly relative to perceived benefits (Hammes, 2005).

Asymmetric and network warfare have demonstrated that superior political will, when properly employed, can defeat greater economic and military power. This represents the antithesis of high-technology warfare. Breaking the will of the enemy and maintaining the will of one's own population became crucial components of complex social engineering. Avoiding direct confrontation is a primary objective of this generation. Tactics employed by Al-Qaeda, the Lebanese civil war, the Second Chechen War, the Second Iraq War (2003–2011), the LTTE war against Sri Lanka, and the U.S. war in Afghanistan (2001–2021) are core examples of fourth generation warfare.

Fifth-Generation Warfare

Fifth-generation warfare (5GW) represents a fundamental transformation in the nature of conflict, characterized by the increasing prominence of non-military and non-kinetic means (Krishnan, A. 2022). Rather than relying primarily on conventional force, this form of warfare operates through cyber operations, information manipulation, and psychological influence. It has been widely described as a form of warfare centered on “information and perception,” in which the battlefield extends into digital, social, and cognitive domains.

In this context, cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure have become more frequent and sophisticated. These include operations targeting financial systems, research institutions, government networks, and energy infrastructure, including nuclear facilities. A notable example is the Stuxnet malware, which was used to disrupt Iran’s nuclear program, marking a significant

milestone in the evolution of cyber warfare (De Falco, 2012).

Simultaneously, methods of social engineering have advanced considerably, particularly through the use of social media platforms and algorithm-driven communication systems (CSM International, 2023.). Information warfare has expanded to include the widespread use of misinformation and disinformation, aimed at influencing public opinion and destabilizing societies. These dynamics were evident in events such as the 2016 United States presidential election, where cyber activities and online information campaigns played a significant role in shaping political discourse (Ibrahim & Attia, 2025). Advances in artificial intelligence, real-time surveillance, and commercial satellite imagery have created a highly interconnected and continuously monitored battle space. As a result, warfare is no longer confined to physical territory but extends into digital networks and the cognitive domain of individuals.

At the cognitive level, the objective of warfare shifts from territorial conquest to the manipulation of perception, trust, and social cohesion. Distinct from conventional forms of armed conflict, cognitive warfare influences the ways in which individuals and institutions interpret their environment, assess available options, and respond to information (Cluzel, 2021). The aim is to destabilize societies, erode institutional legitimacy, and create environments of uncertainty and mistrust. Within such conditions, strategic objectives can be achieved without large-scale conventional military engagement.

Hybrid warfare strategies have emerged as a central component of this paradigm, combining conventional force with irregular, informational, and cyber tactics. These approaches often operate within the "gray zone" between war and peace, exploiting legal ambiguities and avoiding direct confrontation. Consequently, political, economic, and technological forms of conflict have expanded significantly.

Information-driven operations increasingly target human cognition, behavior, and social structures. Data-driven campaigns are designed to exploit existing cognitive biases and shape new ones, thereby influencing decision-making processes at both individual and societal levels. Through carefully constructed information environments, actors can manipulate perception and achieve strategic outcomes without overt violence (Bernal et al., 2020).

Furthermore, advancements in artificial intelligence and digital technologies have enabled the development of large-scale surveillance systems, enhancing the ability of both state and non-state actors to monitor, predict, and influence human behavior. In this sense, fifth-generation warfare is often described as a form of "invisible conflict," (Durrani, 2025) in which populations may be unaware that they are participants in an ongoing struggle.

Certain contemporary events are sometimes interpreted through the lens of fifth-generation warfare, particularly those involving cyber operations, information manipulation, and hybrid tactics. However, it is important to note that the concept itself remains contested within academic and strategic studies, with no universally accepted definition.

Postmodern Warfare

The emergence of postmodernism has profoundly influenced multiple domains of society, including the nature and conduct of warfare. While, at the operational level, many of its components derive from fifth-generation warfare, postmodern warfare fundamentally redefines the meaning, perception, and conceptual boundaries of war itself. In this framework, conflict actors deliberately exploit ambiguity in the definition of war and warfare, often rejecting universally accepted norms and instead interpreting them in ways that align with their own strategic interests and ideological positions.

Postmodern warfare is characterized by the fusion of conventional military operations with hybrid tactics, emerging technologies, and sustained economic and political pressure across multiple theaters, often extending over prolonged periods (Ehrhart, 2017). Conflict, in this sense, is socially constructed: actors actively shape narratives and perceptions within their own societies and among adversaries to legitimize both military and non-military actions in pursuit of political objectives.

Although comprehensive structural reforms in military organization are still evolving, postmodern armed forces are increasingly becoming smaller, more professional, and technologically advanced. These forces often operate through limited, mission-oriented engagements rather than formally declared wars. Moreover, they are deeply integrated with civilian technologies and societal infrastructures, blurring the distinction between military and civilian spheres.

In contrast to earlier paradigms, the primary objective of postmodern warfare is not the total annihilation of the adversary, but rather the control, transformation, or reconfiguration of political, military, and social systems (Kiszely, 2008). This is frequently pursued through precision operations, such as surgical strikes and network-centric campaigns. Regime change achieved through minimal direct military intervention and maximal reliance on non-military instruments is often considered the most effective outcome.

To achieve these objectives, actors mobilize a wide range of instruments, including state and non-state entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private military contractors, thereby exploiting the gray zone between war and peace. Post-human and advanced technological factors also play an increasingly significant role (Gray, 2003). Artificial intelligence–driven systems reduce direct human involvement in combat operations, while enhancing efficiency, speed, and precision.

A central dimension of postmodern warfare is the targeting of cognitive security. By blurring the boundaries between reality and virtuality, actors seek to exploit social, psychological, and economic vulnerabilities. Continuous military and quasi-military operations are supported by advanced technologies, including precision-guided munitions, satellite-based systems, GPS-enabled platforms, and various classes of unmanned aerial systems.

Cognitive warfare, a key component of both postmodern and fifth-generation warfare, focuses on how individuals, societies, and institutions perceive reality, process information, and make decisions (Naval War College Foundation, 2022). Through information manipulation, perception management, and strategic communication, actors attempt to influence behavior and shape outcomes without necessarily resorting to large-scale kinetic force.

Additionally, powerful states may deliberately foster limited instability within adversary states either by exploiting existing tensions or by amplifying new ones in order to gain strategic advantage. Economic and legal instruments, such as sanctions, are also increasingly weaponized to weaken opponents without direct military confrontation.

Finally, postmodern warfare is marked by the growing importance of loosely

organized networks of non-state, political, and ideological actors. At the tactical level, the emphasis lies on achieving greater speed, precision, and adaptability, reflecting a broader shift toward flexible, decentralized, and technology-driven modes of conflict.

Operation Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer: A Case Study in Fifth-Generation Warfare

On 13 June 2025, the United States and Israel launched a surprise attack on Iran, designated as Operation Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer (Marzbanmehr, 2025). The operation was executed with unprecedented force and employed advanced postmodern and fifth-generation warfare designs. In this surprise attack, the U.S. and Israel killed top Iranian political, military, and institutional leaders, as well as heads of knowledge production centers, including leading nuclear scientists. Within the first 24 hours, 200 Israeli fighter jets F-15s, F-16s, and F-35s crossed Syrian airspace with refueling capabilities and, supported by the U.S. Air Force operating from regional military bases, struck hundreds of targets inside Iran (Dolzikova & Savill, 2025; Scarbro, 2025).

The principal strategic rationale was that, following the decapitation of Iran's senior political, civil, intellectual, and military leadership, the population would call for revolt, thereby leading to a favorable regime change in Tehran. From the outset of the war, U.S.-Israeli forces-maintained air supremacy. After the first 24 hours, the pace of attacks slowed slightly, but 50 fighter jets continued bombardment (Dolzikova & Savill, 2025). In this operation, the U.S. and Israel deployed advanced artificial intelligence (AI) technology, which had been in place for months prior (Scarbro, 2025). They also hacked numerous Iranian CCTV cameras for surveillance and target tracking (Shalev & Diamond, 2026). Several tourists were used for espionage; in some cases (Al-Arabia ,2025, June 20), women falsely converted to Islam and married high-profile Iranian figures, later fleeing the country after the attack. During the operation, Iran's communication and internet systems were jammed.

The attack employed high-speed cruise missiles, GPS-guided munitions, and laser-guided weapons. For precision strikes against high-ranking military and knowledge-sector officials, AI-powered drones were used. Israel and the U.S. deliberately selected civilian and military targets to pressure the political leadership into unconditional surrender. In these strikes, nearly 30 top

military commanders and 11 nuclear scientists were killed (Goller & Landay, 2025). Simultaneous with the military attack, the U.S. and Israel called on the Iranian people to rebel against the sitting government as part of a broader social engineering strategy (economic times, 2025). During the attacks, the U.S. and Israel also mobilized anti-Iranian militants within the country and the region, including Kurdish separatists in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

Through this operation, the U.S. and Israel applied all the principles of fifth-generation and postmodern warfare. As fifth-generation and postmodern warfare favor not the total annihilation of the enemy but rather a swift regime change achieved through economic pressure, key assassinations, and surgical strikes on military and select civilian institutions and infrastructure, they executed the same approach in Iran. A tactical priority was also to avoid a land invasion. According to reports, these attacks killed over 1,100 people, including 700 civilians, and more than 5,000 were injured (Human Rights Council, 2026).

However, Iran's unexpected retaliation shattered their strategic calculations. Alongside the heavy bombardment, the U.S. and Israel launched cognitive warfare. In this dimension, following the assassination of political, military, and knowledge-sector leadership, they phoned senior police, intelligence, and military officers, demanding they surrender or die.

Under the name "True Promise," Iran launched 22 extensive waves of missile attacks over a span of just twelve days. Unlike Israel, during its missile attacks, Iran focused solely on military targets specifically, Israeli Air Force bases. During the twelve days of war in response to the U.S.-Israeli attack, though no verified numbers exist, reports indicate that Iran fired over 500 ballistic missiles (Marzbanmehr, 2025). Despite an Israeli blackout on damage-related information for media and social media, various international sources reported extensive damage to both military and civilian infrastructure.

This war indicates that powerful and wealthy nations avoid major ground combat operations or total war, because of huge economic coast and uncertainty of ending of war however focusing instead on air and cyber domination and superiority. Air defense systems play a key indeed, the most important role in contemporary and future warfare. Iran demonstrated a different warfare paradigm: despite a weaker air force,

solely through missile warfare it compelled Israel and the United States to seek a ceasefire. After suffering unexpectedly heavy war costs, the U.S. and Israel expressed willingness for a ceasefire, which Iran also accepted. This twelve-day war constitutes the first full-scale demonstration of fifth-generation or postmodern warfare.

CONCLUSION

Warfare remains a dynamic process, evolving alongside technological breakthroughs, political ideologies, and strategic doctrines. The 2025–2026 US-Israel-Iran conflict serves as a watershed moment in contemporary military history, illustrating both the capabilities and explicit boundaries of fifth-generation (5GW) and postmodern warfare.

Operations Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer demonstrated that modern 5GW strategies no longer prioritize total physical destruction. Instead, they leverage AI surveillance, targeted leadership decapitation, and cognitive manipulation to induce institutional collapse and regime change. However, Iran's Operation True Promise revealed a crucial counter-dynamic: high-tech non-kinetic supremacy can still be effectively neutralized by massive, asymmetric kinetic firepower (ballistic missile saturation).

Ultimately, this research identifies an emerging "paradigm convergence." Modern state-on-state conflict is neither purely non-kinetic nor purely conventional; rather, high-level cognitive/hybrid operations and traditional kinetic deterrence now mutually constrain and shape one another. Future research should further examine how air defense economics and missile production capacities dictate the sustainability of 5GW operations in prolonged high-intensity warfare.

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