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# Considerations and Prospects in Iran's Confrontation with Israel

Unit for Political Studies

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## Unit for Political Studies

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On the night of 13 April, Iran carried out its first ever direct attack from its own territory against Israel. It launched more than 300 projectiles, including some 170 drones, 30 cruise missiles, and 120 ballistic missiles,<sup>1</sup> a small number of which managed to reach Israel and hit the Nevatim military airbase in the Negev Desert. The base was significant as it was from there, according to Iran, that Israel had launched an air strike that killed seven Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders in Damascus on April 1.<sup>2</sup> Israel has threatened to hit back at Iran to restore its deterrence, severely eroded by the attack on Israel by Palestinian militants Hamas on 7 October. Israel responded five days later by targeting an Iranian military base in Isfahan, from which, Israel claims, Iran had launched its 13 April attack. The tit for tat exchange between Iran and Israel raises the prospect of a larger confrontation.

## Background to the Iranian Attack on Israel

Iran's operation was the first ever operation from its territory directly targeting Israel. It came in response to an Israeli air strike on April 1 that targeted Iran's consulate next to the Islamic Republic's embassy in Damascus, killing seven Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers including the top Quds Force official in Syria and Lebanon, Mohammad Reza Zahedi, and his deputy.<sup>3</sup> This was the largest single loss incurred by Iran in Syria since Israel began targeting Iranian military assets there in 2013. It is also significant that the building destroyed in Damascus was a diplomatic facility, although two Syrian families were occupying part of it (members of which were killed in the Israeli attack, including an elderly woman and her son).<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the Israeli attack was condemned by many countries as a violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961).<sup>5</sup> Iran stated that it would respond to the Israeli attack,<sup>6</sup> describing it as an attack on Iranian territory and a major escalation that it could not allow to go unavenged.

From 2013-2023, Israel had launched many attacks – mostly air strikes – on Syrian territory to prevent Iran from transferring weapons to Hezbollah, but without targeting Revolutionary Guard officers specifically. However, this situation has changed since the “Al-Aqsa Flood” attack by Hamas and the start of Israel's war on Gaza. Israel held Iran partly responsible for the 7 October operation due to its support for Palestinian armed factions, especially Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Accordingly, since December 2023, Israel has systematically targeted senior Revolutionary Guard officers in Syria. It killed Quds Force arms and logistics official Brigadier General Reza Mousavi on December 25 in the Sayyida Zeinab area on the outskirts of Damascus.<sup>7</sup> It also killed four senior guard officers, including

1 “Iran's Missile Attack Against Israel,” *Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control*, 15/4/2024, accessed on 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/jh7ocr>.

2 “‘Īrān taz'um istihdāfuhā qā'idah jawiyyah 'Isrā'īliyyah anṭalaqat minhā al-ḍarbah 'alā qunṣuliyyatihā bi-Dimašq.. wa-al-jaysh al-'Isrā'īlī yukashshif al-khasā'ir,” *CNN Arabic*, 14/4/2024, accessed 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/cn7qxj>.

3 “Iran Launches Retaliatory Attack on Israel with Hundreds of Drones, Missiles,” *Reuters*, 14/4/2024, accessed on 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/e79ns>.

4 “‘Irtifā' ḥaṣīlat qatlā al-ḍarbah 'alā al-qunṣuliyyah al-'Īrāniyyah fī Dimashq,” *Al-Hurra*, 3/4/2024, accessed on 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/6dv99>.

5 “‘Idānāt 'arabīyah wa-dawliyyah li-qaṣf 'Isrā'īl al-qunṣuliyyah al-'Īrāniyyah fī Dimashq,” *RT Arabic*, 2/4/2024, accessed on 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/1hplg>.

6 “‘Taqrīr: Īrān satarudd 'alā hijūm Dimashq li-khalq al-rad',” *Al-Jazeera*, 6/4/2024, accessed on 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/upelm>.

7 “‘Īrān tattahimu Isrā'īl bi-qatl qiyādī bārīz fī al-ḥaras al-thawrī bi-ḍarbah fī Sūriyā,” *SwissInfo*, 25/12/2023, accessed 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/eunluh>.



the commander of the Quds Force's Intelligence unit in Syria, Brigadier General Sadegh Omidzadeh, in another operation in the Mezzeh area, in January 2024.<sup>8</sup> In early February, it assassinated an advisor to the Revolutionary Guard, Said Ali Dadi, in an attack south of Damascus.<sup>9</sup> Then in the last week of March, it stepped up its attacks on Iranian-linked targets in Syria, with raids of unprecedented intensity in the Deir Ez-Zor region (March 26) and areas of eastern Aleppo (March 29).<sup>10</sup> In the face of these intensifying Israeli strikes on its officers in Syria, Iran had rolled back its military presence there,<sup>11</sup> but the strike on the consulate led to the first ever direct confrontation between the two rivals, marking a fundamental turning point in their years-long "shadow war".

## From the Shadows into the Open

For years, Israel has been waging a nearly one-sided "shadow war" against Iran, both in Syria – to prevent advanced weapons from reaching Hezbollah in Lebanon – and inside Iran itself, targeting its nuclear and missile programmes. Israeli operations inside Iran escalated after US President Donald Trump withdrew from the nuclear agreement with Iran and, in response, Iran progressively abandoned its obligations under the accord. Tehran stepped up the level to which it was enriching uranium, to 60%, and developed a new generation of centrifuges, as well as increasing their number. In response, Israel began to sabotage Iranian infrastructure and carried out a series of assassinations targeting Iranian scientists, most prominently Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the "father of the Iranian nuclear program," who was killed in November 2020.

During the year-long term of prime minister Naftali Bennett (2021-2022), Israel further escalated the level and scope of its attacks in Iran, to target – alongside the country's nuclear program – Iran's missile capabilities, drone factories, and civilian infrastructure, as well as killing senior Revolutionary Guard officers and scientists specialized in manufacturing missiles and drones. The most significant Israeli attacks on Iranian soil were carried out with drones. One such attack, in February, completely destroyed one of the Revolutionary Guard's biggest drone factories, in the western city of Kermanshah, as well as the aircraft stationed there.<sup>12</sup> These attacks were part of a new strategy based on moving the battle to within Iranian territory, rather than limiting it to Iran's external spheres of influence in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.<sup>13</sup> Despite all this, Iran avoided responding directly to Israel, right up until the 1 April attack in Damascus.

<sup>8</sup> "Al-ḥaras al-thawrī: Maqṭal 4 mustashārīn 'Irānīyīn jarrā' qaṣf 'Isrā'īlī limabnā sakānī fī Dimashq," *RT Arabic*, 20/1/2024, accessed on 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/gt41f>.

<sup>9</sup> "Maqṭal mustashār bi-al-ḥaras al-thawrī fī ghārah 'Isrā'īlīyah bi-Dimashq," *Al-Jazeera*, 2/2/2024, accessed 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/d12u68>.

<sup>10</sup> "Khārījīyat Irān tudīnu ghārāt 'Isrā'īl' 'alā Sūriyā wa-ta'tabiruhā raddan 'alā hazīmatihā fī Ghazzah," *Shaam News Network*, 30/3/2024, accessed on 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/psg5w>.

<sup>11</sup> "Iran's Guards pull officers from Syria after Israeli strikes," *Reuters*, 1/2/2024, accessed on 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/ix3jx>.

<sup>12</sup> "Iran's Attack Was Response to Secret Israeli Attack on Drone Site," *The New York Times*, 16/3/2022, accessed on 18/4/2024, at: <https://nyti.ms/3b0DjJO>.

<sup>13</sup> "Israel's Prime Minister Explains His New Approach to Iran," *The Economist*, 8/6/2022, accessed on 18/4/2024, at: <https://econ.st/3aT6uig>.

## Iran's Considerations

Since the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Tehran has adhered to a security doctrine based on avoiding direct confrontation with its powerful opponents, especially the US and Israel. Instead, it has created and financed a network of proxies through which it can deter its opponents from attacking it directly. Hezbollah is a case in point, being Israel's most prominent tool of deterrence against Israel were the latter to consider attacking Tehran's nuclear programme.

This is not to say that Iran has always avoided direct confrontation in cases where its interests are in danger. Indeed, it has sometimes hit its rivals front-on, but in a calculated manner, to avoid dragging it into an all-out war. For example, in September 2019 Iran targeted oil facilities belonging to Saudi state oil giant Aramco in eastern Saudi Arabia, in a drone attack that knocked half of Saudi oil production (approximately five million barrels of oil per day) offline, after the administration of then-US president Donald Trump had imposed a ban exports of Iranian oil.<sup>14</sup> This attack prompted Saudi Arabia to reconsider the impulsiveness of its foreign policy during the Trump era. Iran also bombed the US military base at Ain al-Assad in Iraq, in response to the American assassination of the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, at Baghdad airport in early 2020.<sup>15</sup> Iran has also repeatedly launched missile attacks on Erbil, the capital of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, claiming that it was targeting Israeli intelligence headquarters. The first such incident came after Israel destroyed the Kermanshah drone factory, and second followed the assassination of Reza Mousavi in Damascus last December.<sup>16</sup>

In January 2024, Iran also fired missiles into Pakistani territory in response to attacks inside Iran claimed by Jaysh al-Adl (also known as the People's Resistance of Iran), which Iran claims is based in border areas of Pakistan and which seeks independence for Iran's southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchistan. Iran de-escalated the situation after Pakistan responded by bombing targets inside Iran.<sup>17</sup> Iran also fired missiles from its own territory into Idlib in northwestern Syria after a January 2024 attack, claimed by the Islamic State group, that left dozens dead in the southeastern Iranian city of Kerman as mourners commemorated the fourth anniversary of Soleimani's killing.<sup>18</sup> Yet despite these cases, Iran had always avoided responding directly to Israel, until the consulate bombing in Damascus.

<sup>14</sup> "U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Iran's Oil Sector," *The New York Times*, 26/10/2020, accessed on 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/jx69lp>.

<sup>15</sup> "Īrān taqšifu qā'idatayn fi al-'Irāq yastakhdimuhumā junūd 'Amrikīyūn 'inti qāman li-maqṭal Sulaymānī," *France 24*, 8/1/2020, accessed 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/rh6zj>.

<sup>16</sup> "Īrān turbiṭu qaṣf 'Arbīl bi-ighṭiyāl Mūsawī... wa-Khāmināī fājā 'al-ḥaras' bi-'amr al-hijūm," *Al-Jarida*, 17/1/2024, accessed 18/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/dteu6>.

<sup>17</sup> "Ra'īs wuzarā' Bākistān ya'qīdu ijtimā'an 'amnīyan ṭārī'an ma'ā qādat al-jaysh wa-al-mukhābarāt fi ḡill al-tawattūr ma'ā 'Īrān," *France 24*, 19/1/2024, accessed 17/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/n2vtf>.

<sup>18</sup> "'Tanẓīm al-dawlah' yatbannā tafjīray Kirmān al-ashadd damawīyah fi tārikh 'Īrān mundhu 45 'āman," *Euronews*, 4/1/2024, accessed 17/1/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/41vlij>.



In reality, Iran had no option but to respond. Israel had targeted one of its diplomatic missions, meaning the issue was now one of national pride. Failing to respond would have made the regime appear weak to its own supporters, who demanded a response, as well as undermining its credibility with its allies, who are engaged in confrontations with Israel and its allies throughout the region, such as the Houthis, Hezbollah, and so on. Iran also had a strong legal basis for a response, considering that Israel violated the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) and attacked its consulate in Damascus, a position confirmed in Iran's official statement after its response to Israel.<sup>19</sup> However, the response was carefully calibrated. It gave Iran's adversaries a long time to prepare, and it appears that the US and several countries in the region were informed of the timing of the operation.<sup>20</sup> The attack was duly repelled, and did not cause the kind of damage that would require a major response from Israel.

Iran's calculus also took into account the Biden administration's strong desire to avoid the outbreak of a region-wide war in the middle of a tough re-election campaign. According to several press reports, Biden held Israel back from launching a counterattack on Iran in the hours immediately after the Iranian attack, arguing that it had only caused minor damage, and that the US had demonstrated its strong commitment to Israel's security by leading operations to repel the Iranian operation, which Biden considered a failure.<sup>21</sup>

## Israel's Calculations

Over the decade from 2013 to 2023, Israel had waged what it called "the battle between wars" in Syria, a long series of military and security operations for which it never officially claimed or admitted responsibility, in order to avoid legal and political responsibility, and to avoid sparking a direct war.<sup>22</sup> At first, this campaign aimed to prevent Iran from delivering to Hezbollah, via Syria, weapons that would "break the balance"—that is, undermine Israel's absolute military superiority in the region. But Israel later extended its goals to include preventing Iran, Hezbollah, or their associated militias stationing forces in southern Syria, especially areas close to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.<sup>23</sup> In late 2017, it began targeting Iranian military assets in Syria, including not only military bases and airports, but also facilities producing missiles, drones, and other weaponry. Despite Russia's military intervention in favour of the regime in September 2015, Israel had reached an understanding with

<sup>19</sup> Iranian Foreign Ministry, "Bayān wizārat al-khārijyah bi-sha'ni al-radd 'alā al-'amal al-'udwānī al-ṣihyūnī ḍidd al-safārah fi Dimashq," 14/4/2024, accessed 18/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/wk671>.

<sup>20</sup> "Iran says it Gave Warning before Attacking Israel: US says that's Not True," *Reuters*, 15/4/2024, accessed on 18/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/m5pj2>.

<sup>21</sup> "US will not Take Part in any Israeli Retaliatory Action against Iran," *Reuters*, 15/4/2024, accessed on 18/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/3hqxj>.

<sup>22</sup> Eran Ortal, "The Fly on the Elephant's Back: The Campaign between Wars in Israel's Security Doctrine," *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 24, no. 2 (April 2021), pp. 108-116, accessed on 18/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/8eap>.

<sup>23</sup> "Motives for Israel's Intensified Military Strikes against Syria," Situation Assessment (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies), 2/5/2017, accessed on 19/4/2024: <http://doha-institute.org/RAA>.

Moscow to prevent frictions and allow it to continue its military operations against targets in Syria.<sup>24</sup> Such attacks increased significantly from 2018 onwards. While Israel only carried out 22 known attacks on targets in Syria between 2013 and 2017,<sup>25</sup> the following year alone it carried out 18 such operations, then 22 in 2019, 36 each in 2020 and 2021, followed by 33 attacks in 2022.<sup>26</sup>

Since the start of 2022, most Israeli attacks in Syria have targeted assets linked to the regime, whether military or civilian. Four attacks on the airports of Damascus and Aleppo in 2022 forced them both to shut down temporarily. During the first half of 2023, 47% of Israeli attacks on Syria were aimed at regime-linked targets, while 24% were linked to Hezbollah, 24% to Iran, and the remaining five percent involved arms transfers to Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>27</sup> Israel's goal in attacking regime targets was to pressure Damascus to change its policy of allowing Iran to maintain a military foothold on Syrian territory.

After the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, Israel stepped up its attacks in Syria, carrying out more than 40 such operations within the six months to early April.<sup>28</sup> These strikes extended to regime military positions as well as those of the Revolutionary Guards, Hezbollah and other Iranian-allied militias. Israel, which had been quick to place part of the blame on Iran for "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood," apparently wanted to inflict a price on Iran as part of the war in Gaza in order to weaken it and, if possible, push it out of Syria – or to broaden the scope of the conflict in the region in order to drag the US into a war against Iran and its allies.

Israel's attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus may have been designed to push Iran into a corner, presenting it with an uncomfortable choice: either refrain from responding directly to Israel (as usual), and risk being weakened internally and lose face with its allies, or strike back and risk being sucked into a major regional war. Perhaps ironically, this was also precisely the situation in which Israel found itself after Iran's response.

The Iranian response demonstrated that Israel is unable to thwart Iranian attacks effectively alone, but must rely on the support of its Western allies and other countries in the region. It also demonstrated that Arab countries were willing to cooperate openly with Israel to thwart Iranian attacks against it. While this may not be a turning point in itself, the incident was the clearest demonstration so far of this tendency, which has gradually emerged over the last decade. The confrontation also demonstrated that Iran has the ability to reach Israeli territory and hit specific targets there, and that the damage could have been greater if the strike had been immediate, only giving Israel a few hours to counter it.

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24 "Tafāhumāt 'Isrā'īliyah Rūsiyah ḥawla tanfidh qarabāt jawwīyah fi Sūriyā," Al-Furat Center for Studies, 16/1/2022, accessed on 18/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/h4r4g>.

25 Ofer Shelah and Carmit Valensi, "The Campaign between Wars at a Crossroads: 2013-2023: What Lies Ahead?" Memo 227, The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), November 2023, accessed 19/4/2024, at: [https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Memo\\_227\\_ShelahValensi\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Memo_227_ShelahValensi_ENG.pdf).

26 Eden Kaduri, "The Campaign between the Wars in Syria: What Was, What Is, and What Lies Ahead," INSS, 6/3/2023, accessed 19/4/2024 at <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/war-between-the-wars-syria/>.

27 Shelah and Valensi, p.50.

28 "Abrazu al-qarabāt al-'Isrā'īliyah 'alā al-arādī al-Sūriyah fi al-'aqdayn al-ākhirayn," *Al-Jazeera*, 15/4/2024, accessed 18/4/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/43ugf>.





## Conclusion

The exchange of hostilities between Iran and Israel, and the emergence of their “shadow war” into the open for the first time, have ramped up the risk of a full-blown war between them. Such a scenario could also drag in other countries across the region and beyond, given the security alliance that aborted the Iranian attack on Israel on the night of 13 April. While the Biden administration is striving to prevent such an eventuality and avoid being dragged a new war in the region, much will depend on Israel’s response to the Iranian attack, on the one hand, and on Iran’s ability to tolerate Israel’s insistence on restoring the anti-Iranian deterrence that had existed prior to 14 April, on the other.