



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 25 April 2024

Has Washington Managed to Contain the Escalation between Iran and Israel?

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

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The United States played a significant role in preventing the recent exchanges of fire between Iran and Israel morphing into an open military confrontation and a new regional war. The Biden administration took great pains to cooperate with allies in preventing Iranian attacks against Israel causing any major casualties that would invite a tough response from Israel. Meanwhile it exerted pressure on Israel not to respond at all to the Iranian barrage on 14 April, to instead be content with the “great success” in blocking the strike, or to limit its response to a small-scale operation. As such, Israel conducted a “symbolic” attack on positions near the Iranian city of Isfahan on 19 April.

New Rules of Engagement?

For decades, Iran and Israel have been fighting a “shadow war”, exchanging attacks either directly or through proxies.¹ However, Israel bombed the Iranian consulate in Damascus on 1 April, killing seven Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers, including Iran’s top military commander in Syria and Lebanon. Iran considered this move an Israeli attempt to change the rules of engagement that forced Tehran to respond directly so as to maintain its prestige as a regional power and to reinstate mutual deterrence, without being dragged into an all-out war.² Against this backdrop, on 14 April this year, Iran launched an attack on Israel from within its territory that included 300 drones and ballistic and cruise missiles.

The Iranian missiles, most of which were shot down by US command, caused little damage. On 19 April, Israel launched a limited-scale retaliatory attack, which it did not officially take credit for, on an air base near Isfahan, which in turn did not cause significant damage. The Israeli response also included an attack on a military radar base in the south of Syria, and another attack, the next day, on a military base (Kalso) in Iraq’s Babil Province, south of Baghdad, which includes a command centre for the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella for many militias affiliated with Iran.

While Iran sought to downplay the scale of the attack on the airbase in Isfahan by stating that it was carried out by small drones launched from within Iran itself, and its air defences were able to shoot it down, information published by US and Israeli media, relying on unspecified official sources, indicate that the attack included missile bombardment.³ The official Israeli silence, along with Iran’s attempt to minimize the impact of the attack and neglect its source⁴ have been widely understood as an attempt by both parties to avoid being drawn into open warfare, and hence to return to the status quo of the “shadow war”. This does not mean overlooking the changes that have occurred. The direct Iranian attack on Israel from its territory is the first since the establishment of the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

1 Cassandra Vinograd, “Shadow War between Iran and Israel: A Timeline,” *The New York Times*, 19/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/nw6uRCzU>

2 Tamara Qiblawi, “Iran’s Attack Seemed Planned to Minimize Casualties, while Maximizing Spectacle,” *CNN*, 14/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Xw6uTFYi>

3 Farnaz Fassihi & Eric Schmitt, “Israel Launched Missiles as Well as Drones at Iran, Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, 19/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Aw6uYzvR>

4 “Israel and Iran Both Have Muted Response to Isfahan Attack,” *Reuters*, 19/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Cw6uIQuR>



Iranian and Israeli Estimations

The exchange that took place over the past three weeks demonstrates the existence of a common desire shared by Iran and the United States and to a lesser extent Israel, each for its own reasons, to avoid being dragged into total war. Iran is suffering the impact of the US economic sanctions, reimposed when Donald Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018. The balance of military power is severely skewed in favour of Israel, which enjoys unmatched US and Western support, as demonstrated by the Gaza war and the support for Israel in intercepting Iran's missile strike.

Consequently, although Iran appeared forced to respond to Israel's attack on its consulate in Damascus, the strike was most likely designed to avoid provoking a large Israeli, and perhaps even US, response. Iran's foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, admitted that his country gave some neighbouring countries, including allies of the United States, 72-hour notice of the attack.⁵ According to US sources, both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates informed the United States of the imminent attack, understood as an Iranian effort to give the United States and Israel enough time to prepare for those attacks.⁶ These warnings were given despite the fact that Iran designed the attack to reach the Nevatim Airbase in the Negev desert near the city of Beersheba. By hitting the target, Tehran sought to demonstrate its ability to achieve its goal in spite of all the defences that Israel and its allies created to intercept an Iranian strike.⁷ Nevatim is considered the main hangar for Israeli F-35 fighters, from which it is believed that the attack on the Iranian consulate was launched. According to satellite images, Nevatim and another military base, located in the same area, were slightly damaged.

In contrast, while Benjamin Netanyahu hopes to drag the United States into a full confrontation with Iran, the realization that the Biden administration will not participate in a retaliatory attack dampened the enthusiasm of the Israeli government. Instead, the Israelis sought to balance between holding on to the prestige of deterrence on the one hand, especially in the wake of "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood", and avoiding provoking an all-out war with Iran. It is already bogged down by its onslaught in Gaza and escalating confrontations with Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁸ Accordingly, the Israeli options ranged between strikes on strategic Iranian facilities, including nuclear sites or Revolutionary Guard bases, and carrying out covert operations or assassinations and cyber-attacks on industrial facilities. It ultimately targeted an air base near the city of Isfahan, so that it would be close enough to the Iranian nuclear facilities, thus demonstrating its ability to target it, but without causing significant damage, embarrassing Iran and pushing it to respond. The damage was so insignificant that it allowed Iran to deny that an Israeli attack had even taken place.

⁵ Aresu Egbali, "Iran Says It Warned Allies 72 Hours before Attack on Israel," *The Wall Street Journal*, 15/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Aw6uOL3t>

⁶ Samia Nakhoul, Parisa Hafezi & James Mackenzie, "Israel's Iran Attack Carefully Calibrated after Internal Splits, US Pressure," *Reuters*, 19/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Zw6uPmuq>

⁷ "Israel Strikes Iran with A Missile, U.S. Officials say, as Tehran Downplays Netanyahu's Apparent Retaliation," *CBS News*, 19/4/2024, accessed on 24/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Bw6uFdil>

⁸ Yasmeen Abutaleb, "Biden Team Greets Limited Scope of Israeli Strike with Cautious Relief," *The Washington Post*, 19/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/hw6uGw94>



Calculations in Washington

Despite the pressure exerted by the Biden administration on Israel not to respond to the Iranian attack, the Israeli government did respond, which some White House officials considered a kind of insult to the United States and to Biden personally.⁹ Biden was quoted as having confided to some of his aides that Netanyahu is “trying to drag Washington into a wider conflict”.¹⁰ This is an indication of how little influence the US has on Netanyahu and his government. According to US estimates, the success of the air defences in the coalition led by Washington was “exceptional” in thwarting the Iranian attack; destroying most of the Iranian missiles and drones before they reached Israeli airspace, while the Israeli air defences took care of most of the rest. On this basis, Biden asked Netanyahu to think carefully and strategically, taking into account the international and regional alliance, which Washington formed to defend Israel, with Arab countries joining. He believes that not responding increases Iran’s isolation and ends the isolation of Israel provoked by its war in the Gaza Strip. When it became clear that Israel did not want to listen to Washington’s advice, the Biden administration made it all too clear that it would not participate in any Israeli offensive against Iran, while remaining committed to defending it against any Iranian attack. This seems to have pushed Israel to settling for the limited operation it carried out near Isfahan.

The United States Central Command (CENTCOM), which includes the Middle East region within its scope, coordinated efforts to repel the attack on Israel, in cooperation with both Britain, France, and Jordan. In addition, there was news of a Saudi and Emirati logistics role. According to a CENTCOM statement, the US forces shot down approximately 80 drones and six ballistic missiles using F-15 and F-16 aircraft, and Patriot air defence system missiles, as well as two US Navy destroyers in the eastern Mediterranean, in cooperation with the allies. US forces shot down a missile near Erbil in Iraq that is believed to have been headed towards Israel, as that included “a ballistic missile on its launcher vehicle and seven UAVs destroyed on the ground prior to their launch in areas controlled by Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen”.¹¹

Following the Iranian attack, the Biden administration tried to dissuade Israel from attacking Iran, by imposing additional sanctions on the latter targeting “the leaders and entities connected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran’s Defense Ministry, and the Iranian government’s missile and drone program.”¹² The Biden administration confirmed that it will continue to work “further strengthen and expand the successful integration of air and missile defense and early warning systems across the Middle East to further erode the effectiveness of Iran’s missile and UAV

⁹ Alexander Ward, “No One Wants to Escalate Things,” *Politico*, 19/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Ww6uHZQI>

¹⁰ John Bowden, “Is Netanyahu Trying to Draw US Into Middle East War?” *The Independent*, 17/4/2024, accessed 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/lw6uJDAd>

¹¹ Greg Wehner, “US Military Destroyed 80 Drones, 6 Missiles Launched from Iran, Yemen, US Centcom Says,” *Reuters*, 14/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/zw6uZSkG>

¹² “Statement from President Joe Biden on Iran Sanctions,” The White House, 18/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/ow6uCRfh>



capabilities”.¹³ It also prompted the leaders of the Group of Seven industrialized nations to condemn the Iranian attack against Israel and the threat of sanctions and additional measures to restrict Iran’s military programs, to which they responded by confirming their readiness “to take further measures now and in response to further destabilizing initiatives”.¹⁴

Notably, Israel gave the US 24-hour notice of its planned strike, warning that it would strike within the coming 24 to 48 hours.¹⁵ Biden expressed his satisfaction with the limited nature of this attack, content that it would not lead to a regional escalation.¹⁶

Conclusion

Although the recent escalation between Israel and Iran was contained with major US effort and pressure on both sides, the developments of the first three weeks of April 2024 made clear just how fragile the situation is. The possibility that a simple error could ignite the entire region as long as Israel’s war on Gaza continues has been laid bare. Washington could be dragged into this conflict against its will, especially since Israel does not show any respect for US interests, nor does it heed advice from the White House. Nevertheless, the United States continues to provide limitless support to Israel, most recently demonstrated on 20 April, with Congress voting to pass a law providing for renewed military aid to Israel worth \$26 billion. This sum enables it to continue its genocidal campaign in the Gaza Strip, standing ready to invade Rafah. Israel is now equipped to ignore international opposition to the invasion and US warnings that horrific massacres would be a likely result, given the presence of more than 1.3 million Palestinians in an area that does not exceed 60 square kilometres.

¹³ “Statement by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Holding Iran Accountable for Unprecedented Attack on Israel,” The White House, 16/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Uw6uC8xQ>

¹⁴ “G7 Leaders’ Statement on Iran’s Attack Against Israel,” The White House, 14/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/Cw6uBNQN>

¹⁵ Zvika Klein, “Israeli Sources to Post: ‘An Eye for an Eye’; Not Clear why Pentagon Leaked info on Attack,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 19/4/2024, accessed on 23/4/2024, at: <https://cutt.ly/vw6uMiPz>

¹⁶ Abutaleb.