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What Provoked Israel's Limited Response to Iran's Attack?

Unit for Political Studies

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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At dawn on 14 April, 2024, Iran launched its first ever direct attack from its own territory against Israel, involving some 120 ballistic missiles, 36 cruise missiles, and 170 drones, in response to and Israeli air strike on 1 April, 2024 that hit the Iranian consulate in Damascus, killing seven officers from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, including Mohammad Reza Zahedi, head of the Quds Force in Syria and Lebanon.

The Iranian attack targeted two airbases in southern Israel, not far from the Dimona nuclear reactor. Contrary to official Israeli claims, it emerged that nine missiles hit the targeted airbases, and five landed at the Nevatim base.¹ Initial reports indicated that the cost of the Israeli response to the Iranian attack amounted to two billion shekels,² while other sources said it had cost between four and five billion shekels (one US dollar equal 3.83 Israeli shekels).³

Strategic Confusion

The Iranian attack, which was carefully calibrated and announced ahead of time, came as Israel languishes in strategic confusion as a result of the ongoing genocidal war it has been waging against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip since Hamas attacked Israel on 7 October, 2023. The disarray in its strategy has been compounded by Israel's failure to achieve its declared goals of ending the Palestinian group's rule and military capabilities in the Gaza Strip and rescuing the Israeli hostages it holds. Israel has also been engaged in a military confrontation with Hezbollah across the Lebanese border since 8 October, which promises to drag on until Israel ends its war on the Gaza Strip. Some 120,000 Israelis also remain displaced from areas near Gaza in the south and the border with Lebanon in the north.

Moreover, Israel lacks clear strategy as to how to deal with Iran's nuclear programme, as Iran approaches the status of a "threshold nuclear state," whereby it would be able to produce nuclear weapons within a short period were it to decide to do so. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, had encouraged then-US president Donald Trump to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear agreement, commonly known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018, hoping the US would eventually use military force against the Iranian nuclear facilities. Successive Netanyahu governments have also failed, since 2009, to secure the military capabilities necessary to carry out a successful military operation against Iranian nuclear facilities were the need to arise.⁴

1 "Report: Iranian missiles hit the plane in Nevatim, and another air force base," *Walla*, 15/4/2024, accessed 25/4/2024 (in Hebrew) at: <https://tinyurl.com/5h6hd2km>.

2 Yoav Azolay, "The cost of interception tonight - about NIS 2 billion; TAA CEO: '30 years drained into one dramatic night,'" *Calcalist*, 14/4/2024, accessed 25/4/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://tinyurl.com/3cbuz9bu>.

3 Alexandra Lukesh, "The cost of Israel's defense against Iran's missile attack: "4-5 billion shekels per night," *Ynet*, 14/4/2024, accessed 25/4/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://tinyurl.com/44cxjdu>.

4 Mahmoud Muhareb, "Siyāsāt 'Isrā'īl tijāha al-mashrū' al-nawawī al-Ṭrānī fī bidāyat ḥukm al-ra'īs 'Ibrāhīm Ra'īsī," *Siyāsāt 'Arabīyya*, 10, No. 59 (November 2022), p.48-61.



Israeli society is also deeply divided over Netanyahu's endeavours to limit the judiciary powers. This battle was put on hold by the war on Gaza, but which is far from over. In addition, pressure is mounting on senior political and military officials to bear responsibility for the failures of 7 October. On 22 April 2024, the head of the Israeli Military Intelligence (Aman), Aharon Haliva, resigned over the failure to anticipate the Hamas attack, acknowledging his full responsibility for the security failure.⁵ Yet, it is likely that his resignation was directly related to his agency's failure to predict Iran's reaction to the Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on 1 April.⁶ On the day he announced his resignation, Chief of the Israeli Army Central Command, Yehuda Fox, informed Chief of Staff Herzi Halevy that he would retire in August because he had not received the support he expected from Halevy.⁷ In the next few months, the Chief of Staff himself and other military and security officers are expected to follow suit. This ratchets up the pressure on Netanyahu and other political leaders, including Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, to take responsibility as well, which could prompt the Knesset to hold early elections.

Considerations in Israel's Response

The Israeli political and military establishment was in consensus on the need to respond to the Iranian attack, despite the opposition of the US, which provided air defences that intercepted most of the Iranian missiles and aircraft that targeted Israel. On the same day of Iran's attack, Netanyahu convened the National Security Council to discuss the Israeli response, and authorized the war cabinet to make decisions on how to respond.⁸ After four days of meetings, cabinet members agreed on the size and timing of Israel's response.⁹

At dawn on 19 April, Israel carried out a limited attack on Iran, striking a radar station near the city of Isfahan. Yet, it refrained from taking responsibility for the attack. Israeli media reported that the target was part of a Russian-made S-300 surface-to-air missile system tasked with protecting sites connected to Iran's nuclear program.¹⁰

Several contradictory factors were at play in Israeli deliberations over the response to the Iranian attack. On the one hand, Israel's commitment to deterrence – one of the basic pillars of its security

⁵ Yoav Zeyton, "Amen head Aharon Haliva resigns: 'We didn't live up to our mission. I will carry the pain with me forever,'" *Ynet*, 22/4/2024, accessed 25/4/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://tinyurl.com/2yr8ukhe>.

⁶ Amos Harel, "Israel did not anticipate the strategic change in Iran, and it will force a cautious approach," *Haaretz*, 17/4/2024, accessed 25/4/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://tinyurl.com/43c2d5em>.

⁷ Yaniv Kobowitz, "General of the Central Command Yehuda Fox informs the Chief of Staff that he will retire from the IDF this August," *Haaretz*, 22/4/2024, accessed 25/4/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://tinyurl.com/yck6tn7y>.

⁸ Moran Azulai, "'We need a response - and a significant one': the pressure on Netanyahu from the right wing of the government," *Ynet*, 14/4/2024, accessed on 25/4/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://tinyurl.com/2w2dcwn7>.

⁹ Amos Harel, "Israel is preparing to attack Iran, and the great danger is that it will drag Hezbollah deep into the campaign," *Haaretz*, 16/4/2024, accessed on 25/4/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://tinyurl.com/urusmbnc>.

¹⁰ Amos Harel, "Iran is signaling that the round of strikes is over - but it is not certain that Israel's goal has been achieved," *Haaretz*, 21/4/2024, accessed on 25/4/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc4fnc9f>.

doctrine—required it to respond quickly and proportionally to the size of the Iranian attack, especially after the damage done to its deterrence by Hamas' October operation and the start of "calculated" tit-for-tat exchanges of fire with Hezbollah the following day. However, the Israeli response to the Iranian attack was limited because of several factors, most notably:

1. The Biden administration's opposition to expanding the scope of the conflict, a reticence based on American strategic interests and domestic considerations related to US presidential elections in November, as well as its reluctance to be drawn into a military confrontation with Iran.¹¹
2. Although nine Iranian missiles hit their targets at Israeli airbases, the Iranian attack caused only minor damage and no loss of life, according to Israeli statements.
3. On the eve of the Iranian attack on Israel, an informal alliance took shape that included the US, some European countries and Arab allies, to shield Israel from the Iranian attack. Although the Iranian attack demonstrated Israel's inability to defend itself without assistance, despite its constant claims to the contrary, Israel attaches great importance to maintaining this alliance, particularly with the Arab countries. In its efforts to develop it, at the expense of the Palestinian people and their interests, Israel is taking into account demands by members of this coalition not to expand the confrontation with Iran.
4. Israel's top priorities at this stage are to achieve its goals in its war on Gaza, expand its settlements and contain Palestinian anger in the occupied West Bank. This requires it to refrain from expanding its war to enable it to complete the occupation of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip.
5. A poorly calculated Israeli response against Iran could mean that the slogan of "unity of the battlefields" among Iran's allies becomes a hard reality, something that has not yet materialized despite more than six months of genocidal war against the Palestinians in Gaza. If Israel and Iran fall into a cycle of tit-for-tat or even a full-scale war, Hezbollah will likely throw its full weight into the conflict, alongside other pro-Iranian militias in the region, a war for which Israel is ill-prepared. While some Israeli officials have endorsed a strategy of exploiting the confrontation with Hezbollah and Iran to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, in reality Israel cannot carry out a successful attack on its own. The Biden administration, for its part, appears reluctant to be dragged into such a scenario, especially as Iran has demonstrated that it is capable of striking Israeli nuclear facilities if its own are attacked.
6. It appears for now that the Netanyahu government wants to further isolate Iran, impose yet tighter sanctions and rebuild an international coalition against it, increasing its own coordination with the US to tackle the Iranian nuclear project, and stepping up its efforts to build a strong military force to deploy against the Islamic Republic if needed.¹²

¹¹ Ben Samuels and Jonathan Lees, "NBC report: Biden fears that Netanyahu is trying to drag the US into a broad conflict, and that Israel will react recklessly," *Haaretz*, 14/4/2024, accessed 25/4/2024 (in Hebrew), at: <https://tinyurl.com/29mbfkbf>.

¹² Tamir Hayman, "'The Day After': The Development of the War Requires Brave Decisions," *The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)*, 12/4/2024, accessed 25/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2fenam97>.



Conclusion

It appears that by carrying out a limited response to the Iranian strike and refraining from claiming responsibility for it, Israel has drawn a line under the current exchange of strikes. However, it is not clear whether the exchange has changed the rules of engagement between the two sides, created a state of mutual deterrence, ended Iran's long-held doctrine of "strategic patience" towards repeated Israeli attacks against its interests both inside and outside Iran, or change Israel's decade-old policy of the "battle between the wars", targeting Iranian interests throughout the region, particularly in Syria. Many Israeli analysts point out that while the "battle between the wars" has made tactical military gains against Iranian interests in Syria and against the Iranian nuclear project, it has failed to achieve its broader strategic goals¹³ of preventing Iran from reaching the nuclear threshold,¹⁴ preventing advanced weapons from reaching Hezbollah in Lebanon and discouraging Iran from gaining a military foothold in Syria. In any case, it seems likely that Israel will become more cautious in targeting Iranian interests, whether inside or outside Iran, at least as long as the war on Gaza continues.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Muhareb, "Siyāsāt 'Isrā'īl."