

## Iran-Israel Missile Strikes: Back from The Brink

---

### Introduction

On 14 Apr, Iran launched its first direct military offensive against Israel. The attack consisted of over 300 Shahed drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles. The launch was detected immediately, and the Israeli forces on high alert had approximately two hours of response time before the drones reached Israeli airspace.

The strike was then taken apart as it moved across the Middle East by members of the United States(US)-led Middle East Air Defence (AD) Alliance, which included jets from the Royal Air Force, the Jordanian Air Forces and the US Air Force. Most of the surviving munitions were then intercepted by Israel's AD Systems which included the Iron Dome, Davids Sling and Arrow 2 and 3. At least five penetrated through these defences and struck targets in and around the Nevatim Air Base in the Negev Desert. These five hits resulted in no casualties and caused only structural damage.

The world was on edge and there was danger that a threatened Israeli retaliation would result in a regional if not wider conflict. Crude prices spiked, markets dropped across the globe and gold reached new heights. For India one of the major dangers of escalation was the blocking of the Straits of Hormuz as it would result in disruption of both crude and natural gas.

### Israeli Response

The Israeli reaction took place within the week. On 19 Apr, they struck a military airbase near the city of Isfahan and Iranian officials also claimed to have shot down small drones near the northern city of Tabriz but this was downplayed. Isfahan Province in the centre of Iran is home to significant Iranian military infrastructure, including a large air base, a major missile production complex and nuclear facilities. As per reports in the Jerusalem Post, the Israelis were targeting an AD radar site near Isfahan that's part of the protection of the Natanz nuclear facility.

The choreography of missile strikes once again ensured that there were no casualties and moreover no targeting of Iranian Nuclear facilities. Iranian media and officials described a small number of explosions, which they said resulted from AD hitting three drones over Isfahan. They referred to the incident as an attack by 'Infiltrators', rather than by Israel, obviating the need for retaliation.

The Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian downplaying the attack said, "They are ... more like toys that our children play with, not drones". He also added; "As long as there is no new adventurism by Israel against our interests, we are not going to have any new reactions'.

With Israel remaining deadlocked in Gaza, where around 130 Israeli hostages remain and Israel has inflicted more than 34,000 civilian casualties including women and children. The Iranian strikes must have seemed as a welcome relief as the narrative shifted from the humanitarian crisis Israel is causing in Gaza. Further, in a timing that cannot be a mere coincidence, the US House of Representatives quickly passed an aid package of \$26.38 bn for Israel.

With no hostage deal or ceasefire mechanisms apparent, the risk of miscalculation remains high. The region remains in a uniquely dangerous position in which Prime Minister Netanyahu may feel that he has little choice but to escalate with Iran in order to maintain public support.

But responses to the strike within Israel have exposed the country's political fissures. Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir described the strike on Iran as 'Feeble' or 'Lame'. In response, Israeli Opposition Leader Yair Lapid called for him to be sacked, and said his remark had ridiculed and embarrassed Israel.<sup>[3]</sup>

### **Things Were Going Iran's Way**

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has taken an anti-Israeli posture and as part of its deterrence strategy has cultivated and financed support for the 'Axis of Resistance' network in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Palestine, surrounding Israel's borders.

The Hamas attack on 07 Oct suited Iran's agenda. Israel had suffered an unprecedented and humiliating setback, and its much-lauded intelligence and defences had failed. Its subsequent actions in Gaza had received widespread condemnation and had aligned the Middle Eastern countries against Israel. Israel's war was steadily harming its image, simultaneously exposing the hypocrisy of its Western backers. Israel was getting increasingly isolated internationally due to its disastrous war in Gaza.

The Palestinian cause in the region and around the world had been resurrected. Sympathy for Palestinians, particularly in the West, was more voluble. Iran did not need to intervene, its proxies acted on its behalf. Hezbollah had been routinely shelling Northern Israel, and the Houthis in Yemen have launched numerous unsuccessful missile and drone strikes against Israel and disrupted global shipping.

But Israel's attack against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Damascus forced Iranian officials to make a more difficult choice. Iran had two choices; it could refrain from overt retaliation and continue to benefit from the present situation where Israel is being criticised for their actions in Gaza. The spotlight would remain on the atrocities in Gaza. Retaliation with force would discourage Israel from crossing the boundaries the two countries had established by their shadow war.<sup>[4]</sup> Both options carried their own risks and benefits.

### **Iranian Compulsions**

Iran felt it had to act post the Israeli strike on its Consulate in Damascus and framed its strike within international law writing to the United Nations Security Council quoting Article 51 regarding its legitimate self-defence. It decided it had to violate a Napoleonic dictum 'Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake'.

Its primary aim was restoring the balance of deterrence by its 'Sub-threshold response strategy' a type of response that was meticulously crafted above deterrence but below escalation.

Surprisingly, Iran even went against a key military principle of war, 'The element of surprise'. It telegraphed its intentions to Washington and several Arab and European capitals assuring them that its strike would be relatively limited.

The use of its array of weapons to inflict the damage was more than mere symbolism as it was aimed at reflecting Iranian capabilities. Iranian Armed Forces' Chief of Staff, Maj Gen Mohammad Bagheri stated, "Our response will be much larger than tonight's military action if Israel retaliates against Iran", which is indicative of weapons in their arsenal which were not

used and could be used in future. It also marks a shift in Iranian policy from ‘Strategic Patience’ to ‘Active Deterrence’. [5]

Iran’s current strategy in the region was working well due to its proxies which gave them strategic depth, operational flexibility and plausible deniability. But its recent action has been driven by few aims; it has tried to demonstrate that it has the ability to alter the prevailing situation and that its missiles have the capability of reaching Israel and penetrating their AD systems. The next is that the attack was directed at both Israel and the US thereby conveying that they would not submit to a Western political vision out of a sense of fear and finally it has also conveyed a message to those countries in the region that were moving towards normalisation of relations with Israel.

The attack showcased Iran’s growing might and its willingness to strike at its adversaries to quote the Commander in Chief of the IRGC, Hossein Salami; “We have decided to establish a new dynamic with Israel”. [6]

## Conclusion

While the Israeli ‘Limited Response’ seems to have averted the storm, unfortunately, while a crisis has been abated the tensions continue to endure. The fact remains that while any nation can start a war, its duration and intensity become indeterminate in the long run.

Hence, the implications of crossing of this red line during this cycle of violence will remain. Firing of missiles primarily to signal resolve rather than cause damage is difficult to design while ensuring the conflict goes no further.

Rewriting the rules of engagement is challenging but undoubtedly both sides have made a symbolic statement and managed the escalation cycle, wherein they have played to the gallery as far as their domestic audience is concerned. They have responded while at the same time ensured that a retaliatory strike will remain below escalatory threshold.

## Endnotes

---

[1] NDTV.com. “Our Next Response Will Be At Maximum Level: Iran Warns Israel Again,” NDTV, 20 April 2024 <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/will-respond-at-maximum-level-if-israel-iran-warns-amid-tensions-5481532>.

[2] Mallinder, Lorraine. “US Congress to Vote on Aid for Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan: What’s the Deal?” Al Jazeera, April 21, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/4/20/us-congress-to-vote-on-aid-for-israel-ukraine-taiwan-whats-the-deal>.

[3] Palumbo, By Sean Seddon And Daniele. “What We Know about Israel’s Missile Attack on Iran,” April 19, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68853402>.

[4] Grajewski, Nicole. “Iran and Israel’s Dangerous Gambit.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 18, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2024/04/18/iran-and-israel-s-dangerous-gambit-pub-92254>.

[5] McKernan, Bethan, Julian Borger, Peter Beaumont, and Emma Graham-Harrison. “Iran Warns It Will Strike Again with Greater Force If Israel or US Retaliate.” the Guardian, April 14,

2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/14/iran-warns-strike-again-greater-force-us-israel-retaliate>.

[6] Tehran Times. "From Strategic Patience to Active Deterrence," April 20, 2024. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/497397/From-Strategic-Patience-to-Active-Deterrence>.

**Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd)** is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

**Article uploaded on 26-04-2024**

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he belongs to or of the USI of India.