

Iran Israel: No Longer Shadow Boxing

Introduction

On 13 April, Iran launched Operation True Promise, its response to Israel's attack on its Consulate in Syria on 01 April, which killed General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, the man reportedly in charge of coordinating the Quds Force's operations in the region, his deputy and several other Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps members.

Tehran fired a combination of more than 300 hundred drones and missiles at Israeli military facilities. The attack was the first-ever direct strike launched against Israel from Iranian territory. A Rubicon has been crossed, at a time when the world is already consumed by two ongoing conflicts and growing tensions in the South China Sea.

The missile strikes were targeted, and calibrated and was a massive attack that was aimed at overwhelming Israel's missile defence system. It was more than mere signalling.

Many analysts felt that there was an inevitability about Iran's retaliation against Israel's strike in Damascus. But until the drones and missiles took off, it was not clear whether they would convert a covert and indirect conflict by using proxies into an overt and direct one.

But as the details of Iran's response and Israel's success at countering it became clear, most policymakers have expressed optimism that further escalation has been avoided. But it is too soon to hope that the possibility that it may explode into a wider conflagration has abated as both sides are still rattling their sabres. Escalating blows which can lead to the United States (US) and Russia getting drawn in remains a concern.

The Attack

While an Iranian retaliation was expected but the scale at which it came was far greater than had been imagined. Over 300 drones, ballistic missiles and cruise missiles launched from multiple locations across Iran targeting Israeli military installations.[\[1\]](#)

With US support aircraft and the Israeli air defences including the Iron Dome, Davids Sling and the Arrow 2 and Arrow 3 systems were able to take on 99 per cent of the projectiles, this figure was as per Daniel Hagari, an Israeli military spokesman. The physical damage was limited and no fatalities were reported.[\[2\]](#)

But Iran also carried the attack out in a manner that exposed weaknesses in sophisticated air defence systems, a large number of slow drones were followed by dozens of ballistic missiles aimed at the Negev Desert followed by more sophisticated missiles which then hit Netavim Air Base, home of the squadron that carried out the Damascus strike but caused only light structural damage, overwhelming the air defence system by forcing it to engage many low-grade rockets. But it has proven that the missile defence system does work however it is said that the costs of countering the incoming missiles was greater than the costs of the missiles fired at Israel.[\[3\]](#) However, hardliners in Israel demand retaliation.

While General Bagheri the Iranian Chief of Staff stated that "Israel had crossed a red line that was unbearable" by targeting the Iranian Consulate in Damascus but after the attack "the mission is accomplished and the operation is over and we have no intentions of going further".[\[4\]](#) This statement was tailored to tread a fine balance between projecting military

strength and avoiding retaliation from Israel. To quote CNN the 'attack seemed choreographed to minimise casualties while maximising spectacle'.[\[5\]](#)

Iran's Use of Proxies

For years, Iran has sought to fight Israel by providing arms and funding a collection of proxies that includes Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It also includes Syria, Yemen's Houthis, and paramilitary organizations in Iraq. These groups were their means of countering Saudi Arabia, the US and the Islamic State of Iran and Syria but since the start of the war in the Gaza Strip last October, these proxies have helped operations against Israel.

While the West felt that Iran had been contained and even isolated but, Iran developed a strategy to empower proxy militias and to influence operations in the region while maintaining plausible deniability. Another consistency of Iran has been its support for the Palestinian cause and unwavering anti-Israel stance.

In response to Iranian proxies, Israel has targeted Iran in its own manner. It has repeatedly carried out covert activity on Iranian soil, including operations targeting nuclear facilities and scientists as well as conventional facilities and its key Generals such as General Qasem Soleimani.

While both sides were wary of letting their tit-for-tat attacks, get out of hand, that delicate balance changed on 07 October following the Hamas attack on Israel and the overwhelming force used by Israel in retaliation in Gaza. Following this there has been a change in the way the Middle East has looked at Israel and Iran's proxies especially the Houthis who stepped up attacks against Israel in a display of solidarity.

These assaults have caused 186 casualties among US troops serving in the Middle East. The Houthis, attacked ships in the Red Sea, causing transit through the Suez Canal to fall drastically. According to Congressional testimony in Mar by General Michael Kurilla, head of US Central Command, the escalation in strikes by Iran's allies and subsequent US military responses have emboldened terrorist organizations not aligned with Iran, such as the ISIS.[\[6\]](#)

In response, Israel attacked Iranian-backed groups in Lebanon and Syria, and then Iranian military personnel themselves. Between early Dec and late Mar, Israel killed nearly a dozen commanders and members of the IRGC which culminated in the airstrike in Damascus.

For years, Iran's approach toward Israel and the US largely revolved around encouraging proxy groups without resorting to direct provocative retaliations. The strategy was based on networks Iran had built, which gave it the ability to engage Israel without risking direct engagements, exacting costs while maintaining plausible deniability. But Iran's 'strategic patience' could no longer remain elastic and be seen as a sign of weakness. Some observers feel that it was a necessity as Iran's prestige was involved though its aware of its weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

But this escalation towards confrontation has been building up over the past few months. In January, Iran struck targets in Northern Iraq and Syria, claiming they were linked to Israel and the Islamic State. They also attacked operating bases of militants in Pakistan stating that they had struck Iran. Now, Iran has attacked Israel. While the symbolism of the attack matters more than the damage caused the ripples around the globe which include the rise in crude prices and plunging of stock markets will resonate.

Conclusion

For India an Iran-Israel confrontation is worse than that between Russia and Ukraine. This is because it is much closer to us geographically, and both are countries with whom we have close relations. India is part of the I2U2 with Israel and have defence ties with them and our planned India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor goes through Israel. With Iran we have an old civilisational relationship as they were one of our largest suppliers of crude. The Chabahar Port is being developed there and the North-South Transit Corridor runs through Iran. This apart our major trade links run through the Red Sea and the Straits of Hormuz. Our interests in this region are much deeper.

The attacks by Iran demonstrated that they were willing to risk their own security by confronting Israel directly with the potential of drawing the US into the conflict.

The attack has also shattered any hopes of a peace process and de-escalation of the Israel Gaza conflict. At another level it has benefitted Israel as the US will now be forced to pump more military hardware in their direction.

Now that Israel has retaliated, with reports suggesting explosions being heard near Isfahan international airport and an army base in Isfahan city, activating local air defence systems. Iran too could climb up the escalation ladder. While the region has not exploded on 13 April, but it is now teetering on the edge, the risk of a wider and more dangerous conflict is stronger. While Iran and Israel may see an opportunity in chaos but chaos can be threatening in many ways. Calibrating risks has its limits.

Unfortunately, to quote Bob Dylan, “We can’t speak too soon. For the wheel’s still in spin. There’s a battle outside and it is raging. It’ll soon shake your windows and rattle your walls”.

Endnotes

[1] Al Jazeera. “Iran Attacks Israel with over 300 Drones, Missiles: What You Need to Know.” Al Jazeera, April 15, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/14/iran-attacks-israel-with-over-300-drones-missiles-what-you-need-to-know>.

[2] Brad Lendon, “How Israel and allied defenses intercepted more than 300 Iranian missiles and drones” CNN, April 14 2024 <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/04/14/middleeast/israel-air-missile-defense-iran-attack-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>

[3] Sengupta, Arjun. “Cost and Benefit: Israel’s Very Expensive Defence against Aerial Threats.” The Indian Express, April 18, 2024. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-sci-tech/iran-israel-missile-attack-cost-9278118/>.

[4] Financial Times. “Iran Launches ‘Unprecedented’ Missile and Drone Attack on Israel,” n.d. <https://www.ft.com/content/a5096429-5eb5-4d0f-8525-5e60c3b35448>.

[5] Tamara Qiblawi, Iran’s attack seemed planned to minimize casualties while maximizing spectacle, CNN <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/04/14/middleeast/iran-israel-attack-drones-analysis-intl/index.html#:~:text=A decades long shadow war,This was a complex mission>.

[6] The Iran Primer. “CENTCOM’s Gen. Michael Kurilla on Iran,” United States Institute of Peace, March 28, 2023. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/apr/07/centcoms-maj-gen-michael-kurilla-iran>.

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