

Despite being shot down Iran's missiles still delivered what Tehran was hoping for



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OPINION

Earlier this month, after an Israeli air strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus killed several military commanders, Iran's Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei used his sermon to mark Eid al-Fitr to equate Israel's attack on the diplomatic facility to an attack on Iranian soil, and vowed that Israel's "mistake" would be punished. At just that moment, the broadcast of the sermon cut to a face in the crowd — Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh. Hajizadeh commands the aerospace forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). His grin was knowing.

A few days later, on Sunday, 300 drones and long-range missiles were launched from Iran toward Israel. The attack marked the first time Iran had attacked Israel directly from its own territory, rather than relying on its backed groups in Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon. Though Israeli jets and air defences responded, with the support of American, British, French, and Jordanian forces, and successfully intercepted most of the drones and missiles, the spectacle of missiles flying above the Dome of the Rock — the third holiest shrine in Islam — seemed to portend a full-blown war.

Shifting dynamics in Washington are more important for the trajectory of this conflict than the dynamics in Tel Aviv or Tehran. US President Joe Biden has reportedly warned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the US would not support an Israeli counterattack against Iran. American officials are briefing reporters on Biden's concerns that Netanyahu may be seeking to drag him into a wider conflict.

Israel and Iran have been engaged in a "shadow war" for years. Iran's Senior generals have been killed. Nuclear scientists have been assassinated. Israeli cyber-attacks have repeatedly hit military sites, nuclear facilities, and civilian infrastructure across Iran. Even now, Iran's military commanders, while eager to project their strength, remain wary of starting a fight with Israel they might not win. The leader has his own deep-rooted concerns.

Khamenei became Iran's leader just one year after the end of the eight-year long Iran-Iraq war, in which more than 200,000 Iranians were killed. For Khamenei and his generation of revolutionaries, the first achievement of the Islamic revolution was the "stability and security of the country", exemplified in the "sacred defence" of Iran against Saddam Hussein's invasion. The maintenance of Iran's stability and security is fundamental to Khamenei's legacy and to the advancement of the Islamic revolution, particularly at a time when many Iranians have come to feel fundamentally unsafe.

It is therefore surprising that Iran chose to attack Israeli territory from its own on Saturday night. Officials and analysts had expected a measured retaliation. Importantly, Iran had given Israel and its partners ample time to prepare for an assault. Iran also engaged in back-channel talks to make clear that it was not seeking to trigger a war. Once the attack was over, the Iranian mission to the United Nations issued a statement saying that the "matter can be deemed concluded".

But the direct nature of the attack, which made it so spectacular and frightening, may still compel a strong Israeli response, possibly triggering a new and dangerous cycle of escalation. In a warning to Israeli leaders, Hossein Salami, the commander of the IRGC, hailed the attack as establishing a "new

equation" in which Israel can no longer attack Iranian "people, property, or interests" without triggering a "reciprocal" response launched from Iran. The Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant has declared that "the campaign is not over yet". In taking the fight to Iran, Israel sees an opportunity to regain international support, so eroded by its horrendous conduct in Gaza, but it is unclear whether the United States will help Israel strike back.

President Biden's statement on the Iranian attack reiterates the US's "ironclad commitment to the security of Israel", but it also includes some remarkable language. The statement makes clear that Iran attacked "military facilities", downplaying the threat to civilian lives. It emphasises that the defence was successful and that Israel's enemies "cannot effectively threaten" its security, pre-empting arguments that Israel faces an existential threat from Iran. Biden vows to coordinate a united "diplomatic response" to Iran's aggression, ruling out an immediate military response. The statement concludes by making clear that American forces had not been attacked — a crucial signal to the American public.

During the third debate in the 2012 presidential election, both the president, Barack Obama, and his opponent, governor Mitt Romney, were asked about Iran and whether they would declare that "an attack on Israel is an attack on the United States". This was once the widely understood meaning of the US's "ironclad commitment to Israeli security". But today, the American electorate no longer understands what national security interests are at stake in the Middle East, and increasingly believes that ironclad commitments should have brass-bound conditions. Notably, most American voters now disapprove of Israeli military actions in Gaza. As Iran's leadership has doggedly pursued the dismantling of the longstanding security architecture in the Middle East, including the withdrawal of US forces, it has sought to expose the limits of American security guarantees. To this end, it has developed an acute understanding of Biden's deep reluctance to enter a new war, most recently evidenced by his response to the death of three US soldiers in an attack at the al-Tank military base in Syria in January.

This may explain why Iran opted for a direct, if calibrated, attack on Israel. It did not directly restore Iranian deterrence, but it did expose a critical American reluctance. The effect may be the same. Biden's statement makes it clear that Israel remains capable of defending its territory and will have US support in doing so. But if Israel continues to go on the offensive, it may be forced to do so alone. This fact, more than anything else, may moderate Israel's next move.

The article first appeared on *The Guardian*.



A demonstrator kisses a bullet shell replica as others gather in celebration at Palestine Square in Tehran on April 14, 2024, after Iran launched a drone and missile attack on Israel.
ATA KENARE/AFP

Iran's historic attack rooted in Palestine's freedom struggle



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OPINION

The eve of April 14, 2024, and the hours that followed will be recorded in history as momentous because the Islamic Republic of Iran launched an aerial assault directly from its home soil against apartheid Israel's settler-colonial regime. Israeli citizens attested that the tense hours when Iran's drones and ballistic missiles came over the occupation state's night skies were bewildering, shocking, and alarming. Many claimed to have spent the night in bunkers and safe rooms, anxious and sleepless. Being on the receiving end of an aerial attack was a new reality that they were confronted with. It was very different to being cheerleaders for the slaughter of thousands of innocent Palestinians in Gaza and the anti-Palestinian pogroms in the occupied West Bank.



Motorcyclists wave flags of Iran, Palestine, and Lebanon's Hezbollah resistance movement in celebration of Iran's drone and missile attack on Israel, in Tehran on April 13, 2024.
MEHDI BOLOURIAN/IRNA

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Being on the receiving end of an aerial attack was a new reality that they were confronted with. It was very different to being cheerleaders for the slaughter of thousands of innocent Palestinians in Gaza and the anti-Palestinian pogroms in the occupied West Bank. A columnist in *Forward* described the sombre reality of the effects of Iran's attacks in the following words: "Sunday is the start of the Israeli work week, but schools and many government offices were closed for the day. This cosmopolitan city's typically crowded light trail was sparse and remarkably silent, with the few passengers glued to their smartphones looking for answers nobody could seem to find."

While uncertainty about the result of Iran's historic attack has preoccupied military analysts who are keen to find answers, they certainly cannot ignore the fact that Israel's deterrence capacity has been severely compromised. Former French military mission chief to the UN General Dominique Trinquand made an important point: "The significant development in this conflict is that Iran has directly hit Israel." Although advanced American defence technology intervened on behalf of Israel to intercept many of the drones and missiles, the Iranian attack "carries significant weight," he said. "One cannot underestimate the number of missiles and drones fired at Israel from Iran, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, with strikes on the Golan Heights."

An equally important observation has been made by Didier Leroy, a researcher at the Royal Military Academy of Belgium. According to Leroy, "We have crossed a qualitative threshold that changes the dynamics and repositions Iran on the map as an active military player." From his vantage point as a former director of Israeli military intelligence, Amos Yadlin predicts that the Iranian attack may lead to a strategic change in "the war in Gaza, and even to its end".

The military decree issued by Israel's war cabinet to block information on the damage caused by Iran's attacks has gagged local and international media platforms and denied access to verify independently the claims that "minimal" damage was incurred. Such repressive conduct unfairly censors news content. This has given the apartheid regime carte blanche to disseminate propaganda couched

as "information" but far removed from truth and accuracy.

Iranian analyst Professor Seyyed Mohammed Marandi insists that Iran's main targets were two air bases, and that 20 or more missiles struck their targets. "The other drones and older generation missiles were inexpensive decoys that depleted the Israeli air defence systems of most of their very expensive missiles." Sceptics argue that Iran's attack was a failure, but they either ignore or deliberately obfuscate the new reality of deterrence injected by the Islamic Republic. From an Iranian perspective, the attack on its consulate in Damascus was a red line which demanded retaliation, otherwise it would erase any notion of deterrence, opening the door for even more brazen Israeli military action, up to and including direct attacks on Iran.

No wonder that former US Marine Corps intelligence officer Scott Ritter has described Iran's retaliatory attack as one of the "greatest victories of this century". He added that "Operation True Promise will go down in history as one of the most important military victories in the history of modern Iran, keeping in mind that war is but an extension of politics by other means. The fact that Iran has established a credible deterrence posture without disrupting major policy goals and objectives is the very definition of victory."

This point was emphasised by Palestinian academic Professor Sami Al-Arian. He insists that the theory of Israeli deterrence has been greatly undermined. "The strategic situation of the Zionist regime after October 7 is not the same as it was before. Similarly, the regional strategic situation after April 14 is not the same either."

No matter how Israel's racist, right-wing regime attempts to spin its lockdown as a "victory", the facts dispute this narrative. Moreover, Iran's prestige as the foremost supporter of Palestine's freedom struggle has been bolstered enormously. It is a position it has not shied away from nor concealed. In fact, part of the strategic calibration that went into its attack was to ensure that Gaza's plight is neither overshadowed nor forsaken.

Unsurprisingly, Palestinian Islamic resistance movement Hamas has backed Iran's attack and affirmed "the natural right" of countries and peoples in the Middle East to defend themselves in the face of Zionist aggression. "The military operation carried out by Iran against the Zionist entity is a natural right and a due response to the crime of targeting the consulate in Damascus," said the movement.

The most important lesson to be gleaned from Iran's heroic mission is that the struggle for liberation, defending sovereignty, and resisting occupation and oppression is a just and legitimate cause.

The article first appeared on *Middle East Monitor*