

## Netanyahu faces tough questions on Iran Israelis don't need any more forever wars



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### OPINION

Israelis woke up on Sunday morning with a tentative collective sense of relief. For the first time ever, Iran had attacked Israel directly, sending a barrage of more than 300 drones and various missiles intended to rain down on Israel. Instead, Israel and a coalition of its allies intercepted 99% of the threats, according

to Israeli authorities — mostly before they reached Israeli territory. Those that arrived caused only limited damage.

Many Israelis felt the country had dodged a bullet. But members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet want to fire back, which would add one more front to a war that is already dangerously overstretched. The ultra-nationalists in Netanyahu's cabinet insist that the only way to achieve fear and admiration in the Middle East is to "go berserk", in the words of Itamar Ben-Gvir, an extremist minister who holds the portfolio, ironically, of national security. He is joined by a posse of fanatical men running the cabinet who are beating war drums.

But how would that work out for Israel, founded as a safe haven for Jews (and all of its citizens, in a democratic view) to live safely and flourish? Escalation with Iran stands to suck all sides into a vortex of full-scale war. It would also be unprecedented, since the two countries have never been at war directly and openly. Such a war would drag in numerous other countries of the Middle East, and superpowers too. All-out war between the two best-armed actors in the Middle East might be someone's definition of national security, but as an Israeli citizen, it's not mine.

The dramatic Saturday night attack also distracted attention from the terrible escalation in the West Bank on Friday. A 14-year-old Israeli Jewish boy who set out from an outpost called Angels of Peace — though no such outpost is established to bring peace (it is in fact a political project to expand Israeli control of the West Bank) — was killed by Palestinians. Even before his fate was known, settlers rampaged through a nearby Palestinian town, with pogrom-like collective-punishment violence, killing one man and burning property. Yet, inconceivably, the incident feels like a new normal after similar events just over a year ago. The West Bank is in a disastrous situation, with Palestinians living under virtual lockdown for the past six months, the widespread loss of jobs since Israel cancelled their work permits and restricted crossings, and with rising settler violence backed by the army stoking fury.

In Gaza, the attention last week turned to Israel's withdrawal of a commando division from the south, but don't be fooled. The war is not over, and will not be over for as long as Israel has neither plans nor intentions to end it. The humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza won't truly end until then, and tens of thousands of Israelis displaced from the south still cannot go home. Netanyahu and his coalition partners from the Religious Zionist party and Jewish Power resist any plans that dare to consider a cease-fire, risking the lives of Israeli captives daily.

The northern border is not at all quiet; the 80,000 Israeli evacuees cannot return home there, either. Escalation with Iran bodes badly for the ongoing brinkmanship between Israel and Hezbollah. Members of Israel's cabinet have advocated escalation in the north since the early days of the war with Hamas; the majority of the Israeli public support this, and some say Iran's attack makes this more urgent. Anything less projects weakness, they say.

What's horribly ironic about this everywhere-is-war reality is how badly Netanyahu's policies have violated his own prized goals. Netanyahu boasted that he was Mr. Security, and would remove the Palestinian issue from national or international agendas, until 1,200 Israelis were slaughtered on one day in October. He basked in Israel's Middle East integration, which is now strained, or slowed at best.

Looking beyond Netanyahu, this is a failure of the dreams of Israel's founders and generations of Israelis. Whether one supports or abhors Zionism, consider its aims: a safe haven for the Jewish people (updated for a democratic country, this means a safe society for everyone). A place for the Jewish people — and everyone — to fulfil their potential, living in security. Forget the "light unto the nations" fairytale; in many ways, Zionism hoped that Jewish people would become equal to others, not better or worse. Thus, it was both a movement of exceptionalism and chosen-ness, in part aimed at becoming average.

Instead, Israel is careering towards pariah status. Israelis are cowering in shelters, forced to flee from their sovereign lands, squeezed into shrunken borders within their own country. Stalwart allies stuck by Israel during Saturday night's direct attack from Iran, but Israel's war in Gaza, following nearly six decades of occupation, has lost vast swaths of the public in the Middle East and in the West. In democratic countries where people vote freely, they will choose leaders in the future who are far less kind to Israel.

To be sure, Israel has real, sometimes implacable enemies, and not everything can be blamed on the occupation or even the Nakba (the destruction of Palestinian society from 1947 to 1949); Hamas and other armed Islamist factions are quite clear that they will not be satisfied until Israel is gone in any form. Iran hasn't extended its hand in peace lately, either.

But it is impossible to see how escalating forever wars on multiple fronts will diminish any of those threats. Too often, Israel resorts first and last to force; a popular quip holds that "whatever doesn't work through force will work through more force." This ignores the extraordinary and enduring success of peace — full, end-of-conflict peace, like with Jordan and Egypt.

On Saturday evening, Jordan stepped up to help intercept Iranian missiles, at considerable risk; now Israelis joke that they'll name their new babies "Jordan". They would do better to remember the hard power of peace, before endless wars destroy whatever is left.

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People take cover in a stairway in Al-Quds (Jerusalem), as a red alert is sounded when drones and missiles fired from Iran neared Israel, on April 14, 2024.

FLASH90

## Why Israel-Iran war is a lifeline for Netanyahu



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### OPINION

Just days ago, much of the world's attention was on the impending famine in Gaza, and on Israel's failure to achieve its war objectives of toppling Hamas and returning captives more than six months into the war. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

was under pressure from US President Joe Biden to allow in sufficient humanitarian aid and reach a cease-fire, as well as appeals from Israeli protesters to seal a captive deal and hold new elections.

But at night on Saturday, April 13, all that faded instantly as Iran launched hundreds of drones and missiles at Israel in much-anticipated retaliation for an Israeli strike that killed senior Iranian military officers in Damascus, Syria, on April 1. Israel's strike in Damascus and Iran's direct response have taken the two countries' long-standing conflict — often characterized by covert strikes and the use of backed groups — out of the shadows, sapping attention from Israel's failure in Gaza, expanding Israel's war effort to Iran, and forcing Netanyahu's critics abroad to get behind him — at least for now.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visits an Air Force F-15 base on April 11, 2024.

KOBI GIDEON/GPO

It is true that Israel has targeted Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers in Syria before, most recently when a missile strike killed Iranian official Sayyed Razi Mousavi in Damascus on Christmas Day last year. But the fact that the April 1 strike was on the Iranian consulate — considered by Iran and others to be a violation of international treaties — was a significant escalation.

There appears to be consensus among Israeli military experts, analysts, and some former security officials that this was a miscalculation by Israel; that it saw an operational opportunity and took it without considering all the repercussions. That is certainly plausible. Israel has become accustomed to attacking Iranian military officers without being confronted with direct retaliation from Tehran.

At the same time, the strike and Iranian retaliation have had a clear upside for Israel, reducing its growing diplomatic isolation — at least from Western capitals — and offering a lifeline to Netanyahu specifically.

Many world leaders issued statements condemning Iran and showing support for Israel. Israel was able to rely on Western and Arab support in what members of the war cabinet are saying creates the potential for a "strategic alliance" and "regional coalition" against Iran (though it's wishful thinking when it comes to Arab states, to put it mildly). Instead of the UN Security Council discussing a cease-fire in Gaza, it is debating condemnation of Iran.

This shift comes just days after the world watched as an Israeli strike on a World Central Kitchen convoy in Gaza killed seven aid workers, for which Israel has still given no good explanation. Prior to the attack from Iran, the United States'

unconditional support for Israel had looked like it might start to crack.

Open disapproval of Netanyahu was at its highest point since the start of the war, at home and abroad. Some families of the Israeli captives in Gaza have blamed Netanyahu for the failure to reach a deal, which has been echoed by statements made anonymously by members of the Israeli negotiating team, deeming Netanyahu an obstacle. Just a few weeks ago, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer was calling on Netanyahu to step down. Democratic senators had begun calling on Biden to condition aid to Israel. The New York Times editorial board just called for that to happen.

In sharp contrast, today, the world is waiting to see if — but more likely how — Israel will counterattack, and how far Biden will go to contain such a strike. Gaza is suddenly out of sight. Even as Gazans reported having the quietest night in six months during the Iranian attack, the urgent need to stop the famine, halt the bleeding in Gaza, return the captives, and figure out a way forward may be sidelined by the risk of an even larger and deadlier regional war.

This will be a real test for Biden's commitment to preventing regional escalation, since the United States has tied itself to Israel's defense in the region since October 7 and would likely be sucked into a wider escalation. Israel cannot effectively attack Iran without US coordination and support. Indeed, the Israel-Iran exchange would ideally accelerate the push for an end to the war in Gaza, given how clear it has become that its continuation has put the region on a knife edge.

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