

# Out of the shadows: What is next for the Iran-Israel confrontation and the region

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While the war in Gaza continues in full scale and hopes for a cease-fire is dimming, it is worthwhile to recall the Iranian-Israeli confrontation of early April. Although the Middle East -at least for now-walked back from an Iran-Israel war, the dynamics that moved the conflict out of the shadows are still alive and the regional context is fraught with enduring challenges. Reflecting on the reasons behind one of the most perilous escalations in the region to date and surveying the reactions of regional actors including Türkiye, we take stock of the latest tension in Iran-Israel affairs and shed light on the context and likely trajectories of a critical juncture in regional politics.

### **Iran replies to Israel's attack**

On April 1, 2024, the news of a military strike against Iran's Consulate in Damascus broke out. The attack killed seven Iranian military officials including General Mohammed Reza Zahedi, a senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander overseeing Iran's military operations in Lebanon and Syria. Almost two weeks later, on the night of April 13, departing from the previous rules of engagement in their "shadow war", Iran retaliated and directly attacked Israel with a large number of arms including suicide drones, cruise, and ballistic missiles.<sup>1</sup> Amid international and regional calls for restraint, Israel made its move on April 19<sup>th</sup>. In the early morning, news from Isfahan, where Iran's Natanz nuclear facility, as well as its missile production site, are based, reported explosions and activation of Iran's air defenses shooting several suspicious flying objects.<sup>2</sup> Iran's Foreign Minister in his interview with the American NBC network, stated that the connection between the incident and Israel was not proven to Iran and did not elicit a retaliation.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that this attack was downplayed by Iran, and the amount of international and regional effort to subdue a potential conflict is indicative of the great pressure that the Middle East has been under since the war in Gaza started. Israel and Iran's confrontations are not new, yet for many observers of the Middle East, Iran's direct attack into Israel, albeit informed, as well as Israel's contained attack in response came at a very fragile time. With the war in Gaza and Ukraine, the elections looming in the United States and the

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<sup>1</sup> Spender, Tom, "What was in wave of Iranian attacks and how were they thwarted?," 15 April 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68811273>

<sup>2</sup> Gambrel, Joe and Joseph Federman, "Israel, Iran play down apparent Israeli strike. The muted responses could calm tensions — for now", 3 April 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-israel-mideast-tensions-4-19-2024-a7ccb2e2844bab089e8e4377a24ddb>

<sup>3</sup> "Iran's foreign minister downplays drone attack, says Tehran investigating," Reuters, 20 April 2024, available at <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2024/04/20/iran-s-foreign-minister-downplays-drone-attack-says-tehran-investigating>

European Parliament, a new threat of escalation of conflict is the last development we all need.

### **Leading up to the Iranian Attack**

Syria has long become an arena of confrontation for Iran and Israel during the so-called Arab Spring era, building upon the conflict over Iran's nuclear program since the early 2000s. The conflict in Syria was mainly played out with Israel's frequent airstrikes growing more intense in recent years on Iran-backed militias, and arms depots. Tel Aviv feared Iran and Hezbollah's increasing and enduring presence close to the Golan Heights while Iran's strategy of maintaining and cultivating further influence in Syria where it invested too much blood and treasure went unabated.

Israel from the onset saw Iran complicit in the October 7 attacks, and the April 1<sup>st</sup> attack added a new ring to Tel Aviv's policy of targeting senior military figures. A few months ago, in December 2023, a suspected Israeli attack in the suburbs of Damascus killed IRGC Quds Force's one of the most senior commanders in the Levant, Sayyed Razi Mousavi, who was coordinating the military alliance between Syria and Iran. In January 2024, another strike attributed to Israel killed five IRGC members, among them Hojatollah Omidvar, a high-ranking intelligence officer at the IRGC Quds Force.<sup>4</sup>

The April 1<sup>st</sup> attack, on the other hand, marked a major escalation when Israel chose to strike Iran not in the field but in its embassy compound which per international law was tantamount to attacking Iran's soil. The strike against its diplomatic mission and loss of its soldiers drew a harsh response from Iran vowing "punishment."<sup>5</sup> Hence Iran arrived at a crossroads where it would either adhere to its long-professed "strategic patience" by refraining from acting in the face of losses and provocations or retaliate to redraw the rules of engagement and establish deterrence yet do so without triggering a new cycle of counterattacks.

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<sup>4</sup> "Who are the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commanders Israel killed in Syria?" 9 April 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/who-are-irgc-commanders-israel-killed-syria>

<sup>5</sup> "Supreme Leader: The Zionist regime will be punished," 12 April 2024, <https://en.irna.ir/news/85442018/Supreme-Leader-The-Zionist-regime-will-be-punished>

Iran's retaliation came almost two weeks later, on the night of April 13, with an operation named "True Promise". The attack was driven by a search for restoring legitimacy for the Iranians who viewed Israel's ongoing operations in the field and Iran's unresponsiveness as a losing game as well as Tehran's quest to restore deterrence. With the attack, Iran's strategic calculus seemed to shift away from "strategic patience" to what IRGC Commander in Chief Hossein Salami called the "new equation" in Israel-Iran relations whereby Iran vows to respond with counterattacks "if the Zionist regime attacks [Iran's] interests, assets, figures, and citizens anywhere", showcased by the "True Promise."<sup>6</sup> After April 13, the region stood at a critical juncture, and whether the latest escalation would be laid to rest and allowed to defuse first and foremost depended on how Israel would act vis-à-vis Iran's attack. Iran's Permanent Mission to the UN declared that "the matter can be deemed concluded", and no further moves would follow unless Israel attacked.<sup>7</sup> The region anxiously awaited the decision of Israel's war cabinet struggling with how to proceed under international and regional calls for restraint and domestic push from a wide spectrum of hardliners for revanchism. The decision was highly critical for it would show whether Iran's "new equation" which set the bar higher than the *status quo ante* would hold. One of the worst-case scenarios was an attack against Iran's nuclear facilities. In any case, if Israel attacked, Iran promised a harsher response "in seconds" without giving Israel "12 days to prepare" in a bid to deter Israel's possible action.<sup>8</sup>

At this juncture, to what extent the US could sway over the Netanyahu Government immensely mattered. While President Biden declared Washington's ironclad support for Israel's defense and played a vital role in taking down the projectiles launched from Iran before reaching out to Israel, in the aftermath of Iran's retaliation Washington stated that the US would not get involved in Israel's possible offensive against Iran. Tehran also made it explicitly clear that should the US join Israel in such a move, it would target American bases and soldiers in the region. Hence, not solely Iran and Israel, but the US and Iran seemed to be on the brink of a major escalation.

Iran continued de-escalating the conflict by downplaying Israel's retaliation on April 19<sup>th</sup>. Israel's response was also limited, as pushed by Washington. The attack did not target Iran's nuclear sites and aimed at an air base operated by the Iranian Army (Artesh) rather

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<sup>6</sup> "Inside story: Iran declares 'new equation' as all eyes on Israel's next move," 14 April 2024,

<https://amwaj.media/article/inside-story-iran-declares-new-equation-as-all-eyes-on-israel-s-next-move>

<sup>7</sup> Permanent mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the UN, 14 April 2024,

[https://x.com/Iran\\_UN/status/1779269993043022053](https://x.com/Iran_UN/status/1779269993043022053)

<sup>8</sup> Sharifi Kian, 15 April 2024, <https://x.com/KianSharifi/status/1779968660884316540>

than the IRGC. Yet, Israel's calibrated move also showed that it can infiltrate Iran to launch attacks from within or penetrate Iran's airfield through unidentified aircraft and hit bases close to Iran's nuclear sites, signalling that should the conflict escalate, they may certainly aim at the nuclear facilities.

### **What does the tit-for-tat between Iran and Israel mean for the region?**

Iran's direct retaliation to Israel's attack in midst of the Gaza War reminded everyone the fragility of the region. Since the start of the Gaza War on October 7<sup>th</sup>, the Middle East playground has been hosting a different game. The Palestinian issue which has been in the freezer for a long time has come back to game as a factor that is hard to dismiss, especially with all the domestic pressure within the United States coming from a very unlikely and historical place, the university campuses. The unwavering support of the Biden administration to Israel in the first months of the war has generated a strong backlash within the US and abroad and the administration in the US is in a very tough position with the elections coming in November. It is therefore very understandable that the US would not want any more trouble in the region.

Iran's attack seems to have accomplished a couple of aims. First, without any serious harm, Iran tested both its capabilities and Israel's air defenses and declared a "clear victory" with the penetration of some of its ballistic missiles into Israeli territory. Second, by ending its "strategic patience" which was basically Iran's passivity and avoidance to directly attack Israel for retaliation, Iran wanted to show Israel and its main Western ally, the US that the Iranian restraint is over.

Looking into the intricate relations amongst the regional players, with their declarations after the attacks, the Arab states, except for Jordan, signaled that they would not permit American operations against Iran from their territory.<sup>9</sup> United Arab Emirates (UAE) whose recently improved relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords would now suffer, Qatar<sup>10</sup>, who has been leading mediation talks on Gaza, Saudi Arabia which has

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<sup>9</sup> Chas Freeman, former Assistant Secretary of Defense and former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, interview by Pascal Nottaz, Neutrality Studies, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLai2YG4NRc>

<sup>10</sup> Farhat, Beatrice, "Saudi Arabia ramps up regional diplomacy to avert Iran-Israel war," 17 April 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/04/saudi-arabia-ramps-regional-diplomacy-avert-iran-israel-war>

been normalizing its relations with Iran since 2023, as well as Egypt<sup>11</sup>, Kuwait and Oman condemned Israeli attacks and called for de-escalation. While the fragile normalization between Iran and its Gulf neighbors continues to move beyond the deep-running mistrust and fierce regional competition since the wake of the Arab Uprisings, the Gulf states fear getting mired in a full-blown regional war should the de-escalation fail, and conflict spiral out of control and involve the United States.

### **What to expect in the region?**

While there is a sense of closure of the conflict, the relative calm should not mislead us. The latest and most escalatory exchange to date between Iran and Israel took place in the context of simmering tensions in the region after the October 7 attacks by Hamas and the ensuing war in Gaza and the war still rages on. Tehran was careful not to get dragged into the Israel-Hamas war and avoided a direct conflict with Tel Aviv while the war reactivated the clashes between Hezbollah and Israel and added Yemen's Houthis into an already complex network of militias destined to resist Israel. Israel from the onset saw Iran complicit in the October 7 attacks. The trauma of the attacks, coupled with the growing international criticisms leveled at the Netanyahu government for creating a human tragedy in Gaza and failure to bring the hostages back are likely to sustain and inflame tensions in Iran-Israel affairs which may act as a diversionary foreign policy maneuver aimed at rally round the flag effect.

Still, we are clueless about whether deterrence is reestablished, or a new deterrence is established and how it will hold in arenas of the Iran-Israel conflict. To grasp it further, we shall watch out for how the conflict will be played out in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, what will happen to the tension in the Red Sea, and most crucially what will be the fate of the Gaza War now reaching Rafah. In the long run, how this recent escalation will affect Iran's strategic calculus over the nuclear program also profoundly matters if deterrence fails to work between the two countries.<sup>12</sup> The recent episode, albeit cast through "calibrated" responses risked triggering a major conflict. Implications for Turkish foreign policy

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<sup>11</sup> El- Gaafary, Nabia, "Division in Egypt over Iran's Saturday night retaliation on Israel," <https://www.newarab.com/news/division-egypt-over-irans-retaliation-israel>

<sup>12</sup> "Iran warns of shift in nuclear stance if Israel threatens atomic sites," 15 April 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/c73b99ec-cd3f-49be-8024-6faf369b58e1>

Türkiye has been very adamant about becoming a mediator in the Middle East, yet, whether all sides believe in its credibility to mediate is unclear. With intricate web of relations amongst many parties and vexed commercial and political interests, there is a lot to consider. While the domestic press in Türkiye portrays Ankara as a moral entrepreneur, we do not have a clear picture of how the parties to the conflict see Ankara as a mediator in the ongoing Gaza War.

In this latest Iran-Israeli conflict, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Communique reported, on April 14<sup>th</sup>, that Turkish authorities talked with all sides to call for restraint and that Türkiye's efforts to prevent further escalation will continue.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the indirect contact between Tehran and Washington through regional intermediaries such as Qatar, Oman, and Türkiye is believed to have shaped Iran's response and strategic calculus on April 13<sup>th</sup>, where the symbolism of its attack outweighed its military success. While Turco-Iranian relations have always been a complex mix of cooperation and competition, the Gaza War and expansion of the conflict will not benefit any of them. During the latest visit of the Iranian President to Ankara, Raisi and Erdoğan agreed on maintaining regional security and stability, affirming their support for the Palestinian cause and the establishment of a just and lasting peace.<sup>14</sup>

Ankara and Tehran are further aligned over the Palestinian cause since October 7 with the recent regional landscape turning against Israel's attempts at normalization and rapprochement with Türkiye. That said, Ankara's credibility as a defender of the Palestinian cause is not very strong in the Iranian eyes. For Iranians, and many others in the Middle East, the fact that Türkiye was "the world's first Muslim country to recognize Israel as a "state";" and that "it has maintained a pro-Palestine rhetoric for much of its 74 years of ties with the regime" is a signal of Türkiye's inconsistent stance.<sup>15</sup> Tehran also criticized Ankara for her maintaining its commercial ties to Israel. In this sense, the Palestinian issue continues to be an arena of competition for regional powers' claim to moral statehood.

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<sup>13</sup> "No: 59, 14 April 2024, Regarding the Recent Developments in Our Region," [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-59\\_-bolgemizdeki-son-gelismeler-hk.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-59_-bolgemizdeki-son-gelismeler-hk.en.mfa)

<sup>14</sup> "Türkiye, Iran sign 10 agreements during Raisi's delayed trip", 25 January 2024, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/raisi-in-ankara-for-delayed-gaza-talks-190009>

<sup>15</sup> "Turkey's support for Gaza heartwarming, but nowhere near enough" 19 December 2023, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/492711/Turkey-s-support-for-Gaza-heartwarming-but-nowhere-near-enough>

In any case, Türkiye and Iran converge on the need for de-escalation of the recent episode and avoiding an all-out war involving Iran and the US. For Ankara, such a scenario is fraught with insurmountable security, political and economic challenges given the major parameters of Türkiye-Iran relations which would also deeply endanger the fine line Türkiye walks in balancing between Iran and the US.

Recent developments once again show that a sustained de-escalation through regional and global diplomacy over the Gaza War and Iran's nuclear crisis and maintaining the momentum of reconciliation and normalization amongst regional actors are more than imperative to avoid a new and worse confrontation.





*Bu yayın yalnızca yazarların görüşlerini yansıtmaktadır.*

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