

The Middle East's Perilous Moment: Policy Implications and Escalation Risks

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Apr 18, 2024

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Brief Analysis

Two former U.S. and Israeli officials join a security expert to examine Iran’s unprecedented attack, Israel’s potential response, and U.S. options to prevent the outbreak of full-scale regional war.

On April 16, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Dana Stroul, Zohar Palti, and Farzin Nadimi. Stroul, the Institute’s Kassen Senior Fellow and director of research, recently served as the Pentagon’s top civilian official on Middle East issues. Palti is the Institute’s Viterbi International Fellow and former head of the Israeli Defense Ministry’s Policy and Political-Military Bureau. Nadimi is a Senior Fellow with the Institute

and author of its 2023 study “[The Next Generation of Iranian Ballistic Missiles \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/next-generation-iranian-ballistic-missiles-technical-advances-strategic-objectives\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/next-generation-iranian-ballistic-missiles-technical-advances-strategic-objectives).” The following is a rapporteur’s summary of their remarks.

Dana Stroul

Following the October 7 Hamas attack, President Biden directed a series of actions to uphold Israel’s right to self-defense. He also upgraded the U.S. military posture in the region as a signal to Iran and its proxies that they should not escalate the crisis. Since then, the administration has engaged in public and private diplomacy to enable Israel to pursue its military objective of defeating and dismantling Hamas, while simultaneously working to prevent the conflict from spreading to other fronts. At the same time, the president has directed more military strikes in the Middle East over the past six months than during the first three years of his presidency. U.S. Central Command executed unilateral strikes in Iraq and Syria in response to **more than 180 attacks** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis>) by Iran-backed militias, along with multilateral strikes targeting Houthi capabilities and infrastructure in Yemen.

For its part, Iran has not changed its strategic goals since October 7. As has been the case throughout the Islamic Republic’s history, Tehran seeks to expel U.S. forces from the Middle East, assert itself as the regional hegemon, and challenge Israel’s existence. After October 7, Iranian leaders saw an opportunity to pursue these goals more aggressively by activating proxies across the region, focusing on actions that they believed would pressure Israel, impose costs on the United States for supporting its partner, and drive a wedge in the U.S.-Israel alliance. Most recently, Iran launched a state-on-state attack against Israel on April 13.

Iran has not achieved any of these objectives, however—its leaders underestimated Washington’s staying power and misread the tea leaves of U.S.-Israeli tensions over the Gaza war. President Biden has increased America’s regional military presence even further over the past few months, deploying more destroyers, air/missile defense systems, and other forces. For example, two aircraft carrier strike groups were deployed there through the end of 2023—the first such presence in the Middle East since 2021, when a single carrier group deployed to support the Afghanistan evacuation. Today, there are more American combat aircraft overflying the region than before October 7. Indeed, Biden’s commitment to Israel’s defense has remained steady and strong. Bilateral disagreements have focused on the humanitarian situation in Gaza and civilian casualties—the strategic alignment against Iran is undiminished.

The abysmal failure of the April 13 missile and drone attack on Israel has also cast doubt on Iranian deterrence. Tehran now finds itself the subject of international condemnation as the aggressor, with more diplomatic attention devoted to its airspace violations against multiple countries. In addition, the attack galvanized the United States, Israel, and allies in Europe and the Middle East to work together on intercepting many of the drones and missiles used in the attack.

This U.S.-organized response is also proof of concept that the years-long effort to integrate Arab and Israeli air and missile defense capabilities can effectively protect against Iranian aggression. This effort was enabled by three key factors: (1) a shared threat assessment that Iran is the main destabilizing actor in the Middle East, and that regional security is better enabled by cooperation, (2) the 2021 decision to move Israel from EUCOM’s area of responsibility to CENTCOM’s, and (3) the development and provision of technology that makes innovation faster and more cost-effective. Going forward, Washington and Jerusalem need to frame this integration not as a “pro-Israel” or “anti-Iran” coalition, but as a united effort to defend the sovereignty and security of every regional partner.

Zohar Palti

Last weekend’s direct, unequivocal attack on Israel marks a dramatic escalation in regional tensions and a new phase in Iranian aggression. The drone and missile barrage was the Islamic Republic’s first open assault on Israel, moving beyond the proxy engagements that have characterized past clashes. The possible motivations behind this shift are manifold:

- Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei may have felt the need for a calculated response to Israel’s April 1 strike on senior Iranian military officials in Damascus, whether because he saw that strike as a potential slippery slope, was troubled by recent internal events in Iran, or both.
- The shift may reflect Tehran’s misjudgment of U.S.-Israel relations under the current leadership. The regime seemed undeterred by Israeli and U.S. deterrents, including President Biden’s explicit April 12 warning not to attack.
- More disturbingly, Tehran’s shift may indicate newfound confidence fueled by advancements in its nuclear capabilities.

Indeed, the attack highlights a vital strategic imperative: Iran must not be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon. For the sake of global stability, Tehran’s uninhibited aggression demands immediate international action to halt its nuclear ambitions.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Israeli civil society has shown commendable resilience and reaffirmed the need to reassess the country’s longstanding national security strategies. The strength of Israel’s foreign partnerships has been validated as well, from the alliance with the United States to the Abraham Accords. The night of April 13 showed the value of collaborative security efforts with Arab states, reassuring Israel that it is not alone.

The growing relationship with Saudi Arabia offers an especially promising avenue for a broader regional peace and security framework, potentially facilitating a significant realignment that isolates Iran diplomatically and curbs its influence abroad. Indeed, a peace agreement with Riyadh would be a victory against Iran.

Israel’s most urgent strategic priorities are twofold: preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities, and freeing the hostages held in Gaza. Toward those ends, Israel is rallying the international community to respond to the Iranian threat not just as a regional issue, but as a matter of global security. In addition to international cooperation, Israel’s multifaceted response to this new level of threat will emphasize strategic patience as well as

preparedness for decisive action when necessary. The strategic landscape of the Middle East is evolving rapidly, necessitating agile and forward-thinking approaches to diplomacy and national security.

Farzin Nadimi

Iran’s unprecedented direct attack was intended to challenge Israel’s qualitative military edge and set a new precedent for retaliating against future Israeli strikes on Iranian assets anywhere in the world. Put another way, Tehran sought to disrupt the regional balance of power and reestablish deterrence vs. Israel.

The April 13 operation involved a substantial number of drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles primarily targeting Israeli military facilities linked to the April 1 Damascus strike. Ballistic missiles, the centerpiece of the regime’s offensive capabilities, were launched from multiple bases across Iran. Many of them were successfully intercepted by Israeli and allied defenses—only a few managed to hit their intended targets. Yet the attack was telegraphed beforehand and was therefore not designed to achieve tactical surprise; rather, it may have been at least partly intended to test Iranian technology against sophisticated allied defense systems.

For now, Tehran has remained cautious about the potential for escalation even as it keeps its forces on high alert and ratchets up the hostile rhetoric. In the longer term, the regime may decide to shift away from reliance on its proxy forces and channel the money it saves back into its advanced weapons programs, potentially with increased Russian assistance (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russian-iranian-cooperation-and-threats-us-interests>). This strategy could include enhancing capabilities in niche areas such as supersonic cruise missiles and hypersonic ballistic and cruise missiles.

Despite the overall success in countering Iran’s attack, the incident highlights the need for tighter regional defense cooperation to effectively counter more serious air and missile threats. Concurrently, the United States, Israel, and other regional partners need to focus on expanding and strengthening their regional defense alliances. This entails building robust air and missile defense networks and emphasizing the importance of coalitions like those prioritized by the United States in the Asia-Pacific region.

At the same time, it is essential to note that the Iranian regime’s actions do not reflect the desires of the broader Iranian population, most of whom seek peaceful coexistence with other countries in the region. This distinction—which highlights the widening rift between the regime and its people—is critical to understanding the motivations and timelines for Tehran’s military strategies and its investment in offensive capabilities. In all likelihood, the regime will continue moving further away from its people, using military adventurism as a tool to assert regional dominance and mask its catastrophic domestic failures.

This summary was prepared by Abdullah Hayek. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ♦

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