

# Will Israel Temper Its War on Iran's Regional Proxies?

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



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## Israeli strikes on Hezbollah and other militias in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq have yielded visible benefits at times, but future operations may elicit a direct Iranian response.

For the past decade, Israel has been targeting Iranian assets and personnel in Syria. Through hundreds of airstrikes, Israel has repeatedly attacked Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force positions, as well as the theocracy's Palestinian, Iraqi, and Lebanese proxy militias operating on Syrian territory.

Israel's forward-leaning kinetic campaign was a novel, effective, and relatively cost-free approach to limiting Tehran's military inroads into Syria. In the aftermath of 7 October and Hezbollah's subsequent involvement in the war, Israel adopted a similar strategy in Lebanon to push the militia's Radwan forces off its northern frontier.

Now, it appears Israel is extending its operations to Iraq, targeting Iranian-backed Popular Mobilisation Forces. These so-called Hashd militias have been firing drones into Israel since the war in Gaza started and may have participated in Tehran's unprecedented 13 April attack on the Jewish State. On 20 April, Israel reportedly hit a Hashd base in Iraq, killing a commander.

Israel's proactive and provocative military approach in Syria and, more recently, in Iraq and Lebanon represents a unilateral change in the rules of the game—the longstanding tacit understandings between Israel and its Iranian-tied adversaries over rules of military engagement intended to limit escalation. The gambit was largely successful in preventing the establishment of Iranian forward missile bases and Hezbollah positions in Syria, and eventually in removing the most proximate Hezbollah surprise attack threat along the border with Lebanon. This tack will likely raise the cost for Iran's Iraqi proxies as well.

After 1 April, when Israel killed a top-ranking IRGC Quds Force general at a professed Iranian diplomatic facility in

Damascus, Tehran also opted for a revision of terms with Israel. The starkest aspect of Tehran's new approach is its demonstrated willingness to attack Israel directly from Iranian territory.

## Unprecedented Attack

**A**lthough telegraphed days in advance, the launching of over 300 drones and ballistic missiles from Iran toward Israel constituted an unprecedented development in the previously "grey zone" warfare Tehran has waged against Israel via its proxies in recent decades.

Less noted, but perhaps equally as significant, is Iran's new ambitious declaratory policy regarding Israeli strikes in Syria and elsewhere in the region. On 2 April, a day after the Iranian attack on Israel, IRGC commander Hossein Salami announced a "new equation" whereby "henceforth, any assault by (Israel) on our people, property, or interests will trigger a reciprocal response originating from within the Islamic Republic of Iran."

The new Iranian equation is far-reaching and vague. Essentially, though, it suggests at a minimum that Israeli targeting of Iranian forward positions in Syria could elicit direct retaliation, presumably by drone or missile attack, from Iranian territory. Less clear is whether Israeli strikes on Hezbollah in Syria or Lebanon—or against the Hashd in Iraq—will be considered an "assault on (Iranian) interests."

On 19 April, Israel responded to the Iranian salvo with [a limited strike](https://en.majalla.com/node/315141/politics/iran-walks-back-threat-immediate-response-after-israeli-attack) (<https://en.majalla.com/node/315141/politics/iran-walks-back-threat-immediate-response-after-israeli-attack>) against a military facility in Isfahan, a retaliatory assault carefully calibrated to avoid casualties, extensive damage, and further escalation. The strike was intended as a message to Tehran that Iranian air defences could be easily breached. While both Israel and Iran seek to avoid war, however, the threat of a broader confrontation—involving Israel and Iran, or its regional proxies—remains a concern.

## Militias Emboldened

**I**ran's attack on Israel seems to have emboldened Hezbollah. Last week, a Hezbollah strike wounded more than a dozen Israeli soldiers—one of the organisation's most effective combined missile/drone operations since October.

The assault came just days after Hezbollah injured several IDF troops operating in Lebanese territory. Since then, Hezbollah has downed an Israeli drone in Lebanese airspace and targeted the northern Israeli town of Safed on the eve of the Passover holiday with 35 missiles. Israel is likely to intensify its operations in the Lebanese theatre in response to Hezbollah's latest moves.

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the apparent Israeli attack in Iraq, Hashd militias, for the first time since February, targeted US troops with drones. These militias may soon resume their targeting of Israel. Given the current dynamic, if this occurs, Israel will undoubtedly respond again on Iraqi territory.

While Israel and Tehran have opted to de-escalate, it's not clear that the current calm will prevail. Tehran's attack on Israel and Hossein Salami's subsequent policy declaration were designed to change the rules of engagement.

Since then, Israel has continued to hit Hezbollah in Lebanon and has seemingly launched strikes against Iran's Hashd proxies in Iraq. In mid-April, Iran reportedly withdrew many IRGC officers from Syria, and Israel has not yet resumed its strikes in the state.

Israel, however, will be loath to accept Iran's new equation, especially after Hamas' 7 October outrage and Tehran's unprecedented attack on the Jewish State. Perhaps after the end of Passover—if not before—when IRGC troops return, Israel will resume its attacks on Iranian personnel and interests in Syria.

Israel's Syria strikes have proved a central element of its proactive policy of denial, preventing Tehran from consolidating yet another hostile front in a neighbouring state. In the future, Israel may be more judicious in

choosing the seniority of the IRGC officials it targets, but the IDF will not significantly alter its kinetic approach in Syria vis-a-vis Iran and its proxies.

Ten years after Israel initiated its so-called “war between the wars” campaign, Iran’s gambit to change the status quo in Syria presents Tehran with some unpalatable choices. Absent an improbable Israeli retreat from Syria, Tehran can either capitulate (much as it has done over the past decade), deploy its proxies against Israel in defence of the Islamic Republic, or choose to escalate from Iranian soil as promised.

Since the Hamas-Israel war started, fears of a broadening conflict have focused on Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and, more recently, Iran. Going forward, the threat of regional war may emanate from Syria.

*David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Rubin Program on Arab Politics. This article was originally published on Al Majalla's website*

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