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Introduction

The Iran-Israeli conflict is a long-standing part of Middle Eastern politics that is rooted in a history of mutual hostility and mistrust. After decades of low-intensity hybrid conflict characterised by retaliatory strikes on and through proxies, mutual accusations of supporting terrorism, and other types of covert and hybrid warfare, a recent series of escalations culminated in the direct Iranian attack on Israeli territory on 13 April 2024, and Israel's subsequent response on 19 April 2024. This exchange raised concerns over the possibility of region-wide conflict between the two states. The global community, including the U.S., the EU, and the UN have called for de-escalation to prevent further deterioration in the region's security and stability. This paper looks at the events leading to the aggravation of the conflict, the responses from Iran and Israel, and the reactions from international players. It assesses the strategies employed, examining both military actions and diplomatic efforts, as well as the global and regional perceptions, and considers the possibilities for future (de)escalation. Ultimately, the research offers insights into the intricacies of the Iran-Israel conflict and its implications for regional stability in the Middle East.

Understanding the Recent Escalation

The unprecedented Iranian attack on Israel in the late hours of 13 April 2024 marked the first direct attack since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The conflict between Iran and Israel has been in the spotlight since the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the consequent Israeli invasion of Gaza, with Iranian proxies and allies frequently barraging and exchanging fire with Israel. Despite decades of open enmity and an escalating and long-standing "shadow war" between the two countries, this is the first time they have directly attacked one another (The Economist, 2024a, Jones et al., 2024; Trofimov, 2024). Previously, the Islamic Republic has operated via proxies, mainly the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza (The Economist, 2024a, 2024c; Jones et al., 2024; Zimmt, 2024).

The Iranian attack came as a retaliation for a deadly Israeli strike on the Iranian embassy complex in Syria earlier in April, which Iran called a breach of "diplomatic facility" (Jones et al., 2024). The 1 April 2024 attack on Iran's consular services building in Damascus resulted in the killing of Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) senior commander, and six other Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps officials (Hirsh, 2024). While the strike arguably is not the first time Israel has targeted Iranian forces in Syria, it was the most significant attack to date (Bergman et al, 2024), Iran's retaliation came on 13 April 2024, when it launched a massive barrage of drones and missiles against Israel, marking the first time a state directly attacked Israeli territory in decades.

Iran's 13 April attack was a complex operation that included drones, cruise and ballistic missiles aimed at two Israeli military bases. According to the Israeli Defence Forces, Iran launched over 185 drones, 110 surface-to-surface missiles, and 36 cruise missiles, which according to Iran accomplished all objectives of the attack (Dettmer, 2024).

Notably and exceptionally, most of the weapons were for the first time launched directly from Iranian territory, while a smaller portion came from Iraq and Yemen (Dettmer, 2024). Despite the scale of the attack and its five-hour duration, Israel's air defences, aided by the US, UK, France, Jordan, and other Arab states, were able to intercept the overwhelming majority of the incoming projectiles (The Economist, 2024c). The impact of the attack was relatively small, amounting to minor damage caused to the Nevatim Air Base in southern Israel and an injured 7-year-old girl, hit by fragments from an intercepted missile (Dettmer, 2024; Hirsh, 2024). Four missiles struck the Israeli Nevatim Air Base, but it did not suffer significant damage (The Economist, 2024c; Jones et al., 2024).

The sheer scale of the attack makes it significant not only for the region but also for modern warfare at large. According to Bernard Hudson, a former counterterrorism chief at the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Iran's overnight attack on Israel is the largest ever in the Middle East (Jones et al., 2024). The extreme scale of Iran's attack makes it more intense than any Russian drone and missile barrage on Ukraine following the 2022 invasion, as though Russian attacks have been larger-scale, they have been much longer than Iran's five-hour barrage (Jones et al., 2024). During Russia's initial assault on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, approximately 160 to 200 cruise and ballistic missiles were launched, but these targeted a significantly larger area than Israel and lasted for longer than five hours (Trofimov, 2024).

There are several suggested rationales for Iran's decision to target Israel directly. In a letter to the United Nations, Iran stated that the attack on Israel was self-defence in response to the Israeli airstrike on its embassy complex in Damascus (Jones et al., 2024). It is, however, unclear whether Iran's attack was solely a face-saving measure or if it was geared towards provoking Israel into a large-scale regional war (Hirsh, 2024). Jonathan Schanzer, a researcher at the Foundation for Defence of Democracies in Washington, suggests that Iran's attack was a test of Israel's missile defence systems, as well as regional and US resolve (Trofimov, 2024). Ali Vaez from the International Crisis Group argues that Iran's choice of weaponry was a deliberate and cautious approach that aimed for spectacular impact without causing significant casualties (Hirsh, 2024). Speaking for Iranian restraint, Tehran kept its largest proxy force, the well-armed Lebanon-based Hezbollah militia, in reserve. While only a handful of the Iranian missiles got through and only caused minor damage, the Iranian military has undoubtedly drawn valuable intelligence from observing how Israeli and US air defences operate (Trofimov, 2024). What is clear throughout different analyses is that Iran sought to avoid an escalation into a full-scale war with Israel while testing their adversaries' boundaries and capabilities.

For Israel, Iran's attack was arguably a significant blow to its deterrence policy, which had long been a key pillar of its security strategy. The opposition leader, Yair Lapid, voiced concerns and asserted that the government and prime minister had shattered Israeli deterrence and become an existential threat to Israel (Trofimov, 2024). Simultaneously, the attack highlighted the importance of Israel's air defence systems, which were remarkably successful in intercepting Iran's barrage.

Alongside the Iron Dome system for short-range projectiles is a wider anti-missile array, including the Arrow 3 high-altitude anti-ballistic missile system and the intermediate-range David's Sling. Today, this array is a central element in Israel's security posture (Trofimov, 2024).

Israel's counterattack was a limited strike clearly aimed at avoiding a cycle of escalation that could lead to war (Lieber et al., 2024). In the early hours of 19 April 2024, explosions were reported in the area around the central Iranian city of Isfahan. The location is known to host the country's nuclear facilities and is defended by an air base that houses S-300 anti-aircraft batteries, a sophisticated Russian air defence system (Lieber et al., 2024). No significant damage was reported, and both parties played the incident down, indicating that both sides were inclined to de-escalate (Malsin, 2024). According to the analysis by Chris Biggers, an imagery expert who used to work at the America's Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, Israeli missiles appear to have made a direct hit on a 30N6E2 "Tombstone" radar, designed to track, intercept, and take out incoming air and missile threats (The Economist, 2024b). It can therefore be argued that Israel's retaliation targeting Iran's main nuclear site, while limited, is a direct warning against further escalation.

The Western Reaction and Key Takeaways

The coordinated interception of the 13 April Iranian attack was unprecedented. According to former CIA counterterrorism chief Hudson, "no one has seen such a defence display in the Middle East" (Jones et al., 2024). The aerial defence mission involved a coalition of Israeli, American, British, and French fighter aircraft intercepting Iranian drones with support from Saudi and other early-warning radar systems positioned near Iran. This joint US-Israeli air defence effort had been prepared in the days leading up to the attack (The Economist, 2024c; Jones et al., 2024). Geopolitically, this marks a pivotal achievement for U.S. strategic objectives in the Middle East, as it looks like it has successfully established a coalition of Arab states and Israel united against Iran (The Economist, 2024c).

On the diplomatic front, responses have been a mix of concern, condemnation, and calls for de-escalation. UN Secretary-General António Guterres strongly condemned Iran's attack as a serious escalation, calling for an immediate ceasefire and warning that "neither the region nor the world can afford another war" (UN, 2024a). The U.S., EU, UK, and UN have urged Israel to refrain from an assault that could exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza (Gavin, 2024a). G7 leaders condemned Iran's attack on Israel and emphasized the need to prevent further escalation and ensure the protection of civilians in line with international law (U.S. Department of State, 2024). On behalf of the EU, High Representative Josep Borrell also condemned the Iranian strikes, reaffirming the EU's commitment to Israel's security while urging all parties to exercise restraint to avoid further escalation (Council of the EU, 2024).

On its part, the US has been working to prevent regional escalation and to pressure Israel to limit its response to the 13 April attack, emphasising restraint rather than retaliation (The Economist, 2024b; Trofimov, 2024). A senior US official noted that "Nobody except maybe [Israeli Prime Minister] Bibi wants this to get out of control" (Toosi & Ward, 2024).

Moreover, the Biden administration made it clear it would not support a direct Israeli attack on Iran. Therefore, the relatively small scale of Israel's counterattack on 19 April reflects US pressure to reduce. As shown in the coordinated interception of 13 April attack, Israel knows that it needs allies to defend itself, and the US is its most important partner both bilaterally and for facilitating a region-wide anti-Iranian coalition (The Economist, 2024b).

Regional context

The April rise in Iran-Israeli tensions fuelled fears of a possible regional escalation. Iran's attack signalled a changing Middle Eastern strategic reality and the departure from a long-standing 'shadow war' that avoids direct military confrontation. These events also saw traditional alliances shifting and new coalitions emerging. US Central Command, which includes Israel in its area of responsibility, has worked time and time again to foster cooperation between Israel and Arab states. The Iranian attack saw Jordan joining Israel's traditional allies in intercepting a swarm of drones that flew over its territory, and other Arab states provided intelligence. Arab states' support for Israel's defence was somewhat unexpected given their worsening ties caused by Israel's ongoing military action in Gaza (UN, 2024b; Trofimov, 2024). These actions suggest that while Arab states strongly disapprove of Israel's actions in Gaza, that disapproval is overshadowed by their concerns over Iran.

Saudi and Emirati officials reported that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates shared intelligence that significantly aided Israel's defence against Iran's large-scale attack. They did, however, refrain from granting the US and Israel full access to their airspace for intercepting missiles and drones, indicating a reluctance to fully align with Israel (Said & Kalin, 2024). This event underscored the delicate balancing act both countries face in managing adversarial relations with Iran, maintaining their alliance with the US, and strengthening but less-than-solid relations with Israel (Said & Kalin, 2024).

As for Israel, some suggest that the limited 19 April response points to its interest in building on the apparent unity with Arab states seen in the coordinated air defence against Iran's attack (The Economist, 2024b). While it might seem like the Iranian attack was a blow to Israel's policy of deterrence rooted in the promise of massive retaliation, Israel opted for a restrained and targeted response more in line with international opinion. This strategy might well be more effective in reaching Israel's apparent objectives. As per Benny Gantz, a member of Israel's war cabinet, "The regional cooperation which we have built, and which withstood a significant test, needs to be strengthened" (The Economist, 2024b, p. 37). Moreover, following the April attacks, the focus has shifted back toward Teheran's nuclear programme (Norman, 2024). Targeting the Isfahan area could be a signal, but Israel appears to be aware that it needs international, and more importantly, US, cooperation to end it in the long run.

Finally, when assessing the (de-)escalatory potential, the situation in Gaza and Israel's planned ground offensive in Rafah cannot be overlooked. Rafah, a city on the Gaza-Egyptian border, currently houses around 1.5 million Palestinians (Gavin, 2024b).

The U.S. and other Western allies have consistently urged Israel to refrain from – or delay - initiating an assault on Rafah. (Gavin, 2024b; Linskey & Gordon, 2024). The EU, for instance, has expressed grave concern about these plans and urged Israel to respect international humanitarian law and an International Court of Justice order to ensure the unhindered provision of humanitarian aid (European External Action Service, henceforth EEAS, 2024). Following the Iran-Israel exchange, the Biden administration has reiterated its opinion on the matter, citing humanitarian concerns (Linskey & Gordon, 2024). In this way, Israel faces a dilemma in that launching an offensive on Rafah might impede their ability to maintain and strengthen regional and international cooperation against Iran and its proxies.

Conclusion

The recent development of conflict between Iran and Israel opens a new chapter in the Middle East. The series of direct attacks on each other's territory over the month of April has raised stakes and increased the risk of misjudgement Iranian or Israeli miscalculation or misjudgement. International and regional actors alike have raised concern over broader instability and the spectre of regional conflict. Following the coordinated defence against Iran's 13 April attack, Israel's transatlantic allies have called for de-escalation, stressed the need for diplomacy, and urged both Israel and Iran to act with restraint. After 19 April, it seems that neither Israel nor Iran has any interest or intention to turn the situation into an outright war. However, as tensions, the war and humanitarian crisis in Gaza, Iran's nuclear programme, and scepticism on the part of the Arab states all remain, it will require a solid commitment from all sides to preserve the Middle East's delicate balance of power. Diplomatic efforts, restraint, and adherence to international law will be crucial to prevent further escalation and hopefully achieve lasting de-escalation.

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