

Israel needs a high-intensity campaign strategy against Iran

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 14.04.2024

Iran's unprecedented missile and drone attack against Israel last night is the pinnacle of a decades-long Iranian campaign that has been ongoing since the Islamic regime took power during the 1979 revolution. Over the years, Iran has gradually built a sophisticated proxy system and, with the exception of very few instances, has preferred to fight Israel via its proxies. Hiding behind them is part of Tehran's calculated strategy, which strives to distance Iran from war or any punishment for acts of terror, despite the Islamic Republic's key role in training, funding, directing, and, at times, actively dispatching its proxies.

Now, feeling obligated to restore its eroded deterrence vis-à-vis Israel following the targeted killings attributed to the latter in Damascus in early April, Iran has chosen to take a public stand and attack Israel directly using its advanced drones and missiles. This is not a comprehensive strategic shift on Iran's part. As soon as the strike ended, and before its scope had even been confirmed, Tehran clearly signaled, via its UN embassy, that it wished to end this historical event and return to normal.

Israel cannot go back to October 6. It must not allow Iran to surround it with a tightening ring of fire while making intolerable threats of a potentially nuclear nature.

However, Israel does not operate in a vacuum either and is required to coordinate its actions with the Biden administration, both by virtue of the strategic alliance forged between the two countries and in view of the implications of an Israeli assault against Iran on local US forces and interests. Tehran seems to regard the United States as the weaker player in this arena, and therefore, since the Israel-Hamas War broke out, has instructed its proxies to carry out dozens of attacks against US interests in Iraq and Syria, in an effort to make President Biden pressure Israel to stop the war. The partial US response to the lethal drone strike in early January by Iran's Iraqi proxy, Kataib Hizballah, killing 3 US troops, appears to have only partially and temporarily deterred Tehran. The United States had, once again, chosen to retaliate against the Iraqi proxy, instead of its

Iranian master.

Thus, although Quds Force Commander, Ismail Qaani, has reportedly instructed Iraqi Shiite militia groups to desist attacks against US interests, and has probably attempted to convince the Houthis in Yemen to do the same, the Iraqi militias have renewed (albeit not significantly) their assaults against US forces in Syria, while the Houthis continue to attack US sea vessels. Tehran itself, during its strike against Israel last night, threatened to attack any US forces that would help Israel in its retaliation against Iran. It is therefore clear that Iran views the United States as the weakest link and more easily pressured player.

Israel must formulate a comprehensive strategy for a high-intensity campaign against Iran, that could include peaks during which Iran would attempt to take direct action against Israel. Otherwise, Tehran would probably prefer to go back to operating via its proxies, given that direct Iranian actions against Israel would help form a regional coalition against Tehran, composed primarily of Jordan and Egypt, and supported by the United States, United Kingdom, and France (as seen in action last night). Such a coalition could shift from defensive to offensive mode since Iran is threatening to take action against any country supportive of Israel's defense efforts.

Israel appears to have certain latitude vis-à-vis Iran, despite US pressure. The Biden administration opposes broad conflict that would run the risk of regional war. At the same time, if Israel and the United States choose to restrain their response, Iran would interpret their inaction as permission to attack Israel, the United States' ally, directly, as well as other US partners in the region (to which Iran poses a threat) without paying the price for doing so. Furthermore, war breaking out between Iran and Israel still seems a long way off, allowing Israel to take action against Iran without necessarily leading the region to war. For instance, Israel could utilize the unprecedented Iranian attack to strike Iran kinetically when it is most suitable and convenient, whereas Tehran, which suffers from an acute domestic legitimacy crisis and can still collectively recall the destruction and aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), would think twice before aggravating its conflict with Israel. The cyberattack weapons that Israel has developed over the years could also serve it to repay Iran by damaging its essential infrastructure in an arena where responsibility is not unequivocally assumed by anyone.

Israel's updated security strategy should include various aspects, primary among which are: the desirable *modus operandi* vis-à-vis Iran; increased coordination with the United States on efforts to thwart the drone, missile, and terror infrastructure in Iran and the region; strengthening the IDF's force buildup so that it would tally with the challenge posed by Iran; and closing the various gaps that enable Iran to carry out cyberattacks and influence campaigns in Israel.

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