

Lessons from Iran-Israel clash: conceptions & coalitions

written by Joseph Rozen | 26.04.2024

This week the Jewish people celebrate the holiday of Passover, commemorating the exodus from bondage to freedom, and overcoming those who seek to eliminate the Jewish people. The recent conflict between Israel and Iran offers poignant parallels and critical lessons.

Israel faced a near existential threat on the 7th of October, and has been fighting a multi-front war since then. In Gaza, Israel has been fighting the Hamas terror organization for more than 200 days, trying to achieve two goals: the release of the Israeli hostages, and dismantling Hamas from its military capabilities and governing power in Gaza. In the north, Hezbollah has been constantly shooting rockets at Israel, leading to a massive evacuation of Israelis from the north, with no estimated date of their return in sight. In addition, the Houthis in Yemen were launching rockets and drones in Israel's direction and disrupting international trade.

For decades, Iran has facilitated attacks against Israel using its proxies. However, Iran's recent direct ballistic missile assault signaled a dangerous escalation, exposing the regime as the main aggressor in the region. While Iran intended to assert strength and hegemonic ambitions, the results have proven quite the opposite. So what happened?

According to media reports, on the 1st of April, Israel killed an Iranian general, Mohammed Reza Zahedi, among other officials of the IRGC, in Damascus. They were the main figures in supplying arms to Iran's proxies in Syria and Lebanon.

Iran promised to retaliate and made everyone guessing about the scope and timing of the attack, leaving the international community on edge. On the 14th of April, it launched 170 drones, 30 cruise missiles, and 120 ballistic missiles against Israel, in one of the largest missile attacks ever. In the end, only 9 missiles reached Israel, hitting an airbase in the south, and causing only minor damage.

Following the attack, Israel had to retaliate and so it did. This time, Iran was on

edge and guessing. It returned some of its advisors from Syria to Iran, expressed its will to end this round, and even used the UN to pressure Israel not to retaliate. The Israeli response on the 18th of April was in the internationally agreed lines of retaliating in a manner that would send the right message to Iran without deteriorating into a regional war. Several reports indicated that Israel attacked a facility near the nuclear site in Isfahan, destroying also a missile defense system, the S-300.

This chain of events holds several lessons for the region and the international community:

On the positive side, it emphasized the importance of the technological factor - Based on various reports, about 50% of the missiles failed at launch or en route. The majority of other missiles and drones were intercepted before even reaching Israel. At the same time, the Israeli precise attack hit Iran in a strategic location, exposing the weakness of Iranian intelligence and defense systems provided by its ally Russia, which couldn't foresee the Israeli attack or prevent it.

The combination of the two proved the defensive and offensive technological superiority of Israel and exposed the outdated weapon arsenal of Iran. This display clarified that Israel is far less vulnerable than Iran presumed, while the Iranian homeland is more vulnerable than its leaders anticipated.

Consequently, the attack backfired remarkably on Tehran. It reinvigorated the US-led regional alliance of Israel and pragmatic Arab nations against the Iranian threat, strengthening vital coordination and cooperation that had waned amid disagreements over Israel's war against Hamas. In addition, it might have opened the door for Israel to operate in Rafah. It also encouraged the US Congress to pass the defense aid bill to supply Israel with the needed arms. Simultaneously, the international community introduced additional sanctions against Iran.

Disconcertingly, Iran's reluctance to escalate to total war suggests its focus remains the insidious pursuit of military nuclear capabilities. The international community, so far, has erred in viewing the Hamas and Iran fronts as distinct rather than part of the broader confrontation against extremism. This perception needs to be averted, so there will be better coordination across regions between like-minded countries.

At the same time, the regional coalition and the American aid, emphasize Israel's reliance on others for its defense. This is a major lesson for the Indo-Pacific region, in which potential threats from China and North Korea push the US and its allies to form coalitions that will provide the necessary defensive umbrella. Nevertheless, it should not limit regional powers in developing their capabilities and freedom of action.

It is still too early to tell if Israeli retaliation will be meaningful and effective in the long term in dealing with Iran. But as Passover commemorates the Jewish people's ancient struggle against oppression, modern Israel must decide whether its security posture remains mired too deeply in a defensive paradigm. Thwarting the danger posed by the Islamic Republic may require a bolder proactive strategy of confronting and dismantling Iran's capability to menace the region.

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