

Middle Eastern politics & society

Iran signals 'calibrated' retaliation to Israeli strike

Tehran indicates response will be designed to avoid escalating conflict amid flurry of diplomatic calls



A Palestinian supporter joins a rally in Tehran on April 5 for the 7 Iranians killed in the Israeli air strike on Damascus © Sobhan Farajvan/Pacific Press/Sipa

Mehul Srivastava in London, **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv, **Bita Ghaffari** in Tehran, **Felicia Schwartz** in Washington and **Sam Jones** in Berlin YESTERDAY

Iran has signalled to allies and western nations that it will retaliate against a suspected Israeli air strike on its Damascus consulate in a “calibrated” manner to keep an all-out regional conflict at bay, according to officials briefed on the talks.

Tehran is unlikely to target Israeli diplomatic facilities in the region, said an official briefed on talks between Iran and Oman, the Gulf state that has often facilitated back-channel diplomacy between Tehran and Washington.

US intelligence on any impending attack appears to be detailed and specific, according to the officials briefed on the situation, giving Israel a window to prepare its defences.

[President Joe Biden](#) said in Washington on Friday that he expected an Iranian attack on Israel “sooner than later”, and that his advice to Tehran was “don’t”.

“We are devoted to the defence of Israel, we will support Israel, we will help defend Israel and Iran will not succeed,” Biden added.

The April 1 [air strike on Iran’s diplomatic compound in Syria](#), which Israel has not publicly claimed, has dramatically raised tensions with Israel, threatening to turn a long-running shadow war between the regional foes into a direct confrontation.

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has twice vowed to make Israel “regret” killing Mohammad Reza Zahedi, the commander of Iran’s Quds force in Syria and Lebanon, and six other military officials on Iranian “territory”.

But diplomatic calls this week between [Iran](#) and its regional allies and European capitals have led at least some western officials to conclude that Iran is preparing a response that aims to demonstrate deterrent strength while also showing restraint.



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei looks at the coffins of Revolutionary Guard Corps members killed in the Israeli air strike on Damascus during their funeral in Tehran on April 4 © Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader/WANA/Reuters

One regime insider in Tehran said it was ready to bide its time to maximise the political impact of the ultimate response. He noted Iran was deliberately seeking to exhaust Israel, both by creating psychological uncertainty and forcing it to remain on high alert. He added that Iran would employ “a combination” of options in its attacks against Israel, without providing further details.

Iran’s expected response has already created a sense of anxiety in Israel, with the government warning citizens not to hoard generators and essential supplies.

Several factors may stop Iran trying to hit an Israeli diplomatic mission. “[Tehran] can’t risk further international isolation by hitting Israeli [diplomatic] targets in a friendly country, and can’t easily target Israeli diplomatic assets in unfriendly nations,” one western official said. “It limits their choices.”

Even a direct attack in Israeli territory would probably be “calibrated” in a manner that would show a robust response, without triggering an Israeli retaliation that would lead to Iranian assets in Lebanon and Syria being decimated, the western official said, while warning that a miscalculation is possible.

Israel has prepared for any combination of attacks, from medium-range rockets and drones launched from Iranian proxy militias in Lebanon and Syria, to long-range missiles launched from further afield.

Despite their long history of enmity, Israel and Iran have never exchanged fire using strikes launched from their own soil. Only once before — in 2018 — did Iranian forces based in Syria fire on Israel directly.



A display featuring Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock shows the slain Iranians in Damascus, as well as allied Lebanese and Palestinians, at Tehran's embassy in Beirut on April 8 © Hassan Ammar/AP

Iran has been building up its military support for decades in Lebanon and for more than a decade in Syria, but has not fully deployed it against Israel. Tehran has also studiously refrained from direct clashes with Israel, choosing not to respond to assassinations of nuclear and security personnel inside the Islamic Republic in recent years, which it has blamed on Israel's Mossad spy agency.

Analysts and officials in Tehran have long warned of Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu trying to goad Iran into a direct confrontation, which the regime has sought to avoid.

Senior Israeli officials have threatened to react not just defensively, but offensively to

any attack. That includes hitting Iran directly if Israel is targeted from Iranian soil.

“Whoever harms us, we will harm them,” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Thursday.

Western diplomats said Israel might be able to tolerate an attack that only did some physical damage to military facilities. But if civilians or military personnel were killed, that would trigger a wider Israeli response.

Netanyahu also held an Israeli war cabinet late on Friday afternoon, in an unusual pre-Sabbath meeting, to discuss contingency planning ahead of any Iranian strike.

Israel and the US, which has stepped up its military presence in the region to deter Iran and its proxies, have been prepared for attacks on military sites in border regions of northern Israel, from where most of the civilian population has already been evacuated, an Israeli official said.

Gen Michael Kurilla, the US's top commander in the Middle East, is in Israel meeting senior Israeli defence and military officials to help prepare for a possible military response. US defence secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with his Israeli counterpart on Thursday evening to “reiterate full US support to defend Israel against Iranian attacks”, according to the Pentagon.

Israel has already surged personnel and materiel to its Aerial Defense Array, which includes the Iron Dome for knocking out low-range rockets, and systems such as David's Sling and Arrow, designed to protect against long-range ballistic missiles. Leave has been cancelled for nearly all Israeli combat forces.

US officials said they had moved additional military assets into the region in preparation for any possible response.

The western official briefed on Iran's calls to regional allies said it was possible that Iran would deploy a new missile capability for the first time, demonstrating technical prowess and reach that would show it is capable of punishing Israel.

Iran's state news agency IRNA published a list of Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles on Friday that it said could travel the 1,600-kilometre distance from Tehran to Tel Aviv.

