

Middle East conflict

Iran rolls dice in conflict with Israel



Israel and Iran's attempts to restore military deterrence pull the region into escalating cycle of violence

Andrew England, Middle East editor YESTERDAY

It was just before 2am when Israel launched its air defence interceptors to counter a barrage of Iranian drones and missiles. Sirens and explosions rang out across Jerusalem, the southern Negev and the northern border region.

Israelis, who had waited anxiously for several hours after first being warned that the arsenal of projectiles was heading their way, scurried to safe rooms or bomb shelters.

After more than four decades of hostility between the arch foes, Israel was for the first time under [a direct attack from Iran](#). It puts the Middle East ever nearer the full-blown regional conflict that western and Arab leaders have feared since Hamas's October 7 attack triggered Israel's retaliatory [war in Gaza](#).

All eyes are now on how Israel — still enraged, traumatised and in full war-mode after the Hamas attack — will respond to the unprecedented assault on its territory.

An Iranian retaliation of some sort had been telegraphed since a [suspected Israeli attack](#) targeted the Islamic republic's consular building in Damascus on April 1, killing senior commanders in the Revolutionary Guards and striking what Tehran considers sovereign territory. But when it came, it was far larger than expected: more than 300 drones, ballistic missiles and cruise missiles launched from multiple fronts at Israel.

With US-led support, the Israeli military said air defences were able to take out “99 per cent” of the projectiles. The physical damage appears limited and no fatalities were reported.

But by launching such a massive barrage, the Islamic republic sent a message: it was willing to risk its own security by directly confronting Israel, and potentially drawing the US into combat. It deals a heavy blow to western and Arab hopes of de-escalating regional hostilities, and bringing an end to the war in Gaza.

For six months, Iranian leaders made clear they were seeking to avoid direct conflict with Israel and the US, or a full-blown regional conflagration, even as they sabre-rattled and stoked instability.

Instead, Iran appeared content to project its hostility to Israel through the so-called Axis of Resistance, the network of Tehran-backed regional militants that includes Lebanon's [Hezbollah](#) militia in Iraq and Syria, Houthi rebels in Yemen and Hamas

Lebanon's [Hizbollah](#), militias in Iraq and Syria, Houthis rebels in Yemen and Hamas. Iran's priority, analysts believed, was to ensure the survival of the Islamic regime by keeping the conflict at arm's length.

There were even signs that Tehran had been seeking to de-escalate regional hostilities since late January, when three US soldiers were killed when Iranian-backed militias launched a drone assault on an American base on the Jordanian-Syrian border.

Iraqi militias, which had launched more than 160 drone and rocket attacks against American troops in Iraq and Syria after October 7, had ceased their assaults on US forces since February, although they have continued to claim attacks against Israel. In January, Iran held indirect talks with the US in Oman.



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei meeting politicians and government officials in Tehran on April 3 © KHAMENEI.IR/ AFP/Getty Images

But Tehran's calculations changed after the April 1 strike on its diplomatic mission in Damascus.

The strike signalled that Israel was raising the stakes in its long-running shadow war with Iran, and it dealt another humiliating blow to Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guards. More than 10 commanders and military advisers had previously been killed by suspected Israeli strikes on Syria since October 7.

In Tehran the Damascus strike, which killed seven guards members, including two senior commanders, was viewed as an Israeli provocation too far. Just as Israel has sought to re-establish its deterrent after being caught cold by Hamas's attack, the

sought to re-establish its deterrent after being caught cold by Hamas's attack, the Islamic regime has now sought to do the same, not wanting to appear weak to its domestic constituency or its regional proxies.

But rather than deter, the result is likely to be an escalating cycle of violence. The key will be how and when Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government responds, and whether the US, desperate to contain tensions, but committed to providing "ironclad" support to Israel, can restrain its ally.

In the wake of the October 7 attack, the mindset in Israel was not that Hamas represented an existential threat, but that Iran and its proxies did if the Jewish state appeared weak and vulnerable.

From Israel's perspective, Hamas was not acting in a vacuum. Rather it considers Tehran to be the puppet master of the Palestinian Islamist group and other anti-Israel militant groups across the region, which have launched multiple assaults against Israel since October 7.

In the months since, Israel's objective has been to restore its military deterrence and signal to Iran that the unwritten rules in the Middle East had been upended: it would not only hit Hamas in Gaza, but was also willing to escalate to weaken other Iranian-backed militants that threaten the Jewish state.

At any other time, the intense border clashes between Hizbollah and Israel would have been considered a full-blown conflict. Israeli strikes have killed more than 250 Hizbollah fighters, a similar number to its combatants killed in its 2006 war with the Jewish state.

But in today's context, it has — so far — been considered to be contained, even as both sides have struck deeper and deeper into each other's territory beyond invisible red lines.

Iran's assault on Israel was, in effect, an attempt to re-establish the old rules of the game. But the concern will be that it provides even greater motivation for Israel to further escalate the conflict with Hizbollah, by far Iran's most powerful and important proxy.

Sanam Vakil, Middle East director at Chatham House, said [Iran had gambled](#), but believed if it had not launched the attack Israel would have continued to try to degrade Iran's forces and those of its proxies, particularly Hizbollah.

"Without trying to reassert red lines and trying to reclaim some of the deterrent

capability, there was no end in sight to the drip, drip of Israel's degradation campaign," Vakil said.

Much will depend on Israel's response, she said. If it decides to "escalate further and strike nuclear facilities, we are in all-out new territory".

If a full-blown regional conflict erupts, it would have far-reaching repercussions. Lacking the conventional weapons of Israel, Iran has long developed a strategy of asymmetric warfare, using the guards and the axis of resistance to strike at its enemies and their allies.

During previous bouts of heightened tensions, Iranian hardliners often threatened to disrupt shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, through which a third of all seaborne oil cargoes pass. Iranian forces seized an Israeli-linked container vessel near the strait on Saturday.

The Middle East has been in a downward spiral since October 7. It just got steeper and far more dangerous.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2024. All rights reserved.
