



The Iranian-Israeli Cold War is Turning Hot

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Any serious observer of the Middle East knows that, long before Hamas' October 7 terror campaign and the resulting military offensive in the Gaza Strip, Israel was already embroiled in an undeclared war with another regional actor: the Islamic Republic of Iran. Jerusalem and Tehran have been waging a clandestine conflict throughout the region for decades. Over the years, that "shadow war" has entailed a great many things, from covert action to cyberattacks to targeted military strikes. But until now, it has been waged indirectly and largely away from the international spotlight.

All that changed on April 13, when the Iranian regime launched a direct attack on the Jewish state from its soil for the first time. The massive offensive, involving 170 drones, 30 cruise missiles, and 120 ballistic missiles, was ostensibly a response to an Israeli airstrike on Damascus days earlier that killed a high-ranking Iranian general. But it also marked a major evolution in Iranian strategy—one with significant ramifications for the Middle East as a whole.

Historically, the Islamic Republic has shied away from direct confrontation, preferring instead to rely on regional proxies (like Hamas, Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah militia, and more recently, Yemen's Houthi rebels) to advance its radical, anti-Western agenda. By doing so, Iran has managed to besiege Israel strategically while maintaining plausible deniability. That makes this weekend's direct offensive nothing short of a seismic strategic shift.

Iran's new boldness can be attributed to a number of factors. One is the timid and risk-averse approach to the Middle East adopted by the Biden administration, which has given Iran's ayatollahs a far freer hand in the region. Relevant, too, has been the very public tensions between Jerusalem and Washington over Israel's recent conduct in Gaza, leading many to conclude that the long-standing "special relationship" between the two countries might be in trouble. These and other factors appear to have convinced Tehran that the time was ripe for a change to the regional status quo.

Iran's attack, when it did come, was not a full-on assault, however. For days following the April 1 airstrike that killed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Mohammad Reza Zahedi, Iranian officials had warned of dire consequences, staking significant regime prestige on it in the process. But in practical terms, they grasped that any action couldn't be so severe as to precipitate a catastrophic response from Israel, the United States, or both. Accordingly, Iran's offensive ultimately entailed long-range weaponry that took hours to reach its intended target, giving Israel and its allies plenty of time to prepare. And, thanks to exceedingly capable Israeli missile defenses, as well as assistance from European and regional allies like Jordan and Saudi Arabia, Iran's volley of drones and missiles was almost entirely neutralized.

Still, Iran's attack can't be brushed off easily. Given the scope of the Iranian barrage, it is clear that this was no mere demonstration. Rather, the Islamic Republic intended to do real harm. And because it did, Israeli officials maintain, Iran's actions should be judged not on what actually transpired but on the damage that would have been inflicted had the assault been successful.

The Biden administration, of course, would strongly prefer if Jerusalem did nothing in response. The White House initially rallied to Israel's side to help thwart Iran's attack. Quickly, however, Washington shifted its stance to counsel Israel to exercise restraint lest hostilities escalate further. And America's opinion definitely matters because defending against Iran is an exceedingly costly venture requiring continued U.S. aid. Post-crisis estimates put the total figure for countering Iran's April 13 salvos alone at north of \$1 billion.

Nevertheless, from an Israeli perspective, doing nothing isn't an option. Simply put, inaction would enshrine a dangerous new status quo in the region—one in which future direct attacks by Iran on its enemies are normalized. Whatever steps Israel takes next will be designed to ensure that doesn't happen.