



AUTHOR ARMAN MAHMOUDIAN, PH.D.



Iran - Israel Conflict: A New Stage Emerges



Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East has long been shaped by the rivalry between Iran and Israel, a conflict rooted in deep-seated political, religious, and territorial disputes. In recent years, this rivalry has intensified, marked notably by Iran's expanding military footprint in Syria. According to Israeli intelligence, Iran now operates thirteen bases in Syria manned by five divisions of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).¹ Additionally, it has established a brand-new proxy unit known as the Al-Hussein Division to specifically operate in Syria.²

The Major Long-Term Impact of Strikes on the Nature of the Iran-Israel Rivalry

The direct confrontations between Iran and Israel in April 2024 mark a significant departure from the longstanding pattern of proxy warfare that has characterized their rivalry. For the first time, the two nations have engaged each other openly, signaling a pivotal shift in the nature of their conflict. This direct engagement has reshaped the strategic calculus on both sides, altering the military, political, and diplomatic trajectories. This section explores the profound impact these strikes have had on the dynamics of the Iran-Israel rivalry, to understand they might redefine future interactions between Iran and Israel and forecast the potential ramifications for the broader Middle East.

1. Redefinition of Engagement Rules

The longstanding unofficial rule that prevented direct territorial assaults between Iran and Israel has been decisively violated. This significant escalation sets a new precedent, potentially leading to more open and direct confrontations. This shift not only increases the risk of a broader regional conflict but also fundamentally alters each nation's security and the general trajectory of their military development. For example, while the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) successfully intercepted a large number of projectiles launched by Iran, concerns remain about scenarios in which Iran could launch a greater number, possibly accompanied by thousands of rockets from Hezbollah, or situations in which allies may not be as active as they were on April 13. Such developments might prompt Israel to enhance its long-range defensive capabilities to protect against deep strikes within its territory, while Iran might prioritize the development of more sophisticated offensive technologies to penetrate Israeli defenses. This enhancement of long-range defensive capabilities, while primarily protective, allows for a proactive posture by enabling preemptive actions against potential threats. This strategic adjustment, primarily defensive, supports readiness for direct engagements without explicitly adopting an aggressive stance.

2. Escalation in Arms Race

In response to the increasing direct threats, Israel, Iran, and other regional rivals, including the Arab States of the Persian Gulf, are likely to accelerate their arms development and procurement strategies. This arms race will particularly emphasize advancements in aerial offensive and defensive capabilities, as demonstrated by the recent exchanges. Expectations are that Israel will continue to innovate in drone technology and air defense systems, such as enhancements to the Iron Dome and David's Sling, while Iran might accelerate its own missile development and drone warfare capabilities. This arms race could extend to cyber warfare, where nations in the region are already active and capable contenders, seeking to undermine each other's technological and strategic advantages without engaging in direct military confrontations. Such maneuvers could significantly shift the strategic balance in the region, compelling both countries to pursue innovative solutions and secure a technological edge.

3. Transforming the Dynamics of Russia and China's Relations with Iran and Israel

The intensification of the conflict influences the diplomatic and strategic calculations of non-western major global players like Russia and China. While these countries might boost Iran's defenses by supplying advanced fighter jets and air defense systems, they may also reconsider their positions based on Israel's military efficacy and concerns about Iran's aggressive tactics. Russia, with its established military presence in Syria, might be compelled to reconsider its stance to avoid escalation that could threaten its position in the Middle East. China, seeking stability for its Belt and Road Initiative, might

Scenario 4: Iran's Military Buildup in Response to Vulnerabilities

Reacting to the realization that its territory and existing aerial defenses are vulnerable to Israeli strikes, Iran opts to enhance its military presence and capabilities in Iraq and Syria. This includes deploying additional troops, constructing new missile launcher stations, and improving radar and air defense systems. The strategic goal is to create a more robust buffer zone that can deter or respond to Israeli actions. This significant military buildup pressures Israel to increase its preemptive and retaliatory strikes, potentially leading to a cycle of escalation reminiscent of the aftermath of the attack on Iran's embassy in Damascus. This scenario could destabilize not just the immediate areas but also have broader implications for regional security, drawing in international involvement to prevent further escalation.

Scenario 5: Proxy Engagement to Pressure the US and Israel

To manage the conflict dynamics and pressure the United States to remain neutral, Iran might strategically use its regional proxies to escalate hostilities without directly engaging Israeli forces. By triggering its proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen to increase their attacks against US and Israeli interests, Iran aims to create a sustained level of harassment across the region. Although not seeking a full-scale war, this strategy could lead to significant casualties and strategic setbacks, as exemplified by the attacks on US military bases in Jordan. This approach is designed to complicate any direct response by the US and Israel, making it harder for them to justify a full-scale retaliation without entering a broader conflict. It also serves as a means for Iran to assert its influence indirectly while avoiding the direct costs of warfare.

Scenario 6: Escalation to Semi-Direct Confrontation

As military buildups continue and proxy activities intensify, the situation may evolve into a "semi-direct confrontation." In this scenario, Israel could decide to preemptively strike Iranian bases and infrastructure in Syria and Iraq to curtail Iran's ability to project power and coordinate proxy attacks. In retaliation, Iran might command its proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and via the Houthis to launch concerted attacks against Israeli targets. The renewed Houthis' attacks in the Red Sea against international shipments indicate that Tehran is no shy of employing them. Additionally, Iran could

to Hezbollah's growing role in other aspects of Iran's regional activities, including in Syria or Iraq, the

Implications

1. Increased Risk for U.S. Troops in Iraq and Syria

encompassing advanced defensive technologies, enhanced intelligence sharing, and a more pronounced military commitment. These escalated demands could put additional pressure on U.S. resources and shift its strategic priorities in the region. Furthermore, the escalating tensions that have brought Iran and Israel to the brink of war highlight a volatile situation that could inadvertently draw the United States into conflict. The persistent sources of tension, including territorial disputes and proxy conflicts, maintain a high risk of future confrontations that could necessitate U.S. involvement, either through direct military action or as part of an international coalition to restore stability. This deepening commitment to regional security significantly increases the likelihood of American military engagement in the Middle East, potentially against Iran or its proxies.

5. Nuclear/WMD Proliferation

The effectiveness of Israeli and allied responses to Iranian attacks, coupled with the overwhelming military superiority of the United States, could prompt Iran to seek a nuclear deterrent as a security guarantee. Currently, there is no evidence of technical developments in Iran's enrichment facilities that would suggest the country is moving toward building a nuclear weapon. However, the recent escalation with Iran over its aerial strike on Israel has highlighted other areas of tension with the Islamic Republic, notably its nuclear project. As General (Ret.) Frank McKenzie suggests, "What is clear is that Iran's leadership's temptation to acquire a nuclear weapon has not lessened since the day before the exchange of strikes."¹¹

However, it is needless to say that any move towards nuclear armament could set off a chain reaction across the region, with other countries like Saudi Arabia and potentially Turkey considering similar steps to ensure their national security. The prospect of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East presents a dire scenario for global security, compelling the United States to intensify its diplomatic efforts and possibly reevaluate its approach to nuclear non-proliferation. The statement by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, indicating that Saudi Arabia would pursue nuclear capabilities if Iran developed a nuclear weapon, highlights the precarious balance of power and the critical role of U.S. policy in preventing a destabilizing arms race.¹²

Takeaways from the Recent Exchange of Strikes

The recent exchange of strikes between Iran and Israel has not only marked a new phase in their long-standing rivalry but also brought to light several critical insights into the current state and potential future of regional security dynamics. The fo1m escalaterity d400030004B00luryity d40Trupyity d40Trupy000Fi nucle004E0s2FoAFv

international effort to negotiate a reduction in foreign military footprints in Syria, which could otherwise lead to broader regional instability.

3- Vulnerabilities in Iran's Air Defense

IDF success in hitting a military airfield in middle of Iran's territory have exposed significant vulnerabilities in Iran's air defense systems. Despite having a substantial military investment, Iran has struggled to maintain a comprehensive and effective defense against aerial incursions on its mainland. This weakness poses serious questions about Iran's capability to protect its territory from sophisticated missile and drone attacks, suggesting that Iran may need to reassess and possibly upgrade its air defense strategy and systems.

4- Effectiveness of U.S. Regional Defense Initiatives

The effectiveness of U.S.-led efforts to bolster the aerial defense capabilities of regional partners has been highlighted by the interception and neutralization of most of the Iranian projectiles during the recent strikes. This success validates the U.S. endeavor to build military partnerships and enhance the defensive capabilities of international and regional allies. It demonstrates the strategic value of these partnerships, not only in preventing Iranian aggression but also in promoting regional security and stability.

Despite the U.S. and its allies' success in neutralizing a significant number of Iranian projectiles, some argue that in the event of a full-scale war between Iran and Israel, there would be no guarantee that Israel and its allies could replicate the success of April 13th. Under such circumstances, Iran could deploy its entire aerial arsenal, including 3,000 ballistic missiles, potentially overwhelming Israel and its allies' air defenses in terms of capacity and speed. In response to these arguments, General (Ret.) Frank McKenzie, the former commander of U.S. CENTCOM, suggested that "while Iran possesses approximately 3,000 ballistic missiles, it has a limited number of missile launchers, in the low hundreds. This means that Iran cannot launch its entire long-range arsenal simultaneously. After the first wave of attacks, the launchers would need to be reloaded, a process that involves delivering missiles from their storage bases. This movement to reload the launchers would not only expose them to Israel and its allies but also requires time, allowing Israel and its allies a sufficient window to recharge their defenses."¹³

Navigating the Future: Policy Directions for U.S. Involvement in the Middle East

In light of the recent developments in the Iran-Israel rivalry and the broader Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape, it is imperative for the United States to reassess and refine its strategic approach. This section outlines a series of policy recommendations designed to strengthen regional stability, enhance the defense

joint military exercises with regional partners will also demonstrate the U.S.'s commitment to maintaining stability in the region.

