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## The Middle East caught in an impossible equation

Since Iran launched more than 300 drones and missiles from its territory towards Israel on the night of 13-14 April, the Middle East region has entered a new era<sup>\*</sup>. This era comes as a consequence of the previous one but is far more dangerous as it is defined by a direct confrontation between Israel and Iran, while states in the region are likely to be drawn into this war if the escalation continues to soar.

By deciding to respond to the Israeli strike on 1<sup>st</sup> April against its consulate in Damascus with an attack aimed directly at the Israeli territory, Tehran has definitively changed the nature of its engagement in its confrontation with Israel. The result points to a definite break away from the doctrine of “strategic patience”, which has placed Iran’s defense policy in a long term perspective, notably through the gradual establishment of proxies in the region.

Red lines had already been blurred since 7 October. As Tel Aviv assessed that Hezbollah and Iran would not engage in a military maneuver that would risk provoking an all-out war (in the case of Lebanon) or direct confrontation (in the case of Iran), it gradually changed the rules of the game. Israel thus tried to push its advantage to the limit by striking more and more targets deemed “sensitive” by its adversaries<sup>1</sup>. Since the start of the war in Gaza, Israel has destroyed many of Hezbollah’s arms warehouses and most of its infrastructure located close to the border – with the notable exception of tunnels. Senior members of the movement were also killed. Some Israeli officials felt that the security situation in the north of the country had therefore become

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<sup>\*</sup> Translated from French by Ines K. T. Grange, Research Assistant, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique. See the original text [here](#).

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Philippe Rémy, Hélène Sallon, “Liban : les violences s'intensifient entre Israël et le Hezbollah, faisant craindre une escalade incontrôlable”, *Le Monde*, 29 February 2024.

better than before 7 October – if it was not for the risk of escalation in light of an endless war in Gaza<sup>2</sup>. In Syria, Israel had been carrying out strikes for many years, targeting arms convoys and depots as well as Iranian proxies. Members of the Revolutionary Guards had also been targeted, yet Israel had shown a degree of restraint. Since 7 October however, these strikes have not only become more frequent but have also increasingly targeted Iranian personnel – culminating in the strike against the Iranian consulate in Damascus that killed General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, who is presumably responsible for coordinating the operations of the al-Quds Force in Lebanon and Syria<sup>3</sup>. Mr R. Zahedi is the highest-ranking official to have been killed since the assassination of General Soleimani in January 2020 by US forces under the Trump administration<sup>4</sup>.

For Israeli decision-makers, pushing back the red lines is considered key to restoring deterrence, an objective that has become a strategic obsession since 7 October even if it means risking war<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the post-7 October context has seen the rise of a new school of thought among Israeli defense circles: Tel Aviv cannot continue to strike at Iran by targeting its proxies only while Iranian proxies are attacking Israel directly<sup>6</sup>. In the words of one adviser close to Israeli decision-making circles, “[t]his school of thought believes that Iran must pay a price”. This is indeed one of the paradoxes in which Israel finds itself today: despite Benjamin Netanyahu’s enduring positioning over recent decades as the main warmonger against the “Iranian threat”, it seems that today it is more the military establishment – which has always been more measured in terms of the definition of the strategy towards Iran – that considers an Israeli response “inevitable” despite the fact that the consequences would be devastating for the region<sup>7</sup>.

In Iranian decision-making circles, it was probably both the profile of the commanders killed on 1<sup>st</sup> April and the location of the Israeli strike – considered as Iranian territory – that constituted a decisive turning point. Other factors that certainly weighed in the decision include Israel’s strategic stalemate in Gaza but also the prospect of presidential elections in the United States, which makes the Biden administration even more wary of the prospect of a regional escalation in which its armed forces would inevitably be involved. For Tehran, it is above all a question of re-establishing balance between the two countries’ deterrence capabilities, which had been undermined by recent Israeli actions. The messages sent to the United States about the imminence of its attack have enabled Israel and its allies to prepare their defense and *de facto* limit the damage caused by the strikes<sup>8</sup>. From then on, Iranian representatives have tried to present the “incident as closed”, while warning that any Israeli action would receive an even

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Israeli officials, February 2024. Hezbollah has repeatedly stated that it will not stop its attacks until there is a ceasefire in Gaza.

<sup>3</sup> Between the beginning of December 2023 and the end of March 2024, Israel killed nearly a dozen commanders and advisers of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the al-Quds Force (see Ali Vaez, “The Middle East Could Still Explode”, *Foreign Affairs*, 15 April 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Akhtar Mohammad Makoi, “Mohammad Reza Zahedi: who was the Iranian commander killed in an Israeli strike in Syria?”, *The Guardian*, 2 April 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with an adviser close to Israeli decision-making circles, February 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with an adviser close to Israeli decision-making circles, 17 April 2024.

<sup>7</sup> According to an adviser close to Israeli decision-making circles, “[t]here was a clear underestimation of the degree of Tehran’s capacity to absorb the Damascus strike. If Netanyahu had known, he probably wouldn’t have given his approval” (interview, 16 April 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Alissa J. Rubin, Vivian Nereim, “With Iran’s Strikes, Arab Countries Fear an Expanding Conflict”, *The New York Times*, 15 April 2024.

harsher response<sup>9</sup>. This is a risky calculation: although there is no wish for military escalation on either side, the “deterrence race” is now underway and the possibilities of stopping it are limited.

Today, one key question remains: what will Israel’s response be? On the one hand, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that Israel had “*no other choice*” but to respond to the Iranian attack<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, the United States, who has always sought to contain the risk of a regional conflagration since the start of the Gaza war, and some European countries, such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom, are trying to dissuade Tel Aviv from retaliating<sup>11</sup>. The Biden administration is trying to convince Israel that the success of its air defense operations in the face of the Iranian attack *is* a strategic victory in itself and therefore does not require a riposte<sup>12</sup>. Yet, according to an adviser close to Israeli decision-making circles, a retaliation is absolutely inevitable, notwithstanding repeated warnings from the White House<sup>13</sup>. The challenge for Tel Aviv thus seems to rather be a question of calibrating a response “*which would not harm its allies*” and have a chance of obtaining tacit agreement from the United States. This is at least what the War Cabinet is inclined to understand from its exchanges with the Americans<sup>14</sup>. Minister of Defense Y. Gallant and former Chief of Staff B. Gantz, who also sits on the War Cabinet, have been tasked with developing plans accordingly. For the time being, strikes against military (but non-nuclear) installations and/or uninhabited areas appear to be the preferred option<sup>15</sup>.

However according to expert on Iran Ali Vaez from International Crisis Group, any strike on Iranian territory, even if it targeted an empty space, would inevitably lead Tehran to react<sup>16</sup>. To him, Tehran’s absorption threshold is lower than Israel’s, simply because its air defense capabilities are much less effective (S-300) and it cannot count on another state to help counter an attack. More alarmingly, such a precedent would probably change Iran’s nuclear doctrine. Iran’s nuclear capabilities have never been so close to the militarization phase, at a time when IAEA control measures have been considerably weakened since the United States withdrew from the Vienna agreement in 2018<sup>17</sup>. Ali Vaez points out: “*If Israel strikes Iranian territory, Tehran will consider that its conventional deterrent capabilities are not working. The people now in power have a much lower degree of tolerance than their predecessors. They know that the prospect of reaching an agreement with the United States on the nuclear issue in the near future is unrealistic. Some will say: we have paid a very high price to be where we are. Our defense is at*

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<sup>9</sup> See the tweet from the Iranian Representation to the UN, 14 April 2024: “*Conducted on the strength of Article 51 of the UN Charter pertaining to legitimate defense, Iran’s military action was in response to the Zionist regime’s aggression against our diplomatic premises in Damascus. The matter can be deemed concluded. However, should the Israeli regime make another mistake, Iran’s response will be considerably more severe. It is a conflict between Iran and the rogue Israeli regime, from which the U.S. MUST STAY AWAY!*”.

<sup>10</sup> “Gallant told Austin Israel has no choice but to respond to Iranian attack – report”, *The Times of Israel*, 15 April 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Le Monde with AFP, “Attaque de l’Iran contre Israël : Ebrahim Raïssi célèbre son armée et menace l’Etat hébreu en cas de riposte ; les Etats-Unis et l’UE veulent élargir les sanctions contre Téhéran”, *Le Monde*, 17 April 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Sam Levine, “White House reaffirms Israel backing but says ‘we don’t seek war with Iran’”, *The Guardian*, 14 April 2024.

<sup>13</sup> An Israeli official explains: “*Israel’s general objective is to say: you can’t launch more than 300 drones and missiles and expect us not to react*” (interview, 16 April 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with an adviser close to Israeli decision-making circles, 16 April 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with an adviser close to Israeli decision-making circles, 16 April 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Interview, 17 April 2024

<sup>17</sup> See “Verification and Monitoring in Iran” on the IAEA website.

*risk. Why not go now?*<sup>18</sup>. In other words, the current escalation could tip the whole of the Middle East into a completely different equation.

## Conclusion

In such a context, the tools for ending the escalation are more than limited. Each side believes that it cannot break out of the “deterrence race” without jeopardizing its national security. Besides, the plans for new sanctions linked to Iran’s ballistic arsenal that were put forward by the United States and the Europeans are unlikely to dissuade Tel Aviv<sup>19</sup>. As for the calls for restraint from the Gulf States, it is difficult to see how they can be heeded by an Israeli government that has proved impervious to their warnings since the start of the war in Gaza. This is all the truer given that Israel remains convinced – wrongly – that the cooperation of certain Gulf States in air defense during the night of 13 April is explainable by the anti-Iranian sentiment of these States, which will sooner or later translate into a genuine military alliance with Israel<sup>20</sup>. While there does seem to have been some form of cooperation during the Iranian attack, the exact content of which has yet to be defined, Israel’s perception of the motives of the Gulf States is largely wishful thinking. For them, it was above all a question of avoiding a regional escalation that would have been inevitable if Israel had been hit hard. In their eyes, Israel’s ambitions for regional cooperation in the form of an anti-Iranian front carry too many risks and offer too little.

Both Tel Aviv and Tehran are under the illusion that an escalation can be controlled. In order to avoid a spiral from which none of the players in the region would benefit, it seems once again that only Washington has sufficient means of pressure to dissuade Tel Aviv from retaliating on Iranian territory. But if Israel is determined to retaliate, it will be difficult for the United States to stop it without using levers that it refuses to consider (slowing down military aid, reducing operational support). At this stage, it seems urgent that deconfliction mechanisms be activated, if only to minimize misreading of perceptions and of intentions on both sides. But above all, as the situation in Gaza becomes pushed into the background, getting out of the war by imposing a ceasefire on the parties appears all the more urgent. At the moment, it may be one of the only ways of genuinely easing tensions in the region. Western diplomats must realize that with the current shift in how Israel and Iran engage with one another, the risks of a regional war are real this time – if it is not already too late. In any case, it is worth asking whether it is possible to halt the escalation between Israel and Iran without resolving the Gaza equation.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview, 17 April 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Sam Levine, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Interview with an adviser close to Israeli decision-making circles, 16 April 2024.

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