

Iran's attack on Israel: waiting for the response

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During the night of 13 to 14 April, Iran launched an assault on Israeli territory using over 330 air attack weapons of different types, including drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles. It did so in retaliation for the attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on 1 April, in which several high-ranking commanders were killed, as well as a series of attacks on Iranian targets in Syria in recent months. The air raid was anticipated and announced (Tehran had warned the governments of Turkey and some Gulf states among other countries, and by extension the United States). Following the strike, Iranian officials announced that the operation had been successful and declared it closed, but warned that much more serious attacks would follow in the event of an Israeli response and any potential involvement by the US. Iranian airspace was reopened to civilian aircraft on 15 April.

Commentary

- Against the background of the decades-long strategic conflict between Iran and Israel, the latest attack by the former should be considered unprecedented. This marked the first time that Iran struck the territory of Israel openly, not through its regional proxies, and used so many various types of weaponry. However, the fact that the preparations for the attack were publicised by Tehran, and the authorities there demonstratively announced the end of the operation after it was carried out, indicates the political, symbolic and one-off nature of this action. It seems that it was primarily intended to calm the 'hawks' in Iran, rebuild Iran's authority both among its allies and around the Islamic world more broadly, and send a warning signal to Israel and the United States. Although weakening Israel remains Tehran's strategic goal, a direct confrontation with this country (with US supported) could have disastrous consequences for it. From its perspective, waiting for Israel to make mistakes and reach a point of exhaustion due to its involvement in the Gaza conflict and its growing domestic crises would seem to be a much safer bet.
- In the attack Tehran used some 185 drones, 36 cruise missiles and between 110 and 120 ballistic missiles. These were launched from bases in both Iran and Yemen. This means that the strike was almost twice as large as the one carried out by the Russian Federation against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. According to available information, all the drones and cruise missiles were intercepted in flight while still outside Israeli airspace by fighter jets from the US, UK, Jordan and Israel itself, as well as by French and US warships. However, it was not possible to neutralise all the ballistic missiles. Based on the available audiovisual material, it appears that between six and ten of these fell onto Israeli

territory. The taxiway at the Nevatim airbase was slightly damaged. The US Central Command announced that US Navy ships operating in the eastern Mediterranean had downed at least six ballistic missiles, with the rest being destroyed by Israeli Arrow-2, Arrow-3, David's Sling and Patriot systems. Falling debris from the downed missiles injured a Bedouin child, who is the only known victim of the attacks.

- The spectacular effectiveness of Israel's air defence, along with the support it received from allied states, came at the cost of the significant depletion of its surface-to-air missile arsenal, and would not be sustainable under prolonged attacks on a similar scale (which Iran has sufficient resources to launch). Moreover, the attacks were not concentrated on a single point; dispersing the strikes from the northern Golan Heights to the Negev Desert not only made the defence easier, but also demonstrated that Tehran was not focused on achieving military effects. Any further escalation of the conflict would pose a problem in this regard for Ukraine as well, due to potential competition for the already limited resources of air defence missiles which the US and Western states have at their disposal.
- Paradoxically, the Iranian attack is advantageous for the government in Jerusalem, as – aside from demonstrating the effectiveness of its air defence – it has placed Israel at the centre of the international coalition assembled by the United States, and has garnered unequivocal support from Western countries. It has also granted Israel – as the party attacked – the right to determine how it responds. Furthermore, it has diverted the world's attention away from the increasingly problematic (both politically and in reputational terms) Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip and the situation on the West Bank, where Jewish settlers, protected by Israeli troops, are terrorising the Palestinian population. Thus, the Iranian attack has contributed to halting Israel's increasing isolation in the international community, and has focused the debate on the region on the Iranian threat; and this debate better serves Israel's interests in this shape.
- However, in a scenario where the confrontation in its current phase ends with the mutual cessation of hostilities, that is, if Israel – following calls from the likes of the US, UK or France – refrains from a military response, the political benefits could prove short-lived. This increases the likelihood of an Israeli retaliatory strike. It is expected that Israel will attempt to reconcile several objectives in planning and executing such a strike. Firstly, it will wish to maintain and strengthen the coalition that repelled the Iranian strike. Secondly, Israel will want to avoid taking overly unilateral actions (to prevent isolation and condemnation for escalating tensions). Thirdly, it does not want to risk the topic of a direct Israeli-Iranian confrontation falling off the international agenda. To achieve the latter, it may have to present its allies with a *fait accompli*, including through escalations that are not coordinated with the United States, or which are reported to Washington at the last minute.