

Iran's Retaliatory Attack on Israel Puts the Middle East on the Brink

by Riccardo Alcaro

A few days after Iran's attack on Israel, it is too early for an overall assessment of the consequences. It is possible, though, to draw some preliminary reflections. Has Iran gained something, or has the attack rather been a strategic setback? And is there a way out?

The attack is the culmination of a months-long escalation

Iran has attacked Israel in retaliation against a series of military operations carried out by Israel since December 2023 against senior Iranian officials in Syria, culminating in the bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus, which killed seven people, among them the commander of operations in Syria of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the paramilitary organisation in charge of Iran's regional security policy. These attacks, and especially the one in Damascus, have confronted the Iranian regime, now controlled by a clique of ultraconservative clerics and hard-line security officials (mostly from the IRGC), with two mutually exclusive, risky and costly options.

Iran could have just taken the blow in order to continue benefitting indirectly from the growing isolation in which Israel finds itself because of the devastation it has inflicted on Gaza's 2.3 million population. The price tag was high, however. Iran's deterrence capacity would have diminished, resulting in an invitation to Israel to keep upping the ante. For a regime that prides itself of its unwavering "resistance" against Israel (and the United States), absorbing the enemy's punches without reacting was hardly a long-term option.

The alternative was a robust military response in the attempt to recover part of its lost deterrence. The risks were high also in this case, as Israel's counter-retaliation could have dragged Iran into a war it does not want, not least because Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu would have gone the extra mile to get the United States involved too.

In the end, Iran chose a kind of middle ground, a massive direct attack from its

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territory with drones (up to 170) as well as ballistic and cruise missiles (about 150 in total) designed to convey a powerful political message but seemingly not to inflict real harm: neither victims nor serious material damage has been recorded. Iran communicated that it would retaliate with so much publicity that Israel had sufficient time to coordinate a defence operation with the United States and its European allies (France and the United Kingdom) and Arab partners, notably Jordan.

Even if Iran's gamble succeeds and the escalatory spiral is reversed, the question remains about what the consequences of its attack may be for Iran, Israel as well as the latter's Western allies.

A strategic win or setback for Iran?

Iran's calculated risk has allowed it to score some points. First, Iran has shown its military prowess. The display of capabilities was impressive enough to make entirely plausible the notion that a future surprise attack could be way more effective.

Second, Iran's audacity in attacking a nuclear-armed military powerhouse such as Israel, even risking a retaliation by the United States, may have augmented its reputation in the public opinion across the region. Considering that the only other actors that have targeted Israel during the latter's brutal operation in Gaza, namely Hezbollah from Lebanon and the Houthis from Yemen, are allies of Iran, the regional status of the "Axis of resistance" – the network of Iranian allies across the region – has been reinforced.

Third, Iran's attack has once again highlighted Western hypocrisy. The United States and Europe have promptly (and rightly) condemned Iran's attack, but prior to it had done little to nothing to dissuade Israel from triggering the escalatory spiral.

Finally, the Iranian attack has revealed quite a degree of Western opportunism, a painful lesson for Ukraine in particular. The United States, France and the United Kingdom have not hesitated to use their air power to defend Israel's airspace and territory from a retaliation that Israel itself has actually provoked. However, they have been staunchly opposing the option of closing the airspace of Ukraine, a country unjustifiably attacked by an imperialist power (which by the way also uses Iranian-made drones).

On the other hand, it is hard to escape the impression that Iran has also lost out. Israel's claim to have intercepted almost all of the drones and cruise and ballistic missiles lays bare the limits of Iranian military power. Furthermore, Iran's fear of a conflict it would have a hard time sustaining has shown through the limited character of its retaliation. The participation in the defence of the Israeli territory of Jordan has highlighted the limits of Iran's recently pursued rapprochement with its Arab rivals. But most important of all is that the attack has shifted the international focus away from Gaza, where Israel is on the defensive, to Iran, where Israel has easily regained US and European support.

Is there a way out?

Iran considers the “matter concluded”. The US Administration is also keen to put the incident behind us. President Joe Biden has told Netanyahu to “take the win” – namely, the almost total impermeability of Israel’s defences. But he has also told the Israeli prime minister that the United States will not join any offensive operation against Iran. And it would not be surprising if Biden’s alleged concern that Netanyahu might want to drag the United States into a war in the Middle East was deliberately leaked to the press.

The question now is what the Israeli government plans to do. So far, the Netanyahu government has consistently frustrated Biden’s plans to negotiate a ceasefire in Gaza in exchange for the freeing of the hostages still in Hamas’ hands. It has also flatly rejected to embrace the notion of re-engaging with a re-legitimised Palestinian Authority with the view to establishing a Palestinian state. And it has ignored Biden’s pleas to restrain from escalatory actions across the region, so much so that Netanyahu did not even feel compelled to inform the US Administration of the bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus. Netanyahu has powerful domestic incentives to continue acting along these lines. His position as prime minister relies on the goodwill of his extremist ruling coalition partners, who are already advocating a strong military response against Iran. A robust counter-retaliation would also be in line with a cornerstone of Israel’s doctrine of deterrence: that is, that it has always to throw the last – and hardest – punch.

The record of the Netanyahu government as well as Israel’s established deterrence policy thus point to an Israel inclined to double down. Only strong, determined and public pressure from the United States and Europe can make Netanyahu think again and opt for restraint. The Western powers could do so by reiterating that their commitment to Israel does not extend beyond defensive measures. They could also make clear to the Israeli government that a regional escalation would make Israel even more isolated, as they would not just not support it, but would keep insisting that the focus remain on a ceasefire with Hamas, the liberation of hostages and the imperative to get much larger humanitarian aid into Gaza.

The Iranian attack on Israel confronts the Western powers with the cost of their reluctance to weigh in more heavily on the Netanyahu government to prevent highly escalatory actions such as the bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus. It is a tragic irony that it has taken an Iranian attack on Israel to pinpoint the West’s need for more autonomy from the Israeli government if they want to achieve de-escalation in the region.

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