

Israel-Iran: Hell on earth



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Iran's attacks on Israeli soil during the past weekend brought the world to a standstill as Israel's allies rushed to take down hundreds of Iranian drones and missiles. Had just one missile gotten through to kill Israelis, the war clouds darkening the skies over the Middle East would have caused a blackout in the region. While parallels with World War I may seem contrived, Iran's attacks on Israel have shifted the strategic reality in the region.

Iran's domestic political elements must also be factored into the geopolitical equation. Recently, there has been a resurgence of Shia supremacists in Iran, such as the Paydari Front, similar to the Zionists sitting in the Israeli cabinet. The head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Maj Gen Hossein Salami, has also said the regime is now moving away from "strategic patience," and working with "a new equation." It is unclear whether Iran would risk a full-blown costly war, and whether its bellicose rhetoric will be just for show—like its salvo of hundreds of drones was. But an emotional Israel that crosses the line has the potential to unleash catastrophe.

Israel's allies are now scrambling, working round the clock, to convince Israel to restrain after cleaning up its mess to take down Iranian drones during the weekend. The road ahead, that we are looking at could

The proposed \$14 billion US military aid to Israel now, will undoubtedly aggravate the genocide in Gaza and even give ammunition to play fire with Iran and its proxies, particularly the strongly armed Hezbollah. It will be yet another mistake by Biden. How will that restrain Israel against Iran? Does one give weapons to a serial killer and expect them to be 'peaceful' with it?

potentially lead to a war that every world power is looking to avoid, but one that could be inevitable if there is any miscalculation on either side testing the tolerance of the other. When we speak about Israel's response, we are also talking about the US and the West. And when we speak about Iran, we are also talking about Russia—which exports Iran's Shahed drones and has used it to great effect in Ukraine—and China, as demonstrated by the BRICS membership.

Iran's retaliation to Israel's deadly attack on its consulate in Damascus shares an eerie similarity with its response to the assassination of its top general, Qassem



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Soleimani, in 2020 by the US. Iran attacked two US air bases in Iraq, avoiding casualties, and received no further retaliation from the US. While the provocation and optics of Iran's attacks on Israel seem disproportionate, its actual toll with one serious injury, compared to 110 injured troops in 2020, is far less. The Western media at the time took to rebuking then President Donald Trump for escalating tensions with Iran; *The New York Times* published a report that loudly declared, "Seven Days in January: How Trump Pushed U.S. and Iran to the Brink of War." Other liberal outlets—or perhaps it's more accurate to describe them now as pro-Dems—such as Vox ran analyses and interviewed defence experts to show that a war between the US and Iran would look like "hell on earth." But where are those punchy articles now? Where's the rebuke for Netanyahu? The same Vox, in the aftermath of an edge-of-the-cliff situation provoked by Netanyahu's government, has concluded, "Israel won—for now."

As Western media outlets note, Donald Trump is definitely a threat to US national security; he may be saying this Iran attack would not have happened under his leadership, but his track record does not back the claims. But it's also important to note, from the history of the Trump-Iran face-off in January 2020, that the restraint from

the US to not further retaliate avoided what could have been "hell on earth." Netanyahu and the Israeli government that provoked this paradigm shift from a shadow war to a direct conflict, for the worse, is a threat to US national security. Iran sent a message through their attacks on Israel: "Control." The message was clearly intended for the US, too, because Tehran's long-held strategic aim has been to end the US presence in a

act to tame its division with Iran while appeasing its war-mongering, destructive friend, Israel.

There are many dilemmas hovering over Washington, and an intact foreign policy strategy that benefits their national interests hangs by a thin thread. On the one hand, Biden has an election to win soon, and further backing Israel's genocide in Gaza would increase the chances of his

proposed military aid to Israel now, which would undoubtedly further aggravate the situation in Gaza and even give ammunition to engage in more conflict with Iran, will be another mistake too. It's giving weapons to a serial killer and expecting them to be "peaceful" with it.

Aside from Israel's response to Iran, the tensions brewing between Israel and Hezbollah, Iran's proxy in Lebanon, the most strongly armed non-state actor with 150,000 missiles and rockets, is another front that has the potential to erupt into a wider war between Iran and Israel. After more than six months of near-daily attacks between the armed group and Israel, on Monday, April 15, days after the Iran attack, Hezbollah for the first time claimed responsibility for detonating planted explosives when a group of Israeli soldiers crossed into Lebanon. Four Israeli soldiers have reportedly been injured.

Militarily, Israel can severely injure Iran, particularly with its most potent air force, but it cannot necessarily "beat" Iran in a war. Many underestimate Iranian military prowess. Iran possesses the "largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East," according to the CSIS Missile Defense Project. The nation's longest-range platforms are ballistic missiles that can reach targets to around 1,240 miles, including all of Israel. Russia, which possessed few drones at the start of its invasion of Ukraine, began using two types of Iran-made Shahed drones to great effect. Furthermore, Iran's strengthening ties with Russia can render it a more formidable enemy to defeat as Israeli leaders debate military retaliation, experts say.

And then there's the question of Iran's nuclear programme, which it denies while also arguing that it has the right to access "civil" nuclear energy. According to a report on US foreign policy on Iran, published this January by Congressional Report Service, Iran "reportedly increased its nuclear activities in the context of heightened regional tensions in late 2023." Regardless of whether Iran has a covert fortress of a nuclear programme, its ties with Russia and China, with whom the US is in a Cold War, provide the nation with heavyweight backers. An eruption of the conflict has the possibility to unite Russia and China on the Iran axis with their common interest to destroy US hegemony. The US' need for a highly measured or even a lack of response from Israel to Iran cannot be overstated.

The US has clearly expressed it does not want war with Iran, which seemingly also does not want one, because if it did, it would have targeted to cause casualties in the weekend attacks. Israeli President Isaac Herzog has also said the same, but there's no predicting Israel. The truth is, no one truly knows what lies ahead. Geopolitics is playing like a game of chess, and if the action and reaction cycle continues, a slightly wrong move from any key player could tip the world over the edge.

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region it seeks to dominate. The US' backing of Israel in its genocide in Gaza has created the perfect excuse for Iran to advance that strategy, and it shows.

According to analysts, Netanyahu has two options that serve his political interest. One is a perpetual war, as the minute the war ends in Gaza, so does his political career. He may be tempted to bargain with Biden and hold off on Iran, provided that Washington supports its planned offensive in Rafah. The other option is pretty straightforward: a direct attack on Iran, which would inevitably drag the US into it. The Israeli government, in its own words, has claimed that Israel is a "nation of lions," and vowed to "exact a price." That price comes either at the cost of the Biden administration or the US security itself.

Biden's confusing actions in the aftermath of the Iran attacks reflect the tremendous pressure he is under. After announcing that the US would not participate in any counteroffensive against Iran, Biden pushed the House of Representatives to pass military aid worth \$14 billion to Israel. To say the least, the Biden administration is in a geopolitical mess created by Israel, as well as because of its unstrategic sponsorship of Israel's war in Gaza, which is at the root of this mess. The US is supposedly trying to create a balancing

lengthy political career ending with the label "Genocide Joe." On the other hand, the US directly engaging in Israel's war with Iran would be disastrous, both strategically and geopolitically. Economically, it would cause a hike in oil prices and lead to a further global economic downturn. However, if the US chooses to isolate Israel, it would risk a permanent divorce with its biggest ally in a region it's struggling to control. And if the US chooses to back Israel's conflagration with Iran, it runs the risk of isolating itself with Western democracies who would pursue sensible diplomatic outreach to Iran for their own gains.

Biden's best option is to engage in dialogue with Tehran. And that includes a compromise with Israel. Either way, Biden loses. Iran will not capitulate from retaliation; it will only accelerate the spiral. This is all leaving morality aside. The best course of action is what Biden should have done a long time ago: demanding a halt in Israel's bombardment in Gaza, and forcing Israel to normalise its relationship with Arab nations who share the animosity against Iran. But that ship sailed far out of reach. In a way, Netanyahu has been a gift for Iran, and the Biden administration's biggest mistake was handing out a carte blanche to Israel, which does not care about the US. The

How a war in the Middle East could impact South Asia



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Iran's retaliation to Israel's attack on its embassy in Syria in the form of a barrage of missile attacks threatens a negative impact beyond the region, especially in nearby South Asia, which has historical, cultural, religious, and economic ties with the Middle East. Israel's attack on the Iranian embassy was a clear violation of diplomatic norms. Yet, the attack elicited no condemnation from Israel's Western allies, in line with similar silence on Israel's ongoing genocidal war in Gaza. Similarly, in the United Nations, they condemned Iran's attacks, on the premise of self-defence, as being disproportionate.

Iran has been providing low levels of support to its allies in the region to fight Israel, including Hamas (Gaza), Hezbollah (Lebanon), the Houthis (Yemen), and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. However, none of these proxies launched any major attacks on Israel after October 7. Thus, Israel's attack on the Iranian embassy was not in response to any past or imminent attacks by Iran or its allies on Israel. Many analysts think that it was a tactic by Netanyahu to draw Iran into the war, and to provide a justification for Israel to goad the US into attacking Iran, which has been a long-held dream of the Israeli prime minister.

The Iranian attacks did not cause much damage in Israel, and Iran has also signalled that it does not intend to carry out further retaliatory attacks. The ball is now in Israel's court. There is pressure from the US to avoid a strong counteroffensive, as it would harm US aims to de-escalate the Gaza war and cause incalculable damage to the global economy (which is already suffering from the effects of the Ukraine war) in a US election year.

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Members of Muslim Talba Mahaz Pakistan chant slogans at a demonstration to condemn Iran's strikes in the Pakistani border area, in Islamabad, Pakistan, on January 18, 2024.

PHOTO: AFP

producing region, if a full-scale war breaks out, where the animosity between Saudi Arabia and Iran also aggravates, it would jack up oil prices to unimaginable levels and may also affect the flow of goods through the Suez Canal. Millions of South Asian migrants work in the Middle East, and a war could impact their security and income, with huge ripple effects back to the economy of almost every South Asian state as remittances slow down. The Middle East is also the destination for a large chunk of exports from South Asian countries, and that would also suffer. This combination of higher oil prices and lower remittances and export revenues would affect

the balances of payment in all Saarc countries.

India, which was sending workers to Israel, already issued a travel advisory to its citizens over escalating tensions on April 12 stating, "All Indian citizens are advised to not travel to Israel or Iran till further notice." India, which maintains close ties with both Iran and Israel, would be caught in a bind if tensions escalate further.

The impact will be particularly severe for Pakistan, which shares a border with Iran, as it shares very close ties with Saudi Arabia. The nation has a much more precarious balance-of-payment situation and a weaker economy than India and Bangladesh. Pakistan has

been undertaking a delicate balancing act in terms of its critical ties with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. The ties with Saudi Arabia are important as it is the biggest source of much-needed foreign remittances as well as a major export destination. In addition, Saudi Arabia generously supports Pakistan with multibillion dollar loans whenever the latter faces dollar shortages.

With Iran, Pakistan faces a porous and long border, which leads to instances of smuggling of Iranian oil and other goods, leading to a loss of import taxes. There are also militant groups based across the borders in both countries (which carry out terrorist attacks in both countries) who accuse each other of either supporting the groups or not doing enough to eradicate them. These neighbours nearly went to war recently, after Iran carried out air attacks in Pakistan following cross-border attacks on its security forces by Pakistan-based militants. Pakistan swiftly retaliated with its own air attacks. However, mediation by China and Türkiye quickly ended the excursions and both countries showed great maturity in de-escalating tensions and resuming diplomatic ties. The Iranian president is set to visit Pakistan next week to strengthen ties. An all-out war between Israel and Iran would be especially crippling for Pakistan.

Bangladesh, too, has close ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia, the latter of which is the second-largest source of remittance for the nation. As remittances have fallen sharply, war erupting in the region would further impact Bangladesh's economy. It is crucial for the well-being of people in both the Middle East and South Asia that the situation in the Gulf de-escalates quickly.