

As Iran and Israel collide, will Palestinians pay the price?

Wednesday 17 April 2024, by [BISHARAT Ghousoon](#), [ELGINDY Khaled](#) (Date first published: 15 April 2024).

The risk of all-out regional war grows more likely with every day that passes without a ceasefire in Gaza, warns expert Khaled Elgindy.

Anti-missile system fires interception missiles as drones and missiles are fired from Iran, as seen over Tel Aviv, April 14, 2024. (Tomer Neuberg/Flash90)

Two days on, the world is still trying to make sense of Iran's dramatic attack on Israel. In concert with its regional partners, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) unleashed more than 300 drones and missiles on the night of April 13, marking the first time Israel or Iran had targeted the other state on its own soil.

While unprecedented in character, Iran's attack was by no means unexpected, coming in the wake of Israel's airstrike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus two weeks earlier, which had killed seven IRGC officers and two civilians. The vast majority of the projectiles, some of which took several hours to arrive, were intercepted by Israel, aided by the armies of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Jordan, and intelligence provided by several Gulf states. Only a handful of the missiles managed to evade Israel's defenses, including one that [seriously wounded](#) a 7-year-old Bedouin girl in an unrecognized village in the Naqab/Negev, and another that caused [minor damage](#) to the Nevatim air base.

To grasp the bigger picture around these events, +972 spoke with [Khaled Elgindy](#), the director of the Israel-Palestine program at the Washington-based Middle East Institute, and author of "[Blind Spot](#): American and the Palestinians, from Balfour to Trump."

While explaining the "message" Iran sought to send with its anticipated attack, Elgindy also shared his doubts on whether Israel would heed U.S. pressures to avoid a severe retaliation, and further noted how Arab regimes might try to "spin" their own involvement to try and save face with their angered publics. But he also emphasized that the Palestinians remain at the heart of this conflagration — and are still paying the heaviest price for it.

"There is a real possibility that in return for Israel de-escalating with Iran, the United States may give Israel a freer hand in Gaza, specifically with regard to Rafah," Elgindy warned, referring to a planned ground invasion of the Strip's southernmost city.

In the eyes of the Biden administration, Elgindy continued, "so long as the costs are borne primarily by Palestinians, then it's acceptable. The moment that the costs escalate beyond Gaza and the Palestinians ... then it becomes more dangerous." But this line of thinking, he added, cannot evade the fact that the prospect of an all-out regional war "grows more likely with every day that passes without a ceasefire [in Gaza]."

The interview has been edited for clarity.

An Israeli military aircraft flying above a military base in central Israel, April 14, 2024. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

Ghousoon Bisharat - We've just seen a dramatic escalation in what has essentially been a decades-long Cold War between Israel and Iran. Why did Iran decide to strike Israel directly?

Khaled Elgindy -That's the question everyone is asking. The immediate trigger, of course, was the Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, which killed two Iranian generals. Everyone understood that there would be an Iranian response — Tehran was quite clear about that. The question was when and how.

People were surprised that this was a direct attack on Israeli territory; that part is unprecedented. The scale was surprising as well: initially, we saw just a few dozen drones, but then we saw cruise missiles and other ballistic missiles, which far exceeded what many people were expecting.

Why did Iran choose a direct attack, and one on this scale, despite knowing that most of their rockets would be intercepted? My sense is that it's trying to instill a deterrent — to send a message that an attack like the one on the consulate in Damascus, or any future escalation on Israel's part, would elicit a major response. The Iranians were quite clear in [saying](#): that's it, after this we're finished.

The problem with escalations that are designed to deter is that they often have the opposite effect: the other side feels compelled to escalate as well, and then you have a full-blown war. I do think the United States is trying to prevent that scenario and at least convince the Israelis not to respond directly on Iranian territory, because that would trigger an even bigger response from Iran. It's up to Israel now to decide if it wants to escalate, knowing it will provoke this.

What does Iran's choice of weapons and targets tell us about the goals of its attack?

Iran wanted to demonstrate its capability and willingness to use ballistic and cruise missiles. It targeted lots of different areas in Israel in order to show what it can do, but I think it was designed to not have many casualties on the Israeli side. But that may not be the case the next time around.

Anti-missile system fires interception missiles as drones and missiles fired from Iran, as seen over the West Bank city of Hebron, April 14, 2024. (Wisam Hashlamoun/Flash90)

How do you read the fact that both sides are claiming victory?

The most obvious interpretation is that it suggests neither side wants to escalate further, that they are satisfied with the outcome. They're trying to signal to their respective domestic publics that they got what they wanted. But the situation is so unpredictable, and you have extremists on both sides.

The Iranian regime, and especially the IRGC, are quite militant. On the Israeli side, you have an extremist government coalition and a desperate prime minister who for a long time has been eager to expand the war, and eager to draw the U.S. into its conflict with Iran. And now it sort of has: the U.S. has its foot in the door. So I wouldn't discount the possibility, regardless of what the two sides are claiming, that this might escalate further — especially given that the Gaza war is not going the way the Israeli government wants.

Some analysts are saying Israel learned it cannot handle such a threat on its own. Do you agree?

We already knew after October 7 that the idea that Israel can defend itself by itself was a myth. Even with all the most sophisticated weapons, intelligence, and missile defense systems, as well as all the billions of dollars that the U.S. poured into Israel, it couldn't prevent or even detect that attack. Right after the October 7 attack, the U.S. immediately sent battleships into the Eastern Mediterranean, underscoring the extent to which Israel needed support. And that continues to be true.

So it's not just about having the most sophisticated weapons. What you actually need is friends and allies who are willing to step up and help out in your time of need. And that will only come through a broader political and diplomatic process.

View of an Iron dome anti-missile system, April 14, 2024. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

How will the Iranian attack, and the involvement of Jordan and other Arab states in Israel's defense, be perceived across the Arab world – especially in light of the passivity and inaction of Arab governments in the face of Israel's onslaught in Gaza?

Across the Arab world, we know that people are angry at Israel, the United States, and the West over their flagrant hypocrisy with regard to how international law and human rights have gone completely out the window over the last six months. Depending on the country, however, there are limits to what the public can express. In Jordan, there are regular protests against what's happening in Gaza; in Egypt, they're not able to protest because they'll be jailed.

At the end of the day, repression is a very effective method to keep things calm domestically. For how long? I don't know. But I don't think that this attack, or the role that the Jordanians and others like the Saudis played to thwart it, is going to tip the balance after six months of devastation and plausible genocide, and suddenly cause the public to explode. They've already absorbed the shock and trauma of Gaza, and absorbed the fact that their regimes are complicit in maintaining this horrific status quo. This isn't going to be any different.

I think in the case of Jordan, the authorities will be able to say that the attack violated Jordanian airspace and they needed to respond, regardless of who was involved. That might be one way for them to make it more digestible domestically. As for the Saudis, there's obviously no love lost between them and the Iranian regime. People in Saudi Arabia understand the threat that Iran poses, so I think the government could make a similar case there.

In both cases, the narrative will be different from what the commentary is here in Washington and maybe in Israel, which is that "Israel's Arab friends" stepped up and had Israel's back. That's not the spin that the Jordanians and the Saudis are going to put on it, but they can put a different spin, which is that there is an Iranian threat to the region.

What are the factors that will shape Israel's response?

There are competing factions within Israel. There's the extremist Kahanist wing of the coalition; there's Netanyahu himself, with [his own personal need](#) to remain in power, and a wider regional war [might serve that purpose](#) if it can be controlled; there's the military establishment, which might push back on how far Israel should go in its response; and there's public opinion, and the question of the extent to which the Israeli public is demanding a bigger retaliatory response. Another factor will be the United States, which will have enormous influence on Israel's course of action over the next few days and weeks. Israel may choose not to respond immediately, but rather at a later date.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu giving a presentation about Iran's nuclear program in a press

conference at the Kirya government headquarters in Tel Aviv, April 30, 2018. (Miriam Alster/Flash90)

What will the Biden administration be thinking now that it has become a more active participant in the war, despite Biden's well-documented frustration with how Israel is fighting in Gaza?

I imagine the thinking is mainly to prevent this from escalating further into direct open warfare between Israel and Iran. That is the nightmare scenario that the U.S. has been trying to avoid for the last six months, as well as the scenario of a much bigger front opening up in the north with Hezbollah.

Both of those are now a much greater possibility than they were 48 hours ago. That will create more urgency for the Biden administration to try and wrap up a ceasefire deal as soon as possible. In the meantime, Biden is trying to convince Israel not to respond directly, at least on Iranian territory.

A large wall mural near Kibbutz Galuyot in Tel Aviv, depicting U.S. president Joe Biden as a superhero defending Israel from Iran, April 15, 2024. (Miriam Alster/Flash90)

Might Biden impose greater pressure in order to prevent an aggressive Israeli response, for example by leveraging military aid?

There had been a growing argument in Washington, especially on the left among Democrats, that U.S. military support for Israel needs to be conditioned or leveraged. That argument has taken a hit following Iran's attack. People are now saying, "It's not the time, Israel needs all the help it can get," so I think that's even less probable now than it was before. But for the Biden administration, and for President Biden personally, withholding weapons was never on the table. They see weapons for Israel as sacrosanct and untouchable, and all the more so following Iran's attack.

Instead, it will be like everything else that the U.S. has tried to convey to Israel: the Israelis will see it as a recommendation, but at the end of the day, they will do what they're going to do, and the Americans will adapt accordingly.

We've seen this from the beginning. The Americans tried to dissuade Israel from undertaking a ground invasion. They've tried to convince them to allow in more humanitarian assistance. They've tried to get them to be more targeted in their attacks on Hamas as opposed to civilians and civilian infrastructure. And the Americans have been ignored at every stage.

There's no reason to assume that the U.S. will be more forceful this time. The way the U.S. has approached this has been to say, "We'd prefer that you didn't, but it's fine if you do." I think this time will be no different.

Missiles were fired from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. On the other side, Jordan helped shoot them down, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE [reportedly shared intelligence](#) about the attack with Israel. What does all this mean for the stability of the region as a whole?

There is a real risk of a major, all-out regional war, and that possibility grows more likely with every day that passes without a ceasefire. All of this was predictable. Everybody understood that the longer [Israel's operation in Gaza] went on, the more actors in the region would become involved. And right now we're on the doorstep of a major regional explosion.

Smoke rises after an Israeli airstrike in southern Lebanon, as seen from the Israeli side of the border, April 10, 2024. (Ayal Margolin/Flash90)

Will cooler heads prevail and allow things to calm down and move toward a ceasefire? Or will people miscalculate and decide that a further escalation is warranted, triggering some kind of chain reaction? All we know is that the region becomes more unstable every day that there is not a ceasefire.

How will this escalation impact the war in Gaza and the northern front with Hezbollah in Lebanon?

This is the big fear. I think there is a real possibility that in return for Israel de-escalating with Iran, the United States may give Israel a freer hand in Gaza, specifically with regard to Rafah. We know that Netanyahu and his war cabinet have been eagerly demanding that they be allowed to go into Rafah and do what they've done in [Gaza City](#) and [Khan Younis](#). They want to replicate that kind of destruction, and the U.S. and the international community have told them that's a red line. That red line could now be erased if it's the only way for the U.S. to convince Israel to de-escalate with Iran.

This is a conceivable possibility because the calculation that the Biden administration made was basically that, so long as the costs [of the war] are borne primarily by Palestinians, then it's acceptable. The moment that the costs escalate beyond Gaza and the Palestinians — a front with Hezbollah, or with Iran or Syria or other actors — then it becomes more dangerous. But they don't really have an issue with the costs being borne by Palestinians.

As for the northern front, it depends on how Israel responds. I think at the moment, because the Iranians have indicated that they're finished with this attack and they're not looking for more escalation, Hezbollah will of course abide by that — they're not going to act against Iranian interests. If Israel escalates, then yes, it's possible that Hezbollah will be drawn into a broader war and into expanding that front.

How will Egypt and Qatar, the two main Arab brokers attempting to mediate a ceasefire in Gaza, be viewing this escalation?

I think it creates much greater urgency on the part of all parties involved in the negotiations — including the United States, but especially the Qataris and Egyptians who are involved more directly — to reach a ceasefire deal as soon as possible, and to intensify their efforts. I hope this is the message that is being received: that this could escalate further at any moment, so we desperately need to end it.

Ghousoon Bisharat

P.S.

- +972 Magazine. April 15, 2024:
<https://www.972mag.com/elgindy-iran-israel-gaza/>
- Ghousoon Bisharat is the editor-in-chief of +972 Magazine.
- *Ghousoon Bisharat's articles on *972:*
<https://www.972mag.com/writer/ghousoon-bisharat/>
- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed

by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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