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After Iran's missile salvo, will Israel bite or fold?

Iran's massive ballistic missile strikes in retaliation for Tel Aviv's rampage of Axis assassinations raise the temperature on regional war – how and if Tel Aviv responds will be pivotal.

Iran's unleashing of a heavy barrage of missiles on Israel is a potential game-changer that comes as a stark warning that West Asia's Axis of Resistance is ready for escalation.

Iranian media outlets stated that over 400 missiles were launched on the night of 1 October, while other estimates put the number at just below 200. According to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), 90 percent of the projectiles successfully hit their targets in the offensive dubbed "Operation True Promise 2," a follow-up to April's retaliatory strikes against Israel.

Avenging assassinations

The IRGC released a statement saying the operation was in retaliation for Israel's assassinations of senior leaders in the Resistance Axis, including Hamas Politburo Chief Ismail Haniyeh on 31 July in Tehran, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and IRGC commander Abbas Nilforushan, who were killed in the same bombing strike last Friday in a Beirut suburb.

"We have targeted the heart of the occupied territories in response to the assassination of martyrs Haniyeh, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, and Nilforushan," read the IRGC statement, which further revealed that the Israeli targets included three military bases: Nevatim, Netzarim, and Tel Nof. The first two house the F-35 and F-15 fighter jets – it was F-15s that were used to assassinate Nasrallah.

The offensive was much larger in scope compared to Operation True Promise 1 on 13–14 April, in which Iran retaliated to an Israeli attack on its consulate in Damascus, marking Tehran’s first direct military action against Israel.

US Pentagon Spokesman Pat Ryder acknowledged that last night’s Iranian military operation was much larger than the April one in terms of the amount of firepower involved, calling the attack “about twice as large in terms of the number of ballistic missiles that they launched.”

The IRGC also disclosed their use of more advanced weaponry this time – ‘Fattah’ hypersonic missiles capable of penetrating Israeli radars – in order to deny Tel Aviv sufficient advance notice of the incoming offensive.

Conflicting responses from Israel and the US

Statements made by various Tel Aviv and Washington officials regarding the attack appeared contradictory. While vowing to take action against Iran, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described the attack as a failure, claiming that most of the incoming projectiles had been intercepted. Israeli Military Spokesman Daniel Hagari struck a somewhat different tone, however, saying the offensive marked “a severe and dangerous escalation.”

Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden appeared to play down the operation, stating that it had been successfully thwarted:

Based on what we know now, the attack appears to have been defeated and ineffective, and this is testament to Israeli military capability and the US military.

On the other side of the analysis spectrum, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan characterized the attack as a “significant escalation and significant event.”

Washington’s warnings go unheeded

Importantly, Iran’s offensive marked a clear act of defiance against the US and its repeated demands that Iran and other members of its regional axis refrain from responding to Israeli aggressions. Only hours before the attack, a senior US official warned that Iran was planning an “imminent” offensive against Israel and threatened “severe consequences” should Tehran proceed with the operation.

Tehran’s defiance of Washington is all the more notable given the earlier US announcement of the deployment of thousands of additional troops to West Asia, in part, according to the Pentagon, to protect Israel.

That Iran chose to launch its most potent salvo of advanced missiles in its history – and defy US warnings – should, however, come as no surprise at this time. Israel has recently scored a string of major tactical successes against Hezbollah – Tehran’s closest ally in the Axis of

Resistance – despite the Axis’ 11-month efforts to contain the threat of a regional conflagration.

These successes culminated with the assassination of Nasrallah, under whose leadership Hezbollah was able to deal military defeats to Israel that many Arab states and conventional armies failed to achieve: end an Israeli occupation by force in 2000 and inflict a political defeat in 2006 after 33 days of war.

Iran’s missile offensive will have the impact of stemming the momentum Israel gained in the previous two weeks as it prepared for a ground incursion into Lebanon and will provide an important morale boost for Hezbollah fighters and Lebanese civilians alike.

True Promise 2 also follows a veiled threat by Netanyahu against Iran, posted in a video message on X and addressed to the Iranian people, in which the Israeli prime minister boasted that Israel was capable of reaching all corners of West Asia and hinted at potential regime-change plans for Iran:

When Iran is finally free, and that moment will come a lot sooner than people think, everything will be different.

Israel’s move... or not?

While the ball now is in Israel’s court, Tel Aviv may ultimately be forced to set aside plans for any real direct escalation against Iran – as in April, when the Israelis only managed to respond with three small drones over Isfahan, all promptly shot down by the Iranians.

While ostensibly Tel Aviv’s response to Iran’s first-ever strikes against Israel, the Isfahan incident fell far short of expectations, with senior Iranian officials denying that any damage was caused and Iranian media outlets claiming the attack was conducted from within Iran’s borders.

Israel’s reluctance to escalate against Iran at the time owed at least in part to the Biden administration’s reluctance to become embroiled in a wider war with Iran and its Axis allies. The White House reportedly conveyed a message to Israel saying it would have no part in any offensive military action against Iran, with Biden urging Netanyahu to “take the win.”

The US president’s reference to a “win” was in the context of Israel’s claims that most Iranian missiles and drones in the first True Promise had been intercepted, and the attack had hence failed.

Diplomatic restraint or military escalation?

Given that Biden has issued similar statements in reaction to Iran’s latest military operation, a repetition of this scenario cannot be ruled out. It is also the case, however, that senior White House officials have threatened to hold Iran to account in the aftermath of last night’s

retaliatory strikes on Israel – one that the US would coordinate with Israel, according to Jake Sullivan.

Whether or not this means the US is this time ready to join Israel in a broader war against Iran remains to be seen. The US presidential election is a month away, and Biden is the lame-duck president who has appeared increasingly weak and on the back foot in his dealings with Netanyahu. Should the US choose a confrontational path and proactively seek a military fight with the Iranians, however, the repercussions would be potentially catastrophic.

Speaking to *The Cradle*, University of Tehran Professor Mohammad Marandi warns:

If the Americans choose to get involved, then that would mean Iran would have to destroy all their bases in the Persian Gulf region. Those regimes in the Persian Gulf that host US troops or assets will not survive this.

Marandi adds that this “would mean a global economic meltdown like we’ve never seen.”

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