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Khalil Nasrallah

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Iran enters a new phase of conflict with Israel

Israel's strategically questionable strikes against Iran fully ended Tehran's long spell of 'strategic patience.' With no ceasefire in sight, Tel Aviv has recklessly paved a road of no return, leaving the field open for Iran and its regional allies to determine the next phase in the battle.

After weeks of saber-rattling, Israel followed through on its threats to attack Iran following Tehran's 1 October military response to the assassination of Resistance Axis martyrs Ismail Haniyeh and Hassan Nasrallah.

Tel Aviv's missile strikes targeted a variety of Iranian military bases and intelligence facilities, including air defense systems deep inside Iran, as per Israeli claims.

Both sides have provided conflicting accounts of what happened on the morning of 26 October. Israel, with its narrative echoed by western media, described the strike as precise and successful, while Iran claimed to have intercepted and thwarted most of the attacks.

Regardless, the gratuitous Israeli salvo introduced new dynamics into the West Asia battlefield. The attack early on Saturday morning revealed why Israel, backed by its western allies, deemed the strike necessary in the first place. And it has prompted new Iranian strategic calculations amid the widening regional war.

Upholding Iran's Promise

It must be remembered that when Tel Aviv carried out its highly provocative attack targeting the Iranian consulate in Damascus on 1 April, the Iranians responded with two key demands: end the war in Gaza and de-escalate the broader regional conflict – or face a direct military response.

Less than 10 days later, frustrated by Israeli belligerence and US complicity, Iran struck back. Operation True Promise, launched on 14 April, saw an unprecedented barrage of Iranian drones and both cruise and ballistic missiles directed at three Israeli military bases, including two in southern occupied Palestine and one in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights.

This marked a turning point for Iran – shifting from a phase of what it termed “strategic patience” – enduring provocations while building strength – to a stage of “empowered retaliation,” undermining the occupation state’s deterrence precepts.

True Promise signaled Tehran’s intent to directly confront Israel, similar to its retaliation against US-occupied bases on 8 January 2020, just days after Washington assassinated Quds Force commander General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad.

Iran’s readiness to use force dealt a strategic blow to Israeli and US ambitions, which aimed to weaken Iranian influence and curtail support for resistance forces in Palestine and Lebanon. Despite the exchange of blows, it became evident that a new balance of deterrence was emerging – one that neither Washington nor Tel Aviv could easily tip in their favor.

On 22–23 September, as Israel expanded the war into Lebanon, Tel Aviv conducted an assassination inside Iran, targeting the head of Hamas’ political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, who was visiting as a guest at the inauguration of the newly elected Iranian president Masoud Pezeshkian.

The assassination was seen as both a strategic and personal affront to Iran. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei vowed revenge, calling it Iran’s duty to avenge its fallen guest.

Escalation by assassination

This Iranian threat was taken seriously by western and Israeli decision-makers. It briefly even opened the door to potential de-escalation through a temporary 21-day ceasefire to resolve contentious issues.

However, the assassination of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah on 27 September disrupted those efforts, especially after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, speaking at the UN, upped the rhetoric against Iran, committing to continue the war until a power shift occurred in the region – aiming to neutralize resistance forces and alter the dynamics across West Asia.

After Iran’s response on 1 October, Israel, with US backing, carried out a limited strike to achieve several aims. Other than desiring a face-saving response to the massive Iranian strikes, the Israeli response sought to force Tehran to reconsider its regional strategies and alliances, including the prevention of further Iranian strikes inside Israel.

Moreover, by acting aggressively when matters could have ended at Iran's retaliation, Israel sought to stack any ceasefire agreement in favor of its own security interests, particularly with regard to Iranian interests in Lebanon and Palestine.

Reasserting Tel Aviv's deterrence capabilities was also a key objective, as was countering Iranian efforts to undermine Israeli normalization with Arab states, especially following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, which derailed rapprochement efforts with Arab leaders yet to formally establish ties with Tel Aviv, notably Saudi Arabia.

Tehran gets proactive

Iran has now acknowledged the Israeli strike and vowed to respond as circumstances dictate. Crucially, the Iranians successfully managed to shield their oil, nuclear, and economic assets from harm, by signaling readiness to retaliate harshly if provoked further.

Khamenei's response encapsulated Iran's stance: "The evil perpetrated by the Zionist regime (Israel) two nights ago must not be exaggerated or minimized," he said in a post on X.

Iran's supreme leader, the ultimate authority on Iranian national security affairs, stressed the need to counteract Israel's faulty calculations. This represents Iran's shift away from absorbing attacks to actively disrupting Israel's strategy. Tehran reaffirmed support for the region's Axis of Resistance, refusing to back down from its broader goals of liberating Palestine and supporting Lebanon's fight against aggression.

Iran's position also underscores its commitment to maintaining unity among its allies against Israeli and US designs to reshape the region – a "new Middle East" – in their favor. While the immediate threat of escalation lies largely in Israeli and US hands, the choices are stark – either adapt to the current balance of power and work towards de-escalation or risk a conflict that could spiral into an uncontrollable war.

Israeli officials' assurances that they do not wish to escalate are not sufficient – concrete steps toward ending hostilities are required, with little patience left for the diplomatic trickery played by Tel Aviv and Washington over the past year.

As Iran asserts its "right to respond," and with the world watching the upcoming US elections, the situation in West Asia remains highly unpredictable. Until then, and in the absence of a politically devastating ceasefire for the Netanyahu government, the battlefield will continue to dictate the terms, leaving the door open to further destabilize and erode the security of the occupation state.

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