

## The “New Equation” in the Middle East

*“We have decided to create a new equation ... From now on, if the Zionist regime attacks our interests, assets, figures and citizens anywhere, we will reciprocally attack it from the origin of Iran.”*

Major General Hossein Salami  
Head, Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps<sup>1</sup>

*“Israel will do whatever it needs to defend itself ... They [the Western allies] have all sorts of suggestions and advice. I appreciate that. But I want to be clear: Our decisions we will make ourselves.”*

Benjamin Netanyahu  
Israel’s Prime Minister<sup>2</sup>

*“The narrow Israeli attack [on Isfahan] and Iran’s rhetoric in response appeared to be an attempt by both sides to calm tensions after more than a week of concerns that Israel’s war with Hamas in Gaza would metastasize into a bigger regional conflict, though fears remain of a miscalculation. Israel was under pressure from the U.S. and Europe to moderate its response and faced the challenge of delivering a blow that would punish Iran for the attack without provoking a response.”*

The Wall Street Journal<sup>3</sup>

It is now going on a week since Iran’s massive attack on Israel. That left the situation in the Middle East more fluid and dangerous than ever. As I was putting the finishing touches on this piece, word came in that Israeli warplanes and drones had conducted a calibrated and limited attack on an airbase near an Iranian nuclear site at Isfahan in central Iran. Israel sent five important messages with its limited retaliatory strike: it retains autonomy of action, wants to limit an escalatory cycle of violence (if possible), can operate with relative impunity over the skies of Iran, has the ability to hit Iran’s most secretive nuclear facilities, and will not play by the rules of Iran’s “New Equation.”

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<sup>1</sup> Jared Malsin and Benoit Faucon, “Emboldened Iran Makes Dangerous Gamble on Open Confrontation,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 17, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Statement on Wednesday (Apr. 17, 2024), quoted by Lawrence Richard, “Netanyahu says 9 chilling words as Iran’s president vows to completely destroy Israel,” *Fox News*, Apr. 17, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Dov Lieber, et al, “Israel Strikes Iran in Narrow Attack Amid Escalation Fears,” *WSJ*, Apr. 19, 2024.

But make no mistake about it, “New Equation” or not, events over the last few days indicate a huge genie has escaped the Middle East bottle, and it will be difficult, if not impossible, to stuff it back in.

What does Tehran’s “New Equation” look like? Perhaps it slipped by you, like an elusive thief in the night, but Iran’s unprecedented aerial attack on Israel on the evening of April 13 and into the morning of April 14—employing some 170 kamakazi drones stuffed with explosives, 120 ballistic missiles, and at least 30 cruise missiles—has changed the face of war, and diplomacy, in the Middle East.

Perhaps forever.

Simply put: the old rules may no longer apply.

With the massive barrage, Tehran’s mullahs dramatically ended the 45-year-old “shadow war” in the Middle East that had been characterized by proxy attacks, covert missions, clandestine operations, assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists, disabling cyberattacks, and a tit-for-tat cycle of violence. The whole purpose of this war in the shadows—as I used to tell my students—was to allow a state actor to hide behind the veil of “plausible deniability.”<sup>4</sup>

Iran ripped off that veil last weekend.

So what?

The sole redeeming virtue of the four decade-old “shadow war” was that all major regional participants knew the rhythm and flow of the “dance.” All the dancers had an intuitive understanding of the rules of conduct, the music being played, and where the red lines within red lines existed. As a corollary observation, outside parties like the U.S., European countries, Russia, China and India, never quite understood the nature of the dance. They still don’t. The nuances of the depth and passion that divides Jew and Arab, and Sunni and Shi’ite, escape regional outsiders. Tehran’s declaration last weekend that there was now a “New Equation” in the Middle East—by which Iran intends to establish new dance rules and shape the regional expectations of the various dancing partners—was an effort to change everything.

There are some who will argue that, in truth, the rules of the “shadow war” dance began breaking down about six months ago when Hamas brutally attacked undefended villages in Israel, massacring over a thousand Israeli citizens and taking over 200 hostages. The act crossed a previously sacred red line established by the dance. Israel’s reaction was likewise an untypical dance response: they sought the total destruction of Gaza as a haven for Hamas militants. Today, only the Hamas bastion of Rafah remains in southern Gaza and one observer of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Yonah Jeremy Bob, “Iran’s Attack Ended the Shadow War,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 17, 2024. Bob is senior military analyst for the *Jerusalem Post* and co-author of the book “Target Tehran: How Israel is Using Sabotage, Cyberwarfare, Assassination—and Secret Diplomacy—to Stop a Nuclear Iran and Create a New Middle East.”

situation—Amir Tsarfati—told his listeners recently that the Israeli military is moving major armor units toward the city.<sup>5</sup>

Israeli pressure on Hamas in Gaza was followed, in turn, by Iranian-sponsored proxy militia activity throughout the Middle East: cross-border violence between Israel and Iran-supported Hezbollah, Houthi attacks on maritime shipping, unrest in the West Bank, and Shi'ite attacks on remaining American bases in Iraq and Syria.

Although the traditional “shadow war” dance was being stretched, the tit-for-tatt response pattern was still holding.

Meanwhile, Israeli intelligence and airborne assets began targeting the planners and enablers of the Hamas operation. In that vein, in December Israeli aircraft took out a senior Iranian commander in an airstrike near Damascus and on April 1, 2024, a precision strike on an annex building on Iran’s embassy compound in Damascus, killed a senior IRGC Quds force commander along with several other high-ranking officers. Facing this steady attrition of senior military officials, Iran decided to try to change the rules of the game. No longer content with losing the “shadow war” dance, Iran decided to unilaterally change the rules and ordered an unprecedented large-scale assault on Israel.

Like most game-changing world events, Iran’s massive attack on Israel last weekend came with its share of head-scratchers. Two of these, in my mind, stand out. First, why did Iran signal its planned strike, code-named *True Promise*, in advance? Two days prior to the strike, Iran forewarned diplomats of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) of an imminent attack that would cross their airspace. This intelligence—confirmed by regional Sunni intelligence organizations in the Gulf region and Turkey—provided a valuable heads-up in terms of the timing and scope of the operation. Israel and its allies used the warning to deploy additional air defenses, shift aircraft, cancel leaves for military personnel, prepare to close the skies over the Middle East, and deny GPS access for outside targeting purposes.

We can safely assume that Iran’s military planners will not repeat the mistake the next time around.

Tehran’s advance notice was so bizarre, in fact, that it has birthed a conspiracy theory playing out in U.S. far-right, non-mainstream media circles. It goes this way: an anonymous Turkish diplomat told *Reuters* this week that his country played the role of a back-channel intermediary between the United States and Iran in the days leading up to Iran’s strike on Israel. According to this source, Tehran informed Turkey of its intended strike in an effort to limit further

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<sup>5</sup> Amir Tsarfati, “Breaking News,” (*Telegram* video), Apr. 19, 2024. My personal thanks to old friend Marcia Ellendar for feeding me Amir’s broadcasts. Amir is an Israeli citizen and a Christian who has valuable insights on Middle East events.

escalation. In response, the U.S. allegedly conveyed to Tehran via Ankara, that any action would have to be “within certain limits.” In other words, while President Biden was saying “Don’t” in front of American television screens, behind the scenes he “greenlighted” the strike on our only true ally in the region as long as it took place within certain limits. As a result, one prominent right-wing journalist has called for Biden to be compelled to resign if the accusation is proven to be true.<sup>6</sup>

Stay tuned to see if this story gains any traction. Or, for that matter, is valid.

My second head-scratcher concerns the Iranian supported Shi’ite militia group Hezbollah on Israel’s northern border. Why did Hezbollah—which has waged continuous low-scale, cross-border attacks, and missile firings since the Israeli punitive incursion into Gaza—largely sit this one out? To date, Hezbollah’s leaders have barely dipped into their reported arsenal of between 100,000 and 150,000 missiles in recent cross-border attacks on Israel, firing only an estimated 3,000 missiles. Indeed, since December 2023, following two months of low-intensity border fighting, Israeli forces began to dislodge Hezbollah’s forces from southern Lebanon. According to one source, more than 90% of Hezbollah’s special Radwan forces have fled the area and abandoned border lookout posts.<sup>7</sup> (According to another source, Hezbollah already has suffered more casualties since the IDF incursion in Gaza than it did during the entire 2006 war).<sup>8</sup> In the same time period, targeted Israeli airstrikes have taken a heavy toll on Iranian and Hezbollah commanders in Syria and elsewhere.

There are, in my view, four possible explanations for Hezbollah’s reticence. First, Hezbollah may be going overboard to prove they are autonomous and not under Iran’s thumb. (In the old days, when I was watching Hezbollah and other Shi’ite militant groups, we used to debate the degree to which Hezbollah was an autonomous actor). Iran is 600 miles from Israel whereas Hezbollah is just across the border. Second, Hezbollah may be acting (or non-acting) primarily out of a motive of self-preservation and realizes that Israeli aircraft can reduce to rubble its strongholds in Beirut and southern Lebanon. If another war between Hezbollah and Israel breaks out—the last one was in 2006—the group’s privileged position as an actor in Lebanese politics would be threatened. They don’t want Lebanon to turn into another Gaza. Thirdly, Hezbollah could be husbanding its resources for a future joint push with Iran against Israel. Finally, in line with the forementioned

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<sup>6</sup> Bob Unruh, “‘Stunning betrayal,’ Biden must resign if he greenlit Iran’s strike on Israel,” *WND*, Apr. 17, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Bob, “Iran’s Attack Ebded.”

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Dadouch and Shira Rubin, “After Iran’s Attack on Israel, now fears over escalation at Lebanese border,” *The Washington Post*, Apr. 18, 2024.

conspiracy theory, Hezbollah was “ordered” to stay on the sidelines to keep the strike within certain, controllable boundaries.

At any rate, from all initial appearances, it seemed like Israel’s technical superiority won the day (night) last weekend and the Iranians were dealt a decisive, humiliating. blow. The mainstream press in our country—certainly no friends of Israel or Netanyahu—have emphasized the role played by American forces in the region to explain the outcome: over 90% of all inbound weapons systems were destroyed. Much has been made of the switch in theater operational command to CENTCOM, the defensive and secretive air alliance of Sunni regional partners such as Jordan, UAE, and the Saudis (a strategy tracing back to the Trump administration—but no one in Washington D.C. these days will admit that). Indeed, there was unprecedented cooperation in shutting down the airspace over the Middle East to allow IDF and allied aircraft to operate with impunity. But make no mistake about it, the elimination of the unprecedented invasion fleet of ballistic missiles was primarily an Israeli operation. American, British, French, and Jordanian aircraft took out many of the drones (during their nine-hour flight from Iran) and the slower moving cruise missiles.

Eliminating the most lethal component of Iran’s airborne armada—the ballistic missiles—was almost exclusively an Israeli operation. Israel’s *Arrow* missile-defense system performed better than anyone expected and brought down in the empty desert almost all the long-range missiles Iran hoped would land on Israeli cities such as Tel Aviv, the Nevatim airbase in the Negev Desert and the Dimona nuclear reactor.<sup>9</sup> (Iranian missiles were used in a mock attack on an Israeli airbase two months earlier). Only seven percent of Iranian missiles made it through Israel’s defenses, doing minor damage to the airbase and shrapnel injuring a 7-year-old girl.

Iran’s officials have tried to put the best face on the humiliating setback by bellicose posturing and suggesting they only used a small portion of their inventory in the attack. Tehran’s apologists have even proposed that it was a trial run to gauge the effectiveness of Israeli defenses. Some analysts, however, are pouring cold water on Tehran’s claims after examining evidence of the weaponry destroyed. “Iran basically threw everything it had that could reach Israel’s territory,” according to John Krzyanah,<sup>10</sup> and U.S. military analysts told *The Intercept* shortly after the attack that American intelligence estimated that 50% of Iranian weapons “failed upon launch or in flight due to technical issues.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Yonah Jeremy Bob, “Iran’s Attack Ended the Shadow War,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 17, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> <sup>10</sup> Susannah George, et. al., “What Iran’s Attack on Israel revealed about its weapons arsenal,” *The Washington Post*, Apr. 17, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Ken Klippenstein and Daniel Boguslaw, “U.S., Not Israel, Shot Down Most Iran Drones and Missiles,” *The Intercept*, Apr. 15, 2024.

From Israel's perspective there is only one huge flipside to its operation: the costs incurred. Many years ago, in Washington D.C., I was invited to participate in a wargame exercise set many years in the future in Asia. One of the problems we identified during the exercise was the rate at which the U.S. armed forces burned through its inventory of advanced weapons, which were costly to replace and—given the state of our defense industries—very difficult to replenish. The same logic holds in the wake of this operation. Israel's Arrow 3 interceptors, for example, are priced a \$3.5 million per shot and David's Slings are \$1 million each. Iran's costs to produce its homemade ballistic missiles used in the attack are probably a tenth of that cost (although they have an estimated 3,000 missiles that can reach Israel and at least 100 launching systems. Furthermore, Iran's long-range Shahed-136 kamikaze drones, a mainstay of Russia's drone force in Ukraine, are estimated to cost between \$20,000 and \$40,000 apiece, a fraction of the cost of any missile-based anti-aircraft weapon. A retired Israeli general estimated that the cost of expended munitions—excluding fuel and operational costs for IDF's manned aircraft—was over \$1.5 billion (another Israeli estimate was \$550 billion. Exactly what fraction of Iran's MRBM arsenal (and what percentage of Israel's defensive missiles were used) remain important "X" factors when judging which side could outlast the in a future sustained war of attrition.<sup>12</sup>

So, why did Israel choose Isfahan as a target? The city houses an air base and a nearby nuclear site ringed by S-300 anti-aircraft batteries (a sophisticated Russian-made air defense system). As such, it was an important symbolic target that checked all the boxes: a symmetrical response to Iran's attack last weekend which focused on Nevatim Air Base. Moreover, it was the first time Israeli air assets attacked a military target protected by the S-300 system (and took advantage of a window in time before more lethal S-400 systems are delivered to Iran).

Today, the political and economic fallout from Iran's "New Equation" pronouncement continues. The Netanyahu administration's decision to hit Isfahan with a limited strike ended the widespread speculation as to how, or if, his government would respond to Iran's aerial attack (especially in light of Biden's recommendation that Israel "take the win"—as if the U.S. would sit on its thumbs if such a barrage came from Russia, China, or Cuba). One Israeli observer even called the latest act a "de-escalatory strike," and in one of the few public comments by Israeli cabinet officials on the strike, a right-wing coalition member posted a one-word response on X: "Weak."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, global oil and gold prices immediately spiked upon news of Israel's response.<sup>14</sup> Israel's decision to strike was

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<sup>12</sup> See the interesting discussion at Roblin, "A Barrage of Missiles," on this issue.

<sup>13</sup> Lieber, "Israel Strikes."

<sup>14</sup> Mariko Oi, "Markets rocked as US says Israel has struck Iran," *BBC News*, Apr. 18, 2024.

a difficult one: following repeated meetings of the Israeli War Cabinet at Kirya Base outside Tel Aviv, and, reportedly, at least two aborted missions.

In Iran, there was a muted response to the strike on Isfahan. Iranian military officials told the state-run media that explosions heard at Isfahan were the result of a mysterious object brought down with no damage. Russian foreign policy officials in touch with Iran, and Russian intermediaries communicating with Israeli officials have said that Iran does not want the recent escalation of skirmishes to continue.<sup>15</sup>

Israeli military sources have said nothing about the attack leaving the *Jerusalem Post* to wonder why the Pentagon felt it necessary to leak news about the attack.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps Iran's vaunted "New Equation" will amount to a one-off event. It certainly seems Israel is content to return to the more familiar "shadow war" dance between the two.

Finally, (and I have received this question several times), what are the prophetic implications of Iran's latest attack and Israel's surgical response? I had intended to discuss this issue in depth. I've ran out of space.

Perhaps another time ...

*This missive is dedicated to my close friend Ray Hartman who went to be the Lord on April 11, 2024 (aged 75). I will miss Harty-Ho's smile, humble spirit, and genuine Christian faithfulness. Ray was a devoted father, a Vietnam-era veteran, played on Springboro's first varsity football team and was an avid reader of my missives. He was a good person in our high school baseball dugout but couldn't play a lick. That didn't stop him from enjoying the experience. Ray was also a Methodist pastor for 15 years. I'm so grateful I got the chance in the hospital room on his final night to say goodbye—I know he heard me.*

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<sup>15</sup> Lieber, "Israel Strikes."

<sup>16</sup> Zvika Klein, "Israeli sources to Post: 'An eye for an eye'; not clear why Pentagon leaked info on attack," *The Jerusalem Post*, Apr. 19, 2024.