



# Syria Strike Sends Clear Message to Iran

Jonathan Ruhe  
Director of Foreign Policy

Yoni Tobin  
Policy Analyst

*This week's airstrike in Damascus against key Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers is the starkest example of Israel's increasingly impactful campaign to roll back Iran's military presence in that country, degrade support for proxies on Israel's northern front, and ultimately compel Hezbollah to curb attacks on Israel from Lebanon. Rather than repeat past mistakes by conspicuously distancing themselves from such actions and inviting Iranian retaliation, American officials should capitalize on Tehran's limited appetite for escalation – and coerce it to further de-escalate aggression against Israeli and U.S. targets more broadly – by affirming support for Israel's efforts and reinforcing their own readiness to impose costs directly on the IRGC.*

## What Happened?

- An April 1 [airstrike](#) on an Iranian consulate in Damascus, reportedly by Israel, killed three senior commanders and four officers overseeing Iran's covert operations in the region.
- According to the *New York Times*, among those [killed](#) was Brigadier General Mohamad Reza Zahedi, who led IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) operations in Syria and Lebanon.

## Why Is It Important?

- Amid persistent Hezbollah and other Iranian proxy attacks on northern Israel from Lebanon and Syria since October 7, this week's strike is the starkest, and likely most impactful, action thus far in Israel's gradually expanding campaign to impose tangible costs on the IRGC in Syria, degrade its material support for Hezbollah via that country, and curb Hezbollah attacks on Israel so the latter's displaced citizens can return to their homes in the north.
  - » In recent months, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has subtly but significantly [shifted](#) its approach [against](#) Iran-aligned forces in these two countries, away from its decade-long interdiction campaign against weapons transfers to Hezbollah in favor of strikes on senior IRGC and Hezbollah officers, which to date has [successfully](#) compelled Tehran to [roll back](#) its military presence in Syria and [urge its proxies](#) – foremost Hezbollah in Lebanon – to limit their multifront attacks on Israel.
    - Since late last year, Israel has been targeting Iranian weapons transfers to its proxies at an [unprecedented](#) rate, prompting one Iran-linked commander to tell Reuters that Israel had changed “the rules of the game.”
  - » Removing Zahedi could prove particularly effective in this regard. The [seniormost](#) Iranian official killed since IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, he was considered more influential than Soleimani's [successor](#) Esmail Qaani and served as Iran's effective envoy supplying weapons to its proxy “ring of fire” in Lebanon and Syria.

- Reportedly, Zahedi [oversaw](#) all Iranian weapons shipments to, and within, Syria and Lebanon. Zahedi also *de facto* led the IRGC's intelligence division, ground forces, and air forces, and was directly involved in planning operations against Israel.
  - Because Iran's proxy network [depends](#) heavily on interpersonal relations and individualized know-how, removing Zahedi and other top IRGC commanders killed in the strike from that equation could appreciably inhibit Tehran's coordination and supply of IRGC, Hezbollah, and other proxy forces all along Israel's northern front – similar to the effect of Soleimani's killing on IRGC-QF operations around the Middle East.
- » The nature of the strike, [the first](#) on an Iranian consulate building that [reportedly](#) also served as a key IRGC headquarters, underscores Israel's growing willingness to run real risks and inflict palpable damage on legitimate IRGC-related targets in order to coerce major changes in Iran's military presence and activities – including its ongoing backing for Hezbollah's persistent attacks that have displaced tens of thousands of civilians from northern Israel in the wake of October 7.
- According to an Iranian [source](#) in Reuters, in its Syria operations Israel “used to fire warning shots – they'd hit near the truck, our guys would get out of the truck, and then they'd hit the truck. Now that's over. Israel is now unleashing deadlier, more frequent air raids against Iranian arms transfers and air defense systems in Syria.”

#### **Key Hezbollah and IRGC Commanders Killed in Recent Months:**

- **April 1 – Mohamed Reza Zahedi**, in charge of overseeing IRGC-QF operations in Syria and Lebanon, was [killed](#) along with five other senior IRGC officials in Damascus.
- **February 26 – Hassan Hossein Salami**, a regional Hezbollah commander involved in anti-tank missile attacks on Israel, was [killed](#) in an airstrike in southern Lebanon.
- **February 8 – Abbas al-Dabs**, a regional commander in Hezbollah, was [killed](#) in an airstrike in southern Lebanon. Al-Dabs was reportedly [responsible](#) for building Iran's air defenses in Syria.
- **February 2 – Saeid Alidadi**, a senior IRGC advisor in Syria, was [killed](#) in a Damascus airstrike.
- **January 20 – Sadeqh Omidzadeh** head of the IRGC's intelligence unit in Syria, was [killed](#) in an airstrike in Damascus along with four other IRGC intelligence officials or advisors.
- **January 9 – Ali Hussein Barji**, commander of Hezbollah's aerial forces in southern Lebanon, was [killed](#) in an airstrike in the southern Lebanese town of Khibet Selm.
- **January 9 – Hassan Abeid Al-Hussein Ismail**, head of Hezbollah's drone operations in southern Lebanon, was [killed](#) in a drone strike in southern Lebanon.
- **January 8 – Wissam Tawil**, deputy head of a unit in Hezbollah's elite Radwan force, was [killed](#) in an airstrike in southern Lebanon. Tawil also [helped](#) kidnap two IDF soldiers in 2006.
- **December 25 – Razi Syed Mousavi**, senior IRGC commander [involved](#) in overseeing Iran's military operations in Syria, was [killed](#) in an airstrike near Damascus.

- Despite publicly [vowing](#) to retaliate, Iran’s most direct options and its appetite seem limited:
  - » Because Tehran’s [proxy strategy](#) is predicated on avoiding direct conflict and reflects its acute sensitivity to casualties and other costs on its own personnel and assets, it is unlikely Iran will invite even more forceful Israeli military action by conducting clearly escalatory attacks with its own forces against Israel proper and/or the IDF.
  - » Hezbollah is far and away Tehran’s best-armed proxy force, but it has demonstrated real reluctance to court escalation above its current threshold of limited, though persistent, attacks on northern Israel using rockets, drones, and antitank munitions.
    - Moreover, Iran has assiduously built Hezbollah into its primary deterrent against an Israeli strike on Tehran’s most-valued asset – its nuclear weapons program – and thus would be loath to expend this ultimate insurance policy on anything less, especially after having refrained from doing so in response to Israel’s operation in Gaza.
  - » Israel’s sophisticated air and missile defenses have performed well enough against missile and drone attacks from elsewhere in the “ring of fire” like Syria, Iraq, and Yemen to likely limit the appeal and effectiveness of such retaliatory scenarios in Tehran’s eyes.
    - Iran’s two signature attacks in recent years – its 2019 cruise missile and drone strike on Abqaiq, Saudi Arabia, and its 2020 ballistic missile strike on U.S. forces in Iraq — were conducted against targets with unprepared or non-existent air defenses.
  - » On April 3, the top U.S. Air Force officer in the Middle East said he [continues](#) “to assess that the Iranians are not interested in a broader regional conflict.”
- Consequently, Iran’s most likely retaliatory route will be indirect, against Israeli targets outside the country and/or against what it perceives as softer but more impactful U.S. targets:
  - » In recent years, Iran repeatedly responded to Israeli strikes in Syria and elsewhere by [attacking](#) Israel-linked commercial shipping in international waters in the Middle East, and for even longer it has targeted Israeli embassies and consulates, as well as other Israeli and Jewish sites and communities, across Asia, South America, and Europe.
    - Iranian officials are calling for [retaliation](#) against Israeli embassies, including in [Azerbaijan](#) where Iran-backed attacks on Israeli targets were foiled in [2012](#) and [2023](#).
  - » Following previous Israeli strikes, Iran also has [retaliated](#) against U.S. targets in the Middle East whenever conspicuous U.S. self-deterrence and disavowals of support for Israel led Tehran to believe that striking U.S. targets would coerce American officials to pressure Israel to halt such actions.

## What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States should affirm support for Israel’s ongoing campaign that already is forcing salutary, if tenuous, changes in Iranian behavior, in order to convince Tehran to further de-escalate in Lebanon and Syria and to refrain from retaliating against Israeli and U.S. targets.
  - » Tellingly, IRGC officials and Iranian diplomats [pressured](#) their proxies to dial down attacks on U.S. as well as Israeli targets earlier this year, in response to the Biden administration’s [strongest](#) military responses to date after an Iranian proxy attack killed three American servicemembers in Jordan on January 28.
  - » In this context, unprompted public U.S. [handwringing](#) over its “concerns about anything that would be escalatory or cause an increase in conflict in the region” are counterproductive by signaling American distance from Israel and advertising U.S. self-deterrence.

- Biden administration officials also should state [proactively](#) their preparedness to conduct military operations against IRGC targets in the Middle East, should they perceive any potential change in the current lull of Iran-backed strikes on U.S. targets in Syria and Iraq.
- The United States should ensure its robust intelligence-sharing relationship with Israel properly factors in Iran's threats to [retaliate](#), likely targeting Israel's diplomatic facilities and other relatively soft targets globally.