



Israel's Iran Strike Threads a Tight Strategic Needle

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Israel's October 26 military operation against Iranian advanced air defenses and missile and drone production sites seeks to rebuild deterrence by inhibiting the Revolutionary Guard's capacity to generate further projectile strikes on Israel, and by enabling future operations to threaten core regime assets even more directly. At the same time, the strikes sought to minimize the near-term risks of an escalatory spiral that could divert Israel's focus from degrading Iran's proxies and jeopardize continued U.S. support. To prevent further Iran-led aggression, the United States must signal clearly that any escalation will be met with a far costlier, more unified U.S.-Israeli response that goes well beyond simply defending against yet more attacks.

What Happened?

- According to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), in the early morning of October 26 local time, Israel carried out [extensive airstrikes](#) against military targets inside Iran, in response to “months of continuous attacks from the Iranian regime against [Israel],” including firing roughly 200 ballistic missiles at Israel on October 1.
- Acknowledging military action by their country against targets inside Iran for the first time ever, [Israeli officials](#) warned Israel would be “obligated to respond” to further Iranian attacks.
 - » Official Iranian media claimed the country's air defenses [intercepted](#) most of Israel's attack and “the reports alleging that 100 Israeli military planes have had a role in the strike are also complete lies, as Israel is seeking to overplay its weak attack.”
 - » The White House promptly took [public credit](#) for encouraging Israel beforehand to “design a response that served to deter further attacks against Israel while reducing risk of further escalation,” and insisted that Israel's response “should be the end of this direct exchange of fire between Israel and Iran.”

Why Is It Important?

- Israel's operation threaded a strategic needle by imposing costs on Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) assets responsible for April and October projectile strikes on Israel, and by signaling IDF readiness for more damaging future operations, while also avoiding further escalation that diverts IDF focus from degrading Hezbollah and Hamas, attrits Israeli interceptor stocks, and jeopardizes U.S. diplomatic and material support for these and other Israeli operations.
 - » It certainly seems plausible that Israel's freedom of action was narrowed, and constraints placed on IDF planning and capabilities, by Washington's transparent calls for restraint, and potentially by restrictions on U.S. munitions made available to the IDF.

- Coming on the heels of devastatingly effective Israeli action against the crown jewels of Iran’s regional axis – chiefly Hezbollah’s leadership and key offensive capabilities in Lebanon, plus Hamas leaders and IRGC liaisons – this operation seeks to compel Iran to halt attacks on Israel, both directly via projectile offensives and indirectly via reconstituting Hezbollah’s devastated arsenals and command-and-control structures.
 - » By bringing the IRGC’s proxy war to Iranian territory and [collapsing](#) its strategy for its proxies to absorb IDF attacks, Israel seeks to exploit the regime’s sensitivity to Iranian casualties and convince it that further aggression will be prohibitively expensive.
 - » Conducting “left of launch” strikes on missile and drone sites related to Iran’s April and October attacks reinforces this message, while also aiming to deny Iran’s ability to carry out further offensives that normalize mass attacks on Israel, give the IRGC valuable operational know-how, further attrit Israel’s air defenses, and increase the IDF’s dependence on U.S. support for its freedom of action.
- The most far-reaching military operation inside Iran since the 1940s, and the largest since at least the 1980s, the Israeli Air Force’s (IAF) strike package conveyed a real capacity to inflict far greater future damage on core regime assets, primarily by bearing tangible operational and tactical resemblances to potential action against Iran’s nuclear weapons program.
 - » Similar to the preparations, distances, complexity, and tempo of an attack on Iran’s wide-ranging nuclear infrastructure, if also smaller in scale, Israel’s October 26 strike reportedly entailed more than [100 aircraft](#) – including F-35 multirole combat aircraft, F-15 fighter-bombers, aerial refueling tankers, and reconnaissance platforms – that utilized precise intelligence to conduct sorties over 1,000+ miles against roughly 20 dispersed military sites in key IRGC centers of gravity around Tehran, Karaj, Esfahan, and Shiraz.
 - » The IAF’s use of a first attack wave against Iranian active defenses to clear the path for a second wave against strategic sites foreshadows a potential campaign against nuclear and energy targets, and helps enable such operations by clearing out in advance some of Iran’s [most capable](#) air and missile defenses, especially Russian-made S-300s.
 - This builds on Israel’s unattributed April 18 [airstrike](#) against an air defense installation guarding key Iranian nuclear facilities around Esfahan.
 - » An unnamed [Israeli official](#) said this weekend’s strike “says we can hit anywhere in Iran.”
- At the same time, Israel’s strike reflected larger strategic and operational considerations militating against broader and more intense military action inside Iran, at least for now:
 - » While less constrictive than after Iran’s April 13-14 projectile barrage, the Biden administration again [openly pressured](#) its Israeli partner to limit the scope of its response, including by avoiding Iranian nuclear and energy infrastructure.
 - Following Iran’s October 1 attack, the United States deployed an advanced air defense system (THAAD) that reinforces Israel’s strained air defenses, but also enabled the Biden administration to affect the timing and severity of Israel’s response.
 - Paralleling its tendency over the past year to telegraph its own operations against Iran-related targets, the administration also routinely and publicly discussed Israeli planning and preparations in the weeks preceding the attack.
 - After Israel’s strike, the White House [reiterated](#) that its posture remains purely reactive and self-limited, proclaiming it is “fully prepared to once again defend against

- any attack” by Iran while conspicuously shying away from any pledge to deal more directly or decisively with further Iranian aggression.
- » In the near term, an escalatory spiral with Iran could undermine the IDF’s ability to maximize success in current efforts against Hezbollah and Hamas, including its elimination of those groups’ key leaders, before those operations reach their culminating points.
 - After the [IDF strike](#), its spokesperson said: “we are focused on the goals of the war in Gaza and Lebanon. It is Iran that continues to push for a wide regional escalation.”
 - » Israel’s strategic needle-threading is reflected in its decision to hit [certain sites](#) previously associated with Iran’s covert nuclear weapons program, since Israel could thus signal its readiness for broader future operations without technically falling afoul of current U.S. strictures to avoid nuclear facilities.
 - As with its April attack, Iran is proactively trying to push apart the United States and Israel by portraying its own actions as limited and reactive, thus playing into the Biden team’s patent and counterproductive fear of any perceived escalation, whether by Tehran or Jerusalem.
 - » The statement by Iran’s [foreign minister](#) before Israel’s strike, that his country’s response “will be proportionate and calculated,” intends to portray Iran as the aggrieved and responsible party in American eyes, and to coerce Israel indirectly by urging the United States to turn the screws on its partner to avoid ostensibly “disproportionate” responses.
 - » Perversely for the United States and Israel, softening the IDF’s response allows Iran to retain as much military capability as possible to continue threatening Israel, and it confirms the wisdom of Iran’s strategy to constrain Israel by feeding U.S. escalation fears.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- With Tehran reading American tea leaves to gauge how to respond to Israel’s strike, the Biden administration must admit that deterring itself and Israel only begets steadily more Iran-led aggression, and instead send unmistakable signals that any escalation will be met with a far costlier and more unified U.S.-Israeli response going well beyond simply shooting down yet more Iran-led aggression against Israel, U.S. targets, and/or Arab partners.
 - » To the extent Iran believes the costs and risks of further large-scale attacks are acceptable, it will feel emboldened to ramp up its support for its beleaguered proxies, escalate horizontally by hastening its progress to the nuclear weapons [threshold](#), and, increasingly, prod the United States to rein in Israel by directly threatening U.S. regional assets.
 - » Conversely, Iran’s proxies will lose hope of triggering an all-out regional war, and will consider viable negotiated settlements ending the conflicts in Lebanon and Gaza, only if they believe Tehran is deterred from further escalation that distracts the IDF from its current focus on dealing major military defeats to Hezbollah and Hamas.
- Expanding on its recent statement that this should end current Iran-Israel hostilities, the White House must highlight the real costs Iran will bear for ignoring this warning, including:
 - » U.S. military and intelligence support for Israel’s ability to continue breaking apart Tehran’s “ring of fire” and targeting the IRGC regionwide, including the regime’s most valuable military assets inside Iran itself.

- » The end of staid U.S. efforts to restrict and slow IDF operations in Lebanon and Gaza, and of its pursuit of ceasefires that would allow Iran's proxies to survive and reconstitute.
- » U.S. and Israel readiness to use all elements of their combined national power to prevent a nuclear Iran, in line with longstanding pledges to this effect by both countries.
- To make these threats credible, the United States should redouble its efforts to restock IDF arsenals, foremost precision-guided munitions and sustainment elements for fixed-wing aircraft and combat helicopters, in addition to vital air and missile defense interceptors.
 - » The United States also should retain its THAAD system in Israel for now, in order to signal U.S. commitment and further affect Iran's cost-benefit calculus for further escalation.
- In tandem, America's enhanced force presence in the region offers timely opportunities for high-profile military exercises with the IDF to rehearse aerial refueling, combined command and control, search and rescue, long-range strike, and other relevant operations for deterring and denying further Iran-led aggression.
 - » In addition to U.S. forces already deployed to the region, this should include KC-46 aerial refueling tankers as well as strategic bombers based in the continental United States, for instance B-2 aircraft that recently employed Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) [bunker busters](#) against Iran's Houthi proxies in Yemen, and which pose unique threats to Iran's deeply-buried nuclear and missile sites.
 - » American leaders should state their readiness to send U.S. [attack submarines](#) to Middle Eastern waters, in order to bolster long-range strike capabilities for deterring or responding directly to further Iranian aggression.
 - » Like it has done in years past with other systems, the United States should consider leaving behind certain U.S. capabilities in Israel, in this case potentially KC-46 aircraft like those Israel has already purchased for eventual integration into its own forces.