

The Middle East on a Knife-Edge

THE US, ISRAEL, IRAN, AND PALESTINE

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On the night of April 13, 2024, the Iranian regime launched operation “True Promise,” which fired more than three hundred drones and missiles on Israel in retaliation for its strike against the Iranian embassy annex in Damascus on April 1. That Israeli attack killed sixteen people, including seven members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the commander of the al-Quds force for the Levant, Mohammad Reza Zahedi. In response to “True Promise,” the Israel Occupation Forces staged their own military operation against an air defense system near Iran’s Isfahan province, which protects the Natanz nuclear facility as well as a Syrian army radar position. This is the most significant conflict between Israel and Iran to date, and one that sets a precedent for even greater hostilities in the future.

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IRAN’S OBJECTIVES

Iran hailed “True Promise” as a national victory, with state media broadcasting images of crowds celebrating in the streets. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi described it as “[a lesson to the Zionist enemy](#),” while Revolutionary Guards commander-in-chief Hossein Salami claimed it aimed to create “[a new equation with Israel](#).” Iran’s UN representatives stated that this “military operation was a response to the Zionist regime’s aggression against our diplomatic premises in Damascus,” and was “[carried out on the basis of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter relating to self-defense](#).” The Iranian Supreme Security Council warned in its statement that any further Israeli action against Iran would receive “at least a tenfold response.”

Iran’s attack targeted the Israeli army’s main air base, Nevatim, home to its fleet of F-35 fighter jets. But Israel—with the help of the US, France, Britain, and Jordan—shot down [84 percent](#) of the projectiles, ensuring that the base suffered minimal damage. None of the 170 drones penetrated Israeli airspace, and 25 of the 30 cruise missiles were shot down by air defense systems before crossing the country’s borders. Some 50 percent of the ballistic missiles fired by Iran either failed to launch or crashed before reaching their target, according to [the Wall Street Journal](#).

This was Iran’s first direct attack on Israel since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. While unprecedented, this military operation can be compared with the Iranian response to Washington’s assassination of Qassem Soleimani (the commander of the IRGC) in January 2020 in

Iraq. Iran launched some twenty missiles at US military bases (each with over five thousand soldiers) in Anbar, Iraq and Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. The office of then-Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdel-Mahdi, stated at the time that the Iraqi government had been informed by Iran that it would be carrying out raids on its soil limited to American bases. [According to some sources](#), Iran also alerted US coalition forces in advance of the strikes on those bases. After the 2020 attack, Mohammad Javad Zarif (Iran's head of diplomacy at the time) declared that his country had carried out and "completed" "proportionate" retaliation and that Iran was "not seeking escalation or war." The operation caused no casualties and minimal damage.

Similarly, in Iran's operation "True Promise," Tehran gave its [allies and neighboring countries seventy-two hours' notice](#) to give them time to protect their airspace, according to Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. Forewarned, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) played an important role in helping Israel Occupation Forces neutralize the attack, sharing information with the US and Israel. The Saudi and Iraqi governments also authorized US Air Force tanker planes to remain in their airspace to support US and allied patrols during the operation, according to [al-Monitor](#).

In addition, Iran chose to attack mainly with drones (which took hours to reach Israel and were easily identified and shot down) and did not call on its allies (notably Hezbollah) to attack Israel. After the operation, Iran's Supreme National Security Council stated that no further military action was currently planned and that it considered "the matter closed." In other words, Iran carried out this strike principally to save face and deter Israel from following its attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus.

The Iranian regime clearly signaled that it wanted to avoid a regional war with Israel—a conflict that could potentially constitute a threat to its rule. Nevertheless, the regime used the attack to churn out propaganda touting its "resistance against Israel" in the hopes of consolidating regional and domestic support while, at the same, [tightening its grip](#) on Iranian society and repressing democratic and progressive organizations. It has prohibited any dissent against its rule, whether on official or social media, and has accused many of spying for Israel.

US IMPERIALISM ARMS ISRAEL FOR REGIONAL WAR AND GENOCIDE

In response to Iran's limited military operation, the Israeli ruling class, both civilian and military, vowed to retaliate. US President Biden declared that he opposed a wider war, and that the US would not participate in a counterattack against Iran. At the same time, US officials presented Israel's successful defense against Iran's attack as a resounding victory, especially compared to its security failure on October 7. The US and Israel both took advantage of the situation to portray the apartheid state as "under attack" and facing an array of hostile state and nonstate enemies. Yet again, the most powerful military in the region was presented as the victim. Both states were happy to deflect media coverage from the genocidal war against Palestinians onto the "Iranian danger."

Israel's warmongering against Iran must not divert our focus from demanding a permanent ceasefire to Israel's genocidal war in Gaza. That demand is the bare minimum. Left and progressive forces must defend the Palestinians' right to resist Israel's racist and colonial apartheid state...Defending the right of people to resist oppression should not be confused with political support for particular political parties like Hamas or Hezbollah.

The US played a decisive role in thwarting Iran's retaliation against Israel. [According to Washington's Central Command \(Centcom\)](#), it deployed aircraft and two destroyers armed with guided missiles in the eastern Mediterranean to reportedly destroy more than eighty unidirectional attack drones and at least six ballistic missiles aimed at Israel. Biden condemned Tehran's actions and reiterated the importance of the US-Israeli alliance, declaring "[We are dedicated to the defense of Israel. We will support Israel. We will help defend Israel, and Iran will not succeed.](#)"

Just as US support was key to Israel's success against Iran's missile and drone attack, US political, economic, and military support has also been instrumental in Israel's genocidal war in Gaza. US officials have repeatedly used their veto against resolutions calling for a possible ceasefire. Washington has supplied Israel with F-35 combat aircraft, over 1,800 MK84 bombs (which are no longer used by Western states in densely populated areas due to inevitable collateral damage) and 500 MK82 bombs.

The Biden administration circumvented Congressional authorization for these arms shipments by invoking emergency powers. It has made more than one hundred arms transfers to Israel without any public debate by limiting the specific dollar amount of each sale below the threshold at which Congress must be notified. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* documented that at least 140 heavy-lift planes bound for Israel have taken off from US military bases around the world since October 7, transporting equipment primarily to the Nevatim Air Base in southern Israel. In mid-April, Biden also called the US Congress to vote in favor of a bill allocating \$26.4 billion of support to Israel.

Washington's strategy of guaranteeing Israel's [qualitative military edge \(OME\)](#) has been the conceptual backbone of US military aid to Israel for decades, and it was made US law in 2008. It commits the US government to maintaining Israel's ability "[to defeat any credible conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from nonstate actors, while sustaining minimal damage and casualties.](#)" This strategy is premised on Israel's key role in preserving Western interests in the region. The normalization process between Israel and Arab countries, initiated by President Donald Trump and continued by President Joe Biden, aims to consolidate these interests in the region, including in its rivalry with China.

RETURN OF THE SO-CALLED SHADOW WAR

While the US cautioned Israel to restraint and expressed reluctance at participating in a military response against Iran, it did not try to prevent the Israeli response. The US likely set limits on the Israeli strike and, afterwards, its officials declared that the US "was not involved in an offensive operation." Israel had two predominant reasons to carry out April 18's attack on the Iranian air defense system located near Isfahan. First, the possible loss of Tel Aviv's nuclear monopoly poses a threat to the United States' and Israel's regional dominance. At the end of 2023, [the IAEA had already warned](#) that Tehran could enrich enough nuclear material for three nuclear bombs. The danger Iran poses to Israel's nuclear monopoly makes it plausible that Israel's initial attack on the Iranian consulate was meant to provoke a conflict and thus provide an alibi to strike Iran's nuclear facilities. Tellingly, the air defense system targeted by Israel's April 18 counterstrike protects Natanz, [a nuclear facility that had already been targeted by US and Israeli cyberattacks.](#)

Second, Israel hoped to salvage its regional and international standing damaged by its genocidal war in Gaza. Israel has failed to achieve any of its stated objectives of "destroying Hamas," freeing its hostages, and eliminating the security threat posed by Gaza. Rather, it has only managed to massacre people on an untold scale while galvanizing global popular opinion and most of the world's states against it. A conflict with Iran and the threat of a regional war offered Israel a chance to shore

up support from the Western powers.

But support from the US and its European and regional allies has not been without limits. Washington refused to give Israel political and military support for a major direct attack on Iran. Arab states were also unwilling to let Israel use their airspace for the attack. This general reluctance stems from the fear that a major war would lead to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, interfering with oil shipping and leading to a spike in oil prices, and thereby damaging an already sluggish global economy. The lack of unconditional support for an attack on Iran also caused [divisions](#) within the Israeli government and war cabinet.

The importance of this strait, through which twelve percent of global commerce passes, cannot be exaggerated. About a fifth of the volume of the world's total oil consumption goes through the [Strait of Hormuz](#). An average of 20.5 million barrels per day of crude oil passed through the strait in 2023. In response to Houthi attacks on ships it considered linked to Israel, Washington set up a multinational naval force to protect merchant vessels in the Red Sea. The US response shows their determination to ensure the free flow of oil and to avoid provoking Iran into shutting down the strait. The choice of sanctions that the US has imposed on Iran makes this increasingly obvious; the US's new sanctions target Iran's drone and missile programs, the IRGC, and its Ministry of Defense, but not Iranian oil.

In the region, the left's task remains to develop parties and movements with a strategy based on solidarity and struggle from below...The imperial states and the region's existing state order are all part of the problem, not the solution.

That said, the Israeli strike does not mean an end to its hostile attacks against Iran. Israel will continue assassinations in Iran and abroad, and continue to carry out cyberattacks against the IRGC and Iranian institutions, and intensify its attacks in Lebanon and Syria.¹ The so-called shadow war will continue with the risk of escalation into open conflict. As Israel signaled when it attacked Iran's nuclear facility, it stands prepared to preserve its nuclear monopoly in the region, even if that means war with Iran.

Israel will also continue to attack Iran's allies in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. It is particularly focused on Hezbollah. In fact, since October 7, Israel has struck around 4,500 Hezbollah targets in Lebanon. Its objective is to push the party to withdraw ten kilometers from the border to the north of the Litani River. Israeli attacks have killed more than 280 Hezbollah members and several dozen civilians, displaced more than 90,000 people, and destroyed civilian infrastructure and large areas of farmland in Lebanon. It is conducting a veritable scorched-earth policy in the Lebanese border regions. Israel has carried out such operations despite the fact that Hezbollah has refrained from launching major attacks on Israeli forces. Since October 7, the party has stuck to its policy of "calculated and proportional reactions" against Israeli attacks, notwithstanding its claims to be part of a "pressure front" against Tel Aviv. Thus, on April 18, [Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary General Naim Kassem](#) told the American *NBC News* that the party was determined to limit its military operations on the Israeli-Lebanese border and avoid being drawn into a full-scale war.

MITIGATING FACTORS AGAINST REGIONAL WAR

This so-called shadow war could easily trigger a regional conflagration. But the states in the Middle

East and North Africa do not want one. Washington's allies—particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—have made authoritarian stability and economic growth an absolute priority. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also committed to stabilizing relations with Iran after years of tensions. Both condemned the Israeli strikes against the Iranian consulate in Damascus.

Saudi Arabia has retreated from its confrontational foreign policy that had led to its deadly war against Yemen and its strategy of maximum pressure against Iran and its regional allies. Both have proved costly failures that threatened to isolate the Kingdom and compromise its plans to reform its economy and lure in international investment. Saudi Arabia's perception that Washington can no longer provide needed security, especially after the uprisings in 2011 and the bombing of Aramco production units in 2019 and 2020, has further pushed it to avoid aggressive conflict in the region.

Saudi Arabia has therefore pursued more cordial relations with its neighbors, including Iran. This culminated in China mediating a historic rapprochement between the two countries in April 2023. Both affirmed their willingness to collaborate together for "security, stability and prosperity" in the Middle East. This is particularly important for Saudi Arabia to stabilize Yemen and to prevent security threats on its southern border.

Israel's genocidal war has reinforced cooperation between Riyadh and Tehran. Saudi Arabia has suspended the normalization process with Israel and, along with the UAE, refused to participate in the US-led multinational naval force against the Houthis. Moreover, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have been reluctant to openly collaborate with Israel and the US in attacking Iran out of fear of reprisals. But if Washington accedes to Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's demand for a US security umbrella like Israel's, they might return to the normalization process with Tel Aviv.

REGIONAL SOLIDARITY FROM BELOW

Israel has used the cover of its military conflict with Iran and its attacks on other states and nonstate actors to deflect attention from its ongoing genocidal war against Palestinians. It has now killed more than thirty-four thousand people in Gaza. Its occupation forces and settlers have also escalated violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, assassinating more than 480 people since October 7. They have seized 1,100 hectares of land, declared them state property, and given Israeli Jews exclusive rights to lease them.

Moreover, there are reports that Biden cut a deal with Israel, greenlighting an offensive on Rafah—where more than 1.5 million people have taken refuge—in exchange for Israel limiting its response to the Iranian counterattack. Israel has amassed dozens of tanks and armored vehicles in southern Israel in apparent preparations for an invasion of Rafah and is likely to pursue its genocidal war against the Palestinians in Gaza before conducting further and more intense military operations against Iran and Hezbollah.

Iran's military operation did not alleviate the suffering of Palestinians. Moreover, it is clear its objective is not Palestinian liberation but the promotion and advancement of its own political and economic interests.² Iran will likely accelerate its development of nuclear weapons to advance these interests, especially when faced with Israel's growing threats. IRGC Major General Ahmad Haghtalab [declared](#) that "if Israel attempts to use the threat of attacking nuclear facilities to put pressure on Iran, a revision of the nuclear doctrine and a departure from the previously announced considerations is likely."

Faced with Israel's genocidal war and a potential regional one, the international left must prioritize

the mobilization of a broad antiwar and anti-imperialist movement against the US and its allies. The US in particular has played a key role in arming Israel to carry out its genocidal war; occupy and colonize Palestinian lands; bomb Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria; conduct black ops and assassinations throughout the region; and escalate military operations against Iran. US support guarantees Israel's ability to pursue these objectives with impunity. On top of that, Washington and its allies have carried out their own military interventions, supported authoritarian states, and enforced neoliberal economic policies that have deepened the misery and suffering of the region's popular classes.

Opposing Israel and its Western imperialist backers should not lead the left to support the reactionary Iranian regime, either in its repressive policies against its own working class or its counterrevolutionary interventions in other states (like, for example its support of Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship in Syria). Iran is a regional capitalist power, not a progressive alternative for its own people or for those in the region. That said, we must oppose any Israeli or US belligerence against Iran.

Most importantly, Israel's warmongering against Iran must not divert our focus from demanding a permanent ceasefire to Israel's genocidal war in Gaza. That demand is the bare minimum. Left and progressive forces must defend the Palestinians' right to resist Israel's racist and colonial apartheid state; like any population facing brutal national oppression, Palestinians have the right to resist, including military resistance. Similarly, the Lebanese have the right to resist Israeli military aggression. Defending the right of people to resist oppression should not be confused with political support for particular political parties like Hamas or Hezbollah. The international left should be critical of military actions when they lead to indiscriminate killing of civilians, while supporting progressive forces within Palestine and Lebanon.

In the region, the left's task remains to develop parties and movements with a strategy based on solidarity and struggle from below. These must remain independent of the capitalist parties and states in the region from Israel to Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as local reactionary political forces. And they must oppose US imperialism and its rivals like China and Russia. The imperial states and the region's existing state order are all part of the problem, not the solution. Therefore, progressive forces in the region must build solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for liberation as part of a regional revolutionary process to establish a new order in the Middle East and North Africa based on democracy, equality, and justice.

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