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Iran's Direct Attack on Israel and Its Aftermath

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The History and Current Status of the Iran-Israel Retaliation War

Fighting between Hamas and Israel over Gaza intensified on October 7, 2023, beginning with an attack on Israel by Hamas. During this period, Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen repeatedly attacked Israel with rockets, ballistic missiles, and drones. It was under these circumstances that, on April 1, 2024, Israel attacked the Iranian embassy in the Syrian capital Damascus (see note), killing Brigadier General Mohammad Zahedi, a senior member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and others. On April 13 (local time), Iran attacked Israel with ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones in retaliation for the killings. For the first time in history, Iran directly attacked the Israeli mainland, moving the geopolitics of the Middle East into a new configuration.

Amid fears of Israeli retaliation, Israel reportedly attacked a military facility in Iran's Isfahan Province on April 18 (local time) but, on the same day, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian made no indication that Israel was behind the attack. The situation has since calmed down, partly due to diplomatic efforts by the US and other countries concerned.

US Response

After Iran's April 13 attack on Israel, US President Joe Biden called for restraint and told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the United States would not take part in any retaliatory attack by Israel. A senior US administration official also stressed that President Biden had made it clear that he

does not want war with Iran, and that the United States does not want to further escalate tensions in the region.

Meanwhile, former President Donald Trump, speaking in eastern Pennsylvania, criticized the Biden administration's stance, saying that Iran's retaliatory attack on Israel was because America had shown great weakness and that the Biden administration's stance had led to the attack by Iran. The Biden administration will now have to make tough choices, keeping an ear out for former President Trump's comments as well.

Also on April 15, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller noted at a press conference that the Iranian attack dramatically increased the risk of an escalation in the conflict". He insisted that the US would continue its efforts to defuse tensions and that the process of trying to maintain as much calm as possible was still underway, stressing that Israel is being encouraged not to escalate the conflict.

The Biden administration does not want the Gaza war and now the Israel-Iran conflict to escalate into a regional conflict and does not want the United States to get involved in a war with Iran. An escalation in the war would prove disastrous for Biden in the autumn presidential election. In fact, in a CBS News poll conducted last fall, an overwhelmingly larger percentage of respondents said that the US would be more peaceful under a Trump administration than a Biden one because the US would not be involved in war. Whether it be the war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza, or the Israel-Iran conflict, the Biden administration must take the initiative to end it or face strong denunciation by Trump as an administration that invites and expands war¹.

Israel's Response

On April 13, Prime Minister Netanyahu held a meeting of his war cabinet to discuss a response to the attack by Iran. Former Defense Minister Benny Gantz, a member of Israel's war cabinet, said that Israel would "make Iran pay the price in the manner and timing that suits us", while Defense Minister Yoav Gallant also issued a statement, arguing that "We have an opportunity to establish a strategic alliance against this grave threat by Iran", and that Israel should work with other countries to encircle Iran. Against this backdrop, Israel reportedly attacked a military facility in Isfahan, inside Iran, on April 18.

However, it would be premature to view this as a complete end to Israeli retaliation. There remain a wide range of options in terms of targets and methods of attack, from soft targets such as Iranian Revolutionary Guard bases in other countries to military facilities in Iran, as was the case on April 18, infrastructure facilities such as power and pipelines, and assassinations of key figures. The most hard-hitting would be an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. In addition to the Bushehr nuclear power plant, Iran has a secretly-built uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy water production facility at Arak. Even if Israel were to retaliate with an attack, allowing the nuclear facilities to remain intact would bring closer the nightmare of Iran possessing nuclear weapons, ultimately leaving Israel in a

position where it could not touch Iran. On the other hand, if Israel attacks the nuclear facilities, the possibility cannot be ruled out that Iran, which has with its limited strike defied the prevailing conviction that it would not directly attack a nuclear-armed Israel, will be unable to resist the hardliners in and around the Revolutionary Guard Corps and will strike back again at Israel in earnest. If this were to happen, the possibility of a fifth Middle East war would increase. On the other hand, there are those who believe that Israel would truly like to avoid an all-out war with Iran, Hezbollah, and the Houthis at a stage when Hamas, whose defeat was the goal of the Gaza War, has not been completely eradicated. This is the reason why Israel's future actions in the Middle East continue to attract attention.

Iran's Response

Iran declared that the April 13 attack against Israel was in retaliation for the April 1 attack on the Iranian embassy in Syriaⁱⁱ that killed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders among others, and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi emphasized in a statement that the attack had "taught a lesson to the Zionist enemy". At the same time, IRGC Commander-in-Chief Major General Hossein Salami stressed that the operation had been limited and kept to the same level of capability that Israel used in its attack on the embassy, indicating that Iran had no intent of making the situation any worse. In an April 19 interview with the US network NBC, Iranian Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian stated that the attack on Isfahan apparently carried out by Israel had not been an airstrike and had been conducted by something resembling a child's toy rather than a drone, adding that Iran would not be reacting anew unless Israel were to engage in new adventurism that goes against Iran's interests. At the same time, he warned that if Israel took decisive action against Iran, it would fully respond quickly and much to Israel's regret.

On April 20, Iran's IRGC issued a statement expressing its gratitude and congratulations to the public regarding the attack on Israel. It did not mention the alleged Israeli retaliation for the attack, which could be taken as an implicit statement of Iran's intention to end the entire operation without further counterattack. Furthermore, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei received a visit on April 21 from commanders of the IRGC, the Islamic Republic of Iran Army and others during which he praised the work of the military and expressed his gratitude while avoiding explicit mention of the attacks on Israel, assuring them that their recent achievements had shown the world the glory and greatness of Iran. This was the first time that Khamenei had spoken after the exchange of attacks.

Saudi Arabia as the Arab Power that Holds the Key

On the other hand, the Arab states are so far not involved in this direct Israeli-Iranian confrontation. The key will probably be the attitudes of Saudi Arabia, a major Arab power, and Jordan, which is sandwiched between Israel and Iran. Saudi Arabia restored diplomatic relations with Iran in March 2023 and the two share a strategic interest in regional stability. It is also worth remembering that

Saudi Arabia was working hard to normalize diplomatic relations with Israel until just before the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023. With its top priorities being its own economic development and the realization of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is determined to avoid regional instability and will continue to spare no effort in diplomacy and mediation between the two countries.

Japan's Response

On April 16, Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa spoke by telephone separately with Iranian Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian and Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz, conveying to both her concerns about an escalation of the situation and urging restraint. Currently (April 21), Prime Minister Kishida has not personally approached the Israeli or Iranian leaders nor has he made any outreach to the Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are directly tied to Japan's national interests.

Against this backdrop, the foreign ministers of the Group of Seven (G7) major economies adopted a joint statement at their meeting on April 19 on the southern Italian island of Capri. While calling for efforts to prevent a worsening of the situation following the attack believed to have been carried out in Iran by Israel but avoiding direct reference to this attack, the G7 stressed in its statement that it condemns the attack by Iran in the strongest terms, calling it an unacceptable step that will lead to regional instability and an escalation of the situation, and expressing its readiness to impose sanctions" depending on Iran's future actions.

Japan's alignment with the G7 on Iran and its stated readiness to play the sanctions card are questionable in terms of the leverage it has in its relations with Iran as well as its relations with other Middle Eastern countries and, by extension, countries in the Global South that take a cynical view of the West's response to the situation in the Middle East in contrast to that taken toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There are concerns that Japan may follow the West's lead and elicit criticism for applying double standards in its reactions.

Future Prospects and Points to Note

Even after Iran's April 13 attack by Israel and the alleged April 18 retaliation by Israel, many believe that neither Iran nor Israel really wants a direct clash and would prefer to maintain a controlled confrontation. The exchange of blows between the two sides does in fact appear to have subsided for the moment. However, the rewriting of the unspoken rule of no direct confrontation between Iran and Israel is by no means insignificant, and the risk of accidental escalation seems to have increased due to increasing difficulty of reading the "red lines" set by the other side.

Since Netanyahu's blunder in allowing Hamas' raid in October 2023, he has faced harsh domestic criticism and declining support, and presenting an image of strong leadership has become the only way to preserve his long political life. The far-right forces on which Prime Minister Netanyahu relies also

have an extreme hardline view that Israel must seize this opportunity to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities. Contrarily, former Defense Minister Gantz and current Defense Minister Gallant are taking a cautious approach to the Gaza offensive, so a close eye should be kept on the future course of political ties within Israel.

If, as is feared in the Middle East, Israel retaliates against Iran in earnest when the time is right, the Biden administration will be required to respond harshly. While US President Biden does not want to be drawn into the conflict, he will also have to respond to pressure not to leave his ally Israel to die. It became clear after the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 that there is a serious feud between Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Biden. Indeed, the US had urged Israel this time around to exercise restraint in striking back at Iran, but Israel ultimately conducted airstrikes on the Iranian mainland itself, albeit in a considerably more restrained fashion. The US cannot get a full grip on Israel, and this is a dangerous sign for future stability in the Middle Eastⁱⁱⁱ.

Iran, too, is experiencing growing public discontent due to the country's economic woes and other problems. Following the April 18 attack, Iranian television showed footage of daily life in Isfahan unchanged. The attempt to trivialize the Israeli attack by feigning calm seems intended to avoid another retaliation that could lead to a confrontation with the United States. However, Iran, too, already crossed the line of directly attacking Israel on April 13 and has made it clear that it will continue to respond violently to Israeli actions. Statements by Iranian leaders have heretofore tended to simply be "words" not accompanied by "actions" but, if Iran must also plan for a scenario in which Revolutionary Guard officers or other hardliners dissatisfied with lenient retaliation against Israel choose in future to take actions in line with their words, it is possible that escalation based on misunderstanding could be sparked.

Given the internal political situations of both Israel and Iran, there is an undeniable potential for escalation in the confrontation between the two countries based on miscalculations or outbursts. In addition, we cannot overlook the risk that proxy forces such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, both of which are supported by Iran, may run amok. A scenario in which a chain of retaliatory exchanges, unwanted by the parties involved, could lead to the involvement of neighboring countries and major powers outside the region (e.g., the United States and Russia) is a real possibility. The situation in the Middle East is likely to remain tense.

(This is an English translation of a Japanese paper originally published on April 30, 2024)

ⁱ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-vs-biden-poll-2024-presidential-election-year-out/>

ⁱⁱ The purpose of noting that Israel states it is not an embassy: according to some reports, certain embassies may be lacking in consular facilities

[iii](#) The author wrote this manuscript in Saudi Arabia during a business trip, and the poor relationship between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Biden as well as the resulting decline in the US grip on Israel came as a surprise to Saudi intelligence sources and business circles alike.