

How to Judge Iranian Response Options Against Israel

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson), [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Nov 1, 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is the Morningstar Senior Fellow and Research Counselor at The Washington Institute.



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and cofounder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to Iran-backed militias.



Brief Analysis

Poor internal communications and miscalculation could lead Tehran to continue the cycle by striking again soon, whether directly or through its Iraqi proxies.

In Washington's view, Iran's April and October missile strikes against Israel had only limited impact on the ground, while Israel's latest counterstrike was quite effective at diluting Iran's offensive and defensive military capabilities—an imbalance that suggests Tehran would be ill advised to strike a third time. Yet Tehran does not appear to share this assessment and could decide to attack anyway, perhaps imminently. If Washington wants to lower the temperature between the two adversaries, it needs to be more active in shaping how Iran views the results of these exchanges.

Detached from Reality?

While the West saw Iran's April 13 attack on Israel as a dismal failure, Tehran evidently saw it as successful enough to merit a repeat on October 1. This is partly a [matter of perspective](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-missile-defense-performance-views-gulf) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-missile-defense-performance-views-gulf>)—the regime and other regional actors may have different views about how many missile impacts and how much damage constitute a successful strike, or how much Iran gains by showing it “resists” Israeli actions. Yet this contrast also raises questions about how accurately Iranian leaders are being informed about what is happening.

Iranian officials at all levels have a well-established track record of ignoring reality and expressing fantastical

assessments of various events. This includes officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), even intelligence personnel, who at times display astonishing ignorance about how the world works. And there is good reason to believe such officials dissemble to the regime's top leadership about important matters, whether or not they believe these rosy assessments themselves. Consider how long the IRGC denied the obvious truth when its forces shot down a Ukrainian passenger jet in January 2020, making more and more implausible claims to deny responsibility. More recently, consider the blatant falsehoods it spread about the killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, calling the incident a drone strike despite substantial evidence of a bomb planted by an insider. In these and other cases, the IRGC lied to the Iranian leadership, not just the outside world.

Although there is little evidence that anyone has paid a price for such deception, IRGC-Qods Force commander Esmail Qaani did disappear from public view for quite some time after recent Israeli strikes on senior proxy figures. This raises the possibility that the regime has commenced a serious mole hunt—a task it has carried out with great vigor in the past.

Western media and policymakers tend to interact with Iranian officials who know the outside world and have faced the reality of what their country can and cannot do (e.g., former foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, one of several vice presidents in the current government). Yet few such figures seem capable of influencing the regime's decisionmaking these days. For instance, in the debate about whether to strike Israel on October 1, both Zarif and President Masoud Pezeshkian pushed for restraint but were overruled and had to fall into line.

Will Iran Retaliate Again?

In the days since Israel's October 26 strike, many of Iran's usual fire-breathing voices—commentators in hardline outlets, known IRGC hotheads, the most radical politicians—have been warning that the regime will in fact retaliate. According to BBC Monitoring, Gholam Hossein Mohammadi Golpayegani—the hardline cleric who directs Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's office—called the Israeli attack “desperate and cowardly” and declared that “Iran's response to the Zionists will be harsh and jaw-breaking.” Similarly, according to the semiofficial Fars News Agency, IRGC commander Hossein Salami warned Israel, “You committed yet another mishap and you will taste the consequences...You have no place to escape to.” And his second-in-command, Ali Fadavi, told Lebanon's al-Mayadeen TV that Iran's response will be “inevitable,” falsely claiming that the regime has consistently responded to every hostile Israeli act over forty years. “Iran enjoys the capability to target everything the Zionists hold dear, all in one single operation,” he declared.

For his part, the often-cautious Khamenei offered more ambiguous remarks on October 27, saying that the effects of Israel's attack should be “neither exaggerated nor downplayed” while calling on authorities to “determine how to convey the power and will of the Iranian people” to Israel. Despite their more measured tone, however, his remarks have been widely interpreted in Iran as a call to strike. The newspaper *Hamshahri* picked up Khamenei's description of the attack as a “miscalculation” that Iran must “correct,” while the **government-run daily *Iran***

(<https://irannewspaper.ir/8590/1/104268>) and the **ultraconservative *Kayhan***

(<https://kayhan.ir/fa/news/298476/%D8%A8%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D9%88-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%AA-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%DA%98%DB%8C%D9%85-%D8%B5%D9%87%DB%8C%D9%88%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D9%81%D9%87%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF>) quoted him as stating that Iran “must make Israel

understand its power.” On social media, his speech was seen as a “**clear order**

(https://x.com/refigh_jalal/status/1850450592142934056) to hit Israel so hard that it will “not be able to stand

on its feet again,” in the words of one blogger.

Despite this apparent confidence that Tehran will strike again (and soon), loud Iranian threats have often proven to be mostly or entirely empty (e.g., witness the many warnings that U.S. aircraft carriers will be attacked the next time they enter the Persian Gulf). Indeed, when the regime issued such threats in the past, the usual advice was “rest easy because that means it won’t do much.” But this may no longer be the case in the current cycle of escalation.

The Iraq Option?

On October 31, [Axios reported \(https://www.axios.com/2024/10/31/israel-iran-planning-attack-iraq\)](https://www.axios.com/2024/10/31/israel-iran-planning-attack-iraq) that Iraq could be a launchpad for Iranian retaliation in early November. Tehran’s partners in Iraq have been [surging drone attacks \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-and-anti-israel-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-and-anti-israel-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis) against Israel of late, with 6 strikes in August, then 37 in September and 111 in October. These militias have also been [using a new Iranian-provided cruise missile \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-resistance-iraq-and-sabereen-highlight-anti-israel-cruise-missile-strikes\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-resistance-iraq-and-sabereen-highlight-anti-israel-cruise-missile-strikes) called al-Arqaq, firing 26 of them at Israel between January 5 and October 5.

What Iran has not done so far is support a ballistic missile attack from Iraq. Yet if it decided to go that route, it could easily pre-position such missiles in areas of Iraq controlled by its proxies—in fact, reports from as long ago as 2019 indicate that it may already have done so. This scenario could complicate Israeli and U.S. missile defense efforts by creating new, expansive launch areas to monitor and, most important, reducing warning and interception times. (Iraqi launch sites would be as close as 420 kilometers to Israel’s borders, compared to around 1,000 kilometers for the nearest Iran route.) As mentioned above, Tehran has pushed the envelope already this year by allowing Iraqi groups to use its cruise missiles; it could do so again with ballistic missiles.

By ordering militias to either use a weapon they have not launched at Israel before or conduct a mass attack using recognized capabilities (drones and cruise missiles), Iran could demonstrate a broadening of the conflict and a further [“unifying of fronts \(https://nationalinterest.org/feature/hezbollah-and-its-%E2%80%9Dunity-fronts%E2%80%9D-strategy-210553\).”](https://nationalinterest.org/feature/hezbollah-and-its-%E2%80%9Dunity-fronts%E2%80%9D-strategy-210553) to use the regime phrase. If such an attack drew heavy Israeli retaliation on Iraq, the militias would likely argue that the United States facilitated or failed to prevent the strike. This in turn could exacerbate already strident objections to the U.S. military presence on Iraqi soil, hastening Baghdad’s efforts to secure a full American withdrawal.

Yet Iran has generally been cautious about overplaying its hand in Iraq. Apart from direct regime funding, Iraq has become [the top cash cow \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqs-new-regime-change-how-tehran-backed-terrorist-organizations-and-militias\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqs-new-regime-change-how-tehran-backed-terrorist-organizations-and-militias) for Tehran’s “axis of resistance,” providing a valuable environment in which pro-Iran political blocs can puppeteer major national resources (e.g., [mass oil theft \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/extent-terrorist-and-militia-fuel-oil-diversion-exposed-iraq\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/extent-terrorist-and-militia-fuel-oil-diversion-exposed-iraq)) in ways that the U.S. government presently tolerates in order to sustain relations with Baghdad.

U.S. Options

Although Washington has limited ability to influence how Iranian leaders understand the results of their actions, it still has an interest in doing what it can. Perhaps the most effective means of communication is to publicize as much evidence as possible after incidents like the Iranian and Israeli strikes, including satellite photos and intelligence estimates.

U.S. officials can also provide extensive briefings to governments that are known to have Tehran’s ear, such as Baghdad and the Gulf states. In particular, Washington can describe to Iraqi leaders the dire consequences their country will face if they stand aside while Iranian proxies escalate their attacks on U.S. allies and facilities. In the past, the threat of losing access to large-scale shipments of physical U.S. dollar notes has been an effective lever for securing Iraqi action, evidently based on the widespread understanding—including among pro-Iran militias—that

this would be a disaster for Iraq.

Washington can also convey that in the event of new Iranian strikes, it will no longer oppose Israel hitting whatever Iranian targets it wants. This could potentially include oil infrastructure or even nuclear sites, which it reportedly urged Israel not to hit last time around.

Admittedly, Iran's track record suggests that U.S. and partner messaging efforts might not have the desired impact. Consider how many governments tried to get Iranian officials to acknowledge full responsibility for the downing of the Ukrainian airliner, with meager results at best. At the very least, however, widely publicizing attack evidence and involving as many governments as possible in the messaging effort would serve as an important international reminder of the regime's stubborn commitment to a posture of perpetual regional destabilization.

Patrick Clawson is the Morningstar Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Viterbi Program on Iran and U.S. Policy. Michael Knights is the Institute's Bernstein Senior Fellow and co-creator of its [Militia Spotlight platform \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight). ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[U.S. Election 2024: Views from the Middle East](#)

November 7, 2024, starting at 12:00 noon EST (1700 GMT)

◆
Nadim Koteich,
David Horowitz,
Barcin Yinanc

[\(/policy-analysis/us-election-2024-views-middle-east\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Egypt's Economic Reforms Must Continue](#)

Oct 30, 2024

◆
Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/egypts-economic-reforms-must-continue\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

How to End the Third Lebanon War—and Prevent the Fourth

Oct 29, 2024



Assaf Orion

(/policy-analysis/how-end-third-lebanon-war-and-prevent-fourth)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](/policy-analysis/iran)

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)