Only a Credible Offensive Threat Can Deter Iran from Climbing the Escalation Ladder

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Brief Analysis

Amid a flurry of U.S. military deployments and allied diplomacy, it is uncertain if an embarrassed Tehran will attack Israel, but one thing is clear: allowing it to do so again without meaningful consequences would set a dangerous precedent.

The July 31 killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps guesthouse in Tehran was both a major humiliation and a severe security and intelligence setback for the Iranian regime. Officials immediately blamed the attack on Israel, claimed it was supported by the United States, and promised severe revenge against Israel using the combined capabilities of its "resistance front." The question now is what form this revenge might take.

Iran and Israel have been in a state of war for more than four decades, with occasional periods of escalation and varying levels of proxy involvement. Their most recent escalation cycle unfolded in April, after an Israeli strike killed senior Iranian military officers in Damascus. Then as now, Tehran threatened a military response and was not deterred from carrying it out despite strong U.S. statements of support for Israel and highly visible military deployments. On April 13, Iran launched a barrage of drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles directly from its territory. Although the attack did not trigger a major Israeli response, the combination of potent __Israeli, U.S., and allied defensive measures (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-sustainable-are-defense-and-deterrence-methods-light-irans-attack)__ probably prevented a catastrophe. The region is now on the brink of a possible redux of unknown proportions, and efforts are once again being invested to prevent Iran from attacking—or, if it does attack, keeping its response at the lower end of the escalation ladder.

Iran's Response Options

The list of potential tactics, intentions, and other variables that could shape Iran's response is a long one:

- **Objectives and target sets**: Humiliate and deter the enemy by destroying a specific set of key military or intelligence targets, a high-profile government building, or civilian infrastructure, in the process demonstrating the effects of its weapon systems and the depth of its intelligence on those targets.

- **Assets**: Use specific types and combinations of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, suicide drones, decoys, terrorist incursions, and cyberattacks that offer better chances of success compared to the April 13 attack.

- **Timing and sequence**: Choose the optimal time for the strike to maximize surprise and effectiveness while the enemy is closely watching, and to minimize the risk of uncontrollable escalation. This could entail one round of attacks or multiple rounds.

- **Rules of engagement and collateral damage**: Aim to either cause or avoid casualties, maximize or minimize material damage, and strike or avoid civilian targets in accordance with set objectives. These objectives range from humiliating the enemy and maximizing deterrence to breaking the cycle of escalation, whether by projecting decisive power or limiting the response to "proportional" or "measured" actions that are deemed unworthy of retaliation.

- **Enemy defenses and response**: Factor in the risks of an Israeli preemptive strike in various forms, and counter enemy defenses by using surprise, saturation fire, decoys, diversionary attacks, or attacks specifically targeting missile defenses.

- **Logistics**: Either openly prepare for the strike with the intent of signaling adversaries (thereby losing the element of surprise), or maintain operational secrecy and use deeply buried assets capable of launching discreetly and reaching hypersonic speeds (in order to minimize warning time). Either option could involve coordinating with other members of the "axis of resistance" or acting alone.

- **Aftermath and escalation**: Consider the broader implications of the strike, including political, social, and economic consequences, potential responses from Israel, and the risk of further escalation.

The cumulative effects of these variables will determine the success or failure of the strike—and whether it happens at all. Obviously, the best outcome for the United States would be if Iran decides that the risks of attacking Israel are unacceptably high. The April 13 attack was a mixed bag for Tehran, and by merely repeating that operation, it would risk facing a prepared enemy and losing any remnant of surprise. At the same time, another spectacular nighttime operation could still fulfill the regime's desire to avenge Haniyeh's death and boost morale within the "axis," regardless of how many missiles actually reach their targets.

Potential Iranian Tactics in a Limited Strike

Iran will likely try to mitigate the shortcomings of the April 13 attack by seeking technological supremacy over Israeli defenses using a different mix of its more modern and reliable ballistic missile types (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/next-generation-iranian-ballistic-missiles-technical-advances-strategic-objectives) such as the Sejjil, Khoramshahr-4, and Fattah. These systems are believed to have more survivable reentry vehicles/warheads—they are maneuverable and can use a solid rocket engine to accelerate to hypersonic speeds during the midcourse and terminal phases of their trajectories and evade Israeli and U.S. missile defenses.

During the April 13 attack, Iran stated that it did not use some of its most modern and capable ballistic missiles, probably expecting that the worst of the conflict was yet to come. By most estimates, half of the ballistic missiles it did use failed on the way to their targets. Iranian ballistic missiles are said to have a self-kill function that activates when they veer too far off course. Also, most of the Ghadr missiles used on April 13 seemingly carried barrage decoy warheads to saturate Israeli defenses so that other missiles with unitary warheads would have a better chance of

getting through. Moreover, Iran claimed that the number of drones and cruise missiles it launched toward Israel was less than the number given by the coalition.

In a future attack, Iran may decide to relegate the drone and cruise portion of the operation entirely to its regional proxies while having its own forces focus on using some of their most capable ballistic missiles. Through this approach, Iran could aim to launch fewer projectiles (including decoys) and prove the effects-based operational concept it bragged about after its January 2020 missile strike against U.S. forces at al-Asad Air Base in Iraq—that is, achieving the same results or better with fewer assets.

Iran has a large number of underground missile bases within range of Israel that are capable of masking the preparation of their weapons. Combined with the hypersonic maneuvering capabilities of some of its missiles, the regime might aim to minimize Israel's warning time to a few minutes by using these "doomsday" bases. In 2022, Iran claimed that its new Fattah missile could reach Israel in less than seven minutes.

On one hand, shorter warning times would put more strain on Israeli and U.S. defenses. On the other hand, by using its most secure bases and procedures and its latest-generation missiles, Iran might unwittingly give away locations and capabilities that may not have been discovered by foreign intelligence services.

As for outsourcing the drone and cruise missile part of the strike, Iran could maximize the element of surprise by having Hezbollah launch barrages of those weapons toward army bases, air bases, and air/missile defense sites in northern and central Israel. Hezbollah might also launch some of its Iranian-made precision-guided ballistic missiles at key targets in Israel in order to confuse and divide the country's defenses.

In theory, Iran could even consider delegating the entire military retaliation to its axis partners and resorting to other tactics on its own (e.g., terrorism and cyberattacks). Yet doing so would jeopardize its credibility and deterrence.

U.S. Response

To deter Iran, the United States has moved a range of additional capabilities to the region:

- An F-22 squadron
- The USS Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group (CSG), repositioned from the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea
- The USS Wasp Amphibious Ready Group, repositioned to the East Mediterranean near Israel, along with highly effective Navy destroyers capable of defending against ballistic missiles
- The USS Abraham Lincoln CSG with a mixed air wing comprising F/A-18E/F, EA-18G, and F-35C jets, repositioned from the Pacific
- A possible deployment of additional land-based air and missile defense systems

Having some of latest-generation Arleigh Burke-class destroyers in theater gives the United States added value in terms of mission flexibility and integration with outboard sensors, as well as the ability to employ the newest generation of antimissile interceptors. Similarly, the presence of fifth-generation fighters gives combatant commanders the ability to conduct all key airpower missions (air superiority, close air support, strategic attack, electronic warfare, reconnaissance, intelligence collection and distribution, and suppression and destruction of enemy air defenses) at the same time while contributing tremendously to understanding the overall threat picture.

To promote de-escalation, these measures have gone hand-in-hand with unprecedented diplomatic overtures and warnings delivered via parallel channels such as Switzerland, Jordan, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Taken together, these efforts show Iran that the United States will not desert its allies. Yet purely defensive measures did not deter Tehran from launching a major attack in April, so the United States needs to rethink its deterrence strategy. If one discounts

Israel's April 19 surgical missile strike that took out a key Iranian air defense radar, Tehran has effectively created a precedent for launching direct missile attacks against its enemies without facing deep consequences. Tehran needs to be unequivocally and credibly warned that any direct attacks against U.S. interests or allies will have serious— even existential—consequences for the regime.

While deploying defensive capabilities is undoubtedly important and contributes to deterring Iran, they cannot do the job alone. To back up its strong diplomatic messaging, Washington needs a credible niche offensive capability in the region.

One cutting-edge capability that the Pentagon can deploy to U.S. Central Command's area of operations is the new Dark Eagle long-range hypersonic weapon system. This strategic surface-to-surface missile is fitted with a hypersonic glide body that can maneuver along a depressed trajectory to hit targets up to 3,000 kilometers away. The system has been successfully test-flown and is just now entering service. Deploying it to the region and inviting allied officers to see it would show Tehran that the United States is prepared to use its newest precision "prompt-strike" systems to deter and, if need be, impose costs on its adversaries. Despite its defiant rhetoric, the Iranian regime is very concerned about the vulnerability of its key centers of gravity and its hold on power. Therefore, it would likely back down in the face of a credible offensive threat.

Farzin Nadimi is a senior fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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