



Israeli Air Supremacy in Middle East Reasserted



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Since the late 1990s, Israel and Iran have been engaged in a constantly expanding ‘**shadow conflict**’ for political and military supremacy in the Middle East. The Iranian regime’s self-ordained role as the defender of the Shiite community has manifested in power projection through its proxies in Lebanon (Hezbollah), Gaza (Hamas), Yemen (Houthis) and Iraq (Badr). Iran has focused on gradually building up its influence and power projection in the Levant by providing support to its proxies and constantly harassing Israel with their attacks. Israel, on the other hand, has countered Iranian power-projection efforts by sabotaging Iranian capability developments through cyber-attacks and destroying the Iranian proxies through a combination of air, ground and sea-borne operations at regular intervals.

Sequence of Events

The latest Israel-Hamas Conflict has now been raging for more than one year (since October 07, 2023) and has resulted in Israel fighting on multiple fronts: **with Hamas in Gaza, with Hezbollah in Lebanon, with the Houthis in Yemen, with the Iranian backed and funded forces in Syria, with Badr organisation in Iraq**. Additionally, Israel has also had to withstand a direct confrontation with Iran for the first time ever with a couple of Iranian ballistic missile and drone attacks. On **October 07, 2023**, Hamas totally surprised the Israelis with a highly coordinated, savage and lethal attack on southern Israeli cities and military bases. In this attack, Hamas looted and killed approximately 1,200 Israeli soldiers and civilians. Hamas also took approximately 250 Israeli hostages, of whom approximately 100 are still in Hamas captivity. Israel responded by declaring war on Hamas and

launching a massive air and ground offensive into Gaza, which has still not been able to achieve its planned objectives of neutralising Hamas and freeing the hostages.

To express solidarity with Hamas, the Iranian-backed proxies—the Houthis in Yemen —have carried out several attacks on merchant ships linked to Israel and Western nations in the Red Sea, significantly impacting the international maritime trade between Europe and Asia through the Suez Canal. Also, Hezbollah from Lebanon has been continuously firing rockets at cities in northern Israel and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, forcing Israeli citizens to take refuge in bunkers. On **April 01, 2024, an Israeli air strike on the Iranian Consulate in the Syrian capital**, Damascus, resulted in the death of several Iranian officers including an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander, Brig Gen Mohammad Reza Zahedi and his deputy.¹ Iran retaliated approximately two weeks later with a **coordinated barrage of approximately 120 ballistic missiles, 30 cruise missiles and 170 drones on April 13, 2024**, which resulted in minor damage to Nevatim Air Base.² This was the first time that the Iranians had involved themselves and had fired missiles from Iranian territory into Israel. Israel retaliated with a **limited drone and missile attack on Iran on April 18, 2024**, which resulted in the destruction of an air defence radar site near an Iranian airbase in Isfahan province. However, the Israelis did not publicly acknowledge this attack. This direct exchange of fire between Iran and Israel in April 2024, the first of its kind, was a clear escalatory step in the Middle East conflict and served as a portent of the worsening situation and expansion of the conflict.

On July 31, 2024, **Ismail Haniyeh**, the political leader of Hamas, was assassinated in Teheran while attending the inauguration of the newly elected Iranian President, Masood Pezeshkian. Iran and Hamas attributed the assassination to the Israelis, which occurred just hours after Israel had targeted a top Hezbollah commander in Beirut. Subsequently, on September 17 and 18, 2024, the Israelis turned their attention to Hezbollah in Lebanon and succeeded in targeting Hezbollah operatives by carrying out multiple explosions of their handheld communication devices (pagers and walkie-talkie sets), which resulted in the death of at least 32 personnel and injuries to approximately 3,500 Hezbollah operatives. On September 23, 2024, Israel launched more than 650 air strikes on Lebanon and achieved significant successes against the Hezbollah operatives. On September 27, 2024, the Israelis were also successful in killing the **Hezbollah commander, Hassan Nasrallah and other senior commanders of Hezbollah** in a coordinated air strike using **85 “bunker buster” bombs** on the Hezbollah underground headquarters in Beirut. The Israelis also launched a ground operation into southern Lebanon with the aim of destroying Hezbollah infrastructure and their forces that had been continuously targeting Israeli

cities in northern Israel since the October 07, 2023, Hamas attack. On October 01, 2024, the Iranians retaliated by firing approximately **180 ballistic missiles, including hypersonic missiles**, at military bases in Israel in response to Israeli assassinations of top Hamas, Hezbollah and IRGC leaders, causing only minimal damage and a few injuries. This was the second direct Iranian attack on the Israelis and represented another step on the escalatory ladder. The **Israeli air strike on military targets in Iran on October 26, 2024**, was in retaliation to the Iranian ballistic missile attack on October 01, 2024.

Operation Days of Repentance

Israel's avowed and much-awaited retaliation to the Iranian ballistic missile barrage on October 01, 2024, came in the form of three successive packages of aerial strikes in the early morning hours of October 26, 2024, called the '**Operation Days of Repentance**'. This was the first time that Israel acknowledged directly striking Iran, bringing the 'shadow conflict' out in the open and crossing another threshold in the escalatory ladder. More than 100 Israeli aircraft consisting of F-35 stealth fighters, F-16 multirole fighters and F-15 fighter bombers, along with aerial refuelling tankers, surveillance and command-and-control aircraft, utilised precise intelligence to carry out coordinated precision strikes in three waves of 25 to 35 aircraft each.³ Certain drones were also used as part of the packages. The aircraft flew approximately 1,000 miles on each side, taking a tactical route through Syria and Iraq to target 20 odd dispersed Iranian military sites in key IRGC centres of gravity around Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz and Karaj.⁴ All the Israeli aircraft landed back safely in Israel without any damages. It is alleged that the Israeli aircraft did not enter Iranian air space and launched their precision long-range weapons from Iraqi air space. Most probably, the weapons that were used were the 'Rampage' long-range, supersonic air-to-ground precision strike missile and the 'Rocks' next-generation extended stand-off air-to-surface missile.

Claims and Counterclaims

The Israelis claim to have struck Iranian air defences, missile and drone production facilities in central and western Iran. In order to prevent further escalation, the Israelis purposefully avoided attacking the Iranian oil refining or production facilities or the Iranian nuclear facilities. After the air strikes, the Israelis stated that their response was strictly aimed at proportionality and deterrence, not escalation. The Russian air defence S-300 surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites at the Abadan oil refinery and the Bandar Imam Khomeini petrochemical complex were targeted by the Israelis. The missile development and

drone facilities operated by the IRGC at Khojir and Parchin (in and around Tehran) were also struck and the missile testing facility at Shahroud was also targeted.

Lebanon The Israelis claim that these attacks have significantly impaired Iran's ability to mass produce missiles as they have struck at least 12 planetary mixers used for making solid fuel for long-range ballistic missiles. The targets at Parchin also included facilities which were previously being used for Iran's research into nuclear weapons development before it was suspended. The Israeli precise targeting of the Iranian most capable air defence assets like the S-300 in the first wave cleared the way for the subsequent two waves to target specific Iranian strategic sites. The Iranians, however, deny the claims of the Israelis, stating that the attacks were successfully countered and that there was only "limited damage" at certain locations. They also confirmed that four soldiers and one civilian had died in the air strikes. **Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, initially gave a measured response, saying the strikes should "neither be exaggerated nor downplayed"**. However, subsequently, the Iranian state media released a video of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's statement, which said, 'The enemies, whether the Zionist regime or the United States of America, will definitely receive a crushing response to what they are doing to Iran and the Iranian nation and to the resistance front'. The Iranian foreign ministry described the Israeli attack as a violation of international law and emphasised that Iran reserved the right to defend itself and respond to the Israeli aggression in a manner of its choosing. If Iran decides to respond to the Israeli air strikes, it would signal another threshold in the escalatory ladder, and in all probability, the response would be another concentrated barrage of surface-to-surface missiles and drones to saturate the Israeli air defence systems rather than a coordinated fighter strike.

Lessons learnt

The Israeli air strikes on October 26, 2024, have reasserted the **Israeli Air Force's air superiority and power projection capabilities in the Middle East**. The claimed successes of the Israeli Air Force—the direct targeting of the IRGC facilities in Iranian territory and exposing the vulnerabilities of the Iranian air defence system—reemphasise their professionalism and offensive capabilities. Through these air strikes, the Israelis have also cautioned the Iranians that any further aggression would invite additional strikes, if required, on strategic Iranian targets and could incur a crippling cost on Iranian military, economic and nuclear capabilities. The Israeli attack on only military targets clearly indicated a desire to prevent further escalation. This is because the Israelis want to remain focused on further degradation

and elimination of the Iranian proxies: Hamas and Hezbollah. The Israelis feel that any further escalation with Iran would only undermine their ability to further decimate Hezbollah and Hamas.

The ‘**Operation Days of Repentance**’ was the most serious and extensive aerial operation inside Iran since the Iran-Iraq War, which ended in 1988. The air strikes totally exposed the vulnerabilities of the Iranian air defence system, which the Israelis targeted in the first wave of the air strikes. The Israelis thereafter had full freedom of operation for nearly four-hour-long three strike packages over Iran. The air strikes also emphatically conveyed the message that attacks against Iranian oil refineries, production sites, or even against Iranian nuclear facilities could be executed with similar success in future.

The air strikes also **resolutely⁵ reinforced the primacy of the fighter aircraft as an offensive instrument of precision targeting and power projection**. The fairly widespread successes of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), loitering munitions, First-Person View (FPV) drones, ballistic missiles and cruise missiles in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War and the Israel-Hamas conflict had many defence experts prophesying the death knell of manned fighters and an expeditious induction of UAS and ballistic missiles into all air forces. The Israeli air strikes of October 26, 2024, have proven that **fighters are, without doubt, the most suited aerial platforms for carrying out coordinated strikes** on multiple targets. The resounding lesson that emerges is that **UAS would be best for complementing manned aircraft, rather than replacing them** in future air campaigns.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

NOTES:

¹ Dr Haid Haid, "The strike on Iran's consulate in Syria could be the spark that ignites the Middle East," Chatham House, July 12, 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/04/strike-irans-consulate-syria-could-be-spark-ignites-middle-east>. Accessed on November 01, 2024.

² "Iran attacks Israel with over 300 drones, missiles: What you need to know," Al Jazeera, April 14, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/14/iran-attacks-israel-with-over-300-drones-missiles-what-you-need-to-know>. Accessed on November 02, 2024.

³ Matthew Savill and Dr Burcu Ozcelik, "Operation Days of Repentance: The Impact of Israel's Strikes on Iran", Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), October 28, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/operation-days-repentance-impact-israels-strikes-iran#:~:text=Operation%20Days%20of%20Repentance%3A%20The%20Impact%20of%20Israel's%20Strikes%20on%20Iran,-Matthew%20Savill%20and&text=Israel's%20recent%20strikes%20on%20Iran's,of%20its%20regional%20deterrence%20strategy>. Accessed on 02 November, 2024.

⁴ Jonathan Ruhe, "Israel's Iran Strike Threads a Tight Strategic Needle," JINSA, October 27, 2024, https://jinsa.org/jinsa_report/israels-iran-strike-threads-a-tight-strategic-needle/. Accessed on November 03, 2024.

⁵ Jon Gambrell, "Iran's supreme leader threatens Israel and US with 'a crushing response' over Israeli attack", AP, November 03, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-khamenei-israel-hamas-lebanon-war-30385c3a17d1fca9415eb37db86dc9c5>. Accessed on November 04, 2024.