

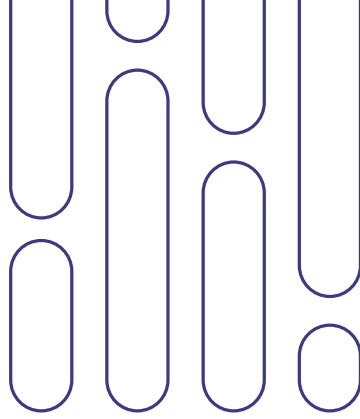
Position Papers

Israel's Strike Against the Iranian Embassy in Damascus: A New Chapter in the Israel-Iran Confrontation on Syrian Territory

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The Nature of the Israeli Strike.....	3
The Gaza War and the Shift in Israel's Tactics.....	4
Iran and Questions Regarding the Context of the Consecutive Attacks on Its Commanders in Syria.....	5
Iranian Retaliation Options.....	6

In a significant turn of events within the context of Israeli military actions aimed at Iranian facilities in Syria, on Monday, April 1, 2024, Israel conducted a strike targeting a structure neighboring the Iranian embassy situated in the Mezzeh district of Damascus, the capital of Syria. This attack resulted in the deaths of a considerable number of key Iranian figures. Consequently, there arises a multitude of questions regarding the specifics of the targeting, its potential ramifications, and the potential courses of action for Iran in response to this development.

The Nature of the Israeli Strike

The Israeli airstrike targeted a facility in Damascus allegedly belonging to Iran, sparking conflicting statements regarding the purpose of the building. While Israel asserted it was a base of the Quds Force, other narratives, including Iran's, claimed it was an Iranian consulate within Syrian territory. Despite the debate over the true use of the building, its significance to both Iran and Israel remains undeniable, driven by various considerations. These include the identities of individuals present during the operation, the strategic proximity to the Iranian embassy and several Western diplomatic missions, and the implications of leaked footage showing Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad at the site, along with reports of his communication with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian at the Iranian embassy in Damascus. Such evidence underscores the site's paramount importance to Iran.

Irrespective of the controversies surrounding the site, it is crucial to assess the operation's impact on the organization and the effectiveness of the Quds Force. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) declaration that the operation targeted one of its key leaders suggests a significant blow to the IRGC's operations room in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. The targeted individual, [Mohammad Reza Zahedi](#), also known as Hassan Mahdavi or Reza Mahdavi, had played pivotal roles within the IRGC since joining in 1980. He held various positions, including leading the 44th Qamar Bani Hashim Brigade and commanding the IRGC air force, and was commander of the Thaarullah forces, the ground forces responsible for maintaining security in Tehran. Zahedi later assumed leadership of the Quds Force

in Syria and Lebanon, overseeing military assistance to Hezbollah in Lebanon and fostering close ties between Iran and the party. His killing represents a substantial loss for Tehran and underscores his significance to both Iran and Israel. Zahedi's prolonged presence on the battlefield and his extensive connections with Iranian militias in the region highlight the magnitude of Tehran's loss of one of its foremost figures in the region.

News reports also highlighted the presence of several notable figures within the targeted building, including Saeed Azadi, the head of the Palestinian division of the Quds Force in Beirut, Abdolreza Shahlaei, overseeing IRGC operations in Yemen, and Abdolreza Masjarian, heading the Ramadan Office responsible for supervising militias in Iraq. However, among the significant names impacted by this strike is Mohammad Hadi Haji Rahimi, who had recently served as the deputy coordinator of the Quds Force before assuming the role of deputy to Zahedi. This positions Rahimi as one of the highest-ranking officials within the Quds Force hierarchy, signifying that beyond the implications of Zahedi's death, Rahimi's death delivers another substantial blow to Iran.

The Gaza War and the Shift in Israel's Tactics

The Israeli operation targeting the Iranian consulate in Damascus and the subsequent killing of Zahedi are seen as part of Israel's ongoing campaign against Iran in Syria, which has intensified since the events of October 7, 2023, and subsequent attacks by Hamas on Israel from the Gaza Strip. Prior to October 2023, the Israeli government had conducted numerous airstrikes aimed at disrupting arms shipments and targeting military groups associated with Iran in Syria. This strategy, often referred to as the "mowing the grass" policy, aimed to undermine Iran's capabilities in both Syria and Lebanon. Despite these actions, Iran had largely tolerated Israel's approach, aiming to keep confrontations to a minimum. However, the dynamics shifted after October 7, 2023, when Israel departed from its previous strategy of conducting covert strikes in Syria and limiting its operations to the first level of engagement between the parties by targeting Tehran's armament operations and military factions in Syria, toward escalating confrontations by inflicting heavy losses on Tehran in its

areas of influence. This change of approach marked a significant escalation in the conflict between the two parties, resulting in heavy losses for Iran and prompting Tel Aviv to adopt a strategy of targeted assassinations through precision strikes against Iranian individuals and commanders in Syria. Additionally, there has been a notable increase in the frequency and geographical scope of Israeli airstrikes on key Iranian targets since the beginning of 2024. Specifically, there have been 30 raids carried out after January 1, 2024, out of a total of 55 Israeli airstrikes launched in Syria since October 2023.

Numerous attacks on Iranian interests in Syria have occurred in the past, each holding significant weight comparable to the recent targeting and elimination of a substantial number of key Iranian leaders in the country. In December 2023, the Israeli government orchestrated the assassination of Radhi Mousavi, a longstanding advisor to the IRGC in Syria. Additionally, on February 2, 2024, an advisor to the IRGC named Saeed Ali Dadi fell victim to an Israeli raid in Damascus. Further, on March 26, 2024, an Iranian officer holding the rank of colonel met his death in an Israeli strike in Deir ez-Zor.

Now, given the significance of the location chosen for the targeting and the presence of prominent Iranian figures, it appears that Israel has decided to raise the stakes of its confrontation with Iran. By delivering such forceful messages, Israel appears to be transcending previous boundaries and openly challenging Iran's activities in Syria. Thus, the message Tel Aviv aims to send to Tehran is very clear, it is telling Tehran to reconsider its activities in Syria, its arms flows to its factions in the region, and the specific threat it poses to Israeli security.

While reports, which remain unverified, suggest the strike occurred [during a meeting involving IRGC leaders and officials from the Islamic Jihad movement](#), it follows [a recent visit by leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad to Iran in late March 2024](#). This indicates Iran's efforts to bolster its influence amidst the ongoing conflict in the Gaza Strip.

Iran and Questions Regarding the Context of the Consecutive Attacks on Its Commanders in Syria

The precise targeting of the building annexed to the Iranian embassy in Damascus, coupled with the strategic elimination of key military

leaders within the Iranian Quds Force hierarchy in Syria, has reignited concerns about potential security breaches regarding the whereabouts and activities of Iranian commanders in the region. Speculation surrounding the existence of such breaches, possibly originating from within Iran or through the IRGC's relations with Damascus, has surfaced before and has been articulated by notable Iranian figures such as former Commander of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the IRGC Hossein Alaei, former IRGC Commander Mohsen Rezaei, former Iranian President Ahmadinejad, and former Iranian Minister of Intelligence Ali Younesi. These concerns underscore the perceived threat of Israeli intelligence infiltration targeting Iranian officials. Furthermore, the precision and efficacy of the recent strikes have prompted warnings regarding the potential presence of field operatives within Syria, pointing the blame at the Syrian government and security services for leaking accurate and specific information about the movements and locations of Iranian targets to Israel. These suspicions have grown since the previous assassinations targeting Iranian figures like Reza Mousavi and Hojatollah Omidvar, and the recent targeting of Zahedi and Rahimi.

Iranian Retaliation Options

Iran's response to the recent Israeli targeting operations appears consistent with its previous reactions to similar incidents. Tehran officials have largely articulated a stance of assessing response options and subsequently implementing them in alignment with their proposed strategies. Therefore, several potential courses of action for Iranian responses can be anticipated in this regard:

- A direct response: This does not necessarily imply action within Israel's borders. Iran is wary of being drawn into direct confrontation with Israel, particularly as Israel's recent operation seems intent on pushing boundaries and showcasing its preparedness for engagement on any front, even beyond its own territory. Therefore, the direct Iranian response might involve targeting Israeli interests elsewhere. This could include actions such as attacking Israeli ships in the Gulf or the Red Sea, striking Israeli diplomatic missions globally, or targeting the headquarters of Israeli intelligence services. This aligns

with Iran's previous actions, such as the January 2024 attack on Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan.

■ **Escalation Via Iran's Proxy Actors and Military Brigades in the Region:** This remains the most probable and favored option for Iran, with a likely timing proximity. It may involve selecting neighboring areas to Israel as strategic sites for launching missile strikes — on the latter's allies — or deploying drones, aligning with Iran's historical approach and its customary response to such situations. In response to the Israeli strikes, Iran has conducted several operations through its proxies. Despite maintaining relative calm in proxy attacks against US forces in Syria and Iraq since early February 2024, it is anticipated that Tehran will end this pause following the latest targeting of its consulate in Damascus and the killing of key field commanders in Syria. In the days ahead, Iran may resume targeting US interests in Syria (and possibly Iraq), possibly with prior knowledge on the US side. This assumption is bolstered by messages exchanged between the two parties following the attack, with Tehran conveying to Washington via the Swiss embassy its expectation that the United States accept responsibility, given its status as Israel's primary supporter. Conversely, [Washington has informed Tehran that it bears no responsibility for the attack](#), potentially signaling a mutual desire to mitigate tensions and minimize confrontation between the two parties. The Iraqi theater emerges as the likeliest ground for Iran's response compared to Syria, potentially leveraging recent targeting incidents to apply pressure on the US administration, notably ahead of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's scheduled visit to Washington in mid-April 2024. While conventional wisdom suggests that Iran's retaliation to the Syrian attack would involve military strikes against Israel from the same theater, significant hurdles exist. Foremost among these challenges is the Syrian government's stance, which refrains from direct involvement in the Israeli-Iranian conflict on its soil. This position has become increasingly apparent since the Gaza War, with official Syrian agencies limiting their response to issuing condemnatory statements and preventing significant military escalations along the southern front neighboring Israel.

■ **In search of a different response commensurate with the Israeli strike's impact and significance:** This realization is particularly

pressing for Iran, as it acknowledges that the regional dynamics could shift in Israel's favor if Tehran fails to respond differently to Israel's violation of the rules of engagement between them. The Iranian government faces mounting pressure to address domestic discontent and maintain its influence, especially amidst internal pressure and reactions from the Iranian public. Following the attack on its consulate in Syria, demonstrations erupted in Palestine Square in Tehran, underscoring popular demand for decisive action against Tel Aviv. However, several obstacles hinder such a response. These include the ongoing US warnings to Iran, emphasizing its reluctance to escalate tensions further in the region and holding Tehran accountable for any targeting of US interests. Additionally, Tehran's need to balance its interests and influence compels it to search for options that maximize gains while minimizing losses in the region. This entails steering clear of actions that could drag Israel into breaking the third and final level of the rules of engagement, leading to an all-out confrontation across all fronts, potentially even targeting Iranian territory.

In conclusion, this strike marks a significant development and potentially a new chapter in the ongoing confrontation between Israel and Iran, commonly referred to as the shadow wars. Several factors contribute to this assessment: firstly, the importance of the Iranian targets and the strategic location of the operation; secondly, the implications for the relationship between the IRGC and the Damascus authorities; and finally, the potential level of Iranian retaliation against Israel, which could escalate the conflict to new heights. However, both parties are likely to exercise restraint to prevent the situation from spiraling out of control, as neither side benefits from an uncontrolled escalation. Nevertheless, there are concerns that these attacks could trigger an unforeseen escalation of the conflict, with adverse repercussions for the region's stability.



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