

Does Israel Want a Wider War?

Provoking Iran is a strategy to distract from the ongoing slaughter of civilians in Gaza.

Israel's April 1 [attack](#) on Iranian diplomatic facilities in Damascus, Syria, and Iran's [retaliatory attack](#) on Israel less than two weeks later has resulted in no winners—and opened the door to a wider, more disastrous war. The initial Israeli attack killed top commanders of the Quds Force, the notorious foreign operations arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, which have led Iran's [proxy forces](#) in Syria and Iraq and have worked closely with the [Lebanese Hezbollah](#). Although there are certainly victims of Iranian military operations who are not sorry for the commanders' demise, diplomatic facilities are, [legally speaking](#), the sovereign territory of the country they represent. Israel's attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus was, therefore, an attack on Iran.

While the [Biden Administration](#) and [Congressional leaders](#) have roundly condemned Iran's strikes against Israel, virtually none seem to acknowledge that Israel struck first. This is particularly ironic in light of the U.S. obsession with Iranians violating the sanctity of U.S. diplomatic facilities when a state-sanctioned mob [seized](#) the United States Embassy in Iran in 1979. Even though they illegally held American hostages for 444 days, no one was killed.

For decades, Israel has been engaged in a [shadow war](#) with Iran, which—despite being more than 600 miles from Israel—has emerged as its most dangerous adversary. [Assassinations](#) of Iranian military leaders, intelligence officials, and nuclear scientists, [cyberwarfare](#), and other attacks, were met with both [inflammatory rhetoric](#) from Iran, as well as support for Hezbollah and other militant groups that would occasionally engage in military confrontations with Israel.

Despite all this, Iran never attacked Israel directly—until now. The unprecedented action by Iran this past weekend was the first time any state has attacked Israeli soil since Iraq lobbed forty-two [Scud missiles](#) into that country during the 1991 Gulf War. And, for the first time, U.S. forces have directly intervened in support of Israel in a military confrontation, [shooting down](#) a number of cruise missiles bound for Israel while they were flying over Jordanian and Iraqi airspace.

The highly [nationalistic](#) Iranian public, despite becoming increasingly [alienated](#) from their repressive regime, appears to be largely [supportive](#) of their government finally striking back after months and years of Israeli provocations. This confrontation unfortunately appears to have therefore strengthened the regime.

Iran, Hezbollah, and allied groups have no interest in taking on Israel in a full-scale war where they would face massive destruction by Israel's vastly [superior](#) military forces. Iran has hundreds of powerful [ballistic missiles](#) it could have sent into Israel with devastating results, yet it chose to primarily launch drones and cruise missiles, knowing they would be mostly intercepted. Their targets included Israeli military installations, not major cities. Iran has [made clear](#) that this attack was the country's only act of retaliation and that it would not attack Israel again unless it was attacked first.

Similarly, Israel has been [bombing](#) Hezbollah targets in Lebanon and Syria repeatedly since October, resulting in large numbers of casualties, only to be met with no more than an occasional rocket fired into northern Israel creating minimal damage, while Hezbollah keeps its own sizable arsenal of missiles in reserve.

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During the past six months, Iran and its extremist allies have been winning politically by simply holding back and watching the Islamic world become increasingly radicalized. This occurs as people witness Israel's ongoing slaughter of Muslims in Gaza with the support of the United States and other Western nations. A broader military conflict would do them little good.

Israel, by contrast, very much wants a confrontation with Iran. When the primary Middle East conflict is seen as Israel versus Palestine, most people—even in the United States—are more sympathetic to the Palestinians. If it is seen as Israel versus Iran, there is [greater sympathy](#) for Israel. Hence, it is in Israel's interest to provoke a confrontation with Iran and, for the sake of the Palestinians, it's important for Iran not to take the bait.

We have seen how, in the days since Iran's attack on Israel, there has been little attention given to Israel's ongoing bombing of civilian targets in Gaza. None of the 70,000 tons of explosives dropped on crowded urban areas since October 7 were intercepted. Nor has there been much attention on Israel's illegal blocking of necessary food aid and the resulting starvation. Nor have there been any more protests in Israel by supporters of the hostages pressing Netanyahu to make the necessary compromises for their release.

In the United States, Biden Administration officials and Democratic Congressional leaders—who were finally appearing to be getting [bolder](#) in their criticism of Israeli war crimes in Gaza—have been largely silenced and are, instead, underscoring their “ironclad” commitment to Israel. Meanwhile, Republicans, along with Democratic hawks, are trying to blame even the timid expressions of disapproval regarding Israeli atrocities and calls to condition offensive military aid, as somehow emboldening Iran to attack.

While the recent confrontation has brought President Joe Biden [closer](#) to Israel, his administration has made clear its [objections](#) to Israel going to war with Iran—insisting that while Washington was still committed to defending Israel from attack, the United States would not participate in any military actions targeting Iran. They recognize that a broader war would open U.S. forces in the region to attacks by Iran and its allied militias. It could also very likely interrupt shipping in the Persian Gulf, the source of a large percentage of the world's oil, thereby having a devastating impact on the global economy.

Despite this, there are those in Congress who would like to see the United States join Israel in a war against Iran, even if Israel initiates it. As far back as 2013, a large bipartisan majority in the Senate [went on record](#) in 2013 calling on the United States to provide military support for Israel in case it is “compelled to take military action.”

Still, Biden is likely to apply Washington's considerable leverage on Israel to prevent an all-out war with Iran, since he recognizes how it would harm U.S. interests. It is unfortunate that he still refuses to apply that same leverage to prevent Israel from its ongoing slaughter of Palestinian civilians in Gaza.