IRAN-ISRAEL CONFLICT
A NEW STAGE EMERGES

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Abstract

After Iran's strike against Israel on April 13th, the intensifying rivalry between Iran and Israel has escalated into a new stage of direct confrontation, marked by significant military engagements with profound implications for regional stability and global security. This paper explores the shift from proxy conflicts to direct actions, including Iran's missile and drone assaults and Israel's retaliatory strikes. It examines the redefined engagement rules, the ensuing arms race, and the transformation of international relations, particularly involving major powers like Russia and China. Additionally, it highlights the potential impacts on the United States, including risks to troops and the likelihood of a broader conflict, as well as the possibility of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. The paper concludes with policy recommendations to navigate the complexities of this evolving geopolitical landscape.

Key Words

Iran, Israel, Middle East, United States, April 13, April 18, Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)
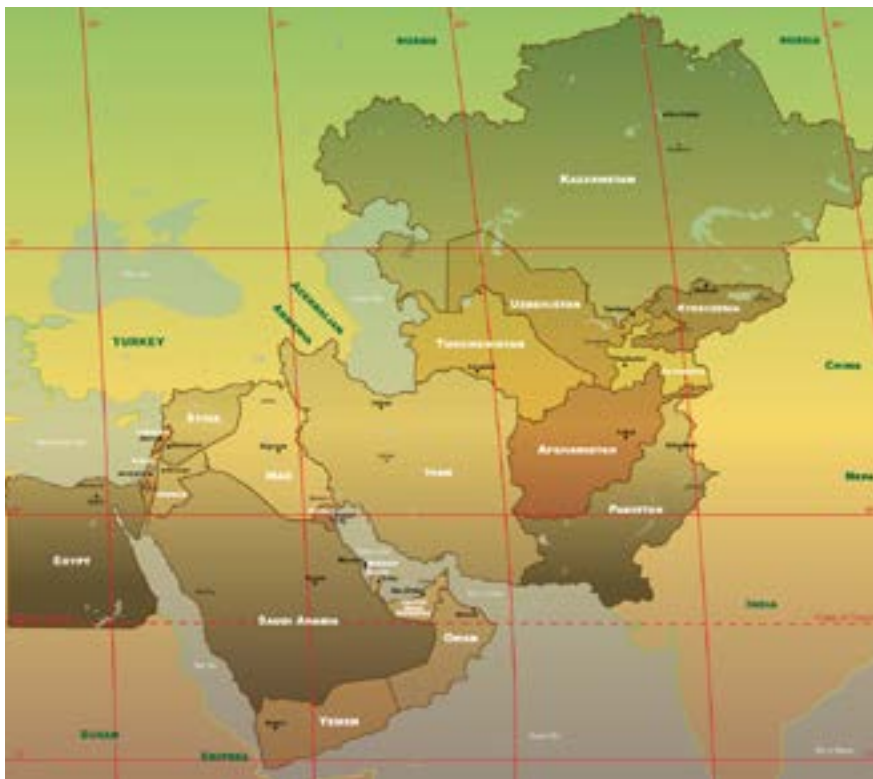
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Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East has long been shaped by the rivalry between Iran and Israel, a conflict rooted in deep-seated political, religious, and territorial disputes. In recent years, this rivalry has intensified, marked notably by Iran's expanding military footprint in Syria. According to Israeli intelligence, Iran now operates thirteen bases in Syria manned by five divisions of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).[1] Additionally, it has established a brand-new proxy unit known as the Al-Hussein Division to specifically operate in Syria.[2] This expansion is perceived by Israel as a direct threat to its security, prompting a series of pre-emptive strikes on Iranian positions in Syria, the most severe of which recently targeted the Iranian consulate in Damascus, resulting in the deaths of seven military officers, including three senior commanders.[3]

In retaliation, Iran, alongside its proxies from Iraq and the Houthi rebels in Yemen, launched a coordinated attack against Israel on April 13th. This unprecedented assault involved more than 300 ballistic missiles, drones, and cruise missiles, signaling a significant shift in Iran's approach to its conflict with Israel.[4] Just days later on April 18th, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) responded with a bold strike on a air defense radar site in Isfahan deep within Iranian territory, underscoring a new phase in the conflict where direct engagements might become the norm.[5]

While the geographical barriers between Iran and Israel, which are not direct neighbors, prevent the likelihood of a full-scale ground war, the recent exchanges mark a significant escalation in the confrontation. This could lead to a major aerial conflict and Israel's engagement in ground warfare with Iran's proxies, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and forces in Syria. Such developments might draw the United States into a broader conflict with Iran. This research paper aims to analyze the impact of these strikes on the nature of the rivalry, explore future scenarios, assess the implications for the United States, and provide policy recommendations for U.S. engagement in the region. Through this examination, we will better understand the dynamics at play and the potential pathways forward in this increasingly volatile conflict.

Figure 1: Source Data from the United States Central Command (CENTCOM)[6] Area of Responsibility

The Major Long-Term Impact of Strikes on the Nature of the Iran-Israel Rivalry

The direct confrontations between Iran and Israel in April 2024 mark a significant departure from the longstanding pattern of proxy warfare that has characterized their rivalry. For the first time, the two nations have engaged each other openly, signaling a pivotal shift in the nature of their conflict. This direct engagement has reshaped the strategic calculus on both sides, altering the military, political, and diplomatic trajectories. This section explores the profound impact these strikes have had on the dynamics of the Iran-Israel rivalry, to understand they might redefine future interactions between Iran and Israel and forecast the potential ramifications for the broader Middle East.

1. Redefinition of Engagement Rules

The longstanding unofficial rule that prevented direct territorial assaults between Iran and Israel has been decisively violated. This significant escalation sets a new precedent, potentially leading to more open and direct confrontations. This shift not only increases the risk of a broader regional conflict but also fundamentally alters each nation's security and the general trajectory of their military development. For example, while the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) successfully intercepted a large number of projectiles launched by Iran, concerns remain about scenarios in which Iran could launch a greater number, possibly accompanied by thousands of rockets from Hezbollah, or situations in which allies may not be as active as they were on April 13. Such developments might prompt Israel to enhance its long-range defensive capabilities to protect against deep strikes within its territory, while Iran might prioritize the development of more sophisticated offensive technologies to penetrate Israeli defenses. This enhancement of long-range defensive capabilities, while primarily protective, allows for a proactive posture by enabling preemptive actions against potential threats. This strategic adjustment, primarily defensive, supports readiness for direct engagements without explicitly adopting an aggressive stance.

2. Escalation in Arms Race

In response to the increasing direct threats, Israel, Iran, and other regional rivals, including the Arab States of the Persian Gulf, are likely to accelerate their arms development and procurement strategies. This arms race will particularly emphasize advancements in aerial offensive and defensive capabilities, as demonstrated by the recent exchanges. Expectations are that Israel will continue to innovate in drone technology and air defense systems, such as enhancements to the Iron Dome and David's Sling, while Iran might accelerate its own missile development and drone warfare capabilities. This arms race could extend to cyber warfare, where nations in the region are already active and capable contenders, seeking to undermine each other's technological and strategic advantages without engaging in direct military confrontations. Such maneuvers could significantly shift the strategic balance in the region, compelling both countries to pursue innovative solutions and secure a technological edge.

3. Transforming the Dynamics of Russia and China's Relations with Iran and Israel

The intensification of the conflict influences the diplomatic and strategic calculations of non-western major global players like Russia and China. While these countries might boost Iran's defenses by supplying advanced fighter jets and air defense systems, they may also reconsider their positions based on Israel's military efficacy and concerns about Iran's aggressive tactics. Russia, with its established military presence in Syria, might be compelled to reconsider its stance to avoid escalation that could threaten its position in the Middle East. China, seeking stability for its Belt and Road Initiative, might

find increased unpredictability in Iran's actions problematic. Both powers might engage in diplomatic maneuvers to either bolster their standing or prevent further escalation, which could include more robust military support or calls for international mediation.

4. Influence in the Muslim World

Iran's aggressive military actions, particularly amidst the ongoing conflict in Gaza, will likely enhance its standing among Islamic communities, pitching it as a formidable force against what they perceive as aggressions by Israel. Simply, as Saudi Arabia focuses on domestic reforms and improving relations with the West, and Jordan maintains a cooperative security relationship with Israel, Iran is seizing an opportunity to assert itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause. By taking aggressive action against Israel, Iran aims to cultivate its image as a leading advocate for Palestinian rights, a position that resonates deeply within the Arab world. This strategic move could significantly enhance Iran's soft power, potentially threatening Saudi Arabia's influence in the region. Despite their own considerable interests in the Palestinian issue, Saudi Arabia's and Jordan's relatively milder stance towards Israel might be perceived by some as a lack of leadership on this critical regional matter. Iran's assertive posture could, therefore, attract support from both state and non-state actors who prioritize the Palestinian cause, reshaping the traditional power dynamics and possibly reorienting alliances within the Middle East.

5. Regional Alignments and Repercussions

The repercussions of Iran's strikes are likely to influence its relationships with neighboring countries, particularly Syria and Jordan. Syria's government, weakened by years of civil war and reliant on Iranian support, faces a precarious balance. On one hand, it must accommodate Iranian strategic interests; on the other, it needs to avoid further Israeli strikes. This delicate situation may compel Syria to reassess its alliance with Iran, especially given the risks of becoming a battleground for Iran-Israel conflicts. Similarly, Jordan's role as a frontline buffer in defending Israel might empower it to leverage its position in bilateral issues, including negotiations concerning Gaza, potentially altering its diplomatic engagements with Israel.[6]

6. Domestic Politics in Jordan

Jordan's internal dynamics could be significantly impacted due to its geopolitical maneuvers. With a large Palestinian population and prevailing pro-Palestine sentiment among its citizens, Jordan's active defense role in favor of Israel could exacerbate tensions within the kingdom.[7] The kingdom's efforts to maintain stability and security may be compromised if the public perceives the government as too closely aligned with Israeli interests. This involvement risks widening the gap between the Jordanian state and its people, potentially leading to unrest and challenging the monarchy's ability to maintain control without resorting to repressive measures. This could, in turn, attract international criticism and affect its relationships with Western nations.

Possible Scenarios in the Escalation of the Iran-Israel Rivalry

As tensions between Iran and Israel continue to escalate, the future trajectory of their rivalry remains highly uncertain, colored by a complex tapestry of geopolitical, military, and diplomatic factors. This section explores the spectrum of possible outcomes, ranging from the most optimistic scenarios involving diplomatic breakthroughs to dire situations characterized by extensive military confrontations. Each scenario reflects not only the potential actions and reactions of Iran and Israel themselves but also the involvement of international stakeholders who might influence the rivalry's direction. By analyzing these scenarios from positive to extreme negative, we aim to illustrate the breadth of possible developments in this volatile conflict, providing insights into how each could unfold and the implications for regional and global stability.

Scenarios

Scenario 1: Diplomatic De-escalation by Iran

In this scenario, Iran, recognizing the brinkmanship's risks leading to an all-out war with Israel, opts for a strategic de-escalation. The Iranian leadership initiates back-channel communications with Western powers, signaling a willingness to negotiate key issues. This includes reducing uranium enrichment to levels agreed upon in previous international deals, and restraining proxy activities in the region, particularly by Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. As part of this de-escalation, Iran might also propose new terms for international inspections of its nuclear sites to build trust and reduce tensions. The successful negotiation could lead to a lifting of some economic sanctions, providing Iran with crucial economic relief and signaling a shift towards more stable regional dynamics.

Scenario 2: Military Fortification without De-escalation

Conversely, Iran may choose not to de-escalate tensions through diplomacy but instead rapidly enhance its military capabilities. In this scenario, Iran intensifies its efforts to acquire sophisticated air defense systems and advanced fighters from allies like Russia and China. This military buildup is not necessarily aimed at preparing for immediate conflict but serves as a deterrent by significantly raising the potential costs of an Israeli or American strike on Iranian assets. This scenario likely heightens tensions in the region, as Israel and the United States may respond with their own military enhancements and strategic positioning, potentially leading to an arms race that further destabilizes the Middle East.

Scenario 3: Enhancement of Iran's Offensive Capabilities

In this scenario, Iran chooses to significantly ramp up its offensive military capabilities without directly engaging Israel or Western interests in the region. Iran's strategy includes diversifying and advancing its arsenal of cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and drones. Furthermore, Iran may seek to bolster its strategic capabilities by investing in space technology, such as launching new satellites, which would aid in the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). This move significantly escalates the regional arms race, prompting neighboring countries and global powers to reassess their own security and defense strategies. While Iran maintains a posture of restraint to avoid direct confrontations, this strategy leads to heightened tensions and necessitates a reassessment of security and defense strategies by both neighboring countries and global powers. The arms race intensifies, potentially destabilizing the region further as each state seeks to counterbalance Iran's growing military prowess.

Scenario 4: Iran's Military Buildup in Response to Vulnerabilities

Reacting to the realization that its territory and existing aerial defenses are vulnerable to Israeli strikes, Iran opts to enhance its military presence and capabilities in Iraq and Syria. This includes deploying additional troops, constructing new missile launcher stations, and improving radar and air defense systems. The strategic goal is to create a more robust buffer zone that can deter or respond to Israeli actions. This significant military buildup pressures Israel to increase its preemptive and retaliatory strikes, potentially leading to a cycle of escalation reminiscent of the aftermath of the attack on Iran's embassy in Damascus. This scenario could destabilize not just the immediate areas but also have broader implications for regional security, drawing in international involvement to prevent further escalation.

Scenario 5: Proxy Engagement to Pressure the US and Israel

To manage the conflict dynamics and pressure the United States to remain neutral, Iran might strategically use its regional proxies to escalate hostilities without directly engaging Israeli forces. By triggering its proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen to increase their attacks against US and Israeli interests, Iran aims to create a sustained level of harassment across the region. Although not seeking a full-scale war, this strategy could lead to significant casualties and strategic setbacks, as exemplified by the attacks on US military bases in Jordan. This approach is designed to complicate any direct response by the US and Israel, making it harder for them to justify a full-scale retaliation without entering a broader conflict. It also serves as a means for Iran to assert its influence indirectly while avoiding the direct costs of warfare.

Scenario 6: Escalation to Semi-Direct Confrontation

As military buildups continue and proxy activities intensify, the situation may evolve into a "semi-direct confrontation." In this scenario, Israel could decide to preemptively strike Iranian bases and infrastructure in Syria and Iraq to curtail Iran's ability to project power and coordinate proxy attacks. In retaliation, Iran might command its proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and via the Houthis to launch concerted attacks against Israeli targets. The renewed Houthis' attacks in the Red Sea against international shipments indicate that Tehran is no shy of employing them. Additionally, Iran could escalate its maritime operations in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean, targeting Israeli or international shipping lanes to disrupt economic activities and signal its readiness to broaden the conflict. This scenario risks a significant escalation that could draw in other regional players and global powers, leading to an unpredictable and volatile conflict dynamic.

Scenario 7: Full-Capacity Proxy War Initiated by Hezbollah

In this scenario, Iran decides to escalate the conflict indirectly by activating Hezbollah to engage in full-scale warfare against Israel. Iran's strategic calculation here is to inflict such a high cost on Israel through prolonged and intense conflict that, even if Israel emerges victorious, the devastation and resource depletion would deter it from future aggressive actions against Iranian interests. This strategy hinges on Hezbollah's ability to sustain a long-term conflict and the assumption that the international community might limit its intervention to diplomatic pressure rather than military involvement. The risk for Iran is significant; if Hezbollah is significantly weakened or defeated, Iran's influence in Lebanon and its deterrent capabilities against Israel could be severely compromised. In addition, given

to Hezbollah's growing role in other aspects of Iran's regional activities, including in Syria or Iraq, the decline of its capability as an outcome of war with Israel, could undermine Iran's regional influence on a great extent.

Scenario 8: Tit-for-Tat Limited Military Engagements

After exhausting other strategies, both Iran and Israel might settle into a pattern of intermittent, limited military engagements. This scenario would involve sporadic attacks targeting military bases, naval and commercial vessels, industrial projects, and critical infrastructure. Each side would aim to assert dominance and deterrence without triggering a full-scale war. This approach allows both nations to manage the intensity of the conflict and avoid the international backlash that a larger war would likely provoke. However, the inherent danger in this strategy is the potential for miscalculation or an unexpectedly effective attack leading to rapid escalation, pushing both countries into a larger conflict neither initially wanted.
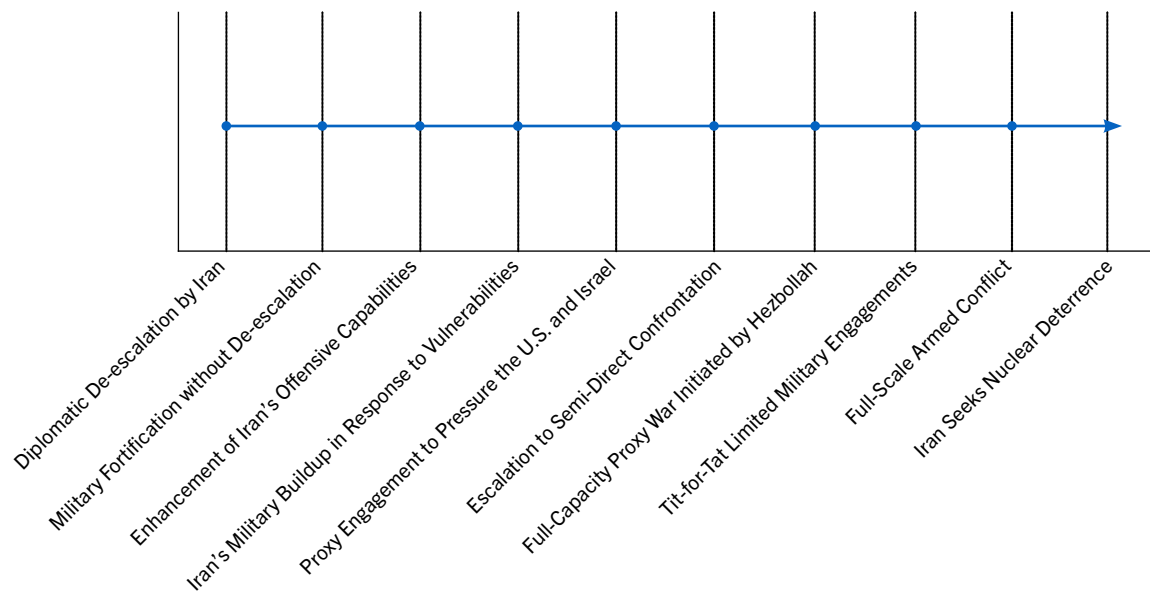
Scenario 9: Full-Scale Armed Conflict

In this scenario, the cumulative effects of limited confrontations, proxy wars, or other escalating actions inadvertently lead to a full-scale armed conflict between Iran and Israel. Despite initial intentions from both sides to control and contain their engagements, the continual tit-for-tat strikes, combined with possible miscommunications, miscalculations, or particularly devastating attacks, spiral out of control. The conflict could rapidly expand as both nations deploy their full military capabilities, including extensive air strikes, missile barrages, and possibly naval engagements in strategic waterways like the Strait of Hormuz. The involvement of allies, regional instability, and the disruption of global oil supplies could compel international intervention, potentially by the United Nations or a coalition of major powers, to restore stability and prevent a broader regional war.

Scenario 10: Iran Seeks Nuclear Deterrence

Following significant military setbacks and realizing the strategic disadvantage against Israel and its allies, Iran might conclude that its conventional military capabilities are insufficient to guarantee national security. The events of April 13 and April 18, where Iran saw the effectiveness of Israeli and allied countermeasures against its attacks and the vulnerability of its own defenses, could be pivotal moments leading Iran to alter its nuclear policy. In this scenario, Iran decides to pursue the development of nuclear weapons as a last resort security measure. This decision would be driven by the perception that only a nuclear deterrent would ensure its regime's survival against perceived existential threats. Such a move would drastically escalate tensions in the region, prompting severe responses from the international community, including possible sanctions or preemptive strikes by the United States, Israel, or a coalition, aiming to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions before it achieves weaponization.

Escalation Spectrum: From Least to Most Intense Scenarios in the Iran-Israel Rivalry

Diplomatic De-escalation by Iran

Military Fortification without De-escalation

Enhancement of Iran's Offensive Capabilities

Iran's Military Buildup in Response to Vulnerabilities

Proxy Engagement to Pressure the U.S. and Israel

Escalation to Semi-Direct Confrontation

Full-Capacity Proxy War Initiated by Hezbollah

Tit-for-Tat Limited Military Engagements

Full-Scale Armed Conflict

Iran Seeks Nuclear Deterrence

Combinations and Hybrids

Lastly, it is crucial to recognize that these are not mutually exclusive and the actual course of events may involve combinations of different scenarios. The dynamic and fluid nature of geopolitical conflicts means that elements from multiple scenarios could manifest simultaneously or sequentially, influencing the trajectory of the rivalry in complex ways. For instance, a period of limited military engagements (Scenario 8) might escalate into a full-scale armed conflict (Scenario 9) under certain triggers, such as a misjudgment or an unexpectedly effective attack. Additionally, the situation could evolve in a manner that lies in between outlined scenarios, reflecting a hybrid of strategic decisions and reactions from both sides. It is also possible that Iran would employ its proxies (Scenario 6&7) not only to challenge Israel, but also to distract Israel and its western allies, especially United States, from its nuclear program to move forward manufacturing a nuclear bomb and establishing a nuclear deterrence (Scenario 10). The circumstances are likely to have a mobile nature, with the conflict potentially moving from one scenario to another as new information becomes available and as the domestic and international contexts change. Thus, while the scenarios provided offer a structured framework for understanding potential developments, the actual unfolding of events will likely be more fluid, requiring continuous reassessment of the situation and flexible policy responses.

Implications for the United States

The Middle East holds enduring strategic importance for the United States, not only due to the region's vast energy resources but also because of its important position in global security dynamics. Despite the U.S. achieving relative energy independence, the reliance of its key allies on Middle Eastern oil links America's economic and geopolitical interests to regional stability.[8] Historically, events such as the 9/11 attacks, the rise of ISIS in 2013, and the recent activities of ISIS-K have underscored how instability in the Middle East can have direct and far-reaching impacts on international stability.[9] In light of these precedents, it is critical to assess the specific implications of recent developments for the U.S. in the Iran-Israel rivalry, especially considering the potential for escalation and the broader geopolitical repercussions. This section will explore how these events might affect U.S. strategic interests, its foreign policy posture, and its commitments in the region.

Implications

1. Increased Risk for U.S. Troops in Iraq and Syria

One immediate implication of the escalating Iran-Israel rivalry for the United States is the heightened risk to its troops stationed in Iraq and Syria. Iran's strategic use of proxy forces, such as Shia militias, has been a consistent feature of its regional policy. These proxies serve as both a tool of pressure and a means of retaliation against U.S. interests and allies, including Israel. Given the events of April 13, which highlighted the potential role of U.S. forces in bolstering Israel's security, there is a substantial likelihood that Iran could direct its proxies to intensify harassment or direct attacks on U.S. personnel. Such actions would aim to undermine U.S. operational capabilities and deter further U.S. support for Israeli military actions, thereby complicating America's strategic operations and increasing the cost of its continued presence in these countries.

2. Rise of Maritime Challenges in Key Waterways

Another significant implication involves the potential for increased maritime confrontations. As tensions escalate, Iran might seek to leverage its ability to disrupt critical maritime routes in the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and the Red Sea through direct attacks or proxy actions via the Houthis. Such strategies would likely target commercial shipping and especially oil tankers, aiming to pressure Western nations by threatening global oil supplies and raising insurance costs for shipping in these key waterways, through which 30% of world's container traffic passes.[10] This form of asymmetric warfare is designed to extend Iran's influence in the Red Sea, giving Tehran hope that by strategically escalating activities, Iran can create market disruptions for the United States and its allies, and could ultimately pressure these nations to reconsider their support for Israel or their involvement in the region. For the U.S., securing these maritime routes is crucial not only for the global economy but also for maintaining the strategic balance in the region and ensuring the flow of energy resources to its allies.

3. Growing Threats Against Regional Allies

The active defense of Israel by Jordan in the face of Iranian attacks not only highlights the potential for increased military cooperation among U.S. allies but also poses significant risks of political backlash within Jordan itself. Jordan's involvement could incite internal dissent, given its large Palestinian population and prevalent pro-Palestinian sentiments, potentially leading to unrest. Moreover, Iran's recognition of Jordan's strategic role might make it a direct target in future confrontations, increasing the security risks for the kingdom. Simultaneously, Iran could leverage its influence with proxies to destabilize other parts of the Arabian Peninsula, further complicating the security landscape for the United States and its allies. Such developments would necessitate a more active U.S. role in bolstering the defense capabilities of these allies, potentially requiring increased military presence and assistance in the region to deter Iranian aggression and maintain stability.

4. Growth of Security-Guarantee Demands and Increased Likelihood of U.S. Involvement in the Middle East

The large and diverse scale of Iran's aerial attacks, as evidenced on April 13, has significantly heightened security concerns among U.S. allies in the region, particularly those near Iran like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These nations, unlike Israel with its advanced missile defense system, face shorter reaction times due to their proximity to Iran and the vastness of their territories makes them vulnerable to widespread aerial attacks. This growing threat may prompt these countries to demand stronger security guarantees from the United States,

encompassing advanced defensive technologies, enhanced intelligence sharing, and a more pronounced military commitment. These escalated demands could put additional pressure on U.S. resources and shift its strategic priorities in the region. Furthermore, the escalating tensions that have brought Iran and Israel to the brink of war highlight a volatile situation that could inadvertently draw the United States into conflict. The persistent sources of tension, including territorial disputes and proxy conflicts, maintain a high risk of future confrontations that could necessitate U.S. involvement, either through direct military action or as part of an international coalition to restore stability. This deepening commitment to regional security significantly increases the likelihood of American military engagement in the Middle East, potentially against Iran or its proxies.

5. Nuclear/WMD Proliferation

The effectiveness of Israeli and allied responses to Iranian attacks, coupled with the overwhelming military superiority of the United States, could prompt Iran to seek a nuclear deterrent as a security guarantee. Currently, there is no evidence of technical developments in Iran's enrichment facilities that would suggest the country is moving toward building a nuclear weapon. However, the recent escalation with Iran over its aerial strike on Israel has highlighted other areas of tension with the Islamic Republic, notably its nuclear project. As General (Ret.) Frank McKenzie suggests, "What is clear is that Iran's leadership's temptation to acquire a nuclear weapon has not lessened since the day before the exchange of strikes."[11]

However, it is needless to say that any move towards nuclear armament could set off a chain reaction across the region, with other countries like Saudi Arabia and potentially Turkey considering similar steps to ensure their national security. The prospect of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East presents a dire scenario for global security, compelling the United States to intensify its diplomatic efforts and possibly reevaluate its approach to nuclear non-proliferation. The statement by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, indicating that Saudi Arabia would pursue nuclear capabilities if Iran developed a nuclear weapon, highlights the precarious balance of power and the critical role of U.S. policy in preventing a destabilizing arms race.[12]

Takeaways from the Recent Exchange of Strikes

The recent exchange of strikes between Iran and Israel has not only marked a new phase in their long-standing rivalry but also brought to light several critical insights into the current state and potential future of regional security dynamics. The following points demonstrate the primary takeaways from the confrontation.

1- Iran's Bold and Reckless Tactics

The recent strikes reveal a significant shift in Iran's military strategy, showing that the Islamic Republic can act bolder and more recklessly than previously anticipated. This behavior is indicative of Iran's growing confidence in its military capabilities and its willingness to engage directly in conflicts that escalate regional tensions. This development suggests a need for recalibrating diplomatic and military strategies by regional actors and international stakeholders to address Iran's unpredictable actions effectively.

2- Unsustainable Military Presence in Syria

Iran's extensive military presence in Syria has been a major factor in the regional power dynamics and the ongoing conflict. The recent strikes underscore the untenability of this status quo, highlighting how Iran's entrenched position in Syria serves as a catalyst for further escalation. This situation demands a concerted

international effort to negotiate a reduction in foreign military footprints in Syria, which could otherwise lead to broader regional instability.

3- Vulnerabilities in Iran's Air Defense

IDF success in hitting a military airfield in middle of Iran's territory have exposed significant vulnerabilities in Iran's air defense systems. Despite having a substantial military investment, Iran has struggled to maintain a comprehensive and effective defense against aerial incursions on its mainland. This weakness poses serious questions about Iran's capability to protect its territory from sophisticated missile and drone attacks, suggesting that Iran may need to reassess and possibly upgrade its air defense strategy and systems.

4- Effectiveness of U.S. Regional Defense Initiatives

The effectiveness of U.S.-led efforts to bolster the aerial defense capabilities of regional partners has been highlighted by the interception and neutralization of most of the Iranian projectiles during the recent strikes. This success validates the U.S. endeavor to build military partnerships and enhance the defensive capabilities of international and regional allies. It demonstrates the strategic value of these partnerships, not only in preventing Iranian aggression but also in promoting regional security and stability.

Despite the U.S. and its allies' success in neutralizing a significant number of Iranian projectiles, some argue that in the event of a full-scale war between Iran and Israel, there would be no guarantee that Israel and its allies could replicate the success of April 13th. Under such circumstances, Iran could deploy its entire aerial arsenal, including 3,000 ballistic missiles, potentially overwhelming Israel and its allies' air defenses in terms of capacity and speed. In response to these arguments, General (Ret.) Frank McKenzie, the former commander of U.S. CENTCOM, suggested that "while Iran possesses approximately 3,000 ballistic missiles, it has a limited number of missile launchers, in the low hundreds. This means that Iran cannot launch its entire long-range arsenal simultaneously. After the first wave of attacks, the launchers would need to be reloaded, a process that involves delivering missiles from their storage bases. This movement to reload the launchers would not only expose them to Israel and its allies but also requires time, allowing Israel and its allies a sufficient window to recharge their defenses."[13]

Navigating the Future: Policy Directions for U.S. Involvement in the Middle East

In light of the recent developments in the Iran-Israel rivalry and the broader Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape, it is imperative for the United States to reassess and refine its strategic approach. This section outlines a series of policy recommendations designed to strengthen regional stability, enhance the defense capabilities of U.S. allies, and clearly define U.S. foreign policy boundaries.

1- Further Moves to Establish Comprehensive Defense Agreements with Regional Allies

As detailed in an article in the Wall Street Journal authored by General McKenzie, Israel, aided by the U.S., the U.K., and other regional nations, was largely successful in thwarting Iran's "maximum effort" to inflict major damage on Israeli targets and restored deterrence.[14] However, to further enhance regional security, it is recommended that establishing comprehensive defense agreements with these countries will help formalize support, ensuring a sustainable and effective defense partnership.

2- Increasing U.S. Active Military Presence in the Persian Gulf

To strengthen both aerial defensive capabilities and rapid response mechanisms, the U.S. should increase its military presence in the Persian Gulf. This can be achieved by deploying additional naval forces, including aircraft carriers and submarines, which will enhance maritime security and deter potential aggressions. Regular

joint military exercises with regional partners will also demonstrate the U.S.'s commitment to maintaining stability in the region.

3- Managing Political Expectations of Arab Allies on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

The U.S. should work with its Arab allies to set realistic diplomatic goals concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. By advocating for expectations that align with the current political climate, the U.S. can help prevent the widening of social gaps between governments and their populations. Initiating dialogues and workshops to bridge understanding and reduce tensions related to the conflict will also contribute to regional stability.

4- Strengthening Financial and Political Support for the Jordanian Government

As mentioned throughout this paper, the recent escalation between Iran and Israel has highlighted the important role of the Kingdom of Jordan in regional stability. However, it also has the potential to trigger a chain of unrest within the Kingdom. In this context, General (Ret.) Frank McKenzie suggested, "It is vital to support the Jordanian government in maintaining domestic stability and addressing regional challenges. The U.S. and its allies should increase their financial and political assistance."[15] This could include heightened economic aid focused on critical infrastructure, healthcare, and education sectors. Additionally, enhancing security cooperation through targeted assistance in counterterrorism efforts and border security enhancements will fortify Jordan's position both internally and regionally.

5- Defining and Enforcing Clear U.S. Foreign Policy Boundaries

It is crucial for the U.S. to clearly articulate its foreign policy boundaries to both allies and adversaries. This can be accomplished through diplomatic channels and public declarations, outlining what the U.S. expects, what it will tolerate, and what it will not. A framework for swift diplomatic or military responses to any breaches of these boundaries should also be implemented to maintain regional order and deter violations.

6- Investing in Cost-Effective Air Defense System

The U.S. should prioritize investments in air defense systems that offer lower operational costs, such as advanced drone technology and laser defense systems. These systems not only provide cost-effective defense options but also ensure long-term savings and operational efficiency in potentially hostile environments. This strategic focus will enhance the U.S.'s defensive posture while ensuring adaptability to emerging threats.

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