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‘Iran still does not want a total escalation’

Ralf Melzer on Tehran’s attack on Israel, a possible Israeli response and the threat posed by Hezbollah

This weekend, Iran attacked Israel directly for the first time. However, almost all of the more than 300 drones and cruise missiles were intercepted. How should this attack be assessed?

It was a massive attack and – precisely because it was Iran’s first direct attack on Israel – it represents a new quality. It is impressive how successfully the Israeli air defence system worked, as well as the coordination and cooperation with the other countries involved. This was the only way to prevent many casualties and massive damage. Despite its ferocity, this military attack was nevertheless measured. There were also prior announcements, and the first wave of attacks was carried out with relatively slow-flying drones, giving advance warning. This could be interpreted to mean that Iran still does not want a total escalation, but that it is primarily concerned with maintaining its power and influence in the region.

Is there a connection between this and Israel’s actions in Gaza?

The main connection is that Hamas wanted to use its terrorist attack on 7 October to force Hezbollah to join the war against Israel with its full military strength. Fortunately, this calculation did not materialise. Instead, Hezbollah Secretary-General Nasrallah has described the war in the Gaza Strip as a Palestinian affair. In Iran’s propagandistic attempts to justify the attack on Israel, Israel’s military action in the Gaza Strip and the humanitarian catastrophe there have – as far as I know – played no role.

The attack was a reaction to the killing of two generals and other members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard by a suspected Israeli air strike in Damascus at the beginning of April. Iran’s leadership has announced that the attack marks the end of the matter. Will Israel respond?

There are also voices in Israel calling for this. A reaction of some kind will probably follow. The government has made statements to this effect, although according to its own statements it has not yet decided what exactly this response would look like and when it would take place. International political pressure on Iran, in particular the inclusion of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard on the EU terror list, could have an influence on Israel's further actions.

Assuming Israel reacts prudently and is politically astute, the repulsed attack over the weekend could be turned into a strategic advantage. After all, in addition to the US and the UK, Jordan was also actively involved. Saudi Arabia and Egypt apparently also helped. This is precisely the strategic alliance that the Americans are working towards and which might also play an important role in a post-war scenario for the Gaza Strip. Saudi Arabia has also signalled that it will normalise relations with Israel in return for significant steps towards a two-state solution.

What could an Israeli response look like?

I am not a military expert, but there are certainly military facilities of Iran or its allies located outside Iranian territory that could be potential targets and where the regime in Tehran would not necessarily feel compelled to retaliate. But even if it is now hopefully possible to avoid further escalation, the core problem remains, namely the threat posed by Iran, which has officially committed itself to the destruction of the state of Israel. Although the escalation management on the northern front has been working to some extent since 7 October, there is no solution in sight to the confrontation with Iran and its proxies, particularly Hezbollah.

As long as the immediate threat near the Lebanese border persists and Hezbollah does not stop firing or at least retreat behind the Litani River, the tens of thousands of people who had to be evacuated in Israel will not be able to return to their homes. This is a situation that is impossible to maintain in the long term. From Israel's point of view, a constructive solution with the Iranian regime and Hezbollah is not possible. This is an analysis that is also shared by military and security experts from the left-wing political spectrum and the peace camp.

In a week's time, the week-long Passover holiday begins. Will this have an influence on the next steps?

No, I don't assume that Passover will have any particular influence on further developments. But it will of course be overshadowed by the very tense situation at the moment.

This interview was conducted by Kai Doering.



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