



## Iran and Israel Escalating to a New Level

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Iran, on 1 October, conducted its second missile strike on Israel this year, justifying it by the killing of the leader of Hezbollah and the Israeli operation in Lebanon. The scale and sophistication of the missiles used were bigger and greater than the attack on 13-14 April, which might spark far-reaching retaliation by Israel. Iran's approach to its rival and other hotspots in the region will be derivative of Israel's subsequent actions, Iran's own limitations, and its attempts to offer credible deterrence and rebuild its image as a leader within the "Axis of Resistance".

### Why did Iran strike Israel again?

In recent months, the government of [Iran has been unable to contain Israel's actions](#) aimed at weakening and dismantling the pro-Iran "Axis of Resistance" that includes Hamas, Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and Yemeni Houthis. Of primary importance to Iran's motivation is therefore the need to maintain its position and prestige, built up over four decades by creating and/or sponsoring radical movements and groups across the Middle East. Additional motivation for Iranian religious and military authorities are personal and family ties to some of the killed leaders of Hezbollah, which is [a factor absent in Iran-Hamas relations](#). Despite previous cautious reactions, the Iranian leadership now feels compelled to once again demonstrate the capabilities of Iran's missile arsenal as a key deterrent to Israel. Moreover, the Iranian regime is struggling with the challenge of preserving the image of stability in the face of external pressures and a restless society. As in April, Iran invoked its right to self-defence at the UN and tried to discourage, via bilateral channels, the U.S. and Arab countries from providing military assistance or diplomatic support to Israel.

### How was Iran's attack this time different from the one in April?

According to preliminary estimates, Iran used between 180 and 200 ballistic missiles in the latest strike, of which at least two dozen detonated at ground level in Israel, near selected targets that included intelligence, military, and

nuclear facilities. The only death in the latest strike was a Palestinian in the West Bank who was killed by a falling fuselage of an Iranian missile (in the earlier attack, 1 person was killed and 31 injured among a group of Israeli Bedouins). Following the [ineffectiveness militarily of the hours-long April strikes](#), Iran appears to have adapted its tactics and means of attack. This time, Iran decided not to use kamikaze drones or cruise missiles, which were relatively for Israel and its partners to intercept. Unlike the April strikes, this time Iran did not use missiles and drones supplied to Shiite militias in Yemen and Iraq. There are also indicators that the new strike involved fewer liquid-fuelled ballistic missiles, which require lengthy launch preparations (120 were used then) in favour of broader use of the *Fateh* family of missiles. These are solid-fuel types with a longer range and more precise warheads than the basic versions of these missiles. Iran's new tactics and missiles significantly complicated Israel's capabilities for early-warning, tracking, and defending missile salvos in the latest attack. During the new strike, the main burden of Israel's defence was assumed by the Arrow-3 system (interceptions of warheads in space), Arrow-2, and David's Sling (interceptions high in the atmosphere), supported again by [U.S. missile defence systems in the region](#) (Patriot and Aegis).

### How might the situation develop in the short-term?

Due to the larger scale and effectiveness of ballistic missiles used by Iran in recent strike, retaliation by Israel will likely be more far-reaching than in the first case. In April, Israel's

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response in Iran was limited by U.S. pressure to de-escalate and the attack was mainly symbolic, with only one radar site connected to S-300 systems protecting the nuclear centre in Isfahan destroyed. Israel's rhetoric towards Iran is now sharper, and its determination is more credible with every next airstrike in Syria and Yemen, as well as ongoing ground and special operations in Lebanon. According to media, Israel also conveyed to Tehran via Arab channels a threat to strike oil, military, and nuclear centres in Iran. Israeli calculations now may take less into account the position of the outgoing Biden administration. Contrary to speculation about Israel's selection of targets, Iran's nuclear centre at Fordow seems to be out of reach and well-prepared to withstand such strikes, and its silos and tunnels likely protect the majority of its long-range missile arsenal. On the other hand, Iran would have a problem if it sustained serious damage to its oil sector and in repelling a larger campaign of cyberattacks on its administrative and economic centres.

## **Has Iran-Israel rivalry entered a new phase?**

The strategic initiative currently is on the side of Israel. Although Iran has been reactive so far it is now willing to take

greater risks to save its influence and image in region. Open confrontation between Iran and Israel was previously curbed by geographical distance and various limitations of military capabilities on both sides. The already demonstrated strong determination of both rivals is, however, increasing the risk of a reoccurrence every few months of mutual exchanges of airstrikes by Israel and missile strikes by Iran, even if Israeli operations in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria were quickly ended. Moreover, depending on the scale and effects of such strikes, Iran may change its approach to its nuclear programme, which so far has been based on the capabilities to enrich uranium to higher levels but without moving to work on weaponisation and building operational warhead nuclear arsenal. Although [Iran declared its openness to nuclear negotiations with the U.S. and EU](#) before latest crisis, the low effectiveness of its conventional missile strikes on Israel may eventually prompt it [to resume work on nuclear weaponisation](#) to balance Israel's advanced capabilities. In this negative scenario, Iran's national security interests could even outweigh its interests in lifting the U.S. and EU sanctions that are hurting its economy.