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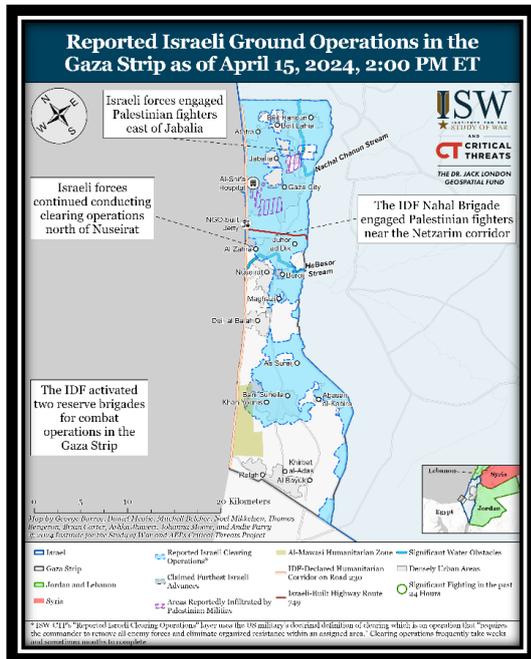
Israel-Hamas War Enters Seventh Month

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Israel-Hamas War Enters Seventh Month

The Israel-Hamas war entered its seventh month on 7 April 2024. Nearly 1,300 Israelis lost their lives in the surprise Hamas attacks on 7 October, the largest number of Israeli casualties in a single day in the Jewish state’s history. Since the hostilities began in the aftermath of the Hamas strikes against Israel on 7 October 2023, at least 33,634 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip as of 12 April, as per the Ministry of Health in Gaza. As of 7 April, 604 Israel Defence Force (IDF) soldiers were killed while 133 hostages still remained in Gaza. The IDF noted that more than 300,000 IDF reservists have been mobilised for the war effort. In the past six months, more than 12,000 rockets were fired at Israel, 9,000 of them from Gaza while 3,000 were from Lebanon.



Israel highlighted its action against the Shifa hospital as indicative of how Hamas and other groups operating in the Gaza Strip used such civilian facilities to target it militarily. The Israeli Ambassador to the UN Mission in Geneva wrote a letter to the head of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus on 19 March informing him that more than 500 Hamas as well as Islamic Jihad operatives were apprehended and ammunition, grenades, among other weaponry, was seized from inside the hospital.

Even as the IDF went forward with its relentless military operations, the fate of the hostages and the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip continued to occupy centre stage. Hostage negotiation talks between US, Qatari and Egyptian negotiators began on 7 April. Reports noted that Hamas had put forward a proposal that would involve the release of the hostages over stages, beginning with the end of the war as the first stage, the return of displaced Palestinians to the northern Gaza Strip and the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails. With Hamas sticking to an end to Israeli military activities, among other demands, Israel accused the Hamas leadership of not being interested in a humanitarian deal.

As for the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, there was a significant amount of back and forth regarding humanitarian aid to the civilians in the Gaza Strip between Israel and UN officials. UN Chief Antonio Guterres on 24 March pointed out in a post on Twitter that a long line of relief trucks were waiting to be let into Gaza. The IDF charged the UN Chief with ‘lying’ and instead noted that the trucks were on the Egypt side of the border and had not reached Israeli crossings.

The amount of humanitarian aid to Gaza witnessed a significant increase during the past 30 days. In three days from 7-10 April, more than 1200 trucks with humanitarian aid entered Gaza. The IDF noted that before the beginning of

hostilities on 7 October 2023, only about 70 food trucks used to enter Gaza. Meanwhile, the IDF strike on 1 April on an aid convoy comprising trucks from the US-based charity World Central Kitchen (WCK) led to the death of 7 people, including six foreigners. The IDF carried out an investigation and called it a 'grave mistake' and senior officers involved in the operation were removed from their positions.

The IDF Chief of Staff Gen Halevi held situational assessments with the US Central Command Chief Gen Michael Kurilla on 13 April as well as with the Netherlands Armed Forces Chief Gen Onno Eichelsheim on 24 March. The meeting with the CENTCOM Commander assumed significance as it was ahead of a widely expected military response from Iran to the strike by IDF fighter jets on an Iranian diplomatic compound on 1 April targeting a senior IRGC Commander. The IDF noted that the Iranian strike on 13 April involved more than 300 aerial threats, 99 per cent of which were intercepted by Israeli air defence systems as well as by the US, United Kingdom and Jordanian assets.

Armed hostilities in the aftermath of the 7 October 2023 strikes by Hamas have not been limited to the Gaza Strip but have also involved Israel's northern borders (with significant IDF action against the Hezbollah targets in Lebanon and Syria). They have also spread to the Red Sea with Houthi involvement in targeting maritime shipping traffic. With analysts noting that Israel will not hesitate to strike against Iran to restore deterrence, the 13 April strikes by Iran have the potential to transform what began as the Israel-Hamas war into a regional conflagration involving nation-states.

Iran Attacks Israel

On 13 April 2024, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) launched an attack against Israel which involved over 300 drones, cruise and ballistic missiles. Israel and its allies including the United States, the United Kingdom, France and neighbouring Jordan mounted a coordinated defence using fighter Jets, warships, anti-missile and air defense systems intercepting the vast majority of the projectiles at the cost of more than US\$1 billion. At least nine ballistic missiles

evaded Israeli defences causing minor damage to Nevatim Air Base in Southern Israel, where Israel's F-35 fighter jets are based.

Iran's Supreme National Security Council issued a statement stating that Iran carried out 'minimum necessary punitive action' and 'legitimate right of self-defence' as outlined in Article 51 of the UN Charter. On 1 April, Israeli air strikes had destroyed Iran's consulate in Damascus, Syria killing seven Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers including Quds



Force senior most commander for Syria and Lebanon, Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi.

Notably, Iran's retaliatory strikes came two weeks after the Israeli attacks during which the UN Security Council was prevented by veto-wielding members US, the UK and France from condemning the aggression against the diplomatic facility of a country. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Abdollahian also took a regional tour starting with Oman, a key diplomatic intermediary between Tehran and Washington.

In Muscat, Abdollahian sought to assuage its neighbours' concerns about Iran's impending retaliatory strikes, stating that it was committed to seeking justice through legal and international channels and its "sole goal in legitimate defence is to punish the Israeli regime." Muscat reportedly relayed Iran's message to the US that Iranian attacks will be calibrated to target military facilities and will seek to avoid civilian casualties.

Even though Israel and its allies claim that they successfully intercepted 99 per cent of Iran's strikes, the crucial point remains that Iran has the capacity and willingness to strike conventionally superior Israel over more than 1,000 km across Iraq, Syria and Jordan. Major General Hossein Salami, the Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC, noted that Iran's retaliatory strikes have established a new equation with Israel. This new equation is that from now on if Israel attacks Iranian interests, figures and citizens anywhere, the IRGC will retaliate from Iran.

Salami was appointed as the chief of the IRGC in 2019 amid the Trump Administration's 'maximum pressure' campaign that resulted in the designation of the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO). He is credited with the revision of Iran's defence doctrine along the lines of the 'strategy of the threat against threat.' The IRGC under Salami countered US pressures on Iran by increasing regional insecurity through a series of deniable attacks on commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz through the summer of 2019.

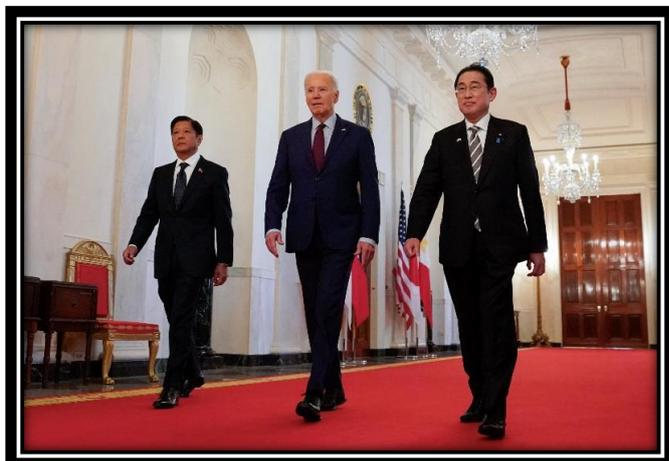
Iran, which fought an eight-year devastating war soon after the Islamic Revolution, has a defensive military doctrine based on deterrence. As the strategy has evolved based on a continuous assessment of the threat environment, the primary objective remains to deter a direct war with the United States. Over the last two decades, when Iran faced an enhanced US military presence near Iran's borders in Iraq and Afghanistan and threats of US/Israeli strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities, its counter-strategy was to unify the disparate 'resistance' forces opposed to the US military presence and Israel in the so-called 'axis-of-resistance.'

Through the 'axis-of-resistance' which includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Jihad in Gaza and Assad-ruled Syria, Iran was able to extend the geography of Iran's deterrence well beyond its borders. Deterrence through proxies has afforded Iran the ability to strike its enemies and profess plausible deniability at the same time, which is crucial for reducing the risk of direct response by the other side, which could lead to escalation into a full-blown conflict involving Iran.

In recent years, the US and Israel have sought to counter Iran's asymmetric strategy of deterrence through stringent sanctions aimed at limiting Iran's ability to finance its allies and proxies and fuelling domestic dissent against Iran's revolutionary political system. Israel under its 'octopus doctrine' has focussed its national security resources on countering Iran as the primary enemy rather than proxies. Over the last two years, Israel has carried out several covert attacks on nuclear and military facilities and assassinated nuclear scientists and military officers inside Iran. Following the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023, Israel has intensified its campaign targeting the highest-ranking IRGC commanders operating as 'military advisors' in Syria and Lebanon.

The US-Japan-Philippines Trilateral Summit

The first-ever US-Japan-Philippines summit took place on April 11, 2024, in Washington DC. The summit meeting was held in the backdrop of escalating tension in the South China Sea where Chinese and Philippines coast guard vessels have regularly been involved in skirmishes.



Mr Biden described America's commitment to defence agreements with Japan and the Philippines as "ironclad." As per US officials, the meeting was aimed at projecting a united front against China's increasingly aggressive behaviour against the Philippines in the South China Sea and Japan in the East China Sea.

Based on the shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific and unwavering support for ASEAN centrality and unity, the joint Leaders' statement outlined a commitment to advancing security and prosperity in the region through partnerships. The three Leaders in their joint statement reaffirmed the critical importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits, which is critical for global security and prosperity. Given the heightened tension in the SCS, the Leaders' joint statement underscored their commitment to international law, as reflected in the 1982 UNCLOS.

In recent months tensions between the Philippines and China have escalated being primarily focused on the Second Thomas Shoal, situated about 200 miles from Palawan. The Philippines grounded a ship, BRP Sierra Madre, in 1999 to strengthen its claim on the shoal, leading to ongoing clashes with Chinese vessels attempting to block Philippines resupply missions. China's dispute with Japan in the East China Sea is over the Senkaku Islands which has witnessed incursions by Chinese coastguard vessels into Japanese territorial waters since 2008. Expressing serious concerns over China's dangerous and aggressive behaviour in the South & East China Sea, President Biden reaffirmed the ironclad US alliance commitment to both Japan and the Philippines.

China asserting its presence in the region through an approach whereby it is enforcing its claims to territories by attempting to alter the realities on the ground, is a major factor for this new mini-lateral arrangement between traditional bilateral alliances. Given that Beijing is unilaterally trying to change the status quo, maritime security cooperation has featured prominently in the trilateral Summit. The three nations have committed to expand exercises and reciprocal access to bases.

The outcome of the summit indicates plans to conduct an at-sea trilateral exercise and other maritime activities in the Indo-Pacific within the next year, to improve interoperability and advance maritime security and safety. These new initiatives reflect a common assessment that deeper security cooperation between allies will help deter China and enhance regional security. The summit also announced the establishment of a trilateral maritime dialogue to enhance coordination and collective responses to promote maritime cooperation. The three nations pledged to strengthen coordination to promote multilateral maritime domain awareness through the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).

There would also be efforts to deepen cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and to this end, the Japan-Philippines-US humanitarian assistance and disaster response exercise was launched. The new mini-lateral would also seek to advance trilateral defence cooperation, including through combined naval training and exercises between the three nations and other partners. Like the joint maritime exercises conducted in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone in the SCS on April 8, 2024, between the navies of Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the US; many such joint exercises could take place in the future.

Beyond maritime and defence cooperation the Leaders' of the three nations affirmed their commitment to the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. They strongly condemn the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's escalatory threats and ballistic and intercontinental ballistic missile launches, which pose a threat to peace and security. The Leaders also reiterated their unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. Towards advancing economic cooperation the launching of the Luzon Economic Corridor was a key outcome. The new economic corridor in the Philippines would be part of the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment that would help develop clean energy, port, agriculture and other projects in the country. The new economic corridor will support connectivity between Subic Bay, Clark, Manila, and Batangas in the Philippines. Therefore, the trilateral relationship also provides the opportunity for strengthening trade and investment; building economic resiliency; and accelerating coordinated investments in high-impact infrastructure projects.

While The White House billed the first-ever trilateral summit with Japan and the Philippines as a potent response to China's attempts at "intimidation", Chinese officials strongly reacted to criticism over their action in the South China Sea and blamed the U.S. for exacerbating tensions. Commenting on the trilateral summit, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said, "No one should violate China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, and China remains steadfast in safeguarding our lawful rights."