

The Coalition of the Malevolent

Iran's attack on Israel is just one campaign in a much larger conflict.

By Eliot A. Cohen



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My wife the photo archivist likes to point out that all stills are a double crop—a crop in time (we do not know what happened before or after) and a crop in place (we do not know what was outside the photographer’s frame). So, too, are pulses of violence, like Iran’s recent salvo of 300 drones, cruise, and ballistic missiles aimed at Israel. To understand what we are observing, we have to push out beyond the frame of what we at first see.

The attack last night was not a mere response to the Israeli strike in Damascus on April 1 that killed two Iranian generals and five other officers in the Revolutionary Guard Corps. Rather, it represents an inflection point in a semi-covert war that has been going on for years. That conflict has included attacks on shipping by both sides, the bombing of Jewish and Israeli civilian targets, the launch of rockets across Israel’s northern border, and the occasional assassination of key figures, such as Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the godfather of the Iranian nuclear program.

Israel’s sardonic war humorists have been cracking jokes about the first direct flight from Tehran to Jerusalem since 1979, but as tends to happen, the joke

has a kernel of insight: Unflinching hostility toward Israel is part of the Islamic Republic's DNA. That hostility, moreover, is inextricably linked to its hostility toward the United States: One is the lesser Satan, the other the great. Reconciliation with either is ideologically impossible; hostility toward both, and the belief that the two are intertwined, is unshakeable.

But there is a departure here. Iran's semi-covert war has used Hezbollah in Lebanon (and elsewhere in the world), Iraqi militias, and Yemen's Houthis to attack and kill its enemies. That inhibition has begun to dissolve. Firing more than 300 guided weapons, and claiming responsibility for doing so, is an overt declaration that Iran is willing to wage war in the sunlight and not just the shadows.

This, in turn, is part of a larger pattern of Iranian belligerence: It includes the use of Iraqi militias to attack American bases, and the arming and assistance of Houthi militias in their attacks on civilian shipping in the Red Sea and beyond. It forces the question: Why has Iran begun to act more blatantly, less cautiously, and at greater ranges than ever before?

One answer may be the seemingly irrevocable march of that country to the possession of nuclear weapons, a march that was briefly slowed by the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 (which was followed by a pause in the Iranian program) and the ill-fated and time-limited Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiated in 2015, abandoned by the Trump administration and unsuccessfully attempted to be revived by the Biden administration.

A second and deeper answer, however, is Iran's entry into a coalition—not an alliance—with Russia, China, and North Korea. Iran now plays an important role in Russia's war in Ukraine. Iranian drones fly every night at Ukrainian cities, revealing and stressing Ukrainian air defenses to pave the way for Russian cruise and ballistic missiles. Iran has reportedly helped with the construction of Russian factories to manufacture the drones, presumably in exchange for Russian assistance on other fronts.

It is this bigger geopolitical shift that makes the Iranian attack on Israel so significant. The major players in the Russia–China–Iran–North Korea coalition are increasingly willing to use open violence (against Ukraine, Israel, and the Philippines), and to threaten much worse, including the use of nuclear weapons.

They are united by a growing belief that their moment is coming, when a divided and indecisive West, richer but flabbier, will not fight.

In response, as is so often the case, the Western states turn to technological and tactical solutions. In the short term, they work. The Israelis, assisted by the United States, Great Britain, and possibly other powers (there have been references to France and Jordan), shot down almost every single projectile heading their way. It is an amazing feat, and will undoubtedly create a great deal of demand for Israeli antimissile technology. In the same way, American and European warships have been shooting down most Houthi (actually, Iranian) missiles flying at merchant ships attempting to approach the Suez Canal.

But antimissile defense is, in the long run, a mug's game. If every defensive missile you fire, together with all of the systems that cue and direct it, costs an order of magnitude more than the incoming missile, even the richest countries are going to bankrupt themselves. Such systems are not currently mass produced, although that may change. Furthermore, the new era of missile and drone warfare is still at an early stage. As the drone war over the fields of Ukraine shows, the numbers, sophistication, and quantity of such systems grow fast under the spur of actual conflict. The game becomes one of measure and countermeasure, and in any case, no defense is 100 percent effective in the long run. And so, sooner or later, ships will sink, apartment buildings will explode, civilians will die.

In such exchanges the attacker wins, because of the larger effects. Shippers will avoid certain routes, companies will hesitate about doing business in a war zone, and tourists and corporate executives will stay away from airports where the sirens go off periodically. That is the larger strategy at work here, and make no mistake: The Iranian purpose is, as has been repeatedly and unambiguously stated, the extermination of the Israeli state, an objective shared by Hamas, and possibly by the crowds shouting "From the river to the sea" on the streets of New York or London. In itself this is not new; it was, in the middle of the previous century, the objective of Egypt and Syria, but that was through a single climactic battle or two. This is something much more protracted.

The aim here is also something a lot bigger than the struggle to destroy Israel. The target of the Russia–China–Iran–North Korea coalition is the overthrow not of a "rules-based international order"—a phrase that misleads more than it informs, because there have always been rules of some kind—but of the

American-led world order, which is an artifact of the past 75 years. The coalition's frame, as it were, is a large one, in which the United States and its allies represent one frangible whole that, if tapped hard in several places, will disintegrate.

It is in this frame, then, that the United States and its allies have to consider next steps. The Iran versus Israel campaign is just one campaign in a much larger conflict. In the mid-1930s, it was a mistake to treat the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the Spanish Civil War, the German reoccupation of the Rhineland, and Japan's launching of war in China in 1937 as a set of unique and unconnected events. Rather, they represented one big problem. American leaders will err if they similarly attempt to compartmentalize each of their challenges today: the Ukraine war, Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, the Middle Eastern conflict.

That a coalition of the West and its partners were willing to act in countering the Iranian missile barrage is a promising sign. Still, until Iran pays a visible and heavy price for its behavior in attacking not only Israel directly but its Arab neighbors and global shipping through its proxies, the problem will only get worse.

If ever there was a time for strong American statecraft backed by military muscle, this is it. But even as the United States berates its allies for failing to spend enough, its own defense spending as a percentage of gross domestic product is declining to levels not seen since the halcyon days of 1999, down to 2.7 percent. That does not begin to give the politicians the big stick they need if their soft words are to carry conviction.

Until the United States gets serious about what it needs to preserve the order it helped create and sustain, benefiting itself and others enormously in the process, many more missiles will fly at the cities of democratic allies. It is cold comfort that others will pay the price in blood long before Americans do—but sooner or later, we will as well.

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