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The Calculus Behind Iran's Delayed Response to Israeli Provocation

By Kristian Alexander

SYNOPSIS

Following the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, allegedly by Israel, Iran weighs its response, considering the benefits of delaying retaliation to exploit Israel's internal political instability while avoiding a strong US military reaction. The strategic calculations also involve Hezbollah's potential role, influenced by Iranian leadership, and the broader implications for Lebanon, already struggling with severe economic and political crises. This calculated restraint reflects Iran's aim to avoid further escalating tensions with Israel and the US.

COMMENTARY

When an [explosive device](#) that had been secretly placed in a Tehran guest house went off on July 31, killing Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, the world has been bracing for Iran's retaliation. Both Iran and Hamas have accused Israel of carrying out the attack, though Israel has neither confirmed nor denied involvement.

Given Iran's history of responding decisively to provocations, speculation has been rife about when and how Iran, possibly with Hezbollah's assistance, might strike back. Despite the widespread anticipation of an immediate response, [Iran has so far chosen to remain silent on the battlefield](#). This response can be attributed to an array of strategic considerations, including regional dynamics, internal challenges, domestic political pressure within Israel, and the reaction by the United States, Israel's main ally.

The inauguration of a [new Iranian President](#) and the formation of a new cabinet mark a transitional phase in Iran's strategic decision-making process. This period of adjustment may contribute to the delay in military retaliation against Israel. However, it is important to note that military decisions in Iran are not solely under the President's authority but are primarily made by the religious leader and the Revolutionary Guards.

Iran's Retaliation Quandary: Deterrence vs. Escalation

Haniyeh was in Tehran to attend the inauguration of Iran's new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, linking the Islamic Republic to the Palestinian military organisation Hamas. Iran, therefore, risks appearing weak if it does not retaliate quickly. This weakness could embolden the Israelis to further actions.

Although Iran may seek to [reestablish deterrence through retaliation](#), past responses to Israeli strikes have not prevented Israel from continuing its operations. In 2018, for example, Iran launched missile strikes against Israeli positions in the Golan Heights following Israeli attacks, yet Israel continued its targeted killings of Iranian operatives in Syria.

Iran has historically responded to such provocations to demonstrate its commitment to deterrence, although sometimes its actions are indirect. In 2020, for example, Iran responded to the assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps leader Qasem Soleimani with [missile attacks on US bases in Iraq](#).

Iran's Strategic Considerations in the Face of Israeli and US Pressures

Iran might also be assessing the current instability and internal challenges facing the Israeli government under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The Netanyahu government is under intense pressure because of its [failure to decisively achieve its objectives against Hamas in Gaza](#), the significant international backlash over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and widespread domestic discontent related to its controversial legal reforms and governance.

A [recent Maariv poll shows](#) that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party would be the largest in the Knesset if elections were held today, despite the ongoing conflict that began on October 7. Netanyahu is seen as more fit to be prime minister than his main rival, Benny Gantz, although a majority of Israelis still believe Netanyahu should step down. The poll also revealed that Israelis are more inclined to prioritise negotiating a hostage deal with Hamas over launching a pre-emptive strike against Iran and Hezbollah.

In recent months, reports indicate that Israel has [increased its readiness levels](#), deploying additional Iron Dome batteries and conducting air defence drills. This preparation is indicative of Israel's anticipation of potential retaliation and is taking the threat seriously. Israel's intelligence agencies are likely monitoring movements and communications within Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guards to pre-empt any surprise attacks.

Iran might determine that delaying an attack is [more strategically advantageous](#), allowing time for Israel's internal pressures to further destabilise the Netanyahu government. By waiting, Iran may seek to maximise the impact of their eventual strike, striking at a moment when Israel is even more weakened.

Iran must also consider the actions of the US, Israel's key ally in the Middle East. US officials have said they were informed of Israel's operation only after Haniyeh was assassinated. Still, [Washington has deployed a formidable array of military assets](#) to

the region, including aircraft carrier strike groups, nuclear-powered submarines, additional warships, and ground forces, all intended to deter any potential Iranian or Hezbollah attacks on Israel. This overwhelming display of force underscores the US commitment to Israel's defence. It serves as a stark warning to Tehran, who may be reluctant to launch an immediate military strike against Israel because of this US escalation.

John Kirby, the US National Security Council's coordinator for strategic communication, has allegedly [issued a clear warning to Tehran](#), emphasising the high risk of severe consequences if Iran retaliates with a major attack on Israel. This warning includes the potential for devastating impacts on Iran's economy and the stability of its newly elected government, both of which are critical concerns for Tehran.

The UK, Germany, and France have also called on Iran to refrain from retaliatory attacks.

This [international pressure](#) may be influencing Iran's decision-making process as it weighs the diplomatic consequences of immediate action.

Hezbollah's Calculus Amid Regional Turmoil

Iran has tended to avoid direct military confrontations with Israel, instead relying on proxy groups such as [Hezbollah to carry out its objectives](#). While Iran has the capability to strike Israel directly (e.g., through missile attacks), it is more likely to engage in asymmetric warfare or cyberattacks, maintaining plausible deniability.

Hezbollah's past actions, including the 2006 war with Israel, demonstrated its willingness to engage on Iran's behalf, but the cost of such engagements, [including potential full-scale war](#), may make this option less appealing unless the stakes are deemed high enough.

Israel's previous attacks on Hezbollah have often led to retaliatory action by the Shia Islamist group, which views itself as a defender of the Palestinian cause and has a close alliance with Hamas. The assassination of a prominent Hamas leader such as Haniyeh, especially on Iranian soil, could be seen as an [attack on the broader "Resistance Axis."](#)

Hezbollah's identity is closely tied to its role as a resistance movement against Israel. Failing to respond to the assassination might be perceived as a sign of weakness, undermining its deterrence capability both in Lebanon and across the region. Hezbollah might feel compelled to act out of [solidarity with Hamas](#) and to demonstrate its loyalty to Iran, which is a key patron.

Iran frequently influences Hezbollah's decisions heavily. There have been numerous instances where Iran has exerted influence over Hezbollah's decision-making process. For example, during the Syrian Civil War, [Hezbollah's involvement was largely driven by Iranian interests](#). If Iran perceives that an immediate attack by Hezbollah could provoke a disproportionate Israeli response or undermine broader Iranian objectives in the region, it is likely to advise restraint. Hezbollah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, recently said there is ["no rush" to retaliate](#), which seems

to align with the possibility of restraint. This could be part of a broader strategy to keep Israel on edge, as prolonged anticipation can be a psychological tactic to destabilise the enemy.

Lebanon is currently grappling with severe economic and political crises. Another war with Israel could further devastate the country, worsening the humanitarian situation and causing widespread destruction. Hezbollah must consider the [potential backlash](#) from the Lebanese population, who may not support another conflict given the country's dire state. Another factor that may play a role in Hezbollah's calculus is the risk of alienating its domestic base, which could further weaken its position within Lebanon.

Conclusion

Iran's leadership is likely weighing the costs of a retaliatory strike against the broader strategic implications. The prospect of further destabilising an already fragile economic and political situation within Iran, coupled with the potential for significant Israeli military retaliation, likely discourages Tehran from pursuing an aggressive military response at this time. This calculated restraint may reflect Iran's broader strategic considerations, aiming to avoid exacerbating tensions with Israel and the US.

Dr Kristian Alexander is a Senior Fellow and Lead Researcher at Rabdan Security & Defense Institute (RSDI), Abu Dhabi, UAE.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798