

This Could Be the Next Big War That Grips the Entire World

by [Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](/experts/neri-zilber)

Jun 2, 2022

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/qd-tkwn-hdhh-hy-alhrb-alkbry-alty-ttal-alalm-basrh\)](/ar/policy-analysis/qd-tkwn-hdhh-hy-alhrb-alkbry-alty-ttal-alalm-basrh)

Also published in *Daily Beast*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](/experts/neri-zilber)

Neri Zilber, a journalist and analyst on Middle East politics and culture, is an adjunct fellow of The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Two countries that have long clashed are tempting fate with escalations that could soon spiral well beyond their borders.

The ongoing war between Israel and Iran across the Middle East came out of the shadows and into the open long ago. But now, on the back of several suspected Israeli attacks inside Iran itself, the deadly contest threatens to escalate—possibly beyond the region.

Last week, several quadcopter drones smashed into a suspected Iranian nuclear research and drone facility at Parchin, killing one engineer. Mere days before, two assassins on motorbikes shot dead an Iranian military colonel in the heart of Tehran. In February, several drones hit an Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) base in the west of the country at Kermanshah. Although never officially taking responsibility, various unsubtle hints by Israeli officials and media reports have left little doubt as to the provenance of these attacks.

This is all part of what the Israeli government, just under a year in power, has come to describe as its “Octopus Doctrine,” a new and risky expansion of its campaign against Iran’s military and nuclear capabilities. If in years past Israel did hit inside Iran, it was done covertly—usually through spies and cyber-attacks—and almost always targeted Iranian nuclear scientists and facilities. For almost a decade, too, Israel made no secret of its campaign of airstrikes, primarily inside Syria, against Iranian-allied militias and weapons shipments. But now, Israeli officials openly describe a “new defense strategy,” as one termed it to *The Daily Beast*, aimed at the “head” of the octopus in Iran, and not just its “tentacles” across the region in places like Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Iraq.

“For many years, the Iranian regime has carried out terrorism against Israel and the region via proxies, but for some reason the head of the octopus—Iran itself—has enjoyed immunity,” Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said in a speech on Sunday. “The era of immunity for the Iranian regime is over.”

To be sure, Bennett first raised this imagery of the Iranian octopus several years ago, demanding a more aggressive policy. But now as prime minister, he is in a position to actualize the policy shift, which has been embraced by other key Israeli decision-makers.

“[The Iranians] have had their military equation for a long time,” the senior Israeli official said, whereby Tehran helped establish a panoply of allied militias and terror groups around Israel equipped with vast rocket and missile arsenals, like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, the Houthis in Yemen, or various Shiite proxies in Syria and Iraq.

According to Israeli defense officials who spoke to The Daily Beast, there is also the growing threat of Iranian UAVs that could potentially penetrate the intricate web of Israel’s air defenses. “We need to turn the tables on them, and dry out the head” of the octopus, the official added. In order to do this, the thinking goes, Iranian capabilities need to be degraded, hence the recent attacks on the Iranian UAV bases and Col. Hassan Sayyad Khodaei, the assassinated Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander believed to be responsible for planning foreign terror attacks against Israeli targets. Likely more important for Israeli strategists, Iran now needs to *believe* that it will pay a direct price for every attack by one of its proxies.

“If the Iranians think that they can bring terror to our doorstep and we will never bring a response to their doorstep, they’re mistaken. It doesn’t work that way,” Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said on Monday. “They’re not allowed to spread terror on our borders or inside Israel and they’ll stay immune in Iran while we continue to compete with them in secondary arenas like Syria or Lebanon.”

The dangers of this new Israeli approach are already obvious. Iranian officials blamed Israel for the killing of Khodaei in Tehran and vowed a response. “The martyrs who are murdered by the Zionists are of a much higher status. God willing, we will take revenge against the enemies,” the head of the IRGC, Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, said over the weekend.

Israeli air defense systems, including the Iron Dome, have reportedly been placed on heightened alert due to the threat of rocket attacks from Lebanon and Syria. There would be a precedent for such a strike, albeit not directly at Israel: in February, after the first Iranian UAV facility was hit, Iran fired several missiles at what it said was an Israeli intelligence base in Iraqi Kurdistan used to launch the attacking drones.

More concretely, Israel’s National Security Council “sharpened” an existing travel warning on Monday for Turkey, assessing that there was a “high level of risk” and “tangible threat” against Israelis on the part of Iranian operatives inside the country. In a highly unusual move, Israeli authorities reportedly contacted 100 citizens thought to be specific targets and asked them to return home. Not to be outdone, an Iranian regime–affiliated media outlet published the names of five former Israeli military intelligence officers (and current tech executives) who are allegedly on Tehran’s hit list. “There is increasing concern in the security establishment regarding Iranian efforts to attack Israeli targets around the world,” the National Security Council added in its warning, emphasizing other countries surrounding Iran and tying it directly to the fallout from the IRGC colonel’s killing.

Over the past three decades, Iran—and Hezbollah in particular—has struck Israeli and Jewish targets in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia, including a pair of devastating truck bomb attacks in Buenos Aires in the 1990s that hit the Israeli embassy and a Jewish cultural center, a suicide bombing attack against Israeli holidaymakers in Bulgaria in 2012, and an attack the same year in New Delhi that injured an Israeli diplomat.

According to Israeli officials and security analysts, all of these types of targets globally are now believed to be in Iran’s crosshairs. “They are constantly looking for opportunities, things they perceive to be softer targets,” one senior Israeli official told The Daily Beast. And yet, the official wanted to emphasize, this wasn’t new, even with the more forceful Israeli strategy of recent months. “[Iran] has a long list of perceived grievances, and there’s always the threat

of terror and other attacks from them,” the official added.

This is in line with the general Israeli government view of the risk of repeated attacks on Iran itself, and possible Iranian reprisals, spinning out into something bigger. As one senior Israeli defense official posited to me (counterintuitively) last year: “When was the last time there was a major war in the Middle East?” Belying the region’s battle-scarred reputation, the official highlighted the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, which “began as a miscalculation, but other than that, it was the U.S. who initiated two wars in Iraq,” he said. “There are lots of ways to avoid war.”

Israeli leaders have repeatedly said they will not be constrained by, or beholden to, any renewed nuclear deal between Iran and the U.S., the prospects of which appear highly uncertain at the moment. In other words, the “Octopus Doctrine” will continue regardless, possibly in conjunction with a steadily expanding Iranian nuclear program. Israeli confidence regarding the high bar to a major war breaking out in the Middle East will be put to the test.

Neri Zilber is a journalist based in Tel Aviv and an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on [the Daily Beast website \(https://www.thedailybeast.com/israel-and-iran-are-risking-the-worlds-next-major-war\)](https://www.thedailybeast.com/israel-and-iran-are-risking-the-worlds-next-major-war). ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Insecurity Prompts Iran’s Deceptive Show of Force](#)

Jun 8, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/insecurity-prompts-irans-deceptive-show-force\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The KRG Turns Thirty: The Future of U.S.-Kurdish Relations in Iraq \(Part II\)](#)

June 6, 2022

◆
Jennifer Gavito,

Qubad Talabani,
Bilal Wahab

(/policy-analysis/krq-turns-thirty-future-us-kurdish-relations-iraq-part-ii)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Rhetoric Meets Reality in Jawlani's Push for Self-Sufficiency

Jun 8, 2022



Aaron Y. Zelin

(/policy-analysis/rhetoric-meets-reality-jawlani-push-self-sufficiency)

TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Iran's Foreign Policy (/policy-analysis/irans-foreign-policy)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)