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Title	AMBREY THREAT CIRCULAR – 02/08/2024				



AMBREY THREAT CIRCULAR – REGIONAL REACTION TO ASSASSINATIONS IN IRAN AND LEBANON

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A. Executive Summary

- The Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has reportedly authorised a direct attack on Israel, and the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, has announced a response is "inevitable".
- It is assessed almost certain that Iran and Hezbollah will retaliate by directly targeting Israel.
- It is assessed highly likely that Iran will target Israeli military sites and likely or probable Israeli-owned shipping, if there are available targets in the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, or Arabian Sea.
- It is assessed highly likely Hezbollah will target Israeli military sites. It is likely or probable that they will also target critical national infrastructure.

B. Situation

Senior leaders of Iran-backed 'Axis of Resistance' groups have been assassinated. On 30 July Hezbollah senior military commander Fuad Shukr was assassinated in Beirut, Lebanon, and on 31 July Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, was assassinated in Tehran, Iran. Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed responsibility for killing Shukr. Regarding Haniyeh, the Israel Defense Forces spokesperson, Daniel Hagari, stated that Israel "did not attack Iran from the air." Nevertheless, Israel has the stated aim of destroying Hamas, and Iran considers Israel to be responsible. Iran has not directly attacked Israel since 13 April 2024. Hezbollah has frequently targeted northern Israel, particularly along the Confrontation Line and Golan since October 2023, with a brief interlude during the last Israel-Hamas ceasefire in November 2023.

C. Analysis

Ambrey assesses it highly likely that Iran will respond in a similar way to April 2024, but likely larger-scale. On 1 April Israel assassinated the senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force commander Mohammed Zahedi in the Iranian Damascus consulate, Syria. On the morning of 13 April Iran seized an Israel-affiliated container ship in the Strait of Hormuz. At the time of writing, the vessel remained held off Bandar Abbas. In the past, Iran has also damaged Israel-affiliated merchant shipping. Subject to target availability it is likely or probable that they will do this again. Later on 13 April, Iran and its proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen fired more than 300 Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and missiles towards Israel. They targeted Israeli military bases. Israel, the US, UK, and regional partners intercepted most of the projectiles. Initially, Israel claimed a 99% interception rate. On 19 April Israel responded with a de-escalatory, but demonstrative, attack on an Iranian S-300 air defence system in Isfahan. Likely anticipating a similar attack, on 31 July Israel's Minister of Defence, Yoav Gallant, visited an Arrow system battery. The scale of the attack is likely to increase as the Axis attempts to test the Israeli and coalition capabilities, and is likely to expand in scope to include critical national infrastructure. This is because the last response did not deter Israel from carrying out further assassinations, and to saturate air defences.

The US support to Israel makes it more likely that the retaliation will target US military sites (most likely via Iranian proxies i.e. indirect/deniably) and realistically possible that Iran will seize a US-affiliated ship. However, it is assessed highly unlikely that US-affiliated ships will be attacked. This action is less likely as it would distract from the attack on Israeli interests. There is assessed to be a remote chance of a shutting down of the Strait of Hormuz, which would be an act of self-harm.

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The Israeli response will highly likely reflect the Axis attack. If the Axis does target critical national infrastructure, including perhaps Haifa port, the risk to Beirut and other ports will be heightened. In the unlikely event that the Axis attacks Israeli civilian targets, it is likely or probable that Israel will launch a ground invasion of southern Lebanon. This could trigger an 'all-out' regional conflict. The risk of this has been growing due to the continued Hezbollah attacks on northern Israel, and the drawdown of operations in Gaza. Miscalculation and escalation logic are considerable risks at this juncture.

D. Mitigation

Merchant shipping calling Israeli and Lebanese ports is advised to consider and drill their contingency plans. These should include:

- A port and vessel-specific risk assessment.
- Identifying emergency contacts in port, particularly ambulance and firefighting. There is a risk of collateral damage.
- Defining thresholds for the suspension of operations.
- Agreeing on the course of action if there is no pilot availability. It may be permissible to depart some berths without this.
- Agreeing crew shelter-in-place locations if the vessel cannot depart.
- Nominating accountable and responsible persons in the shipping companies.
- Recording decisions and training on any record-keeping systems.
- Crew evacuation plans should they be unable to leave on the merchant vessel or by air.
- Crew mental health/well-being consultations and support measures.

The Iranian Israeli merchant shipping target profile is focused on ownership, though they have mistakenly targeted shipping due to an out-of-date affiliation.

The Iranians have also seized shipping with target flags, and bearing cargo destined for target countries.

Merchant shipping headed towards the Strait of Hormuz is advised to conduct a risk assessment, including an affiliation check. For some, it will be advisable to avoid the area at this time. Any decision to avoid the area should be supported by a voyage and vessel-specific risk assessment and documented, to mitigate the risk of disputes.

E. Contact Information

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