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Background and Impact of the “Shadow War” Between Iran and Israel

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Iran, which began to advocate “resistance against the United States and Israel” after the 1979 revolution, has long supported the anti-Israeli militant groups known as resistance forces today. Iran’s support toward resistance forces, such as the Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, has often been conducted via Israel’s neighbor, Syria.

In response, Israel has repeatedly attacked Iran's nuclear facilities, assassinated nuclear scientists, and engaged in other actions with the help of collaborators within Iran, in order to prevent nuclear activities by Iran. Both Iran and Israel have sought to weaken each other—through its support for the resistance forces in the case of Iran, and by assisting collaborators within Iran in the case of Israel. In part because it had not yet reached the stage of direct confrontation, the conflict between Iran and Israel has long been referred to as the "shadow war."

Recently, in early morning of April 14 (local time), Iran launched its first-ever direct attack on Israel, raising concerns about the escalation of the conflict between the two countries. A situation has arisen that may significantly undermine the stability of the Middle East region, which Japan relies heavily on for over 95% of its crude oil imports, depending on the outcome of this conflict,

<Iran’s attack on Israel, and the background leading up to the attack>

The April 14 attack by Iran on Israel was carried out with advance notice given to the neighboring countries as well as the United States. On the day of the attack, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) issued a statement at the start of the attack to declare that they were carrying out a retaliatory attack on Israel. This was a retaliation against the alleged Israeli airstrikes carried out on April 1 on the consular building of the Embassy of Iran in Syria. This airstrike resulted in the deaths of 13 individuals (of whom seven were members of the IRGC), including two high-ranking IRGC officers.

In response to this attack, the Israeli Air Force declared that 99% of the approximately 170 drones, 30 cruise missiles, and more than 120 ballistic missiles launched by Iran had been intercepted. It

further revealed that a few of the missiles fired by Iran had struck an airbase in the southern part of Israel, but the damage suffered by Israel was minimal.

On the other hand, the IRGC declared its attack a success. It had been crucial for Iran to retaliate in some fashion in response to the killings of the IRGC generals in the airstrike on its embassy. Iran had believed that Israel's attack on its embassy had been carried out by Netanyahu's government with the aim of diverting the international community's interest away from Gaza. Moreover, if the conflict were to escalate as a result of Iran's retaliatory attack, it would give the United States room to intervene, which was perceived to be Israel's goal. In short, carrying out a retaliatory attack that did not lead to escalation was the best scenario for Iran.

<Potential for further retaliation from Israel>

In response to Iran's retaliatory attack on Israel, Israel has asserted its right of reprisal. The first point to note here is when the retaliation that Israel will certainly seek to carry out will happen, and in what form it will be carried out. Iran's nuclear activities and support for resistance forces, which have led to attacks from Israel, are still ongoing even today. In other words, Israel is expected to continue with attacks aimed at weakening Iran, which regards Israel as an enemy. The point of interest here is whether Israel will once again return to its "shadow war" mode and aim to conduct "shadow" attacks in which it is difficult to pinpoint the perpetrators, or whether it will now carry out attacks openly.

Another point that should be noted is the intentions of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. There are growing calls within Israel for his resignation amidst his failure to bring about the release of Israeli hostages and the destruction of the Hamas. However, as long as the conflict continues, Prime Minister Netanyahu's war cabinet will be allowed to remain in power. Therefore, it is highly likely that he will aim to continue with some form of conflict in order to divert the international community's attention away from Gaza, and to demonstrate that Iran is the real problem that the international community should address.

<Impact on safe navigation through the Strait of Hormuz>

On April 13, a day before the April 14 attack on Israel, Iran's IRGC Navy had seized an Israeli-linked vessel near the Strait of Hormuz. For Iran, it is possible that this action had been a so-called "prelude" to its full-scale retaliatory attack on April 14. On the other hand, this could also have been a move aimed at containing cooperation with Israel among the surrounding countries, such as the United Arab Emirates which has diplomatic relations with Israel, prior to the attack on Israel.

On April 9, the commander of the IRGC Navy stated to Iranian media that while Iran can close the

Strait of Hormuz, it will not take such action. However, he continued to say that there is no place for Israel in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Based on these statements alone, it would seem that if friendly relations were maintained between Iran and its neighboring countries, safe navigation through the Strait of Hormuz would be guaranteed. However, if the conflict between Iran and Israel were to intensify, and Iran were to become overly concerned about the relationship between the neighboring countries and Israel, it could have an impact on stability around the Strait of Hormuz.

Since March 2023, Iran has been working to improve relations with its neighboring countries, starting with an agreement to restore diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. It is important to pay close attention to how the recent exchanges between Iran and Israel could impact these efforts to improve relations.

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