



TROUBLE BREWING

Matthew Borie reports on the growing tension in the Middle East and considers what the future holds

On 1 April, Israel reportedly conducted precision airstrikes on the Iranian embassy compound in Syria's capital, Damascus, specifically targeting the consular annex. Israel claimed the consular annex was being used by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) for planning military operations against Israel, while Iran claimed the building was a diplomatic facility and constituted a direct attack on Iranian soil. IRGC officials stated that the Israeli strike killed seven IRGC members, including the commander of IRGC operations in Lebanon and Syria. On 3 April, the Iranian Supreme Leader blamed Israel for the airstrikes and intimated that a response was coming, and the Iranian president stated the airstrikes would not go unanswered by Iran.

On 13-14 April, the IRGC and Iranian-backed militant groups (IBMGs) conducted a large-scale attack against Israel, reportedly consisting of over 330 ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and military-grade weaponised drones launched from Iran by the IRGC and Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen

by IBMGs. Nearly all of the missiles and drones were reportedly shot down over Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Israel by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as well as the Jordanian, French, US and UK military forces via air assets and air defences, including conventional surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems capable at all altitudes.

On 19 April, suspected Israeli military strikes were reported in the As Suwayda area of South-West Syria, the Babil area of Iraq near Baghdad and the Isfahan area of Iran. Iranian air-defence systems of unspecified type/variant were reportedly activated in response to the incoming suspected Israeli military strikes over the areas of Isfahan and Tabriz. Iran's military remains on 'high alert' amid tensions with Israel and US. The security situation across the Middle East remains fluid and subject to rapid change.

The areas in the vicinity of the recent Iranian IRGC and regional IBMG missile launches include a number of high-traffic ATS routes used by civil aviation operators in the Middle East region. Military activity – such as ballistic missile launches by the Iranian IRGC and regional IBMGs – over the airspace in the Middle East without adequate prior notice represents an ongoing significant safety concern

for civil aviation overflight at all altitudes. Ballistic missiles will typically reach an altitude apogee of at least 108NM (656,000 feet) before re-entry, crossing all altitude levels both on the way up and on the way down.

The longest-range drones employed by the Iranian IRGC and regional IBMGs can reach 2,500km (c.1,550 miles), while their highest altitude loitering weapons can operate to at least FL320. Cruise missiles – such as those used in the launches by the Iranian IRGC and regional IBMGs – likely reach peak altitudes below FL050. As such, Iranian cruise missiles are not assessed to pose a direct hazard to aircraft at typical cruising altitudes of above FL300. However, though a rare occurrence overall, multiple safety-of-flight concerns emanate from a situation where a cruise missile malfunctions during the boost, mid-course or terminal phases of flight. This would cause the cruise missile to fly an unplanned trajectory and altitude profile, which could expose aircraft to mid-air collision, route diversion and/or debris splashdown.

REGIONAL AIR DEFENCE ACTIVITY ISRAEL

When rockets and/or drones are launched, the IDF primarily employs Iron Dome air-defence systems to shoot down the vast majority that threaten population centres in Israel. The Iron Dome is capable up to FL330 and out to 70km (43.5 miles). In addition, IDF conventional SAM systems capable at all altitudes – such as Patriots, Arrow, David's Sling and others – are employed to shoot down larger rockets, missiles and/or military-grade weaponised drones launched at Israel.

LEBANON

It is likely that Hezbollah will employ man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS) capable below FL260, conventional SAM systems capable at all altitudes and/or other forms of air defences such as Iranian-made '358' missiles capable up to at least FL320 against IDF air assets over Lebanon in response to IDF strikes in the short term. Previously, the IDF reportedly shot down Hezbollah SAMs launched at IDF drones over Northern Israel and Southern Lebanon via air-defence system engagements on 13, 21, 25 and 28 October, 1, 17, 23 and 25 November, 16 and 21 December and 26 February. On 10 November, 25 and 26 December, 6 January, 26 February, and 6 and 21 April, Hezbollah reportedly launched SAMs at IDF air assets that missed their targets or shot down Israeli military drones operating over southern Lebanon.

SYRIA

Syrian military conventional SAM systems capable at all altitudes were activated in response to nearly all sets of suspected IDF strikes over the past year. Syria operates the Russian-made S-200 Vega (SA-5 GAMMON) and S-300PMU2 Favorit (SA-20PMU2 GARGOYLE). The SA-5 is capable well above FL900 and out to 300km (190 miles). The SA-20PMU2 is effective up to FL800 and out to 193km (120 miles).

IRAQ

The US military reportedly continues to have a variety of air and air-defence systems deployed to Iraq and Eastern Syria to defend against drones, rockets and ballistic missiles. US military MIM-104 Patriot conventional SAM systems capable out to 160km (100 miles) and up to FL800 have been employed to shoot down Iraqi IBMG and Iranian

IRGC ballistic missiles over Anbar and Erbil provinces in Iraq during 2024. The reported US military deployment of Patriot conventional SAM systems to Iraq is likely directly related to countering the Iraqi IBMG missile threat.

The US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) reported in August 2022 that Iraqi IBMGs have access to MANPADS capable up to FL260 and other SAM systems. The US DIA has reported that Iraqi IBMGs possess Iranian-made '358' SAM systems capable up to at least FL320, and this weapon was reportedly employed to shoot down a US military MQ-9 Reaper drone over the Diyala area of Iraq on 18 January. In addition, IBMGs reportedly possess and have employed Russian-made 2K12 Kub (SA-6 GAINFUL) conventional SAM systems capable up to FL450 in Eastern Syria along the Iraqi border.

The Iraqi military has procured a variety of Russian and Iranian-made MANPADS capable up to FL260. The Iraqi Army possesses Russian-made Pantsir-S1 (SA-22 GREYHOUND) conventional SAM systems capable up to FL490 and out to 20km (12.4 miles) as well as US-made Avenger air-defence systems capable up to FL260. Several of the above IBMG attacks have targeted bases in Iraq where both the US-led coalition and Iraqi military are present and the Iraqi military has downed several IBMG drones in 2024. Previously, on 29 January 2022, an Iraqi military air-defence unit reportedly misidentified a US-led coalition drone as a hostile target and unsuccessfully attempted to shoot it down via SA-22 engagement over Salah ad-Din province.

IRAN

Iran has airbases with ballistic missiles, military-grade weaponised drones, combat aircraft, air-defence systems and electronic warfare units capable at all altitudes operationally stationed in areas across the country. This includes a wide variety of conventional SAM systems capable at all altitudes. Iran has a documented history of poor coordination, miscalculation and/or misidentification in its airspace between civilian flights and military missile, drone, air and air-defence operations during periods of increased tensions.

US-LED COALITION IN RED SEA

Yemeni Houthi IBMG drone/missile attacks with associated air and air-defence engagements in response – including via conventional SAM systems capable at all altitudes – by several military forces (ie US, UK, French, German, Danish, Italian, Israeli, Egyptian, Jordanian and/or Saudi-led coalition) are likely to occur at least weekly in the Gulf of Aqaba, Red Sea region, Bab al-Mandeb Strait and/or Gulf of Aden in the short term. On 26 February, a German Navy frigate in the Southern Red Sea reportedly misidentified a US military MQ-9 Reaper drone as a Houthi drone and employed two conventional SAMs in an attempted shoot-down that failed due to a technical fault in the SAMs. In addition, a Danish Navy frigate reportedly experienced several conventional SAM system malfunctions during its recent deployment to the Southern Red Sea.

YEMEN

It is likely that the Yemeni Houthi IBMG will employ MANPADS capable below FL260, SAM systems capable at all altitudes and/or other forms of air defences such as Iranian-made '358' missiles capable up to at least

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FL320 against military air assets over Yemen in response to incoming strikes in the short term. The Houthis had developed improvised SAM systems using modified Russian-made R-60 (AA-8 APHID), R-27T (AA-10b ALAMO) and R-73E (AA-11 ARCHER) infrared (IR) guided air-to-air missiles (AAMs) in a ground-based air-defence role. Such systems – at a minimum – would be capable of engaging air targets at altitudes over FL300 and ranges out to at least 20km (12.4 miles).

OUTLOOK

ISRAEL-GAZA

In the medium term, the threat to air operations emanating from Gaza – rocket and drone attacks with associated Israeli military Iron Dome air-defence system shoot-downs, including near Tel Aviv – will be significantly diminished due to the ongoing Israeli military operation in the strip against Palestinian armed groups led by the Hamas IBMG.

ISRAEL-LEBANON-SYRIA

Tensions on the Lebanon border remain high with low-intensity conflict ongoing at present and armed clashes at such levels are a realistic possibility in the medium term in the absence of a diplomatic agreement to cease hostilities. The vast majority of such armed clashes are likely to occur within 20km (12 miles) of the border.

It is possible that high-intensity conflict between the Israeli military and Lebanese Hezbollah will occur in the medium term, with armed clashes occurring deep inside Israel, to include air and air-defence activity in FIR Tel Aviv (LLLL) reaching south of Haifa, over 40km (24 miles) South of the border.

Limited sets of suspected IDF airstrikes against Hezbollah and/or Hamas targets over 40km (25 miles) inside Lebanese territory – to include Beirut – are likely to occur at least weekly in the short term. Israel is likely to continue dozens of daily airstrikes and artillery strikes in Southern Lebanon within 20km (12.5 miles) of the border in the short term.

Israeli military airstrikes into Syria with Syrian army conventional SAM systems capable at all altitudes launched in response are likely to occur multiple times per month in the medium term.

IRAQ

Air and air-defence units of several military forces as well as IBMGs are likely to be at a heightened state of alert at present in specific areas of Iraq. There are no indications at present that any state or non-state actor intends to kinetically target legal civil aviation flights over Iraqi airspace. However, miscalculation and/or misidentification is likely over specific areas of FIR Baghdad (ORBB) at all altitudes as several military forces conduct air and air-defence operations within and/or near portions of Iraqi airspace.

IRAN

Military activity – such as ballistic missile tests/launches and space/satellite launches – in Iranian airspace without adequate prior notice in several areas of FIR Tehran (OIIX) represents an ongoing significant safety concern for civil aviation overflight at all altitudes. Additional multi-variant IRGC military-grade weaponised drone activity and/or missile launches in several areas of FIR Tehran (OIIX) and/or space-launch rocket vehicle or ballistic missile tests from Semnan province are likely on a monthly basis, with a specific flashpoint being the next 90-day timeframe.

YEMEN

The US president has vowed to continue to respond with military action if the Houthi attacks persist. The Houthi military spokesman and other officials within the group have vowed to respond to any US and UK strikes and to continue attacks on Israeli interests in the region amid the Gaza war. As such, further US-led airstrikes and/or cruise missile launches from the Red Sea region, Bab al-Mandeb Strait and/or Gulf of Aden against Houthi targets in Yemen are likely in the short term in response to any Houthi drone/missile launches ●

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An anti-missile system operates after Iran launched drones and missiles towards Israeli

