1. Israel attack on Iran: what this means for war in West Asia

Introduction

Israel launched what it described as "precise and targeted" airstrikes on Iran on October 26 in retaliation to an Iranian attack on Israel earlier this month, in what appears to be a major escalation between the two enemy countries.

Here is what we know about the attack so far, and whether it can trigger a larger conflagration in West Asia as some observers fear.

How did the attacks unfold?

Iranian media reported explosions around the capital Tehran shortly after 2 am local time (4 am in India). Videos uploaded on social media show projectiles (Israeli missiles) raining down on the city and its surrounding areas, as well as intercepting fire by Iranian air defence system.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) confirmed that it is carrying out "precise" airstrikes on Iranian "military targets" at around 2.30 am local time. The strikes were concluded by 6.00 am. According to Israel's military, three waves of airstrikes were conducted by scores of Israeli fighter-bombers.

What was the extent of damage done?

The IDF has claimed that it hit around 20 targets including Iran's missile manufacturing facilities, surface-to-air missile storage sites, and other sites of military importance. Notably, it seems that Israeli targets did not include Iran's sensitive nuclear installations and oil manufacturing facilities.

Iranian authorities said that sites in Tehran, Khuzestan, and Ilam provinces were targeted, adding that the country's air defences had "successfully intercepted" the attacks even though "some areas sustained limited damage". Two Iranian soldiers were reportedly killed in the attacks.

By all early accounts, it seems that Israel's strikes were more limited than previously feared.

Why did Israel attack Iran?
Iran and Israel have long been at loggerheads. Iran does not acknowledge Israel's right to exist, and backs a multitude of groups in West Asia that are fighting Israel and its occupation of Palestine. Most notable among these are Hamas and Hezbollah, who Israel is currently at war with.

The Israel-Iran relationship has gone downhill following the October 7 Hamas attacks last year. On April 1, Israel struck the Iranian consulate in Syria, killing 16 persons including several top commanders from Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). On April 13, Iran responded with a direct attack on Israeli soil, utilising as many as 300 missiles and drones. Israel further retailated with a "limited" strike on an Iranian missile defence system in the region of Isfahan. Things further heated up on July 31, when Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh was killed in an explosion in Tehran, likely orchestrated by Mossad agents. Israel has not officially claimed responsibility for the assasination. Israel further assasinated Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut on September 27, in an attack which also claimed the life of high ranking Iranian official Brigadier General Abbas Nilforoushan.

Iran launched 200 ballistic missiles at Israel, in response to the deaths of Haniyeh, Nasrallah, and Niforoushan. This attack inflicted next to no damage.

The latest Israeli airstrikes are in response to this. A senior American administration official said that the US worked with Israel to encourage a "targeted and proportional" response, according to the BBC. The White House has officially deemed the attack to be an "excercise in self-defence".

What happens now?
Everything rests on how Iran responds. "There is no doubt that Israel will face a proportional reaction for any action it takes," Iran's Tasnim news agency said on Saturday, citing sources.

What a proportional response means, however, is unclear. If Iran's previous actions are anything to go by, it is likely to exercise a degree of restraint, especially in the immediate aftermath of the attack. This is more so because for all the show, the attack seems to have done very little actual damage.

As per the BBC, Iran's foreign ministry said it was "entitled and obligated to defend itself" but added that Tehran recognises its "responsibilities towards regional peace and security".

Israel's attack, too, appears to have been restrained enough to serve as warning but not outright provocation. Israel has targetted Iran's air defence and missile capabilities, instead of vital infrastructure or the country's nuclear facilities.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues
Source: Indian Express

2. Why are swing States critical in this U.S. election?

Introduction

Around 24.4 crore people are eligible to vote for the U.S. presidential election slated for November 5. In 2020, two-thirds of the eligible voters voted. The next President of the U.S. will be decided less by these national numbers than by a few thousand voters in some key places, which are called battleground or swing States, thanks to the unique features of the country's electoral system.

What transpired in the last two elections?

The last two elections of 2016 and 2020 demonstrated the outsize impact of the swing factor in several States, even as the country became more polarised. In 2020, President Joe Biden had a national lead of around 70 lakh votes over Donald Trump, but what mattered more were the small margins with which he won key States. Of around 67 lakh votes cast in Pennsylvania, Mr. Biden led over Mr. Trump by 81,660; in Michigan, he had 1.54 lakh more, of the total 54 lakh polled; in Wisconsin, Mr. Biden led by just 20,682 votes in a total of more than 32 lakh votes.

In 2016, Mr. Trump had trailed his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton by two percentage points, which was in excess of 20 lakh votes, but he could still emerge as the winner because he won key swing States. For instance, he won Pennsylvania by 44,292 votes of the total 61.7 lakh votes polled; Wisconsin by 22,748 of the 30 lakh votes; and Michigan, by 10,704 of the 48 lakh votes polled.

How is the winner chosen?

The winner of the U.S. presidential contest is selected not by a majority of national popular votes, but by a majority in the electoral college of 538, which is 270. Members of the electoral college are apportioned between the States. Most U.S. States have a "winner-takes-it-all" system that allots all electors to the candidate who gets more popular votes. So, whether a candidate has one or one million votes more than their opponent in California, for instance, all 54 electoral college votes of the State, will be awarded to him or her.

Similarly, all 19 electoral college votes of Pennsylvania will be awarded to the winner of the popular votes within that State, regardless of the margin. This system could create the anomaly of a candidate winning the election, without winning more popular votes than the opponent, nationally. That is also why the main opponents this time, Mr. Trump and Democrat Kamala Harris, are trying to turn the battleground States in their favour in the last lap of campaigning ahead of election day.

Which are the key States that will play a role in picking the winner?

Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Georgia, Nevada, Arizona, and North Carolina are the battleground States of 2024; and the contest between Mr. Trump and Ms. Harris is a dead heat, going by all opinion polls. The average polling error for more than five decades in the U.S. is 3.4%. In all the seven swing States, in nearly all the polls, the leading candidate has a lead well within this margin. Like the last two elections, the margins could be very narrow and these States will decide who will be the President for the next four years. It is also possible that most of these States could swing to either side, as it happened in the last two elections, rather than being evenly divided between the two.

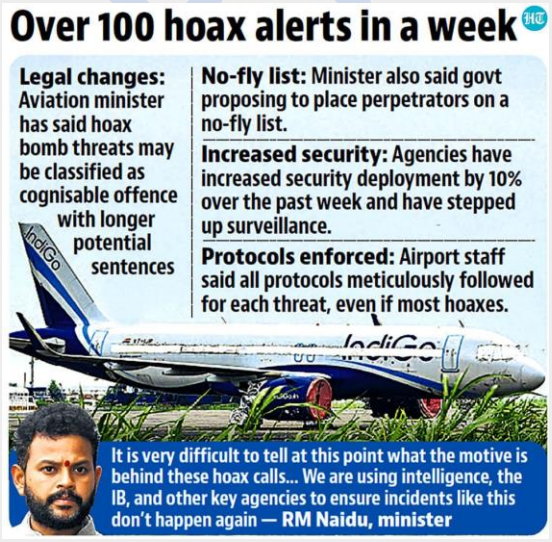
Even a minor swing among significant voting blocs in these States could turn the tide either way. Both candidates are trying to tailor their messages, particularly targeting these States. For instance, Latinos make up nearly a quarter of Arizona's voters. That possibly explains Mr. Trump's recent attempts to portray his opponent as being disrespectful of the Catholic church. In Georgia, Black votes count considerably, and Mr. Trump has been trying to mobilise them behind his anti-immigration politics. Latest polling figures show Mr. Trump gaining more ground among Latinos and Blacks. Michigan, a State that turned Republican in 2016 and Democrat in 2020, has around two lakh Muslim voters. Democrats, and Ms. Harris, face a crisis of credibility among them, against the backdrop of the conflict in West Asia. They may not vote for Mr. Trump but could turn indifferent towards Ms. Harris. Mr. Trump had won North Carolina in 2016 and 2020, but Ms. Harris is making some new inroads, according to polls.

In the last stretch, there will be further concentration of firepower by both sides on the small numbers that count as big in the elections. Catching the swing voters in these States is what both candidates are focussing on now.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues
Source: The Hindu

3. What is the flight protocol for a bomb threat?

Introduction



Over nearly two weeks, almost all Indian carriers including the Tata group airlines — Air India, Vistara, and Air India Express — as well as IndiGo, Alliance Air, and Star Air have faced a wave of threats, resulting in emergency responses and rerouting. There has been military fighter jet interception of some of the flights when they were in international airspace after the crew squawked an emergency transponder code. While all the threats have been determined to be a hoax, they have still led to significant flight delays and financial losses to the airlines, about ₹13 lakh-₹17 lakh an hour.

What do we know about the threats?
According to the Union Civil Aviation Minister, Kinjarapu Rammohan Naidu, most threats have been through social media. Intelligence agencies are looking into the issue and there is a strong possibility of cases being registered. As the threats are largely of an online nature, the tracking of IP addresses and virtual private network use are in focus. The Minister added that even if intuition was that it could be a hoax, nothing was being left unchecked. India has nearly 4,000 flight operations in a day, he said, and within the timeline since the threats began, this would mean over 275 threats for 48,000 flights. He said that efforts were on to make changes in the aviation laws in order to have a strong framework in place. There has been one detention so far — of a teenager who made hoax calls. Representatives of some of the social media platforms concerned have indicated that they are "committed to crack down on terror threats being made against Indian flights".

What is the aviation security architecture?
Almost all the main security guidelines and directives are rooted in the International Civil Aviation Organization's (ICAO) Annex 17–Aviation Security (Restricted). An ICAO spokesperson told The Hindu that the formulation and adoption of Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) for international civil aviation are important, which are detailed in technical annexes to the Convention on International Civil Aviation — also called the Chicago Convention. The ICAO has measures against acts of 'unlawful interference against civil aviation throughout the world'. The SARPs for international aviation security form Annex 17 to the Chicago Convention. There is also the ICAO Aviation Security Manual (Doc 8973–Restricted) which assists ICAO member-states. The spokesperson said that Annex 17 and Doc 8973 are under constant review keeping in mind new threats and evolving technological developments. The spokesperson added that there are restrictions to the information on (member-) state discussions regarding the evolution of security matters, the resulting assessments, and the associated mitigation measures. Specific ICAO guidance on security matters is restricted.

In India, the nodal agency concerned is the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security. Its main responsibility is to have in place standards and measures for the security of civilian flights. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) is concerned with safety. Other agencies involved, directly and indirectly, include the Airports Authority of India; the Central Industrial Security Force; the National Security Guard; the Intelligence Bureau; the Research and Analysis Wing; the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the higher judiciary.

In the context of the threats, amendments could be planned to the Aircraft Act 1934, the Aircraft Rules 1937, and subordinate pieces of legislation to ensure stringent punishment and placing offenders on a 'no-fly list'. The Minister highlighted planned amendments to the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against Safety of Civil Aviation Act, 1982, which would allow legal action even when the aircraft is on the ground. Regulations now focus on in-flight incidents.
An official said that in every airport, the operator, airlines, and security agencies have procedures to handle security threats based on approved documents. He said, "Every airport is prepared to handle such situations as the procedures are regularly tested and updated." There are specific documents but they are restricted. Contingency procedures for unusual occurrences include bomb threats (and aircraft isolation), hijacks, radio communication failure, and other emergencies associated with aircraft.

A pilot who flies the Boeing 777 aircraft says a threat is taken very seriously and there are procedures for the crew. Air traffic control agencies also have procedures.

How are threats to be handled?
An aviation security expert who served in various geographical domains has told The Hindu that hoax calls are of a specific or non-specific nature. While specific details about the hoax calls in the Indian context might not be publicly available, the issue has highlighted systemic issues that concern standardised procedures, guidelines, training, technological limitations, communication gaps, and regulatory challenges.

Tackling hoax calls, for instance, according to the expert, would require investment in technology such as advanced call tracking systems, AI-powered call analysis, voice stress analysis, comprehensive threat assessment, and rewards and incentives for informers. The expert says the industry must look at emerging technologies such as quantum computing, having an aviation cybersecurity framework, pitching for a global hoax call database, having AI-powered chatbots for initial threat assessment, and putting in place enhanced psychological profiling of callers.

An aviation safety expert and a former member of the Civil Aviation Safety Advisory Council suggests placing the photographs of offenders on social media and on display at airports.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security
Source: The Hindu

4. All about the C295 aircraft assembly plant, inaugurated by PM Modi in Vadodara

Introduction
Prime Minister Narendra Modi today inaugurated a plant in Vadodara, where Tata Advanced Systems Ltd (TASL) will manufacture the C-295 aircraft for the Indian Air Force (IAF). Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez was also present in Gujarat, with the two leaders having laid the foundation stone of the Final Assembly Line (FAL) plant in October 2022.

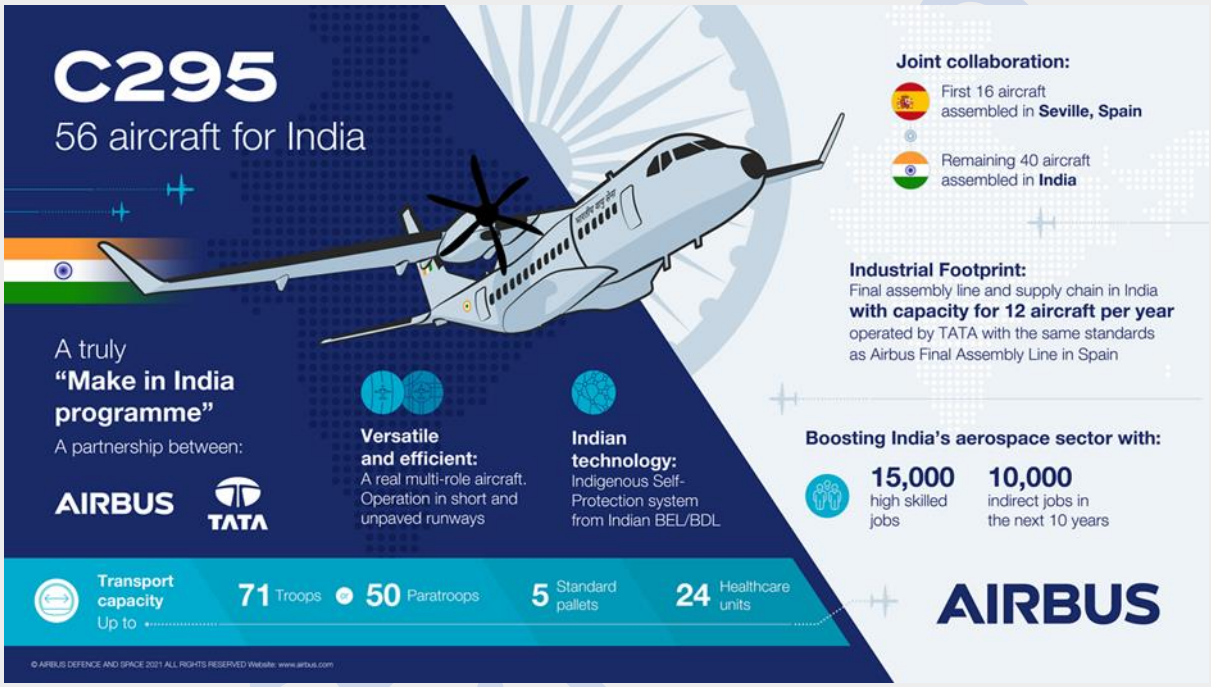
The facility will be the first private sector final assembly line for military aircraft in India, according to a statement from the Prime Minister's Office. Here is what to know about the C295 and its significance for the Indian military.

Where is the C295 produced and by whom?
The C295 was originally produced by a Spanish aircraft manufacturer named Construcciones Aeronáuticas SA. This company is now part of Airbus and the aircraft's manufacturing takes place at Airbus's plant in Spain.

In September 2021, India signed a Rs 21,935 crore deal with Airbus Defence and Space to procure 56 C295 aircraft to replace the IAF's ageing Avro-748 planes, which entered service in the early 1960s.

Under the agreement, Airbus will deliver the first 16 aircraft in 'fly-away' condition from its final assembly line in Seville, Spain within four years. The subsequent 40 aircraft will be manufactured by TASL in India as part of an industrial partnership between the two companies. The 16 fly-away aircraft will be delivered between September 2023 and August 2025. On September 13, 2023, the IAF received the first of the 56 aircraft in Spain. The first Made-in-India aircraft will be rolled out of the manufacturing facility in September 2026 and the remaining 39 will have to be produced by August 2031.

After the completion of the delivery, Airbus Defence and Space will be allowed to sell the aircraft manufactured in India to civil operators and export to countries which are cleared by the Government of India.



What are the technical specifications of the C295 aircraft?

The C295MW is a transport aircraft with a 5 to 10-tonne capacity and a maximum speed of 480 kmph. It has a rear ramp door for quick reaction and para-dropping of troops and cargo. Short take-off and landing from semi-prepared surfaces are some other features.

The technical specifications released by Airbus say that the aircraft has a cabin dimension of 12.7 metres or 41 feet and eight inches. The company claims this aircraft has the longest unobstructed cabin in its class and can accommodate 71 seats. The company also claims that C295 can carry more cargo than its competitors with direct off-loading through the rear ramp. All 56 aircraft will be fitted with an indigenous electronic warfare suite to be developed by Bharat Electronics Ltd and Bharat Dynamics Limited. Former Defence Secretary Ajay Kumar has said the indigenous content in the plane will be the highest ever in India, and that 96 per cent of the work that Airbus does in Spain to produce the plane will be done at the manufacturing unit in Vadodara.

In which terrains have the C295 operated across the world?

As per Airbus, the C295 operates in the Brazilian jungles and Columbian mountains in South America, the deserts of Algeria and Jordan in the Middle East and the cold climates of Poland and Finland in Europe. The aircraft has also flown in military operations in Chad, Iraq and Afghanistan.

What are the roles that the C295 can perform?

As a tactical transport aircraft, the C295 can carry troops and logistical supplies from main airfields to forward operating airfields of the country. It can also operate on short unprepared airstrips as it is capable of Short Take-off and Landing (STOL). It can operate from short airstrips just 2,200 feet long and can fly low-level operations for tactical missions flying at a low speed of 110 knots, says Airbus.

The aircraft can additionally be used for casualty or medical evacuation, performing special missions, disaster response and maritime patrol duties.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology
Source: Indian Express