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ISSN 0793-1042

September 2019

Cover images: DOD photo of Donald Trump by US Air Force Tech. Sgt. Brigitte N. Brantley via Flickr CC, photo of Ali Khomeini via Wikipedia

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Louis René Beres

For by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war.

-Proverbs 24:6

On core matters of peace and security, two closely interrelated questions must be asked:

1. What precisely does Donald Trump have in mind regarding any potential armed conflict with Iran?
2. What might such a possibility portend for Israel, a US ally?

Answers to these questions must extend beyond narrowly partisan simplifications. They should be nuanced and subtly overlapping.

At a minimum, once a shooting war were underway, the Israeli armed forces (IDF) could become involved, possibly to a substantial degree. In a worst case scenario, clashes would involve unconventional weapons and directly affect Israel's civilian population. The worst of the worst could involve nuclear ordnance.

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During the period when Israel remains the only regional nuclear power, an American war with Iran could elicit Israeli threats of nuclear deterrence and/or Israeli nuclear reprisals for harm inflicted upon it by the enemy. For Israel, such threats or reprisals could be entirely rational.

How might such a dangerous situation develop? As a “bolt-from-the-blue” spasm of violence? In difficult to fathom increments? Most credibly, perhaps, a “collateral war” would come to Israel as a catastrophic *fait accompli*, a multi-pronged belligerency that renders even the most comprehensive security preparations in Jerusalem inadequate. What would happen then?

The only meaningful answer to such a question must be a candid affirmation of strategic unpredictability. In science and mathematics, statements of probability must be drawn systematically from relevant past events. The challenge lies in the fact that in the strategic matters currently facing America and Israel, there are no relevant past events.

There is more strategy to ponder. As of this writing, Donald Trump has not revealed a military doctrine. Accordingly, if confronted with a “no doctrine” war launched against Iran by this American president, whether as a defensive first strike or a retaliation, Israel’s senior strategists would need to fashion their corresponding doctrines *ex nihilo*. Inevitably, they would have to proceed without the benefit of historical information.

How should Jerusalem attempt to anticipate Iranian or Iranian-proxy attacks on Israeli targets? As an antecedent question, how should Israeli decision-makers and planners best identify which of these vulnerable targets should be judged “high value?” In 1991 and 2014, Israel’s ultrasensitive nuclear facility at Dimona came under rocket and missile attack from Iraqi and Hamas aggressions, respectively.

In a war with the US, Tehran would likely regard direct attacks upon selected Israeli targets as proper “retaliations” for American strikes – whether or not those strikes were in response to an Iranian initiation of hostilities. Iranian forces could potentially gain operational access to hypersonic rockets or missiles, and Israel’s capacity to shoot down hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs) and/or hypersonic cruise missiles (HCMs) might prove inadequate.

Then what?

It could be to Tehran's perceived advantage to ostentatiously drag Israel into any US- or Iran-initiated war. Striking the US homeland would be vastly more difficult for Iran, and would also be more likely to elicit intolerable reprisals. Wittingly or unwittingly, a Trump-initiated war against Iran would strengthen Saudi military power specifically and Sunni Arab military power in general. While such a strengthening might seem less ominous for Israel than further Iranian militarization, that delicate strategic calculus could change very quickly.

Should the Trump-led US military find itself in a two-front or multi-front war – a complex conflict wherein American forces were battling in Asia (North Korea) and the Middle East simultaneously – Israel could unexpectedly find itself fighting on its own. In such a scenario, Israeli strategists would need to bear in mind that the whole of any deterioration caused by multi-front engagements could effectively exceed the sum of its constituent parts.

This means, among other things, that Israeli strategists and planners would need to remain sensitive to all conceivable synergies. In this connection, it goes without saying that the Trump administration is unaccustomed to such calculations.

For Carl von Clausewitz, the author of *On War*, the determining standard of reasonableness in any military contest must always lie in its presumed political outcomes. For a state to get caught up in a war – any war – without clear political expectations is always a mistake.

For more years than we may care to recollect, futile American wars have been underway in Iraq and Afghanistan. In time, for both Iraqis and Afghans, once-hoped-for oases of regional stability will regress to what seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes called a “war of all against all.” At best, what eventually unravels in these severely fractured countries will be no worse than if these wars had never even been fought.

This is not a desired political outcome.

Shouldn't we now inquire, accordingly: Should Americans sacrifice so much blood and treasure to bring about a *status quo ante bellum*?

Over the years, with the exception of North Korea, America's principal doctrinal enemy has changed from "communism" to "Islamism" or "jihadism." This time, the ideological adversary is real and not merely presumptive. It is a formidable and foe, one that requires serious analytic study – not *ad hoc* responses or seat-of-the-pants presidential eruptions. At times, real or contrived bellicosity can serve American national security policy objectives, but not where it is wholly detached from any previously constructed theoretical foundations.

The jihadist enemy of Israel and America can never be fully defeated. To wit, it will not be immobilized on traditional military battlefields.

If at some point a jihadist adversary has seemingly been vanquished by US military forces in one country or another, it will likely regroup elsewhere. After Iraq, after Afghanistan, even after Syria (which is now winding down with US and Russian support of a genocidal regime that has been historically hostile to Israel), America will face resurgent adversaries in hard-to-manage and geographically far-flung places. These locales include Sudan, Mali, Nigeria, Yemen, Somalia, Egypt, and perhaps even Bangladesh or (in the future) "Palestine."

The American president and his National Security Advisor sound daily alarm bells about Iran – and this after the US, not Iran, withdrew from an international legal agreement that was less than perfect, but better than nothing.

When all these intersecting factors are taken into account, there remains a residual argument (one that might be anticipated in Israel) that a US-generated war with Iran would amount to a *de facto* anti-nuclear preemption or some similarly purposeful act of "anticipatory self-defense." In that case, the American war would be widely regarded in Jerusalem as cost-effective or a net gain. This assessment could, however, be more wish fulfillment than a serious strategic assessment of risks and benefits.

It would be extremely difficult for the US to target its bombs and missiles effectively against the widely dispersed and hardened Iranian nuclear infrastructure. A US war against Iran would thus be contrary to Israel's core national security interests and obligations. Glib reassurances to the contrary from Jerusalem or Washington could be lethal for Israel.

The threat from Iran should never be taken as an opportunity for simplifying political rhetoric. Instead, this threat should be assessed and calibrated dialectically, as reliably as possible according to normally verifiable standards of enemy force posture estimations.

If, at any point during crisis bargaining between Iran, Hezbollah, Israel, and the US, one side or the other places too great a value on achieving "escalation dominance" and too little on considerations of national safety, the conflict could spin out of control. Such a deterioration would be especially worrisome if Israel threatened or actually launched some of its presumptive nuclear forces. This is the case, moreover, irrespective of any promised strategic support for Israel from the US.

In sum: if Israel should look to the US for seamlessly capable geostrategic leadership (especially now), it would be taking very great and indeed unprecedented national security risks. At a minimum, Israel has the incontestable right (and also the obligation to its own citizens) to expect fully decipherable expressions of US military doctrine. Unless it insists more firmly upon maintaining this critical right, Israel could be forced to face starkly injurious security outcomes that could prove irremediable and irreversible.

For both Israel and the US, it is time for caution. All Iran-centered quandaries are turbulent and uncharted waters. In principle, perhaps, they can be successfully navigated, but only after abundant applications of both intellect and perspicacity.

Notes

- 1 Nonetheless, the legal problem of reprisal as a permissible rationale for the use of force by states is identified and explained in the U.N. Declaration of Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States (1970). Additionally, a possible prohibition of reprisals is deducible from the broad regulation of force expressed in the UN Charter at Article 2(4); the obligation to settle disputes peacefully at Article 2(3); and the general limiting of permissible force (codified and customary) by states to necessary self-defense.
- 2 In authoritative studies of world politics, rationality and irrationality have now taken on very precise meanings. In this regard, a state is presumed to be rational to the extent that its leadership always values national survival more highly than any other conceivable preference or combination of preferences. Conversely, an irrational state is one that would not always display such a preference ordering. On expressly pragmatic or operational grounds, ascertaining whether a particular state adversary such as Iran would be rational or irrational could be a daunting task.
- 3 "Everything is very simple in war," says Clausewitz, in his classical discussion of "friction" in *On War*, "but the simplest thing is difficult." Herein, this concept refers to the unpredictable effects of errors in knowledge and information concerning intra-Israel (IDF/MOD) strategic uncertainties; on Israeli and Iranian underestimations or overestimations of relative power position; and on the unalterably vast and irremediable differences between theories of deterrence, and enemy intent "as it actually is." See: Carl von Clausewitz, "Uber das Leben und den Charakter von Scharnhorst," *Historisch-politische Zeitschrift*, 1 (1832); cited in Barry D. Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War*, McNair Paper No. 52, October, 1996, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University Washington, D.C. p. 9.
- 4 For the crime of aggression under international law, see: Resolution on the Definition of Aggression, adopted by the UN General Assembly, Dec. 14, 1974. U.N.G.A. Res. 3314 (XXIX), 29 UN GAOR, Supp (No. 31), 142, UN Doc A/9631 (1975) reprinted in 13 I.L.M., 710 (1974).
- 5 See, by this author: <https://harvardnsj.org/2015/06/core-synergies-in-israels-strategic-planning-when-the-adversarial-whole-is-greater-than-the-sum-of-its-parts/>
- 6 Apropos of Hobbes' argument that the state of nature is worse among individuals than among states, the philosopher Spinoza suggested that "a commonwealth

can guard itself against being subjugated by another, as a man in the state of nature cannot do.” See: A.G. Wernham, ed., *The Political Works, Tractatus Politicus*, iii, II; Clarendon Press, 1958, p. 295.

- 7 Under international law, terrorist movements (of which jihadist groups are a current manifestation) are always *Hostes humani generis*, or "Common enemies of mankind." See: *Research in International Law: Draft Convention on Jurisdiction with Respect to Crime*, 29 AM J. INT'L L. (Supp 1935) 435, 566 (quoting *King v. Marsh* (1615), 3 Bulstr. 27, 81 Eng. Rep 23 (1615) ("a pirate est *Hostes humani generis*").
- 8 International law remains in essence a "vigilante" system, sometimes also called a "Westphalian" system. Such history-based reference is to the Peace Of Westphalia (1648), which concluded the Thirty Years War and created the still-existing self-help "state system." See: *Treaty of Peace of Munster*, Oct. 1648, 1 Consol. T.S. 271; and *Treaty of Peace of Osnabruck*, Oct. 1648, 1., Consol. T.S. 119, Together, these two treaties comprise the Peace of Westphalia.
- 9 Such a “life-saving” preemption option could be entirely permissible under international law. Known jurisprudentially as anticipatory self-defense, this potentially lawful option can be found not in conventional law (art. 51 of the UN Charter supports only post-attack expressions of individual or collective self-defense), but in customary international law. The most precise origins of anticipatory self-defense in customary law lie in the *Caroline*, a case that concerned the unsuccessful rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada against British rule. Following this case, the serious threat of armed attack has generally justified certain militarily defensive actions. In an exchange of diplomatic notes between the governments of the US and Great Britain, then US Secretary of State Daniel Webster outlined a framework for self-defense that did not require an antecedent attack. Here, the jurisprudential framework permitted a military response to a threat so long as the danger posed was “instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation.” See: Beth M. Polebaum, “National Self-defense in International Law: An Emerging Standard for a Nuclear Age,” 59 N.Y.U.L. Rev. 187, 190-91 (1984) (noting that the *Caroline* case had transformed the right of self-defense from an excuse for armed intervention into a legal doctrine). See: Hugo Grotius, *Of the Causes of War, and First of Self-Defense, and Defense of Our Property*, reprinted in 2 *Classics of International Law*, 168-75 (Carnegie Endowment Trust, 1925) (1625); and Emmerich de Vattel, *The Right of Self-Protection and the Effects of the Sovereignty and Independence of Nations*, reprinted in 3 *Classics of International Law*, 130 (Carnegie Endowment Trust,

1916) (1758). Also, Samuel Pufendorf, *The Two Books on the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law*, 32 (Frank Gardner Moore, tr., 1927 (1682).

- 10 Professor Beres was Chair of Project Daniel (PM Sharon) in 2003-04. The purpose of Project Daniel was to examine the developing Iranian nuclear threat and make suggestions about minimizing it. See: <http://www.acpr.org.il/ENGLISH-NATIV/03-ISSUE/daniel-3.htm>
- 11 Historically, preemption has figured importantly in Israeli strategic calculations. This became glaringly apparent in the wars of 1956 and 1967, and in the destruction of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981. It was essentially the failure to preempt in October 1973 that contributed to heavy Israeli losses on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts during the Yom Kippur war, and almost brought about an Israeli defeat. In January, May, and October 2013, Israel, understandably apprehensive about Damascus' supplying of military materials to Syria's Hezbollah surrogates in Lebanon, preemptively struck selected hard targets within Syria.
- 12 The term "dialectic" originates from the Greek expression for the art of conversation. A common contemporary meaning is "method of seeking truth by correct reasoning." From the standpoint of shaping Israel's strategy vis-à-vis Iran, the following operations could be regarded as essential but nonexclusive components: 1) a method of refutation conducted by examining logical consequences; 2) a method of division or repeated logical analysis of genera into species; 3) logical reasoning using premises that are probable or generally accepted; 4) formal logic; and 5) the logical development of thought through thesis and antithesis to fruitful synthesis of these opposites.
- 13 The de facto condition of Hobbesian anarchy within which Israel must make its assessments and calibrations stands in stark contrast to the legal assumption of solidarity between states. In essence, this idealized assumption concerns a common struggle against both aggression and terrorism. Such a peremptory expectation, known formally in law as a jus cogens assumption, was mentioned in Justinian, *Corpus Juris Civilis* (533 CE); Hugo Grotius, 2 *De Jure Belli ac Pacis Libri Tres*, Ch. 20 (Francis W. Kesey., tr, Clarendon Press, 1925)(1690); and Emmerich de Vattel, 1 *Le Droit Des Gens*, Ch. 19 (1758).

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