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The Road to an Iranian Attack on Israel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israeli political and military leaders have warned against the possibility of a major military confrontation with Iran, which wants to deter Israel from disrupting its attempts to build military bases in Syria and Iraq and to construct factories in which Hezbollah can convert its huge arsenal of rockets into accurate missiles. This threat is more acute in light of the American failure to respond to recent Iranian provocations in the Gulf. Israel should adopt an aggressive new strategic approach to meet this threat, in coordination with the US and in consultation with Russia.

Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu recently warned that increasing Iranian provocations and the absence of a US response could lead to a dangerous military confrontation between Israel and Iran. This warning is perceived by some as mere fear-mongering in the wake of two non-conclusive elections. Neither of the two leading candidates for PM, Netanyahu or Benjamin Gantz, has been able to form a government. Opposition spokespersons and commentators suggest that Netanyahu's warning is a manipulation designed to break the political deadlock and push for the establishment of a national unity government of the type he favors.

But the IDF's Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, and Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva, the Head of the IDF's Operations Directorate, have issued similar warnings.

Military and strategic experts argue that an Iranian military attack on Israel is just a matter of time. American strategic weakness, as reflected in its failure to respond to a series of Iranian provocations in the Gulf, could provide an opportunity for an Iranian attack. The main purpose of such an attack would be to deter Israel from its relentless strikes on the military infrastructure Iran is attempting to build in Syria and more recently in Iraq.

Iran has attacked oil tankers and Saudi oil facilities and shot down an expensive American intelligence drone over international waters. It is building facilities to convert Hezbollah's huge arsenal of rockets into more accurate and more deadly weapons. It is trying to add a third military front against Israel in Syria and Iraq (the other two are Lebanon and Gaza), and is using the terror organization Islamic Jihad in Gaza to attack Israeli towns and villages in order to sabotage the Egyptian effort to achieve calm there.

Iran is also systematically violating the 2015 nuclear agreement, which was signed by European powers as well as the US.

On November 6, 2019, Iran began to fuel over 1,044 centrifuges with uranium gas at the Fordow nuclear facility. The purpose is to enrich uranium at 20%. For peaceful purposes, uranium only needs to be enriched at 3-5%, and indeed the nuclear deal allows Iran to enrich only up to 3.67%. Any concentration beyond that level could indicate a plan to build nuclear weapons, which require 85-90% concentration. Once the 20% level is reached, enrichment can be boosted to 90% quite rapidly.

Iran also plans to [increase](#) its enriched uranium production tenfold at the Natanz nuclear facility. On November 4, it said it is developing advanced centrifuges that can enrich uranium faster.

Trump's decision to refrain from any retaliation against Iran's provocations in the Gulf, his eagerness to meet Iran's president Hassan Rouhani at the recent UN General Assembly, his reported willingness to lift the heavy sanctions he imposed on Iran in return for the meeting and possible negotiations over a new nuclear agreement, and his decision to pull out from Kurdish-controlled areas near the Turkish-Syrian border encourage Iran to believe the US is weak and unprepared to use force against either military provocations or the new efforts to accelerate the quest for nuclear weapons. The regime's leaders may have concluded that the US is now an unreliable ally that will not retaliate strongly against either violations of the nuclear agreement or an attack on Israel.

On September 14, 2019, Iran attacked the Saudi oil facility in Abqaiq, one of the world's most important oil production facilities. The surprise attack was launched from Iran and carried out by sophisticated and accurate cruise missiles and attack drones. Tehran claims the attack was carried out from Yemen by rebel Houthis. This is a lie. The evidence clearly shows that the attack came from Iranian territory.

It is obvious that Iran would not attack Israel directly from its own territory. It is much more likely to use its proxies in the region. Fortunately, Iran lost

some of the element of surprise against Israel as it already used precision-guided cruise missiles against Saudi Arabia.

Israel is preparing defensive and offensive answers to the prospect of an Iranian cruise missile and drone strike. An Israeli strategy should include several key components. First it should reveal Iran's plan. Then it should threaten direct and massive retaliation and make clear that Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Gaza will pay a heavy price if attacks on Israel originate on their soil.

In the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Israel distinguished between Lebanon and Hezbollah. This distinction did not really apply then, and it certainly does not apply now. If Israel comes under attack from Lebanese territory, it will attack all of Lebanon in response—the Lebanese army as well as Hezbollah. The same is true for Syria. Israel is trying to persuade Syrian president Bashar Assad and Russia that if Israel comes under attack from Syria, it is Assad who will pay the price and his regime will be endangered.

Coordination with the US and consultation with Russia are critically important. Despite the US failure to respond to the Iranian provocations, the recent decision to withdraw from northern Syria, the forthcoming impeachment process against Trump, and the 2020 presidential election, Israel should consult the US administration on alternative responses to an Iranian attack. Jerusalem should also attempt to persuade Trump to issue a warning that attacks on Israel of the kind launched against Saudi Arabia would trigger a severe American reaction.

Similarly, Israel should inform Russia of potential Israeli action after any attack by Iran, especially from Syrian territory. Russia hasn't been happy about exchanges of fire between Israel and Iranian forces attempting to build a base in Syria. Russia has not protested Israeli military actions in Syria and is concerned about the survival of the Assad regime should an Iranian attack originate from there.

All these strategic components could create some level of deterrence or at least limit the damage of any potential Iranian attack. Yet given the changing circumstances in the region, even a limited attack could trigger a major war that nobody wants, at least right now.

Iran's military leaders often threaten to annihilate Israel or at least destroy Tel Aviv. In view of the growing probability of a direct military confrontation between the two states, Israelis would do well to remember Elie Wiesel's words: "Better to believe the threats of our enemies than the promises of our friends."

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