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The Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies

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Executive Summary

Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu's warning on the emergent Yemen-originating missile threat corresponds to Iran's modus operandi of surrounding its foes with missile “rings of fire” and will enable Tehran to complete the missile encirclement of the Jewish state as a step toward its eventual demise. Israel must do its utmost to confront this new strategic threat by establishing an alert system and defense capabilities against Yemen-originating cruise and ballistic missiles, whatever the cost.
Iranian Missiles and Its Evolving “Rings of Fire”

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On October 10, 2019, about six weeks after the devastating attack on Saudi Arabia's oil installations, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu threw a small bombshell by stating that Iran has deployed precision missiles in Yemen that can reach Israel. This was said at a time of unprecedented political crisis in Israel—barely three days after Netanyahu had handed back the mandate to set up a new government to the president, who in turn transferred the mandate to the head of the opposition. Every utterance of Netanyahu’s at that time was microscopically examined for political content and for its putative contribution (or otherwise) to his political future.

Netanyahu's statement about a looming Iranian missile threat from Yemen was received with skepticism. After all, what would be the logic from Iran’s point of view of deploying missiles as far away as Yemen to be used against Israel when it has already deployed missiles on its own territory that serve that purpose at half the distance? And if they have in fact deployed missiles capable of reaching even the southern tip of Israel in Yemen, why have they not yet surfaced?

Such questions testify to the media's and the general public's lack of interest in the four-year-long war on Yemeni soil between Iran and its Houthi clients on one side and the Saudi-led coalition of Sunni Arab states on the other.

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Early on in this war, Tehran began supplying its Houthi clients with choice missiles, rockets, and UAVs from its own arsenals. Such transfers are made surreptitiously to avoid international censure following the UN-imposed arms embargo on the Houthi regime in Yemen, in force since the May 2015 putsch that snatched control of Northern Yemen from the internationally recognized government.

The missiles, the machinery for local production of missile fuel, and the required raw materials are secretly smuggled into Houthiland through maritime and land routes. In the case of large liquid propellant missiles, they are chopped into short segments for ease of transport; those segments are subsequently welded back together in local Houthiland workshops. The Iranians have managed to surreptitiously transfer to their Houthi clients short-range rockets, ballistic missiles with ranges of up to 1,200 km, and production lines for manufacturing unmanned air vehicles (UAVs).

This armory has been used over the past four years to strike targets within Saudi Arabia, including cities, oil installations, military bases, and Patriot batteries. Moreover, the Iranians use the Houthis to maintain a plausible if somewhat shaky deniability that provides an alibi for their covert aggression against the Saudi-led coalition.

A recent outstanding example was the spectacular September 14, 2019 attack on two major Saudi oil installations. All known evidence indicates that the attack was conceived and approved by Iran's top leadership, that it was planned and executed by the Revolutionary Guard Air Force, and that it originated from Iranian soil. Iran's reaction to such allegations was dismissive, referring all inquiries to the Houthi regime in Sanaa—and, indeed, the Houthis assumed full responsibility for the attack.

It is now clear that Iran has meticulously prepared the ground for the purpose of establishing alibis for itself. Last June, with a great flourish, the Houthis unveiled a new type of "Yemeni" (read: Iranian) UAV sporting a small jet engine copied from a Czech design. They quickly put it to use against Saudi towns across the border, leaving easily identifiable debris. Two months later, in the attack on the Saudi oil installations, one was struck by the same type of jet-propelled UAV, again leaving a clear debris trail linking it to the "Yemeni" vehicle—thus "proving" to gullible souls around the world that the attack had originated in Yemen, not Iran.
In other arenas, Iran's methods are somewhat different. In the past two years, the Quds Force, directly operated by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, has launched a series of attacks and attempted attacks against Israel. In February 2018, the Quds Force flew an advanced UAV into Israeli territory, probably on a reconnaissance mission. The UAV was detected and shot down by an Israeli gunship. Following a series of preventive strikes on Quds Force targets in Syria, the Iranians fired 32 rockets toward Israel's Golan Heights. Four were shot down by Iron Dome and the rest fell harmlessly on Syrian territory. Following a further series of preventive attacks allegedly launched by Israel on Iranian targets in Syria, the Quds Force fired a single heavy precision rocket of a previously unknown type at Israel's Mt. Hermon military base. This rocket too was shot down by Iron Dome. And last August, the Quds Force attempted to strike Israel with explosive-carrying drones, but the attack was foiled by the IDF.

In addition to these incidents, there was a rocket attack against the ski resort on the summit of Mt. Hermon that caused damage to civilian installations. The source of this attack remains unclear. It might have been Lebanese Hezbollah, the Syrian armed forces, local militias, or the Quds Force itself.

The common denominator of all these attacks against Israel was their anonymity. Neither Iran nor any of its affiliated organizations in Syria or Lebanon ever assumed responsibility for them. This anonymous mode of action stands in sharp contrast to the attack on Saudi Arabia, where Iran's Houthi allies not only assumed full responsibility but bragged about it.

At the same time, Iran has assumed full responsibility for having fired missiles from its territory against targets in neighboring countries. In June 2018 and then again in September 2018, Iran's Revolutionary Guards launched precision missiles against ISIS bases in Syria. The June attack was retaliation for a major ISIS terror strike in downtown Tehran that killed scores of Iranian civilians, while the September attack was in retaliation for an ISIS terror strike in the city of Ahwaz that killed scores more Iranians, both civilian and military.

Earlier in September 2018, the Revolutionary Guards launched a volley of precision missiles against two Kurdish targets in Iraq. This was a targeted
killing operation, timed for a meeting of the leaders of an anti-Iranian Kurdish guerilla organization. Two precision missiles hit the structure in which the meeting took place, killing many of the participants.

All three missile attacks—those targeting ISIS bases as well as the one targeting Kurdish headquarters—were openly disclosed by Iran as justified retribution for attacks on its own territory, and were widely glorified in Iran's official media channels.

This short survey of Iranian and Iranian-inspired aggressive actions in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, and Israel reveals the outlines of Iran's missile doctrine. The Islamic Republic of Iran portrays itself as a peace-loving nation that shuns aggression against any other country. This may sound farfetched to Israelis, flooded as they are by incessant reports about Iran's intention to destroy their country. Yet Iran is careful never to commit itself directly to Israel's destruction. The Islamic regime's line of argument is that Israel is destined to vanish from the map, but it won't be Iran that will make it happen. According to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the process of grinding down Israel to the point of exhaustion, collapse, and disappearance is tasked to the entire Islamic and Arab world, mainly through attrition by Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian militias in Gaza.

Even so, this will not necessarily happen in the immediate future. (One of Tehran's public squares sports a "countdown clock" that displays the number of days remaining until Israel's disappearance. The current figure predicts about 24 more years until Israel's demise.) Iran declares that it has no intention of attacking any country in the world—by implication, not even Israel—unless it is first attacked, a kind of a "no first use" policy.

The justification for the two attacks on ISIS targets in Syria was the latter's terrorist actions in the heart of Iran's major cities. The justification for the attack against the Kurdish leadership group in Iraq was that they directed terrorist actions (real or imagined) within Iran's sovereign territory.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has never directly attacked Iran. Hence, Iran cannot use the excuse of justified retaliation for its offensive against Saudi Arabia's oil industry. Instead, it launched a brilliant deception operation that camouflaged its September 14th attack as a Houthi operation originating in Yemen.
As for Israel, here too Iran cannot use the excuse of justified retaliation, as the attacks against the Quds Force in Syria and against various targets in Iraq attributed to Israel never hit Iran itself. Thus, Iran was prevented—by its own declared policy—from assuming direct responsibility for the retaliatory attacks against Israel. Assigning responsibility to one of its local affiliates, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, would have escalated the situation to the verge of full-scale war. Iran therefore selected a policy of ambiguity, with no one taking responsibility for the rockets fired at Israel.

It can be concluded from this pattern of behavior that Iran is limiting itself to declared and fully attributed missile attacks only as justified retaliation whenever its own territory comes under attack. Otherwise it prefers to execute its aggressive actions through its "independent" emissaries, who might or might not take responsibility as the case may be—all the while maintaining formal deniability that allows it to maintain a façade of non-involvement. This policy is being practiced in the case of Saudi Arabia and its allies, as well as in the case of Israel.

Another policy aspect revealed by the fighting in Yemen is the Houthi use of Iranian-supplied missiles to encircle its foes with missile "rings of fire" from all directions.

Iran's missile threat to Saudi Arabia is more than 30 years old. In his book "Desert Warrior", the former commander of the Arab coalition forces in the 1991 Gulf War, Prince Khalid Bin Sultan, explains that his country's surprise purchase of Chinese Dong Feng 3 missiles in the 1980s reflected its need to deter Iran’s emerging missile force. That force did grow enormously in size and power, and the threat it now poses to Saudi Arabia is no less severe than its threat to Israel.

Until the Houthi putsch in Yemen, though, the missile threat to Saudi Arabia came only from Iran's own missile bases, located north and northwest of the kingdom. This allowed the Saudis, at least in theory, to deploy early warning and active defense arrays against missile and UAV threats from those directions only. Now that a new Iranian bridgehead is being established in Houthiland, however, Saudi Arabia is also threatened from the southeast. Moreover, this new missile base is controlled and operated by Iranian emissaries, allowing the Islamic Republic to undertake aggressive military action behind a smokescreen of deniability and freeing it from the need to excuse it as justified retribution.
Iran has thus gained the capability to influence Saudi policy through the indirect threat from Yemen. That threat is even more potent than the direct threat from Iranian territory, limited as that is by Tehran's avowed "no first use" policy.

This shrewd policy is working. Following Iran's destructive yet hotly denied September 14th attack on the Saudi oil installation, which was launched from Iran but attributed to the Houthis in Yemen, the Saudis ceased their air attacks on Houthi-controlled targets in Yemen and entered into secret negotiations with the Houthi leadership to end the war. If the negotiations succeed, the result will be the international legitimization of the Houthi regime in Sanaa. That regime would henceforth serve as a permanent Iranian base on the southern tip of Arabia, controlling the shipping lanes between the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal and deterring Saudi Arabia from anti-Iranian policy.

PM Netanyahu's statement of October 10, 2019 may imply that the Iranians are striving to establish a similar "ring of fire" against Israel. At present, the Israeli heartland is threatened by Iranian-supplied rockets and missiles from the north (Lebanon) and the southwest (Gaza). But according to media reports, Tehran has begun to supply its affiliated militias in Iraq with missiles with a range that can reach Israel.

The rationale for doing this is not obvious at first glance. Iran can hit Israel with missiles from in its own territory and has no need to base them in Iraq. But Iran's proclaimed "no first strike" policy prevents it from threatening Israel directly unless it is first attacked by Israel. On the other hand, Iranian missiles in Iraq—repainted and rebranded as "Iraqi-developed"—would not need the excuse of justified retaliation to be employed against Israel and would allow Tehran to maintain the smokescreen of deniability.

Such Iraqi-based missiles would constitute a significant threat from the east, as they would be capable of retaliating against alleged Israeli attacks on Iranian-affiliated targets in Iraq and of deterring Israel from further attacks.

As described above, there is already a covert Iranian missile force masquerading as a "Yemeni-developed" arsenal in Houthi-controlled Yemen, and it is directed against Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies. This
arsenal has been used over the past four years to strike deep into Saudi Arabia, including eight attacks on the capital city of Riyadh. Netanyahu's statement could imply that the Iranians are now striving to extend the capability of their missile force in Yemen to cover Israel, too.

Again, the logic of such a move is this: Yemen lies southeast of Israel, a direction from which no strategic threat has been envisaged to date. Deployment of Israel-range ballistic and cruise missiles in Yemen would force Jerusalem to dilute its existing north- and southwestern-facing defenses in favor of a southeastern-facing defensive shield, or to invest heavily in additional early warning and active defense systems to close the gap. Moreover, the threat from Yemen would come from Iran's affiliates rather than from Iran itself, and would thus be unbound by Tehran’s "no first use" policy. This would provide Iran with sufficient deniability to deter Israel from military action against its other regional affiliates in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

The rationale is clear. What remains is the question of means.

The military capital of the Houthi regime in Yemen is the town of Sadaa, northwest of the political capital city of Sanaa. Sadaa is 1,700 km away from Israel's southern port of Eilat and 1,900 km from the Tel Aviv metropolitan area. The longest range "Yemeni" (i.e., Iranian) ballistic missile operated by the Houthis, the Burkan 3, has a declared range of only 1,200 km. Even taking the Houthis' claim of responsibility for the September 14th attack against Saudi Arabia's oil installations at face value, the range of their UAVs is about the same. None of their previous deep strikes into the Saudi hinterland have included targets more than 1,200 km away from Houthi-controlled territory. There is no available evidence at this time of the existence of a threat to Israel from any missile or UAV in Houthi service.

It is possible, though, that the Houthis have undeclared missiles with longer ranges. There is evidence that in at least one case, the Iranians transferred to the Houthis one or more of their Soumar heavy cruise missiles, which has a declared range of 2,000 km.

The Houthis announced in December 2017 that they had attacked a new nuclear reactor being constructed in Abu Dhabi. This announcement
was accompanied by a video clip showing the launching of unnamed heavy cruise missiles that looked like twins of the Iranian Soumar, which was unveiled by Tehran with great fanfare in 2015. (Abu Dhabi denied that any attack took place against its nuclear reactor.) The distance from Sadaa to Abu Dhabi is about 1,400 km. It is entirely possible that the Houthis launched a Soumar against Abu Dhabi and that it failed before reaching its target.

The existence in Yemen of a stockpile of Soumar cruise missiles that can reach the Tel Aviv metropolitan area is therefore not inconceivable. Netanyahu may have had this possibility in mind when he made his October 10th statement. At the same time, it should be noted that there have been no further Houthi disclosures about using Soumar-like missiles, nor was there any "Houthization"—i.e., no public unveiling of a renamed and repainted version of this weapon in Yemen touting it as "Yemeni-developed".

The longest-range ballistic missiles in Houthi service—the 1,200 km Burkan 3s—are in essence Scud missiles improved almost beyond recognition by the Iranian aerospace industries. However, the fourfold stretching of the original 300 km range of the venerable Scud seems to have exhausted the growth potential of this vintage Soviet design. To threaten Israel with ballistic missiles from Yemen would require heavier types, such as the latest Shahab 3 versions, which have a proven range of 2,000 km.

Smuggling such missiles into Houthiland should not be any more complicated than transferring the lighter Burkan missiles, but no such transfer has been reported to date in the media.

Like the stretched Scuds, the Shahab 3 family of missiles is unique to Iran. It therefore stands to reason that if and when the Iranians decide to deploy such missiles in Yemen, this will be accompanied by a "Houthization" process, which would including rebranding, repainting, and glorifying the achievements of Yemen's nonexistent missile industry. Launching Shahab 3-type missiles from Houthiland without such public antics might embarrass Iran and expose it to UN censure for abrogating the ban on arms transfers to Yemen.

The Iranians have invested considerable effort into maintaining deniability. It stands to reason that if they decide to provide the Houthis with Israel-range missiles, they will make an effort to maintain this deniability.
Netanyahu's warning about a looming missile threat from Yemen conforms with the pattern of Iran's long-term strategy in the region, as revealed by the establishment of a "ring of fire" against Saudi Arabia. Patronizing the Houthis’ takeover of northern Yemen provided Iran with a secure base in the southern tip of Arabia, which allows it to establish a multidirectional deterrent force against the kingdom by complementing its missile threat from the north with a threat from the south. This is designed to ensure Saudi Arabia’s "good behavior" vis-à-vis Iran. Similarly, the deployment by Iran of very long-range missiles in Yemen would create another "ring of fire," this time against Israel. In Iran's calculus, this would enhance its long-term attrition campaign against that country.

Israel should prepare accordingly, not least by extending its early warning and active defense shield against ballistic and cruise missiles originating from Yemen.

Postscript: At the time this paper was being readied for publication, the US succeeded in killing Gen. Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force and the mastermind behind Iran's aggrandizement in the region, including arm transfers to the Houthis. It remains to be seen which of the three modes of retaliation Iran will choose to employ, if and when it does retaliate: the directly attributed mode of "justified retribution", the "false flag" mode through affiliates, or the anonymous mode of the unattributed strike. Judging by the Iranian leadership's statements following the demise of Soleimani, the US action is being regarded as a direct attack on Iran (though it did not take place on Iranian territory), and retribution is threatened by "Iran and all freedom-seeking countries in the region." This could indicate that Iran is considering the use of at least the first two modes: direct retaliation as well as "false flag" retaliation through its allies, whether in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, or Yemen.
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