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SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

Iranian-Israeli Escalation in Syria

Policy Analysis Unit | May 2018

Israel Entices Iran into Escalation in Syria

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Introduction

Following Donald Trump's announcement that the US will withdraw from the nuclear accord with Iran, Israel attacked a site in the Al-Keswa area, about 22 km southwest of the Syrian capital Damascus, where Israel claimed that Iran was keeping precision-guided missiles. The latest attack comes in a series of increased Israeli attacks in recent weeks, most recently on 29 April 2018, when Israeli aircraft bombed Iranian targets in the suburbs of Aleppo and Hama. The shelling may have targeted modern Iranian "Qiam 1" missiles with range of about 800 kilometers, carrying a warhead weighing 750 kilograms, only recently positioned in Syrian territory.¹ The bombing and explosions set off an earthquake registering 2.6 Richter magnitude scale in the vicinity, indicating that explosions took place in underground stores and that the missiles that hit the targets penetrated the fortifications.²

The day after the attack, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu launched a television campaign against the Iranian nuclear project, in which he announced that the Israeli Mossad had obtained the archives of the old Iranian nuclear file. He claimed that Iran had deceived the international community regarding its nuclear programme.

Between Escalation and Baiting

Israel began to give greater importance to undercutting the Iranian military presence in Syria in autumn 2017, believing that the war in Syria was nearing completion after Russia and Iran secured the Syrian regime's position militarily. Israel also believes that Iran has strengthened its military presence in Syria and is seeking to overstay the end of the war, and to use this military presence as a reserve force, along with Hezbollah forces, against Israel when necessary.

In recent weeks, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, and IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot,³ asserted Israel's determination to prevent

¹ Alex Fishman, "The Cherry in the Treasury," Yediot Ahronot Weekly Supplement, 4/4/2018.

² "A new aggression targeting Iran in Syria," (Arabic) Al-Akhbar, 2/5/2018, retrieved 30/4/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/NzRJCy>

³ Amos Harel, "Despite Iran's threats, Eizenkot is pushing for the continuation of the hard line in Syria," (Hebrew) Ha'aretz, 2/5/2018, retrieved 9/5/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/NtREWn>

Iran from strengthening its military presence in Syria even if it led to a full military confrontation with Iran and Hezbollah. In his comment on the possibility that Russia could provide Syria with sophisticated missile systems or the possibility that Russian forces in Syria would use its advanced missile system against Israeli aircraft, Lieberman said that Israel would respond with bombardment, whoever launched the missiles.⁴ The Israeli red lines for the Iranian military presence in Syria include Iran's medium and short-range missiles, drones, its weapons production plants and various air defense systems that Iran has brought to Syria, and any other advanced weapons that strengthen the Iranian military presence in Syria. Additionally Iranian military forces and allied militias must steer clear of the borders of the Syrian-occupied Golan Heights.

It is clear that the political and military institutions in Israel target Iran whenever it breaches these red lines. It appears from the provocative rhetoric aimed at Iran, and from its repeated military strikes in Syria, that they are not only aiming to destroy advanced Iranian weaponry but also to kill Iranian soldiers and officers, something publicly acknowledged by Israeli officials. It seems that they are also working to lure Iran into a military confrontation.⁵ Israel launched its latest attacks against the Iranian military presence in Syria, aware that this particular stage is a critical one for Iran and Hezbollah, on the eve of the American president's decision to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear agreement, and of the parliamentary elections in Lebanon, into which Hezbollah threw all its weight.

However, this does not explain the continuity of Israeli strikes and Iran's failure to respond to them. Clearly, Israel has taken a strategic decision to prevent the consolidation of Iranian military presence in Syria, even if it leads to an outright military confrontation. Israel has recently entered a gray area in which it has exceeded the limits of its red lines, coming close to inviting Iran to respond militarily, seemingly taking advantage of an unconditionally supportive American administration.

In contrast, Iran is determined to fortify its military presence in Syria. However, Israeli attacks on Iranian targets, with heavy human and material losses and garnering accurate intelligence

⁴ "Lieberman: If the Russian defense systems in Syria are used against us, we will act against them" Ha'aretz, 24/4/2018, seen on 9/5/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/nFWXit>

⁵ A senior Israeli journalist, Aharon Parnaya, wrote to the leaders of the political and military institutions in Israel that the military and political institutions are seeking to entice Iran into a military confrontation and that Netanyahu, Chief of Staff Eizenkot and Defense Minister Lieberman are partners in these steps to entice Iran into military confrontation. For further details, see Nahum Barnea, "The War Before the War," (Hebrew) Yedioth Ahronoth Weekly, 4/5/2018, (print edition).

about the details of the Iranian military presence in Syria, enabled Mossad to steal the archives of the Iranian nuclear program from the heart of Tehran, leaving Iran in a precarious situation.

The Russian Position

Israel attaches great importance to Russia's position on the war in Syria, and recognizes that Russia is the only country capable, if it wishes, of limiting the repeated Israeli attacks on Syria. It also recognizes the Russian dependence on the Iranian military and its allied militias in the war against the Syrian armed opposition in order to complete its countrywide extension of influence over the Syrian regime.

Netanyahu is expected to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin during his visit to Moscow on Wednesday, the eighth meeting between them in less than two years, to reach an understanding on the Iranian military presence in Syria and the Israeli red lines. An understanding may be reached between the two countries that prevents a consolidation of the advanced Iranian military presence in Syria that could threaten Israel in the future. This would likely come in exchange for Israel's acceptance of the presence of Iranian military forces and its Shiite militias in Syria if they are arming the Iranians and the Syrian regime according to the requirements of the war against the Syrian armed opposition, and not against Israel. If Iran does not respond to this, Russia will continue to respect Israel's red lines in Syria. Netanyahu is likely to offer Putin Israeli willingness to strengthen the Syrian regime's strength, and later to rehabilitate it, in exchange for curbing Iranian influence in Syria and preserving Israel's red lines.

Netanyahu's TV Presentation and the Nuclear Programme

Netanyahu did not reveal anything new in his demagogic television presentation regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, except that Mossad had managed to steal the archive of the Iranian nuclear project.⁶ There is almost unanimous agreement that Netanyahu's presentation used information already dealt with by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and that

⁶ Israel leaked to the media that Mossad discovered the existence of the archives of the old military nuclear file in February 2016, and stole this archive from Tehran in January 2018, and that the Mossad director told US President Trump the same month. See for example: "A senior Israeli official: The nuclear documents were revealed two years ago and smuggled to Israel in January", (Hebrew) Ha'aretz, 1/5/2018, retrieved 9/5/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/RZP6QG>

Netanyahu provided no evidence that Iran had developed its military nuclear project after 2009. He could not dare claim that Iran had violated the nuclear agreement. The International Atomic Energy Agency has confirmed in all of its 11 reports that Iran has complied with the nuclear agreement since signing it.

Netanyahu's goal was to unearth the Iranian nuclear archive, after coordinating with President Trump, in order to influence his decision to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear deal, and pressure Europe to reconsider its position on the agreement. With the exception of President Trump, all of the leaders of the major powers, particularly those that signed the Iranian nuclear agreement, agreed on the need to uphold the Iranian nuclear agreement. Some of them demanded, along with adherence to the agreement, negotiations with Iran over other issues not included in the nuclear deal, such as Iran's development of ballistic missiles and its regional role.

In addition, the Israeli military establishment, which fully agrees with Netanyahu on the Iranian military presence in Syria, has maintained its position supporting the maintenance of the Iranian nuclear agreement and urging against the withdrawal of the United States of America, despite its belief that there are gaps in the agreement, especially regarding its duration.⁷ The nuclear agreement freezes the Iranian nuclear project for at least ten years, which, in the eyes of the military, allows the Israeli army to prepare for the military option if necessary, while at the same time addressing the Iranian military presence in Syria.⁸

The Nuclear Weapons Monopoly

Netanyahu has emerged louder than other Israeli leaders in his consistent public call to completely eliminate the infrastructure of the Iranian nuclear project, either by a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities by the United States and Israel, or by imposing more crippling and painful economic sanctions on Iran. He hopes to force the Iranian regime to abandon its nuclear project, or inspire the forced replacement of the regime with one that renounces the nuclear project.

⁷ IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot expressed his support for the agreement, despite his belief that there are many flaws in it. See lengthy Amos Harel interview with Chief of Staff Eisenkot: "Eisenkot: When the IDF is not a state army, we will start talking about an existential threat," Ha'aretz, 30/3/2018, retrieved 9/5/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/cqxMLX>

⁸ Amos Harel, "Maj. Gen. Gilad: US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement serves Iran," Ha'aretz, 5/5/2018, retrieved 9/5/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/uzEH9m>

Over the past years, Netanyahu has vehemently opposed any peaceful solution to the Iranian nuclear project that does not guarantee the elimination of the entire project in both its civil and military forms. He strongly disagreed with the Obama administration and opposed the Geneva interim agreement of November 2013, the Iran nuclear deal framework of April 2015, and the final nuclear agreement reached in July 2015 between the six superpowers and Iran.

Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders have claimed that the Iranian nuclear project poses an existential threat to Israel, as does any other nuclear project in the Middle East. Yet Israel has long been a nuclear state with a large arsenal of nuclear, hydrogen, and neutron bombs. It also has sophisticated aircraft and missiles to deliver these bombs at targets hundreds or even thousands of kilometers away. Submarines supplied by Germany over the past two decades have the ability to direct a second nuclear strike, which can destroy entire cities.

Israel's command and control center for nuclear war management is reinforced against nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.⁹ In fact, the Israeli-led campaign against Iran and its nuclear program is not intended to defend its existence, but to preserve Israel's monopoly on nuclear weapons in the Middle East and prevent any other state from obtaining them. Israel's monopoly on nuclear weapons is part of Israel's national security doctrine, and one of the most important elements of its aggressive regional expansion.

Conclusion

For years, Netanyahu has been acting on the assumption that Israel has a surplus of power that can achieve its various objectives by exploiting the regional and international situation. Since the victory of President Trump, Netanyahu worked to persuade him to withdraw from the nuclear agreement with Iran, strongly opposed by Trump himself. Netanyahu seeks to reach an understanding regarding Syria with Russian President Putin in a meeting in Moscow, after a series of painful military strikes on Iranian forces that elicited no Iranian response at the time. He wants to ensure that the Iranian presence in Syria is not strengthened with advanced weapons, in return for Israeli acceptance of the continued presence of Iranian forces in Syria until the end of the war. This is under the provision that Iran is armed only in accordance with the requirements of the war against the Syrian armed opposition and *not* against Israel.

⁹ "Air force control center undergoes nuclear upgrade", The Times of Israel online, 14/12/2014. Retrieved on 9/5/2018 at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/air-force-control-center-undergoes-major-upgrade/>