Iran’s attack means Israel has an opening: Derailing its nuclearization

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 15.04.2024

It would be wise to keep Iranian nerves in tense anticipation, allowing the Iranian rial to continue plummeting and enabling internal criticism of the regime to intensify.

Israel needs a high-intensity campaign strategy against Iran

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 15.04.2024

Iran’s unprecedented missile and drone attack against Israel last night is the pinnacle of a decades-long Iranian campaign that has been ongoing since the Islamic regime took power during the 1979 revolution. Over the years, Iran has gradually built a sophisticated proxy system and, with the exception of very few instances, has preferred to fight Israel via its proxies. Hiding behind them is part of Tehran’s calculated strategy, which strives to distance Iran from war or any punishment for acts of terror, despite the Islamic Republic’s key role in training, funding, directing, and, at times, actively dispatching its proxies.

Now, feeling obligated to restore its eroded deterrence vis-à-vis Israel following the targeted killings attributed to the latter in Damascus in early April, Iran has chosen to take a public stand and attack Israel directly using its advanced drones and missiles. This is not a comprehensive strategic shift on Iran’s part. As soon as the strike ended, and before its scope had even been confirmed, Tehran clearly signaled, via its UN embassy, that it wished to end this historical event and return to normal.

Israel cannot go back to October 6. It must not allow Iran to surround it with a tightening ring of fire while making intolerable threats of a potentially nuclear nature.

However, Israel does not operate in a vacuum either and is required to coordinate its actions with the Biden administration, both by virtue of the strategic alliance forged between the two countries and in view of the implications of an Israeli assault against Iran on local US forces and interests. Tehran seems to regard the United States as the weaker player in this arena, and therefore, since the Israel-Hamas War broke out, has instructed its proxies to carry out dozens of attacks against US interests in Iraq and Syria, in an effort to make President Biden pressure Israel to stop the war. The partial US response to the lethal drone strike in early January by Iran's Iraqi proxy, Kataib Hizballah, killing 3 US troops, appears to have only partially and temporarily deterred Tehran. The United States had, once again, chosen to retaliate against the Iraqi proxy, instead of its Iranian master.

Thus, although Quds Force Commander, Ismail Qaani, has reportedly instructed Iraqi Shiite militia groups to desist attacks against US interests, and has probably attempted to convince the Houthis in Yemen to do the same, the Iraqi militias have renewed (albeit not significantly) their assaults against US forces in Syria, while the Houthis continue to attack US sea vessels. Tehran itself, during its strike against Israel last night, threatened to attack any US forces that would help Israel in its retaliation against Iran. It is therefore clear that Iran views the United States as the weakest link and more easily pressured player.

Israel must formulate a comprehensive strategy for a high-intensity campaign against Iran, that could include peaks during which Iran would attempt to take direct action against Israel. Otherwise, Tehran would probably prefer to go back to operating via its proxies, given that direct Iranian actions against Israel would help form a regional coalition against Tehran, composed primarily of Jordan and Egypt, and supported by the United States, United Kingdom, and France (as seen in action last night). Such a coalition could shift from defensive to offensive mode since Iran is threatening to take action against any country supportive of Israel's defense efforts.

Israel appears to have certain latitude vis-à-vis Iran, despite US pressure. The Biden administration opposes broad conflict that would run the risk of regional

war. At the same time, if Israel and the United States choose to restrain their response, Iran would interpret their inaction as permission to attack Israel, the United States' ally, directly, as well as other US partners in the region (to which Iran poses a threat) without paying the price for doing so. Furthermore, war breaking out between Iran and Israel still seems a long way off, allowing Israel to take action against Iran without necessarily leading the region to war. For instance, Israel could utilize the unprecedented Iranian attack to strike Iran kinetically when it is most suitable and convenient, whereas Tehran, which suffers from an acute domestic legitimacy crisis and can still collectively recall the destruction and aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), would think twice before aggravating its conflict with Israel. The cyberattack weapons that Israel has developed over the years could also serve it to repay Iran by damaging its essential infrastructure in an arena where responsibility is not unequivocally assumed by anyone.

Israel's updated security strategy should include various aspects, primary among which are: the desirable *modus operandi* vis-à-vis Iran; increased coordination with the United States on efforts to thwart the drone, missile, and terror infrastructure in Iran and the region; strengthening the IDF's force buildup so that it would tally with the challenge posed by Iran; and closing the various gaps that enable Iran to carry out cyberattacks and influence campaigns in Israel.

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Unity is more than just a naïve cliché, it's a matter of national security

written by Ruth Wasserman Lande | 15.04.2024

This is The Plan. All we have to do, is not cooperate with the plot and understand that unity is more than just a naive cliché, but a matter of national security.

The Creation and Consequences of the Iranian Threat Network

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 15.04.2024

Countering Iran’s influence across the region is a strategic imperative of the highest order for Israel and the US. Decisive action against Hezbollah and the Houthis is a crucial first step, while direct action against Iran is the only path to a prosperous and stable Middle East in the long term.

Biden Misinterprets Iran’s Proxy Warfare

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 15.04.2024

Iran cannot be absolved of responsibility for the terrorist actions of its clients.

The US is absolving Iran of responsibility for terrorist proxies

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 15.04.2024

By striking only at Iranian proxy targets, Biden signals he is still seeking to “restore trust” between Washington and Tehran in order to revive the JCPOA.

Israel Must Target the ”Head of the Octopus” – Iran

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 15.04.2024

Israel must take action against Iran as part of its post-Oct. 7 updated doctrine of security. To protect its borders, Israel can no longer be content with fighting Iran’s proxies, but rather must target Iran itself, in keeping with that country’s critical role in the destabilization of Israel’s security.

Since Oct. 7, an ongoing dispute has emerged as to the extent of Iran’s involvement in Hamas’s fatal attack, with an emphasis on the question of whether Iran knew of the attack in advance and took part in planning it. Even if Tehran was not aware of the attack, its responsibility for the massacre and the horrific terror committed by Hamas is clear to all. In point of fact, Hamas would not have been able to carry out the attack without the systematic assistance it has been receiving from Tehran for decades.

Some of the information disclosed since the attack has served to reveal with greater clarity the extent of Iran’s responsibility and involvement. First the heads of Hamas’s military wing had been in regular contact with the heads of Iran’s security apparatus, sharing with them their plans for taking actions against Israel. In an interview on Iranian media on November 8, Esmaeil Kowsari, currently a member of the Iranian Majles’ Foreign Affairs and Security Committee, and formerly a high-ranking commander in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (among other positions, he served as head of the IRGC forces in Tehran), stressed the part taken by the head of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani (who was eliminated by the U.S. in January 2020), in the planning of Hamas’s attacks.

Kowsari stated that the Head of Hamas’s military Wing, Mohammad Deif, had planned many of Hamas’s operation in concert with Soleimani, and that accordingly, “The capability required for that operation is not a matter of a day or two, but rather goes back several years.” Beyond the planning, Kowsari mentioned Tehran’s responsibility for building up Hamas’s force, saying that “The

resistance front empowered Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and as a result Hamas carried out this operation with high capabilities." This intensive collaboration continued even after Soleimani's elimination and survived the crisis which took place in the Iran-Hamas relationship following Hamas's support of the Syrian insurgents. As may be recalled, in the first few years following the outbreak of the war in Syria, Hamas relocated its command posts from Syria to Qatar, and terrorists from its military wing even took part in the battles, fighting at the side of the rebels against Assad's forces.

Yet Hamas later changed its policy, and did so to an even greater extent once it became clear that Assad had managed to survive thanks to the support he had received from Russia and Iran. The relationship between Assad and Hamas has not been fully restored since (despite the historic meeting held in Damascus between Assad and top Hamas officials Khalil al-Hayya and Osama Hamdan in October 2022). However, it appears that the collaboration between Iran and Hamas's military wing persisted over the years, despite Iran's attempt to undermine Hamas in Gaza, primarily by establishing a competing organization, Al-Sabireen, in 2014.

Thus, in a paper published in December, Leila Seurat, a researcher of the Palestinian sphere from the research institute "The Arab Centre for Research and Political Studies" who had demonstrated her access to Hamas by holding interviews with the heads of the organization in Gaza and Lebanon, explained that the top officials of Hamas's military wing, most notably the wing's deputy commander Marwan Issa, have over the years maintained a strong relationship with Iran, notwithstanding the damage caused to Iran-Hamas relations by the war in Syria. As part of that relationship, she notes, "Issa would regularly visit Tehran whenever he was able."

Moreover, statements issued by Tehran have also helped in better understanding its crucial contribution to the development of Hamas's tunnel system. In an interview with Iranian media in mid-November, Iranian commentator Amir Moussaoui, who is allegedly an IRGC official and is considered one of the regime's principal mouthpieces in the Arab media, recounted that Soleimani had provided Hamas with advanced technologies so that the organization could enhance its subterranean system. According to him, Hamas was able to enhance that system owing to Soleimani's direct supervision of the technological equipment provided to Hamas by the Qods Force, thanks to which Hamas successfully constructed a

sophisticated subterranean system across Gaza. In this context, he explained that the Hamas terrorists constructed the tunnels to be resistant to attempts to flood them with either poisonous gases or water.

Furthermore, in early January the IDF revealed terrorism infrastructure and components for the manufacture and development of precision rockets of Hamas, carried out under Iranian guidance in Darj Tufah in the Gaza Strip. This revelation makes it clear that Iran has been smuggling advanced knowledge into the Gaza Strip, in the form of training courses provided by it to Hamas and Islamic Jihad experts in its territory (as publicly stated by the Islamic Jihad's representative in Tehran, Nasser Abu-Sharif, in an interview with the media in November 2018). The training provided in Tehran to Mohammed Zouari (who was eliminated in 2016), one of the significant founders of Hamas's UAV array, also demonstrates Iran's determination to export its knowledge to Hamas in Gaza, with the aim of supplementing the tunnel system, which has been facing certain difficulties after El-Sisi's Egypt has been taking action against it to a certain extent.

The Iran-Hamas relationship is not one of authority, but rather a strategic partnership, in which Tehran equips Hamas with the best of technologies and weaponry available to it. As part of the new security doctrine which Israel is now called upon to formulate, Israel cannot tolerate Iran's subversive influence in the Gaza Strip. Therefore, as a complementary act to Israeli military control of the Gaza Strip and to the establishment of a thwarting array on or near the Philadelphi Route, it must take direct action against Iran. This is due to the fact that Iran forms the "head of the octopus" and the principal supplier which trains, funds, arms and equips Hamas; and past experience has shown that it will soon strive to rebuild Hamas after the war is over.

Accordingly, and in light of Iran's additional responsibility for promoting terrorism on Israel's northern border, Israel must adopt a new and current strategy as self-defense against the activity being promoted by Iran striving to destroy Israel by encircling it and subjecting it to an untenable significant threat. The purpose of that strategy will be to prevent the rise and establishment of a militia backed by Iran on Israel's borders. Within that scope, alongside its ongoing efforts in the Gaza Strip, Israel must also directly strike within Iran, against the capabilities conferred by Iran on its proxies in the region, while also taking further action against the Qods Force. Thus, it must carry out targeted

strikes against Iran's UAV capabilities and missile program, on the well-founded assumption that any weaponry currently in Iranian hands will eventually come into the possession of its proxies across the region.

Concurrently with that course of action, Israel can no longer permit Hamas's continued funding by Iran. Therefore, alongside the policy of sanctions, which has proved to be ineffective in completely preventing the continued Iranian financing, Israel must cut off the financial resources used by Iran to remit the funding, including money changers used as intermediaries in Hawala transactions with changers from the Gaza Strip.

The proposed Israeli intensive action against Iran is not expected to bring about a war with Iran; first, because Tehran would fear that such war would be playing into Israel's hands since it would legitimize an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Second, in light of the prolonged crisis of legitimacy suffered by the Iranian regime, it is highly doubtful that it would willingly choose to enter a war which could risk its domestic survival. Third, Tehran understands that, in the scenario of a war with Israel, the U.S. would find it difficult not to intervene and would be forced to join the fray due to Israel's strategic importance for the American policy in the region and due to the shared values forming the foundation of the deeply entrenched alliance between Israel and the U.S.

The West needs to send a message to the Houthis

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 15.04.2024

If Iran and the Houthis don't pay a heavy price for their attempt to impose a naval blockade, not only will international trade be severely jeopardized, but so will the security of the entire region.

Iran Fears Full-Scale Regional War

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 15.04.2024
Israel should attack the Qods Force apparatus in Iran and across the region.

Tehran’s regional militia network

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 15.04.2024
Iranian strategy in the Middle East has long centered on nurturing regional proxies and partners — a so-called “Axis of Resistance” — to mount an existential threat to Israel by encircling it in a ring of fire composed of heavily armed militias arrayed along its borders. This keeps Israel busy having to defend itself on multiple fronts, thus presumably deterring it from attacking Iran. The bloody war between Israel and Hamas sparked by the latter’s Oct. 7 massacre is the first large-scale implementation of this Axis of Resistance doctrine. Whereas the legacy of the late commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, was defined by the growth of Tehran’s regional militia network, his successor’s, Esmail Ghaani’s, lasting contribution will be the network’s entry into the battlefield in a comprehensive and coordinated manner.

The Soleimani legacy

As commander of the Quds Force, Soleimani was the senior commander to whom Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, assigned the task of developing and expanding the exportation of the Islamic Revolution in the Middle East. This is the same job Khamenei had originally assigned to the Quds Force in 1989, shortly after he became supreme leader. Upon assuming office in 1998 as Quds Force commander, Soleimani began to cooperate extensively with Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, as this partnership empowered Hezbollah’s capabilities and underscored the group’s position as the spearhead of the pro-

Iranian militia array in the region.

This alliance already included at the time the Badr Corps in Iraq, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, the latter of which had by then escalated its attacks against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in southern Lebanon and even began launching missiles toward Israeli territory after the 1992 assassination of its Secretary-General Abbas al-Musawi.

The Iraq War (2003-2011) was Soleimani's next step in developing the Axis of Resistance. As part of an Iranian determination to prevent Iraq from becoming an American forward operating base that could be used to attack Iran, Soleimani played a significant role in the establishment of Jaish al-Mahdi as soon as the Iraq War broke out in 2003. During this period, he fostered Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and other groups. These militias killed and injured American troops across Iraq in cooperation with the Quds Force and Hezbollah's Unit 3800, implementing the Iranian strategy that pushed the United States out of Iraq in 2011.

This is how Soleimani managed to turn the threat inherent in the American invasion of Iraq into an opportunity for Iran to significantly increase its foothold in the country. During this period, there was also a notable warming in ties between Iran and Hamas, especially following the meetings of the then-prime minister of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, in Tehran with Khamenei and then-president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran reportedly provided $250 million to Hamas in December 2006, in a move that reflected the solidifying of relations between the two parties.

Three major events in the second decade of the 2000s led to an unprecedented boom among the Iran-led Axis of Resistance. First, the Arab Spring and especially the Syrian civil war enabled Iran to increase its grip on Syria to ensure the Bashar al-Assad regime's survival. For this mission, the Quds Force formed various Shiite militias in Syria, including the Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zeinabiyoun brigades. In addition to protecting Assad, they also fulfilled Soleimani's vision: to establish a second northern front against Israel.

Second, the ISIS crisis that broke out in 2014 increased Iraqi dependence on Iran, allowing Tehran to deepen its grip there because of the existential threat the partial occupation by ISIS posed to Iraq. In this framework, Soleimani, who

became more and more visible, operated freely throughout Iraq and Syria, dominating the pro-Iranian militias and gradually developing them into a transnational Shi'a army under the leadership of Iran. This phase was critical for the development of the Axis of Resistance, providing the opportunity for its various elements to deeply acquaint themselves with each other, especially through joint participation in conferences in Tehran on topics like countering Israel.

Third, the war in Yemen became an opening for Iran to significantly expand and strengthen the Axis of Resistance, which the Quds Force exploited by arming and training the Houthis. U.S. forces assassinated Soleimani in January 2020, after he systematically grew the Axis of Resistance, which at this stage included militias that possessed advanced military capabilities and operated from a number of key territories across the Middle East, thus constituting strategic depth for Iran. Accordingly, the commander of Iran's Khatam al-Anbia Headquarters, Maj. Gen. Gholam Ali Rashid, revealed in 2021 that three months before Soleimani was eliminated, the then-Quds Force chief asserted in a security discussion in Iran that he had managed to nurture six armies outside of the country: Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, the Houthis in Yemen, Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, and militias in Syria. The management of Iran's network of proxies under Soleimani was characterized by centralization, with Soleimani playing a key role thanks to his charismatic personality and strategic military skills. He made himself ubiquitous on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, regularly surrounding himself with Shiite fighters who admired him.

Ghaani's ascendance

Following Soleimani's death, many commentators speculated whether his successor, Esmail Ghaani, would be able to fill his shoes. After all, Ghaani did not have the same command of Arabic and lacked Soleimani's interpersonal abilities that had enabled him to manage and steer the Axis of Resistance. Ghaani came to the job with a different skill set: He had deep experience in Afghanistan, and a major part of his role as Soleimani's deputy commander was overseeing financial disbursements to elements of the Quds Force's network of foreign militias.

Ghaani also held an inferior military rank to Soleimani's — of brigadier general in the IRGC, compared to the felled Quds Force commander's rank of major general when he was eliminated. Most significantly, Soleimani had a singular connection

with Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, the commander-in-chief of Iran's Armed Forces. As the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) noted in 2019, "[H]is [Soleimani's] close relationship with Khamenei allows him to often directly advise and receive orders outside the traditional chain of command." Coupled with the existence of other more senior commanders in the IRGC, especially Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami, who himself is a major general, this raised questions as to whether Ghaani would have the same level of standing in the Iranian system as Soleimani enjoyed.

In fact, there was a diffusion in the management of Iran's regional assets after Soleimani's demise. In addition to the IRGC's Quds Force, the IRGC's Intelligence Organization became more active. In July 2021, Hossein Taeb visited Iraq for the first time as commander of the IRGC's Intelligence Organization. Likewise, Iran's intelligence ministry increased its profile in these matters following Soleimani's demise. That is not to mention Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's own growing role as a leader of the Axis of Resistance.

The Gaza comparison

The legacies of Soleimani and Ghaani also differ. Where Soleimani presided over the growth of the Axis of Resistance, Ghaani is masterminding its coordination. A comparison of the broader Axis of Resistance's participation in Gazan conflicts spanning the tenures of Soleimani and Ghaani is instructive. During the 2006 Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah, there was no significant kinetic response from other members of Iran's Axis of Resistance, including Hamas. This was despite Soleimani being stationed in Beirut in the course of the hostilities.

During Israeli Operations Cast Lead (2008-09), Pillar of Defense (2012), and Protective Edge (2014), among others, sporadic attacks from Lebanon and Syria coincided with escalations in Gaza. For example, as Operation Cast Lead unfolded, three rockets were fired into northern Israel from Lebanon. Palestinian militants in Syria also fired shots at Israeli forces in January 2009. There was a similarly scattered response from the broader Axis of Resistance during Operation Pillar of Defense, with, for example, two rockets being launched from Lebanon in November 2012 (some others were disarmed by the Lebanese army). Part of this lackluster response can be attributed to Hamas' falling out with Syria's President Assad and Tehran over the civil war, which erupted in 2011.

However, after Soleimani's death, Ghaani made a concerted effort to orchestrate a more cohesive Axis of Resistance. Beginning in 2021, during Operation Guardian of the Walls, pro-Hezbollah media reported that Ghaani twice visited a joint operations room that the IRGC established for Hamas and Hezbollah. These visits featured intelligence sharing and logistics and were reminiscent of Soleimani's stay in Beirut during the 2006 Lebanon War. But Ghaani's trips overlapped with an increasing volley of rockets being fired from multiple theaters, specifically Lebanon and Syria, compared with previous Gazan conflicts during Soleimani's era. There were at least 12 rocket launches from Lebanon and Syria, coupled with provocations at the border fence. Additionally, Israel downed an Iranian drone carrying explosives that at the time was thought to have been launched from either Syria or Iraq.

Fast forward to March and April 2023: Ghaani journeyed to Syria to incite a coordinated attack among Palestinian factions on Israel in response to the latter's strikes that had killed Iranian advisers in Syria. He later traveled to Beirut, where he met with leaders from Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad at the Iranian embassy, including Ismail Haniyeh, who was in Lebanon. Those meetings occurred at the same time as Palestinian militants fired the largest salvo of rockets at Israel since the 2006 Lebanon War as a show of support amid ongoing tensions at the Temple Mount and rocket fire from Gaza.

There have also been reports of significant consultations between Iran and the Axis of Resistance in the weeks leading up to Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, massacre of over 1,200 people in Israel. In the war between Israel and Hamas that has followed, there have been regular attacks against Israeli and U.S. interests not only from Lebanon, but also in Iraq, Syria, and out of Yemen. While the Iranian leadership seeks to keep the attacks below the threshold of what would trigger an armed conflict that could pose a danger to Iran, there has nonetheless been a significant escalation in the response from the Axis of Resistance to Israel's campaign to dislodge Hamas — both qualitatively and quantitatively. Not only have the provocations increased, but their geographical origins have expanded. Since Oct. 7, there have been near-daily attacks from Lebanon on Israel; regular rocket and drone strikes against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria; and, for the first time, the Yemeni Houthis have routinely lobbed missiles and drones at the Jewish state and attacked commercial vessels in international waters. It is worth recalling that the Houthis offered mainly rhetorical and moral support, like

fundraising drives, to Hamas during Operation Guardian of the Walls in 2021 — although in one case, Hamas rejected a Houthi offer to provide them with targeting information for a strike on Israel. Whereas, this time, they are mounting regular kinetic operations against it. Indeed, during the Soleimani era, the Houthis never tried entering the Gaza theater.

The Tehran-led Axis of Resistance has already racked up numerous achievements amid the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas. It has punctured the perception of Israeli invincibility and implemented a mutual defense strategy of sorts across several theaters, all without triggering a war that could endanger its Iranian patron. This record is very much a testament to Ghaani's signature, and it will be his legacy. While Soleimani birthed the architecture of the Axis of Resistance, Ghaani integrated the cause and united the fronts.

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