Beyond the strike: What Tehran’s next move means for the Middle East

written by Moshe Fuzaylov | 26.10.2024

In what has become a decades-long shadow war, Iran has persistently worked to undermine Israel through an intricate web of proxy organizations encircling its borders. This strategy, employing Hamas, Hezbollah, and Shiite militias in Iraq and Yemen, forms part of Tehran’s broader regional ambitions.

The nuclear program has always been Iran’s trump card – its path to reshaping the regional balance of power. But here’s the irony: Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar’s miscalculation has upended Tehran’s carefully orchestrated plans. Instead of managing a controlled conflict, Iran now watches as Israel responds with unprecedented force, striking at the heart of Iran’s military capabilities and challenging its carefully cultivated image of invincibility.

From Israel’s perspective, this presents a rare strategic opportunity to reshape the deterrence balance and weaken Iran’s regional grip. The operation serves a broader strategic purpose: to delay or potentially derail Iran’s nuclear program. With hundreds of aircraft operating across the region, Israel is striking various targets that serve Iran’s military infrastructure – and while these strikes don’t include the nuclear sites themselves, the combined blow to Iran’s channels of influence serves to significantly weaken its position.

Make no mistake: The Iranians – master strategists in this regional chess game – fully grasp the significance of Israel’s newly demonstrated capabilities. Logic suggests they will now seek to minimize their losses, preventing Israel from exploiting any additional vulnerabilities.

Tehran’s strategic patience might well lead them to a familiar playbook: waiting out the 2024 US elections, hoping for a more accommodating administration. They understand that a hardline US stance would impose painful constraints, even if falling short of completely dismantling their nuclear ambitions. This could mean maintaining their position on the regional chessboard until 2040, as originally planned, or until political winds shift in their favor.

Yet there’s another possibility that shouldn’t be dismissed: wounded pride and mounting internal pressure could push Iran toward hasty retaliation, perhaps through another missile barrage against Israel. Should this occur around the US elections, it could provide Israel with the momentum needed to launch more focused strikes against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure.

Last night’s operations have surely driven home a crucial message to Tehran: Israel can operate with remarkable freedom in the Middle East’s most sensitive areas, treating Iran’s airspace as if it were its own. Had it not been for Washington’s diplomatic and military constraints on Israel’s prime minister, we might already be witnessing the first signs of Iran’s nuclear program being rolled back. Tehran’s leadership certainly grasps this reality. While their strategic calculus might favor patience, one can hope that their sense of humiliation will prompt them to take another risk – one that could prove costly.

Published in Israel Hayom, October 26, 2024.