Achieving the Strategic Objective by Striking Iran Now – Opportunities and Risks

written by Prof. Kobi Michael | 19.12.2024

Israel's strategic objective, which has become increasingly evident over the past few months, aims to fundamentally reshape the regional landscape by targeting Iran and the axis it leads, thereby weakening its influence. This strategy unfolds across two parallel tracks.

On the military front, Israel has targeted Iran's key proxies, including Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as Iran itself, exposing its vulnerabilities and undermining its prestige. On the diplomatic front, Israel is working to establish a new regional framework centered on expanding the Abraham Accords through normalization with Saudi Arabia, a plan backed by the United States. This new regional framework is intended to serve as a counterbalance to the Iranian axis, further weakening it and potentially destabilizing the Iranian regime to the point of collapse, thereby reducing regional risks.

Israel's actions have left Iran strategically cornered, facing distress and embarrassment. The regime in Tehran is overshadowed by threats. It fears the imminent return of President Trump, the strength of Israel's military, the loss of strategic assets, and its exposed vulnerabilities, all of which compound its domestic challenges. Indeed, the collapse of Assad's regime, the weakening of Hezbollah, and the removal of Hamas and Islamic Jihad from the Shiite axis have left Iran in a state of strategic confusion. While its rhetoric remains aggressive, Iran must now decide its next steps, particularly as Trump's return to power looms.

Iran faces a strategic dilemma: Pursue a new agreement with the international community, led by the U.S. and a determined president. Such an agreement could allow Iran to focus on economic and security recovery, and perhaps even rebuild the Shiite axis. Or it could accelerate its nuclear ambitions, securing military nuclear capabilities as a safeguard for the regime and a foundation for revitalizing the Shiite axis under a nuclear umbrella.

Despite this dilemma, Iran continues its efforts to rehabilitate Hezbollah, though this task has become increasingly difficult under the new conditions following Assad's fall in Syria. Concurrently, Iran seeks to destabilize Jordan, turning it into a front against Israel, while smuggling advanced weaponry into the West Bank via Jordan to maintain a foothold against Israel and compensate for its other losses in the Palestinian arena. Additionally, Iran may attempt to secure agreements with the new Syrian regime in exchange for investments, though the chances of such agreements succeeding are slim.

If Iran opts for a new nuclear deal, it will likely rely on its signature tactic: prolonged and sophisticated negotiations. Such a deal would likely require Iran to halt its nuclear program, abandon its regional hegemonic ambitions through proxies and terrorism, and scale back the Shiite axis. In return, sanctions would be lifted, and the Ayatollah regime would remain in power. However, it must be considered that in spite of any such deal, Iran would almost certainly seek to undermine it and resume its subversive activities behind the scenes.

As for Iran's allies, the country is increasingly isolated. Russia is likely to focus on negotiating with the U.S. over Ukraine, while China – who prioritizes its economic interests – will support Iran only to the extent that it aligns with its economic and technological dominance strategy. In any case, Iran's current status is problematic: Rebuilding the Shiite axis, meanwhile, would require massive investments, and Iran remains concerned about any activity of insurgents from Syria in Iraq, that would threaten its sphere of influence.

The underlining assumption is that Iran will continue to pose a severe threat to Israel and regional stability regardless of its chosen path. True regional transformation cannot occur without neutralizing the Iranian threat, weakening its influence, and dismantling its regional infrastructure. Achieving this would require destroying Iran's nuclear facilities, targeting its military and governmental symbols, and crippling its economy to render it weak, vulnerable, and focused on internal recovery.

In light of these conditions, Israel must determine the best way to achieve its goals. These include two main components: Completing the dismantling of Iran's nuclear program and pursuing a diplomatic initiative to establish a new regional framework that further weakens the Shiite axis.

It is still unclear how Trump will approach Iran, but Israel cannot accept any deal that leaves Iran's nuclear infrastructure intact. With Iran currently weakened, Syria's air defenses neutralized, and Trump seemingly supportive of Israeli military action against Iran's nuclear facilities, Israel must act swiftly to target Iran's nuclear program and all its components – assuming the IDF can achieve this goal, and the Americans will back it with the needed weapons and intelligence aid.

Simultaneously with targeting Iran's nuclear infrastructure, Israel should aim to destabilize the Iranian regime by striking symbolic targets, disrupting its internal energy economy, and reducing its ability to provide basic resources like fuel and electricity. These measures would harm Iran's economy without significantly affecting the global economy, potentially empowering domestic opposition movements.

Of course, the risks of an Israeli operation must be considered. A single strike is unlikely to suffice, requiring multiple rounds of deep strikes in Iran. There is also the possibility of a significant Iranian response, including large-scale missile attacks on Israel. Even with regional and international coalition support led by the U.S., Israel may not always intercept such attacks as successfully as it has in the past year. However, the opportunity to decisively weaken Iran and dismantle its nuclear program is rare and crucial. This window of opportunity would also serve to establish a new regional framework and solidify Israel's position as a key regional power.

Timing is critical. Delaying until Trump takes office may complicate an Israeli strike. Israel should seize this moment to launch its first strike on Iran before Trump's inauguration, even in the face of opposition from the Biden administration. Such action would demonstrate Israel's resolve to prevent Iran's nuclear advancement. As subsequent strikes would take place under Trump's administration, Israel would likely benefit from greater American support, advancing its strategic goals for regional transformation and ensuring its security.