Iran now faces a Hobson’s choice

written by Dr. David Wurmser | 02.08.2024

If press reports are accurate, not only Hezbollah but Iran itself is preparing to launch an all-out attack on Israel. Such an attack could include up to seven fronts, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, along with Iran itself, Gaza, Judea and Samaria.

We likely stand on the precipice of the next phase in this war: The direct showdown between the Islamic Revolution of the Iranian regime and Israel.

Although this grave reality is seizing headlines around the world, most appear to be missing how big a moment it is.

Iran faces a classic sunk investment in which whatever money has been made is history, the net balance is now a loss and sinking more money into it only promises more loss.

Such is Iran’s great “ring of fire” war against Israel. The war started on Oct. 7 with an Iranian victory via its proxy Hamas and immense growth in stature and influence. Iran was especially successful at seizing the region’s strategic and geopolitical momentum to the benefit of itself, its axis of rogue states and its geopolitical great-power allies of Russia and China.

But since Israel entered Rafah and severed Gaza from the rest of the world by seizing the Philadelphia corridor, Iran’s successful war to redefine the region around its eclipsing power has become a retreat.

Operationally, the IDF is beginning to reach peak performance, much like the U.S. armed forces by the late spring of 1942. The IDF is now fielding weapons that did not exist half a year ago. It is a heavily trained, well-equipped force and morale remains astronomical. It is exercising power unimaginably far beyond anything it possessed in Oct. 2023.

Any further conflict and thus any form of Iranian escalation invites an Israeli response that delivers gallopingly increasing marginal returns that ravage Iran’s assets and strength—from Iran’s proxies to its own territorial forces.

Given how dangerous Israel has become and how the relative balance of military

power is shifting towards the IDF, Tehran ought to be desperate to cut bait and walk away. It ought to "take the win" of Oct. 7 and shut everything down.

But it cannot. At this point, Israel's recent blows—seizing the Philadelphia corridor and Rafah, Muhammad Deif's demise, Fouad Shukr's demise, Ismail Haniyeh's demise, several top Hezbollah operational sector heads' demise—devastated Iran's initial success and have shifted the strategic momentum of the war.

For Iran, all this is a terrible humiliation. As such, if these defeats are left unanswered by the Iranian regime, the regime's weakness will be exposed in full. In turn, the Iranian people—who long ago divorced themselves from their rulers—will smell fear and impotence. That is how repressive regimes fall.

So, the mullahs of Tehran have to act and sink more into their investment of destroying Israel. But the more they do and the more Israel deals them yet further defeats and humiliations, the more Israel strengthens, seizes strategic momentum and emerges as the strong horse of the region. This steadily whittles away or outright demolishes Iran's assets, real strength and reputation.

The only thing that can save the regime in Tehran is an imposed ceasefire, which it might try to claim hampered it from its inevitable victory, now receding faster than Yul Brenner's hairline.

But the mullahs cannot accept a ceasefire that leaves their most recent humiliations without retaliation, to which Israel is waiting to respond, likely in devastating ways, against Iran itself. So the mullahs face a Hobson's choice with no good path forward.

Moreover, the Iranians have always managed to survive and strategically win by being far more sophisticated in the arts of manipulation and seduction than their opponents. They are the masters of playing strategic chess; unrivaled by any on the face of the Earth.

But all strategies anchored to manipulation depend on an opponent who is predictable, sane and rational. Israel's strategic behavior is increasingly possessed and thus unpredictable, wild, dangerous and impossible to manipulate.

In such a situation, the normally strategically sophisticated and supremely

controlling Iranian strategy leads to outright paralysis. Iran has been forced to fall back on the pattern of what has worked before. But that is precisely what Israel's possession has rendered useless.

Iran is thus strategically seized up and finds itself reacting to an unpredictable and unmanageable deadly rival. This is precisely the position it always wants to impose on its opponents rather than have imposed on Iran by its opponents. Iran thus finds itself upside down. It can only act—or rather react—out of habit rather than strategic intelligence.

We may be seeing the beginning of the end of the Iranian regime. The impotence of a tyranny whose sole currency is based on a reign of terror is being exposed. It has revealed the facade of a weak, defeated and humiliated regime not long for this world.

And if that happens…

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