

Israel Concerns and Iran-US Tensions

By Meir Javedanfar

Abstract

In response to the increasing tension between the US and Iran, and both sides' inability to show flexibility to each other, Israel's only option is to be prepared for a possible attack by Hezbollah or Hamas.

There is growing concern in Israel that the current Iran-US tensions in the Gulf could lead to a war between Israel and Hezbollah. So great is this concern that in June this year, the Israeli Defense Forces held its largest drill in two years, simulating war against the Lebanese organisation.

Here in Israel, no one is leaving anything to chance. In the last war between the two sides in 2006, Hezbollah fired approximately 4,000 missiles at Israeli cities and troops. In the next war, it could fire 25 times more than that, as its missile arsenal with the help of Iran has now grown to more than 120,000. Even if Israel manages to intercept 50 per cent of them, 60,000 missiles falling on Israeli cities and forces would wreak unprecedented havoc on Israel's economy, military and civilian population. Additionally, since the last war between the two sides, Hezbollah, through its participation in the Syrian civil war and operations alongside Russian special forces, has considerably improved its conventional fighting capabilities.

There is also the concern that in addition to a Hezbollah attack against Israel in retaliation for US attacks against Iran, Hamas could also join the fray. On 22 July, a senior Hamas delegation visited Tehran and held a meeting with Iran's strongest man, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. In the meeting, Hamas representatives told Iran's supreme leader that they are on the same path: meaning that they are also dedicated to the destruction of Israel. Therefore, in case of war between Iran and the US, the possibility that Hamas also attacks Israel cannot be ruled out.

For now, all Israel can do is to prepare itself. Apart from that, its options are limited. Israel has tried on various occasions to establish relations with post-revolutionary Iran: this included selling weapons to Iran during the Iran-Iraq war and assistance with the reconstruction of the earthquake-hit city of Bam. However, these went nowhere: Iran's leadership insists on non-recognition of Israel and calls for Israel's destruction.

Currently, there are important political facts which cannot be ignored by Israel. An important one being that the US and the Iranian leadership do not consider it in their interest to show flexibility to the other side.

It is difficult for US President Donald Trump to show any weakness towards the Iranians as he will be standing for re-election in 2020. Considering the fact that his negotiations with the North Koreans have not so far been very successful, he will therefore be under pressure to show results when it comes to Iran to his voters, especially from the Evangelical community. This is a sizeable political bloc which cannot be ignored. According to a recent survey by Pew, Evangelicals make up more than 25% of the US population and they mostly vote Republican. For religious reasons, they are also intensely pro-Israel. Even if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is defeated in the next

Israeli elections in September, Mr Trump, owing to his US domestic political interests, would still continue with his current policies towards Iran.

On the other side of the coin, currently, it is very difficult for the Iranian supreme leader to show flexibility to Mr Trump. The Iranians believe that they were wronged by the US in the nuclear deal: Iran held up its side of the bargain, but the US did not. Not only did the US walk out of the deal, but it also imposed the toughest sanctions against Iran, while increasing its military presence in the Gulf. The Iranian supreme leader feels that the Americans saw Iran's compliance with the nuclear deal as weakness. And this is why Mr Trump pulled out of the nuclear deal. Therefore, for now, instead of showing flexibility, the Iranian leadership believes that it has to show strength: by not returning to the negotiation table and resisting sanctions. Iran also believes that offense is the best defense in terms of improving its leverage with the US. The Iranian side also seems to be calculating on a Trump defeat in the 2020 elections.

For now, the possibility of an inadvertent military confrontation between Iran and the US is increasing. The build-up of pressure between the two sides, especially in the Gulf, could lead to an unintended war breaking out between them. We could also see confrontation between Iran and other powers in the Gulf, including the United Kingdom. This is especially true after Iran's recent seizure of the British tanker by its Revolutionary Guards in the international waters of the Gulf.

Therefore, the only option available for Israel is to be prepared for a possible attack by Hezbollah or Hamas in response to a conflict between Iran and the United States. Israel can hope that this does not happen, but for now, due to the inability of Iran and the US to show flexibility towards the other, Israel has no other option but to be ready.

About the Author

Mr Meir Javedanfar teaches Iranian Diplomatic and Security Studies at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, and is a senior researcher at The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies at Haifa University.