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What Happened to Israel's Policy of Ambiguity vis-à-vis Syria?

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Conceptual Background

A policy of ambiguity is possible when several elements exist: the execution of clandestine attacks, no assumption of responsibility for the operations, and secrecy over time beyond whatever period is needed for operational and intelligence-related reasons. In order to deviate from a policy of ambiguity, it is sufficient to overturn even a single condition. Clandestine operations are operations whose results are generally evident to the enemy, but are executed in a way that hides the identity of the attacker or that allows the attacker a measure of deniability. Israel's assumption of responsibility for an attack refers to action that may be interpreted as Israel's admission to having carried out the attack, from reports in the Israeli media (relying not only on foreign sources) to declarations by informed figures, i.e., Israeli senior officials and spokespeople.

Israel's Policy of Ambiguity vis-à-vis Syria

After the attack on the Syrian nuclear reactor in September 2007, Syria held Israel responsible, but denied the nature of the target. Damascus claimed the target struck was an unused military structure and that reports from the United States of an attack on a nuclear facility or an attack on an arms convoy destined for Hezbollah were false. This response reflected Syria's concern that the discovery that it was engaged in a nuclear program would lead to a reaction from the West, which had not been forgiving to Libya or Iraq on the same issue. Syria declared that it retains the right to respond to the attack but to date has not reacted. It seems that Syria's restraint was helped by Israel's ambiguity. Similar ambiguity was also used in later attacks on Syrian soil, attributed to Israel, meant primarily to stop shipments of advanced arms from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon, which Israel considers a high level ("intolerable") threat.

Abandoning from the Policy of Ambiguity on Syria

After the attack on the reactor in September 2007, detachable aircraft fuel tanks, with Hebrew writing, were found on Turkish soil and Israel was forced to issue an apology to Turkey. In addition, sources within the US administration leaked comments to the press, and senior Israeli political officials referred to an operation in the media, either directly or with a wink and a nudge ("If there was an incursion, it was necessary").

As time passed, foreign media revealed more information about the attack on the Syrian reactor, including details based on conversations with informed Israelis. Prominent among the reports was a comprehensive exposé published in the New Yorker in 2012. Initial foreign reports abroad were of use to Israel, because they revealed to the international community the fact that Syria had been engaged in the development of nuclear weapons and Syria had no choice but to comply with an inspection by the IAEA. Later, it was possible to lend importance to the reports, as deterrence in the Iranian context. In addition, foreign reports served as an argument vis-à-vis the Israeli censors to end secrecy about the affair.

Israel's policy of ambiguity on Syria continued with avoiding any assumption of responsibility for other aerial attacks in Syria attributed to Israel against weapons destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon transported via Syria. Bashar al-Assad never responded to the attacks. The ambiguity helped Syria maintain restraint, though the main reason for the restraint seems to have been Syria's concern about engaging Israel in war while still caught up in the civil war that erupted in 2011.

Maj. Gen. Amir Eshel, the outgoing Israel Air Force commander, referred to the policy in an interview with Haaretz in August 2017. According to Eshel, in the last five years, the IAF has attacked weapons meant for Hezbollah and other organizations in other arenas close to one hundred times. He mentioned that the attacks were carried out "under the radar" so as not to drag Israel into a war. The interview, which may be read as Israel taking broad responsibility for the attacks (whether or not this was his intention), was given after a series of deterrent messages relating to attacks on Syria issued by the political echelon. For example, in March 2017, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that "if there is intelligence and there is operational probability – we attack, and that will continue." Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman said that the threat of precision missiles is "intolerable" and that Israel must act to counter it.

The Disclosure of the Attack on the Reactor

Against this background, on March 21, 2018, the military censor authorized the publication of details about the 2007 destruction of the reactor. For the Israeli public, which knew the details previously published abroad and quoted in Israel, the major newsworthy item was Israel's vocal assumption of responsibility for the attack. The big questions asked in the public discourse were what good the publication did Israel and if it could cause any damage. Supporters of the revelation claimed it was "the public's right to know" how government decisions are made. They also stressed the need for more lesson-learning in the security establishment and intelligence community and the importance of deterrence. Opponents of the revelation claimed it allows the enemy to learn the timetable by which the reactor became known to Israeli intelligence. In the context of the "credit war," Defense Minister Liberman said that "some of [the leaked information] caused

substantive damage to Israel's security." It was also said that the vocal assumption of responsibility for the attack on the reactor did not align with Israel's interest in easing tensions in the arena, and was liable to be taken into account in future considerations about a response.

From the point of view of the censor, which has a sovereign status, the decision to allow the publication was made in light of the difficulty of continuing to argue in the High Court of Justice against publication, and after consultation with the defense establishment. The censor operates on the basis of a guideline that says that the chief military censor is not authorized to ban the publication of information unless it appears that publication will almost certainly cause actual damage to state security.

Finally, the ministerial committee on providing permission for publication to current and former public employees authorized the publication of Ehud Olmert's book (*In First Person*, 2018), which inter alia refers to the attack. At the same time, the senior committee is not a substitute for the censor – its purview is very narrow – and it is not meant to determine changes in the nation's security and foreign affairs policy in the government's name, such as ending the policy of ambiguity.

Significance and Recommendations

The leaks were the major reason for the damage to the policy of ambiguity, including the various semantic games played by senior politicians in the media and the use of foreign publication channels beyond the reach of the Israeli censor. Aside from the question of whether assuming responsibility for the attack was justified or inevitable, which is beyond the scope of this article, it appears that Israel assumed responsibility for the event via the censor's desk, which seems to have operated to the best of its ability.

In the future, it is best that decision about policies of this type, as well as decisions to suspend them, be made in the political-security cabinet and under the supervision of the sub-committee of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. Another option is to expand the scope of action of the ministerial committee on publications to include the policy of disclosures. These forums would be wise to discuss the following questions:

- Is an assumption of responsibility on Israel's part liable to become one consideration among many on the part of an enemy regime on whether to respond sooner or later, or even reduce the "scope of restraint" in face of future Israeli activity?
- Can the assumption of responsibility for a given issue affect Israel's ability to continue to make effective use of the strategy of ambiguity in this sphere in the future, in other arenas, and on other issues? If so – how?
- How will the assumption of responsibility systemically affect third party reactions and Israel's struggles in the international arena?

Policy decisions will also make the censor's work simpler – not just to hold information back, but also to release it. Beyond the legal aspect, it seems that the censor's guideline (set by the High Court of Justice in 1989 in a different context) is unsuitable for cases in which it is hard for the state to claim, with a high degree of certainty, that a certain revelation will affect the consciousness and moves of an enemy ruler; however, it is clear that if there is such an effect, this might have significant repercussions. Therefore, it is best to relate to the expectancy of damage of a given revelation. At the same time, it is recommended that different categories for authorizing publication that involves assuming responsibility be set. It seems that there is an essential difference between “assuming responsibility,” expressed in permission to publish articles based on anonymous sources of information in Israel, and a loud publication by the Israeli establishment accompanied by deterrent declarations, which are liable to be understood by the enemy as authorization for an act of war against it and a challenge issued to it. These issues should be discussed in the cabinet and in the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.

The current policy of ambiguity on Syria regarding IAF attacks described above has been suspended or has at least lost a much meaning, because even if Israel continues to pursue a policy of specific ambiguity with regard to particular operations, it has already assumed overall responsibility. Nonetheless, in similar moves in the future, it is still better for Israel to maintain as low a profile as possible.