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Iran in the Nuclear Realm and Iran in Syria: A New State of Play

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In the course of the “explosive days of May,” two strategic vectors have converged at a dramatic junction: on Iran’s nuclear efforts, President Trump announced the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, while in Syria, following the Quds Force’s failed rocket attack into Israeli territory, Israel carried out a wide scale strike on Iran’s military assets in Syria, rolling back many months of cumulative Iranian deployment in the country. Multiple axes met at the junction of these two events: Iran’s nuclear aspirations, its efforts to establish its military presence in Syria, and its efforts to deploy precision missile capabilities as a threat to Israel, as well as US and Israeli policies on these issues. This convergence creates a new state of play in the complex Middle East dynamics.

Iran’s Nuclear Program

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s exposure of the Iranian nuclear weapons program archive aimed to set the stage for President Trump’s announcement of the US withdrawal from the JCPOA; to strengthen the positions of the President’s new team – Defense Secretary Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton; and to convince once again the President’s support base who are already convinced on the matter. Exposing the entire archive, major parts of which had already reached the international intelligence and policy communities years ago, only reinforced the players, each in his own perspective. Nonetheless, Netanyahu’s presentation exposed several important elements. First, the information in question is not merely a past-tense archive but rather a present and future knowledge base and contingency plan, kept ready for use when Iran decides to break out to a bomb. Second, the JCPOA is based on the completely false Iranian assertion that its nuclear program was never aimed at acquiring a nuclear weapon, proving its possible military dimensions (PMD) to be “definitely military program (DMP).” This means that under no circumstances should the main limitations on Iran’s nuclear program be allowed to expire after 10-15 years (according to the plan’s “sunset clause”), as this would give Iran legitimacy to be only a very short while away from a bomb (as was also acknowledged by President Obama). President Trump’s decision to withdraw from the JCPOA was not surprising, considering his staunch views on his both his predecessor and his legacy, and given his explicit description of the JCPOA as the “worst deal ever.” Trump’s saber-rattling as a prelude to tough negotiation seems to be a favorite pattern, evident with North Korea, Iran, and the “trade war” with China. Whether

he is seeking a better deal with Iran, the collapse of its regime, or a casus belli for military action is still an open question.

Iran's Military Deployment in Syria

On May 9-10, 2018, the collision between Israel and Iran reached a dramatic crescendo, earning historical perspective. Since 1979, Iran has waged a long proxy war against Israel, which found itself in recurring clashes with Iran's proxies in Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. Iran's strategic concept is to wear Israel down and erode its blood and treasure by arming, training, funding, and directing proxies encircling Israel, barring direct friction with Israel and paying no cost in Iranian blood and prestige. Iran built the military capabilities around Israel as deterrents and distractors, safeguarding Tehran's nuclear program. Since the turn of this century, Israel has expanded its strategic response concept to the Iranian octopus's proxy war in three ways. First has been the infliction of heavy damage on Iran's proxies during occasional high intensity conflicts with them, thus deterring them from their protracted harassment of Israel between conflicts. This explains the past 12 years of relative calm along the Lebanese border and the restraint in the Gaza Strip since 2014 shown by Hamas, which also enjoys Iranian military aid. The second has been the disruption of Iranian supply and logistical lines (on the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea routes and on the land route through Syria). The third has been to attack key individuals in the enemy's force buildup — mainly command, R&D, and technology threat multipliers. Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria and with Hezbollah's arming accelerating, Israel stepped up its strikes, particularly on quality weapons transfers to Hezbollah. When in turn Iran attempted to initiate a new terror front in the Golan Heights, Israel struck the perpetrators, their dispatchers, and their hosts. These steps put the Iranian efforts in the Golan Heights on ice for a few years. Still, the unwritten and implicit rules of the game excluded direct friction between Iran and Israel.

The change in dynamic began last year, when with the Syrian war phasing out, Iran moved to reap its war dividends, seeking its own forward military deployment in Syria, in which it had invested so heavily. The Iranian strategy combines its application of the Hezbollah model, using Syrian forces, with an import of massive foreign Shiite militias to Syria. However, unlike in the past, it also strives to build a significant Iranian military deployment that would pose a direct threat to Israel, especially with precision ballistic missiles, aircraft, and air defense systems. For its part, Israel attempted to counter this process by turning to the United States and Russia, hoping to mobilize them to diplomatic prevention. However, given Washington's and Moscow's disinterest, the ball remained solely in Israel's court. At first, official Israeli leaders stated Israel's determination to prevent Iran from entrenching itself in Syria. Next, as a signal, unmanned Iranian targets in Syria were attacked, with no responsibility claimed. The Iranian drone's sortie to Israel on February 10, 2018 marked a slight shift from Iran's pattern of indirect action against

Israel to direct action. Concurrently, Israel demonstrated its next level of response to Iran's updated strategy, which included striking directly at Iranian forces and capabilities in Syria, not limiting Israeli action to proxies alone, as well as striking not only at weapons transfers to Hezbollah, but also at factories, facilities, and assets central to Iran's growing threat to Israel. The purpose of these attacks combined the physical prevention of advanced threats, such as precise fire and air defense systems, with imposing costs on Iran, seeking to deter and dissuade it from continuing its efforts to build its force in Syria.

Over the past month, Iran made a number of attempts to retaliate against Israel, all of which were successfully preempted by Israel beforehand. On the night of May 9-10, Iran attempted to fire on Israel twice, although while returning to its indirect approach, using proxy operatives. Israel responded by fulfilling its explicit commitment with a heavy and precise fire strike at multiple Iranian sites in Syria, as well as a number of Syria air defense assets that fired missiles at Israeli planes. On the operational level, these events illustrated Iran's current military weakness in Syria, and at the same time, Israel's intelligence dominance, air superiority, and world-class missile defense. All this duly reflects the difficulties Iran faces in engaging in direct action in a remote theater in which Israel enjoys a clear military advantage and close proximity to the bases of its power. Strategically, Israel has revealed a new policy whereby it has no intention to wait quietly for the cumulative buildup of the Iranian threat or exempt Iran from paying a real price for its proxy war against Israel. This policy stems from lessons learned by Israel from its longstanding war with Iran's proxies, led by Hezbollah, and the Iranian support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, as well as from the singular circumstances in current Syria, where new enemy threats emerge under a weak protective aegis, as Russia respects Israel's security needs. The stage is now set for a new act in the ongoing saga.

Significance

On the nuclear front, the unfolding dynamic from this point onward depends on multiple actors and their strategic choices, which allows for a wide spectrum of possible scenarios: from an attempt by Iran and the JCPOA's remaining signatories to salvage the deal, isolate the United States, and undermine the renewed sanctions; through Iran's renewal of "civilian" uranium enrichment; and up to Iran's deserting the NPT, perhaps also a breaking out to a bomb, seeking nuclear immunity from attack, North Korean style. Economy will play a central role in this game, as Iran's financial, social, and political stability also depends on the European reactions as well as the international companies and world markets. At this stage, it is hard to discern a well-thought, well-prepared and calculated strategic US response to these Iranian scenarios, which leaves Israel with heavy lifting ahead.

In the Iran-Israel struggle in Syria, the recent events call for a general stock-taking by all parties. Iran's leadership must face Israel's new policy and carefully ponder its next

moves in Syria. Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani is probably facing harsh criticism at home due to the failed attempts to strike at Israel and the price Iran incurred with Israel's response, while Iranian President Hassan Rouhani is coming under fire due to the blow to the JCPOA following the US withdrawal. Iran's future buildup in Syria is almost certainly being reviewed and reconsidered in Tehran, and in the present situation there is no way to determine whether the last collision will reduce Iran's efforts or actually boost them, perhaps by again focusing principally on proxy buildup and operations. Lacking common borders and adjacent forces, an Iran-Israel "war" is now limited to air and ballistic strike exchange, complemented with cyber attacks. Iran can still seek its retaliation against Israel in other theaters, such as Yemen (using ballistic missiles or targeting Israeli shipping), or a more dangerous, high risk alternative: Lebanon. Hezbollah, which seems deterred from attacking Israel and thus risking its political achievements (illustrated by the results of Lebanon's recent parliamentary elections), as well as the Shiite population in Lebanon, could provide Iran with the military capabilities it now needs in Syria, and miscalculation-driven escalation still cannot be ruled out. Iran could try to fan the flames in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but its influence there is limited. Recalling Iran's historical record for overseas attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets, this is also an option; however, against the backdrop of the Islamic State, international terror attacks will result in extremely negative international repercussions for Iran. Russia, which received substantial assistance from Iranian forces and its proxies in defending the Assad regime during the war, seems to be tolerant, perhaps even permissive to Israel's moves against Iran, as long as no vital Russian Interests in the theater (Russian troops, Assad's survival) are threatened. The United States, for its part, has provided Israel with political backing, but has thus far displayed little interest in Syria. New US policy vis-à-vis Iran is yet to be put to the test throughout the entire Middle East, including the Levant.

Despite the two blows Iran sustained last week, Israel cannot afford to be complacent or overly satisfied. It will need to follow meticulously the updated policies adopted by each of the involved actors. Thus far, Israel has held separate policies regarding Iran's nuclear program and the Iranian proxy war and malign influence. Now, it must develop an integrative long term policy and strive for coordinated efforts and meaningful cooperation with the United States, European countries, and the countries of the region. Operational and strategic coordination with Russia remains essential. Contending with the Iranian nuclear challenge will require the establishment of a joint "strategic early warning enterprise," with the United States and other allies, aimed at preventing critical surprises. To meet the possible scenarios in the nuclear realm, it will be necessary to preserve and develop diverse and effective capabilities for action. Iran's future actions in the proxy war over Syria and the region will require a broad response, and not only in Syria. Reliable communication channels for de-escalation with Iran become even more

important. Finally, as a standing imperative, it is necessary to continue to deter Hezbollah from war and, at the same time, to continue to prepare for its unwarranted outbreak.