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Iran's Dilemma: Respond to Israeli Actions in Syria with Terror
Attacks Abroad?
Yoram Schweitzer

Iran's launch of some twenty missiles from Syria toward Israeli territory on the night of May 9-10, 2018 marked the end of the Israeli debate on the question of whether, how, and from where Iran would seek to avenge the deaths of its Revolutionary Guards operatives in Israel's attacks on Syrian territory. After the first Iranian response to the attacks, in which Israel suffered no losses, Israel responded to the missiles with a widespread attack on Iranian military infrastructures in Syrian territory, causing severe damage. In view of the public pledge by senior Iranian spokespersons that Israel would soon weep over its soldiers just as Iran mourned its soldiers, it remains to be seen if and how Iran will retaliate for Israel's broad counter-attack: with what intensity, with what method, and in what location.

The Iranian rhetoric suggests the response will be directed against military targets in Israel. However, the scope and continuation of Israeli damage to Iranian targets in Syria; the influence attributed to Israel over President Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear agreement; Iran's embarrassment over the public exposure of its nuclear archive; and public threats by senior Israeli figures to block Iran's intention to consolidate its military infrastructure in Syria – all these add to the Iranian sense of humiliation and could broaden the range of its possible responses. Apart from the Revolutionary Guards, Iran can draw from a pool of proxies and organizations comprising Lebanese, Iraqi, Syrian, Palestinian, Afghan, and Pakistani militants. Some might be willing to participate in action against Israel. And notwithstanding declarations from Iranian leaders that ongoing Israeli actions against its forces and proxies will lead to the destruction of Haifa and Tel Aviv, it appears that Iran is not genuinely interested in war, particularly not on Syrian or Lebanese territory, fearing the consequences for both the survival of the Assad regime and for Hezbollah's status. (Israel too is not interested in an all-out war.) Therefore the mutual verbal onslaughts between Israel and Iran oblige both sides to ensure that their actions should be painful, but at the same time measured, in order to avoid escalation.

For Iran, a possible arena for a response to what is perceived as intolerable Israel provocation is the international arena, although that too is not free of risks and constraints. Israel, aware from past experience how Iran can use its capabilities and

proxies to carry out serious attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets overseas, is preparing for the possibility that Iran may choose this method again. The main candidates for executing such an attack are the Revolutionary Guards, alone or in cooperation with contracted Hezbollah operatives skilled in overseas attack arrangements, and perhaps even with the assistance of local elements in the various countries.

For Iran, there are pros and cons regarding overseas terror attacks on Israeli or Jewish targets. The decisions will depend on the answers to the following questions:

- a. Would one or more terror attacks on Israeli/Jewish targets overseas be a suitable response to the severe damage suffered by Iran in Syria, and fulfill the declared Iranian promise to make Israel pay?
- b. To what extent would such an action deter Israel from continuing its attacks against Iranian moves towards consolidation in Syria?
- c. What are the chances of executing an attack without the perpetrators or their support staff being caught or leaving traces that lead back to Iran?
- d. Is it possible to realize this intention within a reasonable timeframe, so that the connection between the Israeli activity and the response is clear? An effective attack overseas requires a local logistical and human infrastructure linked to external activists. Even if the basic infrastructure already exists, it will take time to train it properly while avoiding any incriminating links to Iran. Precise information must be collected about targets, which is particularly challenging given the strict Israeli security arrangements for their overseas representatives and institutions. Moreover, the planners must take into account that Israeli security elements are particularly alert at this time and also enjoy cooperation with local security elements.
- e. How is it possible to avoid further damage to Iran's image and preclude further isolation, especially when the United States is leading an international campaign to tarnish its name as a country that uses fraud and deception in the nuclear field, and a leading player in the spread of international terror? For example an exposure of Iran's involvement in a terror attack in the European arena, an attack that it initiated and carried out itself or through a proxy, would support the American demand to impose sanctions on Iran for terror, perhaps within an international coalition. There would likewise be negative ramifications in the nuclear context, since Iran has no interest in hampering the efforts of Western countries to prevent the collapse of the nuclear agreement following the withdrawal of the United States.
- f. The arena: Iran's need to limit the risk of exposure and consequential severe diplomatic damage could direct the attention of the planners to places where these risks are relatively small. Accordingly, countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, or

Central and South America are more suitable than the United States or leading European countries.

- g. The nature of attacks and an estimated number of casualties, as much as possible: when selecting the type of action, there is tension between the wish to impose a painful and heavy price on Israel and the fear of a direct Israeli response, and particularly of a strong international response. Such responses will be directly influenced by the number of victims, direct and indirect, resulting from the attack. For example, an attack on a passenger aircraft could potentially cause massive deaths and lead Israel to an extremely severe response, with significant escalation of its activity against Iran, and also arouse intense international anger. On the other hand, damage that is limited to Israeli representatives or organizations will keep the tension within the bilateral sphere, if there are few local casualties.

Iran could opt for a terror attack on Jewish targets identified with Israel, or on Israeli residents and tourists, who are less protected. The many young Israelis who travel in Latin America and the Far East after their army service could be an attractive target for an attack or even kidnapping, since Iran and Hezbollah can present them as Israeli soldiers.

Overseas terror appears to be a means of warfare available to Iran in cases where it wishes to respond, take revenge on Israel, and send messages of deterrence, while retaining the ability to deny any involvement. In recent years, the Israeli public has tended to downplay the potential danger from terror attacks by Iran and Hezbollah, due to the relatively weak Iranian response to assassinations of its nuclear scientists that are attributed to Israel, and because of Hezbollah's failed response to the death of Imad Mugniyeh in 2008: Nasrallah assured Israel of a very severe response and failed. Iran and Hezbollah together planned at least 15 attacks overseas, including attacks on Israeli targets in India and Bulgaria. Thus, Iran and its proxy have not been deterred from attempts to harm Israel outside its borders, and this fact should always be borne in mind. The sometimes unprofessional execution and Israel's success - in cooperation with foreign security elements - in foiling most of the planned attacks are no guarantee that Iran and Hezbollah will not improve their future performance.

To date, Israel has not succeeded in deterring Iran and Hezbollah from use of the overseas arena to launch revenge actions and to intimidate Israel. Iran's relative inaction in this arena is mainly due to self restraint, in view of the potential for international complications, or preference for other, more available, arenas. Hezbollah's "open account" with Israel for Mugniyeh's death, declared by Nasrallah, has not been closed. Moreover, it has been joined by other "open accounts" for the killings of other senior Hezbollah personnel, as well as the Iranian Revolutionary Guards killed by Israel in

Syria. All these could lead Iran and Hezbollah back to consider the overseas arena, but this time Iran will probably be more meticulous about professional execution, and choose relatively convenient sites for action, where the chances of being foiled or exposed are more limited. Nor is it yet clear if Iran would stop at this stage, or be satisfied with efforts to attack Israel from the battlefield in Syria, or whether it will decide to operate in other areas on the Israeli borders and even beyond. In any event, it seems that the current head-on hostilities with Israel will stimulate Iran to refresh its ability to carry out terror attacks overseas. If it indeed decides to take this route, the infrastructure and capabilities at its disposal will be better than those demonstrated by Iran and Hezbollah in recent years.