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The Campaign against Iran in Syria: Are Israel's Statements Helpful?

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In recent weeks Israel has declared that it will continue its policy of attacks in Syrian territory and if necessary will step up such attacks, in order to prevent Iranian military entrenchment on Syrian soil and disrupt shipments of strategic weapons from Iran to Hezbollah. This public statement is designed to underscore that Iran's presence and activity in Syria is a red line that Israel has no intention of ignoring, despite the restrictions Russia has imposed on Israel and the US withdrawal from the arena. This and similar declarations are an about-face of Israel's policy of ambiguity, which has eroded over the past two years. The problem with the new openness is that it is liable to lower the enemy's response threshold and force Israel to continue its attacks with greater frequency, if only to preserve its deterrence and demonstrate its freedom to act. This could heighten the possibility of escalation to a large scale war. Israel's declarations are also liable to arouse opposition in the international arena, which would narrow its scope for maneuvering. It therefore seems that the drawbacks of the declarative policy outweigh its benefits. While countering the Iranian threat from Syria justifies Israel's risk-taking, it would be better for Israel to maintain a low public profile and be satisfied with attacks that according to a risk-benefit analysis may achieve a substantive strategic effect, and avoid attacks designed mainly to demonstrate operational freedom.

On January 13, 2019, Prime Minister and Defense Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that in recent years, the Israel military has struck Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria hundreds of times. He also stated that Israel attacked the warehouses with Iranian weapons at Damascus International Airport on January 11. Netanyahu declared that the latest round of attacks proves that Israel is more determined than ever to act against Iran in Syria, and warned that Israel will step up its attacks if and when necessary. Netanyahu advised Iran to leave Syria at once, because "we will continue our policy of attacks as we promised and as we have been doing, without fear and without pause."

In an interview with the New York Times on January 11, 2019 marking the end of his tenure, outgoing Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot presented Israel's achievements against Iran and Hezbollah during his term, noting that in recent years Israel "struck

thousands of targets without claiming responsibility or asking for credit.” According to Eisenkot, Iran has not succeeded in fulfilling its vision in Syria, and it erred in choosing to confront Israel in the Syrian arena where Israel enjoys superior intelligence and airpower. He also stated that Hezbollah has achieved only limited capabilities in precision missiles. Similarly, during a visit to France (January 22-23, 2019), Israeli President Reuven Rivlin told his hosts that Israel takes action in Syria to prevent Iranian entrenchment and disrupt weapons shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon as part of its right to self-defense, and should it become necessary, the air force will strike again. He thus sent a message to Lebanon via France that Israel sees Hezbollah's precision missile project in Lebanon as a very serious security threat and that it will feel free to act in order to eliminate it.

Israel's official assumption of responsibility for its numerous strikes against Iranian targets in Syria in recent years is new. So too is its declaration that it intends to continue its attacks in Syria and step them up as needed, along with attacks to disrupt weapons shipments from Iran to Hezbollah through Syria. Netanyahu's taking explicit credit for the attack on Iran's weapons warehouses at the Damascus airport was also unusual. Such declarations are the polar opposite of Israel's policy of ambiguity in the Syrian arena, which has dissolved over the past two years. At the same time, declarations about attacks on weapons shipments to Hezbollah are not new.

Why now? It seems that Israel's need to make its red lines in Syria clear to all actors in the arena has grown more acute than before, especially in light of President Donald Trump's announcement of January 3, 2019 that he was withdrawing US troops from Syria and that the Iranians “can do what they want” in Syria as far as he is concerned. In addition, Israel's declarations come in the face of the restrictions on areas of attack that Russia imposed on Israel following the downing of the Russian Ilyushin 20 aircraft by Syria on September 17, 2018, and in light of the efforts by the ruling forces in Syria to shape a new state order.

Israel's declarations seem designed to heighten the conflict between Syria and Russia on the one hand, and Iran on the other, so that Iran will leave Syria, because as long as Syria is a battleground for fighting between Iran and Israel – something made amply clear by the Damascus airport incident – the Syrian regime is endangered and the process of reconstruction is in jeopardy. In addition, the exposure of the Iranian effort and its high cost (according to Eisenkot, Iran has spent some \$16 billion in Syria over the last seven years) help the Iranians who object to Iran's financing of subversive activities abroad at a time that Iran has to deal with US sanctions and severe economic problems at home.

In addition, some Israeli analysts assume that the declarations about Israeli successes at this time are not free of political and other motives. If so, the phenomenon can be expected to disappear after the April 9 elections. A broader consideration has to do with the military's image. Based on some of Eisenkot's statements at the INSS International Conference in January 2019, it seems that the information revealed about the IDF's campaigns in the northern arena may help the Israeli public understand the army's challenges, as in recent years the public has mainly been exposed to IDF activity in Judea and Samaria and on the Gaza Strip border, which are only the tip of the iceberg. The revelations are also in keeping with the public's right to know: in a democracy, it is difficult to engage in large scale, intensive, extended, and risk-filled military activity without public debate.

Iranian and Syrian Reactions

The Israeli declarations triggered harsh Iranian responses consisting mainly of threats, including the threat of launching precision missiles. Reacting to Netanyahu's January 13 statement, Revolutionary Guards Commander Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari announced on January 16 that Iran would leave its advisors and weapons in Syria "despite the ridiculous, surreal threats" by Israel to disrupt Iran's continued presence in Syria. He warned Israel "not to play with the lion's tail" because Iran's patience will run out in the not too distant future; he also said Israel should be worried about the day that a barrage of Iranian high precision missiles lands on its head.

Messages are transmitted also by power moves. On January 20, 2019, foreign sources reported that Israel fired seven missiles at a target near the Damascus airport, which prompted an Iranian airplane to turn around. In response, a surface-to-surface missile (apparently a precision missile) was fired at the northern Golan Heights, and was intercepted by an Iron Dome battery. An IDF spokesperson said that the missile was launched from Syria by "an Iranian force" and that the IDF responded by attacking Quds Force targets in Syria. While the spokesperson noted that Iranian missile launch was preceded by long planning and decisions made months ago, it was hard to ignore the coincidence between the launch, the Israeli declarations, and the Iranian threats to respond.

These events have generated further threats to Israel. In late January 2019, Revolutionary Guards Deputy Commander Brig. Gen. Hossein Salami said that "a new war that Israel starts will end with its destruction." Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran Ali Shamkhani warned that "precision missiles are in the hands of the resistance in Gaza and Lebanon, and they are prepared to fire them and turn life in Israel to hell if it does something stupid." Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah added his threat that the decision to react to Israeli attacks could be taken at a moment's notice.

Syria, a member of the Iranian axis, tends to downplay the severity of the damage, perhaps to reduce pressure on the Assad regime to respond. Nonetheless, following recent events, the Syrian envoy to the UN announced on January 23 that his country would attack Ben Gurion Airport should Israel continue its attacks on Syria. In response, the IDF deployed an Iron Dome battery in central Israel.

Significance

The military Iranian entrenchment in Syria, the recent events, and Iran's declarations calling for Israel's destruction clearly demonstrate the severity of the Iranian threat to Israel and the necessity of foiling it using a variety of means and arenas. At the same time, it seems that Israel's declarations are not helpful, and might in fact increase the risk of escalation and reduce Israel's room for maneuvering in the Syrian sphere.

- a. Assuming that in the past the policy of ambiguity played a role in preventing high intensity confrontations, taking credit for attacks and declaring intentions for future attacks might result in the opposite outcome.
- b. The other side sees Israel's declarations as boastful attempts to humiliate it, which might have the effect of increasing pressure on its leaders to react. The more difficult Iran finds it to respond from Syria, the more it might try to respond outside of Syria.
- c. Israel's declarations might increase its commitment to continue its current policy of offense if only to show continuity lest its deterrence is compromised, which would risk further deterioration even before one takes into consideration other risks, such as a mass-casualty incident, which might change the picture.
- d. The declarations might increase Russia's opposition to Israeli action in Syria and further reduce Israel's scope for maneuvering based on understandings between the two nations. On January 23, the spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry said that "the practice of arbitrary [Israeli] strikes on...Syria must stop." Assuming responsibility for strikes in Syria might increase the opposition of other parties in the international arena.
- e. The struggle between Israel and Iran is played out in many arenas and seems far from coming to an end. Thus, public summaries of successes seem premature, especially because Iran still maintains a military presence in Syria and continues to improve its capabilities to operate from Lebanon and Iraq as well. In addition, there is no good reason to add to Israel's open account with Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria by taking credit for past actions. Furthermore, revealing details to the media about intelligence and security forces activity against Iran while the campaign is still underway is superfluous.

The threat to Israel of Iranian military entrenchment in Syria justifies a policy of deterrence and risk-taking responses. However, it seems that as part of its risk

management strategy, Israel should maintain a low profile and using risk-benefit analyses, be more selective about the targets it attacks, before its scope for maneuvering is further curtailed. Rising tensions in the northern arena require preliminary preparations for a scenario of escalation.