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Military Intelligence Directorate Recommends Stepping Up Attacks on the Iranians in Syria—A Different View

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The probability of an outbreak of war as a result of deterioration and escalation is not low and also depends on Israel—that is the implication of the annual intelligence assessment of the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID). Nevertheless, the MID’s recommendation to the government is to increase IDF attacks against Iranian forces in Syria, in order to exploit the elimination of Soleimani to drive them out of the country. This article analyzes the recommendation and reaches a different conclusion: Israel must not increase its attacks on the Iranians in Syria, beyond what is necessary for its clearly strategic needs, such as countering the supply of strategic weapons and thwarting Iran’s military entrenchment, which could endanger Israel. The risks of moving up a level—to a military struggle and even all-out war on the Iranian military presence in Syria, as implied by the MID recommendation—are far greater than any possible benefits and the struggle should be conducted in the political arena.

The MID Assessment of the Risks of War in the North

According to the main points of the MID’s annual intelligence assessment, which was published in the media on January 14, 2020, there is a “low probability of a war initiated by our enemies in 2020,” but “medium to high probability of maintaining equations of response in the northern arena, with readiness for risks up to and including war.” For example, the MID has assessed that Nasrallah is ready to respond to Israel’s actions, even by starting a war. As evidence, they cite the anti-tank rockets fired by Hezbollah on a military ambulance on the northern border in September 2019, with the intent of killing soldiers (since the rockets missed, Israel avoided a response and escalation).

In other words, as the MID sees it, the probability of an outbreak of war this year, as a result of deterioration and escalation, is not low, and to a large extent depends on Israel’s actions. We can also conclude from the assessment that Israel’s deterrent ability exists but is limited, Israel’s enemies will not hold back over attacks above a specific damage threshold. With the assumption that Israel continues its policy from 2019, it must be prepared for war, and certainly if it accepts the MID recommendation to step up attacks on the Iranians in Syria in 2020 (see below).

The MID Recommendation

On January 14, 2020, the MID published its recommendation—to increase attacks on the Iranians in Syria over 2020, in order to block the Iranians and exploit the death of Soleimani (January 3, 2020) for driving them out of Syria. Before then, on December 25, 2019, in a lecture at the Inter-Disciplinary Center in Herzliya, Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi said that the focus of the IDF's campaign between the wars against Iran and its allies is to prevent the entrenchment of the Quds forces in Syria and the threat of precision rockets all over the Middle East. In other words, the MID recommendation is not talking about a completely new objective, but rather a significant step up in the required achievement—destroying the Iranian military presence in Syria

The MID recommendation relies on its assessment that the killing of Soleimani is a foundational event, which could be decisive on the issue of Iranian involvement beyond its borders, with the emphasis on Syria. This is largely due to Soleimani's importance in shaping Iran's regional policy and in establishing its military presence outside Iran (the Quds Force), which he commanded. In addition, according to the MID assessment, weakness can be discerned in the extreme Shiite axis led by Iran. Consequently, Iran's military activity outside its borders could be given lower priority, as the Iranian regime focuses on areas of top priority with respect to its own survival (economic and political stability, defending the country, and its nuclear program). Hezbollah, Iran's chief ally, is also pre-occupied with its internal-Lebanese arena, and there are indications that it is separating itself from Iran, in the opinion of MID.

At the end of January, the head of MID, Maj. Gen. Tamir Heiman, in a lecture he gave at the Thirteenth Annual International Conference of the INSS, explained the strategic logic behind the MID recommendation. In his words, Syria is at the center of the Shiite axis that is hostile to Israel, and its territory is currently the scene of the struggle between the regional players seeking to shape Syria. This situation provides Israel with an opportunity to influence the shaping of Syria's role in the future system and to break the extreme Shiite axis against Israel. Heiman added that if Israel fails to act, it could find itself the victim of circumstances, in which the most dangerous scenario is the emergence of the Hezbollah model in Lebanon, whether smaller or improved. As for the risk, Heiman said that this was a calculated risk, and for each operational action there was a controlled assessment (see the INSS website, January 31, 2020).

Discussing the MID recommendation is vital, because its implementation could lead to a significant rise in the risk of war, while its non-implementation could mean (at least in the view of its supporters) missing the chance to drive Iran out of Syria. However, in principle, we must distinguish between the MID intelligence assessment and its recommendations for action. As for recommended actions, the MID does not have the

same special professional status that it has in the field of intelligence assessment. Intelligence assessments are restricted to an analysis of the external environment only, while recommendations should result from situation analysis. They combine the assessment of intelligence and the assessment of Israel's capabilities and its situation in a range of areas, including its political relations and, above all, its readiness for war and its willingness to bear the consequences. According to the Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi in his lecture on December 25, 2019, "In the next war, I am speaking about war in the North or war with Hamas, the home front will be under intense fire. I look everyone in the eyes and say the fire will be intense, we must recognize this."

As additional background data for discussing the recommendation, it should be noted that Iranian military presence in Syria is estimated to be about 800 men; in addition, under Iranian sponsorship, there are Shiite militias brought by Iran into Syria, as well as Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon, amounting overall to about 15,000 personnel. This Syrian presence also serves other Iranian interests, which are not directed against Israel, such as preserving the Assad regime and exporting the revolution. Iran is also under pressures to limit its presence in Syria, which is unrelated to Israeli military pressure. These include opposition within Iran to spending on military activity in Middle Eastern countries, while it is suffering economic distress, and complications caused by the Quds Force, among them the mistaken shooting down of a Ukrainian airplane (a development of the campaign against the United States in Iraq, which was led by Soleimani).

Below is an examination of the anticipated benefits versus the possible damage of the MID proposal, based on its assessment of "medium to high probability of maintaining equations of response" and without underestimating the severity of the assessed Iranian threat.

Anticipated benefits: These refer to the size of the potential achievement and its probability. The potential size relates to the question of Israel's most apparent strategic interests in Syria, and whether increasing the use of force will help to achieve them. Obviously, not all of the Iranian presence in Syria should be deemed a strategic target, and it is necessary to be selective. In terms of ability, the question that should be asked is what the likelihood is of Israel being able to terminate Iranian presence in Syria with military means and to maintain this achievement in the long term. We can assume that this is not very likely. Moreover, the price could be quite high, as Iran's withdrawal from Syria will not in principle affect its ability to act against Israel from other places. It could even act from within Syria, by means of secret forces, military sorties into Syria from Iraq and Lebanon, the militias it controls (including the Shiite militias and Hezbollah fighters), and Iranian aid to build and operate the Syrian army. At the same time, if Iran leaves Syria, Israel will lose Syria as a space for deterrence and response with respect to Iran.

Anticipated damage: This refers to the likelihood of military conflict and the potential scope of the damage. Increasing numbers of attacks against Iranian presence in Syria will be accompanied by a rise in responses and a growing risk of war (according to the MID assessment). IDF activity in the North requires great precision in order to avoid escalation, but this cannot be completely ensured, and the probability of an anomalous outcome increases with the intensity of the attacks. Meanwhile, the enemy is also learning lessons and striving for achievements. The descent into war could also occur following an action initiated by the enemy in the mistaken belief that Israel would contain it (see, for example, the Second Lebanon War), and the price of this error would be paid by both sides. War in Syria could spread to other fronts as well. Possible damage to Israel is detailed (at least partially) in the scenario that relates to the civilian front. Even if war does not erupt, Israel could pay a heavy price in the context of counterattacks, mistakes, and complications involving foreign forces in Syria. Such complications would limit Israel's ability to carry out attacks for clear strategic needs, such as thwarting the manufacture and transport of strategic weapons (precision missiles, unconventional weapons) and preventing the entrenchment of the Iranian military in Syria in a way that threatens Israel. Even if the enemy is currently holding back for strategic considerations, it can be assumed that fatal attacks expand the open account. In any event, this policy will commit Israel to further costs and a higher degree of readiness for war that neither side wants.

Summary

One of the components of Israel's security strategy is to extend the intervals between wars and in the meantime conduct the campaign between the wars (CBW) in order to diminish the enemy's capability and give Israel the advantage, should war break out. On the face of it, the MID recommendation matches this logic, but actually the benefits of all-out-war against the Iranian military presence in Syria could be outweighed by the dangers. Moreover, the risks of war must be managed from a comprehensive viewpoint, taking account for the volatility in the Palestinian arena and the possibility that Israel could become unwillingly entangled in a conflict between the United States and Iran. Therefore, Israel should not increase its attacks on the Iranians in Syria, apart from what is necessary for clear strategic needs. Given this, the objective of the withdrawal of all Iran's forces and allies from Syria should presently focus in the political arena. For example, Israel should become involved, through Russia and the United States, in shaping the situation in Syria and work with the United States to ensure that any lifting of sanctions on Iran is conditional upon Iran's ceasing its subversive and military activities beyond its own borders.