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The Iraqi Crisis – Lessons for Israel

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*T*he Iraqi crisis of January/February 1998, appears, in hindsight, to have been a false alarm as far as Israel was concerned. The basic facts did not change either before the crisis or as it unfolded. Iraq's limited ability to strike Israel with missiles carrying conventional or non-conventional warheads has not improved in recent years, and Israel estimated, before and during the crisis, that the risk that missiles would be fired at Israel from Iraq was low. Unlike in the Gulf War, Iraq's leaders made it clear this time, publicly and through diplomatic channels, that they had no intention or ability to fire missiles at Israel. In the end, the crisis was solved with a political settlement; neither a bullet nor a missile was fired.

In spite of this, it would be wrong to treat the crisis as a passing episode. From Israel's perspective, the January/February crisis posed the most serious threat of an Israeli-Iraqi confrontation since the Gulf War, even if a logical analysis indicates that the threat was not great. The crisis occupied the minds of decision makers and the Israeli public for weeks, for two reasons: one, that the intention of the American administration to deal a powerful military blow to Iraq, if it did not

submit to its demands, was perceived to be more serious than in the past – a development that the Israelis feared would lead to an Iraqi reaction against them; and two, because unlike during the Gulf War and other previous wars, this time the use of biological weapons was perceived to be the foremost threat to Israel. In reality, due to Iraq's weakness, the gravity of this threat was significantly less than in 1991, but discoveries related to it in the last three years have increased the concern of the Israeli public.

Israeli preoccupation with this crisis – even if it was based on a working assumption that the chances of an attack on Israel were slim – allows for an examination of several considerations that are at the basis of an Israeli response to the non-conventional threat. This is important, if only because one can assume that a similar crisis might recur in the not-too-distant future.

Strategic Threats against Israel

This analysis calls first for a comment on the general strategic threat to Israel. In the near future, for the next few years, the non-conventional threat to Israel will remain minimal. The potential threat of Syrian

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The Iraqi Crisis – Lessons for Israel (cont.)

missile attack with chemical/biological weapons has existed for some time, but its danger currently appears small, especially given the assumption that Syria is aware of Israel's strategic and military advantage and is not interested in entering a conflict with it. Iraq is weak and isolated, and most of its non-conventional warfare capabilities have been dismantled. Iran, on the other hand, has not yet developed the capability for a strategic strike against Israel, although it is investing much effort to an attempt to acquire such a capability.

However, the non-conventional threat against Israel will increase if and when Iran attains the ability to produce long-range missiles and nuclear weapons, and/or when Iraq is freed from the inspection and sanction regime and begins to rehabilitate its non-conventional capabilities. An important key to the strategic threat will be the future of the Israeli-Arab peace process. A peace agreement between Israel and Syria would gradually reduce the Syrian threat, though it would not cause it to completely disappear. On the other hand, in conditions of a continued stalemate in the Israeli-Syrian peace process, the non-conventional threat could worsen on the Syrian front.

The future of the non-conventional threat from Iraq and Iran is more complex. The Iraqi missile attack on Israel during the Gulf War introduced a new dimension to the strategic threat on Israel. The ability of the peripheral countries – Iraq in the last decade and Iran in the future – to strike against Israel no longer depends on the context of war between Israel and its direct neighbors. Long-range missiles enable countries that do not border with Israel to

attack it, without a war between Israel and Syria, Jordan or Egypt being a condition for their intervention.

Consequently, peace agreements between Israel and its direct neighbors will not provide Israel with protection against attacks by peripheral countries. Of course, a peace agreement between Israel and Syria would deprive the peripheral countries of one motivation to attack Israel. But even then, they might try to harm Israel for their own reasons, in order to undermine the peace process or as a response to an American attack against them. The conclusion, therefore, is that Israel must continue to aim to stop the non-conventional threat by Iraq and Iran, at least as long as these countries do not join peace agreements.

This article examines Israel's ability to deter and respond to strategic threats, the influence of the U.S. factor on Israeli policy in this context, and the impact of public fear of an attack on the home front. It must be emphasized that this analysis refers not only to the possibility of a future confrontation between Israel and Iraq, but also to the possibility of an Israeli confrontation with other enemies, such as Syria or Iran.

Deterrence against Non-conventional Threats

To what extent did the Iraqi crisis affect Israel's deterrent against non-conventional threats? The answer to this question is not clear-cut, especially since the important aspect in this matter is the Arab perception of Israel's capacity – and that is unknown. One must also remember that Israel was not a direct party to the latest crisis, and its

military activity – the main element of its deterrence ability – was not put to the test.

However, the image projected by Israel's behavior in this crisis was one of vulnerability and insecurity – that Israel itself was not confident of its ability to deter strategic threats. The emphasis that Israel placed on preparing the home front to absorb a biological or chemical attack, and the public anxiety aroused during the crisis, could be perceived as an indication that Israel itself did not believe that its strategic power was sufficient to deter even Iraq, with its limited ability to attack.

It is true that the Israeli sensitivity to loss of life is not something new and has been well-known to the Arabs for years. However, the phenomenon of fear in Israel – both in the last crisis and during the Gulf War – might encourage countries such as Iraq, Iran or Syria to continue investing in the means to launch a massive blow against Israel's home front, in order to take advantage of this soft spot. Moreover, the Arab assumption is that Israel, at this point, holds a monopoly in the field of nuclear weapons. In the Arabs' view, the concern Israel demonstrated over the threat of a biological attack strengthens the possibility that the biological/chemical option has created a partial balance of terror *vis-à-vis* Israel; in the Arabs' eyes, this option can counter, at least to some extent, the Israeli nuclear threat toward them.

On the other hand, the January/February crisis may have contributed to Israel's deterrent in three different ways. First is the emphasis on improving the protection of the home front. There are several reasons for the Arabs and Iran to believe that their chances of successfully

hurting Israel with weapons of mass destruction are diminishing; the significant improvement in Israel's active defense capability (and the assumption of further improvement in the future, in light of expected progress in the development of the Arrow missile system and perhaps the possibility of receiving the next generation of Patriot missiles); the indication that there is a defensive response – even if problematic and still incomplete – to an attack with biological weapons; and the transfer of budgets, during the crisis, to civil defense.

The second is the repeated emphasis of U.S. support of Israel. The knowledge that the United States stands by Israel in terms of early warning of missile launchings and missile interception, and that a non-conventional attack on Israel would lead to a severe American response, should raise in the eyes of radical regimes the price of a chemical/biological attack on Israel.

The third is the possibility of an Israeli response. Along with expressions of concern and insecurity regarding the possibility of a biological attack, Israeli leaders also made a number of serious threats regarding Israel's response if it were attacked. These declarations, and perhaps also the impression given by the current Israeli government that its measures are likely to be unpredictable, could heighten radical regimes' fear of an Israeli reaction. A potential attacker would also have to take into account that in a state of public anxiety, Israel might respond faster or more strongly to an attack against it.

Although the initial tendency is to infer that the expression of alarm in Israel during the crisis diminished its deterrent

ability, it appears that Israel's deterrent was not really hurt, and may even have been enhanced. Potential attackers can logically conclude that the effectiveness of a biological/chemical attack on Israel will decline and that the price of an attack is likely to be very high. After all, unlike in the Gulf War, Iraq made a point this time of clarifying that it did not intend to attack Israel. This is not only an indication of Iraq's situation, but also the result of Israel's deterrent capability.

Considerations Affecting an Israeli Response

Israel's deterrent capability is connected to the issue of a possible Israeli reaction in case it comes under a non-conventional attack. Does Israel have an answer to the biological/chemical threat if deterrence fails? Is Israel able to respond effectively to this threat, beyond active defense – early warning and interception – and passive defense of the home front? Will circumstances permit such a response? And what will be its results and repercussions?

Naturally, it is not possible to offer detailed, *a priori* answers; much depends on the specific circumstances of specific scenarios. However, at least four weighty considerations can be offered ahead of a decision to respond. The first is the status of information about the attacker's capabilities as well as his future intentions – especially information about targets related to the attacker's capability to operate non-conventional missiles and weapons. One of the questions that should be raised in this context is: Can an Israeli response paralyze this capability, or will

Israel have to settle for merely punishing and making the attacker pay a price after the fact? One must remember that the lack of sufficient information on targets in Iraq, including targets related to biological/chemical warfare capabilities, was a key consideration in the American decision whether to act against Iraq in the last crisis.

The second consideration deals with the following question: Can Israel settle for a response following a biological/chemical attack against it, or will it decide to deal a preemptive strike if it determines that the chances that the enemy will attack with biological/chemical weapons are high? The answer to this can only be given in the framework of the prevailing circumstances at the time. One can assume, however, that the political and military circumstances will normally make it difficult for Israel to carry out a preemptive strike – even of a biological or chemical attack – and that it will have to settle for responding after the fact, with the aim of punishing the attacker and forcing it to break off the attack. One cannot rule out the possibility of a preventive strike, as was the case in 1981, when the Israeli government decided to bombard the nuclear reactor in Iraq. But it is very unlikely that the conditions of 1981, when Israel was able to focus on a single non-conventional target, will be reproduced.

The third consideration deals with the criteria that will demand an exceptional Israeli response: Should the type of weapons used by the attacker be the main criterion, or should it be the number of casualties? One can assume that in real time, both criteria would have to be considered together. However, it is clear

that a biological/chemical attack on Israel, even if it results in a small number of casualties, is likely to call for a harsh response – if only to prevent the continued use of such weapons.

The American Factor in Israeli Considerations

The final consideration has to do with U.S. policy. There is no doubt that the position of the United States will necessarily have a significant influence on Israel's moves. As already mentioned, American assistance to Israel in the fields of early warning, interception and response contribute to Israel's deterrence of radical regimes. The United States is determined to halt the development of Iraqi and Iranian threats and stop the spread of non-conventional weapons in the area. The United States is almost alone in its struggle to prevent the gradual easing of sanctions on Iraq and has demonstrated its readiness to use military force if necessary to maintain the international inspection regime. Despite the political difficulty of acting alone, the United States has built up an impressive military capability, much improved since 1991, to operate air forces and precise guided munitions from aircraft carriers in the Gulf, even without the help of countries in the region.

However, as important as Israel's common interest with the United States on the issue of Iraq's non-conventional threat is, it is also double-faceted. Although Iraq was finally forced to accept the continuation of inspections, the last crisis – as well as the Gulf War – demonstrated that the United States is limited in its ability to force Iraq to give in to its long-

term demands, especially if Iraq succeeds in creating international and Arab pressure on the United States to reduce its military pressure. American failure to maintain the inspection regime over time will be especially significant for Israel, since it will signal the resumption of Iraqi programs to develop non-conventional weapons.

Israel's link to the United States has an additional dimension. As the Gulf War has already shown, there are situations in which the United States would prefer, for regional considerations, to prevent an Israeli response to an attack on its territory, even if the response appears to be utterly justified. The statement of the U.S. secretary of defense during the latest crisis, to the effect that the United States would prefer Israel not to respond if it was attacked, was subsequently "clarified", but it showed that this position was not reserved only for the special circumstances of the Gulf War.

It is therefore possible that in a future crisis, the United States will again try to limit Israel's freedom of action in order to maximize its own. Such a limitation can also work to Israel's advantage: The United States would find it very hard to leave Israel without a suitable answer following a non-conventional attack – both because of its commitment to Israel's security and because of the joint need to stop the attacker – and it would therefore probably offer to respond instead of Israel. Moreover, the United States has military options that Israel does not have. Still, the United States might demand a political price for its involvement, and one has to take into account that this involvement might not be effective. Besides, Israel's

restraint in case of an attack could harm its deterrent capability. In any case, Israel must take into account the possibility that it will be unable to respond independently because of American constraints.

Public Anxiety

Finally, the public fear of a biological threat leads to two conclusions. On one hand, the Israeli leadership must plan and coordinate its moves and its messages ahead of the next crisis, when the fear of a non-conventional attack against Israel will increase. Such planning is necessary in order to curb the outburst of anxiety and create a better balance between advance preparedness and public panic. On the other hand, one must take into account that even if the public is prepared in advance, it will not be possible to avoid completely an outburst of anxiety during a crisis, which will necessarily affect the considerations and the behavior of the government and the security establishment as well as the situation in the field. It is therefore important that the leadership plan its political and military measures in advance, based on the assumption that there will be some outburst of public anxiety.

Conclusion

For seven years, the U.S. government has demonstrated uncompromising determination not to allow the lifting of inspections as long as the Iraqi regime has the potential and intention to acquire non-conventional weapons. At the same time, Saddam Hussein's regime continuously strives to benefit from the differences of opinion between the United States and its

partners in the Gulf War coalition and to loosen the inspection regime. These opposite approaches repeatedly place the United States and Iraq on a collision course and create a high probability that the January/February crisis will not be the last of its kind. Such a crisis will not necessarily end in a political settlement, as the last crisis did. The Iraqi regime might estimate that a military confrontation with the United States, even if the cost in casualties is high, will help undermine the inspections and sanctions against it. Such

a conclusion could toughen its position, and its determination could lead to a significant U.S. military operation against Iraq. Such a development will reintroduce into Israel's agenda the issues it confronted in the last crisis. Under such circumstances, at least if they develop in the next year or two, one can continue to assume that the chances of an Iraqi missile attack on Israel – conventional or non-conventional – remain small.

However, the assumption that the short-term non-conventional threat to

Israel – from Iraq, Iran or Syria – is small does not alleviate the longer-term trend – that this threat will grow. The extent to which this happens will depend on at least four factors: the rate at which these countries develop weapons of mass destruction; the rate at which Israel concludes additional peace agreements with other countries in the region; the improvement in Israel's defense capability against non-conventional threats; and Israel's deterrent capacities.

Policy Imperatives

Israel should take into account that another severe American - Iraqi crisis – possibly followed by an American military operation against Iraq – might be a matter of time. However, for the next two years at least, it can be assumed that the risk of an Iraqi missile attack on Israel remains low.

In the longer run, the potential risks of a conventional or non-conventional missile attack – Iraqi, Iranian or Syrian – might increase. Beyond improving its strategic capabilities, Israel needs to do three other things in order to cope with such a threat:

Prepare for public anxiety

Israel should plan and coordinate its moves in advance of any crisis, with an eye to preventing public anxiety. At the same time, it should plan its measures on the assumption that some public anxiety is inevitable.

Strengthen deterrence against strategic attack

Israel should preplan its moves and messages in order to strengthen its deterrence against non-conventional attack. Emphasizing its improving active defense capability, as well as stressing the American backing of Israel in terms of early warning, interception and reaction,

can contribute to strategic deterrence. At the same time, over-emphasis on Israel's response capability to non-conventional threats could be counter-productive and might encourage deterioration.

Cope with the American constraint

Israel should consider a scenario in which its own independent response to non-conventional attack will be politically and/or militarily impossible, due to American opposition. Israel should plan its moves for such a situation in order to guarantee an effective American response, avoid a political price for its dependency, and prevent damage to its deterrent capability.