

Israel and the Salafi Jihadist Threat

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Although the threat to Israel of prior decades of conventional, high intensity warfare launched by armies of neighboring nations or a coalition of Arab nations has been vastly reduced, Israel faces three major threats of a different type. The first is the threat from the Iranian-led Shiite axis, which includes Iranian allies, not all of which are Shiite, and is known as the “axis of resistance” because of its ideology that is directed at the West and Israel. The second is the threat resulting from the failure to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the choice of conflict management over conflict resolution, or at least efforts toward that objective. The third is the threat from various Salafi jihadist groups, especially the Islamic State (ISIS) and the groups identified with it throughout the Muslim world, as well as al-Qaeda and other groups within the global jihadi camp.

The third threat was amplified by the upheavals and crises in the Arab world that began in late 2010 and weakened many Arab states. This in turn prepared the ground for the burgeoning Salafi jihadist movements, which succeeded in exploiting the vacuum created by the structural weakening of the Arab states, the persistent governmental, economic, and social crises besetting them, the culture of endemic institutional corruption, and the effect of these elements on the public, on top of the existing religious and ethnic tensions.

The rise of the Islamic State as a new Sunni phenomenon, including its conquests of vast tracts of land in Iraq and Syria, the declaration of the establishment of a new Islamic caliphate in those territories, and the fear of the phenomenon expanding to other large areas of land have led to the

formation of a new set of priorities in the United States and the West and invited the belief that the Islamic State is the major threat that must be confronted.

The Shiite Axis Heads the List of Priorities

Israel has not seen a similar change in the definition of its priorities in confronting the various threats before it. The Israeli government's avowed policy clings to the view that the major threat to Israel comes from Iran and its allies. Several reasons are at the base of this approach.

First, the Iranian threat is multidimensional. To a large extent, decision makers focus on the nuclear threat, which is based on an intelligence assessment that contends that since its inception, the Iranian nuclear program has sought to acquire military capabilities, a goal Iran has never repudiated. In Israel, few – if any – believe that Iran has changed its policy, and Israel views a nuclear Iran as an existential threat. Israel is worried that Iran will try to cheat and will violate sections of the nuclear agreement even in the first years, and certainly further down the road. At the same time, Iran represents another strategic threat because of its large inventory of advanced ballistic missiles. This array of weapons, equipped with conventional warheads, can already be used to attack Israeli cities and strategic targets, as can the shorter range missiles and rockets in the hands of Hezbollah, Iran's proxy. There is also the threat of support and encouragement of asymmetric warfare and terrorism on the part of other Iranian proxies, such as Palestinian organizations enjoying Iranian support. In addition, Iran has a well-developed ability to conduct terrorist campaigns against Israeli and Jewish targets throughout the world.

Second, the prevalent assessment among many experts in Israel is that Iran's hostility to Israel is deeply embedded in its ideology, and there is little hope that the nature of the Tehran regime will change in the foreseeable future.

Third, the Israeli assessment is that Hezbollah is the most serious direct military and terror threat. Fighting this organization will exact a steep toll, given the bitter experience of previous confrontations. Hezbollah is a hybrid organization: it enjoys the advantages of a non-state entity, including lower signature and the ability to conduct effective asymmetrical warfare with fewer political, image-related, and legal constraints than a state, but it also has military capabilities rivaling those of states, including large inventories

of weapons, some at the very forefront of military technology, as well as a large, dedicated, and well-trained military force. These allow the organization to realize a massive threat to targets in every part of Israel. At the same time, Hezbollah participates in Lebanese politics and wields much influence in that arena, and enjoys the support of a large part of the Lebanese public. While Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian civil war has cost it dearly, it continues to amass strength and receive advanced weapon systems from Iran and Syria, and through them also from Russia, and it is gaining operational experience on the battlefield.

How Does Israel Relate to the Islamic State Threat?

At the same time, Israel must be prepared to confront threats stemming from the growth of Salafi jihadists, several of which have already been manifested. So far, the central arena of such activity against Israel has come from the Sinai Peninsula, which has seen an increase in Salafi jihadist activity, with one group even joining the Islamic State under the name Wilayat Sinai, i.e., the Sinai province of the caliphate. Several attacks – rocket launches and ambushes – directed at Israel have already come from Sinai and resulted in civilian deaths. In the north, Assad's loss of control over most border areas across from Israel's Golan Heights is cause for concern that Salafi jihadist groups will have easy access to Israel through the northern border and, at a certain point, will decide to realize their anti-Israel ideology by carrying out attacks on Israeli soil. This concern has grown more acute since Jabhat al-Nusra, a group that identifies with al-Qaeda, began operating in the northern sector of the Golan Heights border while the Islamic State launched an offensive in southern Syria.

At a time when the Islamic State made extensive territorial gains, the concern grew that this momentum would bring the Islamic State to Jordan as well. At first glance, Jordan's circumstances seem optimal for the penetration of the Islamic State: it has an overwhelming Sunni Muslim majority; there is a large population supporting Islamist ideology, with the Muslim Brotherhood traditionally enjoying significant local support; and the kingdom is struggling under the strain of one and a half million Syrian refugees on its soil who are weakening the country's already shaky economy. From Israel's perspective,

an Islamic State takeover of Jordan, with which Israel shares its longest border, is a nightmare.

Nonetheless, at this stage the threat of the Islamic State and the Salafi jihadist organizations seems low, for several reasons. One is that the Islamic State and most of the major jihadist organizations are still active mainly in arenas at some distance from Israel. Another reason is that the concern about negative developments in Jordan has significantly waned, with the Jordanian regime proving its steadfastness. The army is loyal to the regime and can, with relative ease, handle the direct military threat represented by the Islamic State. Furthermore, the internal Jordanian arena is stable thanks to the king's good crisis management, economic aid from abroad, and the public rallying behind the king after the Islamic State burned alive the Jordanian pilot it had captured.

A third factor mitigating the immediacy of the Salafi jihadist threat to Israel is that despite their ideological commitment, the struggle against Israel is still low on the list of priorities of these groups. The Islamic State is focused on fighting in Iraq and Syria against the respective regimes, rival rebels, the US-led international coalition, and the Russian-Iranian alliance. Its proxies – the groups that have declared their loyalty to the Islamic State – are primarily interested in their own local arenas. The Egyptian proxy, Wilayat Sinai, is focused on fighting the Egyptian army and therefore does not launch many attacks against Israel. Even the active al-Qaeda affiliates are more concerned with their local arenas, and attacks against the West and particularly against Israel are of secondary interest. Thus, for now, Jabhat al-Nusra prefers not to open a front against Israel in the Golan Heights as long as it is engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the Assad regime and other rebel groups. Therefore Israel is more concerned by the reemergence of Hezbollah in the Golan Height than by Jabhat al-Nusra and its activity in the Quneitra area.

The last reason is that the responses Israel has developed for Palestinian terrorism and Hezbollah provide a response to Salafist jihadist organizations as well. Israel is concurrently strengthening its defensive measures (detection and obstruction, if needed) along the borders and continues to develop and produce surface-to-surface missile and rocket interceptors.

Yet these elements notwithstanding, Israel is seeing the beginnings of a debate about this very threat scale. Generally, threats must be examined on the basis of two main parameters. One is the strength or impact of the threat, i.e., the ability of the threatening element to inflict heavy damage on Israel, and the other is the probability of the threat being realized. In the foreseeable future, the strength of the threat represented by the Iranian-led axis greatly outweighs the Salafist jihadist threat, although one must consider the possibility of changes in this balance in the future. The relative success of the Islamic State in constructing a state-like framework could place at its disposal state-like and economic resources that might allow it to develop various military capabilities. The Islamic State will also presumably try to acquire nonconventional weapons – biological and chemical – like the type that may already have fallen into its hands thanks to Iraqi experts who fled Saddam Hussein's Baath regime and since then are under its aegis.

This is where a new component enters the picture that is typical of the Islamic State and other Salafist jihadist groups: the absence of a responsible leadership. This feature is in ample evidence in actions that violate all the rules of the game and international standards. On the other hand, specifically in the Shiite axis, Iranian and Hezbollah leaders are demonstrating a more responsible policy in operations, are willing to accept restraint, and are not interested in opening a military front against Israel. Therefore, the major change, of which the first signs might already have emerged, lies in the prospects of the threat being realized. While there is a decrease in the probability that the threat from Iran and its proxies will be realized, the threat from the Islamic State and Salafist jihadist organizations is more at hand than before.

In the scenario of a de facto division of Syria, the confrontation between enemy groups could gradually die down, whereupon the Islamic State and Salafist jihadist entities might turn more of their attention to Israel. Also, competition among the various actors in Syria is liable to develop over their ideological commitment to the Arab-Muslim fight against Israel and their desire to prove it. The spread of the Islamic State to southern Syria might not only generate closer contact with Israel, but also lead to friction with the Druze in the Jabel Druze region as well. This friction might prompt internal pressure in Israel to intervene. Furthermore, pressure from the Islamic State

on Jordan could result in Israel positioning itself alongside Jordan in a fight. In Sinai too, the failure of Egyptian army actions to defeat the Salafist jihadist groups there may well lead to the reality of a jihadist entity being in control of that territory. Once Egypt ceases its efforts against it, the Islamic State is liable to turn its attention to Israel.

On the other hand, the struggle between the Iranian-led Shiite axis and the Saudi-led Sunni axis and the decline into civil wars in various arenas have reduced the motivation of Iranian-affiliated groups to open a front against Israel and have strengthened Israel's deterrence, which is still in place after the Second Lebanon War. The nuclear agreement between Iran and the world powers also has the potential to restrain Iran, which would not like to jeopardize its ability to enjoy the fruits of the agreement and the lifting of the sanctions. It is therefore likely that a confrontation with the Iranian Shiite axis will not turn into a war. At the same time, limited incidents with potential for escalation, especially action against advanced arms shipments to Hezbollah, further Hezbollah and/or al-Quds entrenchment in the Golan Heights, and escalation in the Gaza Strip, are liable to continue to occur.

Therefore, Israel must take into account that in practice, the potential for friction with Salafi jihadist groups is rising and is liable to become a more central component in the range of threats it will have to confront in the future. The realization of this scenario greatly depends on the success of the international and regional efforts to eliminate the Islamic State phenomenon, the unfolding of the Syria crisis, the question of whether Egyptian President Sisi can restore sovereignty to Sinai, and internal developments in Jordan, all of which are highly uncertain. On the other hand, judicious conduct by Israel can continue to reduce the likelihood of a comprehensive confrontation with Hezbollah and Iran.