



Escalation with Iran

By Dr GLEN SEGELL Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies, University of Haifa
05/01/2018

There is a clear message from Israel to Iran “we know where you are and we have the means available to make sure that you behave.” The message comes because Iran’s growing presence in Syria has forced an escalation causing Israel’s security establishment to plan for war. There are indications that Israel will take action sooner rather than later. Iran will lose but what are the consequences?

The escalation started because the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps built itself a permanent infrastructure just across Israel’s northern border in the Golan Heights of Syria. On 10 February 2018 Iran launched an unmanned drone laden with explosives into northern Israel, which Israel shot down. This was the first time that Iran did something against Israel not by proxy of its usual terrorist organizations Hamas and Hezbollah. So Israel destroyed the air base from which the drone was dispatched which was the first time that Israel attacked live Iranian targets

The Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei considers Israel “a cancerous tumor” and wishes to exact wrath against the Jewish state, to annihilate it. Israel’s strategy in response has had two schools of thought. One advocates for Israel taking a back seat to compel members of the international community to step up and assume primary responsibility against Iran because Iran is also threatening other states in the region and indeed the United States.

The other counters that Israel has no choice but to take the initiative. Otherwise the world might conclude that Israel is indifferent to the prospect of a nuclear Iran. Evidence suggests that the current threat of Israeli action to thwart Tehran’s nuclear ambitions even if it means escalation is helping to induce other states to isolate Iran.

Progressively over years there has been an escalation of words and threats between Israel and Iran. The most recent comes from Khamenei’s advisor Ali Akbar Velayati who has threatened that “Israel’s crime” in destroying its base in Syria would “not remain without response.” In response the Israel Defence Force has released satellite images of Iran’s drone deployment in Syria and new details on Iran’s nuclear program. Recent cargo shipments from Iran to Syria have lent additional credence to intent by Iran to escalate beyond words and threats. In response Israel has scaled back its participation in this week’s Red Flag air force exercises in Alaska giving the signal that its fighter jets might be needed closer to home. The combined effect of these measures is a carefully crafted message from Israel to Iran.

Israel is not isolated. The international community is willing to take action as seen by the combined American, British and French 14 April strike on Syria. Though while America has given assurances to stand by Israel in the same voice President Donald Trump wants out entirely “We’ll be coming out of Syria, like, very soon. Let the other people take care of it now.” This may force Israel into a deadline to resolve Iran’s presence in Syria.

How Israel contends with the escalation with Iran also depends on domestic politics. When the Iran nuclear deal was signed in 2015, the Israel public supported government in opposing the agreement and continues to do so. Tehran's sponsorship of President Assad of Syria's brutal dictatorship and of Hezbollah's terror campaign against Israel represents a tangible danger to Israel's national security. With such support the Israeli security cabinet composed of Netanyahu and 11 other ministers will likely accelerate the pace of their consultations. Their discussions are certain to be informed by Israel's abiding credo to "defend itself by itself." Netanyahu's and his Likud party continue to ride high in the public opinion polls and on the narrow question of Iran they have public support.

This leads to the bottom line that Netanyahu has a green light from the United States and the Israeli public to do almost anything he deems necessary for the sake of deterring Iran, blocking its nuclear program and evicting it from Syria. There are only two stumbling blocks. The first is Russia and the other is the consequences in a volatile Middle East.

Russia has strategic interests in Syria and supports President Assad and is likely to oppose attempts to remove him and Iranian support for him in Syria. Moscow's unprecedented public accusation of Israeli responsibility for the 9 April attack on Syria's T-4 airfield, and reports of an imminent Russian delivery of sophisticated S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems both signal that Israel's latitude to rap Iran's knuckles in Syria could be severely curtailed.

Israel has never hesitated to take military action to defend itself even knowing that any action will have a reaction. This time will be no exception and there will almost certainly be Iranian retaliation. If Israel does attack Iranian assets in Syria then Hezbollah's rocket arsenal will likely be unleashed against the Israeli population. Iranian agents will also try to strike at soft Israeli and Jewish civilian targets around the world for example embassies, tourist buses and Jewish community centers .

These however are not the main reason that Israel has not yet taken military action against Iran's nuclear program or its presence in Syria. Any escalation with Iran will see Iran loosing. The hesitation is caused by the dilemma posed by the volatility of the Middle East. Resolving one problem can result in the creation of many more and bigger problems. If Iran, the militias it supports and President Assad are removed from Syria then fundamental Sunni forces such as Islamic State may take control of Syria. If the Ayatollah is removed from Iran then Iran as a blocking force against Saudi Arabian dominance will also change the Persian Gulf balance.

The next few weeks will see some events that can help Israel decide when to take decisive military strikes that are inevitable. Some of these are Lebanon's first parliamentary election in nine years scheduled for 6 May, Trump must decide before 12 May whether or not to re-impose suspended sanctions on Iran, and the United States is set to inaugurate its Jerusalem embassy on 14 May. It will be unfortunate but not surprising if things get much worse before they get better. There is no doubt that Iran will not leave Syria of its own accord nor will it relinquish its missile and nuclear program so Israel will need to strike alone or with others.

JPost.com:

[About Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [RSS](#)

Copyright © 2014 Jpost Inc. All rights reserved • [Terms of Use](#)
• [Privacy Policy](#)