



Escalation – Iran Against the Regional Order

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Executive Summary

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* Unless Russia and China succeed to restrain and contain the new bloc, especially Iran, an eruption of violence is all but inevitable. Any such conflagration with regional ramifications will escalate to a war with Israel - for Israel will surely resist by determined force a collapse of the regional order to its detriment. The Mullahs in Tehran are cognizant and seem increasingly willing to face the risk.

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Analysis

With the new “Middle Eastern Entente” of Iran, Turkey and Qatar consolidated - Iran is leading the bloc in escalating markedly the drive to redo the greater Middle East.¹ Tehran is cognizant that this drive might lead to a regional war and is actively preparing for such an eventuality.

The Iranian timing is most logical. The main fratricidal wars in the region - mainly in Syria and Iraq - are slowing down because of the exhaustion of the main warring factions. The Arab modern states of the last decades are effectively gone. Neither continued recognition by global powers and international entities, nor the chimera of elections, will alter these dynamics.

Hence, the overall dynamics affect all the countries of the region and all the great powers with interests in the region.

Russia, China and Israel are taking active measures - from political to military - in order to contain and reverse the Iranian ascent. In contrast, the US is proving irrelevant to these fateful dynamics despite the very vocal anti-Iran policies.

Meanwhile, a new bottom-up decentralized reality is emerging on its own, and the main powers involved in the region are determined to exploit the dynamics in order to better control the post-crisis greater Middle East. At the core of the anticipated escalation and possible war is the race between Iran and Turkey over the preeminence in the area once known as Lebanon-Syria-Jordan-Iraq, as well as the dismemberment and collapse of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, and the ensuing inevitable clash with Israel - for Israel is expected to resist by determined force the collapse of the regional order to its detriment.

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Indeed, it was the gradual escalation of Israeli air strikes on Iranian facilities mainly in northwestern Syria since early 2019 that provided the last push for the current war preparations.

There is a rush to implement the resolutions of the 18 March summit in Damascus of the military leaders of Iran, Iraq and Syria to better coordinate region-wide military undertakings. On 7 April, Iran and Iraq exploited the state visit to Tehran of Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi in order to expedite the process. Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Bagheri signed a comprehensive agreement on cooperation with his Iraqi counterpart Lieutenant General Othman al-Ghanmi. The most important element of the agreement is the effective integration of the air defense systems of both countries in order “to fend off the challenges facing their respective air spaces.” The two commanders agreed on “the integrated defense of Iran and Iraq’s skies, because we might sense threats coming from the direction of [our] western borders,” Bagheri explained. “Accordingly, it was agreed that the countries’ air defense sectors work together and more coordination be made in this regard.”

Syria was not integrated into the joint air defense with Iran and Iraq because the Russians, who are present everywhere in the Syrian air defense system, would not permit it. Hence, Damascus and Tehran started secret negotiations about replacing Russian advisers and experts with Iranians from the IRGC. Iran agreed to meet all the Syrian requests and volunteered to deploy Iranian air defense missile batteries and radars to Syria. However, Damascus is in no position to expel the Russians from the Syrian Armed Forces.

¹ See Yossef Bodansky, The New Bloc: “The Middle Eastern Entente”, ISPSW Issue No. 612, March 2019



Also during the visit, Abdul-Mahdi agreed to the acceleration of the Iran-controlled strategic transportation projects on the territory of Iraq. The first phase is completing “the new highway from Tehran to the Mediterranean” that will link Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus. This highway will be the first component of a comprehensive network of “new highways and rail systems that would link Syria with Iran via Iraq.”

On 14 April, Syria, Iran and Iraq held the first high-level trilateral meeting “on the connection of their railway systems into one”. The meeting took place in Damascus. According to senior officials at the Syrian Ministry of Transport, “the countries are working on the resumption of the project connecting the railways of Syria, Iran and Iraq and are determining the date of the meeting between the representatives of the countries to develop the points of view.” “The aim of the strategic project,” they added, “is to provide Baghdad and Tehran with access to Syrian ports.” The three countries are committed to a major crash program in order to quickly establish a redundant network of roads, railroads and pipelines that will connect them. Iranian senior officials explained that this unified system of transportation will constitute “a single large security and economic whole” that will guarantee “the existence and development of the Axis of Resistance” in the Middle East.

Damascus is not oblivious to the strategic ramifications of the undertakings. Any efficient on-land transportation system will greatly improve Iran’s ability to deploy forces and assets into Syria. It will negate the inherent vulnerability of the current reliance on a few Syrian airports for the delivery of strategic systems from Iran by transport aircraft. Hence, Damascus is cognizant and apprehensive of the Israeli reaction. “With Israel’s determination to not allow any Iranian military presence in Syria, Damascus and Tehran are attempting to counter this by developing a railway and international highway that stretches between the two countries. While this will not necessarily halt the Israeli air-strikes, it will allow Iran and Syria to widen their operational capabilities. This will help Iran immensely because the heavy sanctions imposed on them by the United States have obstructed their naval operations in the Mediterranean,” explained Syrian senior officials on 18 April.

Meanwhile, Iran is determined to make its presence in the on-land corridor to the Mediterranean irreversible. The key instrument is the escalation of the Shiitization and Persianization of the pertinent regions of Syria and Iraq - from the dispatch of “students” and their families to the Shiite zones of Iraq way beyond Najaf and Karbalah to the flow of Persian families to Syria. On 20 April, Ayatollah Seyyed Abolfazl Tabatabai Ashkzari, Khamenei’s personal representative in Syria, explained that “the Axis of Resistance has developed as a result of recent victories in the Middle East.” The primary instrument of these triumphs is the spread of Shiite-Persian influence. “Now at the beginning of a new era in Syria,” he stressed, “we believe that a cultural cornerstone is emerging in the region of resistance, and that is the civilization of people who are derived from moderate [Shiite] Islam and not [Sunni] Takfiri, extremist Islam and extremism.”

In Syria, the Persian migrants now take over urban neighborhoods abandoned during the war in Aleppo, Hama and Homs - that is, along the corridor that is key to Syrian economy and the center of Turkey’s long-term aspirations to reach Jordan and beyond. These Persians play a major role in the Iran-financed reconstruction of Syrian economy at the expense of Syrian citizens, including returning refugees and internally displaced families. As well, Iran is building residential neighborhoods for Persians and Shiite Lebanese in the vicinity of the Sayyidah Zaynab Mosque near Damascus.

Most of the Persian migrants are families of Pasdaran troops (including families of the dead and wounded) who are eligible for relocation on account of their service in Syria. Significantly, most of these Pasdaran personnel are coming from downtrodden slums and remote villages in Iran - so this is a major economic improvement for them and their families. Consequently, the migrant relocation program has already



generated a wave of Persian volunteers to the elite units of the Pasdaran so that they can bring along their families.

However, the Shiitization and Persianization of western Syria, mainly the Alawite areas, has been a major contention between Damascus and Tehran from the very beginning - when Tehran sought to convert Alawites into Ja'fari Shiites in accordance with the teachings of the late Imam Musa Sadr back in the early-1970's. The Assad leadership has become increasingly beholden to the Alawite traditionalist leadership as the war progressed. Alas, this segment of the Alawite population is vehemently anti-Shiite - that is, against the Iranian-HizbAllah presence and influence, particularly in Alawite western Syria. But this region - the rim along the shores of the Mediterranean - is the focus of the Iranian strategic objectives. Thus, there is no easy or viable solution to the brewing crisis.

In mid-April, Iran shipped large quantities of oil to Syria via the Suez Canal to the Latakia port as both a show of defiance of the US sanctions and commitment to its Syrian ally. On 15 April, the Iranian tanker Stark I crossed the Suez Canal ostensibly en route to a Turkish port near Izmir. In reality, the Stark I is sailing to Latakia in order to alleviate Syria's worst fuel crisis in recent memory. Accepting the sail-plans to Izmir without any questions, the Egyptian authorities did not block the tanker from transiting the Suez Canal. Iraq is also flagrantly ignoring the US sanctions on both Iran and Syria - increasingly serving as a corridor for the transporting of contrabands.

Meanwhile, Turkey is also determined not to miss the opportunity to improve its regional posture as well as strike out at Saudi Arabia and particularly the Hijaz and the Holy Shrines in Mecca and Medina. Ankara is convinced there is a conspiracy aimed to deprive Turkey of the opportunity to rise into regional prominence by exploiting the current regional dynamics. Hence, in mid-April, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan instructed the Turkish military and intelligence services to prepare for an imminent escalation in both northern Syria and northern Iraq, as well as a wide array of regional undertakings.

On 18 April, Ibrahim Karagul, one of Erdogan's closest soul-mates, explained in a *Yeni Safak* Editorial the conspiracies against Turkey and Ankara's resolve to triumph. He warned that "incredible developments have been taking place all around Turkey. From the Balkans to the north of Syria, from the Aegean to the Mediterranean, from the island of Crete to Sudan, from Libya to the Persian Gulf, an extremely insidious plan is being implemented with the aim of limiting Turkey's area of influence." These actions are all part of a global conspiracy against Erdogan's Turkey. "There are two main reasons behind every organization, every attempt, every intervention, every partnership and every enmity that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are involved in: to stop Turkey, and pave the way for a new tutelage era in the region on behalf of the US and Israel."

Both the US and Israel are afraid of the ramifications of the ascent of Turkey, Karagul explains, and are therefore determined to contain and stifle Turkey. "They want to drive us from the north of Syria, distance us from the Balkans, push us away from the Red Sea, corner us in the Aegean and then drown us in the Mediterranean." In order to attain these objectives, Karagul continues, "Saudi Arabia and the UAE are providing weapons and hundreds of millions of dollars to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The target here is Turkey!"

Therefore, there is urgent imperative for Turkey to prepare for a fateful fight, Karagul exclaims. "The regional tension being boiled up is so huge, and Turkey is at the center of it all. Turkey has no choice but to carry out



the preparations of a multi-front fight at an extraordinary tempo. It must start preparing for an extraordinary defense.” Resolving the crisis in Syria is only a first and necessary step toward resolving the crucial regional challenges. Hence, Karagul writes, “Ankara must take urgent and radical steps to immediately conclude the Syrian war. It must do whatever is necessary to negate the plan being carried out in northern Syria through terrorist organizations which targets our country, regardless of the cost.” Then, he concludes, Turkey will be able to focus on the real challenge posed by the implacably hostile proxies of the US and Israel - Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Turkey intends to prioritize regional objectives with the initial focus on the Arabian Peninsula. Mid-April saw the establishment of what Ankara calls Turkey’s “triangle of peace”. The triangle is defined by Turkey’s system of military bases - in Doha, Qatar, in Mogadishu, Somalia, and on Sudan’s Suakin Island. After the coup, the Sudanese military authorities assured Ankara that the Turkish presence will be permitted to continue. Officially, Turkey aims to guarantee “stability in the region” through its “peace triangle” bases.

In reality, the triangle aims to help stifle Saudi Arabia and serve as a springboard for reaching the Hijaz from across the Red Sea. Such undertaking will add to the ongoing Turkish plans to reach the Hijaz via Jordan. On 15 April, *Yeni Safak* alluded to this objective when describing the legacy of the Turkish presence on Suakin Island. “Suakin, one of the oldest seaports in Africa, used to be used by African Muslims on pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia. Ottomans used the port city to secure the Hejaz province - present-day western Saudi Arabia - from attackers using the Red Sea front.”

Regarding Syria, Turkey internalized that there is no substitute for reaching agreements with Iran in the context of their overall bilateral relations and cooperation. The first step in this direction was undertaken by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif on 17-18 April. Zarif arrived in Ankara after a brief visit to Damascus where he informed Bashar al-Assad on the latest policies of Tehran.

First, on 17 April, Zarif met mainly with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu in order to discuss the overall bilateral relations. The focus was on Iranian free energy supplies and other economic aid to Turkey’s collapsing economy in return for Turkish facilitation of all-out sanctions busting. According to Cavusoglu, both sides committed “to set up new mechanisms to improve bilateral trade ties” in total disregard of “the US sanctions on Iran” and other international sanctions. Turkish senior officials elaborated that the two countries strive to triple the current level of bilateral trade to “a target of 30 billion US dollars” annually.

The next day, 18 April, Zarif dealt mainly with Erdogan. He presented Erdogan a detailed report about his talks in Damascus. He delivered a special message from Bashar al-Assad that called for a rapprochement between the two countries. Zarif assured Erdogan of Tehran’s commitment to helping Ankara and Damascus establish “good relations.” Erdogan responded that Turkey was not against improving of relations with Syria except for the threat emanating from the US-sponsored Kurdish forces in northern Syria. Zarif noted that “Iran acknowledges Turkey’s concerns about the PKK-linked YPG in Syria.” However, since the Kurdish forces are also anti-Assad, cooperation between all relevant parties - Turkey, Iran and Syria - is the best way to defeat and destroy them. Erdogan was adamant that Turkey’s vital interests be guaranteed in any future agreement on a post-war Syria. Erdogan and Zarif agreed that “Turkey and Iran will continue to work together in the Astana process with the aim of reaching a political solution in Syria, particularly in Idlib.”

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Meanwhile, the Arab World is profoundly changing. The new greater Middle East is making the attaining of the grand objectives of the new “Middle Eastern Entente” possible.

Saudi Arabia is no longer relevant as a regional actor. Consequently, there is no anchoring for a viable Arab coalition counterbalancing Iran and the new bloc alliance. The ongoing quagmire in Yemen has aptly demonstrated the ineptitude of the Saudi, UAE and assortment of mercenary forces against the Iran-sponsored Houthi forces.

Moreover, all regional leaders and foci of power now assess that Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman al-Saud (MBS) will not survive for long, and that Saudi Arabia will implode and disintegrate as a result of his excesses and erratic reign. The assessment of both friends and foes is that Iran, Turkey and Qatar are best positioned to both exacerbate and exploit the forthcoming self-destruction of Saudi Arabia under MBS.

Egypt, for long the guardian and savior of the conservative Arab states, is no more. Cairo is no longer ready to rush to save Arab states in return for the platitudes and empty promises Egypt used to get.

Egypt is focusing on addressing the multitude of adjacent threats to its vital interests - that is, the Jihadist insurgency in the Sinai, the Jihadist destabilization of Libya (where Egypt supports the forces of Khalifa Haftar), restoring stability in Sudan in the aftermath of the coup against former president Omar al-Bashir, and securing access to the sources of the waters of the Nile in lieu of the lingering dispute with Ethiopia over the impact of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the waters of the Blue Nile.

To meet these challenges and be able to focus on them, Egypt committed to a major military build-up. The vast majority of the new generation of weapons will be purchased from Russia and China. As well, Egypt is permitting China to rebuild the country's strategic infrastructure despite strong opposition from the US.

On 11 April, after a lackluster visit with US President Donald Trump, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi withdrew from the US-led “Middle East Security Alliance” that is commonly known as the “Arab NATO”. The alliance was supposed to be the key to confronting Iran and shielding Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Arab senior officials acknowledged that the Egyptian withdrawal is “a mortal blow” to the US “strategy to contain Iranian power.” Simply put, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States cannot withstand any major foreign onslaught without swift intervention by the Egyptian Armed Forces, and with US intervention and protective umbrella like that provided in 1990-1 no longer guaranteed - the conservative Arab states are extremely vulnerable.

This vulnerability is growing with the concurrent disappearance of the main regional buffer against both Iran and Turkey.

The Kurds - the cornerstone of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities that has been the traditional barrier of the greater Middle East against the encroachment of both Iran and Turkey - are being abandoned to their fate by their traditional patrons - the US and the West. After spilling huge amounts of blood fighting the US-led proxy war against Jihadist terrorism in both Iraq and Syria - the Kurds are being left with only empty promises. The Kurds are being abandoned as Turkey and Iran are more determined than ever to resolve the Kurdish challenge once and for good - that is, to slaughter the Kurds. The forthcoming defeat of the Kurds will bring about the collapse of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and will open the door for both Iran and Turkey into the heart of al-Jazira, the Arabian Peninsula, and dominance of the greater Middle East.

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With momentous changes unfolding throughout the greater Middle East, Tehran made in early April a major decision to consider escalation of the protracted wars-by-proxy with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States (in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan-Pakistan, etc.) into a direct confrontation aimed to destroy the House of al-Saud. The current circumstances in the greater Middle East make such a bold move likely to succeed. Tehran is convinced that the regional Arab armies will not confront Iran, and that Saudi Arabia will collapse quickly because of its inherent weakness. Moreover, Turkey is still not ready for the regional surge, while the Kurdish forces in northern Iraq are still viable and will thus slow down any Turkish advance that could constitute a credible Sunni challenge to the Shiite surge. Iranian forces can attack along a wide front from across the Gulf and through southern Iraq while capitalizing on the active support of the Shiite insurgents of the eastern Arabian Peninsula, the Houthi forces, and a host of Iran-sponsored Sunni Jihadist networks in the country's main cities.

The only question mark existing in Tehran is the possibility of a US quick intervention to protect Saudi Arabia. Hence, the essence of the decision in Tehran was to move fast the moment Iranian Intelligence can guarantee that the US will either not intervene at all or that US intervention will be symbolic at best. Iranian intelligence assessments are that presently this is indeed the case. Significantly, this decision was reached in early April - before the US designation of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC or Pasdaran) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on 8 April.

Throughout, Doha keeps encouraging Tehran to act fast - claiming profound rot in Riyadh. Qatar is convinced it will be able to prevent the US from using the Al-Udeid air base. Oman concurred. The Omani and Iranian militaries held six days of high-level military consultations in Tehran that culminated, on 18 April, in the signing of a major agreement to boost military cooperation. The Omanis promised not to intervene in any regional conflagration and not to permit third-party forces to use Omani bases and territory against Iran.

The US designation of the Pasdaran hurt Iran's pride, and unleashed, on 11 April, a virulent media campaign that included threats to the US and Israel. "The US administration's move to designate the IRGC as a terrorist group is actually a desperate attempt and retaliation to cap the US failures in the region and of course, it lacks operational value and validity and is practically doomed to failure," read the statement of the General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces.

The unleashing of the media campaign coincided with an important meeting between the Commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh and the Commander of the Iranian Air Force Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh. They met in order to coordinate air and air defense operations under the new regional circumstances - from the new agreement with Iraq to the growing challenges in Syria caused by both the growing assertiveness of the Israeli Air Force and the Russian restraining of the Syrian Air Defense. They concluded that the current impasse is untenable and that escalation is all but inevitable. Hence, Iran might seize the initiative to its own benefit.

At the end of the meeting, both commanders issued statements warning the US of the long-term implications of the brewing crisis. The Iranian Armed Forces "will not hesitate even one moment to carry out their dangerous and strategic missions, especially in confrontation against the threats resulting from the plots hatched by enemies, including the criminal and terrorism-nurturing US," General Hajizadeh stated. "The US flagrant measure against the dear IRGC will complete the chain of collapse of the US and Zionism's terrorist system," General Nasirzadeh asserted.



However, the main challenge facing Iran in the pursuit of its regional aspirations is what Arab senior officials call the “cold war” between Iran and Russia in Syria. With fighting subsiding, all key players are focusing on their role and posture in the post-war greater Middle East. Russia, Iran and Turkey are all determined to be the dominant force in the region. Iran has long known that Russia opposes the Iranian ascent as the main regional power and control over the shores of the Mediterranean (unless Iran joined the Fertile Crescent of Minorities where Israel has a major role). Their face-off is now escalating.

Indeed, there were already some minor clashes between Russia-controlled Syrian military units and Iranian and Iran-controlled Shiite units mainly over the control of key villages and strategic points, including Tal-Rifaat, on the edges of the Idlib pocket and in the vicinity of Aleppo. In all these cases, the Iranian and Shiite forces refused to withdraw from these sites in compliance with Russian-negotiated agreements with Turkey. Moscow considers these clashes expressions of Tehran’s resolve to dominate the region and the harbingers of the escalation to come.

As well, Russia is cognizant of, and increasingly worried about, the long-term impact of the Persian civilian presence in Syria and Iraq and the growing Shiitization and Persianization of western Syria. Russian military experts note that thousands of young Syrians now join the Iran-controlled Shiite forces rather than the Syrian Army. These youth are not attracted by financial incentives but rather by “doctrines and religion.”

Hence, Tehran is convinced that while the Russians cannot afford, at this point, to confront Iran directly over its presence in the Lebanon-Syria-Iraq region - Russia can, and does, benefit from the Israeli relentless campaign against Iran in Syria and beyond. Tehran is convinced that there is a tacit “collusion” between Russia and Israel against Iran, and that the Russian forces in Syria support, even assist, Israel.

In mid-April, in the aftermath of the Israeli heavy air-strikes in Alawite northwestern Syria, Syrian senior air defense officers concurred with the Iranian assertions and, for the first time, even criticized the Russians. They explained that the Israeli air-strikes are so effective because Israeli military intelligence “not only benefits from close intelligence ties with the US coalition but also the Russian military.” The senior officers noted that during the Israeli air-strikes in mid-April, the 99th Air Defense Brigade in the Hama area (that is responsible for the defense of the attacked area) received orders from the Syrian High Command in Damascus to open fire a few minutes after the Israeli aircraft left the area, and then, only with their 23mm anti-aircraft guns that were useless at that point. The High Command’s order explicitly forbade the Brigade to launch either the S-200 or the S-300 long-range SAMs that could still hit the Israeli aircraft “because the Russians did not approve of such use” ostensibly for fear of hitting Russian aircraft. For the Syrian senior officers, this was a proof of “Russian collusion” with Israel. Damascus is convinced that there is a Russian-Israeli grand design. “Russia may disapprove of the Israeli air-strikes in Syria, but they will not intervene to stop them as they currently have an agreement with the Netanyahu administration,” the senior officers asserted.

Hence, Tehran is apprehensive of an Israeli military intervention in case of any Iranian surge, even if only against the Arabian Peninsula, because such a move will make Iran the regional power and Jerusalem cannot accept this. Therefore, Tehran ordered in recent weeks a rapid build-up of HizbAllah, Al-Hashd al-Shaabi, HAMAS and Palestinian Islamic Jihad forces in south Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and even the Golan Heights (where these undertakings cause clashes with Russian and Syrian military forces). Visiting Beirut on 20 April, Amir Khojasteh, the head of the Iran-Palestine Parliamentary Friendship Group, noted that “the Zionist regime is now surrounded by Resistance forces so that on one hand it faces HAMAS and on the other hand HizbAllah, Syria and Iraq.” He explained that “the Israeli regime is well aware that Resistance forces missiles will destroy



it if it makes a mistake.”

The overall objective of this Iran-sponsored build-up is to put Israel on the defensive once Iran strikes out elsewhere, and compel Israel to prioritize dealing with threats to the civilian population - rocket barrages and commando raids from Lebanon, Syria and Gaza. Consequently, Israel will not be able to focus on blocking the Iranian surge if and when it comes.

The Chinese, who work closely with the Russians, are ready to invest in regional recovery and rebuilding. In principle, Beijing considers Iran to be “the strategic partner” in the greater Middle East and “a key pivot to China’s BRI in the region.” China also considers the Iranian-dominated network of roads, railroads and pipelines all the way to the Mediterranean a major contribution to the New Silk Road. But now, Beijing is increasingly petrified by the sudden possible slide to a regional war caused by the assertiveness of Iran and its allies in the new “Middle Eastern Entente”. Such a war will reverse all the Russian and Chinese achievements and will disrupt the flow of oil and gas from the Gulf for years to come.

In recent weeks, the Forbidden City sent several secret messages to Tehran urging restraint and caution - only to be ignored.

In late-March, Iran’s Economic Minister Farhad Dejpasand visited Beijing to plead for Chinese help in sustaining the economy in the face of US sanctions. Publicly, Xi Jinping was supportive of Iran. “No matter how the international and regional situation changes, China’s resolve to develop a comprehensive strategic partnership with Iran will remain unchanged,” he said. In private, however, the Chinese senior officials issued strong warnings of waning Chinese support unless Iran contributed to the stability of the region and desisted from provocations. The officials stated that the long-standing assumption in Tehran of Beijing’s unconditional support against the sanctions was wrong. According to Chinese senior officials, their Iranian counterparts simply ignored their - the Chinese officials’ - concerns and apprehension. The Iranians were only interested in increasing their oil exports and imports from China.

For the Forbidden City, this loss of face is unacceptable.

Hence, Beijing took the unprecedented move and publicly urged Tehran to desist. On 14 April, Yin Gang of the Institute of West-Asian and African Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published an article in the authoritative *Global Times* titled “Strategic retreat the better choice for Iran”. He warned that the US will exploit the growing tension in the region in order to attempt to drastically resolve the Iran crisis. If politics and sanctions will not work, the US, Israel and their Arab allies might use force. Yin Gang explained that the strategic outreach of Iran in Syria and Yemen became unacceptable to all regional powers. “Antagonism between Iran and Arab states and Israel will now exacerbate,” he observed. The US is pressing its regional allies to confront Iran.

Tehran must defuse the situation before it was too late, Yin Gang warned. “With little prospect of a thaw between Washington and Tehran in the future, tensions are likely to rise. A better choice for Iran to deal with the situation is a strategic retreat in Yemen and Syria.” Yin Gang can see no alternative to such a painful move by Iran because the regional powers will not accept the strategic posture of Iran under any circumstances. It is Israel and its Arab allies, not the US, that Iran should fear most. “In recent years, Iran’s strong presence in Yemen and Syria has triggered panic in the Arab world and Israel. If Iran adopts a prudent policy of strategic retreat, war and severe internal turmoil could be avoided. But if it continues to be intransigent, the denouement would be hard to imagine.”



In Tehran, however, the aggregate impact of the Russian-Israeli “collusion” and the Chinese pressure has been the emboldening of the Mullahs to strike out fast and decisively before it is too late. Significantly, the revered commander of the IRGC’s Qods Forces, Major General Qassem Soleimani, is among the strongest proponents of the urgent imperative to strike out before an Israeli-led anti-Iran coalition is consolidated and while Saudi Arabia is falling apart from within. In Beirut, Khojasteh stated that “Iran has succeeded in overcoming the problems by relying on popular support, guidance of Ayatollah Khamenei and national unity, and is now the region’s superior power.”

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Thus, as Jerusalem, Moscow and Beijing know and agree, Tehran is adamant on exploiting the current window of opportunity and the strategic gravitas provided by the new “Middle Eastern Entente” in order to attain its historic aspiration to be the leading regional power dominating the on-land access to the Mediterranean and the heart of the Arabian Peninsula. Hence, the audacious yet prudent Mullahs in Tehran will keep prodding and pushing as far as they believe they can get away with. In the process, the Mullahs might make mistakes that will prove most painful.

Meanwhile, the new decentralized region is emerging on its own from the ashes. All the main powers are posturing to exploit the dynamics in order to improve their respective positions in the post-crisis greater Middle East. Iran, Turkey and Qatar - both together as a bloc and individually - are pushing hard to attain preeminence in the area once known as Lebanon-Syria-Jordan-Iraq, as well as to hasten the dismemberment and collapse of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. They are cognizant that their surge, particularly Iran’s, will cause escalation and possible war.

Alas, current strategic opportunities might prove irresistible despite the entailed risks. Thus, unless Russia and China succeed to restrain and contain the new bloc, especially Iran, an eruption of violence is all but inevitable. This might happen by design, by misunderstanding, or by accident. Any such conflagration with regional ramifications will escalate to a war with Israel - for Israel will surely resist by determined force a collapse of the regional order to its detriment. The Mullahs in Tehran are cognizant and seem increasingly willing to face the risk.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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