



The Specter of an Israel-Iran War

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Executive Summary

- * Israel is perceiving an unprecedented threat of war with Iran and Iran's proxies - including the specter of an Iranian surprise attack.
- * Tehran has just started a most profound change in the Iranian regional strategy and US policy - introducing a new assertive and audacious regional doctrine focusing on a clash with Israel.
- * Iran is implementing the new doctrine and priorities through major build-up of military capabilities in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon that are optimized for a major clash with Israel.
- * Israel is watching anxiously the latest developments in Iran and the Middle East as a whole. The repeated Iranian assertions of both the commitment and ability to destroy Israel unnerve Jerusalem. Hence, the specter of an intelligence failure is keeping Israel on edge.

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Analysis

On 10 October, Israeli Prime Minister and Defense Minister Binyamin Netanyahu spoke at the memorial for the fatalities of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. He focused on the rising Iranian threats and strongly hinted of the possibility of both an Israeli preemption against Iran and the specter of a major protracted regional war. "The current focus of aggression in the Middle East is the Iranian regime in Tehran. Iran is striving to tighten its grip on Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Gaza Strip. It is constantly arming its metastases with dangerous weapons and is attacking freedom of navigation in international shipping routes. It downed a big US UAV, it launched a crude and unprecedented attack on Saudi Arabia's oil fields, it repeatedly exceeds its own arrogance," Netanyahu explained. "Iran threatens to wipe us off the map. It says explicitly: 'Israel will disappear.' Time and time again, it tries to attack us, so we must stand ready to protect ourselves from the danger." Whenever Israel is challenged and its security is threatened, Netanyahu asserted, "we always remember and apply the basic rule that guides us: Israel will defend itself, on its own, in the face of every threat. The IDF is prepared to preempt any threat, defensively and offensively, with its overwhelming power in weaponry and in spirit."

This is not the first time Netanyahu raised the specter of a war with Iran, including Israeli preemption, in recent days. Two weeks beforehand, on 26 September, Netanyahu spoke during the New Year's toast at the IDF General Staff forum. He warned the IDF High Command of gathering clouds and rising security challenges. "Israel's proven capacity to simultaneously perform multiple missions is about to be challenged as never before," he observed. "Hitherto we have navigated affairs boldly and responsibly in several arenas, at times simultaneously, but not so far in a comprehensive confrontation." This might change soon, Netanyahu warned, raising the specter of an all-out war as a distinct possibility. Such a war might erupt despite the great success of the myriad of strikes against Iran and Iran's proxies throughout the region.

The difference in emphasis on Israel's determination to act alone, audaciously and proactively, stems from two major developments. Official Jerusalem did not conceal the disappointment from the US abandonment of the Kurds - coming on the heels of the US inaction in the Persian Gulf. Israel now has to face the possibility of being left all alone to confront a rising and assertive Iran. A tweet by Special Forces reserve officer and former Security Cabinet member Naftali Bennett summed up eloquently the Israeli quandary: "Israel will ALWAYS defend itself by itself. The Jewish State will never put its fate in the hands of others, including our great friend, the USA." Unmentioned by Netanyahu and others in public are the most recent changes in Iranian doctrine and regional strategy with unprecedented emphasis being put on destroying Israel by both Iran and its myriad of proxies.

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Indeed, Tehran has just started a most profound change in the Iranian regional strategy and US policy. In late September, once all chances for a diplomatic breakthrough collapsed, top IRGC experts conducted in-depth analysis and assessment of the situation in the entire region, and not just US policies. They concluded that the US objective is to stifle Iran by depriving it of key strategic capabilities, and that under these circumstances there can be neither negotiations nor compromise with US President Donald Trump. According to Elijah Magnier, "Iran will never give up its advanced missile program, which enables the country to defend itself against any attacks and violations of its airspace - as, for example, happened with the US drone downed this



summer. Moreover, for Iran to cease or continue supporting its allies in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan is not a matter of choice. It is part of its ideology, its constitution, its very existence.”

Significantly, “Iranian decision-makers” stressed to Magnier, the Iranian threat assessment and policy are derived from the analysis of the ramifications of concrete Israeli undertakings that are implemented on behalf of the US. “If we stop support for Palestine, Israel will annex the West Bank and wipe Gaza from the map while the world stands watching, applauding Israel’s right of self-defense! If we stop support for HizbAllah in Lebanon, Israel will confiscate the disputed water and land borders and walk into Lebanon any time it wishes to. The Lebanese Army is not allowed to be armed with deterrent weapons to stop hundreds of violations of Lebanon’s sovereignty every single month by Israel. If we do not support Syria, the Golan Heights will be lost forever and Israel and the US will have a foothold in north-east Syria for good. If Iraq is left alone, it will be divided into three parts as was the case in 2014 when ISIS occupied a third of the country. All these countries will be crushed by US hegemony and subjected to Israel’s will and arrogance.”

While this dynamic has existed for quite a while, Trump’s Washington made things far worse due to the way of dealing with Tehran. “The absence of trust between Iran and the US is all-pervasive. Trump has changed his mind about many agreements and has shown much aggression since he took office.” The key to change is now in Trump’s hands, Magnier explained, because Iran will no longer initiate efforts for contacts, let alone crisis resolution, with the US. “The situation will remain the same; pressure will continue to mount in the Middle East unless Trump takes his hand off the trigger and allows Iran to export its oil. The [Iranian] initiative that would help Trump to come down from the tree he has climbed up does not exist! Iran will not be coerced into giving up its missile program and its allies. Trump and his allies have been upstaged and outclassed.” Hence, Iran will pursue its regional strategic objectives irrespective of the escalation all around.

On 1 October, Tehran articulated authoritatively and in detail the new assertive and audacious regional doctrine in a specially convened High Council of the Commanders of the IRGC. Virtually all the most senior IRGC commanders attended in order to discuss the next phase of the struggle for the greater Middle East, including the confrontation with the US. They elaborated on and refined the evolving Iranian regional strategy. All the IRGC most senior commanders delivered lectures to the gathered senior officers. Taken together, these lectures constitute an authoritative articulation of what’s next for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

One of the key lectures was delivered by the Chief Commander of the IRGC Major General Hossein Salami. He introduced the concrete measures for the implementation of the new “strategy of active resistance” introduced by Ayatollah Khamenei back in early September. Salami explained that the new doctrine “has enabled the country to survive the economic pressure put on it by Western countries, promoted the Islamic Republic’s national unity, and given credit to Tehran’s deterrence beyond the country’s borders.” Salami explained that in 2019 Iran is entering the second step of the Islamic Revolution. In the first step - 1979-2019 - Iran focused on the survival and consolidation of Islamic Iran. “The second step of the revolution is the step that rearranges the constellation of power in favor of the revolution,” Salami stated. Consequently, “Iran’s Islamic Revolution will be on top of this constellation... In the second step we will be thinking of the global mobilization of Islam.”

Salami then elaborated on the current strategic posture of Iran. There is no longer a viable threat to Iran so that the country can focus on its ascent as a leading regional power. “We are progressing in various defense fields in a way that IRGC has reached to its self-regenerating stage.” Consequently, Salami asserted, “today we have become powerful and invincible and all the enemy’s options orchestrated against the country have been



weakened and cannot confront us and this reality has been proven today and is visible.” This assessment is accepted by everybody. “Today, friends and foes have realized that the deterrence capacity of the Islamic Revolution is approaching its peak. This is while not only is the credibility of the threat and power of the United States in decline, but also the Zionist regime is no longer a threat, meaning that it is not the size of a credible threat, and it knows its tiniest mistake would be its last mistake, as any new war will result in the wiping of this regime off the political map of the world.”

Hence, Salami stated, Iran has seized the initiative and is now “engaged in a full-fledged war against the Global Arrogance” spearheaded by the US and Israel “in all fronts” as a result of which Iran “is turning the enemies’ maximum pressure campaign into their maximum begging.” Tehran is convinced that Iran has crossed a major threshold in the confrontation with the US, and that the US no longer constitutes a viable threat in the Persian Gulf. Tehran determined that Israel, furthering its own and the US’ interests, is therefore the primary threat to Iran’s long-term vital and strategic interests. Salami announced that destroying Israel was now an “achievable goal.” Four decades after the Islamic Revolution Iran has “finally managed to obtain the capacity to destroy the impostor Zionist regime,” he declared. “This sinister regime must be wiped off the map and this is no longer ... a dream [but] it is an achievable goal.” Salami reiterated that not only the IRGC has “the capability to annihilate” Israel - but that Israel must be “wiped off the world [map]” as soon as possible.

The second key lecture was delivered by the Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force Major General Qassem Soleimani. He delved on the new regional posture of Iran as a result of the close cooperation with Iran’s proxies. Soleimani stressed that Iran is entering a new regional posture. “The IRGC has shattered the awe of the biggest and most equipped army of the world, which is that of America, and displayed its empty nature to the world people,” Soleimani stated. “The IRGC tarnished the world’s largest and best equipped army’s fictitious grandeur in the world.” Consequently, “the way has been paved for Iran to triumph over its enemies” in the region and beyond.

Soleimani stressed that these new dramatic developments are a direct outcome of the “different strategies” employed by the Qods Force “in the past 20 years” in cooperating with Iran’s close allies in the Axis of Resistance. Soleimani further highlighted the ongoing developments throughout the greater Middle East, and particularly “the strategic and ‘miraculous’ impact” that the anti-Israel “Resistance Front” would have on “future equations there.” Soleimani concluded that Iran must stay the course in closely cooperating with the regional proxies. Rather than seek a head-on clash with Israel and the US, Iran “should keep acting with wisdom, just like in the past 20 years, during which we have crippled and defeated the enemy using a variety of strategies and methods.” However, should Israel ignore Iran’s message and choose instead to escalate the confrontation, Soleimani stressed, Iran is ready for this option as well. “The Islamic Republic has prepared the capability to annihilate Israel and this regime must be wiped off the world’s geographic history,” Soleimani stated.

The significance of Iran’s cooperation with the various proxies was echoed by the Chief of General Staff of Iranian Armed Force, Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri. “We offer our advisory and intellectual support to Yemen’s national army,” he stated. “We will stand by the Yemeni people until they completely ward off the aggressions.” No less important is the Iranian long-term support for the countries on the road to the Mediterranean. “We also gave our support to Iraq and Syria upon the request of their governments and offered advisory and armed assistance to them.”



Other speakers repeated Tehran's conviction that there is no longer a viable US threat in the Persian Gulf. The Deputy Chief of Iran's Army for Coordination, Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, warned that the response to any US aggression and invasion will be severe. "The enemy knows that whenever it wants to take an act of aggression against [Iran], it will definitely receive a heavy blow." Iran's response to any US move will be "firm, tough and (one that makes the enemies regret their move)." The Commander of Iran's Army, Major General Sayyed Abdolrahim Mousavi, warned that any US strike will be detrimental to several regional countries. "The enemy should know that if it makes a miscalculation and takes a wrong decision, the smoke of the fire will blind its own eyes," he warned. Mousavi belittled the US threat because Iran's "active and smart resistance has defused all US pressures and sanctions." The US should have realized by now the futility of its threats. "The Americans used all their power to impose the discourse of concession on the Islamic Republic of Iran but despite abundant pressures, the Islamic Republic could stand against the enemy and push it back by using the discourse of resistance," Mousavi explained. "The signs of failure of the (US) strategy of maximum pressure is fully clear," he concluded. "The Islamic Republic of Iran's current and future strategy is certainly active and smart resistance."

In contrast, Tehran is increasingly apprehensive about the long-term and strategic ramification of the Israeli relentless struggle against the on-land access to the Mediterranean and the threats to the HizbAllah. While Iran is cognizant that Israel is pursuing first and foremost its own vital interests, Iran also considers the Israeli strikes the only effective instrument for also furthering the US regional strategy. Therefore, the IRGC determined that Israel is the primary threat to Iran's long-term vital and strategic interests and must be confronted accordingly.

The Deputy Commander of Operations of the IRGC, Brigadier General Abbas Nilforoushan, elaborated on the anti-Israel aspects of Iran's new regional doctrine. The forthcoming struggle against Israel should be examined in the context of Iran's regional posture. "No country can stand up to the Islamic Republic. Tehran's enemies know that they will not be in control of ending a war they might start against Iran." Hence, there is no longer a viable threat of a US-led strike on Iran. "If the enemies could have started a war against Iran, they would have done it." As well, there is no viable military strategy against Iran. "We are not a small country that could be conquered in one step. If all the Western, Arab and Israeli coalitions forces enter our country, Iran's geography will defeat them before they can do anything."

Hence, Iran intends to markedly escalate the reaction to any enemy transgression. "[Iran] will perceive any mistake in the region as involvement in a war in the whole region. Any action to start a war in the region will flare up a fire that will burn those who have started the war," Nilforoushan explained. Moreover, Iran has developed "deep and long-range assault capability" and all the weapons needed to implement it. "We will not let the enemies to face us at our borders. We will quickly drag the war to the bases and interests of the enemies anywhere they may happen to be." Nilforoushan stressed that Iran will be able to quickly turn around any hostile move because "[the] Iranian armed forces do not play according to the rules in their strategic depth which is as wide as West Asia."

Nilforoushan elaborated that this strategic posture enables Tehran to focus on the Israeli threat. He explained that Israel's military doctrine is based on "striking resistance forces before they can be turned into a threat and start an all-out war because they cannot afford being involved in a full-fledged war." Iran cannot permit this situation to drag on and on. Therefore, Iran developed multi-faceted strategy against Israel aimed to decide the war quickly using both Iran's long-range missiles and proxies. Tehran is not afraid of an Israeli strike



because Israel is too weak to attempt such an audacious undertaking. The reason for this is the internal strife within Israeli society. Nilforoushan noted that Israel's "people are poor and there are too many ethnic, cultural and political divides in their society. A war will drag Israel's regime to the threshold of annihilation." Therefore, "Israel is not in a position to threaten Iran."

In contrast, Iran is prepared for a decisive war. "Iran has encircled Israel from all four sides. Nothing will be left of Israel," Nilforoushan declared. "Israel lacks strategic depth." Nilforoushan explained that "because of [this] lack of strategic depth, if only one missile hits the occupied lands, Israeli airports will be filled with people trying to run away from the country." Meanwhile, the war will involve Iran's regional allies and particularly the HizbAllah. The HizbAllah will "liberate northern Israel in case a war breaks out. ... This will certainly happen, as HizbAllah has a good capability to do it," he assured. There should be no doubt about the end of such a war. "If Israel makes a strategic mistake, it [will have] to collect bits and pieces of Tel Aviv from the lower depths of the Mediterranean Sea," Nilforoushan concluded.

On 2 October, Khamenei addressed the special meeting of the High Council of the Commanders of the IRGC. Concluding the event, Khamenei defined his position vis-a-vis the US - setting a refined and up-dated harsh policy. Iran has entered a new era dominated by Iran's unilateral ascent.

Khamenei explained that the US failed to pressure Iran into compliance. "The Americans failed in their Maximum Pressure policy. They assumed [that] if they apply the policy of Maximum Pressure on Iran, Iran would accept to compromise with them. To this moment, by God's grace and power, they learned Maximum Pressure only afflicted themselves with problems." The US even failed to convince Tehran to accept "symbolic defeat" in order to enable Washington to resume negotiations. Khamenei stressed that he forbade any contacts. Yet the US persisted. "Till just recently, to form a symbolic show of Iran's surrender, and to make the Iranian president to meet with them, they [the Americans] even started to beseech us, and used their European friends as a mediator. They failed so far, and this policy will fail forever."

Having given up on both the EU and the US, Khamenei ordered unilateral escalation of the Iranian nuclear program irrespective of the JCPOA commitments. "Concerning the JCPOA, we will seriously continue to reduce our commitments; the [Iranian] Atomic Energy Organization is responsible here, and should carefully and completely enact all the reduction of commitments that the Islamic Republic has declared, until we reach the desired results. We will surely achieve our desired goals, by God's grace."

Khamenei concluded by addressing the domestic situation in Iran and particularly the impact of the international sanctions. He stressed that he was cognizant of the adverse impact on the entire population. "Of course, people have difficulties in their livelihoods, but if the authorities continue to act strongly, reasonably and persistently, it will surely have a gradual impact on people's lives and livelihoods." Khamenei noted that the current short-term hardships are due to the sudden fall in oil sales coupled with Iran's over-dependence on oil revenues. Presently, the oil sales are growing as more countries ignore the US demands and sanctions. In the longer term, Khamenei explained, Iran is transforming the economy and society, and this will ameliorate the economic hardships. "The sanctions imposed on oil sales, which is increasingly focused on in the Maximum Pressure policy, is a short-term problem for the country because, in the long run, it has the benefit of breaking the reliance on oil revenues. This tactical pressure helps us strategically," Khamenei concluded.

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Khamenei could be so assertive because he already knew of the profound changes concurrently unfolding in and around the Persian Gulf. From Tehran's perspective, the turning point took place in late September when both Baghdad and Islamabad delivered official messages that Riyadh was suing for peace. Emissaries from both countries assured the Iranian senior officials they met that the Saudi initiative originated from Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman al-Saud (MBS) in person. MBS was stunned by the US timidity and foot dragging in the face of a series of Iranian provocations in the Persian Gulf (especially the Iranian shooting down of a US Navy drone and the Iran-controlled Houthi attacks on Saudi oil installations), as well as the humiliating trouncing of three Saudi and Yemeni brigades deep inside Saudi territory in Najran. Throughout, MBS's erstwhile confidant and close friend, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan (MBZ), continued to both negotiate with Tehran and urge MBS to follow suit. Taken together, these Saudi setbacks and MBZ's imploring finally convinced MBS that official Riyadh must move fast before it was too late. Hence, MBS asked both Iraq and Pakistan to mediate a deal - seeking Iranian guarantees not to attack and/or subvert Saudi Arabia and promising not to permit the US to operate out of Saudi territory and territorial waters.

One of the issues that must have petrified MBS, and thus pushed him to reach out to Tehran was a major US "exercise" conducted on 28 September. The US Air Force shifted its command center throughout CENTCOM from the Combined Air and Space Operations Center at al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar to Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina. For the entire day, the flight operations of over 300 military aircraft in such key areas as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf were controlled from the US rather than Qatar. Although the Pentagon insists that as of 30 September "all" air operations are once again run from the command center at al-Udeid, GCC senior military officials insist that the US operations are run simultaneously from al-Udeid and Shaw AFB because the US is unsure for how long the USAF will be able to operate in Qatar.

On 2 October, Tehran reacted to the USAF's command exercise. An article in the Khamenei-affiliated *Kayhan* reflected the interpretations of official Tehran. "The US air force has moved control of its Middle East command center from Qatar to South Carolina, in a move which gave an indication of its future plans for the region," *Kayhan* explained. "Although the move was only temporary ... it appears to indicate a significant tactical shift in US thinking. While air force personnel said moving functions to a different base had been a long-harbored ambition enabled by new technology, the move comes amid renewed tension with Iran, which lies around 300km to the northeast." Tehran stressed that the US exercise was prompted by the growing Iranian threat to al-Udeid and all other US bases in the Persian Gulf region. "If conflict with Iran were to occur, the base in Qatar would be a prime target for Iran," *Kayhan* asserted. Therefore, the article concluded, just to be on the safe side, "[the] US air force aims to run the center remotely once a month and remain the rest of the time at al-Udeid."

The strategic-political analysis of official Riyadh was also articulated on 2 October when the super-well-connected Abdulrahman al-Rashed wrote a column in the authoritative *Asharq al-Awsat* titled "Will the Americans Quit Al-Udeid?" Riyadh does not buy the US assurances that this was a routine exercise made possible by newly-acquired technologies. "The transfer of the so-called US Air Force Combined Air and Space Operations Center from Al-Udeid Air Base in the Qatari desert to the Shaw Air Force Base amounts to a 'dress rehearsal,' especially after the Iranians succeeded in penetrating air defenses and bombing the state-owned Saudi Aramco oil processing facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais using low-flying cruise missiles and drones." Thus, the exercise should be considered as a harbinger for a possible US abandonment of, and withdrawal from, the Persian Gulf.



Hence, al-Rashed stressed, “the most important thing for the region is to examine the possibility of a US withdrawal based on the narrative of the transfer of its center of operations from Qatar.” Al-Rashed warned further that “a reduction in the US military presence will be offset by increased Iranian military activities, with repercussions including damage to American and allied interests. Moreover, a withdrawal would mean the failure of the economic boycott that is at the heart of the White House’s Iran policy.” Al-Rashed is convinced that there is a profound change of Persian Gulf policy in the Trump White House. He concludes that the exercise in al-Udeid therefore “reflects a political logic that finds it preferable to exercise economic pressure on the Iranian regime and force it to retreat, rather than wage a war. The US ability to destroy Iran’s capabilities is real and frightening, but this may be the last resort.” Riyadh must change its regional policies and priorities accordingly.

And so it was. Back on 30 September, Rouhani disclosed that he had received “messages from Saudi Arabia” through the leader of a third country - Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi - and that Riyadh asked the mediator to “convey readiness for talks with Tehran.” The next day, when Tehran did not respond, MBS gave Mahdi permission “to arrange a meeting with Iran as a first step towards de-escalating tensions in the region.” Should Tehran agree to such a meeting, MBS promised to intercede with the Trump White House regarding the lifting of the US sanctions and the US acceptance of Iranian cooperation in regional affairs.

In Tehran, Khamenei, rather than Rouhani, oversees the response to the MBS initiative. Khamenei nominated Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani as the point man for the initial contacts with MBS - rather than official Riyadh. Larijani’s first response was public - making a statement to numerous Iranian media venues. “Iran welcomes the remarks of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Muhammad bin Salman, about resolving disputes through dialogue with Tehran.” Larijani repeated Iran’s long-standing call for mutual security arrangements whereby Iran “invite[s] the countries of the region to form a special collective coalition in the Persian Gulf region with the participation of all the countries bordering it.”

Riyadh immediately sent a positive response via Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan. On 2 October, Larijani responded through media statements. “Iran is open to starting a dialogue with Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region,” Larijani told Iranian media. “An Iranian-Saudi dialogue could solve many of the region’s security and political problems.” He was forthcoming but demanding. “Riyadh can submit its proposals to be discussed at the Iranian-Saudi dialogue table without pre-conditions from our side,” Larijani explained. It is not enough for MBS to claim that he “wants dialogue” because Tehran also wants “to know [that] Saudi Arabia is thinking of the region’s interests first” rather than prioritizing its relations with the US.

Tehran approached Moscow for help with getting the improvement of relations on the way. The Kremlin capitalized on the forthcoming participation of the Saudi Oil Minister Khalid al-Falih in the Gas Exporting Countries Forum in Moscow in order to arrange a bilateral meeting with his Iranian counterpart Bijan Zanganeh. They met on 6 October. Zanganeh was emphatic about Tehran’s desire for better relations with Saudi Arabia, telling al-Falih that their countries “have been friends for 22 years; a friendship which had outlived all the ups and downs in Iranian-Saudi relations, and that [Zanganeh] had no trouble meeting with him.” Zanganeh argued that Saudi-Iranian relations have been the victim of US conspiracies against both countries, and reiterated that the Saudis “must not regard us [Iran] as their enemy; the enemy is outside of the region.” Al-Falih promised to deliver the message to Riyadh and predicted major improvement in Saudi-Iranian relations in the near future.



As well, to further placate Tehran, MBS decided to accept the Houthi offer for an unconditional truce that should lead to cessation of hostilities and political negotiations - thus recognizing the AnsarAllah as a viable and legitimate political force. On 4 October, official Riyadh responded positively to the Houthi truce offer. Prince Khalid bin Salman, the full brother of MBS and Vice Defense Minister, issued the statement. "The truce announced in Yemen is perceived positively by the kingdom, as this is what it has always sought, and hopes it will be implemented effectively," he wrote. Just to be on the safe side, the next day AnsarAllah reiterated its warning to Riyadh. Muhammad Ali al-Houthi, the Chairman of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee of Yemen, warned that "Saudi will suffer fatal losses if [the AnsarAllah's] truce bid is rejected." Muhammad al-Bukhaiti of the Supreme Political Council urged Riyadh not to "think they can change the game." AnsarAllah "will never accept a partial halt to the Saudi attacks on Yemen in return for a total halt on our part," he stated. By now, official Tehran considers the Saudi outreach yet another manifestation of the Saudi Arabian capitulation.

From Tehran's perspective, it was all over on 11 October. The UAE National Security Adviser and MBZ's brother, Tahnoun bin Zayed, arrived in Tehran for a two-day secret visit in order to defuse the crisis in the Persian Gulf once and for good. He assured Tehran that the UAE remains committed to "pursuing its own path with Iran" irrespective of the position of Saudi Arabia. He further reiterated that MBZ concurs with Tehran on the imperative to establish a regional security regime that does not include the US and US presence in the Persian Gulf. Significantly, the secret mission of Tahnoun bin Zayed took place against the progress in the back-channel talks between MBS and Tehran - the arrival of Imran Khan in Tehran with the latest truce offers from MBS. Khan promised Saudi cooperation against the US, but also repeated MBS's plea to have Tehran understand Riyadh's plight and obligation to permit the deployment of US forces.

Tehran's response was elucidated in a 14 October memo to Khamenei from the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani. "The US rulers' bitter admission of realities which entail lessons have forced many West Asian countries, even the group which had for years paved the ground or hosted the US deployment in the region, to admit this reality that the Middle East without the US is a more secure place," Shamkhani wrote. Simply put, there will be no Iranian compromise.

Meanwhile, MBS and his innermost circle of allies are under immense pressure to reduce the threats of external and regional escalation that might hasten the US withdrawal from the Persian Gulf. According to numerous usually reliable Saudi opposition sources - from pro-Western Royalists to pro-Iran Shiites - MBS is pressuring his father - King Salman al-Saud - to abdicate so that he - MBS - can become king. The original plan of MBS was to accomplish this unprecedented power grab before the Autumn of 2020 - that is, before the US presidential elections and while President Trump, who is considered both friend and patron, is still in power. But now, there is growing trepidation in Riyadh that the US might withdraw from the region rather than go to war with Iran, and Trump will therefore be disinclined to get involved in the power games of Riyadh. Hence, MBS decided to accelerate the move and increase the pressure on his father.

Concurrently, there is growing criticism of MBS within the House of al-Saud and the Saudi professional elites. They are apprehensive about the negative ramifications of his rush to seize greater power internally. Many leading Saudis tried to reach out to King Salman and warn him of MBS's maneuvers. The Saudi rumor mills connect the death of Major General Abdul Aziz al-Fagham, King Salman's chief bodyguard and very close confidant, to MBS. Officially, al-Fagham was killed in a personal dispute in Jeddah on 29 September. Both Saudi opposition sources and grapevines insist that al-Fagham was assassinated on order from MBS because



he was going to urge the King against the hasty move of abdicating now and crowning MBS. A recurring theme in all the opposition reports about MBS's quest for power is the imperative to slow down the US withdrawal so that the crowning of MBS can be accomplished under the patronage of Trump. Ameliorating the Iranian threat in the Persian Gulf is therefore an urgent imperative.

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As of early October, there is a visible change in the Iranian threat assessment and strategic outlook in accordance with the new tenets as articulated in the IRGC conference in Tehran.

On 2 October, the Commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force, Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, noted that Iran has enhanced its military power to the point that enemy threats are futile. "Today, the balance of power has changed and the shadow of war has become useless," he explained. Should they challenge Iran, the US "will be beaten and they will be the losing side in this confrontation. ... Today, in addition to the trans-regional states' bases, we have made their warships in the sea useless for a distance of 2,000km." This is why the US-led military option against Iran is "no more on the table", Salami explained on the 4th. "Because we have become powerful; because we have been invincible and, at the same time, our enemies have been weakened and their options have become really weak." The US has lost the strategic initiative throughout the region. "It is evident that the enemy no longer has the capability; once it wanted to act and force us to react, but today, the enemy is not even capable of reacting to our capabilities and this reality is seen today on the battlefields," Salami concluded.

Iran is now focusing on proactive and preventive undertakings throughout the greater Middle East. On 5 October, the Head of the Army's Strategic Studies Center, Brigadier General Ahmadreza Pourdastan, articulated Iran's new operational modalities. "All the enemies' moves at the borders and inside and outside the region on the ground, in the air and at sea are being carefully monitored through different systems," he explained. "Warnings sent by [Iran's] Armed Forces have undermined the willpower of the Americans and led to deterrence." Under such conditions, Iranian forces are ordered to strike out and neutralize any potential threat as far away from Iran as possible. "If there is any threat, it can be in a limited form and there is also the capability and capacity to nip that threat in the bud even before it reaches the borders." Iran is introducing strategic activism in order to scare and deter would-be foes. "Sometimes, we should send some alarms to enemies," Pourdastan stressed. "We call these alarms 'active resistance'. ... This active resistance is in place in many areas; both in domestic issues and in issues which relate to the Islamic Republic of Iran's strategic depth such as Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq."

A major goal of the new proactive strategy is to push the US out of the greater Middle East, starting with the Persian Gulf. Also on the 5th, IRGC Deputy Commander for Political Affairs Brigadier General Yadollah Javani stated that "the US forces deployed in the region will be forced to withdraw," and will then be replaced by the "establishment of security by the regional states." This will be an inevitable outcome of the major trends in the region whereby Iran is supplanting the US as the preeminent regional power. "The process of development of power in the region with the pivotal role of the Islamic Republic means that the Americans have no way but leaving the region and this means acceleration of gaining power by the Resistance Front in the region and turning the existing foreign-affiliated powers into popular powers." As the leading power, Iran will be "safeguarding security and stability in the region," Javani stated. "The Islamic Republic is ready to establish security in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz with the help of the regional governments and nations."



On 7 October, Iran's Channel 1 TV broadcasted a speech by Soleimani (that was retrieved and translated by MEMRI) in which he defined the IRGC's achievements to-date. "The IRGC has expanded the resistance in terms of both quantity and quality. It has expanded the resistance from a geographical territory of 2,000 square kilometers in southern Lebanon to a territory of half a million square kilometers," Soleimani declared. "America and the Zionist regime concentrate their efforts on stopping this qualitative expansion. The second point is that the IRGC has created territorial continuity for [the different parts] of the resistance. It has connected Iran to Iraq, Iraq to Syria, and Syria to Lebanon." The IRGC would permit no-one to deprive Iran of these achievements.

Starting 6 October, Salami delivered a series of lectures to IRGC officers all over Iran in which he articulated Iran's new strategic posture. The greater Middle East is going through an historic turning point as a result of the US decline and withdrawal. "Today, [the Americans] admit that they have reached the point where the more they advance, the more they go downwards." "[The] Americans admit [that] the options they have on the table are not practical against Iran." This is an historic development. "A power's lack of strategy is the beginning of its gradual death and this is what has happened in the US," Salami emphasized. "The US is powerful but it is weak in using its power [in the region]," Salami added. He elaborated that "all great powers of the world have collapsed and will collapse for being wrong. This is the tradition of history. The life cycle of vicious powers is like a curve which has a climax but is immediately followed by a decline." This is where the US is presently. "The enemy is retreating and leaving the battlefield while the Islamic Revolution is advancing and this is the sign of victory."

This trend influences the entire region. "The US allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel regime, are now discouraged with it and fully aware that the US cannot protect them in difficult days," Salami asserted. He argued that all world powers should take note of the transformation of the greater Middle East. "All world powers should know that if they want to toy with [the] future of [the] Iranian nation, we will toy with their own future." Salami pointed to "the need to expand [the] viewpoints of the Islamic Revolution across the world." He stated that "to be an independent country, we should be powerful because we have learned victory requires constant watching of enemies."

However, Salami emphasized, the key to Iran's ascent and victory is to "further extend the geographical scope of the Axis of Resistance" far away from Iran because "the resistance of the Iranian nation against enemies knows no limits and borders." Tehran intends to reach out proactively in order to confront the enemy as far as possible from Iran and on Iran's conditions. "[The] Iranian nation's resistance in face of enemies knows no boundaries," Salami explained. "We will not allow the enemy to enter our beloved Islamic homeland, [and] we will not let the enemy set foot on our soil, and with our presence in thousands of kilometers away from our borders, we will prevent and block the enemy's plots and hostilities," Salami highlighted. "The IRGC will expand the geography of resistance and when the enemy sees the growth of this geography and the Islamic Republic's discourse then it should leave the field." Salami explained that the rising spirit of resistance of the Iranian nation and the Shiite allies has confounded the enemies. "Today, we have a grave responsibility to continue the path of resistance." Salami mentioned Yemen as a prime example of the new outreach of the IRGC.

Salami concluded by stressing that Khamenei is expecting the IRGC to markedly accelerate this process. "The Leader of the Islamic Revolution is satisfied, but not content, with the enhance of defense power and hence we should make effort to progress in this field more than ever," Salami stressed.



On 13 October, Khamenei addressed graduating officer cadets of the IRGC. He urged the IRGC to “prepare against [the] enemy” for a major confrontation that might be imminent. He stressed the urgent imperative for a major build-up of the IRGC. “A permanent lesson before the eyes of the IRGC is... Investigate to find out what you need in all military and intelligence arenas. ... The military equipment of the IRGC must be advanced and up-to-date; you should invent and manufacture them yourselves, and [it should] be so versatile that [it] would meet all demands on the ground, in the sky, space, sea, borders and inside the country, and of course, even the virtual space is among the necessary tools today.” Khamenei added that the IRGC needs to “always have enhancing scientific and specialized power in mind, keep moving forward in tactical and strategic strengths, operate with constant alertness and readiness and avoid even a moment of neglect and increase the strength of the IRGC’s faith by training faithful, determined, pure, and motivated youth every single day.” Khamenei concluded by imploring the cadets to “march to the peak of honor, sacrifice and martyrdom,” in order to “rejuvenate the power of Islam and the Islamic Resistance Front.”

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By mid-October, Tehran was convinced that the US was no longer the main threat, and that the Persian Gulf was no longer the source of the primary strategic threat. This conviction was reinforced by the US abandonment of the Kurds and withdrawal from northern Syria. On 10 October, HizbAllah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah gloated that anybody trusting the US was “destined to fail”. “The Americans abandoned the Kurds overnight and left them. This is the fate of all who bet on the US,” Nasrallah said.

Tehran is now convinced that the US would no longer dare to attack Iran directly. On 14 October, the IRGC’s Deputy Commander for Coordination, Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi, explained that because of “the enemies’ fear of Iran’s military power, ... the Americans dare not fire even a single shot at the Islamic Republic.” Also on the 14th, Salami stated that Iran “has been defeating the enemy,” and particularly the US. “We do not allow the enemy’s will to affect our destiny and so far, we have done so and are moving forward. ... The secret to these (military) advances is that God is the ruler of the world and not America, and that anyone who believes in God is not affected by the enemy’s will.”

Therefore, Tehran continues to focus on the on-land access to the Mediterranean as the main challenge facing Iran. This approach follows the instructions of Khamenei back in mid-September. Presently, there is unique opportunity to surge westwards because of the “unraveling” of the US-run wide anti-Iran coalition with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Sheikdoms. Consequently, Israel is all alone in attempting to confront the Iranian-Shiite surge westward.

Politically, Tehran intensifies the pressure on the US to abandon Iraq so that it won’t be able to interfere in the surge westward. Back on 29 September, Iraj Masjedi, the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq and Soleimani’s deputy, warned that should US troops be used for attacking Iran - they will be targeted on Iraqi soil. “If they [the US forces] don’t cause any problem for the Islamic Republic, Iran won’t respond to this presence [of US forces in Iraq]. If the Americans want to cause any problem for the Islamic Republic, they have to expect a response and reaction. A demand of Iran is for American forces to get out of the region because they don’t do any positive or constructive work. This is not strictly about Iraq. It is about wherever they exist.”

Tehran could not ignore the desperate, albeit ultimately futile, US efforts to calm down the Hashd al-Shaabi and convince them to not attack US forces and installations in Iraq. In early October, the Pentagon invited Falih al-Fayyadh, one of the Hashd al-Shaabi leaders, to Washington for secret talks. On the 2nd, he met



Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley ostensibly to discuss “the relationship between the two countries.” According to al-Fayyadh, the Americans brought up “Iraq’s positive role in consolidating stability in the region and the need for this to continue” - that is, that the Hashd al-Shaabi will not join the Iran-led anti-US campaign. The Americans assured al-Fayyadh that the US had nothing to do with the recent strikes against Hashd al-Shaabi facilities in Iraq - thus implying that Israel was solely responsible. Al-Fayyadh responded by demanding that the US cease all the anti-Iran and pro-Israeli activities in Iraq, and do not attempt to block Iranian activities as well as the further improving of Iraqi-Iranian relations.

Since then, Iranian and pro-Iran Iraqi media have intensified their calls for a US withdrawal, and, increasingly, for popular violence against the US presence in Iraq. For example, on 5 October, the Khamenei-affiliated *Kayhan* claimed that the US Embassy in Baghdad was operating “against Hashd al-Shaabi and the ties between the nations of Iran and Iraq, and [in] opposition to Iranian pilgrims visit to Iraq on the occasion of religious holiday Arbaeen.” This is part of the US Embassy’s serving as the base for anti-Iran and anti-Iraq endeavors in the region - including the unfolding protests and riots in Baghdad. “There are many documents about the presence of US, Israeli and Saudi Wahabi agents as well as Baathist elements behind the Iraqi protests.” *Kayhan* observed that “half a glance at the slogans leaves no doubt that there is an American, Saudi and Israeli conspiracy” playing out in Baghdad. Since “US embassies everywhere are the focal points of conspiracies,” *Kayhan* argued, Iraqi patriotic youth should “put an end to the US embassy’s presence in Baghdad.” *Kayhan* pointed out to the Iranian precedent - namely, the seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran back in November 1979. “The seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran has had many achievements for the Islamic Iran. Why should Iraq’s revolutionary youths deprive their country from such achievements?”

Meanwhile, the anti-US incitement campaign has intensified since the US started the withdrawal from Syria rather than confront Turkish forces. The Iranians are blaming the US for the violent riots in Baghdad and other cities and the revival of Jihadist terrorism (including ISIS), as well as concentrated policy to undermine and damage all aspects of the Iraqi-Iranian relations and friendship and particularly the Iranian support for the Hashd al-Shaabi militias. The explicit message of the campaign has been that the US, and not just US forces, must leave Iraq unconditionally and as soon as possible.

Concurrently, Baghdad launched a concentrated effort to divert the rage against Israel. On 30 September, Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi accused Israel of responsibility for the recent attacks on several Hashd al-Shaabi weapon storage facilities. “Investigations into the targeting of some Popular Mobilization Forces positions indicate that Israel carried it out,” he told Al-Jazeera TV. Numerous senior commanders of the Hashd al-Shaabi’s sub-groups immediately reacted that the statement made retaliation against Israel legitimate.

Ahmed al-Maksousi, the Second-in-Command of the Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, explained that they were “aware for more than a month that the report compiled by the commission of inquiry on the bombing of the [Hashd al-Shaabi] positions proved the Zionist regime’s involvement, especially since Americans told Abdel-Mahdi that Israel was behind these strikes.” Abu Ala al-Walai, the Commander of the Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, wrote that the statement constituted “a green light to retaliate against Israel.” Maksousi concurred that “all options are on the table, especially since we reserve the right to respond, and the Zionist entity is not away from our fire range.”

Other commanders declared that the retaliation might come from other members of the Axis of Resistance stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean. For example, Hamid al-Jazairi, the Second-in-Command of the Saraya al-Khorasani group, confirmed that the Hashd al-Shaabi “had detailed information (about the air-



strikes) prior to Abdul-Mahdi's announcement. The Axis of Resistance is not confined within Iraqi borders, but also operates in Syria and Lebanon. Therefore, the response to Israel does not have to be from the Iraqi territory." Jazairi stressed that "there will be a response very soon to the Israeli bombings by resistance factions. It will be an appropriate response, and will be announced in a timely manner." In Lebanon, HizbAllah commanders also announced their readiness to participate in the anti-Israel retaliation operations.

Meanwhile, Iran and the Iran-proxies launched an all-out effort to build and expand military installations in western Iran, Iraq and Syria in preparations for the escalation against Israel. The objectives of this endeavor are to escalate the flow of weapons and supplies westward, and to be able to launch strikes at Israel from a growing number of facilities - thus reducing the likelihood of successful preemptive strikes by Israel. The focus is on a forthcoming confrontation and war with Israel.

Tehran signaled the evolving priorities on 7 October during the inauguration of the new "Persian Gulf Air Defense Headquarters" in Bushehr province. The Commander of the Army, Major General Sayyed Abdolrahim Mousavi, explained in the ceremony that "the new center is equipped with the latest homegrown control and surveillance technologies with the capacity to help keep a better watch on the region." The center will monitor all threats emanating from the north and the west - that is, Israel - and not just the south - that is, the Arabian Peninsula. All air defense forces of the Iranian Army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps throughout southern Iran "will be under the direct command of the Persian Gulf Air Defense Headquarters."

Back in mid-September, the Kataib Imam Ali, a component of the Hashd al-Shaabi, took control over the Shaykh Mazhar Air Base (aka Suwayrah AB) some 50km southwest of Baghdad. Almost immediately, the Hashd al-Shaabi made the entire area off-limits to all Iraqi military personnel. Toward the end of the month, Iraqi Shiite and IRGC engineering and construction elements launched a massive expansion and fortification program. The runways are enlarged and numerous fortified hangars and storage facilities are constructed. Qods Force senior commanders briefed their Hashd al-Shaabi counterparts that they intend to make the Shaykh Mazhar Air Base "the primary base for missile and armed drone attacks on Israel" for the entire Axis of Resistance in Iraq. The base will house aircraft, drones and ballistic missiles in fortified facilities that will protect them from Israeli air strikes. The Qods Force also installed multiple air defense systems including the long-range Bavar-373. These air defense systems are under the command of the center in Bushehr province. Should the need arise, Iranian fighter aircraft will deploy to the Shaykh Mazhar Air Base in order to help in the defense of Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala against Israeli air attacks.

One of the main Iranian efforts in Iraq was on the route westward. Official Baghdad supported the endeavor. On 30 September, Iraq officially reopened the al-Qaim-Albukamal border-crossing with Syria. The Iraqi announcement hailed the growing normalization between Baghdad and Damascus, while Iraqi officials also noted this is "a win for their mutual ally Iran." Baghdad announced that the Hashd al-Shaabi forces will be responsible for securing the crossing point and the entire area. Concurrently, the Syrian military in the Albukamal area was put on high alert along the Iraqi border because "there are grave concerns about a potential Israeli Air Force attack at this new border crossing with Iraq."

The Hashd al-Shaabi forces expanded their deployment in the vicinity of the Iraq-Syria border. "The Hashd al-Shaabi security forces and fighters have taken full control of the border with Syria," explained the regional commander Hadi al-Khorasani. The sole exceptions were "areas on the border strip that are under the control of the US forces." In these areas, Khorasani claimed, "the US forces were conducting drills and exercises on the Syrian border to make the ground prepared for the ISIL terrorists to infiltrate into the Iraqi desert." Toward



this end, “the Americans piloted drones in the desert of al-Anbar to find pathways free from the presence of [the Hashd al-Shaabi] security forces to facilitate the penetration of the ISIL terrorists into the territory of Iraq.” It did not take long for skirmishes between US and Hashd al-Shaabi patrols to begin.

According to Syrian senior officials, the US and Israel were actively attempting to prevent the new al-Qaim-Albukamal crossing from opening. “Daesh’s attempts to launch attacks came from the American military’s orders because the US has kept Daesh units in the region; they also support them and use them for special plots,” the officials claimed. However, “the intelligence and logistical forces of the Syrian Army rapidly reacted to the terrorist attacks, killing several of them and forcing others to flee the region.” Then, starting 11-12 October, there were several reports that “unidentified warplanes targeted the Iranian forces and their allies near the Iraqi border,” and particularly “the positions of the Iranian Armed Forces and their allies near an undisclosed location along the Syrian-Iraqi border.” The main targets of the bombing raids were in the al-Qaim-Albukamal area.

Meanwhile, the Iranian-Iraqi security coordination also intensified in the main border crossings feeding into the access roads toward the Mediterranean. In early October, capitalizing on the massive flow of Arbaeen pilgrims to Iraq, the Qods Force and the Hashd al-Shaabi organized a joint system to provide security for the border crossings used by the pilgrims. The joint security force is under the command of an IRGC senior officer who “recognized the recent unrest in Iraq as a plot planned by the enemies to harm the unity between [the] Iranian and Iraqi nations.” The joint security force already guaranteed that “this conspiracy has been thwarted by the vigilance of the Iraqi people and officials, as well as the security forces, and this glorious march will be held with full security,” the commander said.

Concurrently, the Qods Force also accelerated and expanded the support for the HizbAllah’s preparations for war. In early October, the Qods Force orchestrated the dispatch of Iraqi Shiite reinforcements from southern Iraq and Syria to HizbAllah bases near the Israeli-Lebanese border. “HizbAllah and the Iraqi al-Nujaba together deployed forces on the northern border of Israel,” explained an Iranian official. He claimed that “the Yemeni AnsarAllah is another threat against Israel now” since they are ready to send forces and “deterrence weapons” (that is, drones and missiles) to the Lebanese front. Near Sanaa, HizbAllah engineers work together with the Iranian experts on assembling the Yemeni drones and missiles from components sent from Iran.

Tehran did not neglect Israel’s Golan border either. In late-September, Soleimani ordered Hajj Hashem, the HizbAllah commander of the Golan Front, to markedly accelerate the build-up of the local clandestine deployment of a joint force comprised of Qods Force, HizbAllah and locally recruited Shiite fighters. In early October, the Front expanded the recruitment of local villagers and former fighters. As well, additional Qods Force and HizbAllah elite forces deployed to rear bases some 50-80 kms east of the Israeli border pending a forward push in time of crisis. The Golan Front maintains four main bases close to the Israeli border - three in the area controlled by the Syrian Army’s 52nd Brigade and the fourth in the area controlled by the Syrian Army’s 90th Brigade. The three bases are used mainly for the training and sustaining of the troops, including the use of the short- and medium-range rockets/missiles stored nearby. The Iranian and HizbAllah forces also conduct intelligence operations. The fourth base houses the Quneitra Hawks Brigade - a locally recruited Shiite militia under the command of Qods Force officers that is a part of the Syrian National Defense Forces originally established by Soleimani. The main task of the base is intelligence gathering operations against Israel.

Most important is the marked acceleration of the conversion of the HizbAllah heavy rockets into accurate guided missiles. In early October, Iran started mass production of the Labeik “conversion kit which can turn



artillery rockets into precision-guided missiles.” The project was run by Brigadier General Mohammad Hossein Dadras and Brigadier General Kioumars Heidar. In Iran, the Labeik is used to upgrade the 610mm Zelzal heavy artillery rocket. “The kit is similar to a system used in the Fateh-110 family, and is attached between the rocket’s warhead and engine.” At the specific order of Soleimani, a large number of Syrian and Iranian Il-76 transport aircraft were earmarked for an airlift to deliver Labeik kits to the HizbAllah. The kits are flown from bases in Iran to the T-4 air-base in central Syria, and then either on to Beirut International, or by trucks to the HizbAllah bases in the Beqaa. The Qods Force’s priority objective is to convert the HizbAllah’s long-range heavy rockets - the Nazeat 10-H and the Nazeat 6-H (with ranges of 100-150km) - into missiles whose accuracy is comparable to that of the HizbAllah’s Fateh-110 and Zelzal-5 ballistic missiles.

Also in late September, and before the Turkish invasion of northern Syria that prompted the withdrawal of all US forces from the area, Tehran pleaded with Moscow for help in deterring the US forces in Syria from attempting to block their access to the Mediterranean. Consequently, on 1 October, Russian, Iranian and Syrian forces launched a joint exercise in the Deir ez-Zor area on the western bank of the Euphrates. The exercise involved air force, air defense, mechanized, artillery and special forces units. They exercised protection of strategic roads against air attacks and attempts of blocking by land forces, as well as attacks on and destruction of fortified bases from where the blocking forces were dispatched. For the exercise, the IRGC deployed combat aircraft, drones and special forces to the T-4 air-base. The Russians provided high-quality air defense against air attacks on the route, air support and military experts (mainly artillery and special forces) for the Iranian and Syrian units. Significantly, the main activities took place not far from the US al-Tanf base that blocks the southern route from Iraq to Syria and where the Jihadist forces used to attack the northern route are being trained by US intelligence and special forces. Hence, the US should have gotten the message.

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All these developments are not lost on Jerusalem. Even as Israel remains immersed in a major political crisis in the aftermath of two inconclusive parliamentary elections, the security cabinet and the defense establishment are focused on the looming Iranian threat and the specter of a major war. The US betrayal and abandonment of the Kurds, reluctance to retaliate against Iran, and overall intent to withdraw from the Middle East both emboldens Tehran and petrifies Jerusalem that Israel will find itself alone facing a major war with Iran, its allies and proxies. Hence, Jerusalem concluded recently that it is no longer possible to discard the possibility of a major surprise attack by Iran and its main proxies - the HizbAllah and the HAMAS - that will aim to hit and destroy national infrastructure in the Israeli rear as well as inflict heavy civilian casualties - a known sensitivity of Israeli society. While Jerusalem is making strenuous efforts to be able to detect and forestall preparations for such a surprise attack - Jerusalem is increasingly apprehensive that this might not be possible and that Israel will therefore face a protracted and painful major war.

Israeli Intelligence now believes that Tehran has recently reached the same conclusions - namely, that there is no escape from a major war with Israel. The on-going low-level confrontation between Israel and Iran is leading nowhere. For Iran, the attrition, costs and delays caused by the Israeli strikes are painful - but they have failed to reverse the consolidation of the on-going access to the Mediterranean. With the war in Syria subsiding and the US threat in the Persian Gulf virtually removed - Tehran sees a unique opportunity to move quickly for the consolidation of an irreversible Shiite Crescent. Moreover, the on-going Turkish invasion and prospects for clashes with Syria make it imperative for Iran to secure the on-land route for a significantly larger flow of supplies and reinforcements - hence the growing sense of urgency. Therefore, Israeli intelligence



concluded, Tehran has resolved that there must soon be a dramatic breakout that will enable Iran to consolidate the posture of a major regional power and project this on the Persian Gulf as well.

The Houthi drone strikes on the Saudi oil installations in mid-May and mid-September serve as a wake-up call for Israeli intelligence. The extent of the damage caused and the accuracy of the hits exceed all prior estimates of the capabilities of Iran and the Iran-proxies. Israeli intelligence sources told Arie Egozi of *Breaking Defense* that both Saudi Arabia and the US suffered “a total and embarrassing (intelligence) failure” and “had no idea Iran was planning to attack the kingdom’s oil facilities.” The vaunted Israeli intelligence did not fare better. Emboldened by the dramatic success of the drone strikes on Saudi Arabia, Iran might be tempted to launch a similar attack on Israel before effective countermeasures are developed. Hence, Jerusalem is now worried more than before about the possibility of an Iranian surprise attack and the potential damage to Israeli strategic objectives.

Another key factor worrying Israel is the evolving Russian position vis-a-vis Iran. Russia has long objected to Iranian dominance over Syria and Iraq, but had to tolerate the Iranian presence because of the need for the Iran-controlled Shiite forces as cannon fodder for saving Damascus. But the Russian resolve is no longer as adamant as before. Russia’s growing disagreements and even tension with Turkey over the future of the greater Middle East, the greater Black Sea Basin and Central Asia are reaching new levels after the Turkish invasion of northern Syria and growing support for Russian- and Chinese- speaking Jihadists. The Kremlin is apprehensive that a crisis with Ankara might cause problems for the Russian passage through the Turkish Straits. Hence, Russia is considering alternate on-land routes for sending supplies to Syria - shipping from the Caucasus through Azerbaijan to Iran by rail, and then using the Iran-dominated route to the Russian bases on the Mediterranean. Hence, Moscow already asks Jerusalem to desist from attacking the route. This gives Iran better conditions for escalating. While media reports of Russian Air Force interceptors blocking and turning back Israeli Air Force strike formations are grossly exaggerated - they do reflect a growing Russian inclination to reduce the damage to the Tehran-Mediterranean route.

And so, Israel, commemorating the national trauma of the surprise attack of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, is watching anxiously the latest developments in Iran and the Middle East as a whole. The audacity of the new Iranian doctrine is clear, and so are the pertinent undertakings throughout the greater Middle East. As well, the repeated Iranian assertions of both the commitment and ability to destroy Israel unnerve Jerusalem. However, the Mullahs in Tehran have thus far been prudent and leery of taking unnecessary risks. Will the combination of the seeming urgent imperative for a dramatic breakout and the unique strategic and military opportunities tempt the Mullahs to grow bold and initiate war? Or might the building tension and mounting military preparations on both sides, Iran and Iran’s proxies and Israel, have life of their own - thus leading to an eruption of violence by design or accident? Meanwhile, the specter of an intelligence failure is keeping Israel on edge.

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



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