

Israel has not fully deterred Iranian aggression in Syria



An old Israeli tank with a flag overlooking the Syrian town of Quneitra in the Golan Heights on Feb. 11, 2018. Photo by Hadas Parush/Flash90.

(February 4, 2019 / JNS) Israel's now overt war against Iran has moved to the airwaves as well. At the Cybertech2019 conference held last week in Tel Aviv, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, "Iran threatens us in many other ways. They issued ... threats that say they'll destroy us. ... We're not oblivious to these threats. They don't impress us because we know what our power is, both in defense and in offense."

Netanyahu was responding to threats made by Hossein Salami, Iran's second-in-command of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who threatened recently to "eliminate" Israel if it tries to attack Iran. He said, "Our goal is to eradicate Israel from the world's political map."

Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani, a close aide to Iranian leader Ali Khamenei, threatened Israel as well, saying Iran would continue to develop its ballistic-missile capabilities to counter Israel's "acts of stupidity."

On Jan. 29, Dan Coats, U.S. director of national intelligence, warned of increased chances of a regional war when he told the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that “Israeli strikes that result in Iranian casualties increase the likelihood of Iranian conventional retaliation against Israel.”

In Coats’s view, Israel has not succeeded in deterring Iran from building up its military presence in Syria.

Indeed, Israel’s President Reuven Rivlin, speaking at the 11th annual INSS conference that just took place from Jan. 29-31 in Tel Aviv, warned that Iran will likely “intensify its responses” to Israeli strikes in Syria and will “retaliate with greater force.”

Efraim Inbar, president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, agrees with Coats. Inbar told JNS, “It’s a continuation of what we’ve seen before. We tried to prevent the enrichment of the military presence of Iran in Syria. So far, we have been successful in preventing [them from] establishing air bases and naval bases, and probably also bases for launching missiles. And we see a determined effort on the part of Israel, which is not likely to stop. On the other hand, we see a similar determined effort on the part of Iran. It’s not clear that so far we have been successful in deterring them from continuing.”

“I think the goal is clear—to establish an additional front near northern Israel on the other side of the Golan Heights, and they believe they will be able to establish something similar to what they have established successfully in Lebanon,” said Inbar. “To some extent, our determined effort is a clear admission that we were wrong about Lebanon. For years, we were saying that [Hezbollah’s] missiles will get old and not be effective, and we learned the hard lesson in 2006. So this is part of the Israeli learning curve. We are determined not to repeat this experience.”

Asked if Israel would pursue Iran in Iraq even if it pushed Iran out of Syria, he said, “There are reports of Israeli military activities in Iraq as well. Definitely we will try to do it anywhere possible. Iran is a nuclear issue. It’s a separate issue from Iran establishing a front for a war of attrition against Israel. We will continue to fight the Iranians and their proxies in Syria and elsewhere probably. A war of attrition will not solve the nuclear issue. [Syrian president Bashar] Assad is linked, of course, to the Russian intervention, and we have no interest in entering

into a conflict with the Russians. As long as Assad is not helping Iran, we do not care what kind of regime is beyond our borders.”

‘The Iranians have yet to be deterred’

Norman Roule, a former senior U.S. intelligence official and a senior adviser to United Against Nuclear Iran, also agreed with Coats. He told JNS, “Israel has now conducted hundreds of strikes, and the Iranians continue to build this infrastructure. Thus, the logical explanation is what Israel is doing is not yet a sufficient deterrent to Iran and the Quds Force to keep it from conducting these activities in the future. ... The Iranians have yet to be deterred. ... Iran has been able to move the border of confrontation to its adversary’s doorsteps, while at the same time removing it from its own border.”

“When you speak to policymakers around the world and the region, their first comment is that they wish to avoid a regional conventional war,” said Roule. “Well, let’s look at what we’ve got. We’ve had hundreds of Israeli airstrikes into Syria. I’d call that an air war. We’ve had hundreds of [Iranian-backed] missiles fired into Saudi Arabia. I’d call that a missile war. We’ve had naval activity, and we have finally some small numbers of Iranian ground forces in the Middle East. We have an Iranian war against the region already ongoing, but because it’s been disaggregated, it receives far less international attention than it should. The danger with all this is that Iran is changing the DNA of the region.”

He pointed out that Israel has “certainly been able to conduct multiple strikes against Syria, which have prevented the Iranians from establishing an infrastructure in that country. And the Quds force has significantly failed to establish an infrastructure in the Golan. This has also shown that Russia has shown some weakness. They have not been able to stop Iran from conducting these activities. They have not been able to stop Israel or the United States from punishing Iran or Bashar al-Assad.”

Asked what it would take for Iran to be deterred, Roule said, “It requires multilateral diplomatic and economic pressure of sufficient stature to cause the Iranians to believe that actions will risk an economic pressure that might threaten regime stability. ... They are going through a very difficult period. They are facing unprecedented and simultaneous demographic, economic, ecological, political and social crises. They are also looking at the succession of perhaps a new

supreme leader and a presidential election in 2021. Iran needs stability now more than ever, but Iran needs to know that the international community is opposed to its actions.”

Roule warned that any series of events could easily spiral into a regional war. “Unless the international community sets a real red line with the Iranians—and enforces that red line, and that involves some risk—Iran may believe there are no red lines and continue to push until they achieve a success such as a terrorist action, a missile strike [and/or] an armed drone strike, which could then compel the wounded party to undertake actions that provoke the regional war we all wish to avoid.”

“Iran has a very carefully considered calculation as to what they can achieve without facing serious consequences,” he continued. “And that is a statement on the international community’s response to terrorism, to missile proliferation, not just missiles in Iran’s own inventory that can strike Israel, but the missile technology they have provided to Hezbollah and to the Houthis, which is unacceptable. The drone attack that was conducted by the Houthis against the Yemenite government recently used the drone that was based on an Iranian system. That was the first action by a government—Iran in this case—using a proxy to kill an official of another government, I believe, in history.”

Asked if Iran will ultimately fire missiles at Israel, Roule said “we have seen the Iranians use the excuse of actions against ISIS to demonstrate their capacity to fire ballistic missiles into Syria. There are reports they have provided ballistic missiles to the Iraqis. I think for Israel, there is a danger not only that Iran might do this at some point in the future, but that they will give these weapons to Iraqi Shi’ite or certainly to Lebanese Hezbollah, which would then undertake this without Iran receiving any criticism from the international community because of Russian protection at the United Nations Security Council.”

Source: <https://www.jns.org/experts-agree-that-israel-has-not-yet-deterred-iranian-aggression-in-syria/>

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