

Will Israel launch a preemptive strike against Iran?

Rarely have I had the chance to cover a simple “feel-good” news story here in Israel: no bombs, no threats, no corruption. Most of Wednesday morning that is how it felt, standing at Ben Gurion Airport, as El Al’s first Boeing 787 Dreamliner arrived, direct from the Boeing plant in Seattle.

Talking to the executives of El Al, there was a sense of excitement you rarely see in any other business. For people in the aviation business there is no other event comparable to getting a new plane. As the plane landed and approached the hangar, thousands of El Al employees and their families excitedly awaiting the new arrival.

After the airport water trucks thoroughly hosed down the plane (the traditional greeting for newly acquired aircraft), one of the pilots opened a cockpit window and waved Israeli flags. For a few minutes, it seemed to be a throwback to earlier, simpler times.

For El Al, the event marked an important milestone. At the moment, El Al has one of the oldest fleets flying from Ben Gurion. Furthermore, El Al’s share of the passengers flying out of Israel’s international airport has dropped from 34.2 percent, during the second quarter of 2016 to 29.5 percent this year.

Traffic at Ben Gurion airport this year exceeded 20 million passengers, more than doubling in the last 10 years. So while El Al’s slice of the pie has gone down, it continues to carry the same number of total passengers.

El Al hopes the new and more efficient aircraft, replacing their aging planes, will make the airline more attractive and position the company to increase its share of passengers flying out of Ben Gurion once again.

Alas, the wistful feeling of being back in a simpler time came to an abrupt end when Israel’s Minister of Transportation, Yisrael Katz, got up to speak.

Katz is considered a leading contender in the Likud to replace Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu if Netanyahu is forced to resign due to corruption charges.

While Katz made the appropriate remarks welcoming the new state-of-the-art airliner and the assembled guests — among them, US Ambassador David Friedman — most of Katz's remarks did not touch on aviation. He chose instead to dwell on the Iranian threat to our north in Syria and warned about Iran developing unbroken influence across Iraq Syria and Lebanon.

Katz delivered his speech at almost the same time Netanyahu was meeting with Soviet President Vladimir Putin, 800 miles to the north, in Sochi on the Black Sea.

In Sochi, Netanyahu warned Putin of the same problems about Iran in an attempt to convince Putin that Israel and Russia have a shared interest in this matter. Netanyahu stated after the meeting that he had warned Putin that Israel has very clear red lines.

According to other Israeli observers, those red lines include the creation of permanent Iranian bases in Syria, whether for the Iranian Air Force or Navy.

On Wednesday evening, Veteran Israeli Channel 10 diplomatic correspondent, Moav Vardi speculated on whether Israel might consider a preventive attack against Iranian forces if they went ahead and began building a military base.

Vardi noted that on other matters, Israel had laid down clear red lines and when those lines were crossed, Israel had indeed acted. Last week, an Israeli delegation met with the US National Security Team to discuss Iranian actions in Syria.

Over the course of the Syrian Civil War, Israel has limited its involvement to providing medical assistance to the wounded and intercepting arms shipments bound for Lebanon.

Most Israeli observers did not believe Assad would be able to maintain his grip on power. Today, Israel is not only faced with a Syria still led by Assad, but by a Syria clearly operating under Iran's influence, with steadfast Russian protection.

Yesterday, Netanyahu said that Iran was trying to "Lebanize" Syria, (i.e., control it, as it does Lebanon.)

This constellation, with Iran's expanding sphere of influence, is beginning to keep Israeli planners up at night. It is looking like there is little Israel can do to change the situation. Yair Lapid, head of the Yesh Atid party, called the current situation, "A tremendous failure of Israeli foreign policy."

So much for those 'simpler times'.

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