

Strategic ASSESSMENT

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Strategic ASSESSMENT

The purpose of *Strategic Assessment* is to stimulate and enrich the public debate on issues that are, or should be, on Israel's national security agenda.

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Abstracts

Israel and the F-35 / Gur Laish

Does the IDF really need the F-35, its high cost notwithstanding? To tackle this question, the essay first identifies the F-35's unique features as a fifth generation fighter jet. It then examines the operational need for the F-35 through the prism of the Israel Air Force, specifically, the aircraft's ability to complete missions successfully in today's reality. The premise is that the ability to achieve aerial superiority is a key to effective use of the airpower, but the growing strength of Israel's enemies poses a central challenge to what once seemed assured: the IAF's achievement of aerial superiority. The essay clarifies whether the F-35 can provide a solution to the problem and whether a sufficient response might be provided by other alternatives.

The F-35 Deal: An Enlightened Purchase? / Yiftah S. Shapir

Israel's announcement that it intends to purchase the F-35 Lightning-II fighter plane has aroused much controversy in Israel, particularly given the cost of each aircraft. The critical question, then, is what the new planes will contribute to IAF capability that cannot be obtained without this purchase. The article describes Israel's role in the Joint Strike Fighter project and raises questions of price vs. performance, the plane's ability to cope with future threats, possible alternative systems, the benefit to local industry, and the salient points in the decision making process regarding the purchase. Technical data about the plane and the disputes that the project has sparked in other countries appear in an appendix to this article.

A Green Light on Iran? / Ephraim Kam

In recent months there has been increased public discussion in the United States about military action against Iranian nuclear sites, bet it by the US or by Israel. While the US has in principle not ruled out a military attack on Iran, in practice it has evinced major reluctance, and Israel will have a hard time carrying it out without a green light from the US. In order for the administration to consider the military option positively, a

change is needed in its assessment of the balance of chances and risks of the action, and the amount of domestic and international support for it. This article examines American and Israeli considerations concerning military action against Iran, and reviews how the American position may affect Israel's considerations.

A Home Front Law for Israel / Meir Elran

Although the Home Front Law has been brewing in the Knesset for a long time, it has encountered numerous obstacles in the legislative process and is caught between different sectors with conflicting views as to what the law should encompass and where its emphasis should lie. The recent fire in the Carmel Forest demonstrated yet once more Israel's limited deployment potential for extreme emergency cases. The purpose of this article is to argue the necessity of the law, analyze what should be included among its central components, and propose a framework for those responsible for the preparedness of the civilian front.

Obama and Israel: Two Years Back, and Two Years Ahead / Mark A. Heller

A review of his first two years in office shows that some popular and populist ideas notwithstanding, President Obama's policies are generally consistent with the major thrust of American policies of the past several decades. Nonetheless, the potential for future tension and conflict in US-Israel relations cannot be precluded. If that potential is realized, it will certainly be due at least in part to the belief occasionally framed by the administration that everything important in the Middle East is linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that the major onus for removing that irritant falls on Israel. But it will also be due to a perception in the critical center of the American body politic that Israel is not doing what can reasonably be expected of it.

New Directions in Russia's Foreign Policy: Implications for the Middle East / Zvi Magen and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky

Russia's search for the best way to integrate in the international system and promote its ambitions has led to substantive changes in Russia's foreign policy approach in the past two decades. The result has been noticeable active Russian involvement in major international issues

such as relations with the US; arms control; development of relations with the EU and NATO; and the Middle East. For Russia, which only recently found itself on the fringes of the major international processes, this is an attempt to change its standing and regain a central role in the international arena. The article surveys the developments in Russian foreign policy and the practical implementation of this policy, while examining its ramifications for the Middle East.

“Made in Iran”: The Iranian Involvement in Iraq / Yoel Guzansky

Evidence of Iran’s involvement in Iraq has mounted in recent years. The military assistance Iran supplies the Shiite militias in Iraq – in financing, training, and armaments – has drawn most of the attention. At the same time, Iranian involvement in Iraq has political, economic, and religious dimensions, whereby Iran is seeking to forge a state with Shiite dominance sharing Iran’s interests, a state that would not threaten Iran’s standing in the region and would be as free of American influence as possible. The essay seeks to examine the nature of this involvement and the motivation behind it, as well as its limits and possible ramifications.

Peace vs. Justice in Lebanon: The Domestic and Regional Implications of the UN Special Tribunal / Benedetta Berti

Reports of forthcoming indictments of Hizbollah members in connection with the 2005 assassination of Rafiq Hariri have sparked significant consequences. Regionally, the political crisis created by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigation has increased the influence of Syria and Saudi Arabia on Lebanon, and Lebanon is subject to intense international pressure both from the pro-STL camp (especially the US) and from the supporters of Hizbollah (Syria and Iran). Domestically, tension has grown between the March 14 and the March 8 opposition forces. The article looks at how the expected indictments have been propelled to the center of Lebanese domestic and foreign policy, and it analyzes the regional implications of the current state of affairs.

Israel and the F-35

Gur Laish

Does the IDF really need the F-35, its high cost notwithstanding?

To tackle this question, the essay below first identifies the F-35's unique features as a fifth generation fighter jet. It then examines the operational need for the F-35 through the prism of the Israel Air Force, specifically, the aircraft's ability to complete missions successfully in today's reality. The premise is that the ability to achieve aerial superiority is a key to effective use of the airpower: the discussion clarifies what precisely is necessary to achieve in order to enjoy aerial superiority and the effect that superiority has on how the force is used. Although a full discussion of the radical change in today's threat and its effect on achieving aerial superiority lies beyond the scope of this essay, the growing strength of Israel's enemies, both in theory and in practice, poses a central challenge to what once seemed assured: the IAF's achievement of aerial superiority. The essay clarifies whether the F-35 can provide a solution to the problem and whether a sufficient response might be provided by other alternatives.

The discussion of alternatives to the F-35 is limited to options that will be available in the near future, and does not examine alternatives in the initial planning stages, whose capabilities and costs are impossible to predict. This focus is essential for an informed, concrete discussion of IAF force buildup in the IDF's five year plan. Future alternatives cannot play a role in fighter jet contracts signed today. However, a discussion of advanced (and distant future) alternatives to the traditional understanding of aerial superiority as a key to the effective deployment of the air force is not irrelevant and may, in fact, be essential. However, it requires separate and comprehensive deliberations and should not

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influence present force buildup; the defense establishment would do well to engage in that debate regarding future force buildup.

The F-35 is a fifth generation fighter jet. Its unique advantages include:

- a. Stealth technology / low signature, which allows the jet to deal with airborne and land-based radar and perform even in areas defended with surface-to-air missiles or advanced planes. Its edge lies in the capability to handle threats independently while flying through the operational spheres, as opposed to fourth generation planes, which are dependent on a system-wide response.
- b. Network capability: The plane has information sharing and shared operational capabilities with other planes and means of combat, thereby allowing greater operational output.
- c. Sensor fusion: The plane allows the pilot to deal with a large amount of information gathered by the plane itself that arrives through the network, thereby allowing for full utilization of the plane's and the system's capabilities.
- d. The plane is built with economic considerations in mind, i.e., operation at reasonable costs (compared to advanced technologies and capabilities).

The need for the F-35 is derived from the Air Force's missions, which are driven by the need to deter Israel's enemies from embarking on a war and to serve as a central means of victory in the event that a war nevertheless breaks out.

The Strategic Effect of the Aerial Balance of Power

The decision on whether or not to go to war is affected primarily by a comparison of power between the sides, with airpower being a primary factor in this equation. For example, Sadat was prepared to launch the Yom Kippur War only after he was guaranteed aerial superiority that could protect Egyptian forces on the east bank of the Suez Canal. The understanding that he would not have aerial superiority outside the range of the surface-to-air missiles was what made him curtail his goals for the war. Similarly, the absolute superiority displayed by the Israel Air Force in the First Lebanon War in attacking the surface-to-air missile batteries on the Syrian-Lebanese border and the aerial battles that followed was a significant factor in Syria's decision not to open a second front on the Golan Heights. The fact that the Syrians managed to delay the IDF's

advance on the eastern front of Lebanon might perhaps have encouraged them to think they could deal with the IDF on the Golan Heights as well, yet they remained deterred.

The very fact that the Israel Air Force operates the most advanced planes is a deterrent in the balance of power, and thus the element of deterrence, central in Israel's security concept, almost automatically requires the military to equip itself with the most advanced planes available. In fact, this is what Israel has always done in the past. Deterrence is especially strengthened by fifth generation planes, capable of dealing with advanced aerial defenses and fourth generation planes (such as the MiG-29, the F-15, and the F-16).

The Meaning of Aerial Superiority in War

In order to become an effective force in the combat theater, an air force must both attain sufficient capability of action and deny the enemy its capability of action. A situation in which an air force has effective capability of action in the sphere under discussion is called "aerial superiority." The F-35 has been constructed in order to attain just such aerial superiority, and that is its primary asset.

Aerial superiority is not a fixed, immutable quality. Capability of action is a function of the weapon systems operated and the manner in which force is deployed. In order for the Allies (particularly the United States) to carry out the daytime attacks undertaken in World War II in Europe, they needed to be escorted by interception planes and fly in tight attack formations. The significant firepower allowed them to create local aerial superiority at the time of the attack. As long as the Luftwaffe operated effectively, this form of attack granted sufficient aerial superiority to the Americans, even at the cost of considerable numbers of downed planes and pilots. The reliance on escorts limited American operations to the maximum range of the escort planes, which was significantly less than the range of the bombers (hence the importance and the decisive effect of the long range Mustang). The British Royal Air Force chose to attack by night, thereby greatly decreasing the effectiveness of German intercepting planes and the need to deal with them, albeit at the expense of the quality of nighttime attacks. Obviously, there were tradeoffs in the use and effectiveness of force and the degree of aerial superiority. In the Yom Kippur War, the Israel Air Force found it very difficult to assist the

ground forces because it did not succeed in achieving aerial superiority by attacking the missile batteries on the front.

Aerial superiority thus changes according to the nature of the action. The manner of operating the aerial force is a function of the aerial superiority it has. To ensure that the aerial force is effective, it requires sufficient aerial superiority for its operational capabilities. Consequently, the effect of new weapon systems on the need for aerial superiority is an important factor. Autonomous precision guided weapons (self-guided munitions, directed to the target without a pilot) with gliding capabilities, such as the JDAM (a GPS-guided gliding bomb), make it possible to attack targets from ranges of 20 km and up. This sharpens the question of the extent of aerial superiority needed in the classic sense of flying over the target region: on the face of it, it is possible to attack the targets from outside the region defended by missiles (standoff attack). One could theoretically say that aerial superiority is not necessary on the front because it is possible to attack targets from one's own territory, without the need for entering missile-defended areas. However:

- a. The ranges of anti-aircraft missiles are growing. It is therefore impossible to ensure that the bombs' glide range would provide a full response to an attack.
- b. The nature of the targets on the front is varied. Some are stationary, which can be easily attack by standoff attack, but others are mobile and cannot be attacked with JDAMs.
- c. The number of targets is large. Moreover, any enemy that understands the attack capabilities of the Israel Air Force is increasingly scattering its targets in order to prevent devastating damage by a limited number of sorties. In addition, efforts are made to conceal the targets so that it is difficult to pinpoint them with precision (e.g., it is possible to know that a particular force is located within a said site but not precisely where in that site). The combination of these two factors requires the use of a great deal of ammunition, and at times precision is no substitute for quantity (e.g., when there is uncertainty about the exact location of the target). This combination greatly increases the cost of relying on standoff precision weapons (e.g., the JDAM, and even more so when more expensive and sophisticated weapons are at stake).
- d. The greater the reliance on standoff weapons, the greater the need to remain above the target with unmanned vehicles in order to gather

intelligence and locate the targets. This need intensifies further in relation to “the disappearing battlefield,” the manner the enemy chooses to overcome aerial superiority. In order to allow for longer flight times for aerial vehicles above the battlefield, a sufficient measure of aerial superiority is required, because while risks to unmanned aircrafts are acceptable, it is impossible to operate them if their attrition rate is too high.

Thus in order to operate effectively above the ground front, standoff fire alone is insufficient. A level of aerial superiority that will allow fighter plane activity above the targets is necessary, which will also enable sufficient aircraft activity at tolerable attrition levels.

From the point of view of defense, it is important to look ahead and recognize that the enemy too will have standoff capabilities (more or less effective). Therefore, it will be necessary to defend not only from the air above the battlefield but also to down the enemy’s planes while they are still in enemy airspace (standoff from their perspective). To attain this, enough aerial superiority is necessary to allow the flight of interceptors on the front. In addition, there are situations in which it is impossible to use long range air-to-air missiles and it is necessary to reach the targets themselves in order to down them. The reason may be operational, e.g., the need to identify the target by sight, or technological, e.g., the counter-means to disrupt radar missiles that require the use of heat-seeking missiles. Hence, also from a defensive viewpoint, the Air Force is required to achieve enough aerial superiority above the front.

Types, Numbers, and Dynamics of Targets

In addition to fighting on the front, the Air Force is required to act deep in enemy territory. Enemy rocket and surface-to-surface missile systems are stationed in and operated from the rear of its territory. The classic military infrastructures, such as airfields and concentrations of enemy reserves, are far from the front. Operations in the depth will encounter a defense system that is less dense than the one on the front (because it is impossible to concentrate defenses throughout the sphere), but there is

The very fact that the Israel Air Force operates the most advanced planes affects the balance of power, and thus the element of deterrence almost automatically requires the military to equip itself with the most advanced planes available.

no doubt that where the enemy has significant assets there will be aerial defense systems.

The method of operating deep in enemy territory depends on the nature of the targets. Fixed targets, such as airfields and strategic installations, may be attacked even in the absence of aerial superiority by standoff attacks (usually this involves a limited number of high quality targets). Numbers and mobility are additional factors when dealing with rocket and missile systems; as these may require being airborne in the enemy's rear for an extended period for intelligence gathering and attack, a level of aerial superiority deep in enemy territory is necessary as well. The ability to operate in the enemy's rear also has strategic value because attacking Israel with firepower from the rear is a central pillar in the attempt by Syria (and Hizbollah) to curtail Israel's strategic advantage. The F-35 would allow penetrating and operating in the depth because of its stealth capabilities. The aerial superiority the F-35 would achieve would allow effective action of other systems, such as drones and fourth generation fighter planes. The more the enemy relies on mobile, concealed rocket and missile systems in their territorial depth, so the need for continuous action in the rear increases. The F-35 would be the central component of this capability.

Accordingly, the F-35 is needed for both direct action and attainment of aerial superiority in the enemy's depth. Sometimes Israel needs to be able to operate in enemy territory even in the absence of a wartime confrontation. Such activity cannot rely on early attacks of aerial defense systems, because the intention would usually be to carry out a surprise operation limited in time and with low chances for escalation. The ability to penetrate areas defended by missiles without having to attack them on the one hand, and with high chances of success and survivability on the other, has critical implications for the decision to carry out such an operation to begin with. Therefore, such ability has strategic importance. The F-35 is well suited to the nature of such operations (possible alternatives will be examined later in the essay).

The need to attain aerial superiority must be examined in context of how the force is used and the challenges posed by the enemy in terms of targets (their numbers and quality). The need for aerial superiority is not axiomatic. However, because the enemy adapts to improved fire capabilities, it is still necessary to have a significant level of superiority,

and the ability to achieve it is the basis for attaining the Air Force's missions in the foreseeable future. Moreover, beyond the significance in terms of how airpower is used is the strategic significance for the enemy's willingness to continue to fight. If the enemy becomes convinced that it does not have sufficient aerial defenses, the enemy is likely to end the war.

A Threat to the IAF's Ability to Attain Aerial Superiority?

The struggle between "the missile and the wing of the plane" is not new, and has in fact recurred repeatedly since the introduction of surface-to-air missiles in the early 1960s. Missiles had almost no effect on the Six Day War, and the IAF attained absolute aerial superiority immediately at the start of the war. To a large extent, the War of Attrition revolved around the fight between missile systems and IAF capabilities to prevent these from being deployed along the Suez Canal sector. The War of Attrition ended with Egypt's deployment of missiles along the Canal, which in 1973 allowed it to cross the Canal and establish itself defensively on the eastern bank.

During the Yom Kippur War, "the missile bent the wing of the plane" and the Air Force understood the need for developing missile attack capabilities. Such capabilities matured and were demonstrated in the First Lebanon War, and both sides improved their capabilities at the end of the war and immediately afterwards: the Syrians introduced SA-8 mobile missiles and the SA-5 countrywide defensive systems, while the IAF expanded its countermeasures. Over the next 25 years, Israel had absolute aerial superiority in the arena. Recent years have shown an upswing in Syrian (and Iranian) construction of aerial defensive capabilities, prompted by a number of factors:

- a. The recovery of Russia (and its military industry) from the collapse of the USSR and the return of Russian industry to the forefront of technology, where it is engaged in the development and implementation of aggressive attempts to market advanced defensive systems.

New Syrian and Iranian aerial defense capabilities and related challenges are slowly questioning the IAF's previously assured capability of attaining regional superiority.

- b. Significant economic support for Syria by Iran, thereby allowing Syria to equip itself, following a long lapse, with imported weapon systems.
- c. Syrian understanding that it must change the strategic balance of power with the Israel Air Force if it wishes to be a significant player in the region.

These strategic changes have already been reflected in purchases of defensive systems. Iran procured the SA-15 systems for advanced localized defense; Syria bought the SA-17 for defending high interest targets, such as the front. In addition, there have been contacts, which have not yet developed into signed contracts, for the purchase of the S-300 systems by both countries. This general trend and the related new challenges are slowly questioning the IAF's previously assured capability of attaining aerial superiority.

The chief capability of the F-35 – its stealth technology – allows it to operate with much greater immunity in areas defended by surface-to-air missiles. As such, it is designed to be a central factor in attacking defensive systems and in attaining the required superiority. In addition, its other features – e.g., networking, sensor fusion – turn it into an effective tool against aerial defensive missile systems. Currently the Air Force can attain sufficient aerial superiority, and means for dealing with advanced surface-to-air missiles other than the F-35 are being developed. However, in the long term, stealth capabilities are at the forefront of future technology. The Israel Air Force must acquire stealth capabilities that will allow it to penetrate defended areas and create sufficient aerial superiority. In this context, one may look at the alternatives to the F-35 as improved versions of fourth generation planes. To the extent that these will allow fourth generation aircraft to operate effectively in areas defended with advanced surface-to-air missiles, they represent relevant alternatives. However, it is not at all clear how one improves a platform like the F-15 such that it will have stealth capabilities without going into a whole new plane development project (e.g., the F-22).

Maintaining the Qualitative Edge

Russia's renewed production and sale of high quality weapons, sales by countries in the Far East, and the economic situation in the United States and Europe makes the American (and European) need to sell advanced weapons to states in the region that are not direct enemies of Israel,

e.g., Saudi Arabia, more acute than ever. In order to compete with other weapons manufacturers, the Americans must sell the most innovative systems, as with, for example, the recently publicized arms deal to sell and upgrade F-15s to Saudi Arabia. Such weapons deals affect the region both directly and indirectly: directly, in that the very sale of these weapons to the Saudis makes it easier to sell similar weapons to other countries; indirectly, because weapons such as these in Saudi hands spark an arms race among its enemies and motivates them to attain the same weapons. It also legitimizes sales, so that at the end of the process, the entire region is armed with better weapons than before.

However, maintaining Israel's qualitative edge over the region's armed forces of enemies and non-enemies is an important component of Israel's security concept, and the United States is even obligated to this principle by law. When weapons that are identical and at times even superior to what Israel has are sold to other actors in the region, this challenges Israel's qualitative edge, and the only way to maintain the gap in quality in the air is by purchasing and operating the next generation of weapon systems. Maintaining the qualitative advantage has strategic significance for deterrence and may have concrete effects in a confrontation. The regional arms race forces Israel to equip itself with the next generation of weapon systems.

Renewal

The need for the F-35 also stems from the much more prosaic aspect of lifespan: the IAF fleet is aging. The lifespan of planes is limited even if programs to extend it are implemented. When looking at the IAF ORBAT, the first and most important question from a budget standpoint is its size, which has operational significance determining the capability to carry out missions in a given timeframe. However, it also has a strategic impact. Benny Peled, commander of the IAF during the Yom Kippur War, was quoted as saying that one additional day of attrition would bring the Air Force to a red line, under which it would be appropriate to seek a ceasefire. Whether such a red line in fact

While surface-to-surface missiles can serve as an important means of firepower, it cannot serve as a complete substitute for the F-35 in particular and fighter planes in general, and therefore cannot be seen as an alternative but only as a complement to the military's firepower.

exists is immaterial; what is important is the ORBAT's effect on decision makers.

However, almost without any connection to the size of the ORBAT, aging and obsolescence require ongoing ORBAT renewal. As such, a purchase is required every decade. The scope of the deal relates to ORBAT size, but the very need for a fighter jet deal is a direct derivative of ORBAT age and the possibility of extending its lifespan. Once one understands the need for a purchase, it is possible to examine alternatives to the F-35. Note, though, that even if one contends that the Air Force's ORBAT ought to be reduced in favor of the increased ORBAT of unmanned vehicles, a fighter jet deal is still a necessity.

Examining the Alternatives

Against this discussion of the primary reasons the Israel Air Force needs the F-35, it is necessary to investigate whether there are alternatives that can provide a different response to the operational needs.

Improved F-15s and F-16s

Periodically various proposals are heard such as "F-15s with low radar return," but these do not provide an actual response to the question of whether the improved airplane can operate independently over advanced aerial defense systems. Moreover, were it possible to come up with such an effective improvement, it would have been the first to compete for the tender that was won by the F-35, as the high cost of the latter is a burden also to the Americans and their partners – who clearly do not have a magic solution to the challenge.

Surface-to-Surface (or Sea-to-Surface) Missiles

The enemy's development of firepower as well as very advanced capabilities of the Israeli military industries at times raise the need to examine alternatives to the F-35 (and perhaps even to fighter planes generally) in the form of attack capabilities by surface-to-surface missiles.

This alternative seems to have the advantage in terms of durability in the face of the enemy's firepower in that it is not dependent on air bases that are (erroneously, in my opinion) seen as vulnerable to enemy attack and in its capability of meeting the enemy's most advanced air defense systems. This essay will not expand on this point, but the Air

Force's bases are not so vulnerable to enemy fire if it is not highly precise, primarily because since the 1960s the Air Force has been prepared to act under aerial attacks.

On the face of it, it would seem that the surface-to-surface missile provides a good solution for attacking stationary targets. The real test must include an examination of the size of the warhead and its penetration ability against the targets and also an examination of the number of targets it would be necessary to attack. However, surface-to-surface missiles are liable to be problematic when it comes to mobile targets; even if it is possible to pinpoint the targets, the time it takes for a missile to reach the target (a few minutes) can allow the target to move and the missile to miss its mark. Updating the missile during its flight time is not impossible, but it is not simple and an updating of this kind is also limited. Large warheads are usually not required to destroy moving targets, as they are not fortified, but there is a tradeoff between the size of the warhead and the degree of uncertainty about the precise location of the target. For example, in order to attack a surface-to-air missile system, a very precise pinpointing capability is required of the radar or warhead with a very large kill radius. One may compromise on the kill radius by relying on systems with independent precision homing capabilities or with human intervention (a person receiving intelligence and directing the weapons accordingly), but these systems are themselves vulnerable to missiles, as they are quite slow.

Similar to the discussion about aerial superiority, when one examines the need to confront mobile enemy systems, unmanned aircraft are required to stay aloft in the area of the targets. Such flights may be logical if in tandem activity takes place to attain aerial superiority in the area. If the concept of aerial superiority is exchanged for use of surface-to-surface missiles, unless a supporting effort is made to attain aerial superiority to ensure the activity of the unmanned vehicles, it is not clear that it is at all possible to pinpoint the moving targets.

Finally, it is necessary to examine the numbers of targets to be attacked. Precision surface-to-surface missiles (unlike mid-range non-precision rockets held by the thousands both by Hizbollah and Syria) are not cheap when compared to aerial weapons (not the platforms). The present discussion cannot include the actual numbers, but such a

financial evaluation would conclude that it is impossible to exchange all aerial attacks for attacks by surface-to-surface missiles.

Thus, although surface-to-surface missiles can indeed serve as an effective if not important means of firepower in the IDF repertoire, it cannot serve as a complete substitute for the F-35 in particular and fighter planes in general, and therefore cannot be discussed as an alternative but only as a complement to the military's firepower.

Unmanned Vehicles

Some publications depict the F-35 as the last manned vehicle, and some people argue that even now it is unwise to invest in so expensive a manned airplane, and it would be more appropriate to expand the use of drones and other unmanned vehicles (UAVs). However, the term UAV includes many different types and therefore a more detailed discussion is in order.

When UAVs made their modest entry into the aerial arena, the craft were cheap and used only for observation. Later development endowed them with many new capabilities, both in terms of observation and attack (most American attack activity in Afghanistan is carried out by the Predator drone equipped with Hellfire missiles). However, as capabilities improve, costs rise. While it was relatively easy to risk the cheaper models, the more expensive vehicles are also few and far between. Although their use in threatened areas does not endanger human lives, it does become impractical militarily if their rate of attrition is high (i.e., they are used up before a mission is accomplished). Moreover, if drones are weighed as an alternative to the F-35, they are also required to carry heavy weapons (or intelligence gathering equipment, for example). This means that a large platform is needed, and that is by no means inexpensive (though certainly nowhere near as costly as the F-35). For the larger UAV to be resistant to advanced defense systems (and advanced airplanes), it must have advanced technologies, be they evasive or defensive systems. As such, manning aerial vehicles does not dramatically affect the cost or the ability to operate them in the arena of interest.

This is not to say that no worthwhile operational product is possible from UAVs in general and from advanced UAVs in particular. However, inexpensive models whose attrition can be sustained are of limited capabilities; on the other hand, costly vehicles have no significant advantage as an alternative to the F-35 (beyond the fact that the latter

do not yet exist). In other words, the contribution of the UAV would be in certain fields and areas; the UAV does not seem as a complete replacement for the F-35, and therefore the discussion must focus on it as a complement rather than an alternative.

It is not impossible that the future will offer a more complete solution to missions deep in enemy territory by a combination of intelligence gathering from the air, standoff capabilities, and advanced UAVs with varied fire capabilities – missiles, flights over enemy territory, and standoff fire – but these capabilities certainly do not yet exist and therefore cannot be relied on as alternatives to the F-35. There is also no guarantee that when they do develop they will in fact provide a sufficient response.

Conclusion

Equipping the Israel Air Force with the F-35 has strategic importance in terms of deterring the enemy from starting a war and in terms of maintaining Israel's qualitative advantage in the arena. Effective use of the IAF in a war requires aerial superiority that allows activity for fighter jets on the front and above choice regions deep in enemy territory. Aerial superiority is required to allow the continuous operation of unmanned vehicles at a reasonable rate of attrition. In light of the development of aerial defense systems in Syria and Iran, attaining aerial superiority faces unprecedented challenges. The main features of the F-35 would allow it to operate before aerial superiority is achieved and be the primary tool for attaining it.

The regional arms race requires Israel to equip itself with the next generation of weapon systems in order to provide a response to new weapons entering the arena now and those that will be introduced in the future. An examination of alternatives in the form of surface-to-surface missiles and advanced UAVs demonstrates that despite their expected contribution they cannot serve as complete substitutes to fifth generation fighter jets. This support for the purchase of the F-35, however, should be joined by a discussion about the gamut of the response in the more distant future. It may provide solutions in other directions of force buildup.

The F-35 Deal: An Enlightened Purchase?

Yiftah S. Shapir

In August 2010, Defense Minister Ehud Barak announced his decision to accept the IDF's recommendation to purchase the F-35 Lightning II¹ as the future fighter plane of the air force.² An agreement in principle on this issue was signed in October 2010 by the director general of the Defense Ministry during his visit to Washington. The deal has long been controversial, and the debates about it have been underway for several years, both between Israel and the United States and within the Israeli defense establishment. It was recently announced that the state comptroller also intends to review the decision making processes.

The purchase of the plane has aroused debate not only in Israel. Similar discussions are taking place in the media and in legislative bodies in other countries participating in the project. In all the countries that have expressed a desire to purchase the aircraft, questions are asked about price vs. performance, its ability to cope with future threats, possible alternative systems, the benefit to local industry, and decision making processes.

This article describes Israel's role in the project and highlights the salient points in the decision making process regarding the purchase. Technical data about the plane and the disputes that the project has sparked in countries that have made a commitment to purchase the plane appear in an appendix to this article.

Israel and the JFS Project

The concept behind the development of fifth generation combat aircraft lies in the aircraft of the previous generation.³ The idea was to procure

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a small number of air superiority combat aircraft: large, expensive, and with cutting edge technology. They would be complemented by a large number of multi-role combat aircraft, less capable but smaller and more affordable. During the 1970s this approach led to the development of the large F-15, and the smaller and cheaper F-16. By the late 1980s and early 1990s two projects were initiated: the Advanced Tactical Fighter (ATF), which eventually produced the F-22A, and the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), which was meant to be the “affordable” aircraft, to be procured in large numbers.

From its inception the JSF project was unique. It was meant to be used by three branches of the US military: the US Air Force (USAF), the Navy, and the Marine corps (USMC). Traditionally these three branches have very different requirements, and apart from some rare exceptions (most notably the F-4 Phantom) these three branches have operated different types of aircraft throughout their history. Because of the different requirements, the JSF was to be designed with three different versions with a high percentage of shared features.

In addition, from its early stages, the project was opened to allies. The project managers defined three levels of participation, and participants were required to invest funds in accordance with their levels of participation. Eventually eight countries participated: United Kingdom, Canada, Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Italy, and Turkey. Participants could influence – in accordance with their investment – the design requirements and secure chunks of the orders for their national defense industries. In later stages two states, Israel and Singapore, received a status of observer (without the power to influence the design requirements).

Israel thus began its romance with fifth generation planes at the end of the previous decade. Anyone familiar with the history of security cooperation between Israel and the United States could be sure that Israel would rush to purchase the most advanced models of the US-made fighter planes well before any other country in the Middle East. In the early years of the twenty-first century, it was the F-22 – then at an advanced stage of development – that was discussed. Israel expressed its desire to purchase it, and President Bill Clinton, notwithstanding Congress’s decision in 1997 to forbid export of the plane, promised Israel in the last days of his term in office that it could purchase the plane.

In parallel, the possibility was raised that Israel would join the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) project.⁴ Ultimately, however, Israel was not included in the project at this point, both because of its decision not to invest in the project and because of American reservations about Israel's participation – mainly fears of technology leaks – and the reluctance to meet Israel's special demands concerning the model it would purchase. However, Israel was included with a special status of observer, without permission to be involved or influence the configuration of the plane. For their part, the heads of the defense establishment in Israel expressed their confidence that in any case Israel would be among the first to receive the plane upon its completion.

In 2003, the United States agreed to upgrade Israel's status on the project to security cooperation participant, and Israel agreed to invest a sum of some \$50 million in the project (for the purpose of comparison, Britain invested \$2.7 billion).⁵ Once again, the question arose of customizing the plane for Israel's unique needs. The first controversial issue concerned the possibility of a two-seat model. The Israel Air Force prefers to use two-seater planes and divide the operating load of the plane between the pilot and the navigator/systems operator. The F-35 was planned as a single-seat plane, and its designers believed that its advanced systems would make the additional crew member unnecessary. The second controversial issue concerned installation of Israeli systems on the plane, including:

- a. Weapon systems, such as the Python-5 and Derby missiles. From a technical point of view, this is the easiest aspect to carry out, and the demand that is easiest to comply with.
- b. Installation of Israeli electronics systems. In particular, Israel is very interested in installing Israeli-made electronic warfare systems. Israel considers these systems as especially suitable to the needs of the arena, much more than the original systems in the plane.
- c. The possibility of replacing the plane's radar with Israeli-made radar.
- d. Access to the plane's software source code. This was a difficult demand for the planners,

The success of the F-35 project, one of the US defense establishment's largest projects, is important to the administration. Israel's purchase of the plane will undoubtedly be seen as encouragement to other countries to purchase the plane, and a clear boost for the project.

but such access is essential for installing Israeli systems on the plane that are integrated into the plane's software system.

Even at the initial stages, the cost of the plane, which initially was estimated at some \$50-60 million per unit, raised many eyebrows. However, despite the concern and the misgivings, as early as 2007 an official decision was made in Israel to purchase the plane. The formal request was submitted to the United States in August 2008, and the following month a request was submitted for approval by Congress. The request was for the initial sale of twenty-five planes of the conventional model (CTOL – F-35A), with an option for another fifty of the conventional model or the vertical landing model (CTOVL – F-35B).⁶

Although at that time the plane's price was estimated at \$78 million per unit, the estimated value of the deal – assuming that all the options were realized – was \$15.5 billion (a total cost of \$206 million per unit, a package that included the various components, such as building the infrastructure, establishing maintenance infrastructure, spare parts parts, and more).

After approval of the request the real negotiations began, and as expected, there were disagreements concerning Israel's special requests. The American side refused to approve the installation of Israeli equipment, and they also opposed Israeli access to the classified source code. Instead, it was suggested that Israel submit its particular demands to the manufacturer. Interestingly, these snags were not unique to Israel. Britain too threatened at a certain stage to withdraw from the project over the questions of access to the source code. And in the meantime, delays in the plane's development also affected the deal. The target date for the beginning of serial production of the plane was postponed four years, from delivery in 2010 to delivery in 2014, and with it, the price per unit rose.

The details of the deal announced in August 2010 have not yet become clear, and in particular, which of Israel's demands have been met and which demands Israel has decided to forego. Recent reports are that the target date for the F-35A and F-35C models to become operational has been postponed again until 2016. This change will undoubtedly affect the date of delivery of the planes to Israel.

The Merits of the Deal

Israel has always seen its qualitative advantage as a crucial component of its security, and the United States has also affirmed its commitment to maintain Israel's qualitative edge. More than in any other branch this advantage is expressed in the air force, and Israel has always been equipped with the most up-to-date planes. As such, the purchase of the F-35 was an obvious move. Nonetheless, the rationale of the purchase merits careful consideration.

Threats

An assessment of an air force and specifically its fighter planes must consider the regional arena and the threats it holds for fighter planes and their operation, today and in the future (since the planes purchased today will have to cope with threats in the arena in another twenty or even thirty years).

Air forces in the region. A number of countries in the Middle East operate Western fighter planes that are among the most advanced in existence. Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey are equipped with a large number of F-16C/Ds; the UAE has F-16E/Fs (a model that was developed especially for them, which is comparable to the Israeli F-16I); and Saudi Arabia purchased the European Typhoon and operates a large number of F-15s of various models (the purchase of eighty-four additional F-15s, of a more advanced model, was recently approved). Today none of these countries is seen as a threat to Israel. They are all allies of the United States; Jordan and Egypt have peace treaties with Israel; and the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, are considered de facto partners in the Israeli struggle against the Iranian threat. However, this does not obviate the concern that in the longer term any country operating advanced Western weapons may become an enemy of Israel.

The more hostile countries are actually not capable of threatening Israel in the air. Syria has an outdated air force; its newest planes are MiG-29s purchased before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Lebanon has no combat aircraft and is not expected to have any in the near future. The Iranian air force is outdated, and because of Iran's distance does not constitute a serious threat.

In the realm of technology, the F-35 must be able to confront upgraded Western planes, many of which will have similar capabilities to its own,

such as the F-15s or F-16s equipped with AESA radar. Another threat is the new generation of Russian-made fighter planes, led by the Su-35S, which entered service over the past year in Russia, and two models of future planes made by Sukhoi (T-50) and Mikoyan, which will be full-fledged fifth generation fighter planes. Indeed, the advanced models of the Su-35 were developed with the threats from the fifth generation American planes, like the F-22, in mind. Thus, for example, this plane is equipped with secondary VHF air-to-air radar (a wave-band in which the radar cross section of the F-35 and the F-22 is not reduced).

Air Defense. As in the air-to-air realm, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states have air defense forces based on American systems, mainly the improved Hawk (which is outdated) and various models of the Patriot. Syria has thick, but outdated, Soviet-made surface-to-air missile force. In Lebanon and from Gaza, the main threat is from shoulder launched missiles, some of them among the most advanced Russian models.

In the distant future, sophisticated Russian-made air defense systems are expected to be introduced into the arena, as well as Chinese imitations of these systems: the S-300PMU-2 and the S-400. Again, advanced models of these systems have already been built with the threat of fifth generation fighter planes in mind, and therefore they have means of overcoming the stealth capabilities (such as use of radar in the VHF range).

High Trajectory Weapons. A serious threat to all future Israel air force activity is in the realm of high trajectory weapons: missiles and rockets that already can reach almost any point in Israel from Lebanese territory. The greater the accuracy of these weapon systems, the greater the chance that they will be used with precision against military and strategic targets. If today the main threat to air force bases is the threat of a missile salvo across the area of the base, in the future, the threat is likely to be precise firing on a facility within the base – the control tower, a runway junction, or a particular hangar.

Missions

Air Superiority. The first mission of the air force is to protect the country's skies, and planes such as the F-15A/C have been purchased for this purpose. The F-35 is not designed for this task. It carries air-to-air missiles and its stealth capability is likely to give it an advantage in

an air battle beyond visual range (BVR), but it has no advantage in close air combats (in which it is apparently inferior to the F-16, for example) or in its capability to perform sustained patrolling, and of course it is not intended for offensive escort missions and deep interdiction.

Combat air support. In a future war the IAF needs the capability to launch precise attacks in highly dynamic battlefields that will apparently be protected by surface-to-air missiles, such as with the operations during the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead. The F-35's big advantage is in its stealth and the integration of navigation and targeting systems: radar that is capable of accurate ground surveillance while jamming the adversary's defenses, and various electro-optical systems.

However, many of these capabilities already exist as external additions or enhancements in planes of the previous generation. Thus, for example, the F-35's capabilities in the realm of navigation, and targeting (embodied in its EOTS system) are based, in fact, on the LANTIRN-ER and Sniper-XR systems, which exist as external pods that can be carried by an F-15 or an F-16. Israel itself developed the advanced versions of the LITENING pod. Likewise, it is possible to install advanced AESA radar on F-16s, either American-made or Israeli-made, and to achieve most of the advantages the F-35 has in this realm.

As for the plane's stealth capability, this will undoubtedly give it an advantage, especially in the first stages of an attack in well protected areas. It is true that today, Syria's air defense forces are outdated, and in Lebanon, Hizbollah is equipped mainly with shoulder missiles, but this situation could certainly become a more serious threat. Nonetheless, the stealth capability must be taken with a grain of salt, since the plane is limited to carrying weapons in internal bomb compartments only. Hanging munitions on underwing hard points would compromise its stealth capacity.

Strategic Attack Operations. Strategic attack operations involve deep penetration into the rear of enemy territory. Here the F-35's stealth offers a supreme advantage, but this is offset by the limited amount of munitions that it can carry in a stealth mission (two bombs of one ton each), and its

If the consideration for purchasing the plane was tactical only, the deal, under the current price conditions, is not justified. However, other considerations lend the purchase additional logic, and bolster the arguments of those who support the purchase of the planes.

limited range. Therefore, even when the F-35 is in service, the F-15I and F-16I will likely be the preferred planes for such missions.

Self Defense. The Israel Air Force places special emphasis on aircraft self defense capability, particularly electronic countermeasures (ECMs) to defend against enemy radar (ground based or airborne), missiles, and electronic warfare. The F-35 has several unique advantages in this realm, beginning with its AESA radar, which is also capable of jamming ground radar while scanning for ground or aerial targets, and including its unique warning system (DAS), which grants the pilot warnings about threats in every possible sector. However, the Israeli electronic and anti-electronic warfare systems are considered preferable to every foreign-made system, and furthermore, they are uniquely tailored to threats in the Israeli arena. For this reason, Israel has conducted prolonged negotiations on installation of Israeli-made electronic warfare systems in the planes, although it is not clear if ultimately Israel achieved this requirement.

Ability to Operate from Temporary Airports. Given the severe threat of high trajectory weapons, Israel requested the option of purchasing a certain number of F-35Bs. This model is capable of taking off from very short runways and landing vertically. It was developed for the operational requirement of the USMC, where this capability is especially important. These planes would allow the air force to operate from improvised airports, even when its main bases are under missile attack. However, this model is more expensive than the conventional model, although its aerodynamic performance is inferior. For these reasons, Israel has for now forgone this option.

The Role of the Israeli Defense Industries

A significant asset in the F-35 deal is the benefit for the Israeli defense industry, given the possibilities of customizing and installing Israeli electronic warfare systems and Israeli-made weapon systems on the planes – though this depends on American approval and access to the plane’s original source codes. A second benefit concerns “offset” deals⁷ that are common in the world’s weapons market. As part of the purchase deal, the Israeli defense industry hopes to receive a share of the development and manufacture of F-35 parts for the world market, as subcontractors for Lockheed Martin (manufacturer of the plane),

Northrup Grumman (manufacturer of the radar), and Pratt and Whitney (manufacturer of the engine). With manufacturers predicting a future market of over 4,000 units, there are prospects for very large sales.

Along with the economic advantage, joining the project will allow the defense industry access to the most advanced technologies, such as technologies for materials to reduce the plane's signature. However, this will also obligate the industry to make large investments in infrastructure, staff training, and receipt of licenses from the US authorities. The participation of the Israeli companies in the manufacture of the planes intended for Israel only will not justify such investments.

The Israeli defense industry has vast experience and unique capabilities, especially in several niche areas, but with the F-35 project it is in tough competition with national defense industries in all the participating countries. There is no question that countries that have already invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the project from the early years will demand to receive a return on their investment in the form of orders by the plane's manufacturers. Israel, which joined the project at a late stage and with a relatively small investment, is necessarily in a poor opening position.

Israel's Reputation

An important point in Israel's favor in the negotiations for purchase of the plane is the special reputation of the IDF, and the air force in particular, in the global advanced weapons market. Even after operations that were seen as a failure, such as the Second Lebanon War, the IDF is recognized internationally as a sophisticated user of advanced weapon systems. The IDF's purchase of a weapon system is considered an indication of the superiority of that system over competing systems. There is no question that the American manufacturer (and the US defense establishment) were interested in selling the F-35 to Israel, sooner rather than later, especially since the project is facing technical and financial difficulties and several of the participating countries have already hinted that perhaps they will not purchase the plane, or will purchase a smaller number than they had originally intended. Moreover, the price of the plane (the price per unit) depends directly on the number of planes ordered.

The F-35 project is one of the US defense establishment's largest projects, especially since production of the F-22 was stopped. The success

of the project is important to the administration. Israel's purchase of the plane will undoubtedly be seen as encouragement to other countries to purchase the plane, and a clear boost for the project. Perhaps the proposal to deliver another twenty planes to Israel without compensation stemmed in no small part from these considerations.

Conclusion

For many years, preserving Israel's qualitative advantage has been a main element of Israel's security concept. For this reason alone, it has been clear since the beginning of the JSF project that when the time came, Israel would be interested in purchasing the aircraft. However, for the very same reason it was also clear from the early days of the Advanced Tactical Fighter project that Israel would want to purchase the F-22, the plane that would be developed as part of that project. This purchase was prevented mainly by the project's closure at an earlier stage than planned, and because Congress forbade its sale. In fact, if Israel had a choice between the two, it would almost certainly have preferred to purchase a small number of F-22s rather than a large number of F-35s. (In the end, the price of the F-35, which was supposed to be inexpensive, is close to that of the F-22.)

The analysis above shows that despite the plane's advantages, it will not be the panacea for Israel's problems and most of its tasks can be performed with similar effectiveness through existing planes with one type of upgrade or another. The high price of the F-35, which will allow the purchase of only a small number of aircraft, will in any case require the air force to retain a large number of F-16s for many years. Furthermore, the plane cannot be a substitute for the F-15s, which are used today for both air superiority missions and long term attack missions. As such, these planes are also expected to stay in the order of battle for many years, again, with upgrades of one kind or another.

Therefore, if the consideration for purchasing the plane was tactical only, the deal, under the current price conditions, is not justified. However, the picture is more complicated. The plane is not being paid for with money from Israeli taxpayers, but with American aid. The choice is not between guns or butter, but between various American-made weapon systems – fighter planes or ships, tanks, and cannons. The dependence on purchasing American-made systems and the strategic relationship

with the United States also rule out examining other options, such as purchasing European planes (the Typhoon or the French Rafale) or even the Russian Su-35S or its future replacement.

There are additional considerations as well: the advantages the F-35 deal will provide to the Israeli defense industry, and the deal's contribution to Israel's complex relations with the United States, which for its own reasons is interested in Israel's purchasing the plane. Thus given these considerations, the purchase indeed has an additional logic, which gives considerable weight to the considerations of those who support the purchase of the planes.

Notes

- 1 Although the plane is called "Lightning" by the US Air Force, the plane will *not* be called "Barak" in Israel, since the air force already uses this name for the F-16C/D.
- 2 Anshel Pfeffer, "Barak Approves Huge Deal to Purchase 20 F-35s," *Haaretz*, August 16, 2010.
- 3 The term "generation" refers to jet powered combat aircraft in use since the end of WWII. The first generation: combat aircraft of the 1950s were the first operational jet powered combat aircraft. They were subsonic, armed with machine guns and cannons. Typical models in the Middle East were the MiG-15 and the Mystere IV. The second generation, from the late 1950s until the early 1960s, were supersonic combat aircraft – up to Mach-2. They carried early versions of air-to-air missiles and early versions of radars. Typical models in the Middle East were Mirage 3 and MiG-21. The third generation, from the late 1960s through the mid 1970s, saw multi-role combat aircraft with better radars and better avionics. The main armaments were heat seeking air-to-air missiles, radar guided missiles, and early types of guided air-to-ground munitions. The typical model in the Middle East was the F-4E Phantom. The fourth generation appeared in the late 1970s and 1980s. It involved multi-role combat aircraft with much advanced aerodynamic performance (thrust to weight ratio around 1:1 and better). It sported radars with ground surveillance capabilities, battle management airborne computers, digital avionics, different types of precision guided munitions (PGMs), and electro-optical sensors. Typical models are the F-15 and the F-16. 4.5 generation is a term used for recent models or upgraded fourth generation aircraft, with some fifth generation capabilities like AESA radars and net-centric capabilities.
- 4 "Israel Foresees No Barriers to Early JSF Acquisition," *Defense Daily*, November 14, 2001.
- 5 Dror Marom, "Joining JSF Project will Cost Israel Only \$50m," *Globes Israel's Business Arena*, February 16, 2003.

- 6 Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), “Israel – F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Aircraft,” Transmittal No. 08-83, September 29, 2008, DSCA official website, http://www.dsca.osd.mil/PressReleases/36-b/2008/Israel_08-83.pdf.
- 7 Offset deals are deals in which in exchange for signing a government weapons purchase contract, the manufacturer of the weapon system makes a commitment to invest in the market of the country making the purchase. Such deals are usually (but not always) connected to the main weapons deal (such as purchase of services and accompanying products for the weapon system in the local market). In very competitive markets, the scope of the offset deals is liable to be 100 percent of the weapons deal, if not more.

Appendix: The JSF Project and the F-35

Aircraft Features¹

The F-35 Lightning II is a single-seat, single-engine fighter jet. The plane comes in three versions:

- a. The F-35A – the CTOL (conventional take-off and landing) version – is a plane that takes off and lands in a conventional manner, using paved airfields, meeting the requirements of the USAF.
- b. The F-35B – the STOVL (short take-off vertical landing) version – is a plane capable of taking off from extremely short runways and landing vertically, for use by the USMC (and the Royal Navy).
- c. The F-35C – also known as the CV version – is intended for taking off and landing on aircraft carriers in the US Navy.

In all its versions, the F-35 has some unique features that when combined, mark it as a true fifth generation fighter jet:

Low observability. This is usually called “stealth” capability. The combination of careful body design, especially the parts returning strong radar echoes, and housing of munitions in internal bomb bays has significantly reduced the plane’s radar cross section.²

Engine. The F-35 is a single-engine plane, like the F-16. Pratt & Whitney developed the new F-135 engine for it. The engine provides maximal thrust of some 40,000 lbs (with a burner; the number is approximate, as detailed data has not been published).

Multi-task radar. The heart of the F-35 is the plane’s AN/APG-81 AESA radar system by Northrop Grumman.³ It is based on the F-22’s AN/APG-77 radar system (and both radar systems share many hardware and

software components), but it is smaller and its air-to-surface capabilities are more pronounced. Its precise capabilities have not been made public, but it is known that it can track a large number of targets while continuing to scan the skies and seek new targets. It is even capable of scanning the ground and providing a high resolution picture of the ground by day or night, in every type of weather. It is capable of identifying ground targets automatically, and its smart identifying software allows it to focus on land or sea targets and identify them. In addition, the radar is capable of jamming hostile radar systems in the air and on the ground.

*EOTS.*⁴ The plane has an internal electro-optical system to scan the ground both by visible light and in the infrared spectrum for navigating, targeting, and illuminating with a laser beam. It is based on the Sniper-X and LANTIRN-ER systems already operational in planes of the current generation, but according to the manufacturer, with improved performance, both in terms of its range of detection and in its resolution and precision.

*DAS.*⁵ The plane's self defense system consists of a set of six infrared sensors installed on different spots on the plane's body, providing coverage of a full sphere for passive electro-optical identification of aerial threats, aircraft or missiles, by day and night.

Cockpit. The display in the cockpit includes a multi-functional 20x50 cm screen with projecting capabilities in every type of lighting, by day or by night, and picture processing and memory capabilities that are among the best in the world. The pilot can operate the screen by using a cursor, by touch, or by vocal commands. In addition, the pilot is equipped with a helmet mounted display: data is projected directly on the helmet's visor and is positioned correctly no matter the direction in which s/he turns his/her head.

Weapon systems integration. The plane can be modified to use the entire range of weapons – air-to-air or air-to surface – available to the United States and the program member states. It is designed to carry weapons – both air-to-air missiles and bombs or air-to-surface weapons – in internal bomb bays. At the same time, it also has seven external hard points for suspending a wide range of armaments. (Of course if these stations are used, the plane's stealth capabilities are compromised.)

Avionics, communications, preparation. Special efforts were invested in the software in the plane's development phase. The central idea of the

software architecture is sensor fusion, i.e., integration of the information coming from all sensors into a unified information system. As the sensors themselves become “dumber,” the “intelligence” from them is gathered into a single system. The plane also has an advanced communications suite, which includes satellite communications for communications beyond sight range. It has sophisticated data relays enabling information sharing among planes in formation and information exchanges with other planes and ground stations, both fixed and mobile.

Logistics. The F-35 project put a great deal of thought into developing maintenance capabilities with high operational and maintenance credibility, as well as a system of maintenance and assistance with high reaction speed: the computerized system combines operational data from the planes with configuration parameters specific to the plane, its history of parts, planned upgrades, and prognostics.

Where the Project Stands

The JSF project, like many other complex weapons development programs, has had significant setbacks in budgets and schedules. The project is one of the largest projects ever in the American defense establishment and it is expected to cost \$238.6 billion. Between 2000 and 2009, the program exceeded its planned budget by about \$100 billion and was a full year behind in systems development. In order to accelerate development, program leaders decided on LRIP, i.e., a low rate of initial production, even before all development stages are complete. Acquisitions of the plane began in the 2007 fiscal year.⁶

However, test flights are still in their early stages. While the first flights of the F-35A version began in early 2007, it was only in July 2010 that the AN/APG-81 radar was flown on the F-35.⁷ In early 2010, project leaders announced that the first operational phase of the A and C versions has been postponed to 2016.

Criticism of the Technology

Criticism of the plane’s technological aspects has focused on the following:

Stealth

- a. The plane was planned to have a low signature vis-à-vis radars in the X-band and Ka/K/Ku-band, the frequencies used in most current

- threats. This low signature is effective especially in a forward sector, but less so in other sectors. Its level of stealth is much lower against radar using lower frequencies (and the Russians are already developing such systems).
- b. The stealth capability depends on carrying weapons in the internal bomb bays, which are limited in size. Hanging weapons externally is possible but compromises the stealth feature.
 - c. The F-35 is the first stealth plane offered for sale to non-American customers. Some countries participating in the project have expressed concern that the plane will be sold to them at a lower than maximal level of stealth.

The plane's software and hardware. The plane's software is integrative, transferring the intelligence from sensors and secondary systems to central computer systems. The software is highly complex and this complexity caused difficulties even at the development stages. Critics are worried that difficult problems are liable to surface later, when a large number of planes are already in operational service.⁸

Structure and propulsion. During the early stages, the program ran into problems of overweight. Because the ratio of thrust to weight is the most important component in the performance of a fighter jet, and because this is a single-engine plane, planners were forced to make every effort to reduce the weight at the expense of maneuverability (the ability to withstand large G-forces), the lifespan of the structure, the amount of internal fuel, and more. Critics outside the US have stressed that while decreasing performance is less critical to American customers (because of the assumption that some of the combat missions would be flown by the F-22), it is more critical to countries in which the F-35 would constitute the most advanced plane available. Other concerns have been raised about the F-135 engine. It is supposed to operate at higher temperatures than any other engine in existence, and critics have expressed concern that over time this would cause problems.

Integration of weapon systems. At the outset, the F-35 was supposed to be able to carry almost every kind of weapon – air-to-air and air-to-surface – in American military arsenals. However, the early production batches of the plane will be very limited in terms of the types of weapons they could carry. Because of development delays, the integration of many

weapon systems has been postponed to later production batches, after the first planes have already been delivered to customers.

Conflicts with Partners

The eight countries that partnered in the project have differences of opinion on distribution of labor and ownership of the technologies. All have expressed dissatisfaction with the type and scope of jobs they have been allotted and have threatened to minimize their participation or to cancel orders for the plane. The governments of Italy and Britain have lobbied for the establishment of assembly facilities on their soil.

Another concern is that the United States will withhold technologies from them. Indeed, in November 2009 the Pentagon announced that it would not be sharing some sensitive technologies with Britain, its senior partner. This of course had clear implications for the more junior partners.

How Many Planes Will Be Bought

The customer cost of the F-35 will greatly depend on the number of planes manufactured. According to plans currently approved by Congress, the American Armed Forces will buy a total of 2,456 planes. On the basis of Congressional data there are two possible figures: the program acquisition unit cost (PAUC), representing the cost of the entire program divided by the number of planes. Currently, this stands at \$133.6 million. The other cost is the average procurement unit cost (APUC), representing only the cost of acquisition, divided by the number of planes. Currently, this stands at \$113.6 million.

At this stage, it is still unclear how many planes will be bought by external customers. Program leaders estimate that external sales will reach about 2,000-3,000 planes. Clearly, these sales will dramatically reduce the cost of the plane. Hence, the American interest in selling the plane to Israel is also clear.

Critics, however, worry that the number of planes that will actually be sold is much lower and that therefore the cost of the plane will be much higher. A report prepared by experts at the request of the Dutch parliament estimated that a reasonable assessment puts the total number of planes sold at no more than 2,500. The researchers estimated that the purchase by the American Armed Forces would in the end be somewhere

between 1,170 and 1,440 planes.⁹ This low number affects the cost per unit and steeply increases the cost of future upgrades. At the same time, the chances for the local defense industries making a profit are much lower than calculated today. The report concluded that the cost of the entire life cycle of the plane would be double the current estimate.

Notes

- 1 The primary sources for this appendix are: www.globalsecurity.org; F. C. Spinney, "JSF: Another Card in the Cards Building," *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, August 2000; Jeremiah Gertler, "F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program: Background and Issues for Congress," CRS Report RL30563, April 2, 2010 (this report is published annually under the same title; the most up-to-date version available was used for this article); Carlo Kopp, "Assessing the Joint Strike Fighter," at www.ausairpower.net. This website includes much information, as it is in part devoted to opposing the Australian Air Force plans to purchase the F-35; Carlo Kopp, "F-35 – JSF Program: Collapse is a 'when' question, not an 'if' question," at www.ausairpower.net.
- 2 The radar surface cross section, or RCS, is determined by comparing the radar echo returned from the plane to the echo that would have been returned by a flat surface placed exactly perpendicular to the radar. On the basis of data made public, the F-22's RCS is between 0.0001-0.0002 sq m, or the size of a playing marble. The F-35 has anterior RCS of 0.0015 sq m – i.e., 10-15 times that of the F-22, but still only the size of a golf ball. For the sake of comparison, the RCS of the MiG-29 is 5 sq m.
- 3 AESA – Active Electronically Scanned Array. This type of radar system is constructed of a set of independent transmission and reception units. The radars of the phased array concentrate the radar beam by differentiations in the phases of the various units and thus a change in the pattern of spiraling between the transmissions of the units. It is also possible to divert the radar beam immediately (within nanoseconds) to every direction possible without using mobile parts (unlike radar systems of the previous generation in which the movement of the antenna was mechanical). Likewise, it is capable of simultaneously generating a number of radar projection beams in different directions and at different frequencies, depending on different missions. The AN/APG-81 has 1,200 independent transmission and reception units.
- 4 EOTS – Electro-Optical Targeting System.
- 5 DAS – Distributed Aperture System.
- 6 For 2010, 10 F-35As were budgeted for the Air Force, 16 F-35Bs for the Marines, and 7 F-35Cs for the Navy.
- 7 The radar has gained many flight hours since 2005, first on a Northrop Grumman flying lab (installed on a BAC-111) and later on a Lockheed Martin flying lab (installed on a Boeing 737); the same is true of other avionics systems.

- 8 An acute example of problems that are liable to crop up in such complex systems was an event that occurred in February 2007, when computer systems on board all the members of an F-22A formation crashed during the plane's first flight outside US. See <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/f22-squadron-shot-down-by-the-international-date-line-03087/>.
- 9 Johann Boeder, "Market Analysis for the JSF," www.CEOworld.biz, October 20, 2009.

A Green Light on Iran?

Ephraim Kam

In recent months there has been increased public discussion in the United States about military action against Iranian nuclear sites.¹ The question is twofold: Should the United States take military action against Iran, and should the US administration give Israel a green light to attack Iran if the administration itself prefers not to attack. One reason for the timing of the debate is the shortened timetable, with the intelligence communities in the United States and Israel estimating that from a technical point of view, Iran could obtain a first nuclear bomb within about a year. These estimates are supported by reports of the International Atomic Energy Agency that Iran has amassed enough low level enriched uranium that, if enriched to a high level, can suffice for two or three bombs. Added to this are recent revelations about the improvement – with North Korean assistance – in Iran’s missile array, which is likely to provide Iran with the ability to strike parts of Europe. The second reason is that thus far, despite the intensification of sanctions, Iran has not stopped its pursuit of nuclear weapons, and in the eyes of many experts, including in the US administration, the sanctions will ultimately not motivate Iran to do so. The third reason is the impression in the United States that the current government in Israel, and Prime Minister Netanyahu in particular, will take a harder line toward Iran than did preceding governments, and will be prepared to make a decision to take military action given the conviction that a nuclear Iran is an existential threat.

Nevertheless, an American or Israeli military action against Iran is still apparently not on the short term agenda, for several reasons. At this stage, priority is given to attempt to change Iran’s position through

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diplomacy and tighter sanctions. Despite the doubts that the sanctions will moderate Iran's defiance, it is clear to all governments concerned that this path has not yet been exhausted, and it is still not possible to reach definitive conclusions concerning its outcome. Furthermore, according to American and Israeli intelligence assessments, the Iranian nuclear program is encountering technical difficulties and glitches – including as a result of the computer worm that struck some of Iran's nuclear sites – and there is still time before it reaches its final stages. No less important, both intelligence communities assess that Iran has not yet decided to break out towards a nuclear bomb and apparently does not intend to do so soon, preferring to wait for an appropriate moment. Thus there is still a window of opportunity, albeit narrow, before the point where a decision on a military action against Iran must be taken.

This article examines American and Israeli considerations concerning military action against Iran, and reviews how the American position may influence Israel's deliberations.

Israel's Considerations

Like other concerned governments, Israel would prefer that the Iranian nuclear program be stopped by diplomatic means, supported by meaningful sanctions. At the same time, since it has always been doubtful that diplomacy would move Iran to halt its nuclear program, Israel has stressed repeatedly that it is considering the military option as well; from time to time, this statement has been accompanied by leaks concerning Israeli preparations towards military action. Israel has suggested to the US that it too take steps towards a military option, but the administration has shunned this suggestion and thus far has not raised the threat profile for an attack on Iran.

An Israeli decision on military action against Iran would depend on at least three timetables, which are not necessarily synchronized. First, Israel will find it very difficult to act against Iran before the diplomatic approach is exhausted and as long as, in the assessments of the governments concerned, particularly the US administration, there is still a chance of stopping Iran through a diplomacy and sanctions package. If Israel attacks Iran before it is agreed that the diplomatic approach has been exhausted, Israel will be accused of causing it to fail. This consideration is liable to cause a dilemma for Israel, because if it becomes

clear that the US administration is prepared to reconcile itself to a nuclear Iran, it will increase Israel's motivation to prevent this danger through a military move. Second, the possible timetable for military action will be a function of intelligence assessments about the time remaining until the first atomic bomb is built. Once Iran obtains its first bomb, or even after it produces enough fissile material for a first bomb, military action will no longer be appropriate, because Iran could hide the bomb or the material in a secret facility and it would be impossible to guarantee a successful attack. Third is an operative timetable for a decision: when will there be optimal conditions for an attack – in terms of Israel's obtaining high quality intelligence and completing the preparations for an attack. This advance work must occur against the background of Iran's own preparations, including an improvement in its ability to protect and defend its nuclear sites and in its response capabilities vis-à-vis Israel.

Israel's decision will thus depend in part on several critical conditions: gathering high quality intelligence on Iran's nuclear sites and the means used to protect them; building sufficient operational capability; assessing the amount of damage the attack would cause to the sites and the time it would take to rehabilitate them; assessing the Iranian response; and assessing the amount of political damage that Israel would sustain as a result of the attack.² One additional critical consideration, discussed below, concerns the position of the US administration on the military option. Another consideration, perhaps more complex, concerns the nature of the risk Israel will incur if it decides not to attack Iran and accepts the fact of a nuclear capable Iran.

The likely threat that Israel will face from a nuclear Iran is two-pronged. One aspect is the possibility that Iran would attack Israel with nuclear weapons. This is an extremely serious threat that Israel has never had to confront, but there is no satisfactory answer today concerning its probability because there are insufficient indicators to help make a solid assessment of Iran's future conduct once it has nuclear weapons.³ The second aspect pertains to other strategic threats that would stem from Iran's nuclearization. These include a further strengthening of Iran's regional standing and a more aggressive Iranian policy, which would increase the pressure on moderate Arab/Muslim states to accept Iranian positions; harm the Arab-Israeli peace process; damage the regional standing of the United States, which in turn would weaken its allies;

strengthen Iran's deterrent power towards Israel and the United States; increase Hizbollah's freedom of action under the auspices of Iran's stronger standing; create an atmosphere of panic in Israel that would reduce immigration, increase emigration, reduce foreign investments, and all in all injure the Zionist spirit; encourage the possible participation of additional Middle Eastern countries in the nuclear arms race, which would further undermine stability in the region; and possibly promise an Iranian "nuclear umbrella" for Syria and/or Hizbollah against Israel, if they were in serious military distress.

The question is, which of the threats would military action seek to address? If there is sufficient basis to the assessment that Iran is liable to attack Israel with nuclear weapons, then military action can be weighed as a means to prevent an extreme danger on this level. However, if the basic assumption is that Iran would not launch a nuclear strike against Israel but that Israel would be required to confront threats of the second level, it is doubtful they would justify military action and convince other countries of the necessity of the action. Though important and significant threats, they are not existential, and Israel could cope with them. It is true that in the past Israel conducted many military actions and also went to war in order to remove threats that were not necessarily existential. But the problematic nature of military action against Iran and the exceptional risks it involves, as well as the US administration's reservations, raise doubts as to whether it would be correct to take such action, if its entire goal would be to confront the second level threats.

American Considerations

To this day, the US administration has affirmed its commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and like Israel, does not rule out the military option. However, since 2008 the administration has made it clear that it has reservations about an American military action under the current circumstances. This approach, which mainly reflects the position of the American defense establishment, stems from several serious concerns: the uncertainty about the results and the consequences of a military action; the assessment that an attack on Iran would not completely stop the Iranian nuclear program, but would postpone it for two to three years only, and that after the attack, Iran would improve its protection and defense of its nuclear sites; the possibility that Iran, as the

party attacked, would exploit the attack in order to achieve international legitimacy for the continuation and acceleration of its nuclear program; the disinclination to open another front in Iran, when the United States is already entangled in Iraq and Afghanistan; the fear of a serious crisis in the oil market in the wake of the attack; the fear of an Iranian response against United States targets or those of its allies, especially in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Gulf; the possibility that the action would strengthen the Iranian regime and reduce the chances of changing it from within; and perhaps too the assessment that ultimately it is possible to live with a nuclear Iran, as the Western world coped with the Soviet threat during the Cold War.⁴

Similarly, the US administration has reservations about an Israeli attack on Iran under current circumstances. In July 2009, Vice President Biden stated that Israel is free to act against Iran as it sees fit, and the State Department added that Israel is a sovereign state and the administration does not intend to dictate Israel's moves. However, President Obama quickly and explicitly clarified that the administration has not given a green light to Israel to attack Iran, and senior officials in the defense establishment expressed both reservations about an Israeli attack on Iran and hopes that Israel would not surprise the administration with a military action.

The administration's reservations about an Israeli strike are based on several reasons. Even if in practice the United States is not a partner to an Israeli attack, many people, particularly the Iranians, will assume that the attack is carried out with the knowledge, backing, and participation of the administration. Consequently, Iran is liable to try to strike back at American targets, and for this reason the United States fears that an Israeli action would entangle it in the conflict, whether because Iran would respond by attacking American or American-allied targets, or because the United States would be forced to aid Israel if Israel encountered difficulties. The administration is also liable to suspect that an Israeli attack is intended to draw it into intervening in the conflict and to complete the blow to Iran, for example, if Iran hits back at American targets or at the flow of oil from the Gulf. And above all, the administration fears that an Israeli action would

The administration will need to decide which risk is greater: the risk of a military action, or the risk resulting from a nuclear Iran.

cause a shockwave in the Middle East that would do serious damage to American interests in the region, sparking a crisis in the oil market; criticism of the United States in the Arab and Muslim world, which would create difficulties in American efforts to draw closer to the Muslim world; and a strengthening of radical trends in the region, which would also harm the chances of advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The fact that the administration has not ruled out the military option indicates that in principle, it is possible that the administration might change its position and support an American or Israeli military action against Iran. And yet, the change will not take place under current circumstances because the administration is still giving a chance, however slim it appears, to the sanctions. But if it becomes clear to the administration that the sanctions do not have a sufficient effect and Iran continues in its quest for nuclear weapons, it will have to choose between two difficult options. One is to accept its inability to stop the Iranian nuclear program – meaning Iran will achieve the ability to produce nuclear weapons or will actually produce the weapons – and to prepare to deter Iran from using nuclear weapons and stop its rising power. The other option is to stop the Iranian nuclear program through military action. In effect, the administration will need to decide which risk is greater: the risk of a military action, or the risk resulting from a nuclear Iran.⁵

Under current circumstances, the likelihood that the administration would support an American or Israeli military action against Iran is not great, and not only because it is waiting for the effect of the sanctions to play itself out. As long as the American defense establishment continues to harbor reservations, the administration will be hard pressed to oppose the defense establishment's position and order an attack. Some of the defense establishment's reservations about a military action will not change in the coming years, and the administration will need to take them into account in the future as well. However, there are several conditions that could change the administration's balance of considerations.

- a. A clear step by Iran that would leave no doubt that it is close to obtaining nuclear weapons and is adamant about producing them, so that only military action could block their production.
- b. Increasing support in American public opinion for military action against Iran. Surveys taken in the United States in recent years show

that most of the American public sees Iran as a threat and an enemy, and that more than half of the respondents support military action against Iran if diplomacy and sanctions do not halt Iran's progress towards nuclear weapons.⁶ Furthermore, in recent months additional former members of the political and security establishment, among them former CIA director general Michael Hayden, have come out in support of military action against Iran if the diplomatic option fails. An open question is to what extent the strengthening of the Republican Party in Congress will affect the amount of support for military action.

- c. The departure of most of the American forces from Iraq, and perhaps from Afghanistan, which will reduce, although not entirely eliminate, their vulnerability to Iranian efforts at attack and sabotage. Furthermore, if the American administration withdraws its forces from Iraq and Afghanistan under the aura of failure, defeat, and the strengthening of Iran's influence in Iraq, it is possible that this will encourage the administration to balance this failure with a military strike against nuclear sites in Iran.
- d. If the administration weighs military action in Iran, it will need international support, and possibly also backup from the UN Security Council. Little such support exists today. On the contrary, there is widespread public international resistance to the action. But if the administration attempts to build such support, the picture might look different. Isolated signs of support for military action have begun to emerge, like statements by former British prime minister Tony Blair in September 2010 that he does not rule out military action in Iran.

Even more important are the revelations in the WikiLeaks documents that very senior officials in Jordan and the Gulf states (the UAE, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain), and first and foremost King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, have urged the US administration since 2005 to take military action if Iran's nuclear program cannot be stopped with diplomatic means. According to these documents, Qatar even expressed willingness to allow the United States to use a base on its territory to attack Iran. The actual support of the Gulf

Surveys in the United States in recent years show that more than half of the respondents support military action against Iran if diplomacy and sanctions do not halt Iran's progress towards nuclear weapons.

states for military action at the moment of truth is questionable, and the embarrassment they suffered as a result of the leaks led them quickly to announce publicly that they support a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear problem. Nonetheless, one cannot ignore the fact that several Arab leaders have secretly pressured the US administration to use the military option in the absence of an alternative.

These revelations are quite significant, and illustrate that stopping Iran, even using military means, is not only Israel's issue. Furthermore, they show potential for garnering support and legitimacy for military action if the administration eyes it positively. The revelations also show that these Arab leaders, at least privately, acknowledge that the Iranian threat is a major issue in and of itself, and is not connected to an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Furthermore, if it was important that Israel not be seen as the one pushing the administration to attack Iran, the WikiLeaks revelations have made it clear that Israel is not alone in putting pressure on the administration. This places Israel in a different position and makes it easier for it to press the administration to consider the military option when it is evident that the diplomatic option has failed.

For the administration, the position of those Arab leaders is problematic. It is not only Israel that is seeking to place the military option on the table in a practical way, but several of the most important American allies in the Arab world, with the Gulf states prepared to incur the risk that Iran will retaliate against them in the wake of an attack. Qatar is even prepared to be involved in the action, despite an explicit public warning by Iran that it will retaliate against countries that assist in an action against it. If the administration neither attacks nor succeeds in stopping Iran, this can be expected to harm its credibility in the eyes of the Arab states, and it will face the danger that the Gulf states will fall more into line with Iran from a lack of choice, with Egypt signaling explicitly that it too is liable to go the nuclear route. However, although since 2005 Arab leaders have expressed support for military action, thus far this has not been enough to counter the administration's reservations.

The administration is likely to reach the decision point during 2011-2012, once several factors are clearer: the extent of the influence of the sanctions on Iran; the chance (small) of reaching a diplomatic agreement with Iran on uranium enrichment, which will guard against Iran's continued working toward nuclear weapons; the Iranian policy on the

question of breaking out toward nuclear weapons; the deployment of American forces in the Gulf region; and perhaps also changes in the domestic situation in Iran.

Israel and the American Considerations

The American position regarding the military option was always a major consideration for Israel. Yet until the end of the Bush administration, the main question from Israel's perspective was would the United States, with its superior operational capabilities, attack Iran, thereby freeing Israel of this issue. With the US administration thus far not leaning toward launching a military action in Iran, the current urgent question is: will the US give Israel a green light to act against Iran?

Despite the opposition among many countries to Iran's nuclear program, Israel has not succeeded in convincing other governments, the US included, of the necessity of military action if the diplomatic effort fails. Some of the difficulty in convincing other governments of this necessity stems from their understanding of the meaning of the threat. The more that other governments, led by the US administration, are convinced that there is a not-insignificant danger that Iran will attack Israel with nuclear weapons, the more they are liable to give legitimacy to Israeli military action.

However, the common assumption in the world today is that Iran will not carry out a nuclear attack against Israel, and that ultimately there will be mutual nuclear deterrence if Iran obtains nuclear weapons, as occurred in Europe during the Cold War. The other dangers that a nuclear Iran arouses are not in the realm of existential threats and therefore do not justify a risky military move. Indeed, claims were made in the United States that the fear of an Israeli brain drain in the wake of an Iranian threat is not a reason for military action against Iran. It was also argued that since Israel has military superiority over Iran in all categories, including the nuclear realm, the Iranian nuclear threat is not a sufficient reason for a war with Iran.⁷

Can Israel attack Iran without a green light from the US? Some in Israel claim that on an issue as critical as the Iranian nuclear threat, which might seal the fate of the State of Israel, the government of Israel does not need the approval of the US administration, and it must assume responsibility for its security. Others believe that Israel cannot afford a

serious crisis in relations with the United States as a result of military action against Iran that is contrary to the position of the administration, not to mention the fact that coordination with the United States is liable to be necessary, with the Gulf region and Iraq serving as a theater of operations for US forces.

Ultimately it appears that Israel will not be able to take military action against Iran without a green light from the US administration, or at least a yellow light, whereby the administration would not take a positive or negative stance and would leave the decision in Israel's hands. It is hard to imagine the government of Israel deciding to act against Iran if the US president says explicitly that the administration is opposed to such an action, and that it would harm United States essential interests.

If Israel decides to attack Iran without an American green light, it could pursue one of two tactical courses. One is to inform the US before the action of its intention to attack, thereby avoiding a surprise for the administration and reducing the danger of uncoordinated clashes with American forces in the Gulf region, but risking a refusal and US pressure not to attack. The other way is not to inform the administration and afterwards deal with the charge that Israel did not inform and in fact surprised its most important ally that it was about to undertake such a critical action. Ultimately, the difference between the two paths is not substantial, because even if the administration is not informed, it will be clear that it was against the attack.

In any case, an Israeli attack on Iran that opposes the administration's position will likely lead to a very serious crisis in Israel's relations with the United States. Israel will be accused of harming the most important interests of the United States in the Middle East, and the criticism will come not only from the administration but also from Congress and the media. The action will damage future cooperation between the two countries on the Iranian issue, and because one attack will apparently not be enough to stop the Iranian nuclear program completely and Israel will need the United States to continue confronting the issue, this factor is significant. Since the administration in any case has no promising means of dealing with Iran, Israel will be held responsible for both the failed handling of Iran and Iran's legitimacy to renew and accelerate its nuclear program. The administration is also liable to exploit the criticism of Israel in order to pressure Israel on the Palestinian issue. But most important,

the relations of trust between the two governments will be harmed, and the administration may consequently place limitations on security cooperation with Israel.

Two possible factors might reduce the damage caused by Israeli military action. One would be provocative Iranian conduct prior to the attack, such as the disclosure of secret critical nuclear sites, the exposure of an advanced nuclear weapons program, or Iran's departure from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which would leave no room for doubt that Iran is breaking out towards nuclear weapons, in conjunction with the diplomatic effort reaching a clear dead end. Such conduct would have an especially important effect if it increased support in American public opinion and in Congress for military action. The other factor, and the most important one, would be the operational success of the action, and the recognition after the fact that the damages are not as severe as initial assessments had predicted. Ultimately, the United States and many other countries very much want to stop the Iranian nuclear program. In this case, even if Israel is criticized and steps are taken against it in the wake of the action, they will be short term, and ultimately the attack may even be praised – as with the attack on the Iraqi reactor in 1981.

Conclusion

Under current circumstances, the diplomatic conditions are still not ripe for a military attack on Iran. Almost all governments concerned have reservations about the move; the US administration has not ruled it out in principle, but in practice it has evinced major reluctance, and Israel will have a hard time carrying it out without a green light from the United States and favorable related conditions.

The key to an attack on Iran, either American or Israeli, is in the hands of the United States. At this stage, the administration does not have to decide, because it still has a window of opportunity and it continues to try to exhaust the sanctions and diplomatic option. In order for the US administration to consider the military option positively, a change is needed in its assessment of the balance of opportunities and risks, and the amount of domestic and international support for it. At this point the likelihood that the administration will

The WikiLeaks revelations have made it clear that Israel is not alone in putting pressure on the administration.

change its position appears slim, but it is liable to increase if it becomes clearer that the sanctions are not effective, that Iran is close to the ability to build nuclear weapons, and that there is increased support in and outside the United States for military action against Iran.

Notes

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- 2 See an expanded discussion of this issue in Ephraim Kam, *A Nuclear Iran: What Does it Mean, and What Can be Done*, Memorandum No. 88, Institute for National Security Studies, 2007, pp. 32-41.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 49-55.
- 4 See, for example, Glenn Kessler, "Sanctions Split Iranian Leaders, Gates Says," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2010.
- 5 See also on this issue Ephraim Kam, "The Iranian Nuclear Issue: The US Options," *Strategic Assessment* 13, no. 2 (2010): 59-62.
- 6 Eytan Gilboa, "American Public Opinion toward Iran's Nuclear Program: Moving Towards Confrontation," *BESA Perspective*, No. 117, October 24, 2010.
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A Home Front Law for Israel

Meir Elran

The Home Front Law has been brewing in the Knesset for a long time. This law, announced several years ago by Deputy Defense Minister Matan Vilnai as one of his main goals,¹ has encountered numerous obstacles in the legislative process² and is caught between different sectors with conflicting views as to what the law should encompass and where its emphasis should lie. The impasse encapsulates the dilemmas facing the decision makers in Israel on the main issues regarding the growing threat to the civilian front and what comprises the proper response. The recent fire in the Carmel Forest (December 2-5, 2010) demonstrated yet once more Israel's limited deployment potential for extreme emergency cases.

The purpose of this essay is to argue the necessity of the law, analyze what should be included among its central components, and propose a framework for the preparedness of the civilian front. The article aims to be a basis for public debate of the law, and through enhanced public awareness, enable expedition of its passage in the Knesset.

The Necessity of the Home Front Law

Since its establishment Israel has not had a specific law that encompassed the various elements of home front management, even though the civilian front has known major challenges. Already in the War of Independence, the civilian front was the target of direct air assaults and other attacks, and there were heavy losses³ to the civilian population. In 1951 the Civil Defense Law was passed,⁴ outlining the technical means for defense of the population and containment of damages, and setting the legal basis for the Civil Defense Force (CDF). The IDF Home Front Command (HFC) was established on the basis of the CDF following the 1991 Gulf War,

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thereby replacing the previous organizational structure. But it was only later, particularly after the Second Lebanon War (2006), which exposed the weakness of the civil front,⁵ that it became apparent that the threats to the population demand a reconstruction of the system to provide a legally-based updated systemic response. In his report on the failure of the system in the 2006 War, the state comptroller stated:

The present law...divides the management of the civil front among numerous entities, and does not grant them integrated comprehensive tools to manage the challenge in emergency situations. The multiplicity of agencies and the normative vagueness...create confusion as to responsibility and authority, as well as the lack of a common language regarding preparing the civilian front for emergencies and directing it when catastrophes occur.

This issue was ostensibly resolved in 2007 when the National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA) was established and placed (temporarily, for five years) under the aegis of the Ministry of Defense.⁶ NEMA was to serve as the “coordination staff for the minister of defense, and to assist him to implement his supreme responsibility for the civilian front in all emergency situations.”⁷ However, this government decision was not easily implemented and did not solve the primary issue of general and overarching responsibility for the civilian front. The practice indeed positioned the deputy minister of defense, to whom the defense minister delegated his responsibility, in a leading role vis-à-vis the different agencies. But NEMA has been unable to assume the necessary leadership and the primary responsibility over the other agencies. The result is misunderstanding that is often riddled with conflict and tension, particularly between NEMA and the Home Front Command, which continues to be the most conspicuous element in the field. Given its military basis, it enjoys large resources and a favorable reputation, and as such dictates the development of civilian front preparedness.

This problematic situation deserves more attention due to the growing threat to the civilian front in Israel. Suffice it to mention here the assessment of the former director of Military Intelligence, who stated that “in the next round of conflict we will face several fronts, and the conflict will be more difficult than before and with many casualties.”⁸ If so, the critical question is whether the defensive capacities of Israel, both active and passive, are improving in light of the growing threat and are able to narrow the

emerging gap. At least with respect to civilian preparedness, apparently not enough has been done, and the gap between the threat and the response is widening.⁹ With growing external challenges and internal obstacles, the need for a home front law is all the more urgent. Such legislation will grant a normative basis to outline the directions for achieving the necessary preparedness and set the guidelines for organization and deployment of the civilian front. At the same time, the very reason that makes the legal restructuring imperative – the bureaucratic entanglement – is itself the principal obstacle to the legislative process.

As the main thrust of the new law should address the overarching national responsibility for preparation and the management of the civilian front, it raises several crucial questions that require clear legislative intervention.¹⁰

- a. Which is the responsible organ to direct the civilian front, in routine situations and in emergencies? The government's decision of 2007 to appoint the minister of defense as the responsible party¹¹ is not anchored in legislation, and in fact is not acceptable to many of those involved. Furthermore, its practical meaning is unclear and perhaps also unrealistic, particularly because the same government resolution emphasized that "the other ministries will continue to carry out their responsibilities for the issues under their jurisdiction also in emergency situations."
- b. Relay of information from one organ to the other: this is a serious legal issue regarding who can ask for – and receive – information held by official, public, and private organizations for the necessary deployment in emergency situations.
- c. The allocation of resources for the civilian front: clearly the one in charge of the budget is the most powerful organ. However, in the Israeli case there is no mechanism to regulate the allocation process and oversee planning, prioritizing, and budgeting between the various government ministries. The Ministry of Defense, though rich in resources, has not rushed to allocate the necessary finances from its own budget for the reinforcement of the civilian front. This was apparent from its hesitant approach to the development and procurement of the anti-rocket Iron Dome active system, or the dissemination of the chemical defense personal kits. The other ministries do not act any differently. Consequently, a new approach

- is needed to enable the authorized organ to assume its responsibility by being the clear proponent of a national budgeted program for the civilian front.
- d. "Passing the buck": the national police are responsible for internal security, including in emergency situations, unless the government decides to transfer responsibility to the IDF.¹² This process is not grounded in legislation, and it is also unclear under what circumstances it is implemented.¹³
 - e. It is necessary to regulate the defense of critical systems and infrastructures.¹⁴ Presently the national responsibility for the safety of what are defined as sensitive installations is shared by a long list of agencies, with no coordinating authority among them. The Ministry of Internal Security has recently demanded the authority for this task.¹⁵ No decision has been made as yet, even though the issue is extremely complex due to the respective ownerships of the critical systems, whose smooth operation is critical to both the civilians and the military, especially in emergency situations. Of particular urgency is the communications network, which due to its essential role in numerous national infrastructures is of the highest national priority.
 - f. The legal status of the local governments¹⁶ in disaster circumstances also deserves clarification. Many of those engaged in the management of the civilian front emphasize the role of local governments as the foundation of the system.¹⁷ However, this too is not formally regulated, and the elected mayors are still not legally recognized as responsible for their citizens in an emergency. Legislation should provide the mechanism to grant the mayors with the means and the necessary budget to fulfill this critical task.

While some argue that it is possible to leave the legal situation in its current amorphous state, most agree that a new law is needed to systematically and normatively formulate the responsibilities of the government and its agencies, and regulate the means for their implementation. The challenge now is to translate this broad verbal consent into effective legislation.

What Should the Law Include?

Several drafts of the Home Front Law have been prepared by the Ministry of Defense's legal counsel; such authorship by nature shapes the law's

substance and emphasis to best serve the defense establishment's approach. Yet rather than reviewing particular suggestions proposed in the various drafts, the essay will raise six principal issues that are integral to effective civilian front management.

The first issue concerns the purview of the civilian front law, specifically whether it should deal generically with all kinds of massive disasters, be they natural (such as earthquakes),¹⁸ or associated with hazardous materials (HazMats),¹⁹ or those that are entirely man-made, like war and protracted terror. It might be argued, based on the widely accepted "all hazards approach," that because most disasters have a wide common denominator pertaining to prevention and containment of the damages, the new law should address them all. Moreover, the military will likely be called on to tap its massive resources and serve as the primary first responder in all major disaster scenarios. This is also the case in many other countries. However, the unique Israeli circumstance, in which war and large scale terrorism are clearly the most blatant risk to the civilian front, justifies a specific response to this severe threat. The law should include specific organizational solutions, and define the nature of the state's obligations to its citizens and the necessary response means. The response to other massive hazards should be regulated separately.

The second issue concerns the national responsibility. In the draft prepared by the Ministry of Defense, the overarching responsibility for the home front lies with the minister of defense. Ostensibly, there is a solid basis to continue the present arrangement and grant it a legal status. The Defense Ministry is in fact the largest and best endowed governmental organ; it controls, perhaps not completely, the Home Front Command, the entity that is best equipped to provide the first response for the civilian front. However, this approach should be evaluated carefully. In the years since the ministry of defense assumed responsibility for the civilian home front, a number of problems have surfaced. The Defense Ministry was not successful in attaining primacy, not to speak of control, over the other ministries involved in disaster management. It has not created the necessary cooperation between the various agencies, let alone between the two reporting to it, HFC and NEMA, which are engaged in ongoing competition, particularly around the issues of responsibility and authority. Yet most of all, it has not granted the civilian front the priority it needs and deserves. It might even be suggested that the Ministry of

Defense has maintained the IDF's traditional priorities, as conceived by its General Staff, and does not represent the interests of the HFC in particular and those of the civilian front in general. Therefore, perhaps, a more updated concept²⁰ should be adopted, to position the interests of the civilian front more auspiciously. If the responsibility for the civilian home front is transferred to the Prime Minister's Office, it might better serve the current and future needs and challenges. The prime minister can delegate the overall responsibility for the civilian front to a minister in his office, who by law should be granted special authority and a position of seniority vis-à-vis the other ministries.²¹

The new law should address the crux of the responsibility at the national level and must focus on: overall strategic planning; formulation of the standards for civil defense; coordination of preparedness and management activities at the national level; management of the earmarked budget for the civilian front; and supervision over the state organs. NEMA might be the chief national organization to carry out these missions, particularly in routine times and preparation for disasters. In times of actual emergency the national level will assume responsibility and define strategy on issues such as information dissemination and massive evacuation of inhabitants, prioritization and allocation of national resources, and coordination between the state controlled systems.

The National Emergency Management Authority: NEMA must be part of the new law and reassigned to the Prime Minister's Office, but this will not suffice. In order to establish its primacy and ensure its capacity to fulfill the scope of its duties effectively, NEMA should be granted the clear mandate and organizational authority, particularly when it faces other government ministries, the local governments, and additional organs that share the duties of the civilian front. Beyond its role as the staff of the minister for the civilian front, NEMA should serve as the senior executive organ to direct, coordinate, and supervise the operations on the state level. NEMA's senior position must be grounded in the new law, so that its directing role is clear when it interacts with other entities. Any vague formulation will dilute its standing and will perpetuate the current confusion.

The Home Front Command: The HFC is undoubtedly the largest and most conspicuous professional organization in the Israeli civilian front system. Its legal position is based on the 1951 Civil Defense Law, which

was updated several times. However, because of the vagueness of the HFC authority versus that of other bodies, particularly NEMA and the national police, it is imperative to define its position, responsibilities, and relationship with the others. HFC should serve as a provider of services and act in accordance with the directives of the political leadership, on the national (the government) and local (mayors) level, notwithstanding its being a military organ.

The fifth issue is responsibility at the local level. If in peace time the national government has the primary responsibility for preparing the civilian front for disasters, the situation changes dramatically in times of crisis, when the center of gravity should move to the local arena, under the supervision of the local government.²² Even in a small country, any emergency situation requires focused multi-tiered management around the scene of operations, in accordance with the severity of the event and its impact on the inhabitants and the local infrastructure. In these cases there is no substitute for clear and united leadership by the person who heads the local government, together with his staff and emergency teams, which are trained in the municipal machinery. They should be assisted by all other first responders, among them the HFC units,²³ the police, Magen David Adom (the Israeli Red Cross), and the firefighters. Obviously, the system must be prepared in advance, a process that should be directed by the mayors. Much progress has been made in Israel in many municipalities, but much remains to be done. Under the new law the government and NEMA should be instructed to supervise the progress in preparing the local communities and invest the necessary funds and other resources to achieve the required state of readiness. The new law must also require that the local governments indeed deploy according to the designated standards²⁴ and that those assigned to assist in peace time and in emergencies have the means to do so.

The final issue concerns budgeting. Today there is no central budget earmarked for civilian front needs. Each of the ministries allocates the funds separately and with no coordination. The result is that the minister responsible for the civilian front (presently the minister of defense) has neither control nor influence on the allocations of the other agencies that he is supposed to coordinate. If there is any meaning to the notion of overall responsibility for the civilian front, then this arrangement must be changed drastically. The new law should ensure the direct influence

of the responsible minister – as suggested here, the minister in the Prime Minister’s Office – over all the budgets related to the civilian front and their balanced, calculated, and prioritized distribution, according to one integrated national strategic plan. Such a pattern is not common in the Israeli bureaucracy, and will likely face some sharp criticism and opposition. However, a mechanism will have to be found²⁵ in order to allow meaningful leadership of this crucial field.

Conclusion

The disagreements, not to say the bureaucratic conflicts, over the issues relating to the responsibility for the civilian front threaten the very enactment of the new law. Even within the defense establishment there are obstacles to an agreement on the right formula, especially with regard to the position of the ministry versus NEMA and HFC and their interface. Some members of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee suggest that the present difficult situation might lead to private legislation that diverges from the government’s approach. At the very least the controversy should not lead to diluted legislation, which would preserve the present vagueness on the issues of responsibility and authority. Between an ambiguous formulation and the possible postponement of the law’s enactment until the decision makers understand its full significance, the latter is preferred. If the new law does not set substantial improved norms of the highest standards for the preparation and management of the civilian front, it is best if it is not passed.

It is not only necessary for the law to be formulated clearly in order to create a new systematic and normative reality; it is also important that its authority is enforced over those involved. It must set the concrete mechanism and processes to ensure that all the agencies will act in strict adherence to its spirit, components, and articles.

Whether or not the new law is passed, the most important leverage for improvement of the civilian front is a cultivated understanding about the supreme centrality of the civilian front in the national defense agenda. The periodic dramatization of the threat to the Israeli home front is insufficient. The government must prioritize and invest accordingly in order to narrow the gap between the threats to the civilian front and the strategic response, and this must be achieved before the next conflict.

Notes

- 1 Matan Vilnai, "Maximizing Civilian Preparedness," in Meir Elran, ed. *The Civil Front*, Memorandum No. 99, Institute for National Security Studies, 2009, pp. 9-14.
- 2 In a conference on the preparedness of the civilian front at INSS in July 2007, MK Zeev Boim, chairperson of the subcommittee for the Home Front in the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, expressed doubts on the capacity to advance the legislation. Deputy Chairperson MK Zeev Bielski said: "We lost the hope to advance the Home Front Law as a government law; the only way to promote the subject is via a private draft." Jonathan Lis, "Due to Budget, only 60% of the People Will Receive Protection Kits," *Haaretz*, October 29, 2010.
- 3 See Moshe Naor, *In the Front of the Rear: Tel Aviv and the Mobilization of the Yishuv in the War of Independence* (Jerusalem, 2009), and Mordechai Bar-On, Meir Hazan, eds., *The Civilian Society in the War of Independence* (Ramat Ef'al, 2010).
- 4 See in the HFC website: http://www.oref.org.il/sip_storage//FILES/0/690.doc#_Toc150834608. Since its enactment the law underwent numerous updates, which did not alter its original essence. Recently the Knesset approved in a first reading a new update to the law. See: Draft of Law, the Government: Civil Defense Law (Update # 16), 2010.
- 5 State Comptroller, "The Deployment of the Civilian Front and its Functioning in the Second Lebanon War," Jerusalem, 2007.
- 6 Government decision #1577, April 15, 2007.
- 7 <http://www.rahel.mod.gov.il/AboutUs/Documents/Decision%20B43.pdf> – Government decision B/43, December 19, 2009.
- 8 Jonathan Lis, "IDF Intelligence Chief: Israel's Next War Will See Heavy Casualties," *Haaretz*, November 2, 2010.
- 9 According to *Yisrael HaYom*, November 9, 2010, the HFC depicted updated scenarios for emergency to the local governments, including the losses and damages expected in a general war. It indicated that the threat to the center of the country is not less than to the north or the south.
- 10 On the organizational aspects, see Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, "Structuring the Civilian Front in Israel," 2nd Report of the Commission for the Examination of the Preparedness of the Civilian Front in Emergency Situations, February 2007.
- 11 Government Decision #1577, April 15, 2007.
- 12 The legal advisor to the defense minister in a lecture at INSS, July 4, 2010.
- 13 In a book published by NEMA on the Basic Doctrine for the Operation of the Civilian Front in Emergency Situations (Temporary), April 2010, p. 21: "The overall functional responsibility (for emergency in the civilian front) is divided between the police, which are responsible in the entire territory of Israel, and the IDF, which has functional responsibility in the territorial

- brigades. The transfer of the responsibility from the police to the IDF will be proclaimed in cooperation between the Minister of Defense and the Minister of Internal Security." And, "The functional responsibility for the operation in the arena of event is granted to the IDF or the National Police in accordance with the relative advantage (accessibility or professionalism), and hence will be limited only to the arena of the event or the time of the event."
- 14 HFC, Department of Population, Civilian Defense in the National Infrastructure Organizations, March 2008.
 - 15 Amos Harel, "Ministry of Internal Security Wants to Secure Sensitive Installations," *Haaretz*, June 24, 2010.
 - 16 HFC, Population Department, "The Doctrine of Civilian Defense in the Local Governments," May 2007.
 - 17 Deputy Defense Minister Matan Vilnai: "The central issue is to strengthen the local governments." General Yair Golan, HFC Commander: "The municipality is the basic formation in emergency." Lectures at the INSS conference, "The Preparedness of the Civilian Front," July 4, 2010.
 - 18 Currently, the responsibility for preparations for earthquakes lies with the Ministry of National Infrastructures, through a steering committee established in 1999 that serves as the staff for a ministers' committee and the coordinator between all government ministries and other relevant organizations. See <http://www.mni.gov.il/mni/he-il/NaturalResources/Earthquake/>.
 - 19 The responsibility for HazMat is in the Ministry for the Environment. See HazMat Law, 1993, article 1, 16/c-2 (A): http://www.sviva.gov.il/Environment/Static/Binaries/law/homarim01_1.pdf.
 - 20 This issue was discussed in the past in numerous committees; some recommended that the Ministry for Internal Security offers the proper model.
 - 21 There are those who doubt the capacity and political clout of a minister in the Prime Minister's Office to coordinate and manage such a central issue. However, the crux is assigning the responsibility to the prime minister and his office. The model can vary, for instance, to grant the executive responsibility to the director general of the Prime Minister's Office.
 - 22 See NEMA, booklets and files for the local authorities, <http://www.rahel.mod.gov.il/ActivityAreas/Pages/Booklet.aspx>.
 - 23 Special HFC units were established for this purpose. See: HFC, Population Department, Unit Book, The Liaison Unit for the Local Authority, November, 2008. The Liaison Unit is to "assist the local authority in executing its missions in emergency situations... to assist it in the preparation stage."
 - 24 Some rightfully argue that a benchmark is needed to measure the rate of preparedness of the municipality for emergency. NEMA is supposed to initiate such a step, which will make the municipalities meet the standards, and to supervise its enforcement.
 - 25 For instance, the minister will have a central role in designing and planning the overall budget for the civilian front and supervising its implementation, while the specific budget items may remain within the various ministries.

Obama and Israel: Two Years Back, and Two Years Ahead

Mark A. Heller

Obama at Midterm

Half-way through a president's first term of office is a convenient moment for an interim assessment of his performance. The midterm elections in November 2010 provided American voters with an opportunity to do just that, and their verdict was decidedly negative. In what was universally understood to be a referendum on Barack Obama's performance, the Democrats suffered the most dramatic rebuke to an incumbent president's party in six decades, losing over sixty seats (and their majority) in the House of Representatives and, with the loss of six Senate seats, just barely retaining control of the upper chamber.

The severity of the setback prompted frenzied speculation about how Obama would respond during the rest of his term on the issues that dominated the election – jobs, taxes, debt reduction, bailouts, economic stimulus, and health care. Many observers believed that he would perforce look to compromise with the opposition in order to permit the government to function with some semblance of normality. A few thought that he might even embrace the strategy of “triangulation” adopted by Bill Clinton following a similarly stunning loss in the 1994 midterms, that is, catch the Republicans off guard by appropriating some of their pet policies. Others speculated that he might persist in his policies, as did Harry Truman in 1946, in the hope that he could recoup political capital by campaigning against an obstructionist, “do-nothing” Congress in the next presidential election. Needless to say, the choice will be clarified, if at all, only once the new Congress is underway.

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And if a seemingly decisive election provided little certainty about domestic governance over the next two years, the implications for foreign policy were even more obscure. After all, the election was almost exclusively about the administration's economic performance. Apart from issues that ostensibly bore directly on the economic wellbeing of Americans, such as outsourcing and Chinese foreign exchange rate policy, the rest of the world did not figure in this campaign to any noticeable degree; even the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were barely mentioned. The makeup of the new Congress offers only a few hints about its orientation. The Tea Party movement – the ideological trend that powered the Republican revival – has not formulated a coherent foreign policy approach, though it is known to be highly critical of foreign aid. Republicans in general are skeptical about the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty negotiated with Russia. They are also assumed to favor an even more hard line position on Iran and advocate more enthusiastic support for Israel.

Those assumptions prompted some Israelis and some American supporters of Israel who harbor suspicions about Obama's basic posture to draw encouragement from the election results. Their reasoning was that given Obama's need to find some *modus vivendi* with Congress over the next two years, Congressional sentiment and his own political weakness would constrain any inclination to apply pressure on Israel for concessions in order to promote peace agreements on the Palestinian and/or Syrian track. The same factors might also encourage a more muscular approach towards Iran and limit the administration's ability to accommodate Turkish policies or Egyptian initiatives on the question of Israeli adherence to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But others, even those who share the concerns about Obama's attitude toward Israel, pointed out that while Congress and public opinion might prevent the administration from undertaking the most extreme (hence, least likely) actions deemed hostile by Israel, the fact remains that Congress, whatever its composition, plays a decidedly secondary role in the formulation and implementation of American foreign and defense policy, especially those aspects, such as voting behavior on UN Security Council resolutions, that do not directly emanate from Congressional allocations of funds.

True, Congress has some reserved powers in foreign affairs, such as the Senate's prerogative to ratify Cabinet-level and ambassadorial

appointments and international treaties and to approve declarations of war. Moreover, Congress controls the “power of the purse.” As a result, the legislative branch can obstruct and sometimes stymie presidential initiatives, and the threat of such action may oblige a president to incorporate Congressional preferences into his own programs (as, for example, Richard Nixon did when he was forced to attach the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to his proposal to grant the Soviet Union most favored nation status as part of his policy of detente).

Nevertheless, Congressional defiance or coercion of presidents in these matters is the exception rather than the rule. The president’s constitutional position as commander-in-chief endows the executive branch with the kind of moral as well as legal authority to which Congress and public opinion ordinarily defer, even in matters of considerable controversy (e.g., renouncing control of the Panama Canal). Thus, while a president never has completely free rein to pursue any policy that strikes his fancy, he does have considerable latitude to advocate ideas and actions designed to promote his interpretation of the national interest (or his own political agenda). This was certainly true when Obama’s party controlled both houses of Congress before the midterm elections, but it remains true, beginning in 2011, when it controls only one. Moreover, as some particularly anxious Israeli or pro-Israel observers have pointed out, there is even a chance that Obama, stymied in domestic matters where he has no option but to accommodate the resurgent Republicans, might redouble his activism in foreign affairs, which could work to Israel’s disadvantage.

In other words, the midterm elections, whatever their implications for domestic politics and policies, have no clear and decisive consequences for American foreign policy in general, or US-Israel relations in particular, and any attempt to trace the likely course of American policy over the next two years must continue to focus on the inclinations of the president and his foreign policy team. For Israel and its supporters in the United States, Obama’s presumed attitude toward Israel is therefore still far from a trivial matter.

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The Obama Enigma

There are essentially two variants on the suspicion that Israel needs to be even warier of Obama than of almost all his recent predecessors. The first is that personally he is at least indifferent if not hostile to Israel. This assessment is not based on Obama's public career (because of his meteoric rise to power, he had virtually no established record on international affairs) or on any documented statements; he has not been heard (or at least not been reported) to have expressed anti-Jewish or anti-Israel sentiments – unlike President Richard Nixon or George H. W. Bush's secretary of state, James Baker. Instead, suspicion of his predisposition is grounded in the biography of a man too young to personally remember the Holocaust, the founding of Israel, the 1967 Six Day War, or the identification of Jews with the civil rights movement in the United States when it was led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Likewise he was too removed in his formative years from any socialization in the American version of the Judeo-Christian tradition to develop much empathy for Jewish historical narratives and Israel's place in them. Moreover, there is an element of "guilt by association" in the suspicion of Obama, namely, the notion – propagated during the Democratic primaries and especially during the presidential campaign in 2008 – that he might have been influenced by his Muslim father (whom he barely knew), by a few childhood years spent in Muslim-majority Indonesia, or by connections in Chicago with such individuals as the Reverend Jeremiah Wright (a purveyor of sermons with anti-Semitic themes in the church that Obama attended, whose message Obama has denounced) or Rashid Khalidi (a Palestinian-American professor and former adviser to the PLO, whom Obama has kept far away from his administration). In the most extreme variant of "things are not always what they seem" thinking, Obama was even accused by conspiracy theorists of being a kind of *morisco* – a term used in post-*reconquista* Iberia to describe Muslims who had overtly converted to Christianity but secretly continued to adhere to Islam.

Interestingly, concerns about possible insensitivity stemming from Obama's personal history were not confined to Israel. Some Europeans, for example, felt that the lack of any European resonance in his biography might result in their being ignored or taken for granted. That theme seemed to gain traction when Obama decided not to attend a US-EU

summit scheduled for May 2010 (but canceled following the White House announcement).¹

The second source of anxiety is that Obama's world view or meta-theory of international relations can produce behavior objectively harmful to Israeli interests or national security. Obama, along with much of the electorate, was eager to dispel the criticism, voiced perhaps even more by friends and allies than by adversaries, that especially under George W. Bush the United States had become something of a rogue state, too quick to resort to force and insufficiently attentive to the strictures of international law and the procedures of international institutions. Obama seemed to believe that much of the friction in American foreign relations could be reduced if the United States abandoned this approach and instead consulted more with others and reached out proactively to accommodate their views and interests. Since the views and interests of most others in the global arena have not normally reflected much sympathy for Israeli perspectives, there continues to be some apprehension that efforts under an Obama administration to "reset" the tenor of international relations might come at Israel's expense.

On this matter too, Israel was not alone in its apprehensions. Some with close ties to the United States, notably Japan, India, and some countries in Eastern Europe worried that an American outreach to their regional rivals would entail diminished support for their own needs or preferences. This sometimes translated into the accusation that Obama was willing if not to consciously undermine American allies in order to cultivate American adversaries, then at least to proceed on the basis of a potentially dangerous naivete.

The (Brief) Historical Record

There was certainly an element of zero-sum thinking in all this speculation. Nevertheless, some of the new administration's actions did make it difficult to dismiss the concerns as mere paranoid ravings. For Israel, the most immediate alarm bell was Obama's clear signal that he meant to immunize himself against the criticism leveled against all of his predecessors that their involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process had always been a matter of "too little, too late." The unspoken assumptions behind such criticism were that Israel was the major obstacle to a peace agreement and that America's leverage on Israel was

in any case infinitely greater than its leverage on the Palestinians and their Arab supporters. Thus “American involvement” was often a diplomatic euphemism for pressure on Israel, and Obama’s declaration of activist intent was interpreted by many as a willingness to conciliate Arabs and Europeans with the coinage of Israeli concessions.

Perhaps even more disconcerting was the political logic that appeared to lie behind this activism, namely, the conviction often held but rarely advertised with such candor by previous administrations that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the key to promoting all of America’s other strategic objectives in the broader Middle East region – reducing Arab/Muslim enmity, containing if not defeating the threat of terrorism, undermining the appeal of al-Qaeda, facilitating the stabilization of Iraq and Afghanistan and the withdrawal of American forces from those countries, neutralizing Iran’s nuclear weapons program, weakening Iran’s regional influence and the power of its proxies (especially Hizbollah), and even promoting the liberalization of politics and society in that part of the world.² The clear articulation of such linkage theory by administration figures, even to the point of insinuating that the risk to American military personnel was elevated because of American support for Israel, not only seemed to augur more vigorous action in the diplomatic field but could also be understood as a heavy-handed attempt by the administration to undermine support for Israel in American public opinion.³

In fact, Obama’s activism in the Israeli-Palestinian arena was an integral part of his declared policy of “engagement” with the Arab/Muslim world. But for many Israelis, that too was hardly a source of reassurance. First of all, the physical dimension of engagement was manifested in high profile visits to major Muslim capitals – Ankara, Cairo, and Riyadh – but Israel was conspicuously absent from his itinerary. Furthermore, the rhetoric with which he tried to dramatize his desire to forge a “new beginning” in US-Muslim relations seemed to reflect considerable awareness (by him and/or his speechwriters) of the sensitivities of his hosts but little of those of Israelis. His June 2009 speech at Cairo University, for example, reaffirmed America’s commitment to Israel as a necessary and legitimate response to Jewish suffering over the ages, culminating in the Holocaust. But however well intentioned that message may have been, it struck many as ignorance if not depreciation of the historical Jewish connection to the Land of Israel, particularly the

centrality of Jerusalem to Jewish identity, and even an affirmation of the longstanding Arab complaint that the Palestinians had been made to pay the price for European crimes against the Jews.

The issue that caused US-Israel tensions to burst into the open was the question of settlements, or more precisely, the demand that Israel freeze construction in the settlements in order to allow PLO Chairman (and PA President) Mahmoud Abbas to return to the negotiations that he had suspended following Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in late 2008. In late 2009, Prime Minister Netanyahu responded to American entreaties and instituted a 10-month moratorium on construction activity. But the moratorium was only partial – it did not apply to Jerusalem – and it was grudgingly conceded, not least because there was no reciprocity, not even in the form of a symbolic confidence building measure that Obama had requested such as Saudi Arabia granting El Al over-flight rights – testimony, perhaps, to the limits of American influence if not of American understanding of political dynamics in the region.

More to the point, the moratorium did not achieve its stated objective; Abbas continued to refuse to renew negotiations until he was practically frog-marched into proximity talks, i.e., desultory indirect negotiations. But that “breakthrough” only came after an altercation marked by the kind of sourness not seen in US-Israeli relations since the standoff between Secretary of State James Baker and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir almost twenty years earlier (also over the settlement issue). In March, during a visit to Israel by Vice President Joe Biden, low level officials in the Jerusalem District Planning Commission announced approval of a new housing project in an existing neighborhood inside the city’s municipal boundary but beyond the Green Line (the 1949 Armistice Line). That announcement was a considerable embarrassment to the administration and it produced pressure on Netanyahu, during a visit to Washington that same month, to refrain from future such provocations. Obama’s attempts to persuade Netanyahu included methods that were variously described as a “snub” or a “public humiliation.” Widespread domestic criticism of Obama’s approach,

If the potential for future tension in US-Israel relations is realized, it will reflect at least in part the belief that everything important in the Middle East is linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that the major onus for removing that irritant falls on Israel.

together with the undeniable fact that Abbas was still refusing to negotiate, eventually led the administration to ease its rhetoric – another Netanyahu visit to Washington in May passed much more harmoniously – and revival of direct negotiations in early September seemed to lay the issue to rest. In fact, it reemerged within a month, following the expiration of the moratorium and the renewed suspension of negotiations, when the administration asked for another, shorter freeze. This time, the request was not granted but the controversy was marked by less bitterness, even after the midterm elections were over. Still, it remained as a symbol of the proverbial loaded gun on the table, symptomatic of the unresolved differences between the United States and Israel on the future of the peace process.

The second major source of suspicion and concern is Iran. By extending an “open hand” to the Islamic Republic of Iran at the outset of his incumbency, Obama fueled suspicions that he might be preparing to accommodate the regime and its nuclear ambitions. This demarche provoked considerable anxiety in several Arab Gulf states, and some Europeans initially worried that it was cover for an American attempt to gain commercial advantage. It was Israel, however, that exhibited the greatest anxiety because Iran represents the most salient threat to its national security, and any sign that the United States might abandon its opposition to Iranian-sponsored terrorism and especially to Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear military capability triggered fear that Israel would have to confront this threat alone.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that Israeli approval of Obama and confidence in his future performance are rather low. Although reliable figures are elusive, the same is apparently true of Israel’s major supporters in the United States, Jews and evangelical Christians. The latter have never really been part of Obama’s natural constituency but the former certainly are. In 2008, according to most evidence, Jews supported Obama in overwhelming numbers (as they have done for all Democratic leaders, at least since the time of Franklin D. Roosevelt). Of course, Israelis (among foreigners) and Jews and other supporters of Israel (among Americans) are not alone in showing sharply reduced approval of Obama since 2008. Growing disillusionment is an almost universal

phenomenon, if only because expectations were so astronomically high that they could not possibly be met. What is significant for the purposes of this analysis is that reduced support is also evident even among the Arabs and Muslims targeted by Obama's policy of engagement. The reasons for that are varied: Americans began to leave Iraq but the country is nevertheless in shambles, American-led military operations in Afghanistan have produced considerable collateral damage in that country as well as in Pakistan, the Guantanamo detention facility has not been closed, anti-government Iranians (some, at least) are irate that Obama did not support the opposition more vigorously in the aftermath of the fraudulent elections in June 2009, pro-government Iranians (some, at least) are irate that he has organized a campaign of political isolation and economic sanctions against them, and Arabs (some, at least) are irate that he hasn't done even more to harass, weaken, and contain Iran. But one other major reason is the undeniable fact that Obama has been far less able to "deliver" Israel than many felt they had been led to believe he would, and far less willing to initiate and sustain a truly monumental confrontation with Israel because of Israeli resistance to his initiatives.

That gap between initial Arab/Muslim expectations and subsequent reality with respect to Israel suggests that widespread Israeli/Jewish perceptions and concerns about Obama, however genuinely held, do not necessarily tell the whole story of the last two years or provide a reliable signpost to his probable course over the next two years. It is, of course, extremely difficult for anyone except Obama himself (and perhaps not even he) to know what he profoundly thinks and feels about Israel. However, the record of his first half-term as president does not provide overwhelming evidence either of the indifference/hostility to Israel or the dangerously naive world view often attributed to him. Indeed, no intellectual contortions are needed to interpret his policies as generally consistent with the major thrust of American policies stretching back over several decades.

Indeed, Obama's broad world view may contain elements of idealism, but that idealism seems firmly tempered by an acknowledgment of human limitation, including his own. That explains why he disappointed the Norwegian parliamentarians who awarded him the Nobel Peace Prize when in his acceptance speech he stated that while peace is the noblest aspiration, it is sometimes necessary to wage war. And that explains why

he qualified his aim of bringing about a world free of nuclear weapons by admitting that this was unlikely to happen in his lifetime.

In addition, the impression that he is less willing to use military force than his predecessors does not correspond with his surge in Afghanistan or his approval of the use of remotely-piloted vehicles to target terrorists in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa. Moreover, his effort to reach out to Iran does not necessarily imply a deep conviction that engagement would be crowned with success in the form of an acceptable agreement. On the contrary, it can be convincingly interpreted as a sophisticated exercise in realpolitik, that is, a ritual designed to build the political capital that George W. Bush needed but did not have to facilitate a broader and more vigorous sanctions regime and eventually, if all else failed, preemptive military action against Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

On relations with Israel and American policy in the Middle East, the Obama administration has most explicitly embraced the notion of linkage, but it is hard to imagine that some variant on that theme was not present in the calculations of all previous administrations. Likewise, while the administration has experimented with the idea of a frontal confrontation with the Israeli government over the issue of settlement construction, every previous administration has also denounced settlements as obstacles to the peace process and some, especially those of Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush, made their objections known in an unequivocal fashion.

Apart from that, there is little difference between Obama's positions and those of his predecessors. He has endorsed a two-state solution to the conflict, but so did George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, both considered very good friends of Israel. On the question of borders, he has indicated that America supports only minor (and mutually acceptable) deviations from the 1949 Armistice line, but that has essentially been the position of the United States since 1969, when William Rogers, Nixon's secretary of state, declared that any border changes should be "insubstantial" and should not reflect "the weight of conquest." He has also repeatedly referred approvingly to the Jewish character of Israel, something that most Arabs have adamantly refused to do. Moreover, the Obama administration, like its predecessors, has continued to use American influence to prevent or preempt the adoption of resolutions hostile to Israel by the United Nations Security Council and has acted where it

could to mitigate anti-Israel resolutions in less authoritative UN agencies. It has also continued in other international forums to shield Israel from demands that the latter join the NPT or otherwise expose elements of its security effort that it does not want to expose.

Finally, bilateral strategic cooperation and support for Israel's defense posture have, if anything, intensified under Obama. American spokesmen at all echelons of government have insisted that differences on the peace process would not impinge on security ties between the two countries. Vice President Biden, even at a moment of supreme discomfort during his visit to Israel in March 2010, stressed that "there is absolutely no space between the United States and Israel when it comes to security, none."⁴ This commitment has in part been made manifest by ongoing support and funding for Israeli missile defense programs and by new agreements to provide the most advanced military technologies, including F-35 combat aircraft.

Of course, facts do not necessarily make for the entire truth, and it is possible that the Obama administration does what it does with less enthusiasm or more reservations than did previous administrations. Even if that is not the case, but especially if it is, the potential for future tension and conflict in US-Israel relations cannot be precluded. If that potential is realized, it will certainly be due at least in part to the way the entire complex of issues is occasionally framed by the administration at one level or another, that is, to the belief that everything important in the Middle East is linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that the major onus for removing that irritant falls on Israel. But it will also be due to a perception in the critical center of the American body politic that Israel is not doing what can reasonably be expected of it. A major component of every Israeli government's agenda must therefore be to prevent the spread of such a perception.

Notes

- 1 Stephen Castle, "E.U. Notes a Distancing in American Foreign Policy," *International Herald Tribune*, December 17, 2010.
- 2 Ethan Bronner, "Why America Chases an Israeli-Palestinian Peace," *New York Times*, November 20, 2010.
- 3 Critics of US ties with Israel seized particularly on the comments of General David Petraeus, Head of Central Command, who told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "The conflict foments anti-American sentiment due to

a perception of U.S. favoritism toward Israel.” Mark Lander, “Opportunity in a Fight with Israel,” *New York Times*, March 16, 2010.

- 4 <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2010/March/20100311123835eaifas0.9307062.html>.

New Directions in Russia's Foreign Policy: Implications for the Middle East

Zvi Magen and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky

Recent years have testified to substantive changes in Russia's foreign policy approach. Underlying these changes is Russia's at times troubled search for the best way to integrate in the international system and promote its ambitions. The result has been noticeable active Russian involvement in the international arena, including involvement in major issues such as relations with the United States; arms control; development of relations with the European Union and NATO; and the Middle East. For Russia, which only a few years ago found itself on the fringes of the major international processes, this is an attempt to change its standing and regain a central role in the international arena.

This article surveys the developments in Russian foreign policy and the practical implementation of this policy, while examining its ramifications for the Middle East.

Developments in Russian Foreign Policy

The Soviet Union implemented a superpower foreign policy and strove steadily to achieve a hegemonic status, or at least a status equal to the country's competitors in the bipolar international arena, where the US-led Western bloc was positioned against the Soviet Eastern bloc. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became its successor, but it failed to fill the vacuum that was left after the superpower's dissolution. In the first decade, Russia was pushed to the outskirts of international processes, and it was forced to accept a second class status in the international arena. Meantime, the United States became

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the dominant superpower, and Russia watched as to its dismay the unipolar system increased Washington's influence over all international processes. Russia was unable to reconcile itself to its second class status, and after a short period of uncertainty in its foreign policy began to invest in upgrading its international standing.

Within a decade, the opportunity arose to change the situation. During the first years of his tenure as president, Vladimir Putin changed Russia's foreign policy dramatically in an attempt to have the country regain the status of a major international player. This policy quickly became defiant and assertive, with displays of force and provocations toward the West.¹ This was how the "multipolar" concept unfolded in action, with measures that were supposed to provide Russia with a status equal to that of the United States and to allow it to realize its relative advantages. The path chosen for implementing this concept was a dual approach that combined challenges to the Western system with proactive cooperation with the international community.

This policy earned the support of the public at home, which largely identifies with the "superpower" trend promoted by the leadership. The ideology that has taken hold among the Russian public combines the Russian imperialist tradition with Soviet geopolitical concepts, grounded in an assertive and manipulative approach in international relations such as strong opposition to expanding NATO eastward while bringing the regions of the former Soviet Union into the European Union and NATO, or opposition to democratization pressures. This new foreign policy was implemented during Putin's tenure and has been characterized by the following:

- a. An effort in the international arena to upgrade Russia's status by combining defiance of the United States and NATO – by way of negation of the US-dominating unipolar concept – with proactive cooperation with the overall international system.
- b. On the regional level, which is its preferred arena, Russia has used various levers of influence to push the United States aside and promote its own agenda (for example, agreements on cooperation with BRIC, OIC, and SCO).²
- c. In the space of the former Soviet Union, defined by Russia as an area of vital interest since it is a barrier for ensuring Russia's national security, an uncompromising struggle was waged to repel Western

inroads and attempts to influence countries in the region, and to preserve Russian hegemony. This was done by diplomatic activity (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan), subversion (Ukraine, the Baltic states), and the use of force (Georgia).

In the Russian view, the multipolar system, which undermines the exclusive US status, gives Russia relative advantages.³ The method used to implement this policy – asymmetric of sorts because it was conducted by Russia without real tools (economic, political, or military) – nevertheless achieved noticeable results for Russia and significantly advanced its status in the international arena.

The “Reset” Stage

The new American diplomatic initiative, promoted by President Obama after he took office, created a revolution in Russian foreign policy. The diplomatic initiative, the “reset,” proposed an improved atmosphere between the countries as well as a set of areas for US-Russia cooperation, accompanied by American benefits and concessions. In exchange, Russia would change its policy on issues important to the West, first and foremost Iran. The Russian regime, which had lost more than a little of its self-confidence in the wake of the world economic crisis that caused considerable damage to Russia, saw in the American offer, in addition to its tangible benefits, an opportunity to change Russian policy, which it believed had already maximized its potential. The result of this move was cessation of the diplomatic confrontation with the West and creation of a system of cooperation, along with the establishment of an effective international coalition against a nuclearizing Iran.

The American offer was made as a package deal. As far as is known, Russia was presented with the following proposals:

- a. An American concession on stationing interceptor missiles in Eastern Europe
- b. A positive American response to signing an agreement to reduce strategic weapons (START), in accordance with Russia’s approach
- c. De facto recognition of Russia’s special status in the space of the former Soviet Union, including a concession on not expanding NATO in these areas

d. Integration of Russia into international activity alongside Western countries (including the Middle East peace process and participation in NATO projects).

In exchange, Russia was invited to join the sanctions regime against Iran, work with the United States and NATO against radical Islamic elements, and provide assistance to NATO activity in Afghanistan. In America's view, the main goal of the reset policy (as presented at that time by Vice President Biden)⁴ was to reduce international tension and eliminate the danger of a military confrontation, preserve the strategic arms control system, and prevent friction between Western countries and Russia against the backdrop of their activities in the former Soviet Union region.

Apparently Russia did not feel that the cost exceeded the benefits, and the reset policy, which was launched in the fall of 2009, has proven quite successful. The bilateral atmosphere has improved, the danger of a military confrontation has been significantly reduced, and the START treaty was signed and ratified (see appendix). A positive dialogue is taking place (as within the framework of the US-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission), and cooperation with NATO has proceeded on various levels. Russia is providing logistical assistance for NATO activities in Afghanistan, and is cooperating in the war on terror. Similarly, a decision was made, presented and approved at a NATO conference in Lisbon in November 2010, to launch a joint ballistic missile defense program. The end of the confrontation between NATO and Russia was also formally announced at this conference. In issues relating to the former Soviet Union, it appears that Russia has achieved the desired arrangement, which grants it a special status while keeping the West away from actively advancing its influence in this area. In tandem, Russia has fulfilled its part in the understandings with the United States by joining in the sanctions against Iran.

Despite the relative success of the program, from the Russian point of view there are still gray areas in which its status has not been upgraded, such as participation in the Middle East peace process. It does not appear that over time Russia will concede its interests on this issue. Similarly, it does not appear that Russia has completely abandoned its former global aspirations. With all the advantages and the benefits granted it by the reset program, Russia will likely act to promote its goals in the international system in additional ways.

The New Turning Point

After a period of cooperation in the framework of the reset program, Russia is once again at a crossroads. For some time, a dynamic process has been underway in Russia regarding new solutions to shape the future face of the international system and Russia's proper place within it. Doubts have been raised about the wisdom of Russia's political path, which openly declares an aspiration to achieve the status of a superpower competing alone for its place in the world. Should Russia continue to persist in its activities in glorious international isolation, or has the time arrived to change this concept?

Underlying these deliberations is the understanding that Russia will not successfully meet the growing economic, political, and security challenges on its own, nor will it manage alone to extricate itself from its crises. This is due to its difficult situation (mainly economic) and the widening gap in many areas between it and other global systems, both Western (the US and the EU) and Chinese. Consequently, and as part of the process of examining possible alternatives to the current foreign and defense policy, the model of Russia's partnering with one of the existing international frameworks is under consideration. Any potential new framework would have to be able to help Russia emerge from its difficulties and collaborate with it to design a more convenient (in Russian eyes) international architecture. The following are mentioned as potential candidates:

- a. In the West, the European Union has priority. In addition, a proposal was recently published to establish a new united framework for Russia and Europe as an alternative to both the EU and NATO.
- b. Some are pondering a union with the US in a tripartite Russian-European-American pact, or a bilateral Russian-American pact.
- c. At the very least, closer cooperation with NATO is being examined.
- d. Looking to the Far East, an association with China is under discussion, although other partners are also being examined. Certain elements among the Russian elite believe that the Chinese alternative is preferred. In contrast, there are those who say that China is a competitor and in the future will be a rival of Russia.

It appears that the Russian elite leans in the direction of Europe. In this context, efforts are underway to interest the potential partners, whether by disseminating messages and proposals,⁵ or at high level meetings

(such as Medvedev's meeting with Merkel and Sarkozy in November 2010) and international forums. It is still too early to discuss the practical dimension of the Russian proposals, in light of the rather cool European response.⁶

At the same time, Russia is campaigning to move closer to NATO. The first attempt, made by Medvedev in 2008, was unsuccessful against the background of the war in Georgia. Since the campaign in Georgia in 2008, relations have remained cool, and only with the implementation of the reset program did a thaw occur in relations in this area as well. Russia's renewed attempts during the past year reflect its belief that upgrading relations with NATO will significantly enhance relations with the West as a whole. Therefore, the Russians insist on cooperation, both in the framework of coordination with the NATO-Russia Council, and on the operational level (combating terror, logistical support, and recently, even operational support for NATO forces in Afghanistan). Up to this point, only the deployment of a joint anti-missile array (minor and disappointing from the Russian perspective) was approved, along with continuation and expansion of existing cooperation. In addition, the conflict between Russia and NATO was formally ended, which is likely a sign of things to come.

Implications for the Middle East

The Middle East is seen by the Russian leadership as an area of great geopolitical importance containing a wide range of factors and encompassing global, regional, and Islamic interests. Therefore, the leadership gives priority to the Middle East in its foreign policy and is investing considerable efforts to promote its influential standing in the region by way of competition with its adversaries.

To promote its goals to the fullest, Russia is forced to maneuver between global and regional interests, that is, between the image of a worthy partner for the West that is essential to the international system, and activity on the regional level that is intended to reduce the influence of the West. This latter activity encompasses the principle of cooperative relations with all the regional players in order to gain a clear advantage as an influential actor that balances and mediates between the players because of its ability to engage in dialogue with all parties in the region. Eclipsing the United States and other competing parties is advanced

by encouraging anti-Western trends, a varied aid proposal, including security aid, and development of multidisciplinary cooperation. Among the services offered are bridging and diplomatic mediation.

The new Russo-American cooperation in the framework of the reset program has brought about a refreshing change in Russia's conduct in the Middle East. Within the reset the Middle East is a central place, mainly because of the Iranian issue, and Russia's participation in the sanctions against Iran is a major component of this program. Among the American promises to Russia as a reward for its participation is the issue of upgrading Russia's status in Middle Eastern affairs while integrating it into a more significant role in the diplomatic processes in the region. At least this is Russia's understanding, which with an eye to a future position of influence has proposed various ideas, such as convening a peace conference in Moscow. In any event, Russia has fulfilled its expected role in the agreement and joined the sanctions against Iran. This was accompanied by much hesitation and occurred after Iran itself torpedoed Russia's efforts a number of times to mediate between Tehran and the West.⁷

Is this the final picture, or is this a temporary change in tactics? Here opinion is divided. Russia's interest in its preferred status in Iran has not disappeared, nor has Iran's interest in enjoying Russian support in the future. In practice, however, matters on the Russian-Iranian axis have continued to deteriorate, and even recently a meeting between the Russian and Iranian presidents (a conference on the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan) ended without significant results. For this and other reasons, it appears that at this point there is a crisis in relations and that Russia is seeking an alternative to this shaky axis.

Syria and Lebanon are relevant in this context,⁸ with reports of new procurement deals signed between Russia and these two states. Syria was provided with the Yakhont, an anti-ship cruise missile, in addition to other weapon systems,⁹ although its requests for weapons that upset the balance were rejected, which indicates Russia's measured conduct on

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this sensitive topic. Lebanon also received a Russian gift that includes attack helicopters, tanks, and ammunition.¹⁰ The Lebanese deal, which has no economic rationale, can in fact be explained as the provision of maintenance and training services that ensure a future Russian foothold in the country. The diplomatic side to this rapprochement includes visits by leaders (Medvedev in Syria, Hariri in Russia) along with a series of agreements and understandings. These Russian efforts have not escaped the notice of the United States, which is likewise active in these countries (Lebanon was also offered generous American security assistance).

The Russian rapprochement with these states may indicate a certain turning point in the Russian architecture in the region. This may be an attempt to consolidate an additional diplomatic axis, possibly as an alternative to the weakened Iranian axis. Another possibility is that a Syrian-Lebanese track is being prepared under Russian auspices that will be activated in the peace process with Israel.

Over the past year, there has been a significant warming of relations with Israel as well. Is this merely the logical continuation of a long process of building bilateral relations, or can we expect the acceleration of Russian cooperation in support of Russia's diplomatic goals? Can this be connected to developments in the Lebanese-Syrian sector? Is Russia constructing a new formula of its own to promote the regional peace process? While all developments have been influenced by the reset program, is there a hint in the recent events of a transition from the reset program to a different concept? Answers to these and other questions will emerge with further developments in Russia's foreign policy.

Conclusion

Certain changes are emerging in Russia's Middle East policy, possibly as a consequence of the changes taking place in Russian foreign policy in general. The new trend is unfolding in the wake of Russia's response to the reset program and its participation in the sanctions regime against Iran. First and foremost, these changes have to do with Russo-Iranian relations, which have cooled significantly. This has implications for the previously positive interface between Russia and the "axis of evil," whose future is now unclear. As a result, Russia finds itself seeking quick alternatives, with a separate "axis" with Syria and Lebanon emerging as the preferred option. If so, it can serve a number of possible goals in the

region. For example, it can demonstrate to Iran that it is not indispensable and there is an available alternative, and that it would do well not to move too far away from Russia despite insults suffered. Otherwise, Russia will make do with a new option. Or, the new axis can allow Russia to jumpstart a Syrian-Lebanese track in the peace process with Israel, which might enable Russia's involvement, although it has not been included in the Palestinian track up till now.

While Russia has taken a rather active part in the peace process in the Quartet and in other international forums, it does not in fact play a real role in the peace process itself. It was absent from the Washington Conference, it is not taking part in the discussion with the parties in the Middle East, and it has not sponsored a peace conference in Moscow, as it intended. It appears that the United States is conducting the process in the Middle East alone, and it will likely not be prepared to share this status with other partners.

There has recently been a new flowering in bilateral relations with Israel, with Russia expressing interest in extensive cooperation (with an emphasis on technology). International trade is growing and tourists from Russia are flooding Israel. Russian signals present Israel as a desirable partner in the international arena, and Russia has adhered to its commitment to a peace process and to Israel's security. At the same time, there is no lack of dispute between the two countries. Likewise, Russia is careful to adopt a "balanced" approach towards the other interested parties in the region, while demonstrating its abilities to maintain positive relationships with all the parties.

The current Russian rapprochement with Israel, which includes increased cooperation, is likely intended, *inter alia*, to facilitate Russia's future integration into the peace process with the help of the Israeli "entry ticket." It is possible that America's difficulties in promoting the process in accordance with US considerations boost Russia's interest to test its strength on this court, where it has previously not succeeded in making inroads. Russia is therefore working to cast itself as an effective mediator acceptable to all parties in the region. And overall, signs that Russia is distancing itself from the reset policy and turning to a new policy can be seen in current Russian conduct

One possibility is that a Syrian-Lebanese track is being prepared under Russian auspices that will be activated in the peace process with Israel.

in the Middle East. In this context, the positive independent capabilities that Russia is trying to demonstrate are liable to help it gain entry to the prestigious EU and NATO clubs.

Thus Russian foreign policy in recent years reveals a mixture of dynamic processes, combining efforts to shape an assertive foreign policy to upgrade Russia's international standing with a cautious, constructive policy that works to integrate Russia in a positive manner in the international system. These concomitant trends suggest that Russia has no real intention of making concessions in its far reaching aspirations in the international arena. Perhaps this is the adaptation of the multipolar concept to changing circumstances and its latent integration into veteran international frameworks, such as the reset policy or the new proposal for a union with Europe or NATO. Time will tell whether changes can actually be expected in the familiar Russian trends.

Notes

The authors would like to thank Natan Lerner for his help in gathering data and preparing the appendix.

- 1 See, for example, Putin's speech in Munich in 2007, <http://www.securityconference.de/Putin-s-speech.381.0.html?&L=1>.
- 2 Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC); Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC); and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).
- 3 See *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, <http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml>.
- 4 See Joe Biden's speech in Munich in 2009, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2009/02/07/8375>.
- 5 Irina Filatova, "Putin Seeks Free Trade with EU," *Moscow Times*, November 26, 2010, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/putin-seeks-free-trade-with-eu/424854.html>.
- 6 David Gordon Smith, "The World from Berlin: Putin's Free-Trade Proposal Is 'Just a Smokescreen,'" *Spiegel Online*, November 26, 2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,731370,00.html>.
- 7 Samir Shakhbaz, "Interview with Alexei Fenenko: Russia and America are Doomed to Remain Political Enemies," *Global Research: Centre for Research on Globalization*, October 12, 2010, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/PrintArticle.php?articleId=21416>.
- 8 Syria is the most conspicuous Russian partner alongside Iran. Russia has a long common history with Syria from its Soviet Union days, which, after a period of cooling off, has flourished once again over the past decade. In exchange for writing off old debts and diverse new cooperative ventures, Syria also granted Russia a new foothold in its ports, Tartus and Latakia. In

- recent years, Syria has become a key regional player for Russia, which, with the changes taking place in the Iranian sector, is becoming more important.
- 9 For details, see Reuters, "Report: Russia Signs Arms Deal with Syria," *Haaretz*, May 14, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/report-russia-signs-arms-deal-with-syria-1.290409>.
- 10 "Russia Gifts Lebanon," November 25, 2010, <http://www.strategypage.com/htmw/htproc/articles/20101125.aspx>.

Appendix: New START

In April 2010 the American and Russian presidents signed the new START nuclear disarmament treaty, another in the series of agreements between the countries for the control and disarming of strategic nuclear weapons, some of which have entered into force and some of which have not, beginning with the SALT agreement in 1969. According to the new understandings, the number of warheads deployed will be limited to 1,550 for each side. The number of launch platforms will be limited to 800, and of these, only 700 can be deployed.¹

Although ratified by the US Senate in December 2010, the agreement was deemed problematic by much of the public. First, the agreement refers only to the limitation on deployed warheads. Therefore, in light of the limitation achieved in the SORT agreement, which limits the general number of warheads to 2,200, each of the sides can have another 650 non-deployed warheads. Second, in counting the warheads, the bombers are counted as one warhead. This makes it possible to place the non-deployed warheads on the bombers as well, and thus in practice to increase the number of deployed warheads. Furthermore, it is also possible to increase the number of warheads beyond 2,200 if Russia upgrades its planes and takes advantage of the legal lacunae in the agreement.² Third, there is no limitation in the agreement on tactical warheads. This fact gives Russia an advantage because it has many more tactical warheads than the United States. Fourth, Russia has 809 warhead carriers (566 of them deployed), and the US has 1,188 warhead-carrying missiles (798 of them deployed).³ Therefore, limiting the number of warhead-carrying missiles benefits Russia more than the United States. Finally, Russia has declared that if the US develops an anti-missile missile system, it will withdraw from the agreement if it sees this development as dangerous.

Agreement	Warheads	Number of warhead-carrying missiles	Expiration date
START 1 (in effect since 1994)	6,000	1,600	December 5, 2009
SORT (in effect since 2003)	2,200	No limitation	December 31, 2009 or with the signing of a new agreement
New START	1,550/2,200	700/800	

Notes

- 1 *Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms*, www.state.gov/documents/organization/140035.pdf.
- 2 S. Bank, "Beyond the Reset Policy: Current Dilemmas of U.S.-Russia Relations," *Comparative Strategy* 29, no. 4 (2010): 339.
- 3 NGO Committee on Disarmament, Peace, and Security, "US and Russia Conclude New START Treaty," http://disarm.igc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=337:us-and-russia-conclude-nuclear-arms-control-treaty-after-nearly-a-year-of-negotiations-new-start-treaty-makes-modest-cuts-to-arsenals&catid=145:disarmament-times-spring-2010&Itemid=2.

“Made in Iran”: The Iranian Involvement in Iraq

Yoel Guzansky

Evidence of Iran’s involvement in Iraq has mounted in recent years. The military assistance Iran supplies the Shiite militias in Iraq in the form of financing, training, and armaments, primarily through the Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, has drawn most of the attention. At the same time, Iranian involvement in Iraq has assumed several non-military dimensions, whereby Iran is seeking to forge a state with Shiite dominance sharing Iran’s interests, a state that would not threaten Iran’s standing in the region and would be as free of American influence as possible. This essay seeks to examine the nature of this involvement and the motivation behind it, as well as its limits and potential ramifications.

Iran shares its longest land border, some 1,500 km, with Iraq, and is keenly interested in the old/new state-in-the-making. It seeks to nurture the large Shiite stronghold (while weakening the Sunni identity) in southern Iraq, which controls the strategic access to the Gulf and about half of all Iraqi oil reserves. As early as 2007, Ahmadinejad announced that “Iran is prepared to fill the vacuum left by the Americans retreating from Iraq,”¹ and indeed, Iranian involvement in Iraq is motivated by what Iran views as its natural sphere of influence. It is fed by concern about the future nature of an Iraqi state, Tehran’s ambitions for regional hegemony, and the understanding that Iraq is an important component in attaining that hegemony. Until the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Iraq was Iran’s primary rival for control of the region; at least for the foreseeable future, the military balance of power clearly favors Iran. Iran is also seeking to maintain the not inconsiderable gains it has made (largely courtesy of the US) with the weakening of the Iraqi state and the

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rise of its Shiite element. The fact that the 50,000 US soldiers remaining in Iraq are scheduled – unless a new agreement is signed – to leave by the end of 2011 is liable to propel Iran to intervene in Iraq even more, so that the state is further aligned with Iranian interests.

The fear that Iraq will not be able to stand on its own and may de facto become an Iranian satellite is not without foundation. As the American forces in Iraq thin out, Iraq's neighbors are liable to be increasingly motivated to have an even greater say in the workings of the state and try to fill the vacuum that will be created by the withdrawal. Indeed, since 2003 all the countries bordering Iraq have attempted to increase their influence there to advance their own particular interests, but Iranian involvement in Iraq has exceeded other foreign influence. This involvement is evident in several and often overlapping areas, among them the military, political, religious, and economic sectors.

The Quds Force and the Shiite Militias

Since 2003, Iraq's inherent weakness has opened the door for external involvement from Iran as a way for Tehran to expand its influence, reduce the risk to its national security, and help it gain hegemony in the Gulf region. In this context, the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards – a force established in the early 1990s in order to promote Iran's interests beyond Iranian borders via military, political, and economic means – supplies financing, equipment, and arms to Shiite militias in Iraq. Training includes methods for surveillance of targets and rigging and detonating powerful roadside bombs, which have caused the deaths of many Iraqi and American soldiers.²

Among the leading American concerns in recent years is the tactical military assistance given by Iran to the Shiite militias. Commanders in the US military who served in southern Iraq testified that Iran has posted Quds Force representatives there in civilian dress to gather intelligence and maintain contact with pro-Iranian factions, particularly in Shiite provinces. The major function of these Iranian "diplomats" is to identify and train Iraqi fighters, set up safe transit routes for activists and arms between Iraq and Iran, and aid militias in terrorist activities.³ American intelligence has reported that Iran also works with Hizbollah operatives (who speak Arabic and are seen as seasoned veterans), even though in

the past Iranian senior officials pledged to the Americans to stop this type of activity.⁴

The fact that the Iran-Iraq border is for the most part unmanned made it possible for Iran after the fall of Saddam Hussein to have many operatives infiltrate into southern Iraq in order to bolster the Iranian influence there. According to various estimates, over 1.5 million people have crossed the border;⁵ many of them are exiles, but others, led by members of the Revolutionary Guards, came at Iran's behest. Since 2003, Revolutionary Guards Quds Force personnel have moved around Iraq under diplomatic cover in order to avoid leaving Iranian fingerprints and maintain their anonymity; to a large extent, to use General Petraeus' expression, they serve as the executive arm of Iran's foreign policy in Iraq.⁶ Former Iranian ambassador Hassan Kazemi-Qomi was himself an officer in the Revolutionary Guards; before that, he operated in Lebanon in a consulting position with Hizbollah. Similarly, current Iranian ambassador Hassan Danafar served in the Revolutionary Guards Navy. Nor is Iranian involvement in the Kurdish region new. Over the last decade, Iranian intelligence personnel have operated there virtually unopposed in what has long since become an autonomous Kurdish state,⁷ as evidenced by the fact that in 2007 American soldiers apprehended (and released in 2009) five "Iranian diplomats" in the capital Erbil, on suspicion they had assisted Shiite armed forces.

Iraqi security forces, with American help, routinely carry out raids along the Iranian border and have even built bases near the border in order to foil arms smuggling from Iran to Iraq. From time to time, arms such as rockets, mortar bombs, artillery shells, ammunition, and RPGs stamped "made in Iran" are discovered in large quantities.⁸ In addition, the 2008 Battle of Basra between the Iran-allied Mahdi army (Jaish al-Mahdi) and American and Iraqi forces weakened the militia significantly and caused its leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, in exile in Qom since 2007, to declare that he was shifting his activity from the military to the political and social arena. In practice, his followers split into smaller armed groups, such as the Hizbollah Brigades, which are under Iranian auspices.

Despite the links between the Shiite religious leaderships in Iran and Iraq, there is little probability that Iraqi Shiites will subordinate their national loyalty to their religious beliefs and side with Iran over Iraq.

The American Defense Department claims that since 2009 Iran has reduced the number of militias it supports, although it has improved training and upgraded the arms it supplies.⁹ It is unclear what lies behind the selective reduction of Iranian support for the Shiite militias. Was it the result of growing American pressure, or a trust-building move for the incoming Obama administration and the adjustment in the administration's policy towards Iran? Was it an understanding that at this stage it is necessary to stress political influence that will not generate antagonism towards Iran in Iraq? In mid 2010 General Ray Odierno, the former commander of US forces in Iraq, stated that Iran continues to arm and train militias within its own borders, but is currently more interested in intelligence operations and political influence. In his opinion, the militias intend to take advantage of the American withdrawal and carry out attacks against the forces, in order to reap a propaganda victory by creating the image of an American withdrawal under fire.¹⁰

While Iran has signed a string of agreements with Iraq, including agreements on military cooperation, it is liable – certainly in the absence of American forces – to exploit both its military advantage and Iraqi instability to “solve” the problems of the minorities and border disputes. Indeed, it seems that in the past year, perhaps in light of the continuing American withdrawal, Iran has felt freer to make aggressive moves against Iraq: on several occasions, Iranian military forces penetrated deep into Iraqi territory, whether to capture, at least temporarily, a disputed oilfield (December 2009) or to act more aggressively than in the past against Kurdish rebels.¹¹ In December 2010, Iran even held a ground maneuver near the Iraqi border, unusual in its scope and location.¹² To date, these actions have not elicited a determined Iraqi (or American) response beyond a faint call for the need to respect Iraqi sovereignty.

The Political Dimension

Iranian interests, particularly the drive to bring about Shiite dominance in Iraq have to date coincided, albeit indirectly, with American interests, as the United States has sought to promote a model of representative democracy in Iraq. The fact that Iraq's population is 60 percent Shiite has helped. The Iranian interest, i.e., translating the demographic advantage into more political influence in Iraq, has made many strides forward: for the first time in the history of modern Iraq, Shiites hold the reins of state.

During Saddam Hussein's rule, Iran granted asylum to a host of Iraqi opposition organizations, and part of its ability to affect Iraqi politics today is linked to the fact that the individuals comprising a significant portion of the Iraqi political map formerly resided in Iran. Beyond political asylum, Iran supplied these opposition organizations with financial, organizational, and logistical assistance, thereby contributing to the development of a dependent relationship on personal as well as ideological levels.¹³

Iran failed to prevent the signing of agreements late in the Bush administration on strategic relations between Iraq and the United States. Yet because of the pressure Iran exerted on the al-Maliki government, the timetable obligates the withdrawal of US forces and a paragraph forbids Iraq from attacking neighboring countries from its territory. Another example of the extent of Iranian influence is the direct involvement of Quds Force Commanding Officer Sulemani: according to reports, he is one of the signatories on a 2008 ceasefire agreement between Iraqi government forces and Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army signed in Basra.¹⁴

Already a few years ago, the Americans warned of Iranian involvement in Iraq's internal political arena: "They can change the election results with roadside bombs, killings, assassinations of important candidates. And they can do this so that other elements will be blamed."¹⁵ As part of its military activity, Iran's political power relies on its use of proxies, and when incriminated, its ability to deny affiliation with them.

Many observers speculated that following the March 2010 elections the establishment of a government would be delayed, but no one expected the intensity of the conflict over the election results themselves. However, the tensions should have come as no surprise, as the government's composition will largely determine the future of the Iraqi state for years to come and perhaps also the scope of external involvement

The future relationship between the US and Iraq will likely be the leading factor regarding Iran's ability to intervene in Iraq's internal matters.

in its internal matters. Thus, all of Iraq's neighbors were prompted in one way or another – through direct financial assistance, propaganda, or falsification and fraud – to fashion a favorable (from their own perspectives) Iraqi government. Of Iraq's neighbors, Iran apparently

enjoys the most influence in Iraq, primarily because it does not shy away from maintaining ties with almost every political entity in Iraq.

US military commanders claimed there was intelligence evidence of Iranian attempts to influence the election results through financial and military assistance via various proxies in Iraqi politics.¹⁶ Secretary of State Clinton too, in a hearing before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, noted that the United States was doing all it could to promote widespread participation in the elections to counteract the effect of Iranian efforts to manipulate the results through bribery and financial support of candidates.¹⁷ Before the elections, the Justice and Accountability Commission, whose legal validity is unclear, was asked to make sure that the candidates would not include former Ba'athists. In practice, the JAC banned hundreds of candidates, mostly Sunnis or secular Shiites, in a transparent – though ultimately unsuccessful – attempt to cast Iraqi politics in an Iranian mold.

Iran has exerted much effort to unite the Shiite political factions in Iraq so that they can form a government. Indeed, the political pilgrimage to Iran immediately after the elections demonstrated just how significant its role was in shaping the future government of Iraq. Delegations from all parties came to Tehran; even Ayad Allawi, who had accused Iran of negative interference in Iraq and an attempt to keep him from being appointed prime minister, paid a call.¹⁸ Allawi, who seems to enjoy considerable Saudi Arabian support despite his being Shiite, won many votes among Sunnis. He managed to convince them he would see to restoring their rights and would protect their interests. That he is an outspoken secularist whose party includes many prominent Sunni leaders apparently helped his candidacy. Another reason for the support he garnered is linked to the hostility many Sunnis feel towards Iran and the fear of its influence.¹⁹ Iran did not conceal its desire for the Shiite blocs to overcome their differences and take advantage of their numerical advantage in order to choose the next Iraqi prime minister, which is exactly what happened.²⁰ Moreover, the political clout of Iran's most prominent representative in the government – Muqtada al-Sadr (40 seats) – and his ability to tip the scales one way or the other greatly allows him to steer future Iraqi politics according to the wishes of his patrons.

The Religious Dimension

The Shiites, who represent 60-65 percent of Iraq's population, have taken control of centers of power in the country, but their sense of loyalty to Iraq has so far prevented an even bigger bloodbath and maintained the framework of the state. Thus despite the links between the Shiite religious leaderships in Iran and Iraq, there is little probability that Iraqi Shiites will subordinate their national loyalty to their religious beliefs and side with Iran over Iraq. Over the years, Shiites in Iraq, with a few exceptions, have identified with the Iraqi nation and have distinguished themselves from their Iranian brothers.²¹

In addition, most Shiites reject the principle of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (the absolute guardianship of Islamic clerics) as formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini. The religious authorities in Najaf, headed by Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the most senior Shiite cleric in Iraq (with higher religious authority than Khamenei himself), have more than once expressed their opposition to the idea that the supreme authority in Iraq would be simultaneously religious and political, like the model applied in Iran. Likewise, the Iraqi Shiites are not a homogenous bloc, as there are significant political and ideological rivalries between various groups that are locked in struggle with one another. In the recent parliamentary elections and unlike in the past, Ayatollah Sistani refrained from even veiled involvement or expressions of support for one political party or another. After the elections he worked to establish as broad-based a government as possible that would represent all ethnic groups and would comprise most of the large parties, including the Allawi-led bloc.

However, religious affinities have not erased cross-border competition. Iran, as a Shiite nation, would presumably be interested in strengthening the Iraqi Shiite component. The flourishing of the Shiite holy cities of Najaf (where tradition places the burial place of Ali, the founder of Shia and its first imam) and Karbala, more holy than Qom in Iran, is likely to steal the primacy Iran's Shia has enjoyed to date. Moreover, strengthening the religious elite in Iraq at the expense of its Iranian counterpart is likely to play into the hands of those in Iran – especially in the opposition – who would like to promote pluralism and challenge the religious authority at the base of the Tehran regime, particularly with regard to the authority of the supreme leader.²² However, the death of Najaf-born Ayatollah Fadlallah, who had refused to recognize Khamenei as the *marja-i taqlid*

("source of emulation" or "religious reference")²³ for the entire Shiite community, and the fact that Ayatollah Sistani is old and in poor health are likely to help Iran ensure the supremacy of Qom.

Thus although Iran uses the religious element to strengthen its hold on Iraqi Shiites, especially for political gain (e.g., influencing voters before the elections), its leverage here is not guaranteed. A survey carried out in Iraq after the last elections indicated that only 17 percent of Shiites view the Iranian leadership and Ahmadinejad in a positive light. Forty-three percent of Iraqi Shiites said they view Iran's links to Iraqi politicians in a negative light, and only 18 percent viewed these ties positively.²⁴

Economic and Bilateral Ties

Iraq plays a significant role in Iraq's economy, and alongside Turkey is Iraq's largest trading partner and its main export destination (excluding oil). Trade between the nations is primarily unidirectional, and years of sanctions and the ongoing fighting have rendered Iraq dependent on Iranian goods. According to estimates, since 2003 trade between the two nations has grown by 30 percent.²⁵ Although there is no precise data about the current scope of trade between the two countries, the estimate is that in 2009 it totaled \$4 billion, and the countries have announced their intentions to double that number.²⁶ The only place outside Iran where the Iranian currency – the rial – is used as a medium of exchange is southern Iraq. Furthermore, two large Iranian banks operate in Iraq, and Iranian goods – from Iranian-made vehicles through concrete construction blocks to foodstuffs – flood Iraqi markets; most of them are subsidized.²⁷

Around the time of Ahmadinejad's visit to Iraq in March 2008, the first visit of an Iranian president in Iraq since the Islamic Revolution, Iran announced the extension of \$1 billion in credit for Iranian exports to Iraq. This sum is matched by a similar amount allotted for the construction of an airport in Najaf on behalf of the tens of thousands of Iranian pilgrims visiting the city every month. Seven agreements on cooperation in security, customs and tariffs, industry, education, the environment, transportation, and the development of a free trade zone near the shared border in the region of Basra were signed.²⁸ In March 2009 both former president Rafsanjani and Speaker of the Majlis Larijani visited Iraq and affirmed Iran's desire to help in the reconstruction of Iraq.

While Iran plays an important role in the reconstruction of Iraq, its involvement has helped foster a state of codependence between the states. Since 2003, the two have signed a long string of economic agreements, and Iran appointed a special committee headed by President Ahmadinejad charged with examining ways of further developing the economic ties with Iraq.²⁹ Apparently the United States does not oppose the development of economic ties between Iran and Iraq, and may even view them as contributing to Iraqi stability, although it must ensure that this trade does not violate the sanctions in place against Iran. In this context, it has been reported that oil smuggling into Iran is increasing, especially from Kurdish regions, whether because of its low monetary cost or because of a desire to circumvent the limitations on Iran. It is not inconceivable that as international pressure mounts, Iraq could increasingly serve as a primary Iranian tool for evading the sanctions.

The geographical proximity makes it easier for Iran to exert influence on its weaker neighbor. For example, Iran is responsible for a considerable part of Iraq's electricity supply, which suffers from a chronic shortage.³⁰ In addition, on several occasions Iraq has accused Iran (as well as Turkey) of using the water shortage in order to pressure the Iraqi government to expel the Iranian opposition group Mujahedeen-e-Khalq from Iraq. This is apparently a reference to the diversion of water and construction of dams, which have reduced the flow of the Karun River (the water source for the Basra region) and the Sirwan River flowing into the Shatt al-Arab. Iran has also tried to win Iraqi (and Arab) sympathy by means of operating Arab-language media, such as the Iranian al-Alam TV station, which went on the air on the eve of the American invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003.

In order to strengthen the bilateral ties overall, Iran has expanded the number of its diplomatic representatives in Iraq. The first Iranian consulate opened in 2003 in Iraqi Kurdistan; by June 2010, when Iran opened a new consulate in Najaf, it joined consulates located in Erbil, Karbala, Basra, and Sulaymaniyah. Iran thus boasts the largest

Iraq's problems are mostly unconnected to the involvement of any external element, but its weakness allows such involvement an easier entry. Iran's influence on Iraq is almost inevitable, if only for historic, ethnic, and geographic reasons.

number of consulates of any of the 35 countries with diplomatic missions in Iraq,³¹ as well as the country's largest embassy, situated in Baghdad.

The United States

The fact that Iraq abuts the revisionist, would-be nuclear capable Islamic Republic; the desire to turn Iraq into a successful democratic model (the first such in the Arab world); the tremendous oil and gas reserves in Iraq; and the moral imperative stemming from the extended occupation are all reasons for Iraq to remain a central part of the United States approach to the region. The future relationship between the US and Iraq will likely be the leading factor regarding Iran's ability to intervene in Iraq's internal matters. By exposing and disrupting Iran's activities (such as apprehending Revolutionary Guards personnel), the Americans have tried to provide evidence for Iran's involvement in Iraq, perhaps hoping that this would drive a wedge between Iran and the Iraqi elites. UN Security Council resolutions on Iran include an explicit ban on arms supplies from Iran to third parties, a limitation designed in part to rein in the military support it provides to Shiite militias in Iraq. The American administration has likewise issued several executive orders granting the Treasury Department the authority to freeze assets of "certain persons who threaten stabilization efforts in Iraq," including senior Quds Force personnel who were added to this list in January 2008.

In addition, the United States has tried to decrease Iran's involvement in Iraq, or alternatively to change its negative nature by means of engaging in a direct dialogue between the nations. As part of the lessons generated by the Iraq Study Group, which recommended engaging in dialogue with all of Iraq's neighbors, a dialogue (at the level of ambassadors) with Iran, focusing on Iraqi stability, was launched in May 2007, but in the spring of 2008 Iran ended the talks with apparently no results. The timetable for the withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq is also tied to the Iranian nuclear issue. As American soldiers are stationed on Iraqi soil, certainly in their current numbers, they are considered by many to be likely targets for attack by Iran in response to any attack on its nuclear facilities.

What about a possible American-Iranian dialogue? Theoretically, any arrangement the sides come to on the nuclear issue is likely to contribute to a smoother withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, and it is not inconceivable that in exchange for Iranian assistance in stabilizing the

arena, the United States may show greater flexibility on the nuclear question. The current American intelligence assessment indicates that Iran cannot acquire military nuclear capabilities before 2013. If this assessment is accurate, the United States will be able to withdraw its troops without the fear of Iranian attacks, and thereby conduct talks with Iran over the future of Iraq as well as its nuclear status. If the American forces are in fact vulnerable to an Iranian response, it is in America's best interests to continue the talks as long as possible and not resort to the military option before their withdrawal. Even under optimal circumstances, it is unreasonable to think that the American withdrawal from Iraq will be complete before the end of 2011. However, it is not clear whether the United States is willing to wait until then to resolve the nuclear issue, unless it is possible to reach a compromise with Iran whereby inspection of its nuclear activities is tightened.

The withdrawal of American forces from Iraq will give the United States greater freedom in planning its military action in the Gulf and allow it to present a more credible – albeit veiled – military threat against Iran. Iran itself not only admitted supporting the militias but also gladly linked its continued support for them to progress of the nuclear program. Sir John Sawers, the head of the British intelligence service MI6, said that as early as 2005, "the Iranians wanted to be able to strike a deal whereby they stopped killing our [British] forces in Iraq in return for them being allowed to carry on with their nuclear programme."³²

Increased Iranian involvement in Iraq is liable to generate a need for America to increase its military presence in the Gulf in order to defend its allies, certainly after concluding the withdrawal of its forces from Iraq. The challenge that the United States is facing now is how to cement its ties with Iraq so as to allow Iraq to regain its former strength in a way that does not threaten its weaker neighbors. The United States will have to establish an attractive strategic partnership with Iraq that will serve as a substitute for Iran's influence; it can even hint to Iraq, which is dependent on American economic and military assistance, that its assistance is contingent on Baghdad distancing itself from Tehran. Furthermore, the US could send a message to Iran that any assistance to militias inside Iraq will be repaid with similar American assistance to opposition groups inside Iran.

Nonetheless, the United States understands that Iranian involvement in Iraq is a reality. In a hearing before the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, America's former ambassador to Iraq, Christopher Hill, said it was important to steer Iran's influence to more positive channels and focus it, for instance, on religious tourism and trade, and at the same time to reduce its negative involvement, which too often was characterized by its conduct in Iraq.³³ The possibility of a rift between the United States and the Iraqi government over policies towards Iran is only one of the questions that will be answered after the withdrawal of American forces. Another question still open is: will the other issues in dispute between Tehran and Washington, specifically the nuclear program, not interfere with an attempt to put Iraq on the right path?

Conclusion

Iranian involvement in Iraq has received much attention since the beginning of the war but remains among the least understood of the elements. The discussion above has tried to demonstrate that for all its extent, this involvement is also significantly limited in certain ways, and that despite the concerns of the Sunni Arab world it is difficult to see Iran as being in control – certainly not absolutely – of Iraq. There is no question that Iran has essential interests in Iraq and takes keen note of events there. In recent years, Iraq has become an arena of struggle between Iran and Arab nations that are quite hesitant in warming their relations with Iraq because they view the al-Maliki government as Iran's lackey.³⁴

What about Israel? After the American withdrawal, Iraq is liable to present a greater threat against Israel, if only because of a possible blow to the prestige of the United States in the Middle East, especially if the government in Baghdad becomes an Iranian proxy. Such a scenario is liable to create territorial contiguity that would make it easier for pro-Iranian terrorist groups to set up bases for activating attacks against Israel and for Iran to send arms to Syria, Hizbollah, and Hamas; it would improve Iran's regional status, and under certain circumstances possibly lead to a direct military confrontation with the IDF (which incidentally could also be viewed as a positive development). At this stage, it is unclear if this also has ramifications for other questions such as a possible Israeli withdrawal from the Jordan Valley in a future permanent settlement with

the Palestinians, as well as the expected deterioration in the security of the moderate Arab states, such as the Gulf states and Jordan.

The goals of Iran's policies are to limit American dominance in the region, prevent the growth of a threat from Iraq, and use Iraq as a platform for Iranian influence on the region as a whole. However, it is possible that within the Iranian elite there are also historical considerations (revenge for the crimes committed by Saddam Hussein) and an economic agenda (the desire for compensation for the ravages of that war), which they can gain only from a weak Iraq. Iran in a sense patronizes its neighbor to the west and sees its involvement there as entirely natural: in the short term, in order to prevent an attack against it from Iraq and to weaken the central government in Baghdad to make it easier for Iran to exert its influence there, and in the long term in order to prevent to the extent possible the development of a competing model – a moderate, secular Shiite state with democratic trappings.

Finally, Iran's involvement seeks to rein in Kurdish nationalism, prevent Iraq from becoming a hothouse for Iranian opposition elements; prevent Iraqi criticism of Iranian policy (including criticism of its nuclear program); prevent Iraq from joining an anti-Iranian coalition; keep Iraqi oil export quotas low; reduce Sunni Arab involvement in Iraq to the extent possible; and damage any long term relationship between Iraq and the United States. Even if it seems as if in recent years Iran has made a move towards exerting a softer influence over Iraq, it still benefits if it maintains close contact with Shiite militias for use as leverage to affect Iraqi policies (not necessarily linked to the identity of the government or the scope of America's presence in Iraq) and as insurance against future eventualities. Iran is not interested in the deterioration of Iraq's internal situation, because instability there is liable to spill over into Iran. However, should the central government in Baghdad weaken, Iran may strengthen its hold on the Shiite south.³⁵ Iran is not the only one seeking to influence and shape the future Iraqi state, but it is the most involved in Iraqi society and has perhaps the most to lose should its influence there wane.

Iran cannot control Iraq, but it can influence it so that Iraq does not threaten Iran's essential interests or allow American forces to do so. To be sure, Iraq's problems are mostly unconnected to the involvement of any external element, but its weakness allows such involvement

an easier entry. Iran's influence on Iraq is almost inevitable, if only for historic, ethnic, and geographical reasons. Still, raising awareness of Iran's negative function in Iraq may increase opposition to it in Iraq and strengthen international pressure on Iran even more. The withdrawal of the American forces is viewed in Iran as a success and as an opening to expand its influence on the region in general and on Iraq in particular. How Iran expands its influence depends to a large extent on the Iraqi elite and the manner in which Iraq balances its neighbors, as well as the role the United States will play in the future Iraqi state, which will undoubtedly intensify should Iran attain nuclear capabilities. In such a case, it is not inconceivable that Iraq, like other nations in the sphere, will decide that it had best fall in line with Tehran's interests.

Notes

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 - 18 Interview with Ayad Allawi, *Spiegel-online*, August 29, 2010.
 - 19 Kanan Makiya, "The Iraqi Elections of 2010 and 2005," *Middle East Brief* No. 42, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, June 2010.
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 - 21 In the Iran-Iraq War, Iraqi Shiites, with the exception of a few small rebel groups, fought alongside Saddam Hussein.
 - 22 On the first anniversary of the Iranian election riots, protest movement leader Mehdi Karroubi criticized the broad authority of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, saying that "since his powers were expanded in 1989, he has wielded greater authority than God granted even to the Twelve Shiite Imams." He added that God himself would not have allowed himself to treat his creatures as Khamenei treats the Iranians. Memri, June 20, 2010.
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Peace vs. Justice in Lebanon: The Domestic and Regional Implications of the UN Special Tribunal

Benedetta Berti

In December 2005, when the government of Lebanon requested assistance from the United Nations in the investigation and trial of those responsible for the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, the public response, both domestically and abroad, was highly positive. The creation of the United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) was seen as an important, transparent step towards securing justice for the Hariri murder while fostering a process of national reconciliation. However, five years later, as both external relations and internal stability appear shaken by the likely upcoming release of the Tribunal's first set of indictments, Lebanon is left wondering whether it will be able to strike a balance between its need for justice and its need for peace, or whether it will be forced to choose between the two.

Specifically, leaks regarding the STL's alleged implication of Hizbollah members in the Hariri murder have dramatically heightened the tension between the organization and its supporters – from the outset opposed to the Tribunal – and the Saad Hariri-led March 14 government. This charged atmosphere has been especially noticeable in the past six months, as the indictments were originally expected to be issued between September and December 2010.¹ As of late 2010, internal sources began to suggest that the release of these preliminary findings may now be delayed until the spring of 2011,² but this has not helped to ease the tensions surrounding the STL investigation.

The article looks at how the expected indictments have been at the center of both Lebanese domestic and foreign policy over the past few

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months, and it analyzes the potential regional implications of the current state of affairs within Lebanon.

The STL and Internal Stability: The Role of Foreign Players

In the past few months domestic tension surrounding the STL investigation has drawn a great deal of international attention. Consequently, there has been increased outside involvement in Lebanon's internal affairs, both in an attempt to contain further escalations of the sectarian tensions, and as direct intervention on behalf of one of the parties (specifically, Hizbollah), which in turn fuels the ongoing conflict.

Syria and Saudi Arabia have dominated the first type of intervention. Since August 2010, the two countries have been involved in a series of bilateral and trilateral meetings aimed at preventing the escalation of violence within Lebanon and at agreeing on a common approach regarding the STL and how to deal with the indictments once they are finally issued.³ However, beyond contributing as "mediators," through these meetings Syria and Saudi Arabia have had the opportunity to stress their power and influence on Lebanese domestic policy and their direct impact upon the decisions taken by Prime Minister Saad Hairi. For example, in November 2010 a local newspaper reported that the ongoing internal discussions on how to deal with the STL were temporarily postponed until the end of the month in anticipation of a Saudi-Syrian agreement on the Tribunal, which would in turn be implemented domestically, possibly offering a way out of the current crisis.⁴

At the same time, while Syria has been directly involved in the meetings with Saudi Arabia and the Lebanese government to prevent escalations of violence within Lebanon, the ongoing STL investigation and the possible indictment of Hizbollah members have begun to take a toll on its relations with the Lebanese government. Recent months saw increased contacts between members of the March 14 forces and the Syrian regime, a trend that culminated in Saad Hariri's official apology to Syrian president Bashar al-Asad for having accused Syria of involvement in the murder of his father.⁵ However, despite this dramatic step by Prime Minister Hariri towards the Syrian regime, no real progress in the diplomatic relations of the two countries seems possible as long as the Tribunal's findings threaten to attack Syria's ally Hizbollah.

In fact, in September 2010 Syria's foreign minister Walid al-Muallem began to speak to this issue when, echoing the position of Hizbollah

and the opposition forces, he requested that the STL be replaced by an exclusively Lebanese investigative team.⁶ More interestingly, only a week after these statements were released, a Syrian judge issued arrest warrants for 33 Syrian and Lebanese citizens, accusing them of tampering with evidence and giving false testimony regarding the Hariri murder.⁷ Although Syria's ambassador to Lebanon Ali Abdul Karim was adamant in explaining that the indictments were a purely judicial act, with no political implications, it is easy to interpret them as part of Syria's campaign to discredit both the Tribunal and the Lebanese government's efforts to uphold its legitimacy. This theory gains particular weight since the Syrian indictments play directly into Hizbollah's campaign to undermine the STL and the prosecution's alleged reliance on false witnesses. Furthermore, Syria's distress over the progress of the STL investigation and the Lebanese government's renewed support for its work has been expressed even more directly. In October 2010, Syrian prime minister Muhammad Naji al-Itri gave his country's view of the elected Lebanese government, saying, "We do not take into consideration 14, 15, or 16 since those are a house of cards."⁸ In other words, the Syrian government wanted to downplay the importance of the March 14 coalition and depict it like an unstable political force on the brink of collapse.

Another external player that recently increased its involvement in the STL issue, openly questioning the Tribunal and defending Hizbollah, is the organization's main regional ally, Iran. During an important visit to Lebanon in October 2010, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad expressed his support for the Lebanese-Shia organization while questioning the work and independence of the STL.⁹ From the opposite pole, the United States, in response to the rising political strength of the anti-STL camp and to the increased involvement of Iran, has also stepped up its diplomatic efforts regarding the UN Tribunal.¹⁰ In this context, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman recently visited Beirut, urging the government to continue to support and cooperate with the STL, as well as to commit to accept its findings.¹¹

Thus the STL and its ongoing investigations have risen quickly to occupy a central role in Lebanon's current external relations. On the one hand, the expected indictments have put a strain on the development of diplomatic relations with Syria and have led to increased Iranian involvement on behalf of Hizbollah. On the other hand, the Lebanese

government is also under pressure from its Western allies, the United States in particular, to renew its support for the Tribunal, in sharp contrast with the Syrian and Iranian position.

Lebanese Domestic Politics: The Escalation of the anti-STL Campaign

Over the past few months, Hizbollah has mounted a twofold campaign to both discredit and attack the STL and its work, and to create an alternative domestic forum to investigate the Hariri assassination. The tones used by the organization in pursuing this campaign have grown increasingly aggressive, leading to a general rise in the political and sectarian tensions.

First, Hizbollah's posture on the UN tribunal, which it has always opposed, has become progressively more confrontational. As early as July 2010, the arrest of two employees of Alfa, one of the two local mobile phone companies, in connection with a larger investigation that targeted Lebanese citizens accused of spying for Israel, led Hizbollah to substantially raise its criticism of the Tribunal.¹² In fact, the alleged reliance of the STL on phone records acquired through Alfa made Hizbollah question the reliability of the evidence gathered by the Tribunal.¹³ Following the Alfa arrests, the Lebanese-Shia organization began to openly dismiss the UN Tribunal as an "Israeli project,"¹⁴ while the organization's deputy leader Walid Suktaryieh declared: "The credibility of the international tribunal is seriously in doubt, as it has proven over time that it was politicized."¹⁵

A second strategy employed by Hizbollah to question the reliability of the STL, in addition to challenging its records and evidence, has been to claim to have acquired information that directly implicates Israel in the Hariri murders, an allegation first advanced in August 2010.¹⁶ However, when pressed by both Lebanese general prosecutor Judge Saed Mirza¹⁷ and by STL prosecutor Daniel Bellemare to turn in the evidence, Hizbollah first hesitated, and then provided information deemed as "incomplete."¹⁸

In addition to discrediting the STL, Hizbollah has begun to prepare for possible indictments against its members, indicating that it will consider such documents a "declaration of war" and that it will refuse to hand over its members to the Tribunal.¹⁹ These hostile declarations were followed on October 28, 2010 by a speech by Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, with the confrontational tones again targeting the STL, following a clash

between the Tribunal's investigators and a group of women in response to the UN team's request to access gynecological records held by a clinic in the southern suburbs of Beirut.²⁰ Nasrallah affirmed: "Copies of whatever the international investigators collect are transferred to Israel ...what is taking place is a violation. The investigation is over. The indictment they say will be issued has been written since 2006. The issue is over." Furthermore, the secretary general urged that it was incumbent on "every official in Lebanon and on every citizen in Lebanon to boycott these investigations and not to cooperate with them,"²¹ marking the peak of the anti-STL campaign.

While criticizing the Tribunal and calling for its boycott and ultimate dissolution, Hizbollah also condemns the STL's refusal to try a number of alleged false witnesses accused of having derailed the investigation on the Hariri assassination in its early stages. Accordingly, these individuals are responsible for fabricating and tampering with evidence against Syria; their testimony allegedly contributed to the arrest of four generals from the pro-Syrian camp, who were later detained without charge for four years, before being released for lack of concrete evidence.²²

In July 2010 Hizbollah began to actively campaign to intervene in the "false witnesses case," and it urged the government to create an ad hoc committee to investigate the issue.²³ The government initially refused the organization's request, which was seen both as interfering with the STL as well as overstepping the constitutional limits on the power of the legislative branch, as such an investigation is the purview of the judiciary system. However, in the wake of Hizbollah pressure, in August 2010 the Council of Ministers agreed to review the so-called "false witnesses file," a document largely influenced by the testimony of Brigadier General Jamil al-Sayyed, one of the four pro-Syrian generals originally detained in connection with the Hariri assassination.²⁴

In this context, the Syrian indictment of 33 alleged "false witnesses" in September 2010 directly played into Hizbollah's campaign, leading the organization to step up its efforts to create a de facto parallel investigation. With this objective the organization began to campaign to discuss the false witnesses file in the Cabinet, claiming that it was the single most important issue that should be discussed by the government, and that its examination could not be postponed.²⁵

In the past few months Hizbollah and the opposition forces have maintained this same posture, demanding that the Cabinet vote to transfer the “witnesses file” to the Judicial Council. This has led to repeated clashes with the March 14 forces, which maintain their opposition to the proposal.²⁶ Eventually these tensions escalated to the point where the opposition ministers organized a de facto boycott of the Cabinet and held alternative meetings to discuss the witnesses file.²⁷ As of November 2010, the two camps agreed to temporarily postpone the confrontation on this issue and thereby avoid an open clash within the Cabinet, which could lead to a severe crisis of the Hariri government or even the paralysis of the political system, in the event of a prolonged boycott by the opposition forces.²⁸

The Potential for Renewed Internal Conflict

Although no open clashes between the Hizbollah-led opposition forces and the March 14 camp have taken place so far, the tones of the political confrontation have become increasingly aggressive. Indeed, Hizbollah has been escalating the atmosphere by flaunting its military strength, perhaps as a warning to the government in the event of a future indictment of organization members. The best example of this tactic was Hizbollah’s display of approximately fifteen vehicles with fighters and weapons at the Beirut International Airport in mid-September as part of a welcoming parade for Brigadier General Jamil al-Sayyed.²⁹ In expressing its support for the pro-Syrian general first implicated in the Hariri murder and then released for lack of evidence, Hizbollah declared: “The party will cut the hand of whoever tries to touch General al-Sayyed. Jamil al-Sayyed and Hizbollah are under the law and respect the state institutions. We are attached to the state but we also know for a fact that some judges are politicized and corrupt and this is what we are opposed to.”³⁰ This public display of force was followed only a few weeks later by a Hizbollah exercise in Beirut, allegedly to show the group’s ability to assume control of the capital in the event of an armed confrontation.³¹

In response to this dynamic, the March 14 forces have increased their criticism of Hizbollah, while maintaining their support for the work of the UN Tribunal. Specifically, March 14 forces have interpreted Hizbollah’s refusal to respect the STL and its campaign to create an alternative file as part of a subversive project to ultimately take over Lebanon through a

coup and transform it into an Iranian proxy.³² For instance, on November 3, 2010, an official March 14 statement defined Hizbollah's anti-STL stance as part of an "anti-Lebanese intimidation campaign," adding that "disastrous scenarios are also pumped on a daily basis with the aim of taking possession of the country for good. Hizbollah, a totalitarian party which is leading the campaign, is mistaken if it believes its conditions and its campaign will force the Lebanese to go back on their constant principles. No one has the ability to turn the clock back or cancel the national achievements made by the independence uprising."³³ In addition, March 14 Christian leaders have also stressed their perspective on the potential Hizbollah takeover, adding that Lebanon is at present in "grave danger."³⁴ Thus the potential for violence between the parties is high, as confirmed by an *Al-sharq al-Awsat* report detailing how, following the political clashes on the false witnesses file, the Lebanese arms market registered a substantial increase in its local demand.³⁵

At the moment, however, some factors are preventing this escalation: the delay in issuing the indictments, the ongoing Syrian-Saudi reconciliation efforts, and the internal efforts to prevent a governmental crisis. While the timing of the indictments cannot be controlled internally, the single most important step that Lebanon can take to avoid the escalation of violence is to keep the prime minister in power. The possible resignation of Saad Hariri could lead to a power vacuum and the collapse of the elected government, raising the potential for the parties to take the confrontation from the parliament to the streets.

In the longer term, however – if the STL indictments implicating Hizbollah are indeed issued – Hariri will have to face an extremely complex political dilemma, having to choose between continuing cooperation with the STL and refusing to follow up on the Tribunal's findings. While the former option risks the collapse of the government, the alienation of Hizbollah, and even the resumption of sectarian violence, the latter course of action is also highly problematic. In fact, by "dodging the bullet" and rejecting the need to take Hizbollah to task, Hariri would not only be going against the country's international commitments with respect to the STL, but also – more importantly – he would lose the political credibility he needs to continue to govern the country.

Conclusion: Implications of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon

In the past few months, reports signaling an imminent issuing of indictments of Hizbollah members in connection with the 2005 political assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri have led to significant regional and domestic consequences.

Regionally, the political crisis created by the STL investigation has increased the direct influence of Syria and Saudi Arabia on Lebanon through their ongoing mediation efforts. At the same time, however, the possible indictment of Hizbollah members has led to a freeze in the detente between Syria and the Lebanese government, as the Asad regime has advocated increasingly against the Tribunal. In this sense, Lebanon finds itself the object of intense international pressure both from the pro-STL camp (especially the United States), as well as from the local supporters of Hizbollah (Syria and Iran).

Domestically, the STL and its expected indictments have created a political crisis between the March 14 forces, which support the Tribunal and are committed to uphold its findings, and the March 8 opposition forces. In the past few months, the tones of the anti-STL campaign have progressively escalated, culminating in Hizbollah's call to dismantle the "Israeli-controlled Tribunal" and urging all citizens to boycott it. In parallel, the Lebanese-Shia organization has also conducted an internal campaign to create an alternative investigation of a number of alleged false witnesses who it claims tampered with evidence. The March 14's refusal to pursue this track have led to a paralysis of the Lebanese Cabinet, a situation that could potentially escalate into a full-fledged crisis of the elected government or even ignite renewed sectarian violence.

In this context, both the ongoing Syrian-Saudi reconciliation efforts as well as the influence of the prime minister have prevented escalation of the conflict. In the long term, Prime Minister Hariri, as the son of the assassinated leader, is probably the only Lebanese politician with the moral authority to diffuse the conflict by refusing to follow up on an eventual STL indictment of Hizbollah members. This choice, however, would most likely cost him his credibility and power, and thus the prime minister is seemingly facing a lose-lose scenario. Hizbollah is equally troubled by the prospective indictments, which would surely be detrimental to the group's local legitimacy. In this sense, cooperating with the Tribunal or accepting its findings are not feasible options. Similarly,

declaring that the implicated Hizbollah members are “rogue elements” would reflect badly on the organization’s image of unity and internal control. Fighting the Tribunal and the Lebanese government, however, also has troubling consequences, led by the potential escalation of the internal strife into a more prolonged and bloody internal conflict.

From an Israeli perspective, the current dilemma faced by the Lebanese government could have direct security repercussions. On the one hand, the indictment of Hizbollah could cause severe damage to the credibility and popularity of the organization, which could certainly be seen as a positive development for Israel. On the other hand, a potential Lebanese refusal to cooperate with the Tribunal would have negative consequences for Israel, as it would strengthen Hizbollah and dismantle its political opposition. Moreover, the potential for internal strife exploding in conjunction with the indictments could ultimately lead to a situation where through its military strength Hizbollah manages to reassert its standing and influence on Lebanon, thus growing in power. Similarly, prolonged internal instability could lead to a renewed and increased Syrian presence within Lebanon, which could also be detrimental to Israeli security.

The article above analyzes the political crisis that arose in Lebanon surrounding the STL, focusing on both the domestic and regional ramifications of the investigation. The period covered by this review extends through December 2010, and thus the political developments in Lebanon underway in January 2011 as this issue goes to press – which, significantly, the article anticipated as possible developments – are themselves not covered.

The internal crisis described in the article escalated in January 2011. Following the official resignation from the Cabinet of the ten ministers from the Hizbollah-led March 8 coalition and an “independent” minister appointed by President Sleiman, the national unity government led by Saad Hariri collapsed. This situation requires new parliamentary consultations in order to elect a new prime minister and form a national unity government. However, in the absence of an agreement between the parties on the configuration of the new government and on the issue of the STL, Lebanon could once again be heading towards the paralysis

of the political system, raising the potential for domestic instability and internal strife.

Notes

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