

Will Israel Move Against Iran?

by Hilal Khashan - February 28, 2022

The situation in Ukraine is a timely reminder that states that declare war usually find a way to justify it, regardless of how convincing it is.

Consider the recent history of the Middle East. A few days before the Israelis invaded Sinai in 1956, Hungary's anti-communist revolution broke out. Taking advantage of the world's focus on the Suez Crisis, the Soviet army stormed Budapest. In 1967, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's decision to close the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping gave Prime Minister Levi Eshkol the *casus belli* to launch the Six-Day War.

Right after Russia invaded Ukraine, an Israeli media report expressed concern that Iran might take advantage of the war and instruct its Middle Eastern proxies to launch attacks against Israel. To be fair, its concerns seem more grounded in 19th-century pogroms and the Holocaust than they do in, say, the revival of the Iran nuclear talks. Israel is loud about the security threat presented by Iran, not the other way around. A serious provocation by Iran will undoubtedly further complicate the talks. In any case, Israel will likely use the Ukraine war to target Iran's nuclear assets or regional proxy groups.

There is no shortage of speculation about Israel's plans to attack the Iranian nuclear program. It's not so much about accumulating enough weapons-grade uranium to build an atomic bomb – Iran can do that in a matter of weeks. It's about acquiring a delivery system, which will take at least two years to develop. There is no indication that Iran is rushing to develop its ballistic nuclear missile system because it is not something that it could hide. It doesn't want to give Israel the pretext for an attack.

Israeli officials maintain that they are not bound to a nuclear agreement between Iran and major world powers. They reserve the right to act unilaterally to remove the atomic threat. Even so, they will have difficulty convincing the U.S. that an attack on Iran is justifiable at the current rate of its nuclear program progress. Even if Israel chooses to attack Iran's nuclear facilities without direct U.S. involvement, it can only hamper its program for a few years, after which Tehran would resume and advance its activities.

In any case, Israel would have to precede its attack on Iran by destroying Hezbollah's precision

missile and drone capabilities. Hezbollah is Iran's first line of defense against Israel and the main force in furthering its ambition and influence through subversive activities. Israel unilaterally withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000 without reaching a peace agreement. It has been its consistent policy to avoid escalation against Hezbollah, which understood the new game rules and made no attempt to violate them. (A notable exception was in July 2006, when a limited border raid to take Israel Defense Forces prisoners went wrong, inflicting more casualties than Israel could accept.)

In the years since, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah has made pompous claims about acquiring and developing precision ballistic missiles. He said his group had therefore achieved the capability to deter Israel, allegedly establishing a balance of power with the IDF. Even more recently, he bragged about sending a drone over northern Israel that neither the IDF nor its touted Iron Dome system could intercept. A tiny drone will not alter the military balance of power that overwhelmingly favors Israel, of course, but it's notable that, according to Nasrallah, Hezbollah is now manufacturing and selling drones. Israel responded by sending two Israeli Air Force jets to fly over Beirut and its southern suburbs, Hezbollah's key stronghold. In the 1980s and 1990s, a provocation of this magnitude would have invited a heavy Israeli retaliation.

If Israel ever decides to strike Iran's nuclear sites, it will have to negotiate Hezbollah's military assets in advance. For IDF commanders, the question is not if they would again go to war against Hezbollah, but when. The preconditions for a decisive Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear infrastructure are not ready yet, but they are already in place for Hezbollah. It might be difficult for the U.S. to stop Israeli action against Hezbollah after Russia invaded Ukraine despite repeated warnings not to. Israel can claim that it has more convincing security reasons to take on Hezbollah than Russia to dismember Ukraine and topple its government.

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