

How Iran Plans to Destroy Israel

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Tehran's commitment to surrounding, besieging, and eliminating the 'Zionist entity' has not changed, and countering this goal will require pushing back against Iranian advances in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and elsewhere.

The following is an excerpt from the article's conclusion. To read the full text, download the PDF.

The Islamic Republic regards its commitment to the destruction of Israel as a long-term project that would require major shifts in the regional political landscape. While displaying a great deal of ambiguity concerning its direct role in a decisive confrontation with Israel, for obvious reasons, Tehran emphasizes its ongoing effort to improve the capability of Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian resistance movements to face Israel. The main, immediate target is turning the West Bank into a solid base for military operations. Obviously, the Iranians are well aware that Israel is determined to prevent a takeover of the West Bank by hostile groups. At the same time, they realize that, despite their enormous investment in Hizballah, the group cannot be expected to carry out a "final" war with Israel, especially when it is spending most of its blood and treasure fighting and dying in Syria.

The Iranians are bent on strengthening their influence in the Arab world, with a priority on achieving a land link from Iran to the Mediterranean through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Such a link, once obtained, would allow Iran not only to beef up the resistance movements with Iraqi and Syrian militias, as well as volunteers from far away Afghanistan, but also to open the way to the ultimate introduction of Iranian troops to the lines of confrontation, especially on the Golan. Not for no reason have Iranian generals been strutting around up there lately (and sometimes meeting an untimely demise).

For the United States, which wants to avert an eventual Iran-Israel war, a major priority should be preventing the creation of this land corridor. This will require further efforts to strengthen the government in Baghdad and diminish the power of Iranian-led Shi'a militias operating there. Helping the Iraqi army achieve effective control of

Anbar province is likewise crucial. But, as has been shown lately, this is far from easy.

Weakening and ultimately ousting the Assad regime should also remain a top U.S. priority, despite the temptation to discount Damascus as a threat given the danger of ISIS. Iran's strategic planning would suffer a severe blow if the Assad regime were toppled and Syria no longer served as an ally of Hizballah and a base for Iranian supplies. The recent setbacks suffered by pro-Assad forces present an opportunity to increase military pressure on the regime and its Iranian sponsors. On this count, the most promising sector for a rebel push toward Damascus is southern Syria, where combinations of rebel militias have managed to block the regime's counter-offensive and maintain positions close to the capital's southern outskirts. As Nasrallah himself put it bluntly in May, the fall of Assad and his Iranian allies would mean the "fall of Hizballah, too," since it will be locked into a small enclave within Lebanon.

Naturally, Jordan must be assisted in its efforts to frustrate Iranian activities aimed at undermining the Kingdom and recruiting local Palestinians and east Jordanians along Israel's longest border. Indeed, Jordan's precarious stability would be worsened by Iranian hegemony over neighboring Syria and Iraq. Until now, Tehran has been cautious in its effort to obtain followers and influence in Jordan, but few doubt that Jordan is regarded by Iran as an important potential staging area for future operations against Israel.

Finally, it is absolutely imperative to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Here one need only to recall the infamous statement by ex-president Hashemi Rafsanjani on Qods Day, December 14, 2001: "If one day, the Islamic World is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. However, it will only harm the Islamic world. It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality."

Such a statement has not been repeated since, given consistent Iranian denials about seeking a nuclear weapon. However, Rafsanjani's declaration evoked Palestinian warnings -- including by Hamas leader Khaled Meshal -- that Iran should take into account that not only Israelis, but many Palestinians, would die in a nuclear bombing of Israel.

Whatever the risks, nuclear bombs will boost Iran's claim to hegemony in the region and will encourage its leaders to pursue even more aggressive and adventurous policies with respect to Israel. Such policies will be advanced by a coalition of terrorist groups, equipped with thousands of state-of-the-art missiles under a nuclear umbrella. One should assume that if Israel concludes that such a threat is imminent, it will see itself as having no other choice than to undertake a preemptive military strike that would trigger a wide confrontation.

Iran, then, must be kept away from nuclear weapons and at the same time kept as far as possible from Israel's borders, if Washington and its allies wish to avoid a direct Iran-Israel confrontation. Along these lines, a nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 might keep Iran from a breakout for a decade or so, but it will at the same time allow Iran to improve its pursuit of different weaponization options, once a decision is made to proceed along those lines.

In the meantime, efforts should be directed at curtailing Iran's drive to broaden the "Resistance Wall" around Israel. This requires not only Israeli measures to insulate the West Bank from Iranian penetration and foil attempts to establish a new front on the Golan Heights, but also a determined U.S.-led effort, together with regional allies, to prevent an Iranian victory in Syria and curb Iranian predominance in Iraq. A direct connection exists between the battle for the Levant and the danger of a war between Iran and Israel. The emergence of an Iran-led "Shi'a crescent," as depicted first by Jordan's King Abdullah, will surely energize the Islamic Republic's oath to destroy Israel.

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow with The Washington Institute and a Middle East commentator for Israel's Channel Two television. ❖

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