

Easy on the Stick:

Why the United States Should Deconflict

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Brief Analysis

This week, hundreds of U.S. soldiers will participate in Juniper Cobra, a joint exercise with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to test the interoperability of U.S. Patriot and Israeli Arrow antiballistic missile systems. Such bilateral cooperation, coupled with reports that the Bush administration is considering providing Israel an additional \$4 billion in military assistance, suggests that Washington is relying mainly on carrots to discourage an Israeli military response in the event of an Iraqi attack. These moves may explain Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's recent declaration, "We never had such cooperation in everything as we have with the current administration." Yet, precisely what form would this "cooperation" take if Iraq used weapons of mass destruction against Israel or otherwise inflicted mass casualties? Would Washington attempt to shape Israel's retaliatory options as it did during Operation Desert Storm?

The Desert Storm Experience

During Desert Storm, the United States used both positive and negative inducements to restrain Israeli retaliation for Iraqi Scud missile attacks. Positive inducements included the deployment of Patriot missiles and U.S. personnel to man them; assurances that coalition forces would neutralize Iraq's Scud missile capability; crisis management via shuttle diplomacy; and pledges to compensate Israel with several hundred million dollars in additional financial aid.

Negative inducements centered on Washington's refusal to "deconflict" -- that is, to take steps ensuring that U.S. and Israeli forces could safely operate in the same area if necessary. Specifically, by not sharing "Identification Friend or Foe" (IFF) codes with the IDF, the U.S. military impeded Israel's ability to launch air attacks against Iraq. When aircraft equipped with IFF are "interrogated" by other aircraft or ground-based radar, they automatically respond with an electronic signal; if the signal does not correspond with a prearranged code, the emitting aircraft is presumed to be other than friendly. Without the proper codes, Israeli jets entering the crowded airspace over western Iraq could have risked drawing friendly fire. U.S. forces also did not leave specific areas of Iraqi airspace clear for predetermined periods, which would have enabled Israel to mount a limited operation.

The positive inducements eased Israel's desire to retaliate, but the refusal to deconflict effectively precluded an Israeli military response. According to Avihu Bin-Nun, commander of the Israeli air force:

Every day, we had to decide whether to respond or not. But we never carried out any of the planned operations because the Americans made sure we didn't get the [IFF] codes we needed to coordinate with their planes. They [also] led us to understand that they would not evacuate the area where the missiles were being launched if we operated there.

Former secretary of state James Baker likewise wrote in his memoirs, "Our refusal to give Israel the electronic codes was critical to this outcome [Israel not retaliating]. I believe that if we had given the Israeli government those codes, sooner or later they would have struck back at Iraq."

The Dangers of Not Deconflicting

The U.S. refusal to deconflict in 1991 offered two apparent advantages. From a political perspective, sidelining Israel was a means of preserving Arab membership in the coalition against Iraq. From an operational perspective, Israeli restraint gave the Pentagon added control over the military campaign. Although these two objectives remain relevant today, it is important to underscore the potential risks to both coalition and Israeli forces if Iraq attacks Israel and Washington again opts not to deconflict. The following two cases illustrate the dangers of not deconflicting:

On May 17, 1987, the Iraqi air force attacked the USS Stark. Although Iraq and the United States were tacit partners against Iran at the time, they did not coordinate their military activities. Because the Stark had not deconflicted with Iraqi forces, they apparently thought that the American vessel was an Iranian tanker. Thirty-seven American sailors died as a result of the subsequent Iraqi missile strike. Had the United States and Iraq deconflicted, the Stark tragedy might have been averted (though some believe that the Stark was targeted in retaliation for the U.S. provision of arms to Iran as part of the Iran-Contra affair).

During the Six Day War, Israeli forces mistakenly attacked the USS Liberty, an intelligence-gathering ship. Because the Liberty was listed as "unidentified" on the IDF's control board, Israeli forces assumed that it was an Egyptian supply ship and attacked it, killing thirty-four Americans. At the height of the 1991 Gulf War, David Ivri, director general of the Israeli defense ministry, told U.S. secretary of defense Richard Cheney that he feared "another flying Liberty" would occur if U.S. and Israeli forces did not deconflict.

This time, a U.S. refusal to deconflict may not be sufficient to prevent Israeli retaliation. Improvements in Israeli air- and space-based intelligence-gathering and long-range strike capabilities have increased Israel's ability to act against Iraq, independent of U.S. assistance. For example, the Ofek-5 reconnaissance satellite's high-resolution photos may allow Israel to locate and strike high-value targets in Iraq without significant U.S. intelligence sharing.

Moreover, many Israelis believe that their government's restraint in 1991 eroded Israel's deterrent capability. The current government has not stated whether it would retaliate against Iraq -- even if coalition forces do not deconflict with the IDF. One can, however, foresee scenarios in which Israel decides that maintaining its deterrence outweighs this danger. Indeed, several Israeli policymakers have already stressed that Israel will not sacrifice its deterrent capability. David Ivri, for example, recently stated, "If we do not retaliate another time, neighboring countries may think we do not have confidence in our ability." Moreover, polling data released last week from the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research at Tel Aviv University show that the Israeli public is less inclined now than it was in 1991 to hold fire in the event of an Iraqi attack.

Policy Implications

The 1991 Gulf War offered the ostensible lesson that not deconflicting could successfully restrain Israel from retaliating in the event of an Iraqi attack. The administration would again want to preserve the coalition, and minimize disruptions to coalition operations during a war, but a decision not to deconflict could prove risky. In light of the fact that Israel is committed to maintaining its deterrent capability and now possesses better independent reconnaissance, surveillance and strike capabilities than in 1991, there is greater likelihood of Israeli retaliation against Iraq. In such a case, a decision to not deconflict could put at risk both coalition and Israeli forces.

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