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Where is smug Iran's revenge against Israel?

The answer may lie in the protests
sweeping the streets of Middle East capitals

Analysis Amos Harel

Two conflicting strategic trends are underway in the Middle East these days. The places where they intersect has been a focal point of events in the region for the past few weeks – and may explain why dangers Israeli defense officials have warned of have not yet come to pass, concerning Iranian attempts to attack Israeli targets.

The first development, which has been discussed at length in the past, concerns the rise in Iran's self-confidence and the aggressive line it is taking – in light of American capitulation in the region and the Trump administra-

tion's clear lack of desire to confront Iran. A new record was set this week, when Tehran declared it had carried out another planned violation of the nuclear agreement.

The second development manifested itself only last month with the beginning of the protests in Iraq and Lebanon, directed against their governments supported by Iran. The challenge presented by the protesters has created headaches for the regime in Tehran as well as for its strongman in the region, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, General Has-

san Soleimani. When Soleimani, who is responsible for preparing all the Iranian military forces in Syria, Iraq and other countries, is occupied with handling the daily demonstrations of resolve by protesters in Baghdad and Beirut, it may leave him with less time to carry out the aforementioned plans for revenge against Israel.

In May 2018, after the decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran, the Trump administration peddled the 12-point plan of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, whose focus was applying maximum pressure on Tehran, with the

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goal of convincing the Iranian regime to change its policy – implying that if the pressure did not succeed, it would indirectly bring about the overthrow of the regime. A year and a half later, it seems there is no choice but to conclude that the plan has failed – and along with it, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's reliance on his friend U.S. President Donald Trump.

The United States has shown restraint in the face of a series of Iranian attacks, the most serious of which came in mid-September and caused widespread damage to Saudi oil facilities. Except for the automatic imposition of additional economic sanctions on Iran, the Americans did not go crazy over the fourth stage of the nuclear deal, which took place on Wednesday: Renewing the enrichment of uranium by injecting gas into centrifuges at the underground and heavily fortified Fordow nuclear site, along with the activation of new and faster centrifuges. Intelligence sources estimate that by so doing, Iran has shortened the potential breakout time it needs to manufacture nuclear weapons, to less than a year.

At the same time, the Iranians have discovered that the protesters in Iraq and Lebanon have been targeting them more and more in their protests. Over 250 protesters have been killed so far and thousands have been wounded by snipers operating on behalf of the security forces and Shi'ite militias, with Iranian encouragement. The protests may be directed against government corruption and widespread unemployment, but they are accompanied by a display of anger against the local militias that operate like extortionist Mafia gangs.



Demonstrators setting fire to a makeshift Israeli flag in Tehran on Monday.

Valid Salemi/AP

Col. (res.) Ehud Evental of the Institute for Policy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, wrote this week: "The protest that broke out powerfully in Iraq and Lebanon has once again reminded all the regimes in the Middle East that the shocks in the region are still in play as part of an historic process," because fundamental economic, social and demographic problems have yet to be resolved. Evental says the protests have forced the region's leaders to go on the defensive. As a result, "the regimes are expected to focus their attention inwards at the expense of external affairs, to tighten their control of their countries and deepen their means of supervision and repression."

According to Evental, if a month ago it seemed that Iran was managing to ride the wave, which expressed itself, for example, in the demands by the Shi'ite militias to remove the remainder of the American forces from Iraq – now things have reversed themselves completely. "Given these circumstances, it is clear that the Iranian interests, both in Iraq and in Lebanon,

are at risk. The demand to cancel the ethnic system [of the division of power in both countries] presents a threat to Iran's hold, influence and assets – and concretely to Hezbollah and the Shi'ite militias' weaponry – an issue that is anyway in internal dispute."

Just last month, Israeli intelligence warned about a change in Iranian policy: A firm decision had been made to respond to every Israeli attack, changing the "equation" between the two countries. This was accompanied by a fear of a possible future operation being launched against Israel from western Iraq – an attack by drones or cruise missiles – or even from Yemen. In retrospect, it seems that in the near future the intention is to the possible use of other means, such as anti-ship missiles in the Red Sea or anti-aircraft missiles. The deployment of ballistic missiles also looks like part of a future Iranian plan.

For now, at least judging by a lack of reports appearing in the Arab media, it seems that the aerial attacks in Syria and Iraq attributed to Israel have stopped. The "war between the wars" is

no longer being fought on this front at the same pace as before. In contrast, Iran accused Israel of attacking one of its oil tankers in the Red Sea last month, and this week the Iranians announced that the shipping lane in the Red Sea, used by a large part of the oil industry, is not safe – after three such attacks have occurred there.

Evental writes that given the present circumstances, "when Iran and its allies in Iraq are under attack, it will find it difficult to carry out revenge operations from its territory. This situation turns the spotlight back on Syria, where Israel has better tools to address the threat, or to distant Yemen." In Evental's assessment, the growing Iranian focus on the nuclear area may possibly be "at the expense of regional provocations."

No black and white

All this informs us that things are not just black and white. Israel did not defeat Iran a year and a half ago, when it prevented a series of somewhat amateurish attempts by Soleimani to carry out revenge attacks; and also not in September, when

only by chance did a military ambulance avoid being hit by three Hezbollah anti-tank missiles near Moshav Avivim on the border with Lebanon. We are not facing a defeat, or a certain war, now, either.

Nonetheless, the mistaken reliance on Trump over the Iranian question raises other questions as to the castles in the air built by the Israeli right, based on Trump's support just a few months ago. Trump supplied Netanyahu with unconditional love (at least until his two failures in this year's election campaigns), moved the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and recognized Israeli sovereignty in the Golan Heights.

At the same time, the alliance with Trump – which followed the resounding clashes with his predecessor, Barack Obama, came at the expense of Netanyahu spoiling his relations with the Democratic Party, shattering bipartisan support for Israel. If on the right they hoped to enlist Trump to support the annexation of part of the West Bank, it seems that this is an initiative that will have to wait for at least a year, until after next year's presidential election in the United States.

In summary, the benefit Trump has brought Netanyahu has been revealed to be rather meager. It was actually Obama, who was described by the sleepwalking margins of the right as a "hater of Israel," who signed a military aid agreement for another decade. Netanyahu's opponents said at the time that if it was not for the disagreement over the Iranian nuclear deal, it would have been possible to receive more aid, even more than the annual \$3.8 billion agreed upon. And once again it was Obama who budgeted more than another billion dollars for the plans to intercept rockets and missiles, systems that Israel may need even more in the future – in light of the changes going on in the Middle East.