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REVISIONISTS

How Iran Plans to Destroy Israel

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The mullahs seem dead serious about wanting to destroy Israel, but exactly how they plan to go about it remains studiously cryptic.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been committed for the past 36 years to a doctrine aimed at wiping Israel off the map. Statements to this effect still pour out of Tehran almost daily. President Hassan Rouhani has somewhat softened his predecessor's language, but does not refrain from expressing his loyalty to this objective. All rival factions within the regime, and many outside too, agree that the destruction of the Jewish State constitutes an important tenet of their devotion to Islam, reflecting a deep ideological conviction in the indispensability of annihilating the "Zionist entity."

Now, some pro-Iranian apologists in the West have claimed that the goal of annihilation does not mandate military means to achieve it, the intimation being that Israel will be destroyed through the deployment of truth, faith, and divine power—or through a highly improbable referendum (more on this below). In calling for Israel's demise, Tehran has adopted the line that Israel is an artificial, weak, and split society that will easily implode under pressure—a "spider web" in the words of Hizballah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. At the same time, the Iranians present Israel to their audience as an aggressive, agile opponent that benefits from generous Western support. At the very least, the regime is signaling that a military effort would be essential to bring about a collapse in Israel.

Consequently, much rhetoric is devoted to mobilizing popular support toward achieving this goal. "Death to Israel" is chanted at rallies all across the country, and the mantra is inscribed on a variety of weapons systems in military parades. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's mouthpiece, the daily newspaper *Kayhan*, once summed up Iran's stance as follows: "The belief that Israel must be eliminated is a condition of our adherence to Islam. . . . [E]ach and every one of our officials

should reiterate our responsibility of the need to destroy this cancerous tumor of Israel.” Only some members of the suppressed Green Movement have voiced reservations regarding the regime’s prioritization of aiding Israel’s adversaries.

Besides demonstrating ideological purity, the disciples of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini see practical benefits in their virulent anti-Israeli posture. Through their repetitive, venomous tirades against Israel they posit Iran as the one true, trustworthy champion of Palestinian rights. The token of this policy has been continuous Iranian support for Palestinian “resistance” movements, the more radical the better. This they contrast with many Arab regimes that seek accommodation with the enemy. Iran thus presents itself as more dedicated to this noble Arab cause than the Arabs themselves. In this way the regime strives to advance Iranian interests by acquiring popularity among Sunni Arabs, thus driving a wedge between the Sunni “street” and its governments.

Yet Iran’s policy toward Israel transcends regional posturing and rhetorical ritual. Over the years Tehran’s hostile activities support the assessment that Iran is engaged in a sustained campaign to shape the regional landscape for an eventual effort to draw Israel into a doomsday war. This effort started in 1982 with the establishment of Hizballah and evolved into the creation of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and a military alliance with Hamas. A year ago Iran formed a new militia in Gaza, “al-Sabeerin” (HSN), and more recently it extended itself through attempts to operate proxy groups in Syria along its borders with both Israel and Jordan. Iran has made sure that missiles provided to its partners in the “Axis of Resistance” can reach every coordinate in Israel, and it has invested lavishly in developing and deploying hundreds of long-range missiles capable of hitting Israel from its own territory. These actions testify to the seriousness with which Iran regards its mission.

The Islamic Republic’s quest for nuclear weapons offers yet more evidence of its intention to take on Israel at some future date, but not necessarily evidence that it will use these weapons to attack Israel directly. It may be that Tehran seeks a nuclear deterrent to Israeli nuclear weapons, so that the “spider web” can be dispatched without danger to the Iranian homeland. Thus from the Iranian perspective, a nuclear weaponization program is not essential to a final confrontation with Israel. Iranian military strategists seem to think they can eventually destroy the Israeli state without using nuclear weapons.

It is a typical Western liberal conceit to dismiss the threats of autocratic regimes. And it is true that the Iranian regime has proven ready in the past to ignore its declared policies on a variety of issues and change course when politically expedient. Thus, fairly specific threats directed toward the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other actors have been dropped without explanation at different junctures. But its commitment to destroy Israel is a pillar of the

Islamic Republic, and so it would seem politically impossible merely to drop it. At the same time, the Iranian regime has consistently refrained from clarifying what role it might play in fulfilling this “religious obligation.” Does Iran plan to spearhead, at the appropriate moment, an offensive against Israel? Would Iranian armed forces be directly engaging Israelis on the battlefield? Or would they rather restrict their contribution to arming other combatants and orchestrating their strategy? In short, does the Islamic Republic aspire to become the “liberator” of Jerusalem, or merely a sponsor from afar? Do Iran’s leaders envision Arabs celebrating in Palestine, or Iranian troops themselves?

No one knows the answers to these questions, including, very likely, the Iranian leaders themselves. Not everything has gone the mullahs’ way, either, in the run-up to achieving their goal. The regime used to have very close relations with Hamas, for example, but the sectarian divisions opened up by the Syrian civil war have introduced great tension into that relationship. Indeed, the deepening of the sectarian divide in recent years has neutered the Iranian attempt to use the Palestine issue to harm Sunni Arab regimes.

Perhaps such perturbations help explain why over the past four decades Iranian leaders have remained ambiguous, never explicitly threatening an assault on Israel at some future date, but never ruling it out either. They have also studiously avoided clashes with the Israeli military, mounting no retaliation for Israeli attacks on ships loaded with Iranian arms in the Red Sea, strikes against storage facilities for Iranian missiles in Syria and Sudan, and even the killing of an Iranian general on the Syrian Golan. They keep stressing the need for “Muslim unity”, bringing together rival states for the common purpose of attacking Israel. But they have never gone kinetic directly against it.

Needless to say, the call for Muslim unity is widely understood, including in Israel, to be no more than lip service to an elusive dream. More credible is the Iranian emphasis on the potential role of an effective Palestinian “resistance” that would confront Israel aided by allies such as Hizballah. Still, the Iranians themselves never address the question of whether such a coalition would be capable of defeating the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on its own.

None other than Iran’s favorite proxy, Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah, referred in April to these unanswered questions in a lengthy interview granted to Syrian official television. “We are not claiming that Hizballah is capable of launching a war”, he said.

We are incapable of this. Are we expected to lie to the people or to ourselves and say that we are capable of launching a war against Israel and wiping it off the map and liberating Palestine? We have never claimed anything like this.

Nasrallah also stated that, contrary to previous warnings, he cannot promise that Hizballah fighters could capture any part of the Galilee and certainly “not all the area on the way to Tel Aviv and Eilat.” His conclusion was that none of the resistance movements are up to this task, and therefore that a decision to wage a war of this magnitude should be made by “partners who are able to accomplish the goal.” He was clearly implying that said partner would be Iran. On the occasion of the recent Qods Day Nasrallah explicitly said that Iran remains “the only threat” to Israel’s existence.

Nasrallah’s exceptional statement amounts to an open admission that Iran’s active participation in a war against Israel would be indispensable, and therefore the decision to launch a war belongs to Tehran. Although overlooked at the time by most Western media, this interview reveals Nasrallah’s true calculation of the balance of power in the region; it certainly reflects, as well, Hizballah’s significant losses incurred fighting in the Syrian civil war.

The Iranian government has refrained from all official comment on Nasrallah’s statement, which was mentioned only briefly in the Farsi press. Iranian authorities, it would seem, were not overly pleased with their protégé’s insinuation that, at the end of the day, everything rests in Tehran’s hands.

Iran’s stated policy, as recently refined by President Rouhani, is to proceed with a strategy of “active deterrence.” Upgrading the accuracy of Iranian missiles is, in his view, both “moral and humane” because it can deter Israeli attack. Yet Iranian officials declare repeatedly that the regime has no desire to threaten or attack anybody, or to seek territorial expansion. Iranian analysts occasionally reinforce these proclamations by noting that for two centuries Iran has not initiated a war on any front. Indeed, the last major Iranian military campaign took place on Iranian soil when Reza Shah recaptured the city of Ahwaz, in Khuzestan province, from its rebellious Arab emir, Sheik Khaza‘al, in 1925.

With regard to Israel, no record exists of any official military threats beyond the context of retaliation for an Israeli strike on Iran’s nuclear installations. The Iranians have simply escalated their warnings in line with their growing confidence that Israel either lacks a credible military option or has become less inclined to employ it. Khamenei himself led this escalation of retaliatory threats, which was invariably echoed by the top brass of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) and the regular army.

The escalation consisted of four distinct stages. First, Khamenei reacted to the public debate in Israel concerning the wisdom of a preemptive strike on Iran’s nuclear installations by declaring that no “hit-and-run” attack against Iran’s

atomic program was possible. This was interpreted by the Iranian media as indicating “that there could be no possibility that an attack against Iran would go unanswered.”

The second stage was Khamenei’s adoption in public of a “threat for threat” posture that signaled, according to pro-regime analysts, “that in addition to being ready to thwart all kinds of threats, Iran was actually posing new threats against its enemies.” The third step occurred on February 3, 2012, when the Supreme Leader proclaimed, following the Pillar of Defense operation in Gaza, that Iran will help and support anyone prepared to engage the Israelis. One Iranian commentator explained that, “these threats against Iran, having failed to push the Islamic Republic into passivity, have further emboldened it to prepare itself for long term and energetic confrontation with its enemies.”

Shortly thereafter, on March 20, during a public address in Mashhad, Khamenei swore explicitly “to raze Tel Aviv and Haifa to the ground” in response to an Israeli strike. The message is clear: Iran’s missiles are on the alert to hit Israel. Other regime spokesmen pointed to the nuclear reactor in Dimona as an additional likely target for instant retaliation.

The threat to Dimona is something of an old story. As early as August 17, 2004, General Mohammed Baqer Zolqadr of the IRGC noted:

If Israel fires one missile at the Bushehr atomic power plant, it should permanently forget about its Dimona nuclear center, where it produces and keeps its nuclear weapons, and Israel would be responsible for the terrifying consequences of this move.

General Yadollah Javani, head of the IRGC’s Political Bureau, said such a retaliatory attack would be carried out by “Shehab-3” long-range ballistic missiles. Other Iranian officials mentioned, among other possible targets, Israeli gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean.

As such statements attest, in order to obtain robust retaliatory capabilities, Iran is relying on its rapidly growing arsenal of long-range missiles. It has also provided tens of thousands of shorter-range rockets and missiles to clients such as Hizballah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas, which could be urged to help respond to an Israeli strike. Iranian officials often take pride in the fact that missiles with ever improving guidance systems stationed in Lebanon—and to a lesser extent in Gaza—can now reach Israel’s entire territory.

Iran’s missile development in general since 1980 is beyond the scope of this essay; suffice it to say that the leaders have long emphasized to Iranian military commanders the need to develop missiles that can reach Israel in particular. This began with Khamenei’s order for missiles with a 1,000-kilometer range

that, if launched from Iran's western border, could hit Israel. Still later, Khamenei instructed his commanders to acquire missiles with a 2,000-kilometer range, allowing for a successful hit on Israel from most of Iran's territory. And later still Khamenei personally ordered that the accuracy of the missiles should be dramatically improved. Not surprisingly, therefore, the IRGC's Aerospace Force and Missile Unit commander, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, and his deputy, Majid Mousavi, stated directly that the unit was established in order to attack Israel. Mousavi elaborated last year on the logic of the missile program, saying that, "the Supreme Leader set a particular goal for us based on the assumption that the Zionist regime is our main enemy, and that, if it is decided that we should confront it, missiles with a 2,000-kilometer range would be sufficient."

According to current estimates, Iran deploys approximately 400 missiles capable of hitting Israel. The missile brigades are based in some two dozen locations in central and western Iran. This would allow the Iranians to fire volleys that compound the challenge to Israel's Arrow defense batteries.

Besides their impressive missile arsenal (the largest in the region), the Iranians have so far acquired only limited additional capabilities for engaging Israel directly—other than resorting to terrorist operations. Their aging air force has a poor chance, if any, of reaching Israel. Their new domestically produced ships and submarines would face major difficulties in reaching the Red Sea and Mediterranean but could theoretically attempt to impose, together with the Houthi militias of Yemen, a blockade on Israeli shipping through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, similar to the blockade imposed there by the Egyptian Navy in 1973. Iran's ground forces for the foreseeable future are unprepared to mount any large-scale multidivisional attack on the distant Israeli frontier, though some elite IRGC units could be sent to Syria to join Hizballah in Lebanon.

Of course, all this may change if Iran decides to allocate resources, derived from the lifting of sanctions and the unfreezing of its financial assets abroad, as a result of a P5+1 nuclear deal, to a major effort to project military power beyond its borders. The S-300 air defense batteries to be supplied from Russia could also greatly improve Iran's defensive posture, while other deals for offensive weapons systems are being considered, or are at least rumored to be. One such deal is the possible purchase of 250 Sukhoi-30 MKM fighters from Russia and/or J-10s from China, and the purchase of dozens of IL-78 MKI aerial tankers. Yet it is obvious that Iran's reliance on its long-range missile arsenal will remain for a long time the backbone of its military strategy with regard to Israel.

As for calls within Iran to take it to Israel offensively, rather than simply prepare to counter an Israeli strike, these have been rare—notably by the now imprisoned former presidential candidate Ahmed Tavakoli—and have received a decidedly cool reception from the regime elite. Instead, that elite, at its very

apex, has from time to time spoken in frankly ridiculous terms about how to destroy Israel. The most authoritative, and coldly detached, interpretation of the “death to Israel” slogan came from the Supreme Leader himself in his November 2014 plan titled “9 Key Questions about the Elimination of Israel”, posted on his Twitter account. “The proper way of eliminating Israel”, he wrote, is through a “public referendum” for all of the “original people of Palestine including Muslims, Christians, and Jews wherever they are.” However, the “Jewish immigrants who have been persuaded into emigration to Palestine do not have the right to take part.” Following such a referendum, the new government will have to decide if “non-Palestinian emigrants” can remain in the country. Khamenei commented further that destroying Israel does not mean the “slaughter of the Jewish people in the region” but he then went on to call for “arming the people of the West Bank.” There was no mention of Iranian involvement in forcing Israel to accept the proposed referendum.

The “arming of the people of the West Bank” had been articulated as a policy shift even before Khamenei’s nine-point plan arrived. The logic of this approach requires little explanation. Turning the West Bank into a second Gaza, armed with missiles, trained militias, and controlled by the resistance (Hamas and Islamic Jihad), would create a threat to the heart of Israel. And this, at least, has not been empty talk. Since the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, the IRGC’s “Qods Force” has been smuggling money into the West Bank, mainly through Jordan and Turkey, or via Israeli Arabs, and by using exchange bureaus. Both Hizballah and Hamas are trying to enlist West Bank operatives and furnish them with the know-how to manufacture homemade rockets. The importance allocated by Iranian strategists to the West Bank may explain why Tehran does not rule out the establishment of a rump Palestinian state, since IDF withdrawal from it would enhance the prospects of reviving resistance groups there.

The Iranians are likewise investing much effort lately to establish a “resistance” base for operations along parts of the Golan Heights frontier. The goal is to extend the Hizballah-Israeli front in South Lebanon to the Syrian Golan. Though this effort has not been crowned with great success so far, the Iranians seem bent—together with Hizballah—on using Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s dependence on their support to turn southern Syria into a new arena of operation against Israel. Under IRGC commanders, Hizballah is busy recruiting local Druze and others to stir up the Golan frontier by planting IEDs and lobbing occasional mortar shells. Iranian commentator Amir Moussavi summarized this new effort as being aimed at turning the Golan into “a free military area”, thus abandoning Assad’s traditional objection to heating up the front.

The Iranians’ short-term vision thus has Israel squeezed by four fronts of *moqawama* (resistance): Lebanon, southern Syria, Gaza, and, most importantly, the West Bank. Such a scenario would provide them with plenty of

opportunities to keep their proxies engaged with Israel, paving the road to a long-term war of attrition masterminded by Tehran and backed by its missile arsenal, with or without nuclear warheads. As Khamenei put it last year, “the only solution is its [Israel’s] annihilation and liquidation. Of course, until that moment, the determined and armed Palestinian resistance and its spread to the West Bank are the only way to deal with that bestial regime. . . . [T]herefore, it is my belief that the West Bank should be armed just like Gaza.” Affirming this commitment in July 2014, Basij commander Mohammed Reza Naqdi urged all resistance factions to conclude a defense pact against Israel to resurrect the old, pre-Syrian civil war military cooperation agreement between Hizballah and Hamas and expand it to include other resistance factions. The objective would be to present Israel with the specter of a two- or three-front challenge in any future outbreak of fighting in Gaza or on the Lebanon-Syrian front.

Assuredly, it is no easy task to topple the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank or to achieve freedom to mobilize underground networks and then deliver arms to them. But the Iranians claim that even under the current circumstances they have devised smuggling routes to transfer weapons to the West Bank. Still, so far, security cooperation among Israel, the PA, and Jordan has managed to foil Hamas’s attempt to resurrect a military wing in the West Bank. Several attempts to establish workshops for missile production in the West Bank have been uncovered at an early phase.

Iran’s idea of besieging Israel with a “resistance wall” constitutes yet another dimension of its thinking. Some Iranians imagine the creation of a land corridor from Iran through Shi’a regions in Iraq to its desert al-Anbar province and from there to Syria and Lebanon. Establishing such a corridor would require at least the tacit cooperation of the authorities in Bagdad (where Iran already enjoys predominance) or the power brokers in Iraq’s southern provinces. It would definitely require the Iran-sponsored “Popular Mobilization” units and the various other IRGC-backed Shi’a militias to overcome the Islamic State’s current control over key sectors of western Iraq so that it could link up with the Euphrates River Valley in Syria. As yet, the deployment of Shi’a militias into western Iraq has only been tentative, but the issue is under debate. Some militiamen have made it all the way to Damascus to protect that capital from a Sunni onslaught, so anything is possible.

If ISIS loses ground in Anbar and eastern Syria as a result of U.S.-led coalition strikes, and if Damascus remains a member of the “Axis of Resistance”, the Iranian corridor to the Israeli frontier could come about in due course, allowing in the more distant future the transport of military supplies and even personnel through the desert to the frontlines. Such a development might even encourage Iranian planners to contemplate launching an expeditionary force in the event of a confrontation.

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.

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