

## Global Security Briefing – May 2018

# The Risk and Consequences of an Israel-Iran War

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### Summary

Two events in May signalled the growing risk of a direct military confrontation between Iran and Israel, backed by the United States. The first was President Trump's repudiation of the 2015 international agreement on Iran's nuclear programme. The second, two days later, was Israel's air attacks on dozens of Iranian military targets within Syria. This briefing revisits ORG's 2010 analysis of the risks and consequences of such a war, concluding that the risk is greater now than in 2010, with changes in Trump's security team creating a window of opportunity for Israeli action in 2018.

### Introduction

In 2010 there was concern that the Israeli government was seriously considering military action against Iran's nuclear industries because of concerns that the Ahmadinejad government in Tehran was actively developing nuclear weapons and was within a year or so of testing a device. The Israeli concern was that the Obama administration was intent on pursuing a diplomatic solution and did not recognise the danger of what was happening. This situation paralleled great concern back in 2006 that the Bush administration had Iran in its sights after the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq three years earlier.

At the time of the 2006 crisis Oxford Research Group (ORG) had published an analysis that warned against a war ([Iran: Consequences of a War](#)) and in July 2010 it repeated the exercise with the publication of [Military Action Against Iran: Impact and Effects](#). In the event, the Obama administration succeeded in negotiating with Iran's new Rouhani government, leading to a multinational agreement between Iran and the United States along with Russia, China, France, the UK and Germany. ORG played its own [small role](#) in supporting this breakthrough, through providing discreet space for representatives of these states to think through a potential deal.

The resulting Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in July 2015 and involved lifting of sanctions in return for Iran subjecting its nuclear programmes to international verification. This verification procedure has so far been successful and Mr Obama is said to regard the agreement as his most successful foreign policy initiative.

However, the Trump administration takes a very different view, has just withdrawn from the JCPOA, has said that it is enacting the toughest set of sanctions ever, and has warned of military action against Iran if it finds evidence of nuclear weapons ambitions. Meanwhile, Israel is already engaged with a proxy war in Syria with Iranian forces and there is widespread concern in Western Europe over the risk of sudden escalation in Syria, Lebanon or the wider Middle East.

ORG's 2010 analysis remains highly relevant and this month's briefing seeks to bring it up to date in respect of the geopolitical and military shifts that have rocked the Middle East and wider world in the intervening eight years, not least Syria's civil war, Iran's widening military engagements and the advent of the Trump administration.

## The 2010 Report

The **Executive Summary** of the 2010 Report reads:

This report concludes that military action against Iran should be ruled out as a means of responding to its possible nuclear weapons ambitions. The consequences of such an attack would lead to a sustained conflict and regional instability that would be unlikely to prevent the eventual acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran and might even encourage it.

Oxford Research Group's (ORG) analysis in its last report on the issue in 2006 examined the capabilities and intentions of the United States and Israel to carry out military action. While US action against Iran may now be unlikely, given the policies of the Obama administration, Israel's potential for action against Iran has increased. This report examines the improvements in Israeli strike capabilities in the past four years and points to Israel's newly developed ability to conduct major attacks on Iranian nuclear and missile programmes. Long-range strike aircraft acquired from the United States, combined with an improved fleet of tanker aircraft, the deployment of long-range drones and the probable availability of support facilities in north-east Iraq and Azerbaijan, all increase Israel's potential for action against Iran.

Many sections of the Israeli political elite regard the Iranian nuclear and missile programme as an existential threat to Israel. If there is no progress to curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions by other means, there is significant Israeli support for military action. This might also extend to renewed action by Israel in southern Lebanon to counter the progressive re-arming of Hezbollah militias by Iran.

Iran regards a civil nuclear programme as a technological right, and sees its missile force as primarily defensive, however this might be viewed in Israel. While there is little evidence of a nuclear weapons programme, there are indications that Iran is moving towards the means to acquire that capability, even if it does not plan to take the final steps and withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

While an Israeli military strike could not be initiated entirely without the knowledge of the United States, it could avoid over-flying US-controlled airspace. The operation would target a wide range of nuclear and missile facilities and would also be aimed at the technical support, including factories, research centres and university facilities that would underpin the rebuilding of the facilities after attack. There would be significant civilian casualties.

An Iranian administration under attack would experience considerable national unity and would work rapidly to redevelop its weapons programmes, withdrawing from the NPT and prioritising nuclear weapons. This would lead to further Israeli military strikes, resulting in prolonged conflict – the start of a long war with potential regional and global consequences. Iran could, if it chose, take many other actions, including operations to affect world oil markets and to increase instability in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prospects for regional stability and wider global security would be very seriously damaged.

The report concludes that military action against Iran should be ruled out in responding to its possible nuclear ambitions.

## What has Changed?

### Syria

In July 2010 the political upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East were still six months away but from early 2011 there were profound changes in Syria. These started with nonviolent demonstrations against the Assad regime that followed closely on those in Tunisia and Egypt, but these were suppressed with considerable violence by the regime. This led in turn to armed opposition and an appalling civil war that has left many hundreds of thousands of civilians killed or seriously injured and over 12 million Syrians displaced from their homes. As the war evolved, the regime turned initially to Hezbollah militias from Lebanon and then to Iran for support. It also gained direct support from Russia in 2015, cementing its position with the retaking of Aleppo by the end of 2016, and making steady gains and consolidations ever since.

From an Israeli perspective, the increasing role of Iran in Syria has been regarded as hugely worrying and is seen as a deliberate plan to forward base Quds Force units (the overseas arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC), and to nurture a Syrian paramilitary equivalent of Hezbollah among the Shi'a or Alawite minorities, both of which could act directly against Israel.

This concern has been shared by the Trump administration since it came to power eighteen months ago. Even before then, US and UK special forces and their local proxies were quietly active in southeastern Syria to prevent the Assad regime and its allies from controlling road access to Iraq and thus establishing a secure land corridor from Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria.

### *Israeli military capabilities*

The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) has consolidated the improvements covered in the report and its air force, in particular, has conducted numerous air strikes in Syria, around a hundred in the last five years. Until recently most of these have been directed at Hezbollah, especially any kind of supply chain that assists the group in transferring weapons to southern Lebanon.

More recently, Israel has been active in attacking facilities directly used by Iran, especially the Iranian Quds Force. On 10 May alone, Israel's air force claimed to have struck 70 different sites used by Iranian military and intelligence forces within Syria, as well as Syrian air defence sites. Moreover, these air strikes reportedly marked the global combat debut of the Lockheed-Martin F-35 Lightning stealth fighter. If true, this makes Israel the only country other than the United States (which designs, builds and sells the F-35) to field operational combat aircraft essentially invisible to radar. This would be a major advance in capability over 2010, although Israel's ability to use the aircraft at long range, which would require refuelling by non-stealthy tanker aircraft, may still be incomplete.

Israel has also made advances in its defensive infrastructure in response to the steady increase of Hezbollah rocket and missile stocks. In 2011 it began to deploy its Iron Dome system to protect Israel from short-range rocket attacks and has used it many times since then with relative success. This is part of a multi-layered missile defence system that does not wholly negate the threat of rockets or ballistic missiles but certainly makes

Israel feel safer than it did in 2010. The US military has tracking facilities within southern Israel that feed into this system and in September 2017 the US Army broke ground on a facility in the Negev desert that will soon house US missile interceptors.

Israel has continued to maintain connections with Azerbaijan but there are indications that it has also enhanced its links with Georgia. If, in the event of a conflict, Israel was in a position to use forward operating bases in either or both countries this would enhance its abilities to attack targets in northern Iran. However, use of the intervening air space has potentially become more difficult for Israeli aircraft given that Russia now has an air defence capability in northern Syria, Turkey has remained opposed to the Israeli government, and the US no longer controls Iraqi air space.

### ***Israeli and US relations***

Israel has continued its drift towards a more hawkish stance, with the Netanyahu government, in power since 2009, feeling especially empowered by the support it is receiving from the United States under Donald Trump. It is particularly pleased with the manner in which conservative evangelical Christians in the United States are so forward in their support and it notes the especially strong role of Vice President Mike Pence and the participation of leading evangelical pastors in the recent inauguration of the US Embassy in Jerusalem. This support available from the United States is certainly one of the reasons why it has felt able to use considerable force in containing unrest in Gaza, to the extent of killing over one hundred Palestinians there since March, and injuring well over two thousand, many by sniper fire in the past month.

In the United States, Donald Trump campaigned vigorously against the Iran nuclear agreement during the 2016 election campaign and this was greatly welcomed by many evangelical Christians, especially those that embrace the Christian Zionist view of Israel as a God-given entity that is a core component of the coming “End Days” era. In the past two months Israel has been particularly appreciative of two new senior appointments to the Trump team, Mike Pompeo as the new Secretary of State and especially John Bolton as the National Security Advisor.

In the most significant indicator of the Trump administration’s policy on Israel Mr Pompeo gave a speech to the Heritage Foundation in Washington on 21 May in which he warned of punitive sanctions against Iran unless it accepted twelve conditions. These include stopping all uranium enrichment, halting launches of ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, ending support for Hamas, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, ending support for Houthi rebels in Yemen and withdrawing all Iranian military forces in Syria. While not specifically demanding regime change in Tehran his speech implied support for this.

Although this is hugely welcome in Israel, government security analysts may be concerned at the persistent instability around the White House with many changes of senior staff in the past eighteen months. The current make-up of the Trump team may currently be highly conducive to Israeli thinking but there is no guarantee that it will last, so the window of opportunity for strong US support for a conflict with Iran may be small.

### ***Iranian Politics***

The Iranian government led by Hassan Rouhani was convincingly re-elected for a second four-year term in May last year but continuing economic problems and pervasive

maladministration have dented support. While President Rouhani has adopted a much less confrontational foreign policy than his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, real power remains with the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, who takes a stronger line. In addition, the IRGC has a considerable degree of independence in pursuing its military policies in Yemen, Iraq and Syria.

That being said, the recent US decision to withdraw from the nuclear agreement has prompted a substantial degree of political unity across the spectrum, so much so that the idea that tougher sanctions will lead to the fall of the government is hardly tenable. Moreover, any military attack on Iran from Israel, with or without overt US support, should be expected to lead to a substantially united country.

### **Conclusion: Risks and Consequences**

The 2010 report argued that the result of an attack on Iran “would almost certainly not be the wholesale destruction of Iranian nuclear capabilities, yet there would be considerable damage done in terms of physical infrastructure. There would also be many civilian casualties, both directly in terms of civilians working on Iran’s nuclear programme, but also their families [...] and others in research stations, university departments and factories.”

The report further argued that Iran would have many options in retaliation. Apart from immediate withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and a determined effort to develop nuclear weapons, they might include any of the following:

- “Missile attacks on Israel using conventionally-armed systems might be carried out primarily to demonstrate the survival of a capability after an initial Israeli attack. These would be intended principally to undermine Israeli morale rather than have any serious military effect.
- Closure of the Straits of Hormuz, however brief, would cause a sharp rise in oil prices and be a reminder of Iran’s leverage over Gulf shipping routes. Any sustained price rise would have a potentially catastrophic impact on the global economy.
- Paramilitary and/or missile attacks on western Gulf oil production, processing and transportation facilities would be of very deep concern to the producer states, especially Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. While such facilities have much more intense security than a decade ago, they remain essentially soft targets.
- Action in Iraq and Afghanistan in support of those groups opposing western involvement could be tailored to discourage further attacks on Iran.”

All of these options remain, with many additional options in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Furthermore, as the 2010 report argued, when a bombing campaign against Iran starts, and given that the Iranian government will not accept demands from Israel or the United States, the war will not be one brief episode but will be prolonged. Once the bombing starts it will not easily stop.

Apart from Iranian involvement in Syria, the key difference between 2010 and the present is the attitude of the United States towards Iran, Mr Pompeo’s recent speech

demonstrating that it is singularly uncompromising, to the extent that the United States would be likely to become directly involved in a war between Israel and Iran.

While the British government has been at pains to align with the other JCPOA signatories in favour of its continuation, and would be unlikely at this point to join in any pre-emptive strikes against Iran, the consequences of such action (either by Israel alone or Israel and the United States together) would be certain to implicate the UK given its entrenched and [growing military and commercial presence](#) in all of the Gulf States, often entwined with the larger US military presence there.

The risk of war is currently higher than in 2006 or 2010 and this makes it even more important that other actors, not least the EU and the governments of France, Germany and the United Kingdom do all they can to limit the extent of the crisis and offer alternative routes to greater stability.

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#### **About the Author**

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