FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 24.10.2024 | Ruslan Suleymanov

Pressure on an atomic level

Israel's strikes against Hezbollah and Hamas weaken Iran. The country's will to cross the nuclear threshold is growing

Violence in the Middle East has escalated dramatically since the Hamas terrorist attack in October 2023 and the fallout that has since followed. There is tension, if not a state of war, between all the major opponents on the ground. Israel is directly facing off with mainly non-state actors from other countries, who have more firepower than their country's national armies. Think of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Ansar Allah (Houthis) in Yemen and Shia militias in Iraq. Together with Hamas, they form the 'Axis of Resistance', an armed pro-Iranian alliance in the region.

For years, Tehran's military doctrine was based on keeping any conflict with a potential enemy far away from its own borders. Now things are different. Iran has launched massive attacks against Israel from its own territory. The country's shift in foreign policy is primarily a product of events in the Gaza Strip. Although there is no evidence that Iran was involved in the Hamas attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023, officials in Tehran have openly welcomed the events that killed at least 1 200 people. 'What they have done signifies pride, glory and strength; God will support them', said then-Iranian-President Ebrahim Raisi as he congratulated Hamas. Israel's subsequent campaign in Gaza has now been going on for a year, claiming the lives of 40 000 civilians. The fate of many Israeli hostages remains unknown.

Israel has now shifted its strategy to intelligence operations. These include the assassination of the head of the Hamas Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, in Tehran in July, the killing of numerous Hezbollah fighters through exploding communications devices, and the assassinations of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in September and Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in October. All of these were huge moral blows to Iran, showing that it cannot protect its puppets' commanders even in their own countries — hence Tehran's response to Israel's attacks.

The only success that the Israelis' ground invasion has achieved is that it has diverted the world's attention away from the Gaza Strip.

Hezbollah has lost at least 10 high-ranking leaders, not least Nasrallah, in Israel's attacks. The militia seems to be on the ground in the long term, but how important it will be in the future is being questioned. Still, it's too early to write off Hezbollah. The group has around 100 000 fighters in its ranks, and its arsenal still consists of up to 150 000 missiles. History shows that these groups are quick to replace high-ranking leaders with other militants who can carry on the group's work seamlessly. In 2004, Israel took out two Hamas leaders. But that only brought the group even greater popularity and influence.

The fact that the militia is still capable of resisting the Israeli government is demonstrated in its drone attack on 13 October this year. To date, more than 80 000 Israeli citizens have had to flee their homes in the north of the country and cannot return home because of coming under constant fire from Lebanon. The only success that the Israelis' ground invasion has achieved is that it has diverted the world's attention away from the Gaza Strip. The situation there is dire: the prospects of freeing the remaining hostages are still slim, and Hamas continues to thrive. After all, Sinwar's assassination does not mean Hamas has been defeated. According to ACLED's US analysts, the group has lost only about 8 500 of its 25 000 to 30 000 fighters in clashes with Israel. These losses are offset by unknown quantities of new Palestinian recruits, who lost friends and relatives in Israel's attacks.

The attack on Lebanon also triggered the second massive Iranian missile attack on Israel within a year. Both attacks were calculated not in a way to cause maximum damage, but to send a symbolic message. Bold words from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued after the attack showed that Israel's continued response is still unclear. All-out war is not as likely as it is sometimes made out to be. This is also due to the great distance between Iran and Israel – at their nearest points, it is 1 200 kilometres. But it's not just that ...

Israel knows that attacking Tehran's oil industry would send global prices in the crude oil market shooting up and

Iran has mustered around 40 000 Afghan, Iraqi, Pakistani and Syrian militants together in Syria. Iran has not tried to use them against Israel yet, as the Tehran leadership only knows too well that doing so would be suicide. What's more, the situation in the oil market is preventing escalation on both sides. While Iran relies on its

upset its own allies, most notably the US.

oil revenues, Israel knows that attacking Tehran's oil industry would send global prices in the crude oil market shooting up and upset its own allies, most notably the US. Ultimately, a massive attack on Iran with civilian casualties would rally its population around the otherwise unpopular government. So, despite its military inferiority, the Iranian regime is actually in quite a favourable situation if it comes to direct conflict. Any escalation could only end up strengthening it.

And then there's the possibility of an Iranian nuclear bomb. Officials in Iran have been clear in recent years that when it comes to nuclear weapons, their aim is to maintain what they call a 'threshold status', i.e. to be capable of producing nuclear weapons quickly, but only if needed. The situation has changed dramatically here too. International observers have raised concerns that Iran could soon start developing a nuclear bomb, with US intelligence agencies reporting in July that active preparations were underway. Shortly afterwards, the International Atomic Energy Agency stated that it could no longer be confident that Iran's nuclear programme was for peaceful purposes.

It might sound paradoxical, but despite high inflation, more and more people in Iran support the idea of producing nuclear weapons. In a survey conducted by IranPoll, nearly 70 per cent of Iranians surveyed said that the country should possess its own nuclear weapons. The more pressure that Israel or the West puts on Iran, the more determined the country will be to cross that nuclear threshold to deter a conventionally superior opponent if it deems it necessary.



Ruslan Suleymanov
Cairo

Ruslan Suleymanov is a Russian orientalist and journalist. He was the senior Middle East correspondent of the TASS news agency in Cairo until February 2022. He resigned from this post in protest against the Russian

invasion of Ukraine.