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Iranian UAV in the Russia-Ukraine War and a new government in Israel impact a military strike on Iran

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Introduction

In January 1849, the French journalist Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr of the Figaro newspaper proclaimed a maxim. He wrote in one of his entries: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Simply, that reads “the more things change, the more things remain the same.”¹ Perhaps this is an apt thought after so many years and so many threats from Iran and those opposing its nuclear and missile programs, but without any military strikes against it.

Bearing this in mind, could anyone really say that the New Year 2023 and a new government in Israel would really bring a military strike on Iran? However perhaps there are variations from the past - both in the new Israeli government, the ever increasing preparations by Israel and America and due to Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) used in the Russia-Ukraine War - all spurred on by the clear failure to renegotiate the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal!

The new Israeli Government

On Thursday 29 December 2022, The Israeli Knesset whose 120 members have been elected in 25 general elections since independence in 1948, expressed its faith in the 37th Israeli Government formed by a coalition of parties, that will be led for the 6th time as Prime Minister by Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu.²

One of the ongoing priorities is Iran. While Iran long has maintained its program is peaceful, non-proliferation experts warn Tehran has enough 60% enriched uranium to reprocess into fuel for at

1 Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alphonse_Karr

2 Knesset News, *37th Government of the State of Israel is sworn in*, 29 December 2022
<https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/press291222r.aspx>

least one nuclear bomb.³ Experts have also warned of Iran's direct regional intervention by the Revolutionary Guards and by proxies, from Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Houthis in Yemen, as well as other groups based in Syria; and the increasing spread into Africa.⁴

Although these threats aren't new, their severity is increasing and other measures for example economic sanctions and diplomatic agreements have failed. Those who elected the new Israeli government will no doubt wish to see them deal with such a threat and not procrastinate.

The New Israeli Government's Defence Officials

At the beginning of Netanyahu's speech to the Knesset on the change of government, thunderous applause was heard in the Knesset plenum. When introducing the ministers of the new government, Netanyahu announced the appointment of former General Yoav Galant to be Minister of Defence, Itamar Ben-Gvir to a newly created position of Minister of National Security that will include control of all Police and Border Police Units and Bezalel Smotrich as Minister of Finance with the power to name the Coordinator of Government Activities in the West Bank Territories (COGAT) as well as the head of the Civil Administration there.⁵

All three were elected as Knesset Members, but the latter two have stirred controversy world-wide for their extreme right-wing comments about handling Gaza and the West Bank. Ben-Gvir for example has promised that he would change the opening of fire instructions for Army and Police Units in the West Bank.⁶ Perhaps that is an indication that this will be probably the most hawkish right-wing government that Israel has ever had and targeting Iran may soon become part of their rhetoric and policy intent.

Also appointed is the former ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer as Minister of Strategic Affairs, that traditionally coordinates Intelligence analysis. Dermer's tenure as ambassador in Washington, can play a role in actions against Iran. Dermer's understanding of the American political system has previously given Netanyahu a way to navigate through Washington. For example in 2015 when Netanyahu addressed a joint session of the US Congress over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) - Iran Nuclear Deal, Dermer is widely believed to have engineered that speech in which Netanyahu, against the wishes of then-President Barack Obama, urged the US not to become a party to Deal.⁷

3 Francois Murphy, "Iran has enough uranium near weapons-grade for a bomb, IAEA report shows," *Reuters*, 7 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-near-weapons-grade-uranium-stock-grows-probe-stuck-iaea-reports-2022-09-07/>

4 Ashley Lane, "Iran's Islamist Proxies in the Middle East," *The Wilson Center*, 5 December 2022 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies>

5 Knesset News, *37th Government of the State of Israel is sworn in*, 29 December 2022 <https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/press291222r.aspx>

6 Calev Ben-David, "Special interview: Dershowitz slams Ben-Gvir's open-fire plan," *i24 News*, 8 December 2022, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/politics/1670522079-special-interview-dershowitz-slams-ben-gvir-s-plan-to-change-israel-s-open-fire-rules>

7 Martien Sieff, "The undiplomatic envoy," *The Jerusalem Post*, 4 March 2015, <https://www.jpost.com/jerusalem-report/the-undiplomatic-envoy-392899>

Speeches at the handing over of Government on 29 December 2022

The composition of the security positions held in the new Israeli Cabinet and indeed the long history of the Iranian threat was notable in speeches given at the handing over of government on 29 December 2022. Netanyahu said “In the next four years, we will work for Israel to be a world power, prosperous and strong, whose existence is no longer in doubt. To that end, we must carry out some tasks: the first is to thwart the development of Iran's nuclear arsenal, make sure that it does not destroy us with atomic bombs and the second task is to continue to expand the circle of peace with Arab countries to end the Israeli-Arab conflict.”⁸

The outgoing Prime Minister who will head the opposition in the Knesset (Yair Lapid) said at the beginning of his speech that “The incoming prime minister said that the first task is to curb Iranian intensification - I agree with him. We dealt with it a lot. Our government managed to stop the re-signing of a nuclear agreement with Iran. During our term of office, Israel carried out a series of overt and covert actions to prevent Iranian intensification. We increased the effort to prevent Iranian establishment in Syria, but Israel's long hand also reached far beyond. We laid the foundations for full Saudi accession to the Abraham Accords.”⁹ The latter may well prove to be important for ensuring regional security agreements in the Middle East in a post-Iran military strike era.

Israeli and America Preparing for the Military Option Against Iran

It would be an understatement to say that a military strike on Iranian nuclear research, development, and production facilities and the same on its missile programs and its arsenal has not been considered for decades. Perhaps one reason that this hasn't taken place yet is global diplomatic efforts, due to the experiences from the Iraq War 2003. That showed that removing one threat in the form of Saddam Hussein and his Baath Party, and attempting regime change, can lead to more complicated threats and anarchy. So the experience suggests that it would be more preferential to get an existing regime to change its course and intentions. Hence US President Biden has said he is prepared to use military force, if necessary, but still prefers to exhaust the diplomatic route first, even if apparently agrees in private that this has failed.¹⁰

Perhaps another reason is that while the regime in Tehran is racing towards nuclear capability, the operational plans of the Israel Defence Force (IDF) especially the Israeli Air Force (IAF) are still far from being ready. It is no secret that in 2016, a few months after Iran signed the nuclear agreement with the major powers, Israel curtailed the preparations for an attack on Iran, or what is known in Israel as the “Third Circle”, for the benefit of no lesser burning issues in Gaza and Syria.

Beyond the need for up-to-date intelligence and the preparation of several options for action, the IAF / IDF will also be required to change its force structure, the training of the forces, the maintenance of the planes and even the purchase of more spare parts for long-distance flights. To

8 Knesset News, *37th Government of the State of Israel is sworn in*, 29 December 2022

<https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/press291222r.aspx>

9 Knesset News, *37th Government of the State of Israel is sworn in*, 29 December 2022

<https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/press291222r.aspx>

10 Barak Ravid and Hans Nichols, “Biden in newly surfaced video: Iran nuclear deal is "dead", *AXIOS Video*, 20 December 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/12/20/biden-iran-nuclear-deal-dead-video>

this end in October 2021 IAF Commander Amikam Norkin said “Next year training will begin for a possible attack. The challenges we face are increasing.”¹¹

That is not to say that the United States and its Air Force are not capable of striking Iran, should the White House give the order. For example, shortly after Norkin’s statement in October 2021, IAF F-15 fighter jets escorted an American B-1 bomber flying over Israeli territory on its way to the Persian Gulf as the US hit Iran with a fresh set of sanctions targeting the Islamic republic's lethal UAV drone program.¹² Most recently as a show of force and solidarity in November 2022 two IAF F-35 fighter jets escorted two American strategic B-52 bombers above Israeli airspace on their way back from the Persian Gulf.¹³

Later in November 2022, preparations increased when their respective military’s held joint drills, simulating strikes on Iran and proxies. The Israeli Intelligence Directorate conducted an extensive simulation that replicated a campaign against distant countries. This exercise tested the IDF’s abilities at gathering intelligence, researching, and outlining targets, and making intelligence available to the operational forces.¹⁴

Also during the November drills, which took place over Israel and the Mediterranean Sea, four IAF F-35i fighter jets, accompanied four American F-15 aircraft and an American KC-135 aerial refueling aircraft, that refueled several IAF F-16i fighter jets.¹⁵

Capability needs to be coupled with intent and then plans set in motion. There are indications that this might be in progress. For example, immediately after the new Israeli government was sworn into office, the administration of US President Joe Biden announced that it would send National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to Israel in mid-January 2023 for talks with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu concerning his government's policies as well as with Israeli National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi and Minister of Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer. Added was that Secretary of State Antony Blinken could head to Israel soon after Sullivan's visit while a possible visit by Netanyahu to Washington in February was also on the cards.¹⁶

11 Judah Ari Gross, “IAF to start training for strike on Iran nuke program in coming months,” *The Times of Israel*, 15 October 2021 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iaf-to-start-training-for-strike-on-iran-nuke-program-in-coming-months/>

12 Lilach Shoval, News Agencies and ILH Staff, “Message to Iran: IDF fighter jets escort US bomber through Israeli airspace,” *Israel HaYom*, 31 October 2021, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2021/10/31/message-to-iran-idf-fighter-jets-escort-us-bomber-through-israeli-airspace/>

13 JPOST Staff, “In first, Israeli F-35 jets escort US bombers returning from Gulf,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 10 November 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-722054>

14 Emanuel Fabian, “IDF holds joint air drills with US, simulating strikes on Iran and proxies,” *The Times of Israel*, 30 November 2022 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-holds-joint-air-drills-with-us-simulating-strikes-on-iran-and-proxies/>

15 Iran News Staff, “Israel To Hold Joint Air Drills With US To Practice Strikes On Iran,” *Iran-News*, 29 November 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202211297530>

16 “US national security advisor to visit Israel for briefings with new govt,” *i24 News*, 31 December 2022, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy/1672470907-us-national-security-advisor-to-visit-israel-for-briefings-with-new-govt>

Analysis

There is clear ongoing strategic and tactical cooperation of Israel with the United States over the Iranian threat. The evidence shown indicates that Israeli and US officials are mulling military action against Iran's nuclear and missile programs and preparing for it. From one perspective this might be an attempt to deter and dissuade Iran and bring it to the negotiating table. Another perspective is that if an Israeli and American military strike is really being intended then such preparation is prudent for it would take place in a tactical and strategical challenging environment for four reasons.

Firstly bombing Iran's nuclear and missile facilities would have little element of surprise, as any military strike will require a large visible force. Secondly optimistic assumptions on targets to strike rely on a set of incomplete intelligence assessments. Thirdly Tehran's facilities are widely dispersed and well defended. They all benefit from various levels of hardening, air-defense systems, and electronic warfare measures. That might mean hundreds of aircraft and thousands of sorties to deliver enough bombs on multiple targets as well as maintain operational sustainability to conduct a post-strike assessment of success. Fourthly an Israeli and American military strike might not guarantee that Tehran wouldn't restart its nuclear efforts or curtail its regional interventions and support for extremist proxies, so long as the Ayatollah Regime remained in power.

Reaching a political deal with the Ayatollah Regime in a post-strike environment would be even harder than a military strike. In other words, the Israel and America would also need to design a plan to change the regime or at least its intentions and activities. This will be challenging for the Islamic Republic's leaders have shown their ability to forge a domestic consensus and a political willingness to ratchet up tensions and use brinkmanship when threats to the regime are high. This could result in a situation that would force America to remain ready for continued militarily engagement with Iran including facing immediate terrorist responses globally, and longer-term periodic follow-up strikes. It might also increase Sunni-Shia confrontations leading to greater regional instability.

Such challenges and consequences could leave the bottom line for decision-makers to look at diplomatic efforts even if a military strike is the best immediate option. That would once again be quoting the maxim of Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr of the Figaro newspaper *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Simply, that reads "the more things change, the more things remain the same."

Even so the situation is dynamic. With the change of government in Israel that is more hawkish and right-wing than ever before the tone of political discourse is to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities that threaten Israel's security. All new Israeli Government's Defence Officials are known to favor a military option: Bibi Netanyahu, former General Yoav Galant, Itamar Ben-Gvir, Bezalel Smotrich and Ron Dermer.

Nevertheless they are also known to be rational and prudent. A short, middle, and long-term resolution of international non-proliferation efforts in the Middle East and even for global concerns needs to be coupled with the mitigation of economic and security grievances connected with any state seeking the nuclear option. This has been the dilemma and conundrum that has resulted in a status quo of not taking military action against Iran for decades, and not reaching a sustainable diplomatic agreement.

Here a significant difference that could change previous scenarios on security, economics and regional stability is The Abraham Accords signed over two years ago. It could be a means and

solution to achieving a regional order, and a forum for conflict resolution, especially if Saudi Arabia were to join, as hinted by outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid.

It is fair to say as a bottom line in analysis that for Israeli Leader Bibi and for American President Biden that the Big Question then is what is the likelihood that they will select the military option and launch a preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities in 2023 and not wait until 2024 or a diplomatic solution?

Two potential answers to this Big Question rest on different catalysts. The first is if they feel the Iranian threat has escalated due to the quantity of Uranium enriched to the point where the cost of a strike is strategically less than the risk of remaining silent, even if it has negative consequences for the region's security and stability. The second stems from Iran's proliferation of UAV across the region and allegedly to Russia for use against Ukraine.¹⁷

Both catalysts threaten international peace and stability where the latter is more immediate as it has an impact directly on the European continent and this is closest to home to NATO and the European Union! Being closest to home means domestic public opinion plays an important role in decision making and policies and their implementation for America and European states. That coupled with a new hawkish right-wing government in Israel, and close Israel-American military preparations may well be turning points clearly spurred on by the failed diplomatic efforts at reviving the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal of President Obama's administration.¹⁸

17 David E. Sanger, Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Scrambles to Stop Iran from Providing Drones for Russia," *The New York Times*, 28 December 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/28/us/politics/iran-drones-russia-ukraine.html>

18 Glen Segell, "All agree, and agree to agree, that the 2015 JCPOA Iran Nuclear Deal is dead!" Middle East Tracker, 1 January 2023, <https://univcambridge.wixsite.com/middle-east-tracker/post/all-agree-and-agree-to-agree-that-the-2015-jcpoa-iran-nuclear-deal-is-dead>