

NEW ESCALATION IN ISRAEL–IRAN CONFLICT: SITUATION ANALYSIS²

TARGETING IRAN'S STRATEGIC INFRASTRUCTURE

At the end of January 2023, one of the military facilities located in the center of the city of Isfahan, Iran, was subjected to an air attack. According to Iranian official sources, the air attack was carried out using launched UAVs and did not cause serious damage to the infrastructure of the military facility.

Israel's military-political leadership has so far refused to comment on the incident, essentially neither confirming nor denying Israel's involvement in the air attack. Despite all that, recently, the Israeli side has stated more than once that is ready to launch military strikes on Iran's nuclear infrastructure in the event of the ineffectiveness of diplomatic channels to resolve the issue of termination of Tehran's nuclear program.

Washington did not hesitate to give his assessment. According to Pentagon spokesman Patrick Ryder, the US Armed Forces did not take part in that incident; however, he bypassed the question of the Israeli side's participation³.

It is clear that the targeting of the military industrial facility located in the center of Isfahan at the beginning of this year was not the first such incident. In this regard, the year 2020 was particularly full, when dozens of incidents and explosions were recorded in the direction of Iran's strategic infrastructures. Moreover, the incidents in Tehran were mainly linked to technical motives, avoiding giving them political grounds.

Recently, the biggest incident in Iran's infrastructure was related to Iran's Natanz nuclear enrichment facility. Perhaps the biggest reason is that the incident took place in one of the most important infrastructures of strategic importance in the field of development of Iran's nuclear program.

¹ Orientalist, Arabist. From 2004 to 2018 worked as an Expert at the "Noravank" Scientific and Educational Foundation, since 2017 - Head of the Political Research Center of the Foundation. From 2018 to 2021 performed the duties of the Senior Expert of the "Public Relations and Information Center" SNCO of the RA Prime Minister's Office. Author of more than 350 published articles and books.

² *The original article:* Veranyan K., New Escalation in Israel–Iran conflict: Situation Analysis (in Arm.). The article was submitted to the editorial office on 28.02.2023.

³ Hafezi P., Stewart P., (2023). Israel appears to have been behind drone strike on Iran factory, U.S. official says. Reuters. (29.01.2023). <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/blast-heard-military-plant-irans-central-city-isfahan-state-media-2023-01-28/> (download date: 20.02.2023).

An article was published in the «New York Times» on 5 July, 2020, according to which Israel planted a bomb in the building of Iran's Natanz nuclear facility, where centrifuges are assembled⁴.

HYBRID WARFARE

These processes are taking place against the background of intensifying anti-government demonstrations in Iran, which are placed in the context of conducting the same hybrid war. By the way, this is the first incident of an air attack in the direction of Iran since Benjamin Netanyahu took over the post of Prime Minister again in 2022, forming the most right-wing government in the history of Israel.

One of the effective tools used by Israel and the United States to exert political pressure on Iran is to incite anti-government public complaints inside Iran.

In recent months, another wave of anti-government protests in Iran began after the death of 22-year-old *Mahsa Amini*, who was beaten in a police station for wearing a hijab improperly.

By provoking public complaints and demonstrations in Iran, Israel and the West are trying to solve the Iran issue as quickly as possible and avoid repeating of the Syrian scenario.

The leadership of Israel has repeatedly sent video messages to the people of Iran to fight against the leadership of Iran. Netanyahu is more active in this matter, and in his messages called on the people of Iran to go to the streets and demand that the Iranian leadership "instead of wasting money in meaningless wars in Syria, Yemen and the Middle East, solve problems such as air pollution, scarce water resources, terrorism". There was also a call to get rid of Iran's leadership, where Israel was presented as a friend of the Iranian people.

REGULATION OF TEHRAN–RIYADH RELATIONS

In general, the weight of the Gulf Arab countries has increased in international relations. A change is being noticed in Tehran's position towards the latter's. The former direct confrontation has been replaced by pragmatic flexibility, as a result of which Tehran is trying to overshadow Israel's cooperation with the latter by improving relations with the Arab countries of the Gulf.

Lately, it is noticed that Iran–Saudi Arabia relations have been warming. The two sides are trying to end a years-long standoff, with Yemen's Houthis receiving Tehran's military-political support in their fight against the Saudi-backed Yemeni government.

⁴ Fassihi F., Perez-Pena R., Bergman R. (2020). Iran Admits Serious Damage to Natanz Nuclear Site, Setting Back Program. The New York Times. (05.07.2020). <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/world/middleeast/iran-natanz-nuclear-damage.html> (download date: 24.02.2023).

On March 10 of the current year, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) of Iran Ali Shamkhani had a meeting with the National Security Advisor of Saudi Arabia Musaad Bin Mohammed Al Aiban. The parties agreed to establish diplomatic relations and open embassies. A mutual agreement was reached to respect each other's sovereignty and not to interfere in internal affairs. Earlier on, negotiations on the regulation of relations between the two countries took place in Iraq and Oman.

It is noteworthy that China, where the above-mentioned meeting was organized, assumed a mediating mission regarding the settlement of Tehran–Riyadh relations. With this, Beijing records a serious success in its diplomacy in the Middle East, which is called "*an event that changes the global system*". By regulating Tehran–Riyadh relations, Beijing also strengthens its economic–energy interests. China is one of the main consumers of oil in the Gulf, mainly of Iranian and Saudi origin. In Washington, they approach the current developments with jealousy, but prefer to admit that the rapprochement of the relations between the two Middle Eastern rivals is nevertheless beneficial for the United States.

POSSIBILITY OF MILITARY SCENARIO

Israel is seriously preparing for the scenario of airstrikes against Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

In the second half of February, the head of the defense wing of the "Boeing" company Ted Colbert was in Israel and had meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu and the leadership of the defense army.

According to the Israeli media, during the visit, the long-awaited KC-46 refueling planes and 25 F-15IA fighter jets were discussed with Israel in order to increase the effectiveness of its ability to attack Iran.

A clear timetable for the delivery of fighters has not yet been set, but in all probability, even in the case of the shortest terms, they will be delivered to Israel only in 2028. Expectations are higher in Israel. As for the KC-46 tankers, it is planned to deliver them to Israel earlier, in 2025.

Recently, Netanyahu's meetings with the country's power structures, including the heads of the Defense Army, Foreign Intelligence, and Military Intelligence, have become quite frequent. During the meetings, issues of the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear infrastructure were discussed.

In the second half of February 2023, "Bloomberg" and "Reuters" periodicals published reports, according to which Iran's uranium enrichment rate reached about 90%.

A day after the publication of the reports, Israel's National Security Advisor *Tzachi Hanegbi* made a statement regarding the issue, specifically stating: "*Either it is possible to stop Iran now or never. We are trying to convince everyone that in order to prevent a confrontation with Iran, it is necessary to have an effective*

military threat either by Israel, the USA or the international community." According to Hanegbi, this indicator of uranium enrichment cannot be used for civilian purposes: its only motivation is the production of nuclear weapons.

The Biden administration still avoids the rhetoric of military threats against Iran, but the situation will be different if Trump is re-elected. The Trump–Netanyahu couple will significantly increase the probability of direct military strikes on Iran. Netanyahu's expectations are great from the US Jewish diaspora, which is already taking active political and public steps to ensure Trump's re-election.

THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Israel's political and military leadership intends to appeal to the international community to form an anti-Iranian coalition in order to thwart Iran's nuclear program. It is planned to attack Iran's strategic nuclear infrastructure with the support of international forces. It's about 3.000 such targets that are planned to be hit.

In terms of getting the support of international players for planning attacks against Iran, the political circumstances can be considered quite favorable, because the West is nervous about Iran's support for Russia in the Ukraine crisis. It is difficult to say how far Israel will be able to justify the need for Western participation in striking Iran, but the list of most likely players includes the United States, France, as well as the Arab countries of the Gulf.

It was no coincidence that after assuming the post of Prime Minister, Netanyahu made his first visit to France, where one of the topics of the meeting with President Macron was Iran.

Netanyahu's message is clear: Israel supports the West in the Russian–Ukrainian crisis, expecting the latter's support in the war against Iran.

ISRAEL'S POSITION IN THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

Due to security reasons in Syria and the Middle East, Israel has so far avoided providing military support to Ukraine, limiting itself to humanitarian assistance.

Recently, the rhetoric of the military-political leadership of Israel has changed, especially after the appearance of Iranian-made UAVs in the Ukrainian crisis.

Expert assessments are divided on Israel's neutrality in the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. Externally, or rather, officially, Israel continues to be neutral in the crisis, but really behind the scenes it provides direct or indirect support to Ukraine.

THE MOSCOW FACTOR

It cannot be ruled out that in the first phase of the Russian–Ukrainian war, Israel had tried to maintain neutrality and even had offered to act as a mediator.

In early January 2023, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen announced that he would be "more restrained" when it comes to Russia and Ukraine. The fact that Cohen first had a private conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, and then with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba, also spoke of the change in the position of Netanyahu's government.

Maintaining good relations with Russia is important in Israel, first of all, within the framework of Tel Aviv's cooperation with Moscow in Syria. In essence, Russia, in vernacular terms, is turning a blind eye to Israel's military operations against Iran in Syria. This also implies a fairly high level of cooperation between the armed forces of Israel and Russia in Syria.

In mid-February 2023 as a result of Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen's visit to Ukraine, the two countries agreed to cooperate on the issue of Iran.

After the meeting with President Zelensky, Cohen announced that they had a private conversation about deepening cooperation between Israel and Ukraine in order to act against Iran on international platforms. However, it is difficult to understand from that statement whether Israel is going to provide military support to Ukraine.

THE IRAN–ISRAEL CONFRONTATION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

In the last decade, the geography of the Iran–Israel confrontation began to expand in the South Caucasus as well. Today it is already a reality that Israel and Iran, directly or indirectly, are also involved in the military-political processes of the Artsakh conflict. Israel's activation in the South Caucasus is significantly facilitated by mutually beneficial strategic relations with Azerbaijan.

The parties have mutual interests. Azerbaijan is one of the main oil suppliers to Israel, and for Israel, Azerbaijan is one of the important markets for arms sales.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, during the period of 2011-2022, Israel was the second largest supplier of arms to Azerbaijan after Russia.

It is clear that Israel's involvement in the South Caucasus region is primarily due to the Iranian factor, where the interests of Israel and Azerbaijan largely coincide.

For Azerbaijan, the issue of cooperation with Israel on the anti-Iranian front is important, for various political interests. First, it is a pressure lever against Iran, so to speak, for the "rights protection" of the Azerbaijani ethnic minority living in the country, but in fact, in support of the latter's separatist processes. The Israel–Azerbaijan alliance balances Iran–Armenian cooperation in the region, including in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. On the other hand, of course, through the involvement of Israel, Azerbaijan supports Ankara, which has always sought to take advantage of any opportunity to weaken Tehran's influence in the region.

In Iran, they closely follow the process of cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan, which is a direct threat to Iran's security. More than once, Israel has used Azerbaijan as a platform to conduct intelligence activities against Iran.

IRAN – AZERBAIJAN TENSION

Recently, the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have intensified again. One of the manifestations of the growing tension was the case of a gun attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran, as a result of which one of the employees of the embassy was killed. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan made a statement about the need to evacuate the entire staff of the embassy, accusing Iran of starting an anti-Azerbaijani campaign.

Moreover, the Baku parliament passed a law regarding the opening of the Azerbaijani embassy in Israel, thereby breaking the tradition of delaying this decision for nearly three decades.

Let's remind that in the early 1990s, Israel opened its embassy in Azerbaijan, but Azerbaijan avoided the decision to establish an embassy in Israel due to caution in relations with Iran until recently.

TURKEY'S POSITION

The manifestations of the Iran–Israel confrontation, directly or indirectly, are also due to the factor of Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus. In general, the configuration between the main regional players in the South Caucasus is quite fragile and changeable due to the concentration of various external interests. The Ankara–Tehran confrontation is more competitive in controlling the zones of influence: the more the international pressures on the latter increase, the more advantageous Ankara is in trying to fill the created vacuum. At the same time, it is not necessary to exaggerate the last circumstance, because exerting excessive pressure on Iran is contrary to Ankara's interests in the region. The leadership of Turkey has repeatedly stated that it prefers to settle the South Caucasian issues in the format of the main regional players. In this sense, Ankara does not understand Israel's involvement in the South Caucasus and its clear illegal position. Turkey has a clear position on the Palestinian issue and has repeatedly condemned Israel's military operations against Palestine. In Ankara, they are jealous of the strategic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel, which partially counterbalances the alliance of Ankara and Baku. The increase of Israel's influence in the region is seen in Ankara as a strengthening of Washington's position, which is beneficial for Turkey to the extent that it does not negatively affect the dynamics of Russia–Turkey relations and the consensus formed between the main regional players. It has been more than a decade since the formerly influential Turkey–Israel axis lost its relevance.

VIEW FROM YEREVAN

As for RA, there are no necessary economic and resource prerequisites for establishing mutually beneficial cooperation with Israel, which are present in the case of Azerbaijan. An exception is perhaps the political premise, that is, RA is interesting for Israel due to the existence of a land border with Iran, issues of RA–Iran economic and political cooperation at a rather high level. At the same time, however, the answer to the question of what makes Armenia interesting and important for Iran in the confrontation against Israel is not so clear, and whether official Yerevan formulated for itself that vision, how it could use that confrontation, receiving dividends and avoiding the possibility of becoming a conflict front. Moreover, the issue of the possibility of a coup in Iran through a counter-revolutionary wave has been on the agenda for years. It remains a concern the question of what the South Caucasus region security system will be and what Armenia's place in that system will be in the case of a Syrian scenario in Iran.

After independence, RA consistently continues to develop traditional neighborly relations with Arab countries, which should be evaluated positively. However, it is worrisome that this cooperation took place at the expense of Armenia–Israel relations. The previously influential Turkey–Israel tandem also had a negative impact on the establishment of political dialogue between the two states. In recent years, as a result of the flexibility of Armenian diplomacy, certain positive dynamics can be observed in the relationship between Armenia and Israel, but this is not enough to even partially counterbalance the strategic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel. A prerequisite for the development of relations with Israel can be the formation of a dialogue platform between the Armenian and Jewish communities of Europe and the United States. Until now, the Jewish communities have carried out serious work in the matter of cooperation with the Azerbaijani communities. The Israel–Greece–Cyprus tripartite alliance, which has become a reality in recent years, can be a second important prerequisite. Years ago, it would have seemed unbelievable that Israel could establish strategic cooperation with Turkey's opponents, Greece and Cyprus. Yerevan can take substantive steps to join that tripartite alliance, taking into account RA's traditional neighborly relations with Greece and Cyprus. Tangible success is observed in the field of cooperation between the Jewish and Greek Diasporas, which can also become a bridge for the establishment of the institutional dialogue of the Armenian Diaspora with the latter. There is also the possibility of Armenia acting as a mediator in the settlement of Israel–Iran relations. These Middle Eastern countries, considered rivals today, formed one of the most influential alliances in the mid-20th century. The mediation mission can provide ample opportunities for the state undertaking it to take advantage of both the confrontation between the parties and the process of regulating relations. This will have a positive impact on the security environment of Armenia, and will lower the riskiness threshold of threats thrown at Armenia.

In the created situation, favorable circumstances have been formed for the process of improvement of RA–Turkey relations. It can create an opportunity to reduce Turkey's dependence on Azerbaijan in the Armenian–Azerbaijani confrontation. The settlement of relations with Ankara will increase Yerevan's weight in Iran's regional politics. RA can get a wider field of maneuver in the Ankara–Tehran competition. This is also a favorable period in the sense that Baku–Tehran relations are tense.

CONCLUSIONS

Israel–Iran confrontation tends to intensify due to the expansion of Iran's influence in the region. The situation is getting even more complicated after the indirect involvement of Iran in the Ukrainian front.

In the US and especially in Israel, the issue of targeting Iran's nuclear infrastructure has become more topical. We can say that the ring of international pressure around Iran is gradually tightening: talks about the possibility and necessity of a coup in Iran have become more frequent in the West.

These processes have negative effects on the international security system, if it can be called a system, for the simple reason that, in essence, this system does not work. Various regions are in an unstable, turbulent phase, including the South Caucasus, which is in the immediate vicinity of Iran. The tendencies of increasing the possibility of scenarios of a possible air attack on Iran's nuclear infrastructures, of provoking public discontent in Iran for the purpose of a coup, in turn increase the challenges thrown to the security environment in the South Caucasus and raise the risk threshold.

On the other hand, of course, the rumors about air strikes on Iran by the United States or Israel have been circulating for more than a decade, but they remained as rumors. As they say, in some cases, making a threat is much more influential and effective than making the threat itself. At the same time, however, any scenario should not be excluded. It was difficult to predict the Syrian scenario decades ago, or the Ukrainian scenario years ago.

The Israel–Iran confrontation in the South Caucasus has become pronounced. In the context of regional processes, the 44-day Artsakh war is also, partially, placed in the logic of that conflict in the Middle East: in general, it was aimed at weakening the influence of Tehran in the region. We can say that the external unstable environment formed around Iran has a negative impact on security in the South Caucasus region, and judging by the current processes, this unstable environment predetermines the tendencies of deepening rather than discharging.

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