

Watershed moments for Israel

written by David M. Weinberg | 20.04.2024

Reading the Israeli and global media, one would think that this week Israel achieved its greatest victory since the Six Day War, successfully stymieing a massive Iranian missile attack. With dozens of videos and hagiographic pilot profiles, the IDF is busy pumping out its technological prowess. In religious circles, there are a thousand memes and essays circulating asserting a divine miracle, no less.

This is poppycock. At best, Israel can record a defensive tactical achievement, perhaps indeed blessed, but not a strategic win. On a strategic level, Israel suffered a whopping loss as Iran pierced, with apparent impunity, American and Israeli deterrence frameworks.

The US president in Washington barked “don’t,” and Jerusalem didn’t believe that Iran would dare to attack Israel directly, but Iran nevertheless dared to do so. The ayatollahs brazenly launched a colossal Russian-style strike package intended to cause considerable damage - the largest one-night drone and missile barrage ever launched in history by one nation against another.

The fact that the attack failed - with 50% of the missiles failing to launch or crashing before reaching their target and 49% more impressively being intercepted by Israel and its allies - is irrelevant from a strategic perspective.

The screeching strategic reality is that Iran has catapulted its 40-year-long war against Israel - a war that has been underway via proxies ever since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 - to a new, stratospheric plateau (literally so, with ballistic missiles flying from Iranian soil through space to hit Israel).

When one realizes what a dramatic watershed moment this is, the fact that the strike did amazingly little damage fades into the background. It is not a pertinent consideration in determining how and with what ferocity Israel should respond.

That is why President Biden’s reported advice to Israel - to “take the win,” as it were, to suck up its indignation, to rely on Western sanctions against Iran alone as “smart retaliation,” and in general to “avoid escalation” - is outrageous and dangerous nonsense.

And compounding his failure to deter Iran from directly attacking Israel, Biden has now added to the potential further collapse of any deterrence against Iran by declaring that he seeks no confrontation with Iran and will not participate in any Israeli retaliatory strike at Iran. This is strategic insanity of grandiose proportions!

When America fears escalation more than Iran does, the path towards grand Western defeat is clear. If Israel fears escalation more than Iran does, Tehran will march all the way to Jerusalem with even greater and grander attacks.

One can be certain that Tehran can and will build more successful strike packages in the future designed to overwhelm Israel's defenses. It will try again and again, just as Hamas has launched repeated rocket wars against Israel over the past 20 years, each time with a larger number of longer-range and more accurate rockets.

Imagine if only one of the eight ballistic missiles (out of 120) that managed to penetrate Israeli defenses last Saturday night had fallen not in and around a well-protected airbase in the barren Negev but on a high-rise building in Tel Aviv? What if that one ballistic missile had hit the nuclear reactor in Dimona, which is near that airbase? What if that one ballistic missile had been nuclear tipped? What if Israel had no advance notice of another such Iranian attack (which it did have this time) in order to mount a robust air-defense plan?

Remember that every single warplane in the Israeli arsenal was in the air for eight straight hours this past Saturday night, along with warplanes and flying intelligence platforms from four Western air forces and reportedly several allied Arab air forces, plus all reserve components of Israel's air defense array (Iron Dome, David's Sling, Arrow 2 and 3, and the like). This is certainly not something that will necessarily be in place every time Iran decides to take a direct, unannounced poke at Israel in the future.

DETERRENCE is a tricky task, a defense and diplomatic act that is hard to achieve. It is a construct that requires constant maintenance or else it dissipates. Psychologically, deterrence is measured by "subsequent behavior," meaning that the Iranian attack will be considered successful if it dissuades Israel from future attacks against Iranian leaders and assets.

Conversely, the Iranian attack will be considered unsuccessful - not because the

damage it intended was prevented – if Israel continues to target Iranian leaders and assets inside Iran and around the region. Such offensives are necessary to prevent Tehran’s hegemonic ambitions and nuclear military effort.

The worst possible thing for Israel’s deterrent posture is for a perception of Israel “being stuck” to take root in Tehran and/or around the world. The unhealthiest situation involves Israel being “stuck,” not moving forward, in crushing Hamas in Gaza (Rafah), in confronting Hezbollah in Lebanon, in suppressing terror cells in Judea and Samaria, in targeting IRGC emplacements in Syria, and in sabotaging nuclear facilities in Iran.

Being stuck in a situation in which Israel is diplomatically or militarily hampered in every direction by well-meaning but weak allies or by supremely confident Shiite mullahs and their Russian ally is an unacceptable and perilous position for Israel. Instead, Israel needs to become “unstuck” to free itself from stale strategic paradigms and insufferable diplomatic handcuffs that dominated before October 7 and April 14 – two dates that constitute watershed moments for Israel.

IN GENERAL, I sense that Israel’s strategic goals have become too limited in recent decades, hamstrung by the failed Oslo peace process with Palestinians and the failed Obama peace process with Iranians. These gambits emphasized quiet, co-option, deflation, and survival at the expense of principle, dominance, and victory. They brought about cowering postures instead of the appropriately necessary offensive postures.

As a result, at this very moment, Israel is being pressed by its fainthearted friends to abandon its goal of liquidating Hamas, to instead prioritize humanitarian provisions for the enemy population, to downgrade its rage over the invasion, murder, abuse, and humiliation of its citizens, including kidnapped Israelis held hostage for more than six months, and to acquiesce in the release of Palestinian terrorists and butchers (including the “Nukhba” marauders of Hamas).

Israel is also being pressed to absorb Hezbollah’s continued blows, including the depopulation of northern Israel, to settle for another worthless, airy-fairy diplomatic “settlement” that will only perpetuate the Iranian threat from southern Lebanon, and to refrain from “escalatory retaliation” for the April 14 earthquake-level Iranian assault on Israel.

Were they to be adopted, these policies, taken together, would amount to a grand

strategic defeat for Israel. They would constitute a straitjacket that puts Israeli survival – yes, Israel’s very survival! – at risk, which brings into question Israel’s power to persevere as an independent nation in the Middle East. Were they to be adopted by Israel, these policies, taken together, would inevitably crash Israel as a resilient, buoyant society and a prosperous, leading economy that contributes so much to the world.

The Biden administration’s current campaign to delay, dissuade, and eventually preclude further military conquest in Gaza and to delay, dissuade, and eventually preclude further confrontation with Iran, accompanied by persistent threats to deny Israel diplomatic backing and weapons if Jerusalem does not heed Washington’s warnings, are formulas for grand defeat. As such, they must be resisted.

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