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**War Game: The Hours following an Attack
on Iran's Nuclear Infrastructures**
The Policies of the Actors and Principal Insights

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The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) held a war game (simulation) focusing on the first 48 hours after an Israeli aerial attack on Iran's nuclear infrastructures.

The Scenario

After midnight on November 9, al-Jazeera reports that Israeli airplanes have attacked Iran's nuclear facilities in three waves of attack. As reports multiply, Israel officially announces it has attacked Iran's nuclear sites because it had no other choice. According to the scenario, Israel did not coordinate the attack with the United States in advance, and only informed the US once the planes were already en route to the Iranian targets. Initial assessments estimate that the Iranian nuclear program has been set back by nearly three years.

Following the successful attack, Iran decides to react with maximal force, launching missiles from within its borders and urging its proxies – Hizbollah, Hamas, and other radical elements – to attack Israel. Nonetheless, it is careful to avoid attacking American targets. Israel attempts to contain the attacks and works to attain a state of calm as rapidly as possible. The international community is paralyzed, largely because Russia tries to exploit the situation for its own strategic objectives. At the end of the first 48 hours, Iran continues to attack Israel, as do their proxies, albeit to a lesser extent. At this point in the simulation, the crisis does not seem to be close to a resolution.

Main Policies of the Various Actors

Israel: After achieving its operational goals, Israel showed restraint in the face of provocations and reactions by the radical players spurred by Iran. In parallel, Israel conducted an additional aerial attack to complete destruction of one of the major targets in Iran. Israel's strategic objective focused on preventing regional escalation and achieving as fast as possible a level of events that was controllable and of low intensity.

The United States: Although not informed before the event, the United States clearly stood by Israel's side and did not expose its differences of opinion with Israel, in order to present a united front against any possible regional escalation. The United States demonstrated willingness to return to the negotiating table and even relax the sanctions, provided Iran showed restraint and in exchange for an Iranian declaration it was ending its military nuclear program. The United States decided it would take military action against Iran only if Iran were to close to the Strait of Hormuz or attack American allies and assets in the Gulf. Similarly, the United States activated economic measures to control the rise in oil prices.

Iran: In light of the outcome of the Israeli attack, Iran felt it had no choice but to react strongly and militarily against Israel, launching some 100 Shehab missiles right away (and another 100 in round two) at Tel Aviv, the Negev Nuclear Research Center in Dimona, and various cities. Iran also pressured its proxies to act against Israel and launch rocket and missiles at Israeli targets, as well as engage in multi-front acts of terrorism. At the same time, Iran appealed to the international community to grant legitimacy to its enrichment program and revoke the sanctions against it. At first, Iran chose not to attack American targets and assets to keep the United States from joining the fight against it. But the more Iran felt it was cornered and its freedom of action was curtailed, it realized that its strongest card lay in acting against America's allies in the Gulf and closing the Strait of Hormuz.

Russia chose to promote its objectives in the Caucasus and Europe. Russia also viewed the attack as an opportunity to position itself as the leading actor in the international community because of its ability to communicate with all the actors involved. However, the gap between the US and the Russian positions led to a paralysis of the international community's ability to act. In turn, and in the absence of American leadership, China, with access to all the relevant actors, became a key player on the international field.

Syria preferred to focus on its domestic upheaval, maintain a low profile, and not be dragged into combat against Israel.

Hizbollah found itself in a quandary. On the one hand, Hizbollah came under heavy Iranian pressure to begin a massive launch of missiles and rockets at Israel, this being the "day of reckoning" for which Iran had furnished Hizbollah with 50,000 missiles and rockets. On the other hand, Hizbollah was wary about causing heavy damage in Lebanon yet again. It therefore chose to respond to Iran's demands selectively by launching rockets at Israeli military targets, especially airfields and active anti-missile defense systems. Israel's restrained response intensified Hizbollah's dilemma and supported its decision to attack to a relatively limited degree and focus on military targets.

Hamas chose to walk a fine line by demonstrating some commitment towards Iran, while making sure not to provide Israel with an excuse for a large scale attack in the Gaza Strip. Hamas' limited ability to control rogue and radical elements in Gaza was evident, and Hamas was forced to ask the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt for help in restraining the rogue elements it lacked the power to control.

The other actors – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Turkey, and the international community: Each chose to operate on the basis of its own particular interests, distance itself from the events, and prevent widespread regional escalation.

Insights from the War Game

- a. The war game staged the first 48 hours after the attack. The intention was not to predict developments, rather to examine the significance and implications of one possible scenario. The players acted very rationally, demonstrating preventive policies and motivated by crucial interests alone, and ignored domestic and external constraints.
- b. The Israeli actor assessed that the Israeli public possesses the stamina and fortitude to absorb the blows because it was convinced that for Israel, this was a war of no choice that had achieved its operational goals. The policy of restraint was based primarily on this assumption.
- c. Iran has only limited tools and a limited ability to hit Israel directly, and therefore must operate its proxies against it. Iran has tools that are more relevant in the Persian Gulf sector, capable of hurting American interests and causing global oil prices to spike. Nonetheless, Iran clearly understood the cost it would have to pay should it ignite the Persian Gulf, especially the United States joining the fighting. This would only incur greater damage to its nuclear infrastructures and greater destruction to a wide array of quality targets in Iran.
- d. A successful Israeli attack with clear cut results and the meeting of the operational objectives would lead to two contradictory trends: on the one hand, Iran would be obligated to respond militarily and via its proxies; on the other hand its dependence on proxies would allow deterrence of the relevant actors and insertion of a wedge between Iran and its regional allies, thereby preventing regional escalation and encouraging containment.
- e. Two other important elements likely to help contain the events are America's clear resolve to stand with Israel and a restrained policy on Israel's part, especially if the strategic objectives of the attack were met in the initial attack.
- f. The simulation again raised the disadvantage of having no access to Iran's Supreme Leader and the limited levers of influence. In general, it became clear that there are no reliable lines of communication with the Iranian leadership.

- While Russia cannot serve as a credible channel for dialogue, it emerged that China may be capable of serving as a mediator.
- g. In planning the exit strategy and a mechanism to contain and mitigate negative developments, Israel cannot rely on the international community. It is highly probable that the deepening of the divide between the United States and Russia would paralyze the international community. Some of the players on the international arena would like to see Israel "bleed" in order to pay for attacking Iran, regardless of the interests of others, and to restrain its actions in the future. If the crisis were prolonged, it could generate unintended consequences with the risk of regional escalation. Efforts by regional and international elements to end the event may involve a cost to Israel in the area of arms control.

Conclusion

When the simulation was planned, it appeared that the fall of 2012 would be a critical period, and therefore it was decided to examine the possible developments subsequent to an Israeli attack. This sense of an imminent decision has since abated somewhat, but after the US and Israeli elections, the question of an attack will undoubtedly resurface. It is therefore critical to continue to examine the potential ramifications of an attack.

The scenario of an Israeli attack immediately after the US elections does not reflect the position of the Institute for National Security Studies. The possibility of an Israeli attack at any time is complex and has been analyzed in many INSS publications. Overall, there are two opposing assessments of the implications of an Israeli attack. One anticipates the outbreak of World War III, while the other envisions containment and restraint, and presumes that in practice, Iran's capabilities to ignite the Middle East are limited. The war game that took place developed in the direction of containment and restraint, with the actors motivated mainly by rational considerations and critical interests.

