

IRAN AND ISRAEL: DANGEROUS WARS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

ОПАСНАЯ ВОЙНА ИРАНА И ИЗРАИЛЯ ЗА БЛИЖНИЙ ВОСТОК



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The paper studies evolution of different aspects in Iran–Israeli relations in the Syrian crisis. Basic developments of Iran–Israeli confrontations and analysis of its specific are retrospectively shown. The author examines key internal and external factors, influencing the nature of Iran–Israeli conflict and the character of its development. The author argues that regional and international environment determined the character of Iran–Israeli conflict more than religious and cultural differences of the two nations, while the perceptions of external threats and defense of the national suzerainty and territorial integrity played critical role in Iran–Israeli conflict. The author stresses that in the first three years of Syrian crisis Tel Aviv’s stand towards Iranian support of Al-Assad’s regime was neutral in character, but further developments in the Middle East led to further confrontations between Iran and Israel. This very fact was drastically demonstrated in 2021–2022 after military confrontation between Tehran and Tel Aviv had taken new forms and influenced other Middle East countries and Caucasian region. New



developments in Iran–Israeli crisis complicated situation in the region and created potential threats for launching a new war on the Middle East. In 2023 Iran–Israeli contradiction persisted, although positive developments in regional situation emerged. Measures taken by leading regional and international powers formed perspectives for cooling down the hostilities in the international relations in the Middle East that might result in lessening tension in Iran–Israel relations.

Keywords: Iran, Israel, Syria, Middle East, Russia, United States, international relations

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В статье исследуются вопросы эволюции различных аспектов ирано-израильских отношений в условиях сирийского кризиса. Дается обзор основных этапов развития ирано-израильского противостояния, проанализирована его специфика. Исследованы ключевые внутренние и внешние факторы влияния на характер ирано-израильского конфликта и особенности его развития. Сделан вывод о том, что конфессиональные, этнические, культурные различия двух народов не определяли характер ирано-израильского противоборства в отличие от региональных, международных отношений на Ближнем Востоке. Определяющую роль во взаимоотношениях Ирана и Израиля играли соображения национальной безопасности и сохранения государственного суверенитета. Кризис в САР активизировал конфликтный потенциал Ближнего Востока и обострил ирано-израильское противостояние. Автор отмечает, что в начале сирийского кризиса Тель-Авив спокойно реагировал на помощь Тегерана режиму Б. аль-Асада, однако укрепление иранских позиций в САР обострило конфликт между Тегераном и Тель-Авивом. Данный факт ярко проявился в 2021–2022 гг. после массированных бомбардировок израильской авиацией военных объектов ИРИ в САР. В последующем враждебность и конфронтационность в двусторонних отношениях усилилась и вышла за географические рамки Леванта. Ирано-израильское противоборство приняло новые формы, охватив другие страны Ближнего Востока и Кавказского региона. В начале 2023 г. вооруженный конфликт между Тель-Авивом и Тегераном вошел в критическую фазу и поставил Ближневосточный регион на грань новой войны. Предпринятые весной 2023 г. влиятельными региональными и международными державами меры дали импульс развитию позитивных процессов в региональных отношениях призванных снизить градус напряженности в ирано-израильском противостоянии.

Ключевые слова: Иран, Израиль, Сирия, Ближний Восток, Россия, США, международные отношения

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The Syrian Crisis has complicated Iran–Israeli military confrontation on the Middle East. At the beginning Israel seemingly felt no vulnerability with regards of Iran’s policy in Syria. But when it became clear that Tehran’s assistance to Al-Assad’s regime had wider aims to strengthen Iran and Hezbollah military presence in Levant along with multiple Shia militias, Tel Aviv has reacted [Ахмедов, 2022, с. 58–64].

FIGHTERS IN THE AIR

Since the beginning of Syrian events in 2011, Israel inflicted more than 300 air and land strikes on Syrian territory. The Israeli and Syrian Air Forces (SAF) and Antimissile Defense Systems along with Iranian drones took part in the air war. As a result of Israeli airstrikes in early 2018, several Syrian



air defense batteries and Iranian military facility were destroyed. In May 2018, Israel attacked the 1st Armored Division of the Syrian Armed Forces in Al-Kiswah area (a suburb of Damascus). Iran fired 20 missiles at Israeli positions in the Golan Heights. In response, Israeli aircraft attacked Iranian targets in the areas of Damascus, Quneitra and Dara'a, launching dozens of strikes on Iranian and Hezbollah military installations [Al-Hamid, 2023]. In spring 2019 Israeli raids on Syria continued. Another blow on the northern regions of Aleppo caused tangible damage to Iranian warehouses and infrastructure facilities of the airport, which were actively used by Hezbollah [Location of the Raid, 2019]. At the end of 2021 Iran strengthened its military presence in various regions of Syria. In October 2021 Iranian-controlled Shia militias began building a new military base in Abu Kamal (right bank of the Euphrates). After a series of Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in Syrian Arab Republic (SAR), Iran dispersed the leadership of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah and Shiite militias in various regions of Syria. By mid-summer 2021 Iran had 277 strongholds, fortified areas, and bases in 12 provinces of SAR [Na'ameh, 2021]. In February 2022 Iran significantly expanded the supply of various weapons and military equipments from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. By early 2023 areas controlled by Iran in Syria had grown. Iranian presence was noted by various degrees of penetration into local security spheres, public infrastructure, and economy. Massive military presence of Iran in SAR ensured Tehran's success in the economic sphere [Special Report, 2022]. Iran achieved the most lucrative contracts for reconstruction work in Syria in strategically important areas. At the same time, Iran expanded acquisition of real estate in urban centers of SAR. Iranian strengthening in SAR was part of the campaign to change the demographics of Syrian society.

In March 2023 frequency and intensity of Israeli air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria increased. Main objective of the Israeli Air Force (IAF) strikes in Syria was not the withdrawal of Iran from

Syria, but reduction of Iranian military presence and blocking the weapons' supply to Hezbollah [Wail, 2023]. In mid-March 2023 Israeli aircrafts attacked one of the central districts of the Syrian capital, where a meeting was held between Islamic Jihad's military representative A. Al-Ajur, with Syrian and Iranian security forces [La-rivaiya-syria... 2023]. Israeli air attacks became an 'habitual' element of the Syrian conflict. Damascus and Tehran could not stop Israeli airstrikes. On the other hand, Tel Aviv failed to provide reliable protection for its security in the face of the growing military threat from Iran and Hezbollah [Al-Maktari, 2023]. Thus, 10-year-long "air war" between Iran and Israel in Syria marked a stalemate in Iran-Israeli conflict when neither Tel Aviv, nor Tehran couldn't achieve acceptable result of the conflict.

BEYOND THE RED LINES

The Iran-Israeli confrontation escalated in summer 2022 after a massive bombing of the Damascus airport by Israeli aircrafts. A secret war without "red lines" erupted between Tel Aviv and Tehran, targeting senior officers from elite army units, security services and high-ranking civilians employed in nuclear technologies. In 2022 the head of the special operations department of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) in Syria and Iraq was killed. Tehran conducted series of successful operations in Iraq, during one of which Israeli agents in Erbil (Iraq) were neutralized. A special unit of Israeli snipers killed several IRGC officers in Baghdad [Harb-djawsis... 2022]. In the second half of 2022 General H. Tayieb was removed from the post of intelligence chief in IRGC. Some experts believed that Tayieb's resignation was caused by the failure of IRGC operation in Istanbul and the murder of several high-ranking Iranian officers.

Resignation of Tayieb marked the beginning of large-scale personnel reshuffles in Iranian security forces at the level of senior and middle command personnel. Tehran planned to rebuild the organizational structure of IRGC and other law enforcement agencies, bringing it in line with



the new tasks and priorities in the areas of security and foreign policy [*Maza-ya'ani-al-karar...* 2022]. The geography of the deadly actions of Israeli intelligence *Mossad* and the IRGC expanded and covered the Arabian Peninsula, Turkey, Iraq, and the North Caucasus. The Israeli military presence in the Caucasus was seen by Iran as a potential threat to its national security and territorial integrity. Israel could use strategic advantage to carry out terrorist actions against Iranian nuclear scientists. Iran did not rule out the possibility of creating a military alliance between Turkey and Israel in Azerbaijan [*Iran-tahsb'a-wujood...* 2022].

In October 2021 Iran conducted military maneuvers near the border of Azerbaijan, which caused negative reaction in Baku and Ankara. In mid-December 2021 Israeli intelligence chief publicly promised that he would not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. A similar statement was made by Israeli President I. Herzog, who stressed that if the negotiations in Vienna (on Iran's nuclear program) failed, Israel would make its own choice [*Al-Djarida takshafu...* 2021]. At the same time, an explosion took place at an enterprise in Iranian city of Natanz [Madjeed, 2021] — according to Iranian sources, unidentified drones penetrated Iranian airspace. Iranian Bavar-373, S-300 air defense systems and IRGC's Air Forces were not able to hit unidentified UAVs, which made several flights over Natanz for about an hour. In early October 2021 IRGC posted threats against the Bahraini authorities in view of Israeli Foreign Minister's visit to Manama. According to the Iranian military, Israel sought to turn Bahrain and United Arab Emirates (OAE) into a new springboard for conducting active intelligence and sabotage activities against Iran [Hammud, 2021].

In early 2023 critical changes took place in Iran-Israel conflict. In January 2023 Israeli drones attacked military enterprises in Isfahan (Iran). Thus, Tel Aviv made it clear that now its main target was not only pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Syria but

military installations on Iranian territory, as well [*Taukit-madrus...* 2023]. Tel Aviv demonstrated that it still has good position in Iranian special services. Israeli attacks on military installations in Isfahan marked significant adjustments in the strategy of Israel and the United States towards Iran. Tehran prepared retaliatory UAV strikes against Israeli and US military facilities in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Azerbaijan [Kasir, 2023(a)]. Iranian special services exposed more than ten *Mossad* agents operating on Iranian territory [Autwan, 2023]. Islamic Resistance (mainly, Hezbollah) established command headquarters for joint military operations against Israeli army and US military in Levant [*Ma-Ghiya-Kataib...* 2023]. After Tel Aviv's strike on Isfahan, Tehran decided to attack Israel from three directions: Palestine, Lebanon, Syria. In 2013, Hamas¹, at the request of local authorities, closed its mission in SAR. In October 2022 Hamas leaders met with B. Al-Assad. In January 2023 Hamas delegation headed by the deputy head of Gaza office K. al-Khoya was in Damascus discussing the restoration of Hamas office in SAR with Syrian leadership [Hmeidy, 2023]. At the same time posters and photos of H. Nasrallah's (Hezbollah leader) meeting with I. Haniya (Hamas head) appeared on the streets of southern Lebanon. Islamic Resistance (IR) managed to return Hamas to Syria, provide a new level of communication between Hezbollah and Shiite communities of Lebanon, and transfer the armed conflict with Israel to its territory.

A FEW STEPS AWAY FROM WAR

In April 2023 Hamas launched dozens of rockets from the territory of South Lebanon. At the same time, rocket attacks were launched from Gaza (Palestine) and Golan Heights (Syria) to the regions of Northern Galilee. This action was taken in response to the harsh Israeli security actions against Arab pilgrims at the Al-Aqsa

1 Hamas [Arabic acronym and pun, meaning "spirit of courage"], Haraka-t-al-mukawwama-al-islamiya [Islamic Resistance Movement] was founded in Palestine (Gaza) in 1991 as a military branch of "Muslim Brotherhood" under the blind eye of Israel, which considered using it to counter secular Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).



Mosque (Jerusalem) and showed a strategic shift in the rules of the Iran–Israeli confrontation along with strengthening Hamas positions in Syria and Lebanon. The IR actions undermined Israeli claims that Tel Aviv was capable of waging war on multiple fronts and unilaterally define the “rules of war” on its southern and northern borders. Iran coordinated IR forces in these areas and imposed its battle tactics on Israel. Rockets fired from Lebanese territory took Israel by surprise. Israeli military could not at first determine exactly who struck the Northern Galilee. Hezbollah denied involvement in this action. It was difficult to believe in this, since the territory of Southern Lebanon has been under control of the organization, and it was almost impossible to launch 34 rockets without Hezbollah knowledge.

On the eve of the missile attack, I. Haniya (Hamas), H. Nasrullah (Hezbollah), Ismail Qa’ani (Al-Quds Corps of the IRGC), M. Amani (Iranian Ambassador in Beirut) met in Beirut and discussed the latest regional developments considering the Iran–Israeli confrontation. Nasrullah also met with Secretary General of Islamic Jihad (Z. al-Nakhalah) [Kasir, 2023(b)]. Meanwhile, “Shiite silence” in connection with the rocket attack from South Lebanon did not mean common position on this issue between Hezbollah and AMAL² [Dahiya, 2023; Shakir, Abu Najem, 2023]. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) planned strikes against Hamas in Southern Lebanon and Gaza to demonstrate their ability to deter Hezbollah and Hamas. According to the military representatives of the IR, the first target of Israeli strike should be Y. Sinwar (the representative of Hamas in Gaza) and S. Al-Aruri (the head of the Hamas Political Bureau), who are considered in Israel to be involved in planning IR strikes against Israel. Tel Aviv also suspected S. Al-Aruri of having links with Hezbollah and maintaining activities to strengthen Hamas

positions in Northern Lebanon [Bashir, 2023]. Former Israeli Defense Minister A. Lieberman said that Netanyahu cabinet plunged the country into a difficult situation, causing destabilization within Israel and its foreign policy isolation. According to Israeli Minister of Agriculture A. Dither (former head of “Shabak” — counter intelligent service), Israel suspected that retaliation against IR positions in Lebanon may push Hamas to act in Israeli depths from Southern Lebanon. Situation in the Iran–Israeli confrontation was fraught with the risk of a new war in the Middle East. Indeed, Iranian leaders were not ready to put up with Israeli air strikes on Iranian military facilities on the territory of third countries, especially inside Iran [Reihan, 2023(a)]. Betting on the protest movements that began in September 2022, economic shortages caused by the Western sanctions and the illusion of Iranian political isolation could turn out untenable. In this situation, Tehran could strengthen security measures inside the country and grow IR forces in the Middle East.

Israeli Air Force attempts to use airfields in Gulf countries to strike Iran have multiplied risks of spreading Iran–Israeli armed confrontation over entire region and exposing US military in the Persian Gulf, Iraq, and Syria. In turn, Israeli authorities could not put up with Iranian retaliatory measures, especially when they targeted civilians, as was the case in Northern Galilee (2023), Turkey, and Argentina (2022) [Al-Hamid, 2023]. Iran’s further support of its nuclear project could prompt Israel to take more decisive actions against Iranian nuclear facilities to set the Iranian program back decades. Deliveries of drones to Moscow turned Iran in the eyes of US and Europe into an actual participant of the Ukraine Crisis and a threat to European security. The ongoing confrontation between Russia and the West in Ukraine, not favored by Washington, could prompt Washington

2 AMAL [Arabic acronym and pun, meaning “hope”], Lebanese Resistance Detachments (Regiments). [Afwaj-al-Mukawwama-al-Lubnaniya]. First known in 1960s as a militia in the Movement of Dispossessed [Haraka-t-al-Musta’adafin] (Iraq). Was established in Lebanon in 1970s as independent Shia militia by Musa Al-Sadr. Al-Sadr born in Qom (Iran). Son of Ayatollah from the family of Lebanon’s Jabil Amil with branches in Iraq & Iran. In 1978 Al-Sadr departed for Libya at the invitation of Muammar Gaddafi. He was never heard of again.



to go beyond its strategy of limited conflict with Iran and openly support Israeli strikes against it [Abu Zuhri, 2023].

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

Till now, Israel and Iran refrained from taking steps that could provoke a large-scale armed conflict in the region. Tel Aviv and Tehran sought to capitalize positive developments in the Middle East. Following the normalization of Iranian-Saudi relations in March 2023, the US State Department appointed a new ambassador to Riyadh. The appointment went to M. Ratney, who is considered one of the architects of the “Abraham Accord” (Israel-Sunite [Gulf countries] alliances). In January–March 2023 Saudi Arabia official media actively promoted Arab peace initiative, adopted at the Beirut summit in 2002 as the basis for future Arab–Israel settlement. The key idea of this initiative was to resolve the Palestinian problem based on two states solution in Palestine [Kaye, 2023]. Given the recent shifts in the pan-Arab position on Syria normalization in favor of Damascus and Tehran, Tel Aviv found itself in a difficult situation. Israel could not neglect political dividends from the “Abraham Accords” of 2020. Following the same course on the tracks of Palestinian-Israeli settlement and confrontation with Iran could postpone Tel Aviv’s plans to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia [Ashraf, 2023]. The Gulf monarchies were not happy with the prospect of Tehran nuclear program. But even more they were afraid of being drawn into the Iran–Israel war on the Arabian Peninsula. After normalization with Riyadh, Tehran worked out algorithms for Saudi–Iranian interactions in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Tehran took part in the process of balanced power calibration in Lebanon initiated by Saudis. Tehran supported the statement made in March 2023 by the Saudi Minister of Finance to increase investment in Iran. Tehran officials stated Iran’s readiness to resume the negotiation process on Iranian nuclear weapons in Vienna to normalize relations with EU countries [Al-Maktari, 2023].

The Iran–Israeli confrontation posed a potential threat to Moscow’s interests in the Middle East and the Caucasus, affecting national security environment of the Russian Federation. Moscow has equally good relations with Tel Aviv and Tehran and cooperates with them on a whole range of political and security issues in Syria and the Middle East, in general. After the start of Russian special operation in Ukraine, Moscow constantly had to deviate from the general political line in the Syrian conflict to reduce the degree of confrontation between Iran and Israel and safeguard positive balance in relations with them. In practice, Moscow efforts to ensure prolonged solution of Iran-Israel confrontation in Syria had only a temporary effect and ended with a “zero sum”.

For its part, the United States were hardly prepared to support Israeli massive military operation against Iran. In case of a large-scale Iran–Israel conflict, the US partners in the Persian Gulf rather than Israel could find themselves in sight of Iranian drones. The bitter seeds of Iranian strikes on Saudi Arabia energy facilities (2019) grow fears in the Gulf States. A new war in the Middle East in face of confrontation with Russia in Ukraine could have a detrimental effect on the American economy. The latest decisions by OPEC to reduce oil production between April and December 2023 point to the possibility of this unfortunate scenario. Conversely, establishing channels of communication with Iran in the absence of nuclear diplomacy and the escalation in the Middle East could be crucial in the process of crisis management [Al-Rabia, 2023].

The United States have concerns about the alleged deal between Russia and Iran on military-technical cooperation. In 2023 Iran was going to supply Moscow with about 6 thousand UAVs and medium-range missiles. In turn, Russia was ready to deliver to Iran 30–50 Su-35 fighters and S-400 Air Defense Systems. Since the end of December 2022, a group of Iranian pilots from the IRGC have been training in Russia, honing their flying skills under the guidance of Russian instructors. In Washington, however, the supply of Iranian UAVs to Russia was regarded as a threat to European security. Israel



believes that supply of these Russian weapons to Iran will change power balance not in favor of Tel Aviv [Reihan, 2023 (b)].

EAT YOUR BANANAS, CHEW SHAWARMA?

Following the Hamas rocket attack Washington warned Tel Aviv against unleashing a new war in the region. United States' military informed their Israeli partners that Washington would not organize an air bridge to support the IDF. The head of the US Security Council J. Sullivan visited Tel Aviv, Cairo, and Doha. At the request of the United States, the head of the Egyptian intelligence, General A. Kamel held meetings with I. Haniya and his representative in Gaza (J. Sinwar). Hamas leaders said they would not seek a large-scale confrontation with Israel in case Israeli response would be limited. Qatari Foreign Minister M. al-Khalifa stepped up contacts with Hezbollah and Iran. Tehran refused to provide any guarantees against repeated strikes on Israeli settlements in Palestine if Israel hits Hamas and Hezbollah positions in Palestine and Lebanon. After consultations with Washington, Tel Aviv decided to strike on banana plantations in the South Lebanon (Saida district) to avoid a new round of armed confrontation. This "balanced" decision adopted by Netanyahu's cabinet intended to satisfy the right-wing radicals in Israeli government and show Arabs, that Tel Aviv appreciates their mediation efforts [Reihan, 2023(c)]. Pacifying rightists' officials at the expense of Israeli military and victorious army may turn out as unpleasant surprises with regard of current internal instability in Israel and its complicated regional and international political environments.

Meanwhile, radical fanatics in Israel and Islamic Resistance show very typical behavioral patterns. Both are ready to punish people merely for their love of pork³. As for Hezbollah, some of its senior officers are very skeptical about the Saudi–Iran agreement. They consider Iran–Saudi normalization

as untimely and hasty step. Right wing Hezbollah leaders presume that normalization may weaken Hezbollah's positions in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. They are confident that Tehran will not change Hezbollah tasks in Levant. Radicals from IR seek to show Iran that they can change the situation in Levant, launching a large-scale armed confrontation with Israel. On the other hand, in March–April 2023, Russia and Iran agreed to push previously signed agreements on joint Russia–Iranian companies in cargo transportation across the Caspian. For the first time in past two decades Russian dry cargo moored in northern Iranian port. Russia and Iran agreed on financing the project of Iranian–Russian food zone in Middle East by attracting public and private investments from Arab countries, as well. In view of these developments, Hezbollah is unlikely dare to torpedo Moscow–Tehran's ambiguous plans by taking one-sided military actions in Levant [Al-Husseiny, 2023].

However, recent positive developments in the region do not guarantee imminent detente in the Iran–Israeli confrontation. Middle East exists in its unique existential paradigms where not every war ends with stable peace, not any peace prevents new wars.

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3 The author fully respects all Abrahamic religions and feels sorry if feelings of *real believers* are unintentionally touched.



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