From 2006 to 2019: After Failures in Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Yemen, War Is No Longer an Option for Israel

By Elijah J. Magnier
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Elijah J. Magnier 4 August 2019

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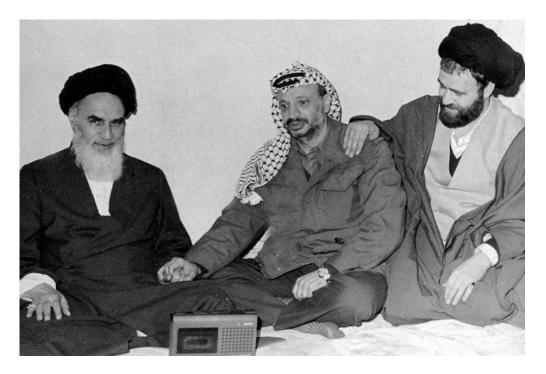In-depth Report: IRAQ REPORT, PALESTINE, SYRIA

During the summer war of 2006, Israel managed to destroy a large number of Hezbollah's rocket and missile stocks. Most Hezbollah missile units were destroyed and, in the suburb of the capital Beirut, over 250 buildings (mainly but not exclusively hosting Hezbollah offices, warehouses and officers' homes) were flattened by Israeli precision bombs targeting Hezbollah (and many civilians) in the suburbs of Beirut. Hundreds of houses were completely destroyed in the south of Lebanon. However, Israel was unable to fulfil its objectives due to the defeat of its infantry which faced harsh resistance and was unable to push deep inland. Moreover, the Kornet anti-tank laser-guided missiles and the "Nour" anti-ship missiles of Hezbollah surprised the enemy, indicating a serious lack of Israeli intelligence and confirming Hezbollah's strong fighting abilities.

Thirteen years later, the failure of US and Israeli policy in the region means it is no longer possible for Israel to contemplate a direct confrontation with Hezbollah in Lebanon. The US and Israel failed to achieve four main goals: regime change in Syria, the partition of Iraq, the defeat of the Houthis in Yemen, the Palestinian "deal of the century". Added to this, Israeli-US rejection of any fair Palestinian state has strengthened Palestinian resolve against Israel.

Israel has increased its firepower and military capabilities, but Hezbollah also moved from being a tactical local organisation to becoming a strategic player in the Middle East. The group's superior fighting abilities have been enhanced by new military hardware. This has had the effect of rendering war in the Middle East unlikely any time in the near (or medium-term) future.

The attempt by the US and its partners to remove Syrian **President Bashar al-Assad** and transform the country into a failed state governed by jihadist Takfiris (ISIS and al-Qaeda groups, who overwhelmed all other rebel and non-jihadist organisations) forced the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran and Iraq to engage militarily in the Levant. The same scenario repeated itself in Iraq when the US looked on as ISIS grew strong and held on to robust intelligence – the accuracy of which was later confirmed – that ISIS would be migrating from Iraq to Syria after occupying a large part of Iraq. Hezbollah, Iraqi groups and Iranian forces fought in Syria and Iraq to stop the jihadists from expanding and to prevent a direct danger to Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

In Iraq-by contrast with prevailing disinformation- ISIS did not occupy the second largest city of Mesopotamia, Mosul. It was a group of organisations, along with a few hundred ISIS fighters, who stole victory from other Sunni groups (mainly the Naqshabandi). They were supported by neighbouring countries and by the Iraqi Kurdish Leader **Masoud Barzani**, whose aspirations would have been fulfilled by the partition of Iraq into Kurdistan, Sunnistan and Shi-istan.

Turkey's leadership wanted to reclaim Mosul as part of its ancient Ottoman Empire; Turkey stood to benefit from the occupation of Mosul and the north of Iraq by a group like ISIS. It would not have been difficult at some time in the future to defeat such an organisation lacking any international recognition.

The Kurdish leader Barzani wanted control of oil-rich Kirkuk and aimed for a self-proclaimed state for the Iraqi Kurds- a state which he later "declared" (but failed to achieve), notwithstanding the defeat of ISIS. Indeed, Barzani praised ISIS during its occupation of Mosul, as a "Sunni revolution"- but he failed to reckon with the fact that the terror group was also aiming to control Kurdistan and Kirkuk.

The US wanted the north of Iraq divided between a Sunni state and a Kurdish state. They would have never allowed ISIS to expand beyond Baghdad, in order to keep the oil under US control. Southern Iraq would have survived as a small but hopeless Shia canton in the south, notwithstanding its oil and gas wealth, and Iraq would have been eliminated from the map of "Iranian allies", no longer a potential threat to Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The list of benefits to the US and its allies, had Syria disintegrated and been transformed into a jihadist safe haven, was very long. A failed state would have prevented Russia from supplying its oil to Europe via Syria and Turkey. It would have removed Russia's access to warm Mediterranean waters and dislodgedits naval base in Tartus. It would have broken up the "Axis of the Resistance" between Iran, Syria and Lebanon. It would have stopped the flow of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and thus prevented the group from re-arming itself and updating its military hardware. It would have isolated the Shia in the south of Iraq from Syria.

The US coalition could then have watched the movement of jihadist takfiri groups from Syria to Lebanon and keep Hezbollah busy with a sectarian struggle that could have lasted for years, and weakened the enemies of Israel. This would have pushed Lebanese and Syrian Christians to migrate to western countries and abandon the Middle East to future decades of sectarian struggle. The jihadists would have had no objection to the gift of the Golan to Israel. Dismantlement of the Syrian army would have left the Palestinians without any support from Hezbollah, Syria, Iran or Lebanon. With no Syrian or Iraqi armies to fear, with Hezbollah busy domestically and its supply line of weapons cut off, with jihadists providing an easy target and a pretext for war, and with Saudi Arabia on its side, Israel could have expanded and widened its territory at the expense of the Palestinians and of neighbouring countries: no country or force could have stood in its way.

But these plans failed: Hezbollah moved to Iraq and Syria to fight ISIS and al-Qaeda. It managed to secure Lebanon by defeating al-Qaeda and ISIS in Arsal and along the Lebanese-Syrian borders. It has secured the land and air passage from Syria to Lebanon for supply of weapons and renewal of its arsenal. It gained tremendous urban, guerrilla and classical fighting skills and trained itself in real combat scenarios to operate alone, with the Syrian army, and with the Russians and Syrians, using classical fighting skills together with air and artillery support. Hezbollah, used to fighting Israel within an area of less than 1,500 sq km in the south of Lebanon, now fought in Syria on over 80,000 sq km of territory.

But that is not all: During the war imposed on Syria, Hezbollah has invented a rocket with a ton of explosives in its warhead (Burkan-Vulcano) and operationalised it. It has run intensive courses in the use of its drones, used its precision missiles with accuracy, produced thousands of highly trained Special Forces and it has fought an enemy (al-Qaeda) that is much more motivated to fight to the death than any Israeli Special Forces units. Furthermore, Hezbollah established its precision long-range missiles on the well-protected Lebanese-Syrian borders to alleviate the consequences of any future war for the Lebanese cities and villages.

The failure of the regime change cemented Hezbollah's and Iran's position in Syria to the level of full cooperation with the state, a level never reached in the past. The Syrian government was supported economically by Iran and protected militarily by the Iranian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Russian interventions.

Today US forces occupy the territory holding most Syrian oil resources in the north-east of the country and Syria is under heavy economic sanctions. Only Iran is rushing to support Syria's economy to prevent it from collapsing by providing oil, constructing pharmaceutical and other industries to support the local economy, and fulfil some basic needs. The US-Israeli policy to cripple the government t of Damascus is strengthening the Iran-Hezbollah-Syria relationship, particularly since the US prevented the Arab and Gulf states from returning to Damascus to re-open their embassies, leaving the road open for Iran and Russia to be exclusively represented in the Levant.

Iran is also building up Syria's missile capability. The current Iran-US tensions have proved that missiles can face down a superior air and naval force and are capable of establishing rules of engagement with a very small investment in comparison with the price of jets and frigates. Indeed, the war in Yemen and the Iran-US crisis both showed how armed drones and missiles can hit far-off targets and fulfil targeting objectives.

This is exactly what Hezbollah picked up in Lebanon and along the Syrian-Lebanese borders. In 2006 Hezbollah's command made the mistake of building-up strategic warehouses in Syria. Israeli air superiority made the supply of weapons hazardous, as Israel could hit anything moving from the sky. The Syrian war provided Hezbollah with a heavy presence on the borders with long-range precision missile bases; they are now ready to widen the operational theatre in case of war. There is therefore no need for the non-state actor to move its missiles around from Syria to Lebanon.

In the last years, Israel bombed hundreds of objectives in Syria, including truckloads of weapons transiting to Lebanon, but never without prior warning to the driver before the raid. Israel wanted to avoid human casualties among Hezbollah officers, fully aware of the price of retaliation. Notwithstanding the repetitive attacks, Hezbollah's warehouses are full, according to an Israeli estimate. This means the group has the capacity to fire thousands of rockets and missiles daily over a long war. Israel acknowledges its failure to limit the group's armament supplies and capabilities.

Lessons have been learned from the wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. More military lessons are being drawn from the US-Iran confrontation in the Gulf. Low cost missiles directed towards oil platforms, harbours, transiting ships, airports, electricity facilities, drinking water stations and military bases are today much more effective politically and militarily than

hitting civilian targets. Armed drones and precision missiles can be deadly to the most advanced and highly equipped military state. Rockets can be used to saturate Israeli interceptor defensive missile systems. Dozens of rockets can be launched simultaneously, followed by the launch of a few precision missiles against a target. The interceptor system will be saturated, unable to shoot down all the incoming rockets and missiles, thus allowing at least 30-40% of the missiles to go through and hit the desired target, enough to create a real damage and be considered as balance changer. Such saturation techniques can be extremely effective, as all parties recognise.

The new war is essentially economic; it is a war of sanctions and limiting free movement of ship movements around the globe. It is a war of tankers and oil platforms. It is a starvation war where no one can threaten the enemy with a return to the "stone age" because the firepower is now universally available. Yemen is the best example: the threat of bombing Dubai forced the Emirates to seek Iranian mediation to prevent a missile attack against them. The Houthis, despite years of Saudi bombing of Yemen, have also managed to bomb Saudi airports, military bases and oil stations in the heart of Saudi Arabia, using cruise missiles and armed drones.

Gaza, along with Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad, are all highly equipped by Tehran with sufficient missiles to inflict real damage on Israel and on US forces deployed in the Middle East. Israel is playing around by targeting various objectives tactically but with no real strategic purpose- only for Netanyahu to keep himself busy and train his Air Force, and to gain publicity in the media. Soon, when Syria recovers and Iraq is stronger, the Israeli promenade will have to cease. Hezbollah in Lebanon may also find a way in the near future to keep its irregular but organised army busy by firing anti-air missiles against Israeli jets and imposing new rules of engagement. It is, however, too early now to challenge Israel in the air because the "Axis of Resistance" alliance works according to priorities, and this stage of the Iran-US crisis is still only beginning. However, as the crisis develops, the new stabilising effect of the deadly and accurate generation of drones and missile threat will make open warfare unlikely.

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