Israel Behind Air Strikes in Syria Directed against Hezbollah. "Greater Israel" in the Making?

By Lucas Leiroz de Almeida
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Tensions have worsened in the Middle East. Apparently, the Israeli government is promoting an escalation of violence in Syria with the aim of expelling any trace of Iranian presence from the country, leading to the collapse of relations between Tehran and Tel Aviv. On April 28, Israel's Defense Minister, Naftali Bennet, made a public statement in which he suggested that he was behind an air strike against pro-Iranian forces in Syria. Still, Naftali made it clear in his speech that there is a focus by the Israeli armed forces to completely destroy the Iranian presence in Syria, not stopping the attacks until the objective is achieved.

According to data reported by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), such attacks hit territories near Sayyida Zainab, which are home to the Lebanese Hezbollah militia and the Iranian Quds Force. Syrian state media also reported that the country's anti-aircraft defense systems have successfully dealt with Israeli aggression, intercepting several missiles, with no confirmed reports of casualties or major damage due to the strong interception. This was not, however, the only recent occasion of an Israeli attack on Syrian territory. On April 20, the news agency reported that Syria's anti-aircraft defense systems repelled an Israeli attack in the skies of Palmyra, taking down several hostile projectiles. There are also several other cases of violation of Syrian space by Israeli attacks against Iranians and pro-Tehran groups since the beginning of the civil war in the Arab country.

The Israeli Defense Minister did not explicitly confirm Israel's involvement in the attack, however, his words were considered to be a "clear hint" of such involvement, as pointed out by the Times of Israel publication. These are his words:

> "We have moved from blocking Iran's entrenchment in Syria to forcing it out of there, and we will not stop (...) We will not allow more strategic threats to grow just across our borders without taking action, we will continue to take the fight to the enemy's territory".

Bennett stated that the reason behind this defense policy is to impose on neighboring states an acceptance of the existence of the Jewish State in the Land of Israel:

> "We've not yet reached the point at which the enemies of Israel accept the existence of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. Unfortunately, I can't promise that it will happen in our generation. Even now, the Iranian regime and its proxies are working in an effort to harm the State of Israel and its citizens".

Some Israeli military experts have warned that the recognition of these attacks puts more pressure on Iran and its representatives to retaliate in order to save the country's international public image – so that it does not appear "passive" in the face of foreign attacks. However, perhaps this is exactly the intention of the Israeli government: to provoke retaliation that justifies a public and even more deadly attack. This is a strategy well known in contemporary wars, full of unidentified attacks and terrorist practices: after an attack, the state that practiced it insinuates that it was carried out, not publicly assuming it; the battered state responds and then, the aggressor attacks publicly with more force and is no longer accused of aggression. This, however, does not appear to work with Iran.

A major strategic mistake by countries like Israel and the USA, accustomed to a hegemonic position, is to underestimate their enemies, even when they have a long history as belligerent states and thousands of years as civilizations. Iran does not appear to be the type of belligerent agent that gives in to any provocation from the enemy, reacting uncoordinatedly and demonstrating its weaknesses to the opponent. Let's recall Tehran's reaction to the brutal American attack that murdered General Qassem Soleimani earlier this year: an attack of such magnitude is a clear cause for war, but the Iranian response was subtle and extremely strategic and effective – the attacks against American bases in Iraq were sufficient to demonstrate the strength of the country and to make the United States retreat in its war plans, stabilizing the situation in the region. Currently, Iran is making a strong push for the liberation of the Persian Gulf through the resurgence of its marine policy and the strengthening of its naval fleet; however, at no time did it frontally attack an American vessel, asserting its interests through military diplomacy. What, then, will Iran do in the face of a failed attack like this one from Israel, in which almost all the missiles have been intercepted and there are no reports of victims?

If Tel Aviv expects a response with missiles violating Israeli space, it will be frustrated; as such acts are not part of the traditional defense guidelines Iran, which has greater interests than fruitless retaliations. Pro-Iranian forces in Syria have so far not been weakened by the Israeli onslaught. In fact, what would be Israel's interest in purging the Iranian presence from Syria? How would this imply greater recognition of the existence of the Jewish state? Are air raids and bombings really the best tactic? Tel Aviv strategists seem to be making the wrong bet.

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