

Reciprocal Escalation! Out of Control

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Global Research, January 08, 2020

[Jordan Times](#) 7 January 2020

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Military and WMD, US NATO](#)

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Crises in the Middle East are by no means unusual. Instability in our region has, for decades, been the rule rather than the exception. But the current showdown between the US and Iran is nearing serious breaking point, if not an all out war, that may engulf the entire region, and beyond. The gravity of the consequences of such a war have been the main reason for restraint so far. The question is whether or not restraint is going to be possible this time.

The current US-Iran crisis is not an independent event. It is a culmination of decades-long polarisation between two regional hostile parties: Israel on one side and Iran on the other.

Along the way there have been severe political tensions, crises, bitter disputes and bloody wars. The core issue, therefore, is the Arab-Israeli conflict. The failure to resolve this century-long conflict is the root cause of the continued instability, radicalisation, violence and destructive Middle East wars.

Israel considers the post-1997 Iran as an archenemy and an existential threat. Right from the beginning, the Iranian Islamic Revolution has been on the side of the Palestinian struggle for liberation and independence. With time, Iranian support turned more committed and, from Israel's view, much more dangerous: arming and financing Hizbollah and Hamas, helping the regime in Syria to survive a long and a deadly civil war and expanding in Iraq and Yemen.

While there was hope, in Israel and its supporters' circles, that the Iranian influence would be undermined by sanctions and other forms of international pressures, Iran in fact, again from Israel's view, was rewarded in 2015 by the Nuclear agreement with the five permanent Security Council members plus Germany, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPO). This was a severe blow to Israel, which, with the US during the Obama Administration, tried desperately to prevent the deal, but failed.

The Nuclear deal was a historic achievement that created a much healthier political climate between Iran and the rest of the world, with the exception of Israel. Israel did not give up on its efforts against the deal until it finally succeeded in gaining ground against it with President Trump's withdrawal from the agreement soon after his election, and his imposition of severe sanctions against Iran as well as against third parties that continued to deal with Iran. The other signatories opposed the withdrawal and decided to remain committed, but they are not doing enough to save it.

The US offered to renegotiate the nuclear agreement's terms by introducing restrictions on Iran's spreading influence in the region, and by cutting down its missile capabilities. Both conditions were designed to meet Israel's concerns and to address Israel's case against Iran.

Iran refused to negotiate under pressure and while the imposed US sanctions remained in place. They also rejected the idea of compromising their sovereign rights with respect to foreign policy and military abilities.

Israel was hoping that the Syrian crisis would topple the Assad regime, end the Iranian presence in Syria and sever the roots of supply to Hizbollah. The opposite had actually happened with Iran getting closer to Israel's borders and the roots of supply to Hizbollah in Lebanon getting more secure. Continued Israeli air raids on positions in Syria during the past five years, on alleged convoys of arms shipments to Hizbollah and later on Iraqi Hizbollah positions in Iraq, had hardly changed the situation.

This is the background to the recent crisis in Iraq. By blocking any possible settlement of the Palestinian/Arab-Israeli conflict, by its continued occupation and creeping colonisation of Palestinian and Syrian lands and by treating the Palestinians in Gaza and the West bank so harshly and inhumanely for more than five decades, Israel is constantly enlarging its circle of enemies. The US would better help Israel and better serve its long term interests by encouraging it to end the occupation, to recognise legitimate Palestinian rights in accordance with the provisions of international law and dozens of UN resolutions on the conflict and to stop its aggression. Israel missed great opportunities for living in peace and normalising its relations with all its neighbours, near and far. It still does.

Unfortunately, instead, the US is encouraging Israel's intransigence by recognising Jerusalem as its eternal capital, by recognising Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and by declaring the illegal Israeli colonies on Palestinian lands legal; in addition to other unlawful measures. The inevitable result will be that the US will end up equally blamed for Israel's actions. Consequently, the road to any reasonable settlement of the conflict remains blocked while the causes of regional trouble thrive.

The recent tensions in Iraq cannot be separated from what is happening around the region. Israeli attack on Iraqi Hizbollah positions last August must have caused reprisals elsewhere in Iraq. The chain reaction continued with a rocket attack by Iraqi elements on an American base near Kirkuk and the death of an American contractor. That was followed by American bombing of an Iraqi militia group, killing 25 and injuring fifty. Retaliating, angry Iraqi crowds, including militia members, stormed the US embassy in Baghdad, breaching its security walls, burning security posts and causing enormous damage to the external structure. They did not reach the main building or harm Americans. Though an alarming escalation, the crowd, which threatened to stay there indefinitely and built tents, decided to evacuate the place completely the next day upon wise advice from their leaders, who clearly opposed escalation.

That was a very suitable moment to break the spiraling cycle of violence which brought relief, until the US decided to assassinate Iranian military general Qassem Suleimani on Iraqi territory, plunging the entire region once again into the very deep abyss of endless violence and possibly larger war. No one can predict where this unnecessary, miscalculated provocation will take the region. The only certainty is that the situation is extremely grave and dangerous. The assassination was widely criticised, even in the US.

"Trump lit a fire by exiting the Iran Deal and poured gasoline on it by Killing Soleimani", wrote Gary Sick in the Business Insider on January 4.

One would hope to see the UN acting to defuse such a crisis, but the UN is completely

absent. One would hope that a major world power would drop the torch and hold an extinguisher instead, to put out fires as they appear any where in our world, not start ones.

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