

Opinion – Is the Next Middle East War on the Horizon?

Written by Glen Segell

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Opinion – Is the Next Middle East War on the Horizon?

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GLEN SEGELL, DEC 4 2020

The latest in the saga of Iran's decades long nuclear program is the question of who assassinated high-ranking Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh on November 27. It would be foolish for anyone to claim responsibility for risk of retribution. Iran, as usual, is blaming Israel – noting how Israel has also been blamed for having taken part in the assassinations of other Iranian nuclear scientists during 2010 and 2012. As of the time of writing, there is no definitive evidence. However, with emotions running high it could become a catalyst to the next Middle East war.

The timeline and reasons for Iran's nuclear and missile programs are well documented. So too is the opposition to them by most other countries in the Middle East and globally. Also documented is extra-regional intervention, be it the supply of technology and resources or arms control and disarmament efforts. Iran on the one hand has called for the creation of a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) free zone in Middle East and has signed the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This was one of many Cold War and post-Cold War treaties aimed at conflict reduction in arms control and disarmament.

At the same time, Iran leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini since 1984 sought civilian nuclear electricity and that is acceptable to the global community. Iranian personnel have been trained by China and Pakistan, and Russia agreed to construct the nuclear power plant. However there were reasons to suspect this as a way to attain military nuclear strength and in 1996 American President Bill Clinton approved an embargo on Iran for trying to acquire nuclear weapons. The American cause for concern since 1996 is that in addition to a nuclear program Iran also has an ongoing missile program that according to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), since 2003 has the capability to deliver a nuclear weapon on targets in the Middle East and Eastern Europe and is aiming for globally.

The global cause for concern has been heightened by Iranian involvement in civil wars including Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, support for non-state groups in Lebanon and Gaza, the attacking of civilian shipping in the Persian Gulf and its ongoing quibble as a Shia Muslim state with the majority of the Sunni Muslim world. This gives rise to the potential for an escalation of the region's multiple conflicts. Consequently, there have been efforts to negotiate conflict reduction and arms control with Iran. The most recent was the JCPOA, signed on July 14, 2015.

When Donald Trump was elected US President in 2016 he was lobbied by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who opposed the JCPOA, to impose embargoes and sanctions on Iran. In May 2018, Trump withdrew the US from the 2015 nuclear deal and placed harsh economic measures on Iran. The other signatory states continued to respect the Agreement. There followed American and Israeli indecision of the options on what to do next and the larger implications on US policy. The victory of Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential elections became a catalyst for change as in his election campaign Biden said America would return to the 2015 deal with Iran.

Following his election loss Donald Trump reportedly sought options to strike Iran. The president's senior advisors dissuaded him from doing so, though it's unclear if he settled on a different option. Then, on 17 November, both Israel and Saudi Arabia reinforced their agreed message that that Iran can never possess nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities. Netanyahu spoke to Biden by phone about Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's repeated offer that Iran was willing to return to the 2015 nuclear deal, which was negotiating during the Obama-Biden administration. At that point, nothing appeared out of the ordinary when it came to Iran. There also appeared to be a coalescence of interests between Trump (for his remaining days in office), Israel and Saudi Arabia against Iran.

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The Trump administration released a statement on 18 November “The Importance of Sanctions on Iran,” which argued that the administration’s moves against Iran had made the world safer and should not be reversed – a reference to Trump’s May 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA. On 22 November Netanyahu travelled to Saudi Arabia, reportedly meeting Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The visit was a historic first in the diplomatic relations between the two states, which Saudi officials later denied happening due to its controversial nature. Later, on November 22, Saudi Arabian Minister Adel al-Jubeir paraphrased Netanyahu’s red lines on Iran, saying, “Saudi Arabia has made it very clear that it will do everything it can to protect its people and to protect its territories.” He even went so far as to say that the Kingdom would seek nuclear weapons itself if Iran was to obtain nuclear weapons.

The next day, on 23 November, the Middle East awoke to the news that Israeli jets had struck eight targets in Syria including a site at the Damascus International Airport used as Iranian headquarters. The strike was in retaliation for explosives placed on the Syrian-Israel border by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Later that day, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, toured the Golan Heights, a first since the US recognized Israeli sovereignty over it, and he was also the first to visit a settlement in the West Bank. Also that day, King Salman urged the world to take “a decisive stance” to address efforts by Iran to develop nuclear and ballistic missile programs, in his annual address to Saudi Shura Council, the top government advisory body. Like Netanyahu, Salman maintains a strong position on Iranian involvement in Syria. He was the first Arab leader to condemn Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s repression of the 2011 Arab Spring protests. He has supplied weapons and ammunition to rebel groups to counter shipments of weapons from Iran to the Syrian government.

If the outcome of the US election was the catalyst for going public on Netanyahu’s visit to Saudi Arabia, then perhaps the historic visit was to signal to the incoming Biden administration a unified front against Iran: that there is no returning to the 2015 Agreement. While formal ties have not yet been normalized between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the reported visit was likely a signal to Iran to watch the evolving regional events carefully. Maybe also irking Iran are the Abraham Accords brokered by the United States and signed between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and then the normalization of Israeli relations with Sudan. These may be signs of a growing diplomatic, and possibly military, mobilisation against Iran.

Five days after Netanyahu’s reported visit to Saudi Arabia, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, Iran’s high-ranking nuclear physicist was assassinated. There are many questions following this. Was it an American option to halt or slowdown Iran’s nuclear and missile program? Was it Israel or Saudi Arabia reiterating their message to Iran with actions that speak louder than words? Was it a third party whose intentions were to drive Iran to attack Israel? Was it the intentions of someone to undercut Biden’s diplomatic options? Will this lead to conflict reduction or the opposite? Why did Iran announce on Sunday its intentions to remove supervisory access to its nuclear facilities and to set deadlines for multiple steps to be taken to accelerate and improve its nuclear infrastructure and production?

It is fair to say that whatever the answers to these questions are, that there are two things that are reasonable to outline. First, the events surrounding the assassination are strong messages to Iran as well as others outside the region that they should take heed of the growing closeness of Israel and Saudi Arabia and the strengthening of the regional and global coalition following the Abraham Accords. Second, it is reasonable to believe that the trajectory of events shows that nothing is set in stone. On the one hand, former adversaries (Israel and Saudi Arabia) can normalize diplomatic relations and on the other hand regional escalation is always possible.

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