

Iran Deal Throws Sparks on Mideast Tinderbox

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By Peter Berkowitz

RCP Contributor

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TEL AVIV, Israel—On Aug. 5, President Obama warned Jewish leaders invited to the White House that if his Iran deal were scuttled and the United States were compelled to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, "You'll see Hezbollah rockets falling on Tel Aviv." Although it is hard to take the president's threat to use force at face value, his grim analysis is probably correct.

What Obama obscured is that implementing the deal, whatever the long-term impact on Iran's nuclear ambitions, will not lessen Hezbollah's ability to strike Tel Aviv—and targets throughout Israel—with substantially greater firepower than it directed at Israel nine summers ago during the Second Lebanon War.

As a senior Israeli government official told me, by strengthening and emboldening Hezbollah's chief financier and principal weapon's supplier, the U.S.-brokered agreement encourages Iran to increase the quantity and enhance the quality of the formidable aerial arsenal—larger than those of many European countries—that Hezbollah has aimed at the Jewish state.

In a 2014 New Yorker interview, Obama said his goal was to create a "new equilibrium" in the Middle East. In the short run, at least, his signature diplomatic undertaking can be counted on to bring more violence to this volatile region. Secretary of State John Kerry's recent letter to Congress, which recognizes the need "to increase security assistance to our allies and partners in the region and to enhance our efforts to counter Iran's destabilizing activities in the region," tacitly acknowledged this unpleasant truth.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the agreement is formally known, provides the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism an infusion of somewhere in the neighborhood of \$100 billion of unfrozen assets and a great deal more of continuing revenues as businesses and governments around the world rush to profit from oil-and-gas-rich Iran's reintegration into the world economy. The agreement relaxes the international isolation of the Islamic Republic and ratifies Tehran's status as a nuclear threshold state. And it relieves restrictions on Iran's acquisition of weapons, including ballistic missiles.

By providing tens of billions up front and greatly increased cash flow, new political legitimacy, and access to armaments, the JCPOA enables Tehran's governing ayatollahs to step up their financing and fomenting of aggression in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip while providing no incentive for them to curtail their armed quest for regional hegemony.

The delicate balance of power between Israel and Hezbollah will be one casualty of the deal. Currently, neither side is spoiling for a fight. Israel has long understood that bombing Iran's nuclear facilities would provoke a punishing retaliatory strike from Hezbollah, which has served as a deterrent. Tehran knows that to deter Israel effectively, Hezbollah must hold its fire. Furthermore, Hezbollah has thousands of soldiers bogged down in Syria's civil war fighting on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad and can ill afford to open a second front.

As the JCPOA comes into effect, however, a rehabilitated but unrepentant Iran will ship more sophisticated weaponry to Hezbollah, most notably GPS technology that improves rocket and missile accuracy. In addition, Tehran will increase support for Assad and Hezbollah against ISIS and other rebel forces. While Syria is not likely to be put back together again, a steady stream of money and equipment from its ascendant Iranian patron will enable Assad and Hezbollah to carve out a secure colony in a fragment of the former country. This will permit Hezbollah fighters to return home to Lebanon. As Iran's worries about absorbing a military strike on its nuclear facilities subside, so too will its incentives for demanding restraint from Hezbollah diminish.

The next round of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah has the potential to bring significant destruction and loss of life. According to Israel Defense Force estimates, Hezbollah possesses approximately 120,000 rockets—from Katyushas with a range of seven to 24 miles to Scud missiles with a range of 420 miles. About 1,000 of these have precision-guided capabilities. The IDF also reports that Hezbollah has acquired unmanned aerial vehicles that can conduct reconnaissance and ground attacks. And Hezbollah is about 30,000 troops strong.

Should Hezbollah's leaders conclude the time is ripe, Iran's Lebanon proxy has the capacity to launch a first strike that could kill civilians in Tel Aviv and all of Israel's major cities, close down Israel's major ports and Ben Gurion International Airport, and bring commerce and culture in Israel to a standstill.

Last summer during the 50 days of Operation Protective Edge, Hamas fired approximately 4,500 rockets into Israel, according to IDF Lieutenant Colonel Peter Lerner. Hezbollah's current stockpile gives it the capacity to fire almost 4,500 rockets and missiles *a day* for an entire month.

To be sure, Israel has great capabilities and would respond swiftly and decisively.

But Hezbollah, in keeping with its cruel and unlawful conduct of war, has dispersed its arms depots, rocket launchers, infantry and anti-tank positions, tunnels, and command and control headquarters in towns and villages throughout Lebanon, with the heaviest concentration in the south. This will compel Israel, acting in its self-defense and in the pursuit of legitimate military objectives, to inflict severe damage on Lebanon's civilian infrastructure and kill hundreds if not thousands of noncombatants.

The heightening of the risk of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah is just one example of how President Obama's Iran deal, whatever the long-term consequences for Iran's nuclear program, renders, in the short run, the tinderbox that is the Middle East even more explosive. Call it the new disequilibrium.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.