Iran strike in the spring? Israel only has partial missile defense

What Operation Pillar of Defense says about the state's wider strategic picture

The recent conflict between Israel and Hamas offers several hints regarding Jerusalem’s wider strategic situation in the region. For many years, Iran and its proxies on Israel’s borders have worked to create rocket and missile bases, aimed at threatening its soft underbelly: the civilian home front.

The Iranian project saw terror bases developed in southern Lebanon and Gaza, and represents the most serious asymmetrical threat faced by Israel to date.

The Iranian plan is based on the idea of giving Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad the ability to flood the home front with projectile fire, thereby causing casualties, widespread damage and a paralysis of ordinary life. This capability has multiple purposes in the hands of Israel’s enemies.

SECURITY AND DEFENSE
• By YAAKOV LAPPIN

It allows Gaza terror factions to realize their ideology of eternal jihad, buffered only by tactical cease-fires between rounds of fighting. Even more significantly, it enables enemies of the state to try and deter Israel from striking at the threats that surround it. When Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps oversaw the creation of the rocket bases, they had hoped that the threat they were developing would deter Israel from carrying out targeted assassinations of terrorists in Gaza on the local front, while on the regional front, Israel might be deterred from striking Iranian nuclear sites.

Hamas had wrongly assumed that the rise of its fellow Islamists in Egypt would contribute to that deterrence.

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In addition to the threats from Lebanon and Gaza, Iran possesses hundreds of ballistic missiles, such as the Shihab 2, Shihab 3, and Shihab 4 (all supersonic ICBM missile) and the BM25 (purchased from North Korea in 2008), all of which can strike Israeli territory.

Jerusalem has already developed a response to this threat in the form of the Arrow 2 ballistic missile defense system, which intercepts incoming threats in the upper atmosphere, and the Arrow 3 system, which will intercept missiles in space after becoming operational.

"The key threat that is the state of the radars within the Arrow system," said Maj.-Gen. (res.) Glora Eiland, former head of the National Security Council.

"In the November conflict, rockets still managed to strike the home front, and terror organizations began overwhelming Iron Dome with massive volleys toward the end of the escalation," Eiland noted. "I'd bet that the trend will feature a rise, not a drop in rockets. In the future, they'll try to fire many more rockets than what we've seen," he said. But Lt.-Col. (res.) Michael Segall, a strategic analyst for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, takes a more optimistic view on the repercussions of the conflict. In an interview published, Segall viewed the conflict through a wide regional lens, placing it within the context of a growing rift between the Shi'ite and Sunni camps. He said that the Shi'ite-Christian alliance, led by Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime in Syria and Hezbollah — is on a collision course with the emerging Sunni camp — composed of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.

The tensions are "evident in the conflict arenas in the Middle East — Syria, the Palestinian arena, Bahrain, Jordan," Segall said, and stand to greatly influence the landscape of the region.

Egypt, playing a central role in determining the new regional order, will likely find itself in confrontation with Iran. Turkey is already confronting Iran over regional hegemony and influence, with Syria as a front line," Segall said.

In this context, Israel's ability to deflect Iranian rockets, as exhibited last month, helped "put Iran in a problematic position of growing isolation," he argued.

Segall views Iran's future as one of a number of blows to Iran's standing in the region. Whether the Gaza war damaged or benefited Iran, Tehran's nuclear clock continues to tick...