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Gaza War may strengthen Iran's hand

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi

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NEW YORK - Now that the dust of the eight-day Gaza war has settled, the war's shift of geostrategic fortune in favor of Hamas's Iranian military patron state is rather unmistakable. Israeli leaders may publicly boast of inflicting heavy damage to Hamas's rocket capability, yet the fact remains that they failed to reach their ultimate objective of dismantling that capability, which is sure to be replenished and strengthened in the months to come.

Hamas's impressive rocket capability, which withstood the onslaught of some 1,500 sorties by Israeli jet fighters unloading their bombs in the densely populated area, and the failure of Israel's "iron dome" interceptors to prevent some 420 rockets from landing inside Israel, reflects a new "balance of terror" that chips away at the Tel Aviv's traditional military supremacy, underscoring new areas of Israeli vulnerability that, in turn, adversely affect the country's anti-Iran posture.

Indeed, this much can be surmised from the statement of Ali Baqeri, the undersecretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council:

When the Zionist regime can't stand the resistance in the blockaded Gaza strip, it is clear that it will definitely have nothing to say when it comes to the power and strength of the Islamic Republic.

Similar sentiments have been expressed by Iran's military commanders, including by the commander of the Revolutionary Guards, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, who has publicly admitted that Iran has provided Hamas with the technology to build Fajr-5 rockets and "their production was rapid".

"If Israel's intention of provoking this war was to use it as a prelude for an attack on Iran, then it was a complete failure mainly because the war ended in a victory for Hamas, Iran, and [the Lebanese] Hezbollah, a triumvirate of power that poses a formidable challenge to any war scenario against Iran," said a Tehran University political science professor who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The widespread impression that an Israeli strike on Iran is now even less likely than in the past as a direct result of the Gaza war is bound to influence the climate for negotiation between Iran and the "5+1" nations - the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany - scheduled for the near future. The "military option" used to coerce Iran at the negotiation table, albeit discretely, has now lost a good deal of its utility, and that is a definite plus for the diplomatic option.

"At a minimum, the Gaza war's windfall for Iran has been a wider opening of the diplomatic window, which should translate into a greater flexibility and mood for compromise by the Western governments," said the Tehran professor.

Nuclear talks, the road ahead

Ahead of the next round of multilateral talks, bilateral discussions between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) scheduled for the second week of December in Tehran could pave the way to a modality for "structured cooperation" aimed at resolving the outstanding issues invoked in last November's IAEA report.

IAEA director-general Yukiya Amano has tacitly admitted that some of the intelligence report cited in the "annex" to the agency's November 2011 report may have been questionable, given his statement that "overall" the annex was credible; in other words, not all the specific intelligence fed to the agency was credible.

The key finding of the latest report, released earlier this month, is that the inspectors have found no evidence of diversion of declared nuclear material, in light of the comprehensive verification mechanisms, including dozens of short-notice inspections, regular environmental samplings, and use of surveillance cameras at all the uranium enrichment halls in Iran.

Another key finding is that Iran has converted a large percentage of its 20%-enriched uranium into fuel plates and has kept its accumulated quantity to around 110 kilograms, perhaps as a sign of good will, just as it has not fed gas into half the centrifuges installed at the bunkered facility known as Fordo.

In case the Iran-IAEA talks show real progress as anticipated by Iran's officials, then it will inevitably set a better tone for Iran's talk with the "5+1" representatives headed by European Union's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, who at a recent meeting in Brussels emphasized the importance of sustaining the diplomatic negotiations.

The question is, of course, whether the Western negotiators are willing to take into consideration

the strengthening of Iran's bargaining position as a result of the Gaza war, which has dampened the mood for a military strike on Iran. If so, then, how will this translate into a greater willingness to make concessions on the Iran sanctions, compared with previous rounds when the Western governments refused to consider a softening of sanctions even if Iran agreed to stop the 20% enrichment?

That was then, and now, after three rounds of inconclusive talks earlier this year, the stage is set for a guarded optimism on the prospects of the next round. Another important development affecting the talks' environment in Iran's favor has been the US's decision to force the postponement of the much-anticipated conference in Finland on a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction.

The US's decision, widely perceived as a concession to Israel, the main proliferator in the region, has been strongly condemned by Iran and a number of Arab countries, who have pointed at the US's double standard of selective counter-proliferation exonerating Israel. Iran's envoy to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, has lambasted the US over this matter, and Iran and Russia have now joined hands in pushing for an early date next year for such a conference. [1]

For sure, come the next round, Iran and the "5+1" nations will have much to talk about concerning the lofty objective of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East, which serves Iran's interest in highlighting its peaceful nuclear intentions. That Iran's representative may find a more receptive audience across the negotiation table is, as stated above, in no small measure directly due to a mini-war in Gaza that clearly did not go well for Israel.

Note:

1. See interview with Ambassador Ali Asghar Soltanieh Iran prepares for Moscow, Kaveh Afrasiabi, Asia Times Online, June 9, 2012.