



# After Soleimani: Israel's challenges through the eyes of experts



**I RECENTLY** had the opportunity to sit down with Israeli experts in security, intelligence, international law, history and politics, in off-the-record conversations about Israel's current "war between the wars" with Iran and its challenges in managing its interests at home and abroad. With the demise of Iranian military chief Qasem Soleimani in a US airstrike at Baghdad International Airport, Israel and its experts are reassessing their strategies regarding Iran.

The one common denominator expressed by all the experts was the importance of maintaining the strength of the US-Israel relationship. As former IDF chief of staff Gadi Eizenkot wrote in a recent policy paper, *Guidelines for Israel's National Security Strategy*, the special US-Israel relationship is a "cornerstone of the overall Israeli effort to attain national security by political means."

Every authority I spoke with was concerned about the hyper-polarization of American politics, with Israel becoming a partisan issue.

That relationship will now be put to the test as everything in the Middle East has now changed and is more unpredictable with the assassination of the architect of Iran's hegemonic ambitions who created the world's most dangerous terrorist organization while perfecting asymmetric warfare.

Soleimani, who commanded the overseas Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, wrought destruction, death, civil war, and committed war crimes across the region, was justifiably eliminated.

Critics of US President Donald Trump, aside from making news by criticizing virtually everything he does, rightly worried about how Iran would respond, as did Israel, but targeting Soleimani – "the epitome of evil," as Gen. David Petraeus described him a decade ago – should rise above partisanship.

The US was within its rights to pre-emptively strike a proven master terrorist with imminent plans to kill more Americans. It is now

only a matter of time before the Israel-bashers further test the "unbreakable relationship," claiming that the US is doing Israel's work, the tail wagging the dog, and drawing Washington into another Middle East war.

Managing the US-Israel relationship in a non-partisan fashion will become even harder, especially with the palpable hatred of this presidential season. Israel for its part must do a better job of public relations while remaining apolitical to try to navigate the inevitable challenges the two nations now face.

Over the years, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has tried to balance his domestic political concerns with the realpolitik international demands from both the White House and Congress in ways sometimes contradictory ways to American eyes, especially with the on-again off-again rhetoric about settlement expansion over the 1949 armistice line. Most notably in 2014, he chose to take the risk of accelerating the bipartisan divide by going to Congress to lobby against the Iran deal (JCPOA) without the blessings of the president or the support of his Democratic party.

President Barack Obama had the last word, getting even so to speak, punishing Israel, not just Netanyahu, with the American-orchestrated UNSC Resolution 2334 in 2016, which declared all Israeli holding of territory over the 1949 armistice line as a war crime, undermining the ambiguity of UNSC Resolution 242 for territorial choices, which has caused lasting damage to Israel and has made the Palestinians even more intransigent.

Difficult decisions for both the US and Israel will be made in the aftermath of Soleimani's assassination, but must be handled better especially as Iran will use its proxies to challenge Israel, and Israel needs to make sure it's one supporter in the world has its back.

Placating Israel's critics in the US, especially some American Jews who see Israel's "occupation" as the cause of almost all problems in the Middle East and lament the withdrawal

from the flawed Iran nuclear deal, is often an exercise in futility, and is not the path for a better relationship between the nations. Israel gets no credit when it acquiesces in their demands and receives no support in explaining the complex realities of living with a corrupt Palestinian Authority, and genocidal Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran.

Too many of the experts I spoke with did not realize that educating Congress and the American audience with facts in context should be a continuing priority, as far too many people in the US, including professionals, receive their news from like-minded echo chambers and media. This is especially relevant in light of the new reality Washington faces with Tehran and the international community

IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Aviv Kochavi has publicly acknowledged that Israel is determined not to allow a growing Iranian presence in Iraq to endanger Israeli security interests.

This becomes far more complicated now. Preemptive Israeli actions in Iraq may not be welcomed as they may be perceived as destabilizing the region, further undermining American interests, so consideration for more coordination with the White House is important.

The boldest Israeli recommendation I heard regarding Iran, which could put stress on the relationship with the US, was made by the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS), which includes some of Israel's most influential strategic thinkers, including Yaakov Amidror, a former National Security Advisor, and Efraim Inbar, the founding director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic



ABDULLAH DHIAA AL-DEEN / REUTERS

Mourners attend the funeral of Qasem Soleimani (pictured) in Kerbala, Iraq, on January 4

Studies. According to David Weinberg, the institute's vice president, "JISS experts say that Israel must be ready to tackle Iran militarily on its own and fight a preemptive war with Hezbollah," Iran's proxy in Lebanon.

A major pre-emptive war could be a stress test for the health of the bonds that hold the US-Israeli relationship together, especially with the situation between the US and Iran becoming more volatile after the assassination of Soleimani. America wants fewer or no boots on the ground in the Middle East, both from its populist Right and its progressive Left, so a full-blown war with Iran in conventional terms is unlikely.

Every professional I spoke with believes it would be a serious threat to Israel if Syria turns into another Lebanon, with the Iranian-controlled Shi'ite militias there becoming as powerful as Hezbollah, with the potential for thousands of precision-guided missiles to be aimed at Israel's major population centers.

Yet another head of a leading think tank told me that Israel should "keep its powder dry" and not act preemptively unless the situation becomes clearly an imminent threat – which is different from the JISS assessment. The distinction between a preventive attack to stop a threat from becoming an imminent threat, and a preemptive attack for a threat that is already imminent, is a very slippery slope where objective criteria are lacking. The US made that distinction with the attack on Soleimani.

Yossi Kuperwasser of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA), a former head of the research division of IDF Military Intelligence

and director-general of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, told me that Israel can continue to effectively target the transfer and production of precision guided missiles without a major war without boots on the ground for the foreseeable future. He also believes the escalating American sanctions are what are causing Iran to lash out and though it may be counterintuitive, the US was correct by not retaliating to the Iranian brinkmanship, avoiding an Iranian trap.

During my meetings with the experts, there seemed to be a consensus that an Iranian nuclear threat is not yet an imminent threat, not requiring a pre-emptive action at this time. There was however disagreement whether Israel will know in enough time when Iran's nuclear weapons program crosses a threshold where a pre-emptive strike will be too late. There was also a difference of opinion of how effective a strike on Iran's nuclear and weapons facilities would be at this time, but it seemed that delaying it for years would be worth the risk if that is important to preserve the working relationship with the US.

If Israel's northern military theater becomes an unsustainable risk, or war breaks out due to circumstances that spiral out of control, such as an Iranian strike with a significant Israeli civilian death toll, what will Israel need to be militarily successful and avoid some of the chaos of the Second Lebanon War? It will need to be in close communication with the Pentagon, White House, and with members of Congress, especially if the war drags on and Israel needs to be resupplied as it was during the Yom Kippur War.

In addition, Israel's needs access to pre-positioned American stockpiles of precision guided missiles housed in Israel that can hit Iranian precision rockets that could devastate and demoralize the nation. The morale and unity of the Israeli people will be tested. Would the US pre-position the most advanced bunker buster missiles for Israel's use against their nuclear program if the Iranians follow their pledge to resume their program for enriching uranium?

Israel will need American support for any future war no matter how just, as Israel will be accused of disproportionate use of force when it has to attack dual use military/civilian infrastructure in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemin, Gaza, or Iran. The weaponization of the charge that Israel uses disproportionate force by international circles is a recurring theme, but

according to a non-politicized dispassionate view of international law, what some consider disproportionate is justified and legal if the threat merits it, and the enemy deliberately puts its civilians in harm's way as human shields.

American defenders of Israel should ask the Europeans, if Hezbollah, Iran, Hamas or the PMUs (Iranian-controlled Shi'ite militias) kill 20 Israeli children would the proportionate response be targeting twenty Lebanese, Syrian, Iranian, or Palestinian children?

Some experts claim that part of the reason Iran has not directed Hezbollah to begin another war with Israel since the Second Lebanon War in 2006 is that Hezbollah lobbied Iran to think hard before initiating actions that could force Israel use its superior power to again cripple its civilian economic structure, especially now that even Shi'ites in Lebanon are protesting Hezbollah's corruption. That theory will be challenged after Soleimani assassination.

The political, security, and intelligence experts were also divided about the stability of Israel's eastern neighbor Jordan, which is considered vital to US and Israeli interests. Some consider it an economic basket case that can be rescued with economic aid. Others worried that the resentment of the Palestinian Arab majority of the Hashemite monarchy combined with the overwhelming numbers of refugees from two wars, the growing influence of Sunni jihadists in the periphery, and the rising support of the Muslim Brotherhood make Jordan an unpredictable pillar to rely on going forward.

Regarding the protesters in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, the opinions ranged from endorsing public US support to those who said overt support would be counterproductive, undermining the legitimacy of the protests. I was told by the White House that this debate was front and center within its policy meetings.

Finally on the political front, all the experts are frustrated with Israel having no military budget because of the current political stalemate that is crippling its ability to plan for longer-term threats.

The challenges are great, but the Jewish nation is strong. It's time for Israel to get its political act together, especially in light of the escalation of tensions after the Soleimani assassination. ■

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