The coming Israeli attack on Iran

written by Gilbert Achcar | April 17, 2024

Iranian missiles passing over Al-Aqsa after IRGC hit Israel with multiple airstrikes. Photo from Wikimedia.

There is little doubt that Israel will respond to Iran's launch of three hundred and twenty drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles on its territory with a major attack on Iran, and this for several reasons. The first is that the Zionist state escalated its attack on the "Islamic Republic" deliberately, by bombing the Iranian consulate adjacent to the Iranian embassy in Damascus. The whole world rightly saw in that attack a dangerous escalation of the low-intensity war that Israel has been waging against Iran for a few years, especially since the latter began expanding its own military network on Syrian territory in the context of the war that broke out there more than ten years ago. Israel undoubtedly realizes that it cannot continue its attacks on Iranian targets, and even less so escalate them, without Tehran being forced to respond.

The fact is that the leader of the "axis of resistance", as Iran likes to describe itself, has been greatly embarrassed in recent years by its inability to translate its repeated threats into actions commensurate with its words. The most dangerous blow that it suffered before the attack on its consulate was the assassination by U.S. forces of the commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, at the very beginning of 2020 near Baghdad airport. The Iranian response was lacklustre: it consisted in launching twelve missiles at American forces at the Ain al-Asad Air Base in the Iraqi Anbar Governorate, after giving a warning of the attack so that no U.S. soldier was injured (the only injuries were traumatic brain concussions). Donald Trump was thus able to dispense with a response, as it was clear that the assassination of Soleimani was more serious than the Iranian reaction, which was clearly the outcome that Tehran expected.

Everything indicates that Iran's intention in its recent attack on the Zionist state was similar: that is, to save face by responding, but keeping the response's effectiveness limited so that it does not lead to a counter-response. Thus, Iran launched 170 drones and 30 cruise missiles from its territory, that is, from a distance of 1,500 kilometres, knowing that it will take a few hours for these missiles to cross that distance, so that Israel can prepare for their arrival in order to shoot down a large number

of them even before they enter its airspace, especially since it enjoys the help of allies, led by the United States. Tehran even says that it informed Washington of the timing of the attack, while Washington denies this, its sources claiming that it learned of the attack's timing in advance thanks to intelligence (it is not clear whether U.S. or Israeli intelligence).

Whatever the case, the result is that none of those missiles exploded on the territory of the Zionist state. What is worse still is that, of the 120 ballistic missiles launched by Tehran, only four did hit the Zionist state! Thus, Israel was able to take pride in shooting down "99%" of what Iran launched against it. If it is true that dampening the effect of its attack to some extent was Iran's intention, the degree of the failure certainly exceeded what Tehran expected, such that the deterrent effect of its attack was eventually very limited, and in fact counterproductive by encouraging Israel to go ahead in escalating the confrontation. By striking the Zionist state's territory, Iran thus fell into a trap set by Israel by allowing the latter to launch an open counterattack on Iranian soil. Had Tehran contented itself with a proportional response to the attack on its consulate, by attacking an Israeli embassy in Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates, for example, its response would have looked legitimate and would not have entitled Israel to escalate in the eyes of the world.

It is no secret to anyone that Israel has been planning for years a strike inside Iranian territory aimed at destroying the nuclear facilities of its arch enemy. This strike has become very urgent in Israeli's reckoning, as Tehran has greatly intensified its uranium enrichment since Trump repudiated in 2018 the nuclear agreement concluded with Iran by his predecessor Barack Obama in 2015. It is estimated today that Tehran now possesses sufficient enriched uranium with the technological capabilities to make at least three nuclear bombs within a few days. This puts Israel in a state of high alert, as the loss of its regional monopoly on nuclear weapons would constitute a great strategic loss. Worse still, it would stir its fears of annihilation as a small-sized country facing enemies calling for its destruction, and whose ideology is based on intensive exploitation of the memory of the Nazi genocide of the European Jews. This strengthens the hypothesis that the attack on the consulate was a deliberate provocation that was part of an escalation aimed at creating an opportunity for the Zionist state to strike inside Iranian territory—at Iran's nuclear potential in particular.

The U.S. position remains in the balance, as Israel is unable to risk a full confrontation with its Iranian enemy without the guarantee of protection provided by its U.S. godfather. Israel has the capability to strike in the depth of Iran using its F-35 "stealth" aircraft, evading radar detection. It has close to 40 of these planes, which can travel fully loaded more than 2,200 kilometres, and a longer distance after dropping their load midway in their flight. However, they would likely need aerial refuelling on their way back from a strike inside Iran. This requires the assistance of the United States, or the permission to use the airspace of one of the Zionist state's Arab allies geographically located between it and Iran, since the refuelling process cannot escape monitoring.

U.S. cover remains necessary for Israel in any case, however, and it may seem unavailable after Washington repeatedly warned against an Israeli escalation that could spark a war in the whole Middle East. The U.S. fear is certainly not out of concern for peace, but rather primarily a fear of seeing a closure of the Strait of Hormuz and a hike in oil prices leading to a new crisis in the global economy. For this same reason, Washington is unwilling to escalate sanctions on Iran to the point of imposing a full ban on its oil exports. But, on the other hand, Washington shares Israel's concern about the prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, and successive administrations in the White House have repeated that this matter is, in their view, a red line that would require their intervention.

It is therefore possible to doubt the sincerity of Joe Biden's calls for restraint, knowing that he went beyond his predecessor Trump in supporting the Zionist state to the point of full participation in the

genocidal war that it has waged and is still waging against Gaza. Biden called for patience and de-escalation while confirming on the other hand that the United States, even if it won't participate in an Israeli strike inside Iranian territory, will remain committed to protecting its regional ally, which is exactly what the latter needs in order to carry out its attack. Israel realizes that the U.S. administration cannot take the risk of participating in an attack whose outcome is uncertain, and whose failure could reflect on it and cause the defeat of Joe Biden in the presidential elections next fall. The conclusion from all the above is that strategic logic incites Tehran to speed up its acquisition of nuclear weapons and make it known once done, as it is the most effective means of deterrence that it can acquire.

Translated from the Arabic original published in *Al-Quds al-Arabi* on 16 April 2024 and retrieved from Gilbert Achcar's website.