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“Tehran found itself backed into a corner by the attack on its consulate”

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Franco-Lebanese researcher Gilbert Achcar, professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, reviews the Israeli attack on April 1st against the consulate in Damascus and analyses the response of the Islamic Republic. He also examines the effects of this renewed tension on the ongoing negotiations to end the war in Gaza. [Interview given today to the French Communist Party’s daily L’Humanité.]

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Pierre Barbancey - What was Israel seeking by striking the Iranian consulate in Damascus?

Gilbert Achcar - The Israeli attack continued the long series of strikes against Iranian objectives in Syria that started some ten years ago, when Iran began to establish itself in that country seizing the opportunity created by the civil war that followed the 2011 popular uprising. However, the Israeli authorities could not ignore that the destruction of the consulate, adjacent to the Iranian embassy, constituted a major escalation, even beyond the identity of the victims that included a high-ranking member of the Islamic revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the ideological armed wing of the Iranian regime, and seven other officers.

It therefore seems to me that this was a deliberate provocation aimed at prompting an Iranian response and setting in motion a spiral that could lead to large-scale action against Iran. There are two main reasons for this, one of which is “trivial” and the other strategic. The trivial reason is that the military headlong rush is in the interest of Benjamin Netanyahu, whose retention of power is conditioned by the state of war, as everyone knows. It is also in the interest of the entire Israeli government, which is facing growing antipathy in Western public opinion. However, a confrontation with Iran, which has a very negative image, is likely to restore Western solidarity with Israel. This also applies to the Biden administration, which has recently suffered from the deterioration of its Israeli ally’s image.

As for the strategic reason, it is obvious: since Donald Trump repudiated in 2018 the nuclear agreement concluded in 2015 with Iran, the latter has considerably accelerated its uranium enrichment activity to the point that it is now estimated that it would take Tehran only a few days to produce at least three nuclear bombs. If we add Iran’s remote strike capability, which we saw demonstrated last Saturday, it is easy to understand Israel’s fear of losing its regional monopoly on

nuclear weapons, and therefore its dissuasive capacity. To be sure, Israel has a considerable number of nuclear warheads, but its territory is much smaller than that of Iran. It is therefore to be feared that the attack on the consulate was designed as the first salvo of a military escalation leading to an Israeli attack against Iran's nuclear potential.

What can we read in the Iranian response?

We can read a great embarrassment. Tehran found itself backed into a corner by the attack on its consulate. Its deterrent "credibility" has been considerably eroded over the years by repeated promises of revenge that were never kept, at least to a significant level, as after the assassination in Iraq, ordered by Trump in January 2020, of the head of the IRGC Al-Quds force, Qasem Soleimani. There has also been the lack of direct intervention against Israel's war in Gaza, contrary to Hamas's urgings. Iran was content to involve its Lebanese and Yemeni allies, within a clear self-limitation in the case of Lebanon's Hezbollah.

Tehran therefore had to act this time so as not to completely lose face. At the same time, Iranian leaders are aware of the aim of the Israeli provocation and fear that an attack on their soil might happen before they have achieved a balance of terror by acquiring nuclear weapons. This is why they opted for a seemingly massive attack, which they knew would not have much impact. To launch an attack on a state equipped with the best air defence in the world, and aided by powerful allies, primarily the United States, by means of drones and cruise missiles from 1,500 kilometres away, for a journey lasting several hours, is to expect that very little will reach destination. Only a few ballistic missiles were able to slip through the Israeli protection net.

Iranian sources were quick to declare the matter closed as far as Iran is concerned. This is very naïve indeed. Had they attacked an Israeli diplomatic representation in the United Arab Emirates or Bahrain, for example, no one could have seriously blamed them. But by launching hundreds of devices directly on Israeli territory, they walked into the trap, thus legitimizing a direct Israeli attack on their own territory. It is not very difficult to understand that they have demonstrated at the same time the threat they represent for Israel, thus strengthening the Israeli argument for a pre-emptive destruction of their own potential, and their strategic weakness in the face of an opponent much better equipped than them. In my opinion, this is an error which could prove to be as monumental as that which Hamas committed by launching the operation of October 7, 2023.

What are the consequences for the war in Gaza and the negotiations?

The negotiations were already deadlocked before all this. Now, the prospects of an agreement have become very slim, especially since Western pressure on Israel will very likely decrease in intensity, and since uncertainty hovers over the fate of the hostages. Israel has already destroyed most of Gaza, transforming it into a firing range and field for occasional intervention of its armed forces. There remains Rafah, which Israel is preparing to invade after having displaced the civilian population. This requires much less effort than the offensive carried out until last January. Furthermore, the confrontation with Iran does not require additional ground mobilization, except in the north to ward off a possible Hezbollah offensive. As for the Israeli potential for remote strike, it remains intact since the Biden administration sees to it that it is kept at high level through continuous deliveries of weapons, in addition to its direct contribution to the Israeli war drive.

Interview conducted by Pierre Barbancey

P.S.

- Blog. 4/14/2024:
<https://gilbert-achcar.net/tehran-backed-into-a-corner>

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