

CHAPTER THREE

Trouble in the North

“From the North Evil Shall Erupt” (Jeremiah 1:14)





3.1 Foiling Iran's Nuclear Project



The Iranian existential threat to Israel is rooted both in Iran's ambitions for regional dominance, and in the central role that extreme hostility towards Israel plays in the Islamist regime's ideological outlook. Thus, the ongoing, undeniable Iranian quest for military nuclear capabilities is a security challenge of the first order. The July 2015 six-power nuclear accord with Iran known as the JCPOA actually preserved Iran's technological ability to break-out quickly towards a military nuclear capability. If current tensions between Iran and the US continue to escalate, an Iranian break-out could come sooner rather than later, greatly enhancing the prospect of an all-out confrontation.

Taken together, Iran's activities constitute a threat well beyond what Israel has faced in recent decades. This includes Iran's ongoing efforts to establish a military infrastructure for attacking Israel from Syrian soil, the presence of Iran in Iraq through control of Shi'a militias, its grip on Lebanon through Hizballah, and its influence in Gaza through control of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and assistance to Hamas. In addition, the Iranian presence in large parts of Yemen in support of the Houthi uprising gives Iran a chokehold on shipping lanes at the entrance of the Red Sea. Subversive Iranian terrorist activities and infrastructure have spread across the region and beyond it.

Israel's government cannot ignore Iran's determined drive to obtain nuclear weapons. Even if the route to nuclear weapons is taking much longer than many in Tehran might have expected, the plan has not been abandoned. It should remain Israel's basic strategic assumption that stable nuclear deterrence (the so-called MAD of the Cold War era) cannot be sustainable with a regime of this ideological bent, in a stormy and unstable region. An Iranian nuclear umbrella would provide cover for extensive terrorist aggression. It is thus imperative to prevent Iran from obtaining a bomb. Moreover, it is unsafe (as detailed in the next sub-chapter) to rely on the highly uncertain prospects for regime change in Iran in the near term. Nor is there any hope for a reduced level of hostility from the Islamic Republic towards the Jewish state.



At first, Iran did choose to keep its commitments under the JCPOA despite the Trump Administration's decision to withdraw from the accord, because Iran still hoped to sustain many ongoing benefits. It continued to focus on its long-range missile project and the centrifuge research program as allowed under JCPOA terms. However, Tehran seems to have concluded – as American sanctions have dramatically cut Iran's oil exports and the IRGC was designated a terror group – that there is no point anymore in honoring the JCPOA; and the time may have come to generate a crisis, and further down the road to break-out towards a nuclear device.

The more credible Israel's threat of military action against Iran is, the greater the likelihood that international actors will commit to an effective effort at curbing Iran's nuclear efforts.

In the face of further escalation and Iranian provocations, Israel must make three decisions:

1. To allocate the necessary resources to monitor as closely as possible all Iranian nuclear activity, in order to be ready on a short notice to translate such intelligence into the action necessary to foil the Iranian nuclear project.
2. To instruct the army and intelligence community to make all necessary preparations so that they can undertake, once an order is given, an active and credible effort to disrupt the project. Timetables and costs should be presented to the cabinet for approval. Israel's friends and allies should be put on notice (and thus may be energized to take their own measures).
3. While avoiding public statements on this matter, to re-affirm the directive to the IDF to prevent the emergence of an Iranian base in Syria – designed by Tehran to open another front with Israel and establish a hegemonic position in the region. This effort should proceed regardless of an Iranian decision on the resumption of nuclear activities.

All three decisions must be backed by a diplomatic campaign in the international arena, in conjunction with the US, in order to convince key actors that Iran's nuclearization is a global threat and must be prevented. Israel must also be willing to bear the economic costs necessary to build the military capabilities for foiling Iran's nuclear project and for handling confrontational responses of Iran and its proxies.

The Iranian threat is quite vivid to most Israelis. Thus, the suggested course of action is well within a national consensus, and in fact would strengthen national cohesion.

Israel benefits from the present US administration's apparent willingness to act resolutely against the Iranian regime. The growing level of threat and uncertainty requires close coordination between the two countries. So does the prospect of forcing Iran back to the negotiating table, where the regime is likely to do its best to mislead the West into another faulty deal.

Still, if US pressure on, and international reactions to, Iran should falter, Israel could be left alone in facing Iran's dash for the nuclear bomb. The need to take military action would then fall on Israel's shoulders. Paradoxically, the more credible Israel's threat of military action against Iran is, the greater the likelihood that international actors will commit to an effective effort at curbing Iran's nuclear efforts; thus making it less likely and necessary that Israel take military action alone.



3.2 Insight into Iran



Despite Iran's deepening internal problems, the regime appears stable, or at least capable of containing unrest by violent repression. In any case, no change is expected in Iran's threatening policies towards Israel. However, the regime is clearly worried about the massive impact of sanctions, since they may lead soon to a dramatic collapse in income with severe financial and economic repercussions. Apparently, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i is no longer sure Iran can hold out until after the 2020 US elections.

There are, indeed, signs of disaffection and frustration in Iran which erupt overtly, mainly in the form of strikes and protests by blue-collar workers, particularly in the periphery of the country. The brutal repression of protest leaders, and the forced extraction of admissions regarding "political motivations" behind the protests, indicate that the regime needs both to break and discredit the protestors (although the Iranian public does not seem to trust the veracity of these admissions of guilt). Still, the fact that most protests have come from ethnic minorities in Iran means that they are unlikely to spread to other parts of the country and to other social groups.

Therefore, the prospects in the foreseeable future for regime change as a result of social unrest remain remote. However, the likelihood of a broader upheaval may increase as the effects of sanctions become more pronounced (and thought should be given as to whether, and how, to assist this). Other opportunities may arise after the death of the Supreme Leader, whose health is known to be fragile.

Iran's economy is in a bad shape. Inflation and unemployment are rampant. Still, it is only with the recent tightening of sanctions that the regime is facing a real crisis. Until now, Iran's trade ties with China (above all), Russia, India, Turkey and the EU have shielded Iran from most consequences of US withdrawal from the JCPOA. But while most of these countries have refused to formally cooperate with the US on re-imposing sanctions, they nevertheless now are confronted by difficulty if they persist in defying US sanctions. If they were to re-join the sanctions regime, under the influence of American pressure and in the face of a credible military threat on the part of Israel or the US, economic pressures on Iran could become even more effective.



Even without such formal adherence, the corporate response to US pressure has led to a drastic reduction of Iran's oil exports, gravely reducing the regime's income. Recent regime actions indicate that this new reality is keenly felt in Tehran, directly and deliberately leading to the recent escalation of tensions.

Despite slogans used at demonstrations in Iran against Iranian activities abroad, the protests have not led to any diminution in Iran's regional subversive activities. On the contrary, the regime sees subversion and terror as tools of counterpressure on the US. These activities are conducted by a highly compartmentalized component, separate from all other arms of the regime, and even from most elements of the IRGC. Orders come from the Supreme Leader, and he alone determines the scope of subversive activity beyond Iran's borders.

Israel should cooperate with all relevant countries in order to foment internal tensions in Iran.

The rivalry between President Rouhani and Supreme Leader Khamene'i sometimes makes it seem to optimists in the West as if Iran has two foci of power. But when it comes to actions outside Iran's borders, the Supreme Leader's harsh line undisputedly has the upper hand. There are reasons to doubt the seriousness of Rouhani's domestic reforms in Iran; but even if these are authentic, this relates only to internal matters. The Quds Force of the IRGC has been able to enshrine the doctrine according to which interventions in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere are an inseparable part of Iran's national security doctrine. This is now beyond dispute in Iranian decision-making circles.

Israel should cooperate with all relevant countries in order to foment internal tensions in Iran, whether the prospect of regime change is in the cards or not, as long as resources allocated to this effort reflect its secondary nature. While destabilization measures can have a restraining and delaying effect on Iran, they could also tempt the regime to lash out, making it even more necessary for Israel to be ready for a military escalation.

Iranian determination makes it more difficult to frustrate Iran's presence in Syria, and so does the involvement of its proxy militias. This raises the importance of finding other chinks in Iran's armor – from anti-Hizballah voices within Lebanon to anti-regime allies within Iran itself, particularly among ethnic minorities. Again, it should be taken into account that such subversion may engender aggressive regime responses.

With Iran's neighbors in the Gulf already committed to the effort to curb Iranian ambition, and the US too, it is important for Israel to demonstrate its value to its strategic partners in the region, demonstrating that it is ready and willing to act forcefully against Iran, if necessary.





3.3 Iran's Military Build-Up



An examination of Iran's conventional military forces reveals a focus on access denial and power projection, with less emphasis on forces for ground warfare. Iran has focused on acquisition of missiles – surface-to-surface, surface-to-sea, sea-to-sea, surface-to-air and air-to-surface missiles. It also has concentrated on developing unmanned aerial vehicles, small- and mid-sized naval vessels, cyber capabilities, and nuclear capabilities. Weapons displayed in frequent Iranian military parades are all in the realm of access denial and force projection. Its weapons for classic military maneuvering – manned aircraft, tanks and artillery – increasingly are outdated. There are no indications of efforts to modernize these.

The apparent conclusion is that Iran's national security doctrine accords priority to securing the Islamic regime, to deterring foreign invasions, and to enhancing Iran's capacity to influence other countries further afield. Nothing suggests plans for directly invading other countries, and the threat of invasion by Iran's neighbors is not considered to be serious. Iran's regional influence is to be secured through force projection (as in the case of the missile strike against a Kurdish command post inside Iraq); and through the creation, arming and training of local militias in target countries (such as Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen).

Another significant trend in Iran's military build-up is the emphasis on domestic production. Almost all new weapons are of indigenous development or licensed production. The single exception to this rule has been the acquisition of Russian-made modern air defense systems; and even in this field, in line with the policy of indigenous production capability, Iran is working to develop air defense systems with similar capabilities in its own defense industry. Iran is also developing tanks and combat aircraft, but these projects do not seem to have priority. There are reasons to believe that Iran deliberately exaggerates its achievements in the development of weapons systems that are usually the prerogative of great powers.



Iran's conventional build up can be slowed down and disrupted (but not reversed) by economic, diplomatic and covert means. In this context, Israel should do its best to back up American sanctions, which are bound to have an impact on Iran's ability to produce its own weapons or acquire them.

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Israel should intensify intelligence efforts to uncover and expose Iranian purchases of sensitive materials and components from other countries for Iran's military projects, to block its channels of weapons acquisition.

Israel should leverage the renewed struggle between the US and Iran over the nuclear project – and the indications that the regime is desperate enough to lash out through proxy terror attacks and disruptive actions in vital sea lanes – to further delegitimize the regime and its various proxies.





3.4 Reducing the Iranian Threat from Syria



After eight years, Assad's success in the Syrian civil war seems certain – at least in the sense of defeating the uprising and the bid to unseat him. By now, there is no real military threat to the survival of his regime, nor are there any signs that his two allies, Russia and Iran, have any interest in bringing about a change at the top level in Syria.

Still, the war is not yet over. Assad rules only 60% of Syria. The areas east of the Euphrates river (some 30% of Syria) are under SDF Kurdish-led rule, backed by the US. This area contains more than 80% of the country's oil and gas resources. Another area in the north-west is under the control of the Turks and/or Sunni rebels.

Meanwhile, Iran is using the Syrian crisis to build a land bridge to the Mediterranean Sea, in pursuit of hegemony in the entire Fertile Crescent. These efforts may intensify as the US-Iran crisis escalates.

Iran has other goals in mind. First, it is seeking to erect on the Syrian side of the Golan border and in southern Syria generally a forward base of the al-Quds Forces of IRGC, assisted by Hizballah and Shi'a militias. This base is to serve as a launching pad for rockets (some of them produced in Syria) and as a base for raids into Israel. An Iranian military presence which would constitute a threat to Israeli population centers will give Tehran, presumably, a deterrent against a possible Israeli (or American) strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

A presence adjacent to the Jordanian border will also enable Iran to lay the groundwork for destabilization in Jordan, and ultimately to penetrate the Hashemite Kingdom in order to gain access to PA territory for attacks on Israel. Iran explicitly aspires to turn the West Bank into another Gaza.

Moreover, Iran seeks to provide the Hizballah forces with technology that would significantly improve the accuracy of their missiles. True, Iran has been airlifting missiles from Tehran to Beirut International Airport, which is under Hizballah control. But the land corridor allows for expanded scale and scope of deliveries.



Israel did not take sides in the Syrian civil war, beyond a tactical alliance with rebel groups in the areas immediately adjacent to the Israel's Golan border. However, Israel has used air strikes and special forces to foil Iranian basing efforts. These operations have inflicted significant damage upon Iran, Hizballah and the Shi'a militias and disrupted the creation of an Iranian forward base in the Syrian Golan Heights. Iran's deployment of weapons in Syria also has been constricted because of Israeli attacks. Hizballah's missile-upgrading project also has gained limited success. The organization has been able to improve the accuracy of only several dozen missiles.

In the period ahead, however, Israel may not be so successful. Assad's visit to Tehran in February 2019 produced a formal agreement enshrining Iran's presence in Syria, and this is likely to be used by Iran for advancing its military purposes – including the integration of IRGC elements, Hizballah and Shi'a militias within the Syrian army.

Meanwhile, the Trump Administration has signaled (and then partly retracted) its intention to withdraw US forces from Syria. One of the stumbling blocks to the extension of the Iranian corridor has been the US military presence in al-Tanf in eastern Syria on the border with Iraq. If indeed the US does withdraw from this position, Iran could deepen its presence in Syria. This could also weaken the Kurds, whose presence in Iraq and Syria constrains Iran's designs on the land bridge. (Administration messages on this issue have been ambiguous, particularly regarding timing.)

Israel should prepare for the likely prospect that the more Assad's regime is entrenched, and his army resurrected, the more likely Syria will be to respond forcefully to Israeli air attacks.

At the same time, the efforts to stabilize Syria in the post-civil war era, including the return of Assad's regime to the Arab League from which it has been expelled and the renewal of diplomatic relations with the Arab world, may put further limitations on Israel's freedom of action in Syria.

Israel's explicit goal is to uproot the Iranian presence from Syrian soil. Given the scope of the Iranian project, and the extent of Iran's investment in it, Israel has not yet generated enough harm to make the Iranians change their policy. The militias which operate with Iranian support and local elements controlled by Iran cannot be eliminated by air strikes. Iranians are positioned within 60 kilometers of Israel's border. Consequently, Israel must consider the likelihood of an Iranian military reaction, at some point, either in the form of retaliatory action by proxy or even through a direct attack.

Attempts to force Assad to act against the Iranians or bring about their departure from all of Syria will not succeed at this time, since the Syrian regime, still dependent on Iran and its proxies, simply does not have what it takes to do so. Nevertheless, determined use of force by Israel can achieve a more limited goal, such as reducing Iranian activity in Syria and limiting its geographical scope.

Russia can be of help in limiting the Iranian presence. As detailed in the next sub-chapter, Russia does not share Iran's interest in turning Syria into a battlefield. Indeed, this runs counter to the strategic Russian goal of stabilizing Assad's regime. Thus, Moscow will continue to respond with little beyond rhetoric to the ongoing Israeli strikes in Syria, if they are not aimed at undermining Assad's rule. At the same time, active Russian help in removing Iran from the border areas can only be obtained if there will be an Israeli quid pro quo in support of Russian interests – and not necessarily in the Syrian context.



In any case, Israel should prepare for the likely prospect that the more Assad's regime is entrenched, and his army resurrected, the more likely Syria will be to respond forcefully to Israeli air attacks. If this happens, Russia should be notified that its client is taking unreasonable risks.

Recently, it seemed as if the Israeli policy of ambiguity about actions in Syria was being abandoned in favor of a more overt posture. The policy of ambiguity should be restored. Public comments on this issue should be avoided altogether, or at least confined to the vaguest generalities.





3.5 Strategic Dialogue with Russia



Russia is actively pursuing a policy of enhancing its international standing and emerging as a significant player in a multi-polar world. It takes an antagonistic view towards the US and the West. In this context, the Kremlin treats both Iran and Syria as levers that are useful in the pursuit of global Russian interests, and more specifically, in its immediate strategic environment. At the same time, Russia formally opposes Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, while leaving it to others (the US or Israel) to face the consequences of preventive action.

In Syria, the Russians have stressed that the preservation of Assad's regime is not a goal in itself, but a way to secure stability in the country and the region – which in turn serves their goals in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Their air and naval bases in Syria enable Russia to project power in these areas. Moreover, in the Syrian arena, and in the "Arab street" in general, Russian actions served as proof that it is a reliable ally, willing to use force in defense of its clients. (Whereas the US, under Obama, abandoned a long-term ally like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak).

For Russia, Syria is an arena where it can play a (partly) cooperative game with both Iran and Turkey to advance its goals. The Syrian situation also provides Russia with leverage for negotiating with the US and the West over other matters of importance. Russia's ability to bring about stable arrangements in Syria, which would also respond to Israeli concerns about Iran (as discussed above), serves Putin as cards in a larger game.

The Russians, lacking resources of their own, are also badly in need of partners in the huge undertaking of reconstructing Syria. They need to stabilize Assad's regime, gain renewed regional and international legitimacy for his rule, alongside acceptance of a permanent Russian presence in Syria.

Thus, Israel should once again affirm that if Iran's bid for control in Syria is reversed, this infrastructure reconstruction project (as distinct from a military build-up) will not be harmed or disrupted. Nor will Israel prevent Assad from asserting his nominal sovereign rule over all Syria (although it would be in Israel's interest that the Kurdish-led SDF should retain its autonomy and guns).



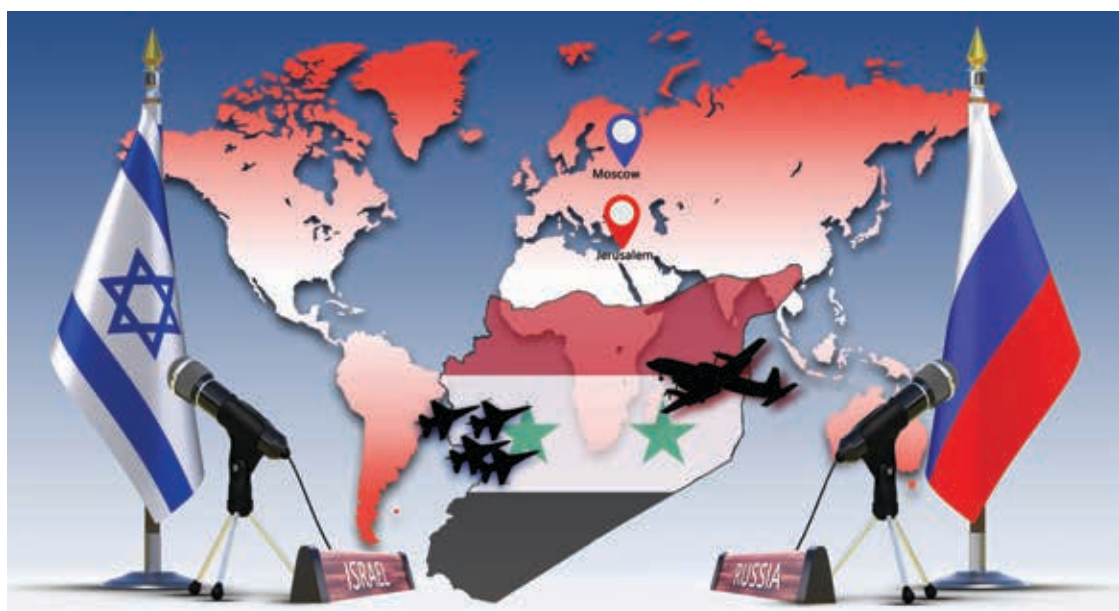
Israel should approach Moscow with deference, expressing respect for Russia and for Putin. Still, respect in Moscow for Israel's military power and Israel's ability to destabilize the Assad regime is Jerusalem's strongest card.

It is important, therefore, to increase coordination with Russia, within the limits imposed by military operational considerations. Israel should to continue to avoid, almost at all costs, hitting Russian personnel or hardware in Syria, or even Syrian assets involved in securing the stability of the regime – unless this is necessary in order to demonstrate to Moscow that Israel stands on its red lines. It is equally important to avoid public discussion of IDF activities in Syria, and to resist the temptation to comment on Israel's ability to overcome Russian defense systems deployed there.

It may prove possible to identify the components of a broad deal with Russia, which would involve an Israeli “give,” perhaps alongside the alleviation of US sanctions on Russia.

As much as possible, Israel should refrain from taking stands in international fora that directly contradict Russian interests (e.g., over Ukraine). Israeli discretion makes it easier for the Russians to quietly influence Syrian conduct.

It may prove possible to identify the components of a broad deal with Russia, which would involve an Israeli “give,” perhaps alongside the alleviation of US sanctions on Russia. This would in turn produce greater Russian willingness to support the pressure on Iran. When US National Security Adviser John Bolton, his Russian counterpart Nikolai Patrushev, and Israeli NSC chief Meir Ben Shabbat met in Jerusalem in June, they hinted at a deal, involving the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria in return for the relief of US sanctions on Russia. Still, Israeli action should be conditioned by sensitivity to the deeply held hostility of the US defense community towards Russia.





3.6 Iran's Grip on Lebanon through Hizballah



Most political power centers in Lebanon are now directly or indirectly controlled by Hizballah. That organization has developed a network of alliances with various political and confessional groups; pushed changes in electoral law; neutralized political rivals, and more. In practice, today in Lebanon there is no political element that stands in the way of the organization, which is in possession of a huge arsenal of weapons. It fully controls all military decisions in Lebanon, and the Lebanese Armed Forces cooperate with it.

Recently, Hasan Nasrallah has begun to take control of Lebanon's economy too, thus completing his takeover of the three key power centers in the country: the political system, the military and the economy.

In fact, it has become difficult to distinguish the Lebanese state from Hizballah. The state is a tool in Hizballah's hands, while the organization hides behind it and directs it behind the scenes, in line with its interests. Therefore, it is right to hold Lebanon responsible for Hizballah's actions. Both the organization's political allies and its rivals should be put on notice that Lebanon will pay a heavy price for provoking Israel.

The US and the West should be provided with evidence that the legitimacy they accord to the Lebanese state serves Hizballah. More countries should be urged to follow the British example and brand Hizballah's political "wing" and leadership, not just its so-called "military wing," as a terrorist organization. (The distinction between "wings" is one that Hizballah itself never makes).

Israel should also make the point that international security guarantees to Israel relating to Lebanon have been shown to be inefficient, at best; utterly useless, at worst. Specific intelligence can be marshalled to this effect, including exposure of Hizballah's terror attack tunnels aimed at Israel and activities that should have been prevented under UNSCR 1701. (This is relevant, too, in the debate over utility of such international security guarantees in the context of a putative future settlement with the Palestinians).



There are internal disputes within Lebanon today regarding Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) waters and the delineation of the border with Israel. Both Hizballah and Amal have rejected Israel's suggestion that the EEZ and the "Blue Line" issues should be negotiated in a separate format; whereas their Christian allies – President Michel Aoun and his party – are willing to consider it. A new effort to mediate this matter under US and UN auspices is underway. Whether Hizballah will allow agreements to be reached remains to be seen.

Hizballah has no plans to give up its arms, and Lebanon is now a tool in Hizballah's hands.

In general, Israeli concessions related to Hizballah activity south of the Litani River, on border delineation, or on the EEZ will not bring a political settlement with Lebanon any closer, nor will this remove the danger that Hizballah poses to Israel. Iran, Hizballah's sponsor, continues to view Israel as a target for full destruction. There is no point in a "give" to an Iranian-controlled Lebanon.

On the other hand, however, an indirectly negotiated compromise (with the help of the US and Israel's Mediterranean friends) could create a common short-term interest in reducing friction, in order to draw-in investors for natural gas development in the eastern Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, Israel should find points of weakness in the Lebanese economic system. With Iran cash starved, Hizballah's predicament is increasingly serious. Economic conditions in Lebanon have deteriorated and may be at the edge of the abyss – a concern of great importance to all players, Hizballah included. Hizballah's base of support among the weakest socio-economic groups could suffer. The Lebanese economy is mostly sustained by banking, foreign deposits, services (tourism), real estate transactions and loans. It is therefore vulnerable to external pressures.

Thus, Saudi Arabia should be urged to join hands with other Gulf countries (UAE, Bahrain) in issuing or renewing a travel advisory, and/or in expelling Lebanese working in the Gulf, or in threatening to end easy loans to the Lebanese. In parallel, Israel should urge all participants to the 2018 Paris conference on the Lebanese economy – which ended with several countries pledged for support and investments in Lebanon – to stick to their conditions, which included both economic reform and a promise to consider disarming Hizballah.

Israel should emphasize that Hizballah has no plans to give up its arms, and that Lebanon is now a tool in Hizballah's hands. Hence, all assistance to Lebanon helps Hizballah; whereas any constraints on the Lebanese economy harm Hizballah and increase the financial burden on it.