

How a Scary History Is Repeating Itself in the Middle East

A confluence of current Middle Eastern events, and a 38th anniversary observed this month, may foreshadow a similar outcome from then, in the future.

The Middle East events unfolding are unique and parallel on two fronts: Iran and Turkey. But there is a connection.

With Iran increasing its hostility to the US, Israel and world in general, the most recent example of which being an attack on oil tankers in the Gulf, tensions are running high. Underscoring this brazenness, the most recent attack took place on a Japanese ship, while the Japanese Prime Minister was visiting Iran.

Iran is flexing its muscle against the US, the Saudis and others. Should violence come to pass, its likely Iran will engage Israel as well, either directly or through its proxies in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria. None of that is good, and there may be an inevitable need to engage Iran militarily.

Parallel to this, Turkey is challenging the West, ironically from within, as a NATO member. It has announced it will be buying the Russian-made S 400 anti-aircraft missile system, which threatens Europe and the U.S.

As a result, the U.S. is threatening to cancel the sale of advanced F-35 stealth fighters to Turkey, aircraft that will make their air force among the most advanced in the world. To put it nicely, the increasing Islamist and authoritarian trends in Turkey, including reaching out to and closeness with Russia, are incompatible with its NATO membership and responsibilities to that alliance.

How do these current, and parallel, events relate to the past, and how does that portend for the future?

Just as Israel and Turkey used to be close allies until 1979, so did Israel and Iran. That ended with the rise of the Islamist regime there that broke relations and with Israel. Since then, Iran has become increasingly hostile, threatening Israel's destruction with a once secret nuclear weapons program.

After the Iranian Islamist revolution, the US canceled a major contract to supply Iran with 75 F-16 fighters. This would have made Iran, then, one of the strongest middle eastern air forces, just as a deal with Turkey for the more advanced F-35s would today.

The cancellation of the F-16 sale to Iran then created an inventory of planes and an opportunity for other US allies. As a leap of faith, when offered the planes Israel immediately said yes, and then figured out how to pay for them.

38 years ago this month, Israel celebrated the achievement of Operation Opera, its daring strike on Iraq's nuclear reactor. At the time, much of the world condemned it. But then, and certainly today, the world should have been thanking Israel. However, one of the greatest ironies in this accomplishment is that it was made possible by the acquisition of the new F-16s as a result of the Iranian Islamist revolution.

Today, should the U.S. cancel the sale of F-35s to Turkey, there's likely to be an inventory available to an ally like Israel which can add dozens of the super advanced planes to its growing fleet. The parallel is that the cancellation of the sale of advanced fighter jets to a former ally (Iran then, Turkey now) provided hardware for Israel to defend itself, and the world, from Islamist extremism.

Should Iran continue its threats, among which are the destruction of Israel, Israel may need to undertake a similar

strike against Iranian nuclear targets.

Just as in 1981 when Israel stretched the limits of the F-16 to make Operation Opera possible, even with advanced F-35s, Israel would be stretching the limits of the plane. But without a doubt, having the F-35 gives Israel additional operational superiority, with Iran and on all fronts.

Then, it was unclear with the F-16's fuel capacity whether Israeli planes would be able to make it to Iraq and return home safely. The F-35 capacity today is much greater, but an operation to take out nuclear facilities in Iran is no less a stretch.

"Then, there was no mid-air refueling, no GPS, none of these technologies," said Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Yadlin, who was one of the pilots during Operation Opera. He eventually became the head of the IDF intelligence division. "We flew at speeds best suited to conserving fuel and not the best speed for flying in enemy territory." The pilots had to focus on every minute detail because even the smallest miscalculation could mean there would not be enough fuel to return.

Israel was so concerned about not having enough fuel, it did something that's normally prohibited and dangerous. Once the F-16s were lined up on the runway, they brought out a tanker to top off the planes' fuel to the absolute limit.

Speaking at an event marking the anniversary of Operation Opera, the pilots celebrated their role but recognized that the true hero was Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Yadlin noted "The real hero of this operation was not the pilots, but those who took the decision, and it was a very difficult decision. Firstly, the whole Middle East was hostile, and the diplomatic damage could have been huge."

Yadlin added that the lessons then are still applicable today because of "the decision by Begin, and the doctrine that was established with this operation and later named after him (the

Begin Doctrine) ... if there is an Arab leader who calls for the destruction of Israel, Israel will not allow them to have nuclear weapons."

On September 6, 2007, Israel observed the Begin Doctrine in a mission known as Operation Orchard, when Israeli jets destroyed a nuclear reactor in Syria.

The question remains whether Israel will need to employ the Begin Doctrine again regarding Iran, but if so, the current confluence of events and potential for Israel to acquire dozens more F-35s will make an invaluable difference. {eo}

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