

Military Intelligence Foresees Escalated Conflict For Israel in 2015

The Middle East is expected to be very bad place in which to live over the coming year—perhaps one of the worst and most dangerous places in the world. When Military Intelligence puts its feelers out across the borders—in the direction of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and North Africa—it sees and describes a world gripped by social decay, a world that is crumbling politically and becoming increasingly poor.

The chronic economic crisis that is affecting the Arab Spring countries, and continues to worsen in light of the falling oil prices, is accelerating the internal disintegration of major countries such as Syria, Libya and Iraq, and could undermine stabilizing regimes like Iran and Egypt.

In Saudi Arabia alone, which is seen as a stable country, unemployment among the young will reach 30 percent in the coming year. No wonder there are so many Saudis in the global jihad organizations.

Many more young individuals will fail to find their place in the Muslim societies, resulting in the rise of many more radical movements around Israel and the spilling by Muslims of a lot more Muslim blood in relation to previous years. And this tidal wave of violence could spill over into Israel. If there is a nightmarish scenario that's going to keep MI officials awake at night in 2015 it's the possibility that they won't be able to locate this tidal wave as it begins to form.

This gloomy outlook, in the drier and more professional terminology of the MI researchers, is the bottom line of the

comprehensive document MI's Research Department submitted recently to senior General Staff officials in the traditional ceremony known as MI's Annual Assessment—a regular ritual designed to present the army chiefs and political leadership with a forecast outlining the expected political and military developments in the coming year.

This intelligence assessment, consisting essentially of a series of potential threats to which answers must be found, is supposed to serve as the foundation for the State of Israel's security-economic-political work plan for the year to come.

This time, however, this gloomy forecast will fall on the shoulders of a new government, a new cabinet, a new chief of staff and perhaps a new defense minister too, making the situation even more worrisome. The Middle East, after all, is not going to wait until the summer, until a new Israeli government settles in. The uncertainty, instability and volatility of the events taking place could shake the region without warning.

It's no wonder then that MI officials themselves are saying today that an intelligence assessment for an entire year is excessively pretentious. They say they can offer an assessment with a high degree of certainty only for the first few months of 2015.

Chief of staff-elect Gadi Eisenkot sits today in the temporary office set aside for incoming army chiefs on the 15th floor of the Defense Ministry tower. There's a good chance that he will have to take responsibility for everything for a few months, at least. A new government, and perhaps a new defense minister, will need time before figuring things out and starting to adopt long-term decisions. Until then, Eisenkot will be the only one to offer continuity in terms of security readiness.

He will also have to act as mentor for the new group until it

gets comfortable in its seats. He is very familiar with MI's assessment, having been party to its preparation. Now, he's racking his brains: How do we construct a wall of security to prevent the madness that is gripping the Middle East—and is likely to get worse throughout 2015—from spilling over into our house?

The Landlord's Vanished

Every MI assessment begins with an overview of the regional picture from the perspective of the world powers. The bottom line here is a very simple one: The Middle East of today has no international landlord. There's no single element that maintains the balance, that facilitates international collaboration to preserve peace of sorts in the region.

Vladimir Putin's Russia is making every effort to increase its influence in the Middle East by means of a firm foothold in Syria. The United States, which for years enjoyed a free hand in the Middle East as a soloist, doesn't make a move these days without coalitions. In Syria, it's an Arab coalition; in Iraq, a Western coalition. Without a coalition behind him, Barack Obama would not have gotten involved with Islamic State and wouldn't have come down from the fence to help the more moderate Sunni forces in Syria and the Kurds in Iraq.

The Russians, who have come to the aid of the Syrians in several key battles against the rebels, have despaired with the Syrian Army. Syrian and Iranian experts, working shoulder to shoulder in Syria, have already come to the conclusion that the Syrian Army is not going to deliver the goods and stop the tide.

They are trying therefore—with the Americans getting dragged along—to work towards a compromise solution between the rebels and Bashar Assad's regime that would lead to a division of powers in the country. This isn't stopping the Russians from continuing every week to deliver a shipload of arms for the

Syrian Army—from bullets for Kalashnikovs and through to heavy rockets—to the port of Tartus.

Greater Syria no longer exists. The accepted term these days is Assad's "Little Syria," which controls 20-30 percent of the country. The remainder comprises independent cantons that are fighting against one another. Israel's part in the story is the Golan Heights.

The price Israel is paying for providing humanitarian aid to the Free Syrian Army rebels is the deployment of these moderate Sunni groups over a large portion of the Golan Heights, facing into Syria. They create a buffer and physically prevent elements such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State from spilling over into the Israeli side of the Golan Heights.

North of Quneitra lie a number of Druze villages that serve as hotbeds for hostile actions against Israel on the Golan Heights. The units operating there are backed by Hezbollah and the Syrian Army. One of them is under the command of the son of Imad Mughniyeh, who oversaw Hezbollah's terror activities abroad and was assassinated by Israel in 2008. A second group is under the command of another familiar face—Samir Kuntar, who spent decades in an Israeli prison before being released in return for the bodies of Israeli soldiers Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser, who were captured by Hezbollah.

And by the way, the chemical weapons issue in Syria will remain unresolved in 2015 too. The body dealing with Syria's chemical disarmament, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, has yet to close the file. There is reason to believe that the Assad regime is still concealing chemical agents.

The Iranian front presents a complex picture too. We won't know before the summer if Iran and the United States are going to sign an agreement on the nuclear issue. MI officials

believe today that such an agreement would be bad for Israel.

On the one hand, it would allow for a more accurate assessment vis-à-vis Hezbollah's future conduct along Israel's northern border; on the other, if Iran doesn't sign an agreement with the West and fails to shake off the global sanctions, it could spiral out of control. Disappointment with President Hassan Rouhani and continuing economic despair could see a return to power in Tehran of the Revolutionary Guard. These are dramatic processes that could have an immediate effect on the northern border—but no one can foresee them today.

At least two more issues will determine the face of 2015 in the Middle East—the Israeli elections and the impact the falling oil prices has on the oil exporters in the region. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are believed to have accumulated sufficient financial reserves to allow them to get through the crisis in one piece. In contrast, the price crisis could bring down the regimes in Iran, Iraq and Libya and lead to further anarchy. The Russians, too, could change their tune in the Middle East in light of the dramatic decline in oil revenues and turn more aggressive, in an effort to combat what they perceive as an American plot to destroy them.

A Ray of Light in the Dark

MI's assessment also deals with the issue of the disintegration of the nation states. Libya is divided into three states—Cyrenaica in the east, Tripolitania in the west, and Fezzan in the largely desert south. Sudan has split in two. Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Somalia are falling apart. The process, MI officials say, could spread to other countries and deepen in those crumbling already now.

Islamic State elements—political not military, for the time being—are in Jordan's Ma'an region. In the Sinai Peninsula, the Ansar Bait al-Maqdis organization, which was once linked with al-Qaeda, recently pledged allegiance to Islamic State.

Since the declaration, the Israel Defense Forces' Southern Command has been readying for the group's first terror attack against Israel from the Sinai. The emir of Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced a few weeks ago that Israel was one of the organization's targets.

The global Jihad, in all its various forms, continues to run rampant through the Middle East and Africa. It's in the Sinai, Gaza, Syria, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen. Osama bin-Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who came from Egypt, has—unlike his predecessor—a Middle Eastern agenda with Israel at its center.

MI officials speak of four camps in the Middle East that are fighting one another. The first is the radical-Shia axis that includes Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and the Houthis in Yemen. This axis is currently trying to embrace Hamas. In the past two weeks alone, senior Iranian officials have announced plans to begin providing military aid to Hamas in the West Bank.

The second axis is the moderate camp—Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Qatar, too, has recently joined this group, albeit in part only, after the Saudis coerced the Qataris into reaching an understanding with the Egyptians. This understanding between Qatar and Egypt is particularly significant for Israel. It could delay or prevent a conflagration along the Gaza border. This alliance could distance the Iranians from Hamas and give another boost to the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip in cooperation with the Palestinian Authority.

This process will undoubtedly encounter resistance from global jihad elements and rogue organizations in Gaza. In the last few days alone, we've twice received proof of efforts to drag Israel and Hamas into another round of hostilities—a rocket fired in the direction of the Eshkol region by global jihadis and sniper fire in the southern section of the Strip from an

unidentified organization.

Hamas, which can see the Qatari money and reconstruction of Gaza on the horizon, is making every effort to prevent the global jihad groups and rogue organizations from acting against Israel. The Qatari-Egyptian partnership, still in its infancy, may in 2015 turn out to be a ray of light in the darkness of the relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Israel is now keeping a close eye on Mahmoud Abbas' moves and efforts to present a request to establish a Palestinian state within two years to the UN Security Council. If Abbas does so after January, he'll have a majority for the decision, and the event will take on different dimensions. Tensions between Israel and the Palestinians will increase and could lead to deterioration in the security situation.

Deterioration in the security situation between Israel and the Palestinians, or between Israel and Gaza, is a realistic option in 2015. Hamas now has 30 percent of the rocket capabilities it had on the eve of Operation Protective Edge—a 5-10 percent improvement since the ceasefire.

While the defensive tunnels in Shujaiya and Khan Younis are undergoing renovations and rebuilding, there are no signs meanwhile of new tunnels leading into Israeli territory. Israel has proof that Hamas has purchased cement from more than 8,000 homeowners in Gaza who received the building material from the United Nations, in cooperation with Israel, in order to repair their homes.

The third camp is the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood. They are in Gaza, Israel, Jordan, Egypt and Syria. MI's assessment doesn't rule out the possibility that the protest rallies will return again to the public squares in Jordan and Egypt, as the chances of stabilizing the economies in the Arab states are very low.

The fourth camp in the Jihadist-Sunni one—Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ansar Bait al-Maqdis and their offshoots.

All four of these camps are at war with one another on the playing field of the Middle East. Israel, meanwhile, is the observer that sometimes gets hit with a ricochet from the fighting.

Get Ready for a Cyber Assault

The MI assessment also points to a change in the enemy's perceptions, vis-à-vis its use of force. Both Hezbollah and Hamas have dropped their projectile-based defensive and attrition tactics in favor of offensive methods and close-quarter hostilities with the use of forces operating inside Israeli territory. The goal is also to create the image of victory and undermine the resolve of Israel's citizens. This change was clearly evident during the course of Operation Protective Edge, in terms of the tunnel tactics and the establishment of the special units for carrying out operations inside Israel.

At the same time, both Hezbollah and Hamas are focusing on striking at Israel with precise weapons—cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles and sophisticated rockets. One of the lessons the two organizations learned from Operation Protective Edge concerns the introduction of short-range missiles with large warheads that can destroy structures near the border—a move perceived during the fighting in Gaza as an essential element in terms of breaking the enemy's spirit. And indeed, Hezbollah has acquired Borkan missiles, which have a range of just 4-5 kilometers but are armed with a huge warhead.

The new military doctrine that Israel will face also involves the decentralization of the military forces it will encounter, with no clear-cut target or two on the other side that if taken out could leave the enemy unbalanced. The duration of

the hostilities, too, is a crucial factor from the point of view of the enemy, which will try to spark more prolonged military campaigns.

Hezbollah is at the ready in southern Lebanon for the order from Iran, the moment Tehran feels threatened. The arming of Hezbollah is going ahead in keeping with a multi-year work plan. In Lebanon, the central government has very limited control over the nationalist cantons. For now, Hezbollah and the Lebanese Army are working together to curb Jabhat al-Nusra and the Lebanese global Jihad groups.

Another threat that could take Israel by surprise this year involves a cyber-attack: Israel must consider the real possibility that one day we'll wake up to an assault on our military and civilian systems. We witnessed the outcome of such an assault just recently in North Korea.

The criticism voiced from within the army against MI's annual assessment does not deal with the facts, and stems more from their interpretation instead. According to the detractors, MI's assessment for 2015 fails to see the opportunities and only perceives the threats, the half-empty cup. And perhaps, given Israel's lowly status in the international arena today, we can't afford to see the half-full one instead.

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