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US PERMANENT MILITARY BASE IN ISRAEL: AN EYE ON IRAN?!

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On September 18, 2017, the US inaugurated a permanent military base in Israel regarded as its “first ever stationary unit.” It is located inside Israeli Air Force’s Mashabim Air Base in the middle of Negev desert near the town of Beersheba (4th most populous metropolitan area in Israel) and being referred to as the “base within a base”. This move is being regarded as historic by both Israeli and American media with Israeli Brigadier General Tzvika Haimovitch (Head of Israeli Aerial Defence Command) referring to it as a “strategic commitment” of the US in supporting Israel. The General also added that the move was not a direct response to any specific incident or immediate threat, but was a combination of “lessons learned” in the 2014 war in Gaza and the intelligence analysis of future dangers.¹ However, it is interesting that the move comes at a time when Israeli concerns related to the development of long range missiles by Iran, its adversary in the region, are growing.

The newly established military facility is an air defence base and will include numerous electronic systems to identify and intercept various aerial threats and will operate under Israeli directives.² It is pertinent to mention here that The Pentagon already operates an independent facility nearby, in the Negev Desert. The facility is used only by the US and is meant to detect and warn of a possible missile attack from Iran.³ Israeli threat perception emanating from Iran’s development of long-range missiles is being cited as the foremost reason for this move. This base is close to the town of Dimona which is also home to Israel’s nuclear reactor and the “not openly acknowledged” nuclear warhead arsenal.⁴ The road for the US government’s ongoing assistance to Israel was paved under section 1259J of the National Defence Authorisation Act for 2017 titled “Authorization of United States assistance to Israel”, authorised by the President of the US in 2015-2016.⁵ It gives a nod for the “Procurement, maintenance, and sustainment of the David’s Sling Weapon System for the purpose

of intercepting short-range missiles.”⁶ Furthermore, Israel has also bought 50 F-35 stealth fighters from the US to strengthen its defence against Iran.⁷ Together with the US, Israel has developed a multi-layered system of defences against long-range guided missile attacks from Iran to crude rockets fired from Lebanon and the Gaza Strip,⁸ sending a clear message, about Israeli readiness, to its enemies in the region.

Historically, due to the confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union, the West Asian region became one of the most vital areas of interest for the US. In the past decades, the US not only successfully took control of the region, but has in a way used West Asia's strategic location to maintain its hegemony in the international system. This has also been done to contain Soviet Union through the much portrayed promotion of democracy agenda as a means to cover-up its interventions in the countries and recruitment of allies of this region. Currently, US' military bases are scattered all over West Asia, especially in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Turkey.⁹

Also, the US military's presence in West Asia and especially in the countries bordering Iran has increased in the past decades through the bases established in its various ally countries in that region. Furthermore, the establishment of these bases serves the dual purpose—dealing with hostile regimes (such as Iran, Syria, Iraq

etc.) and ensuring the security and integrity of the Israeli regime and its other allies in the area. This has become the vital objective of US policy vis-à-vis West Asia, lately. By establishing military bases in various countries in West Asia, the US has assured the Israeli regime that it will be supported by the US against any kind of regional threat.

At present, Israel considers Iran's nuclear ambition, and the development of long-range missiles, as a sign of hostility and anti-Israel narrative. Iran's *alleged* support for anti-Israel militant groups is also a cause for concern, further exacerbated by Iran's involvement in Syria. In this regard, Israel's multi-tier missile defence system which includes the Arrow (or Hetz, anti-ballistic missile system), designed to intercept long-range ballistic missiles in the stratosphere is being deployed in order to keep an eye on Iran, and the Iron Dome, which defends against short-range rockets from the Gaza Strip. There is also the deployment of David's Sling which is meant to counter medium-range type missiles possessed by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah militants.

This latest development is not only about Israeli defence, but also about projecting power in the region—especially to its immediate neighbours such as Iran, Syria and Lebanon. It goes without saying that if Israel's nuclear facility is threatened; this will undoubtedly be used by the US to step-up 'security operations' thereby

further aggravating a tense situation in West Asia.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ "First US military base in Israel", September 18, 2017, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/235696>. Accessed on September 20, 2017.

² Ellen Mitchell, "US opens first permanent military base in Israel", *The Hill*, September 18, 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/351274-us-opens-first-permanent-military-base-in-israel>. Accessed on September 20, 2017.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "US opens first permanent military base as tensions with Iran rise", September 19, 2017, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/us-opens-first-permanent-military-base-in-israel-as-tensions-with-iran-rise/5609675>. Accessed on September 22, 2017; However, Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris in "Israeli nuclear weapons, 2014" claim that Israel has a stockpile of approximately 80 nuclear warheads for delivery by two dozen missiles, a couple of squadrons of aircraft, and perhaps a small number of sea-launched cruise missiles, as published in *Bulletin Of The Atomic Scientists*, Volume 70, Issue 6, November 01, 2014, <http://thebulletin.org/2014/november/israeli-nuclear-weapons-20147799>. Accessed on September 29, 2017.

⁵ "Section 1259J, Authorisation of United States Assistance to Israel", 114th Congress 2015-2016, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/4909/text#toc-HCB514E5A21DE4CEC9508A4806AF7D888>. Accessed on September 20, 2017.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ n. 1.

⁸ "Israel and US Open First American Military Base in Israel", September 19, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/israel-us-military-base/4034781.html>. Accessed on September 20, 2017.

⁹ The US has Naval Bases in Bahrain, Djibouti and Kuwait, Army Bases in Kuwait and now Israel and Air Force bases in Kuwait, Qatar and Turkey, respectively.