

**“Resist, Maneuver or Concede?
Three Paths for Iran Facing U.S. Resolve”**

Maison du Futur

Thursday, September 12, 2019

Fast moving developments over the past three months have dramatically escalated the situation in the Arabian/Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman to unprecedented levels. The maximum pressure policy adopted by the United States (U.S.) Administration to compel Iran to adhere to its list of demands – especially negotiating a new nuclear agreement – has prompted a counter policy of extreme brinkmanship by Tehran. A series of attacks on tankers in the Strait of Hormuz have been linked by Western Intelligence sources to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Iran has also seized three tankers – including a British one – under various pretexts. Threat to shipping lanes and tankers drove the United States, Britain and other countries to increase their naval and military presence in the region amidst plans by Washington and London to create an international armada to patrol and secure the area between the Straits of Hormuz and Bab el Mandeb.

In light of these developments, “Maison du Futur” held its third “War Game Simulation” Seminar, organized in cooperation with the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation (KAS)/ Beirut Office entitled: “Resist, Maneuver, or Concede? Three Paths for Iran Facing U.S. Resolve.” The Seminar included three sessions under the Chatham House Rule, moderated by a senior expert, and discussed different scenarios for the outcomes of the crisis.

“Maison du Futur” stressed that the objective of these seminars is to provide a free space to address the different aspects of the numerous challenges facing the region and find peaceful solutions. It noted that the subject of this Seminar is thorny and complex. Its dimensions and repercussions cannot be confined to the two sides of the crisis, namely the United States and Iran. Its consequences have been felt in many States in the region. It has been directly affected by many factors, such as the Israeli role and the policies of its Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who chooses to exacerbate the crisis over de-escalation. The declaration by Israel of Jerusalem as its capital, its annexation of the Golan, and tensions with the West Bank bring the U.S. back to square one, and revoke all previous treaties, leaving a significant impact on the region. The last three Israeli attacks on Lebanon, Syria and Iraq also come into play and do not really advance any peaceful solution. On the other hand, the Iranian leadership is also complex, and one must take a step back and look at the whole picture before analyzing the current crisis. Iran's influence in the region has grown through its proxies, its direct military intervention in

more than one crisis, its practices in the Strait of Hormuz and the threat it poses to international shipping.

As for the U.S. leadership, it has always been inconsistent and its positions ambiguous. We remain unable to predict the policies that President Donald Trump will adopt. Can he change course to achieve sustainable peace in the region? Will he meet President Hassan Rouhani on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly in New York? The facts are not encouraging. All the initiatives he has taken, whether regarding North Korea or the Taliban, have yet to yield tangible results. In addition, he has caused tensions in the United States' trade relations with more than one country in three different continents: America, Europe and Asia.

We stress that “Maison du Futur” will remain an open space for free dialogue that brings together all parties in the region's different crises. The main goal of these meetings is to pave the way towards a free and impartial dialogue among conflicting parties to resolve the crisis. Our endeavor may be far-fetched, but we will always try to find a peaceful means to solve conflicts.

The expert started by thanking the organizers of the Seminar, which is introducing a new methodology to the Arab World, namely a simulation of war and peace in the region. He explained that each participant would represent a party to the conflict and defend its own interests. Participants will express their positions openly and straightforwardly to reach an objective outcome on the course of things. He said there were numerous scenarios in the crisis between the U.S. and Iran, especially given the intransigent Iranian leadership whose ambition is unstoppable, at a time when the U.S. Administration lacks a clear vision on how to approach the crisis and facts imply that the U.S. President does not want war. The first session will address the tensions in the Gulf and the prospects of an open war that drags in many States allied to each of the two sides. The second session will tackle the turmoil in the Levant, the repeated confrontations at the borders, and whether they will lead to an open war or remain contained. The last session will be devoted to the discussion of peaceful solutions, the mechanisms that can lead to them and their outcomes. It is a very important session, especially in light of the recent developments, namely Donald Trump firing his National Security Advisor John Bolton who is known to be very tough on Iran. This could mean it is possible for a U.S.-Iranian dialogue to be held. At the end of each session, we will try to give the floor to the audience to comment. The expert pointed out that during the sessions, he would present a number of scenarios as events that have actually happened, to listen to the different reactions.

The first session started with the first scenario: Due to recent developments, the number of U.S. and British vessels has grown in the Gulf, increasing the likelihood of clashes. There is a U.S. led effort to establish a joint naval force to protect maritime navigation.

Scenario 1: An explosion on one of the U.S. vessels caused either by a naval mine or by a drone, has led to a number of casualties. The U.S. and its allies are pointing the finger at Iran, while the

latter denies any involvement. What is the reaction of the parties directly involved in this incident? In addition, what is the reaction of their allies?

U.S. position:

U.S. representative: The U.S. representative stressed that President Trump has reiterated, more than once, that he will respond to any attack on the United States, its assets and interests, which leads to material and human losses. However, he expected the response to this attack to be limited to some Iranian sites without leading to a large number of victims. He also expected the Iranians to retaliate but remarked that their retaliation would also be limited. According to him, President Trump would authorize military reinforcements to be sent to the region and strengthen intelligence to anticipate and monitor any future Iranian attack. He also expected Trump to give orders to launch cyber-attacks that could have disastrous consequences on Iran, especially since he prefers this type of attacks. He believed the U.S. response would not go beyond these measures and stressed that Americans and their allies might decide to establish a force to accompany the vessels not only in the Gulf but also if they were moved to the Mediterranean.

Senior expert: The U.S. will therefore respond with a limited attack, military reinforcements, and intensification of intelligence efforts and cyber-attacks.

Iranian position:

Iranian Representative: “First of all, it must be emphasized that Iran is avoiding war. This is the fact on which our assessment of Iran's policies and positions should be based. In the current situation, Iranians believe they are targeted, and their independence is threatened, especially by the United States. This did not start with the current U.S. Administration. This has always been the case with the previous Administrations. Did Iran's former Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh, possess a rocket arsenal in 1953? Did Iran have nuclear ambitions back then as it has been accused today? Of course not. However, U.S. and British intelligence tried to overthrow him through Operation Ajax, for the sole reason that he decided to nationalize oil companies, which is a legitimate Iranian right. Mosaddegh wanted to cooperate and coexist with the United States, while enjoying a minimum degree of autonomy. This is why he nationalized oil companies and in return, the United States orchestrated a coup against him. Autonomy and independence are very important for Iranians. The demand for autonomy was the foundation of the Iranian revolution. The outside world does not understand much about the regime in Iran. This is not only about its political philosophy and background. It is also about its tendency to be

autonomous without bowing to American rules, especially with the Iranian motto “No East, No West” coined by Khomeini.”

He added; “This attachment to our autonomy continues to be targeted today. Whenever it comes under attack, it is met with a strong, calculated and intelligent reaction simultaneously, knowing that history proves that Iran has never been the aggressor. Today, Iran is domestically very solid which gives further strength to the Iranian people and government. I am not saying this as part of a media campaign, but recent events have proven how unified reformists and conservatives are in the face of any foreign attack or threat. When confronted with threats to our nation, all personal interests are set aside. This cohesion and unity will allow Iran to strongly confront any foreign aggression. However, I reiterate that Iran does not want war. Nevertheless, it will not stand idly by while the U.S. and Israel are progressively suffocating its people to death. Sanctions can only be interpreted as an indirect terrorist military aggression against Iran and all Iranians. This is a terrorist and economic war par excellence, and Iran's response will be appropriate, strong and intelligent. It will be a contemporary war and Iran shall defend itself with all its might.”

He continued: “Should this scenario take place, an Iranian attack would certainly be legitimate, and the response to any U.S. aggression would not be limited to Iran. It would rather include Iran's allies in the region and the Axis of Resistance. This Axis would defend itself and its existence with full force. I do not think the situation in the region can afford to be shaken this strongly. Perhaps the U.S. President, personally, does not want to wage war, but the United States' regional allies and the President's entourage want to launch a war against Iran and are inciting him to do so. Bolton's dismissal is a case in point. In the event of a war, its consequences would be irretrievable, because as I have said, it would not be against Iran alone and Iran would not defend itself alone. All its allies in the region would join it. The other point I would like to make is that Iranians are aware that surrender costs much more than war. Over the last decade, we saw how Arab countries, which have completely surrendered to the U.S., ended up. The problem is that aggressors are greedy, and they will never stop once the country surrenders. They will suck it dry. In brief, if, God forbid, war erupts or the scenario presented becomes true, Iran will respond to any U.S. attack on its territories or bases. There are some past examples: when a technologically advanced drone was flying over Iranian territory, Iran's response came quick, decisive and strong: it shut it down. Those who have an idea about the technology used in that drone can see how technologically advanced Iran's responses have become. If the attack is massive, Iran's response will be violent. Because although the Iranian leadership does not want war, its military has its finger on the trigger to retaliate. The response will be legitimate because of Iranian unity and the people's support for their leaders. The strength of the people cannot be underestimated. Seeing their leaders acting rationally to manage the crisis over the past few years, especially the last two years, has helped them in taking an informed decision. In conclusion, the response will be as tough as the attack. We will not compromise on our independence nor on any attack. These are red lines for all Iranian political players.”

Senior expert: The U.S. attack will trigger a response, but it will be rational and specific and will not in any way entail any reason that could lead to a direct and comprehensive war. What is the Gulf's position regarding the U.S. reaction in the event of missiles targeting some of its countries, especially in the absence of any coordination with the U.S.?

Gulf Position:

Gulf Representative: “In fact, it seems that Gulf countries are the weakest in this crisis. There are two factors to be taken into account: 1) there has never been any unified position in the Gulf regarding Iran, even before the crisis with Qatar. Concerning the Iranian cold war with the Gulf, there are hawks and doves. Teheran is aware of that. Some might accuse Iran of having expansionist ambitions, but Iran is actually very rational, and we do not expect it would respond to the U.S. attack by targeting American bases in the Gulf.”

“2) There is mistrust in the relationship between the Gulf and the U.S. According to the security dilemma theory, when you are a small ally of a big power, you feel you are stuck with it. So if the U.S. decides to negotiate with Iran without consulting the Gulf, just as Obama did, the Gulf will feel betrayed. I believe the U.S. will not pay attention to its small allies in the region.”

He added; “I do not think Iran will ever respond by attacking any of the 20 U.S. bases in the Gulf which include more than 30.000 troops. I do not expect the U.S. military presence in the region to be affected. The response by both sides will be limited, unless red lines were crossed. Moreover, we should not rule out the Israeli factor, especially since Netanyahu is desperate to win the elections. Iran is acting smart by retaliating through its proxies without going into direct fighting. I think the first scenario will not lead to a broad regional war that nobody wants: neither Iran nor Trump.”

Senior expert: If missiles ever target U.S. military bases in the Gulf, will Gulf States respond, or will they leave it to the U.S. to handle it?

Gulf Representative: “Some argue that the Gulf is inciting the U.S. to attack Iran. This is a misconception because it is not in the interest of the Gulf and because the United States cannot be instigated. It has its own interests and calculations, and it acts based on its national security. In the event of Iran responding to the U.S. attack by targeting U.S. military bases in the Gulf (which is very unlikely), I do not expect the Gulf to respond. I think it will leave it to the U.S. to handle it. Gulf States will not be involved in the U.S.-Iranian conflict if it ever grows into a war, unless Iran attacks Gulf facilities, especially oil facilities.”

United Kingdom (UK) Position:

UK Representative: “In the midst of the current U.S.-Iranian crisis and the latest developments in the Arabian/Persian Gulf, the UK has three objectives: ensuring the security and stability of our allies in the Gulf, deterring and preventing any Iranian hostility, maintaining the safety and freedom of international maritime navigation.”

He added; “In the case of the scenario put forward, I think the UK's position will be balanced and coordinated with that of the U.S. We will opt for diplomacy, and work with Lebanon, Iraq and the Gulf states to prevent any escalation. We will evacuate British nationals from the region. The UK will not take part in the U.S. response to the Iranian aggression. However, it will be ready to assist in any effort to protect international maritime navigation. We will also call on European countries to join these efforts, especially if Iran does not commit to ensuring the safety of maritime navigation.”

He continued: “We think that any major escalation will threaten the international and UK economies. It will threaten the UK's interests. We will think twice before taking any step that could exacerbate instability. We will opt for diplomacy to resolve this issue, although as I have said, we reserve the right to take part in any effort (of any kind) to protect international maritime navigation.”

European Union (EU) Position:

EU Representative: “Since the beginning of the U.S.-Iranian crisis, the EU has tried to play the role of mediator. We will continue our mediation efforts because we still believe they might yield positive results.”

He added; “The scenario put forward is exactly what the EU is trying to avoid. If it happens, we will first call on everyone to show restraint. I do not believe we would want to be part of the fleets that would protect tankers and ships, because a step like that could drag Europe into a war that it does not want. We would not want to take part in something so dangerous, especially if it is U.S. led and not an international effort, because it will have catastrophic consequences, not only on the region, but also on the world. The Chancellor of Germany made this clear when she refused to take part in any force to protect maritime navigation in the Gulf. On the other hand, Europe is not dependent on oil flowing from the Strait of Hormuz. The issue is therefore not a security priority for us, although we are extremely interested in ensuring safe international navigation. I do not believe Europe will do much, but as I mentioned, it could participate in any international – not U.S. – effort to protect ships in the Gulf and beyond.”

Senior expert: Iran has allies in the region, especially in Iraq. How will Iraq react if Iran targets U.S. military bases on its soil in response to the U.S.?

Iraqi Position

Iraqi Representative: “In this scenario, I think it is necessary to determine whether the attack takes place before or after U.S. presidential elections. We are talking about a specific confrontation. As the representative of Iran has mentioned, the Iranian response will be as strong or minimal as the United States'. Therefore, I do not think Iran would target U.S. military bases in Iraq. I should also note that Iraq is divided on the U.S.-Iranian crisis: some call for neutrality and disassociation while others believe Iran's security directly concerns them. The first group can be represented by the three presidents who refused to involve Iraq in the crisis and to establish an alliance with Iran against the United States, while the second group includes Iran's allies, mainly the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) which have repeatedly and publicly stated that any attack on Iran will be treated like an attack on Iraq and the response will be carried out accordingly.”

She continued: “In fact, the extent of the confrontation between both sides will determine Iraq's response. Officially, Iraq can adopt a balanced position, knowing that Iran may respond to the U.S. by mobilizing its proxies in Iraq. Iran might urge its allies to target some U.S. bases without causing casualties or to intensify their demand for a U.S. withdrawal from the country. The PMF may then bring pressure to bear on the parliament to call for a U.S. withdrawal and announce that Iraq is standing by Iran against the United States. The problem is that there is no unified position on foreign policy in Iraq. Iran can therefore take advantage of this, but it depends on the scale and size of the American response and Iran's desire to escalate or not. Iran does not want war. In that case, Iraq can be compared to Lebanon, except it would be facing a more difficult situation because of the public differences plaguing it. It is possible the Government collapses if the PMF accuses the Prime Minister of not supporting Iran and pledging loyalty to the United States. However, I do not think we would get there. As the representative of Iran said, the situation will remain contained and manageable.”

Senior expert: In conclusion, the different positions agreed on the following: the U.S. response to the Iranian aggression would be limited, and in turn, the Iranian response would be of the same scale. It would take place either in the Gulf or in Iraq. What will the U.S. position be if the Iranian response leads, intentionally or unintentionally, to the death of a great number of U.S. troops?

U.S. Representative: The representative of Iraq asked whether this scenario would unfold before or after the elections. I believe in both cases, it will be the same, because neither Republicans nor Democrats want a full-scale and direct war with Iran, unless an incident ignites

a war and the U.S. is forced to invade – something similar to World War II in 1941 when Pearl Harbor was attacked.”

He continued: “In the event of casualties, I do not think the response would be fundamentally different. However, it would be an indirect or proxy war. As I mentioned earlier, the U.S. would urge its allies to respond with a cyber-attack and would be happy if Iran followed suit. This would attract a lot of media attention rather than becoming an actual military war. The U.S. does not expect any help from European countries, since Europe's role in international affairs has been and will continue to decline. If the U.S. considers it should confront Iran directly, it will confront it in the sea by striking naval targets rather than attacking Iranian soil.”

Senior expert: If the Iranian aggression was strong enough to cause a lot of casualties and was met with an equally strong or a stronger response, what is the possibility of Hezbollah getting involved in this U.S.-Iranian confrontation, especially following Hassan Nasrallah's declaration that any aggression against Iran would not be tolerated? Will it be involved in the confrontation or will it remain neutral? What level of confrontation could push it to intervene?

Hezbollah Representative: “Hezbollah is part of the Axis of Resistance. This Axis includes more than 150.000 fighters with a unified war room in Syria. There are also national leaders to ensure unified military action. In its actions, each group of this Axis takes into account the internal circumstances in the country. So far, all responses have been limited, whether in Lebanon, Palestine or Syria. Hezbollah has been careful not to engage in an all-out war because of the situation in Lebanon. However, if this develops into a full-scale confrontation, Hezbollah will have a duty to participate. The question here is about the role it will play. I think Hezbollah will respond in such a way that it tries as much as possible to keep Lebanon on the fence. It is likely its response will target Israel since it does not need to send fighters abroad. Today, following Israel's repeated violations of Resolution 1701, Hezbollah has a reason to respond directly to Israel through its southern front. Hassan Nasrallah's positions on a large-scale war have been clear: he has warned against it and stressed that it would destroy the region. These positions are part of the deterrence message addressed to the U.S. and Israel to warn them against the consequences of a war. His messages are a warning against war rather than a desire to drag Lebanon into one.”

Senior expert: “So Hezbollah will take part in the war if it is waged on a full scale and when Iran is in a weak position.”

Question by the EU Representative: “I do not understand; in what way would an attack on Israel help Iran?”

Hezbollah Representative: “Hezbollah believes that Israel and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) are the main instigators of the U.S. against Iran. It therefore understands that Israel is concerned in any war against Iran, regardless of whether it is directly involved in the war or not. Israel's attacks on Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are part of the war on Iran. Today, Hezbollah can internally justify any attack on Israel, and this is reassuring. Israel is the aggressor and Hezbollah will not hesitate and will respond to its attacks.”

Senior expert: “What about Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz? Do you think the continued U.S. pressure and escalation to prevent Iran from exporting its oil would prompt Iran to carry out its threat and close the Strait of Hormuz? If so, how will the U.S. and the UK react?”

U.S. Representative: “In fact, we believe it is likely Iran would continue to target the Gulf Sea and deny its responsibility. The U.S. will try to expose Iran and unveil how it is carrying out such attacks. This would harm Iran's interests and the U.S. would be mobilizing international support to attack it. This is a difficult scenario because it requires tremendous intelligence efforts.”

UK Representative: “If Iran were to close the Strait of Hormuz, it would do so by planting naval mines. I believe demining the Strait would be very dangerous because Iran would be deploying missiles along its coast. Military action would therefore be inevitable to reopen the strait. The UK would try to work with the United Nations to organize an international operation to reopen the strait and would provide support to the U.S. The worst and most dangerous scenario is that of closing the Strait of Hormuz! I do not think Iran would take this step because 1) it harms its interests, and 2) what it is doing right now serves its interests better. But if it were to take that step, it would be hard to imagine there would be no military action.”

Iranian Representative: “I do not believe our leadership would close the Strait of Hormuz, not even for one day. It is very keen on keeping this vital maritime channel open. However, as I have already mentioned, the policy of starving Iranians can only be interpreted as a war against Iran. If this war reaches its peak, Iran will defend its people. It will not accept to protect other countries' interests while its own are being jeopardized. This Strait is for everyone. Nevertheless, when countries escalate against Iran, I believe the latter will prevent any ship from crossing, and this is according to statements by Iranian leaders. Allow me to point out that any confrontation decision is an Iranian political decision. The IRGC cannot take it alone as is widely believed and said. Outside International Law, nobody can impose on Iran how, when and to whom it should sell its oil and resources. Iran has always protected the security of the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, but this shall not come at the expense of its own interests, while it is being starved and denied access to this corridor.”

As the discussion continued, the following questions were asked:

A question to the Representative of Iran: You spoke about the Iranian people being progressively suffocated to death. At what point do you decide that you have had enough? How will you respond?

A question to the Representative of the U.S.: You remarked that the United States does not want war, but at the same time, it is smothering Iran and strengthening its military presence in the Gulf. Do you not think this is contradictory?

U.S. Representative: “I reiterate that President Trump is willing to sit down at the negotiation table with Iran. All his efforts today are focused on that objective, and not on waging war. The military reinforcements in the Gulf were only a response to Iranian attacks on oil tankers and ships. They were not intended to create a confrontation with Iran and start an all-out war. Experience has shown that sanctions are a viable and less harmful alternative to military action.”

Iranian Representative: “The sanctions that the United States has imposed on us, and more dangerously on our steadfast people, are a psychological war. We went through some difficult circumstances, but today this is over. I can confirm that this psychological war failed and did not meet its goal, namely pitting the Iranian people against their leaders. On the contrary, it further unified the people and their leaders. There is one important fact that I should point out: unlike other oil exporting countries in the Gulf (whose budget depends by 80 to 90 percent on oil exports), oil only accounts for 25 to 30% of the Iranian budget. Iran's trade activities have therefore continued with its neighboring countries. I think the sanctions policy has failed, and the countries most affected by the war are the U.S.'s allies in the Gulf, especially since they do not have the necessary military experience. Weapons alone do not give you strength and cannot guarantee victory in a war.”

Session II: Lebanon, Iraq and Syria in a U.S.-Iranian Crisis Scenario

The representative of KAS launched the second session. He started by thanking the international experts for taking part in the meeting and then gave the floor to the senior expert.

Senior Expert: In this session, we will discuss various scenarios. We will start with the following: in the last two weeks, we witnessed many developments in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, mainly the Israeli attacks on Iranian sites as claimed by Israel, and the response promised by Hezbollah through its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. Israel justifies its attacks by claiming there are factories of precision missiles in Lebanon and Syria. It said it was only trying to prevent Hezbollah from acquiring such weapons or missiles. It also said that it was trying to limit Iranian

presence in southern Syria. Its operations also targeted PMF bases in Iraq, although it is still unclear whether Israel or the U.S. carried out these operations.

Scenario: Hezbollah carries out a military attack, which prompts Israel to execute its threat and target what it considers a missile factory in the Beqaa. This results in a number of deaths and injuries. How will Hezbollah react?

Hezbollah representative: “We have mentioned time and again that we will respond to any attack, however we will do so in a limited manner. If Israel begins bombarding, the response will be equal to the scale and intensity of the attack, depending on regional circumstances. If the attack takes place at a time when no agreement was reached between the main parties to the conflict, Iran and the United States, the response will be an open one, in other words, it will target Israeli military posts or others, particularly given that Hezbollah today owns smart missiles that are neither blind nor indiscriminate. Its missiles are targeted and reach their destination, particularly in Haifa and Galilee where the enemy has military posts. If the attack takes place following an agreement, the response will be limited and will not result in heavy casualty or severe damage. It is worth mentioning that Hezbollah's work is no longer limited to a military dimension and now has a political dimension as well”.

Representative of the Lebanese State: “It should be noted that first and separately from the theme of the symposium, we have noticed that this symposium is held with a dual representation for Lebanon, the Lebanese State on the one hand and Hezbollah on the other hand. This reflects the reality of the situation on the ground and the Lebanese reality. The Taef accord excluded Hezbollah from surrendering its weapons, as it considered that these weapons were for resistance and they were linked to the developments and results of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Following the beginning of the war in Syria, the Lebanese government adopted a policy of dissociation from foreign crises. Its first concern was to preserve national unity on the one hand, and respect and abide by international resolutions on the other hand. Currently, the Lebanese government is closer to Hezbollah and its domestic, regional and international vision over many issues. It will continue to ensure that the relationship between Lebanon, Hezbollah and Israel is one of mutual deterrence, away from any direct confrontation. In the event of such a scenario, Lebanon will confront, but the nature of this confrontation will differ according to that of the attack: was the Lebanese army targeted or not? Were state institutions targeted or not? We must remain vigilant not just to the possibility of war, but also to how to wage this war and the post-war period. What happened after the 2006 war was more dangerous than the war itself with all the destruction it inflicted on Lebanon. It resulted in enhancing the strength and standing of Hezbollah in the Lebanese decision-making process. It controlled the most important elements of the State and it pushed Lebanon towards the regional Axis of Resistance. Following the Doha agreement, the Lebanese State will first try with Hezbollah to limit the impact of this confrontation and define its location. It will call for a ceasefire and urge the world to understand the Lebanese exception

and the internal situation when it comes to the existence of Hezbollah. There are matters within State control, and unfortunately, there are others outside of its control over which it has no influence. So far, the international community has shown understanding with this conundrum”.

Senior expert: If Israelis strike what they believe is a factory for precision missiles, Hezbollah's response will depend on regional circumstances: either a large-scale response or a limited response. If the response is large-scale, will Israel show self-restraint?

Israeli representative (UK representative took over this task): “First, we must distinguish between two elements in a foreign policy and the rationale behind them. On the one hand, the Israeli government adopted a methodology of communicating with the outside world to highlight the extent of the danger it is facing by broadcasting pictures of Hezbollah factories. On the other hand, Nasrallah has mentioned several times that in any new war with Israel, Hezbollah will rely on the experiences gained in Syria and will harm the Israeli State until its destruction. If Hezbollah's response were strong, Israel will continue to strike and destroy any missile infrastructure, wherever it may be. In the event it uses a launchpad from another country to strike Israel, the latter will strike back. However, the Lebanese internal division could lead to an internal war and we do not want that. Nonetheless, we will not hesitate to respond to and attack anything that might jeopardize our national security. We will target and destroy every site used to launch missiles. At the intelligence level, some pictures emerged displaying how Hezbollah is using homes to launch missiles. Israel has reaffirmed that it will target missile launchpads and not the Lebanese people.”

Senior expert: What kind of response would result in a bigger response from Israel? If Hezbollah for instance targets airports?

Israeli representative: “We must recognize that in the event Hezbollah launches missiles in the direction of Israel, the Israeli defense system will interdict these missiles and Israel will respond equally, even if it meant expanding the range of the attack to strike all launchpads and other targets. This scenario will be tragic because the Israeli State will not tolerate the launching of dozens and hundreds of missiles against its citizens and airports without an even bigger retaliation”.

Senior expert: If the Israeli response is commensurate to the scale of the attack: is Israel trying to go to a third war against Lebanon or is it trying to avoid this war?

Israeli representative: “If Israel can avoid a war, it will. Therefore, today we are targeting missile sites. In the event of a third war, we realize that we will pay a heavy price but we are ready to do so if our very existence and security are on the line. We will not hesitate to launch a ground operation if we successfully destroy these missiles.”

Senior expert: In that case, does the United States hope to begin negotiations with Iran or are the drums of war getting louder? How do you look at Israeli attacks along its borders with Lebanon and Syria, up until Iraq? What would the EU position in the event of a third war between Lebanon and Israel be?

U.S. representative: “The U.S. has expressed its support to any response from Israel in the event of an attack against it. Some might say that a third war with Lebanon could lead to its destruction. That is correct and unfortunate. Lebanon must not allow Hezbollah to drag it into a similar war. If this war begins, the U.S. will support Israel's choices completely.”

EU representative: “Europe is working diligently on preventing any war between Israel and Lebanon, particularly with the presence of UNIFIL forces on the southern borders of Lebanon and we have troops among these forces (Italy is the first troop contributing country to these forces while France ranks second). Given the historic relationship between Lebanon and France, I expect Paris to be the first capital to play a role in this case. Many factors could influence such a scenario:

Are there actually any precision missile factories in Lebanon? Israel has yet to offer solid evidence on the existence of such factories and Europeans do not believe that the threat against Israel is imminent. The Israeli narrative regarding these factories relies on pictures and we seriously believe that the Israeli government is promoting this narrative for purely electoral purposes. If Hezbollah strikes Israel to respond to an Israeli attack, resulting in several casualties and damages, and Israel responds without targeting what it claims are missile launchpads, the situation will be catastrophic at the humanitarian level. We believe that the current Israeli government is using this narrative about missile factories to make electoral gains. Europeans will undoubtedly try to alleviate tensions while investigating the veracity of the reasons behind the attack.”

Senior expert: We will go over the second scenario: Israel launches a strike against Syria resulting in casualties among Hezbollah, Iranians, and Syrian soldiers, and we witness a larger tripartite strike against Israel by launching over 20 missiles towards it. How will Israel respond?

Israeli representative: “I believe that the Israeli response in Syria will take into account the Russian presence or absence in the site where the missiles were launched. It will differ according to both scenarios. If the site does not have a Russian presence, Israel's response will be large-scale and destructive, and it will rely on direct air strikes with unmanned combat aerial vehicles. In the event of a Russian presence on site, we will witness a lot of diplomatic movement between Russia and Israel. The latter will inform the Russians of the strikes on the site so that it can be evacuated of Russian soldiers.”

Senior expert: What is the position of the Syrian government?

Representative of the Syrian government: “The answer to this question is complicated. However, the Syrian government and regime will make the final decision based on two considerations: first, the alliance between Syria and Iran and the Axis of Resistance, and second the alliance between Syria and Russia. Another thing that the Syrian government will take into consideration is whether the attack targeted the Syrian army, Hezbollah or the IRGC. If the Syrian army is attacked, while noting that the army is a red line for the Syrian government because it is the backbone of our fight against terrorists, then the Syrian response will be commensurate with the attack and we will respond equally. However, we will not start a war with Israel. If the target is either Hezbollah or the IRGC, I believe Mr. Hassan Nasrallah has spared Syria the responsibility to respond when he promised that the response would come from Lebanon if any member of Hezbollah in Syria were killed by Israel. This promise spared the Syrian regime and gave it enough room to maneuver politically, in a way that does not cause Syria any embarrassment if anyone from Hezbollah or the IRGC is targeted by Israel on Syrian soil. I note this while stressing that the IRGC are mostly spread along the borders with Iraq. To this date, Israel has failed to destroy any weapons convoy or missile and ammunition sites. Nevertheless, I would like to stress that Syria is the backbone of the Axis of Resistance, given that it is the bridge connecting Lebanon to Iraq and it has an open front with Israel. Tel Aviv today is afraid of the accumulation of power of the Axis of Resistance during the war in Syria which it will surely use in any confrontation with Israel.”

Senior expert: So does Syria hope that Hezbollah will limit the confrontation with Israel inside Lebanon and from Lebanon?

Representative of the Syrian government: “The nature of the response depends on the time and circumstances of the attack, while noting that the Axis of Resistance will not drag Syria into a war due to the great significance of its strategic location.”

Senior expert: Will Hezbollah use its sites in Syria to respond to Israel or will it respond from Lebanon?

Hezbollah representative: “There are plans in place between the countries of the Axis of Resistance (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Yemen) so that everyone is fully prepared for a confrontation, and we have had joint trainings. We will use every front in case of a comprehensive confrontation. Syria has a sensitive location, notably the Golan front. Confrontation will not be limited to missiles. There will be a land border penetration and human entry to occupied Palestine. Hezbollah has put in place several options and plans; a scenario for a limited confrontation; a scenario for a possible expansion towards the Lebanese borders and a scenario for a comprehensive confrontation. Allow me to refer to the Jordanian diplomat and politician Marwan Mashar’s statement regarding a possible Palestinian transfer towards Jordan

to pass the deal of the century. He said that Jordan is under an existential threat. Hezbollah has put in place a comprehensive confrontation plan in the event of this transfer.”

Senior expert: During the 2006 war, Hezbollah received indirect military and financial Iranian support and there are currently a lot of speculations about the ability of Iran to secure such a support in the event of a full confrontation with Israel. Will Iran intervene from its territory to strike Israel?

Iranian representative: “First, allow me to point out that Iran believes that if these missiles did not exist, the geography of the region would have been much different today. Iran has learned the significance of these missiles in our war with Iraq under Saddam Hussein. It was his winning card in the War of the Cities. Back then, Iran only owned a handful of missiles. In fact, these missiles are missiles of peace because owning these missiles prevents the possibility of war. Lebanon's experience has been a great example. A second point I wanted to highlight is the following: the daily mention of Iranian deaths on Israeli media is merely for electoral purposes because none of it has been verified on the ground.”

He added, “I do not believe that Iran will leave its allies and the countries of the Axis of Resistance without support, no matter the cost. It will remain vigilant to any second Sykes-Picot agreement. If it were not for this Axis, the region would have been divided once again and our borders would have been redrawn. The U.S. received nothing during the first Sykes-Picot agreement and today it is trying to reach a second Sykes-Picot agreement that will guarantee its interests, through the so-called deal of the century, which we believe, would be a second Balfour Declaration. Iran will not forsake the countries of the Axis of Resistance, no matter the cost. The members of this Axis are united and there will be no neglect at the operational level. The events and developments on the ground will impose the scale and nature of this support at the military, political and economic levels.”

Senior expert: Would the scenario, whereby missiles were to be launched from the Golan and Lebanon as one front change the Israeli strategy?

Israeli representative: “I think you are going a bit too far with these scenarios especially when you start talking about missiles being launched from Jordan!”

Senior expert: I did not say Jordan. I said the Golan.

Israeli representative: “We expect a confrontation on this front. Hezbollah will use the Golan Heights just as it will use Lebanon. Israel can respond to any aggressive act from the Golan. It will be easy for the U.S. because the Golan is not a densely populated area. We will resort to air and ground operations. Our radars will allow our planes to launch attacks. However, we fear they might come under attack upon their return. Therefore, we will resort to a ground operation in

southern Lebanon. This would be the worst-case scenario for Israel and the Israeli army but we will not hesitate to do so in order to protect our national security.”

Senior expert: What will the U.S. position on a possible Israeli ground operation in Lebanon and Syria be?

U.S. representative: “We do not favor a ground operation. In that case, we will push for a brief and limited operation.”

Israeli representative: “What would Syria's position on a possible ground and air Israeli attack on its soil be?”

Representative of the Syrian opposition: “Last year, Israel perpetrated an act worse than an attack: it annexed the Golan. Nevertheless, there was no response from the Syrian regime. It launched over 200 air strikes and there still was no significant response. I do not believe that the Syrian regime is in a position to make a decision to respond to any Israeli attack. However, I do believe the Axis of Resistance will respond in Idlib. I do not see any possibility of escalation from Syria or from Syrian territory, contrary to what we have heard from the representatives of Hezbollah and the Syrian regime.”

Senior expert: In summary, we can say that all parties are relying on brinkmanship to push each other to the negotiation table. War is not the objective despite the fact that all the actors are resorting to violence. Herein lies the danger of a potential slip towards an unintended war.

Third session

Senior expert: It was obvious in the two previous sessions that the parties to the conflict, notably Iran and the United States, do not wish for a comprehensive war. The objective is to increase pressure for a return to negotiations. On more than one occasion, president Trump has announced that he is ready for dialogue without any preconditions. We have heard the opposite from Iran, which on the one hand welcomed a dialogue and on the other hand linked this dialogue to the lifting of sanctions. There were various attempts in this regard led by the Sultanate of Oman and France. Iran responded to the latest French initiative, as evidenced by the visit of the Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to France on the margin of the G7. Everyone is wondering what impact John Bolton's exit from the U.S. Administration will have on the relations between Iran and the U.S. Does it indicate that the American escalation policy towards Iran has failed? What is the scale of its impact on U.S. foreign policy?

U.S. representative: “For a while now, John Bolton's presence has been useful for Trump. They have both played good cop/ bad cop and it benefited both. However, lately, Bolton led a campaign in the congress to pressure Trump into adopting stricter policies towards Iran; this move angered Trump and pushed him to fire Bolton. There is a difference in the approach of both men to foreign affairs. Trump has always considered that those who will sit at the negotiation table with the U.S. must deserve it. He feels that Iran has totally failed to meet the required standards. Similar to other traditional politicians, he believes that competent institutions must draw U.S. foreign policy. On the other hand, Trump thinks like a businessman and believes that he can talk anyone into reaching an agreement. He has relied in his foreign policy on his personal relationship with heads of state rather than establishing institutional relationships. The approach of these two men to foreign policy has been very different. The problem is Trump's approach has not been successful because he starts by making too many demands and at the end, he settles for little and he might do the same with Iran. As for the nuclear agreement, Trump has mentioned that his predecessor president Barak Obama was crazy to make such an agreement. I think he is trying to sit at the negotiation table with Iran regardless of the content of the agreement that they might reach. Merely sitting at this table might be politically beneficial for him. On the other hand, all countries are now sick and tired of the permanent state of wars in the Middle East and they certainly do not wish for a new war, especially one in which Iran might be involved. They want to reach an agreement with Iran. Trump dreams of being the maker of that deal. He is trying to achieve this objective with all his might. He is also trying to get a commemorative picture with Rouhani! The problem is the ball today is in Iran's court. We do not know if Tehran is willing to sit at the negotiation table with Trump with the current policy of sanctions and preconditions. I do not believe it is possible to reach an agreement because Khamenei does not trust the Americans. More likely, France and Iran will reach an agreement to circumvent the economic sanctions on Iran or to make up for them by asking India and China to

use their currency to allow Iranian companies to sell Iranian oil. There are mechanisms that can be easily operationalized and the U.S. might turn a blind eye to that.”

Senior expert: Do you believe that Trump's flattery facilitated his meeting with Rouhani?

Iranian representative: “The issue of negotiations is complicated and has nothing to do with a position from a U.S. president or secretary or advisor. It must be taken into account within the entire U.S.-Iranian relationship landscape. The United States is threatening Iran. Bolton has been telling Iranians for the past three years that they will not celebrate the 40th anniversary of their revolution. Pompeo has imposed 12 conditions on Iranians to return to negotiations. There are talks now about attempts to change the Iranian regime. This leaves Iranian negotiators with the wrong impression.”

He added, “Iranians will not give in to threats and will not enter any negotiations under threat because the results of similar negotiations are known in advance. In the preamble of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+one in 2015, it was stressed that this agreement was limited to the nuclear project. If there is a need to address other matters, another path should be taken. It must be noted that the Iranian defense missile system is non-negotiable, because as I have stated before, it is a deterrence system, which we will not surrender, particularly after our experience following the war with Iraq. No one in Iran will accept to surrender this system because it is considered in the Persian narrative as Iranian law.

Iranians will not agree to change the agreement. They do not trust American negotiators because they have already withdrawn from a previous one. What guarantee do we have that they will not do it again, that they will not renege on a new agreement that might be reached in the future? We want guarantees that this will not happen again. Until that happens, we wonder who governs the U.S. The contradictory positions of its leaders make us doubt the seriousness of a U.S. policy. What has been happening in the United States in terms of resignations and dismissals shows uncertainty. Iran does not rely on a change in individuals in the U.S. Administration to change its positions. What matters is the U.S. strategic position towards Iran and the Middle East and this will not change with a change in individuals. The experiences of the United States with Libya, North Korea, China, even European allies and its allies in North America do not encourage Iran to negotiate with it. Tehran will not give Trump a commemorative picture with Rouhani as a gift so he can achieve electoral gains. The U.S. is not betting on the victory of a democrat or another republican to change its position towards Iran. Either way, the latter will remain on the terrorist list. This proves to the Iranian people that negotiating with the U.S. is like negotiating with the devil.”

He added, “I would like to point out one last matter: I believe in the end, Trump and his advisors will recognize the price of going into war with Iran in light of the chaos in the region and during U.S. presidential elections. I recall in this regard that during the hostage crisis in the U.S.

embassy in 1979, former president Jimmy Carter needed to negotiate their release with the Iranians who refused to do so due to the blatant American interference in Iranian affairs. In April 1980, he ordered “Operation Eagle Claw” to free the hostages: A failed military operation that ended with the destruction of two American planes and the death of eight American soldiers. The most important outcome of this event was the fact that Carter's chances for reelection were destroyed. Trump followed these developments closely. I do not believe that Americans can afford the cost of losing more soldiers. Ultimately, negotiations in light of this turmoil, contradiction, preconditions and sanctions will not take place. How can you negotiate with someone who has a knife to your throat? Under what pretense did the United States violate the nuclear agreement, at a time when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), European countries and the United Nations reaffirmed the commitment of Iran to this agreement which was considered as a win-win for all?”

Senior expert: Before the following scenario: Iran refuses to sit at the negotiation table under these conditions and sanctions against it. The U.S. wants to negotiate but it still not desperate enough to give up its conditions. Do you not believe there is a need for some hidden diplomacy to build trust between parties and open channels between them before the current policy leads to a miscalculation and a war that none of the parties want? Does that reality not open the door before countries trying to mediate between both parties to resolve the conflict, notably the UK? Is it ready to play this role or is it too busy with Brexit?

UK representative: “You are right. The UK is busy with the exit from the EU. It is unlikely that it will play the role of a mediator given that the issue is not currently on its list of priorities. The UK has the ability to play that role but the problem is that it does not distinguish between a nuclear weapon, ballistic missiles and other Iranian practices, especially in the Middle East. The Iranian government has and continues to undermine the security and stability of the region with all the consequences this may have on the entire world. It is making it difficult for the UK to play the role of mediator. We must clarify a very important point. The UK is not a neutral party to this crisis. It will undoubtedly stand with the U.S. if it had to pick a side. During the past five months, the UK's policy towards Iran has become closer to that of the U.S. than that of the EU.”

Senior expert: Will the French initiative bear fruit?

EU representative: “We hope so. However, Trump wants any success with Iran to be his success alone and does not want anyone else to achieve it. We wonder if he would ever give credit to the French. I believe that U.S. sanctions complicate matters. There is a lot of talk about some exceptions but no one will risk dealing with Iran with these sanctions in place. In this regard, Europeans cannot give Iran anything. What matters to Europe is reaching an agreement, no matter who reaches it. I believe that attempting to address pending issues with Iran all at once will lead nowhere. The rules of negotiations dictate that we must focus on one thing at a time. It

would have been better for the U.S. to maintain the nuclear agreement and launch new negotiations on other matters.”

Senior expert: What will the position of Gulf countries be if there is any progress towards reaching an agreement with Iran, particularly if they do not participate in the negotiation process and if they are not given any role in that process?

Gulf representative: “At first, we were not pleased with the negotiations that took place under the table between Iran and the U.S. We asked to give a seat at the table to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, given that they would be the most adversely affected by a limited or open confrontation. The problem is the absence of any unified position from Gulf countries on this issue. The KSA, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain opposed it while Kuwait, Qatar and the Sultanate of Oman understood the situation even though they did not welcome this development.”

He added, “Today, Gulf countries believe that Iran will win in a confrontation. It is clear in its positions while that of the U.S. Administration and its president are unclear. We cannot deny that Iran is now controlling dossiers while we sit on the sidelines or while we are adversely affected by the situation. We have no role in everything that has been happening although this situation has a direct impact on us. Iran is playing in a smart way and Bolton's dismissal is a win for Iran. The problem is that Trump is unreliable. If the U.S. and Iran reach a modified nuclear agreement, will Gulf countries contribute to its drafting, while noting that the latter do not care about nuclear weapons. They only care about Iran's practices. Trump is thinking more like a candidate rather than a president. Therefore, I believe any agreement with Iran will give him an achievement in foreign policy because so far, he has been unable to achieve anything.”

Iraqi representative: “About three weeks ago, and during negotiations over the detained UK vessel, word got out that the UK has been in contact with the Iraqi Prime Minister to solve the crisis with Iran. Iraqis felt jubilant because they were playing a role in this matter, although it should be noted that the Iraqi government does not have the ability to negotiate with or pressure Iran. Unfortunately, the political class in Iraq is a mere puppet in the hands of Iran. Politicians are not even agents! Iraq cannot play the role of a mediator. If Iraq gets a seat on the negotiation table, its biggest concern will be Iran's destabilization practices. President Trump wants to open the nuclear dossier and to address it successively. He also wants to address the issue of ballistic missiles because it concerns Israel. As for other matters, notably Iran's agents in the region, he believes that Israel can handle them. Therefore, he will not address the issue of Iranian interference in our affairs. In this regard, I would like to ask the U.S. representative the following question: what little does Trump want to add to the nuclear agreement for him to be satisfied with it? I also want to ask the Iranian representative the following question: You are asking the

U.S. to make concessions even before the start of the negotiations, at a time when you keep reaffirming that you will only negotiate over the nuclear dossier.

U.S. representative: “There are many reasons that drove President Trump to withdraw from the nuclear agreement:

- Ballistic missiles;
- Putting an end to Iran's regional activities that are undermining security and stability;
- Amending the IAEA's inspection mechanism;
- I would add to that Iran's location from Israeli borders.”

Iranian representative: “I do not wish to interfere in Iraqi affairs but I will not have anyone say that Iraqis are puppets in the hands of Iranians. That is offensive for Iraqis. The elections brought forward the current Iraqi leadership. As for the answer to your question: Iran only wants its rights. The U.S. is trying to impose its hegemony on Iran and force it to pay the price of something that is its right and it will not agree to that”.

Senior expert: I will conclude with a set of questions to expand our discussions: How can the parties start a dialogue? Will everyone be on the same page? Will Gulf countries welcome a dialogue in which they are not participating? What about the Lebanese and Iraqi governments that are bearing the consequences without playing any role therein? What about the Israeli elections whose results are still unknown? If they have a unified government, will that reflect positively on the nuclear agreement? KSA is trying to force Iran to put an end to its practices that are undermining security in the Gulf and the Middle East. Israel is concerned about the same matter. It also wants to make sure that Iran's agents in Syria and Lebanon do not have access to precision weapons that could threaten its national security and change the balance of power. The focus today on nuclear weapons is no longer as strong as before.

The representative of Maison du Futur concluded by stressing on the Israeli factor because Israel considers Iran as an existential threat and might be more inclined to go to war than to peaceful negotiations.