The Israeli-Iranian Cold War Heats Up

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Last month, Israeli fighter jets bombed a series of weapons depots north of Baghdad, Iraq, destroying facilities that were being used by the Iranian regime to ferry weapons to proxy forces in Syria. The event was a milestone, marking the first time the Jewish State is known to have carried out airstrikes on Iraqi soil since its destruction of Saddam Hussein's fledgling nuclear program back in 1981. But it is also an important barometer of a broader Israeli campaign against Iran's proxies and influence in the region — a national effort that is now picking up serious steam.

Israel's activism, showcased in the mid-July airstrike in Iraq as well as other recent sorties against Iranian-linked targets in neighboring Syria, is understandable. Over the past several years, Iran's intervention in the Syrian civil war in support of its strategic ally, Bashar al-Assad, has allowed Tehran to entrench itself deeply along Israel's northern border. While officials in Jerusalem initially hoped that the United States or Russia (which also heavily backs the Assad regime) might be able to force Iran's exit from the Syrian theater, they have gradually reconciled themselves to the notion that the Iranian presence there is becoming more and more permanent.

Indeed, the Iranian regime has been working diligently to solidify its footprint in, and hold over, the Syrian state. It is doing so through a multi-pronged strategy that involves extensive investment in various sectors of the Syrian economy, the acquisition of strategic territory in places like Deir Ezzor, and the resettlement of foreign Shi'a so as to progressively alter the demographic composition of the country. These efforts have succeeded in greatly strengthening Tehran's Syrian stake — and expanding the potential threat it poses to Israel in the process (something that Israel's bombing of Iranian drone facilities in Syria over the weekend makes abundantly clear).

In response, Israel's government has increasingly begun to go on the offensive. A recent paper by Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Strategic Studies, the country's most influential think tank, provides a good explanation of exactly why. Israel, the study notes, is seeking the "victory of time over space."

Since the 1980s, the study outlines, Israel's wars have shifted away from deterring conventional Arab armies toward "asymmetrical fighting against terrorist organizations." In such conflicts, the country's goals are essentially twofold: to "reduce the duration and damage of war to a minimum, and [to] defer the next war for many years." In other words, as far as Israel is concerned, the best defense is a good offense, and this is precisely the strategy that it is putting into play against Iran.

In this context, Israel's recent airstrikes in Iraq are likely just the beginning. Indeed, Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Jarida recently reported that the Israeli government is now also contemplating military strikes in the southern Persian Gulf against targets associated with Yemen's Houthi rebels, another Iranian proxy which has received significant military and financial support from Tehran.

Politically, meanwhile, Israel's expanding activism speaks volumes about America's Iran policy. Over the past several months, the Trump administration's campaign of "maximum pressure" against the Islamic Republic has undeniably had a significant impact on country's finances and overall economic stability. What is far less clear, however, is whether the United States is having any real success in rolling back Iran's broader activities and assets in the region, of which its extensive network of proxies remains a major part.

To judge by the growing pace of Israel's activities against precisely those forces, it isn't. That makes Israel's July military strikes a portent of things to come, as officials in Jerusalem increasingly seek to take matters into their own hands.