



The Iranian-Israeli Conflict Goes Online

May 26, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman** *Al-Hurra Digital*

Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Iran; Israel

A different kind of conflict is taking shape in the Middle East. Unlike the long-running Syrian civil war, this one is not a pitched power struggle between an entrenched secular dictatorship and assorted Islamist forces. Nor is it a brutal political tug-of-war between rival militias, the way post-Muammar Gadhafi Libya has become. Rather, it is a further intensification of the ongoing shadow war between Israel and its regional nemesis, Iran – one that has now begun playing out in cyberspace.

In late April, as Israel was busy managing its response to the coronavirus pandemic, the country's National Water Authority was struck by a large-scale cyberattack. The operation was designed to hijack and manipulate industrial control systems and destroy critical data at sites linked to the country's national water network. In all, six separate facilities responsible for water supply and waste management were targeted by hacks subsequently identified as having originated from Iran.

The damage incurred was moderate in nature, and the country didn't experience the kind of system failure that, for a water-stressed nation in the arid Middle East, could have proved catastrophic. Nevertheless, the situation was serious enough that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu convened the country's "security cabinet" to review the situation and plan out a strategic response.

The results became visible on May 9th, when a cyberattack struck a key shipping terminal near the southern Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. The attack against the Shahid Rajaei facility caused large scale disruptions to ship and truck traffic that lasted for days. While Israel's government has not confirmed its involvement, the *Washington Post* has conclusively linked Jerusalem to the "highly effective" attack.

The tit-for-tat exchange represents a notable escalation in the deepening tensions between the two countries. Over the past two years, Israel has carried out hundreds of air strikes against Iranian personnel, facilities and installations in southern Syria in an effort to degrade the Iranian regime's position there. More recently, these sorties have focused in particular on the growing arsenal of precision-guided munitions now in the hands of Iranian proxies – weaponry that, if left unaddressed, Israeli officials fear could decisively tip the regional balance-of-power away from their country.

That pressure appears to be having a significant effect. Before he left office earlier this month, outgoing Israeli defense minister Naftali Bennett announced publicly that "Iran is significantly reducing the scope of its forces in Syria and even evacuating a number of bases" in the Ba'athist state as a result of Israeli pressure. (Israeli military intelligence has now confirmed that assessment.) Bennett has since vacated his post, but his successor – former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz – can be expected to preserve and even expand the country's current Syria campaign.

Israel's successes, however, are a clear challenge for Iran. Amid waning strategic fortunes in Syria and its own ongoing nationwide health crisis, the Islamic Republic is finding it more urgent than ever to showcase its regional prowess. That was the rationale behind the Iranian navy's recent harassment of U.S. vessels in the Strait of Hormuz – an incident severe enough to elicit a threat of military escalation from President Trump. It's also the reason why, in response to Israel's battlefield successes, Tehran is now turning its attention to cyberspace, and seeking to showcase its capabilities and destructive potential.

Only time will tell whether the cyber domain turns into a full-blown front in the evolving Israeli-Iranian conflict. What is already clear is that the ongoing confrontation between Tehran and Jerusalem is becoming more complex – and more potentially volatile – than ever before.