



Israel's New War is Part of Iran's Strategic Plan

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Ever since the Hamas terrorist group carried out its savage campaign against Israel nearly two weeks ago, countless observers have nervously watched the start of what, as of this writing, stands as a real risk of spiraling into a regional war. Considerably less well understood by most, however, is that the current conflict is very much a proxy war – one by which Iran's radical regime is attempting to reshape the Middle Eastern order in its favor.

The reasons have everything to do with what I heard from one well-connected Iranian academic on the sidelines of a major international conference: that the radical regime in Tehran is now facing three concentric circles of crisis.

The first of these is local, stemming from the persistent nationwide protests that have rocked the Islamic Republic since the September 2022 death in police custody of Kurdish-Iranian activist Mahsa Amini. Those protests, which have continued despite repeated regime crackdowns, have confronted Iran's clerical rulers with the most profound challenge to their legitimacy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The second is regional, driven by Iran's growing marginalization amid a spate of new Israeli-Arab political and economic contacts. Over the past three years, this normalization wave, kicked off by the September 2020 signing of the Abraham Accords, has fundamentally altered the complexion of the Middle East. And there have been encouraging signs of yet more such contacts to come.

The third is international, a product of the regime's increasingly mature nuclear program. Since revelations of a clandestine Iranian atomic effort broke into the open some two decades ago, the international community has worked to complicate the Islamic Republic's path to the bomb as much as possible. The result has been a widening array of economic sanctions that, over the years, have profoundly affected the country's fiscal health and prosperity.

That last arena is more or less resolving on its own, thanks largely to the Biden administration's dogged efforts to resuscitate the 2015 nuclear deal known as the JCPOA. Its resulting lax enforcement of sanctions has allowed billions of dollars in oil revenue to flow to the Islamic Republic, stabilizing an economy that, just a couple of years ago, was profoundly rickety.

But the other two fronts represent serious, sustained challenges to the Iranian regime's internal cohesion and regional standing. And the unfolding Israel-Hamas war has the power to play a pivotal role in improving both.

Geopolitically, Hamas' horrific October 7 terror rampage and the resulting military response launched by the State of Israel have had seismic effects. It has short-circuited the prospects for normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, with indefinitely frozen bilateral discussions. Even more worryingly, it has inflamed the Arab "street" in many regional capitals, including those that have taken the risks of normalizing with Israel. And, as Israel's military response to Hamas has ramped up, regional human rights issues (including the Iranian regime's extensive repression of its people) have been replaced by a focus on the potential for a humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip.

All this has been a boon to Tehran, allowing it to consolidate control at home while stoking a deepening Israeli-Arab divide in its immediate neighborhood.

The Biden administration doesn't seem to have drawn the connection. While expressing its steadfast support of Israel, the White House has remained adamant that, at least as yet, there are no signs of direct Iranian involvement in Hamas' October 7 atrocities. But that's largely immaterial because— regardless of whether Tehran gave a "green light" to Hamas—Iran's long-running support for the terror group (which totals as much as one hundred million dollars annually) clearly laid the groundwork for its latest campaign. Moreover, Hamas' actions dovetail neatly with Iran's own strategic objectives: to improve its domestic situation and simultaneously unravel Arab-Israeli integration.

As they work feverishly to defuse the current crisis, officials in Washington would do well to take stock of who benefits the most from it because it isn't just Hamas.

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