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Israel in Iraq: Expanding the Campaign against Iran

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There are growing signs that Israel has expanded its campaign against Iran's efforts to consolidate its power in the region, including in attacks on infrastructures in Iraq that are linked to Iran. An overall cost-benefit analysis should prompt Israel to consider the potential implications of expanding the campaign, among them an early withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and Syria, which would leave Israel alone in the campaign against Iran's entrenchment in the region. The Iranian attempt to carry out weaponized drone attacks against northern Israel is testimony to Iran's arrival at a critical point, forcing it to change the nature of its response to Israeli operations. Israel will have to consider whether the attacks in Iraq indeed help it combat Iran's military capabilities targeting Israel, in particular, Hezbollah's precision-guided missiles in Lebanon. For its part, Iran will have to decide whether to escalate its reactions against Israel, or continue to focus on building the missile array in Lebanon with relatively little interruption. Further development of weapon systems, together with operational opportunities and a crossing of the escalation threshold by Israel, will push Iran to react differently than it has done so far.

There have been several reports in recent months that Iran is building an array of ballistic missiles aimed at Israel in Iraq. This choice of venue follows repeated Israeli attacks on Iranian military infrastructure in Syria, which have disrupted (albeit not entirely) Iran's efforts to consolidate its power in the country. According to various reports, in the last two months, weapons depots belonging to the Iranian-backed Hashd al-Shaabi Shiite militia (Popular Mobilization Forces – PMF) have been attacked in Iraq. Iranian missiles were stored in the weapons depots, and infrastructure for assembling advanced weapons was built there. A strike on an ammunition cache near Balad air base in the Salah ad Din Governorate (north of Baghdad) on August 20, 2019 was attributed to Israel, and was the fourth in a series of attacks and explosions at bases held by the PMF – all in the Baghdad region, or neighboring provinces. It followed attacks at Amerli base on July 19; Camp Ashraf in Diyala Governorate on July 28; and the Saqr military base in the Dura neighborhood of southern Baghdad on August 12.

There is no official confirmation or factual evidence that Israel is behind the strikes in Iraq, but unidentified US officials have asserted that Israel was responsible for bombing an Iranian weapons depot in Iraq last month. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

has hinted that Israel operates in a broad front against Iran and "does not give Iran immunity anywhere." He added, "We are working on many fronts against a country that wants to destroy us, and I have given the security forces a free hand and a directive to do whatever is necessary to obstruct Iran's plans."

On Saturday, August 24, the IDF attacked a helicopter airfield in southeastern Damascus with the aim of thwarting Iranian preparations for a strike against Israel with weaponized drones. According to the IDF spokesperson, the Iranian Quds Force and Shiite militias were deployed in the Damascus area in preparation for strikes against targets in northern Israel. This appears to be an Iranian response to Israeli operations against it, including attacks on sites in Iraq. If so, Israel is presumably responsible for at least some of the attacks, and as such, has extended the front against Iranian military consolidation efforts from Syria and Lebanon to Iraq as well.

Why Now?

During the years of the civil war in Syria, Israel focused on Iran's military consolidation there and on weapons deliveries intended for Hezbollah in Lebanon. Approximately one year ago, there were initial reports of Israeli strikes against weapons transfers and operations of Shiite militias in the Abu Kamal area of Deir ez-Zor province in eastern Syria, on the border with Iraq. According to the reports, Israel refrained from further operations in the Syrian-Iraqi border area given reservations by US Central Command forces, who feared a reaction against their troops stationed in Iraq. Thus if the recent strikes in Iraq were carried out by Israel, it is likely they were launched in coordination with the Defense Department and Central Command, or at least after the United States was briefed to this effect. There has been no official United States report on a policy change that allows Israel to operate in an area under American influence, but there may be understandings regarding strikes on high quality targets, despite the risks involved.

Israel has maintained a policy to prevent the entrenchment of the Iranian "war machine" near its borders in Syria and Lebanon. However, it is currently reluctant to deal with the spearhead of the Iranian-Shiite axis – Hezbollah, which is equipped with a wide array of missiles, rockets, and UAVs in Lebanon, and in particular precision-guided missiles that are currently assembled, for now undisturbed, in Lebanon. Israel appears to have chosen to expand its attacks on the Iranian-Shiite axis from Syria to Iraq in light of the expected heavy cost of attacking Hezbollah's Iranian missile infrastructure in Lebanon. In order to reduce the damage from its reluctance to attack targets in Lebanon, Israel seems to be choosing to operate in a field where the likely price for its operations – certainly if there is no clear evidence that these are Israeli attacks – is immeasurably lower than the danger of escalation with Hezbollah.

Moreover, for the long term, Israel displays boldness, initiative, and proof of the effectiveness of its long arm. It is also possible that Israel has decided to exploit a specific operational opportunity, based on up-to-date intelligence and covert operational capabilities, conducted without leaving a fingerprint, to enable it to surprise Iran, its proxies, and its allies in the region. In the meantime, Iran's subversive operations in Arab countries have been exposed, and forces in the Arab world are encouraged to act against it.

The Embarrassment in Iraq

Assessments of the attack are discussed on social media in Iraq, divided here into three groups: (1) public discourse (mostly Shiite); (2) discourse of politicians and MPs; and (3) discourse of Shiite militia commanders and leaders of the Popular Mobilization Forces.

Until the August 20 strike on, the discourse expressed mainly anger and frustration at the helplessness of the Iraqi government. In May 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, on a surprise visit to Baghdad, presented Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi with satellite and aerial photographs of the Iranian warehouses and weapons located in Iraq. Pompeo reportedly told him that if Iran's military infrastructures and missile capabilities in Iraq were not dismantled, they would likely be attacked. Following Pompeo's visit on July 1, Iraq's Prime Minister issued a government order to integrate all armed groups into the Iraqi army, a move that has garnered support from many Iraqis, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the most prominent Shiite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr. As per the order, members of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are to be subjected to the same regulations imposed on regular army personnel and will fully operate as part of the Iraqi armed forces. Despite widespread agreement, no steps were taken in this regard, and the government lost much support among the public. Against this backdrop, the strikes on the weapons depots are a great embarrassment to the government and the Prime Minister. There is widespread public anger that the government knew about the Iranian military activity in Iraq and was either unwilling or unable to prevent it. In addition, the government played a game of concealment and denial, and chosen not to share details with the public.

Furthermore, there is much criticism of Iran, which is impinging on Iraqi sovereignty by deploying missiles in its territory. There is a near consensus in the public discourse that the Iraqi government must commit to prevent Iran from using Iraqi territory as a platform for its war against Israel and the United States. Leaders such as Muqtada a-Sadr and Qais al-Khazali, the head of the Shiite militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (part of the Popular Mobilization Forces) emphasize the superiority of Iraqi sovereignty and nationalism over serving any foreign agenda (without explicitly mentioning Iran) that undermines Iraqi sovereignty.

Following the August 20 attack, two other trends appeared in the Iraqi discourse. One is operational, and basically calls for improving Iraqi air defenses through advanced interception systems such as Russian S-400 batteries. The second refers explicitly to the party responsible for the attacks – Israel. The discussion on Israel's responsibility takes place mostly among Shiite politicians, led by MP Izzat al-Shabbandar, who tweeted: "The day is not far off when we will see the Israeli Air Force in the skies of Iraq carrying out political assassinations of Iraqi leaders (a hint at Shiite militia leaders) as part of the Israeli-American anti-Iranian project in the region." Other senior Iraqi figures have spoken out aggressively against Israel and against Iran, who clash with each other on Iraqi soil.

Rift also emerged within the PMF leadership. Deputy Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis issued a statement placing direct responsibility for the attack on the United States, claiming there was intelligence proving that the US allowed four Israeli UAVs to penetrate Iraqi airspace and carry out attacks against the organization's headquarters. Threatening the US, he added that a direct response to any future strike can be expected. At the same time, chairman of the PMF Falih Alfayyadh announced that al-Muhandis's statement does not represent the official stand of the PMF, and announced that "the blasts were a result of an act organized by a foreign side," but refrained from naming that side – and likewise refrained from threatening any response against the United States. In light of the criticism, the Iraqi government has directed that any airstrike in Iraqi territory be coordinated with the Iraqi Defense Ministry.

Implications and Looking Ahead

If Israel continues to strike in Iraq, then the risks of harming American assets and interests there will rise. Continuation of this policy could also accelerate a US withdrawal from Iraq due to internal pressures in both Iraq and the United States, which would join President Donald Trump's stated intention to withdraw American troops from the Middle East. In this scenario, it is important that the United States condition its exit from Iraq on the dissolution of the Popular Mobilization Forces and their integration into the state system, with the monopoly of power concentrated in the hands of the Iraqi government. A move in this direction can be a precedent for an international demand of Lebanon and Hezbollah, with the aim of reducing Iran's influence in the so-called Shiite Crescent and throughout the region via the mobilization and deployment of Shiite militias.

A cost-benefit calculation for Israel currently point to the benefits of expanding operations against Iran along the "axis" eastward into the Iraqi front, while signaling a threat to Iran itself. However, factoring in the US component of the calculation suggests that in the overall picture, the cost for Israel may be higher than the benefit: the

withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and Syria will leave Israel alone in the campaign against Iran's entrenchment in the region and against continued Iranian determination to strengthen the Shiite Crescent and willingness to take increasing risks. The Iranian attempt to carry out weaponized drone attacks against northern Israel is testimony to Iran's determination or to its arrival at a critical point, forcing it to change the nature of its response to Israeli operations. Iran will soon have to decide whether to escalate its reactions against Israel, or continue to focus on building the precision-guided missiles array in Lebanon with little interruption. Further development of weapon systems, together with operational opportunities and a crossing of the escalation threshold by Israel, will push Iran to react differently than it has done so far.