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Iranian Nuclear Negotiations and Escalating Tensions with Israel

Unit for Political Studies

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With the Vienna negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program on the rocks, Israel's unilateral "shadow war" against Iran has escalated. Increased attacks inside Iran and sustained military operations targeting the Iranian presence in Syria culminated in June 2022, when Israel targeted Damascus International Airport, rendering it almost completely out of service. Contrary to the past year, when Washington was pressuring Israel to avoid making any move that could sabotage the Vienna negotiations, it seems that the US administration is currently turning a blind eye to the recent Israeli activities. Perhaps Washington is even giving Israel the green light, with the ulterior motive of exploiting these attacks as a pressure tool to push Iran back to the negotiating table and force Tehran to accept the draft agreement made in early March. Meanwhile, as security pressures increase on Iran, efforts continue to be made to strengthen security and military relations between Tel Aviv and some Gulf states. Israeli media reported that Israel has installed radar systems in the UAE and Bahrain to monitor any possible Iranian attacks, and there is talk of efforts by Washington to form a US-led regional defence system that would align Arab countries with Israel to confront Iran.

The Nuclear Deal Negotiations Hit an Impasse

Nearly a year after negotiations to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iranian nuclear deal, multiple sources reported that a draft agreement was on the horizon in early March 2022.¹ The draft stipulated an Iranian commitment to stop operating its most advanced centrifuges to increase uranium enrichment, and that those centrifuges should be stored in Iranian warehouses under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency, in addition to either downgrading or transferring its stockpile of enriched uranium exceeding the limit set by the agreement abroad (mostly Russia).² In return, Washington will lift the bulk of the 1,500 nuclear-related sanctions imposed by the Trump administration as part of his "maximum pressure" policy, and release frozen Iranian funds in banks around the world.³ While this agreement is weaker than the original agreement that the Trump administration tore up in May 2018, the Biden administration is keen to restore restrictions on Iran's nuclear program and avoid getting embroiled in a new war in that region.

To encourage Iran's return to the agreement, the Biden administration removed some of the technical sanctions imposed on Iran by the Trump administration.⁴ However, the wave of optimism in March was soon replaced by an atmosphere of tension with the increasing likelihood that the negotiations would flounder. Both parties reaching an agreement is hampered by two Iranian requests: the first is that Washington provide guarantees that any upcoming US administration will not withdraw from the agreement again, as the Trump administration did, and the second is that the US remove

1 "Iran Nuclear Talks Appear Near Climax, but No Deal Yet," Reuters, 4/3/2022, accessed on 16/6/2022, at: <https://reut.rs/39rV9Wf>.

2 Colum Lynch, "The Little Iran Nuclear Deal That Couldn't," Foreign Policy, 5/4/2022, accessed on 16/6/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3QmQo0B>.

3 Karen DeYoung, "Iran Nuclear Talks Head Toward Finish Line, but Outcome is Unclear," *The Washington Post*, 10/2/2022, accessed on 16/6/2022, at: <https://wapo.st/3xRbVax>.

4 "U.S. Restores Sanctions Waiver to Iran with Nuclear Talks in Final Phase," Reuters, 5/2/2022, accessed on 16/6/2022, at: <https://reut.rs/39xw787>.

the Iranian Revolutionary Guard from its list of terrorist organisations. The Biden administration argues that it is legally and politically unable to bind any incoming US administration to any policy, including honouring the agreement. The Biden administration also believes that putting the status of Iran's Revolutionary Guard on the negotiating table at the last minute threatens to collapse the agreement, given that it has nothing to do with the nuclear negotiations, and that Iran, for its part, has refused to discuss any issue besides its nuclear program. Accordingly, negotiations have been suspended since 11 March 2022, and many questions have arisen about their fate, especially once President Biden decided not to remove the Revolutionary Guards from the terrorism list, despite previous reports of his willingness to consider the matter.⁵

Escalation against Iran

Despite the continuation of Israeli attacks against Iranian targets, either in Syria or inside Iran, during the nuclear negotiations, they significantly escalated in recent weeks as optimism waned about the possibility of reaching an agreement in Vienna. It is likely that the Israeli escalation is currently enjoying a US blessing, because Washington had previously warned Israel against compromising the Vienna negotiations.⁶ However, the stalled negotiations may have prompted Washington to turn a blind eye to the Israeli escalation, which included Iranian targets in both Syria and inside Iran, and was motivated by several factors, the most important of which are:

- The increase in Iranian military presence in Syria as a result of the Ukraine war, which forced Russia to withdraw some of its combat units and transfer them to the battlefields in the Donbas region in Ukraine. It is also likely that Russia's ability to enforce rules of engagement between Iran and Israel in Syria has weakened after Turkey closed its airspace to Russian air traffic in April 2022. Ankara previously restricted the movement of Russian warships to and from the Black Sea, making it difficult to urgently send any Russian military reinforcements to Syria. This led to a growing Iranian influence in Syria and an increase in its activity, with Iran trying to fill the vacuum left by the Russian forces. This was accompanied by a significant increase in Iranian arms transfers to Syria, which Israel used as a pretext to strike Damascus International Airport, putting it out of service. Israel has targeted the peripheries of the airport and its military facilities several times over the past years, under the pretext of intercepting Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah but this is the first time it has put the civilian airport out of service, destroying the landing strips, the control tower and parts of the passenger terminal. This strike thus represents a profound shift in the conflict between Iran and Israel on Syrian soil.

5 Humeyra Pamuk, "Biden to Keep Iran's Revolutionary Guards on Terrorist List, Israel Claims," *The Guardian*, 25/5/2022, accessed on 16/6/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3QmTwjX>.

6 "Report: The Biden Administration Asked Israel to Stop the 'Dangerous Gossip' about the Natanz Bombing," *Al Hurra*, 17/4/2021, accessed on 16/6/2022, at: <https://arbne.ws/3O1felk>.



- Israel has justified its escalation inside Iran by saying that Iran, which greatly accelerated its uranium enrichment process after President Trump withdrew from the former (up to 60 percent) and developed new generations of centrifuges, is closer to making a nuclear weapon than ever before. Tel Aviv claims it is seeking to prevent Iran from achieving this goal by targeting its infrastructure, as well as carrying out assassinations targeting Iranian scientists and experts. Since last summer, Israel has launched several strikes targeting Iranian nuclear facilities, including three major attacks on the Natanz facility. The first occurred in July 2020, when a massive fire destroyed a large part of the facility for the production of enrichment devices, and the second occurred in April 2021, with a powerful explosion completely destroying the internal electrical system that feeds the centrifuges for underground uranium enrichment. The third explosion occurred in December 2021. Israel also carried out a series of assassinations targeting Iranian scientists, the most prominent of which was Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, who is considered the “father of the Iranian nuclear program.” He was assassinated in November 2020.
- The government of Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, since coming to power in June 2021, has raised the level and scope of attacks inside Iran, which, in addition to targeting the nuclear program, have expanded to include Iran’s missile capabilities, drone factories and civilian infrastructure facilities, as well as targeting senior officers in the Revolutionary Guards and Iranian scientists who specialize in the manufacture of missiles and drones. The most prominent Israeli attacks inside Iran were carried out by drones and led to the destruction of one of the largest drone factories run by the Revolutionary Guards in Kermanshah, western Iran, in February 2022. Reports state that the attack led to the complete destruction of the factory as well as the planes that were stored inside.⁷ These attacks came within the framework of a new strategy based on moving the battle inside Iran instead of limiting it to Iranian spheres of influence in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.⁸

Establishing an Arab-Israeli security alliance

In parallel with the visit of the Israeli Prime Minister to Abu Dhabi, on 9 June 2022, the US Congress adopted a draft resolution requesting that the Pentagon work to integrate Israel and a number of Arab countries into a missile defence system to confront Iran.⁹ Attempts to establish an Israeli-Arab security alliance began since responsibility for Israel was transferred from the European Command to CENTCOM in September 2021, after the “Abraham Accords” were signed between Israel and the Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco.¹⁰ These attempts culminated in a meeting between the foreign

7 “Iran’s Attack Was Response to Secret Israeli Attack on Drone Site,” *The New York Times*, 16/3/2022, accessed on 16/6/2022, at: <https://nyti.ms/3b0DJjO>.

8 “Israel’s Prime Minister Explains His New Approach to Iran,” *The Economist*, 8/6/2022, accessed on 16/6/2022, at: <https://econ.st/3aT6uig>.

9 “U.S. Proposes Helping Israel, Arab States Harden Air Defenses Against Iran,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 9/6/2022, accessed on 16/6/2022, at: <https://on.wsj.com/39vrlhO>

10 “Why Israel’s Transfer to US Central Command Could Help Deter Iran,” *Defense News*, 7/9/2021, accessed on 16/6/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/39rsMHN>

ministers of Israel, the United States, Egypt, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in the Sde Boker Kibbutz in the Negev on 27 and 28 March 2022.¹¹

There is mixed enthusiasm from the relevant Arab countries about the proposal to establish a defence alliance with Israel, with the Emirates appearing most enthused in this direction. This is evidenced by the shared vision between the two countries regarding the nature of forces in the region and even the Palestinian issue, in addition to their position on Iran. Among indications of increased security coordination is the number of visits by Israeli security officials to the UAE in particular, with the aim of strengthening the relations of the two parties in both security and defence, including developing joint security and military production, building an advanced defence system against unmanned aircraft, and designing and manufacturing unmanned boats to carry out anti-submarine attacks.¹² Meanwhile, Israeli media has recently reported the deployment of radar systems in the UAE and Bahrain to monitor any possible Iranian attacks. Tehran takes the consolidation of relations between Israel and some Gulf states as threat to Iran and considers any Israeli military presence in the Gulf a hostile act aimed at encircling it after Israel strengthened its military relations with Azerbaijan in the north, while Iran faces the extensive presence of Israeli intelligence in Iraqi Kurdistan. Last March, Iran launched a missile strike targeting what it said was the headquarters of Mossad in Erbil, which was used to launch the attack on the Kermanshah drone factory.

Conclusion

With the faltering nuclear negotiations, the shadow war that Israel is waging against Iran intensifies, as Washington turns a blind eye. Israel's attacks, as part of a new strategy aimed at moving the battle inside Iran, include targets related to Iran's nuclear program, missile program, drone weapons, and civilian infrastructure, in addition to a series of assassinations aimed at destabilizing the regime and exposing its impotence. But this approach also carries significant risks; Iran may rush to develop a nuclear weapon as the only way to protect itself and deter Israeli aggression. Still this approach could open the door to the possibility of a larger and broader confrontation. Another possibility for Iran given mounting pressure and the exacerbated economic crisis is to return to the negotiating table and strike an agreement with the Biden administration. If it can't reach an agreement with the current US administration, Iran is unlikely be successful with any future administration, given that Biden has made reviving the Iran nuclear deal one of his administration's top priorities in the Middle East.

11 Jonathan Liss, "At the Summit They Did Not Commit to Making Speeches Against Iran but Discussed Defense Cooperation," Haaretz, 28/3/2022, accessed on 16/6/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3NSUoV0>. [Hebrew]

12 "Edge Announces Strategic Deal with Israel Aerospace Industries to Develop Advanced Unmanned Surface Vessels," Edge Group, 18/11/2021, accessed on 31/3/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3qQ1d06>.