



## Israel Escalates Actions Towards Iran

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Since last year, Israel has increased its operations against Iran's nuclear programme. The actions corresponded to the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy on Iran. Currently, the Israeli actions are an attempt to put pressure on the negotiations launched by the U.S. and Iran to restore the nuclear agreement. Israel opposes those talks, but further escalation will be limited by the stance of the Biden administration.

**Context and Escalation.** Israel identifies Iran's nuclear programme as the most significant strategic challenge and the main threat to its national security. This perception is supported by the hostile rhetoric and actions of the Iranian authorities, as well as the fear of nuclear proliferation, which would deprive Israel of its status (officially unconfirmed) as the one and only [Middle East nuclear state](#). After the dismantling of the nuclear programmes of Iraq, Syria and Libya, Iran remains the only state in the Middle East with advanced capabilities in this area. An additional area of the conflict is Iran's involvement in the civil war in Syria and its support for organisations hostile towards Israel—Hezbollah and Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Israel under Benjamin Netanyahu has been actively working to limit Iran's abilities to obtain a nuclear bomb. The alleged Israeli operations include infrastructure sabotage, cyberattacks (including use of the Stuxnet virus in cooperation with the U.S.), and assassinations of people linked to Iran's nuclear programme. The Netanyahu government has also been a staunch opponent of the JCPOA nuclear deal signed by the U.S. and other countries in 2015. The main points of criticism are that the deal excludes Iran's regional operations and its ballistic missile programme and the time limits allowing for the preservation and expansion of Iran's uranium enrichment capacity. The policy towards Iran was the main point of dispute in Israel's relations with the U.S. (although they maintained operational and intelligence cooperation) until Trump took power. Israel became one of the staunchest supporters of the "maximum pressure" policy, which led to

the U.S. [leaving the JCPOA in 2018](#) and reinstating sanctions.

Since 2020, there has been a visible intensification of operations attributed to Israel against Iran's nuclear, industrial, and military infrastructure. Several acts of sabotage at such facilities in Iran were reported in June and July last year. In November, Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, one of the architects of Iran's nuclear program, was killed in an attack in Absarda. The most serious infrastructure attack took place on 11 April this year at the Natanz nuclear facility where an explosion destroyed part of the uranium enrichment plant. Iran placed official responsibility on Israel for the killing of Fakhri-zadeh and the sabotage at Natanz. Regional seas are another area of escalation.

According to media reports, Israel regularly attacked Iranian tankers transporting oil to Syria in 2019-2021, and in April this year an Iranian ship in the Red Sea (which allegedly was used for intelligence operations) was damaged. In response to the explosion in Natanz, Iran supposedly attacked an Israeli-owned ship (and two others previously). Israel accused Iran of attempts to launch attacks on Israeli diplomatic missions in Africa and Asia, as in the previous escalation in 2012 (including an explosion at the Israeli embassy in Delhi in January this year). At the same time, Israeli attacks in Syria continue, for example, on arms transports for Hezbollah.

**Political Aspects.** The escalation has a clear political context and is closely related to the dynamics of Israeli-American relations. The actions carried out by Israel in 2020 were in line with the strategy of the Republican administration, which assumed that increased pressure would force Iran to

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make far-reaching concessions in the negotiations expected in Trump's second term. His election loss resulted in a reorientation of U.S. foreign policy. The Biden administration, together with the other signatories of the JCPOA, re-launched negotiations with Iran in Vienna in April in order to restore the Iranian commitment to the agreement (including limiting [the uranium enrichment resumed in 2019](#)). The next phase after stabilising the situation is opening separate talks on a new, broader agreement covering—in addition to de-nuclearisation—the ballistic missile programme and other areas.

The Israeli government officially criticises the return to negotiations. Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that Israel would not be bound by any agreement that “paves Iran's way to nuclear weapons”. Israeli Army Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi called the U.S. plans to return to the JCPOA a mistake, and Defence Minister Benjamin Gantz emphasised the possibility of independent Israeli attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. In this context, the actions carried out since November 2020, and in particular the sabotage at Natanz (which took place after the negotiations resumed), may be attempts to derail the negotiation process. In provoking Iran, it may be hoped that it will react more severely, which it is assumed would force the U.S. to retaliate—escalation that would lead to a breakdown in negotiations and tightening sanctions. In an extreme scenario, a direct Iran-U.S. confrontation may occur if Iran starts to finalise work on a nuclear weapon. Such a scenario, however, would destabilise the region and pose additional threats to Israel's security beyond the current areas of escalation, such as missile attacks from Syria or Lebanon directly on Israeli territory.

At the same time, the Israeli leadership is aware of the limitations of its instruments. Despite the harsh rhetoric, Israel alone cannot stop the Iranian programme with one operation, as it did in Syria and Iraq. Preventing Iran's full nuclearisation depends primarily on U.S. policy, and the current administration prioritises the diplomatic path. In addition, as in the negotiations over the JCPOA, some Israeli policymakers and security institutions unofficially agree that limits on Iran's nuclear programme are a more favourable solution that in the long term prevents the expansion of its nuclear potential.

The Biden administration emphasises that the negotiations with Iran will include consultations with Israel. The parties established an official communication mechanism (the

Israeli side is represented by the head of the Mossad, Yossi Cohen, and other high-ranking officials). A scenario in which future Israeli operations are partially coordinated with the U.S. as an element of pressure in the negotiations cannot be ruled out. The U.S. influence on de-escalation might encourage the Iranians to make their position more flexible, especially since Israeli operations on Iranian soil constitute a serious image and political burden for its leadership. At the same time, the perception on the U.S. side of the Israeli position is adversely affected by the experience of the Obama term and the involvement of Prime Minister Netanyahu at the time in internal U.S. politics, as well as the lack of a stable government in Israel as a result of a [post-election political crisis](#).

**Perspectives.** Tensions between Israel and Iran are at their highest in years, but both sides are still trying to control the level of escalation. However, continuation of mutual attacks will further destabilise the region, especially if they extend to activities in third countries (e.g., in Lebanon where Polish soldiers are stationed as part of the UNIFIL mission). This increases the role of mediators who can provide communication channels between the parties, such as Russia, whose role in Israeli-Iranian relations is increasing. The latest escalation also confirms Israel's high capabilities in intelligence penetration into Iran and operational potential.

The Israeli leadership are aware that the chances of the U.S. and Iran withdrawing from the path of diplomatic talks are low at present. Further escalation (e.g., additional attacks on targets in Iran) would set the Netanyahu government in an openly confrontational stance with the Biden administration and would strengthen the part of the American political scene [demanding more conditionality in U.S. policy towards Israel](#). Escalation, though, will be more difficult due to the ongoing political crisis in Israel and the weakening position of the prime minister. Hence, the most likely scenario in the short term is a de-escalation of Israeli operations in coordination with the U.S., balanced by the maintenance of an advanced consultation mechanism and political incentives, such as greater support for [Israeli-Arab normalisation](#). EU diplomacy may also become involved in activities in this area. At the official level, the participation of EU institutions and states in reactivating the JCPOA is viewed critically, although a change of government in Israel may lead to a softening of positions and rhetoric.