

Attacks inside one of Iran's most secure nuclear facilities are the latest blows in a shadowy battle with Israel

-A shadowy battle between Israel and Iran has intensified since the US withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018.

-They have mostly avoided open clashes, but their ongoing campaigns have been punctuated by high-profile attacks and assassinations.

After the US unilaterally withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, tensions between Washington and Tehran have steadily risen.

For leaders in Israel — one of the US's closest partners and Iran's biggest foes — those tensions have confirmed their misgivings about the deal and about Iran, and they've gone on the warpath.

Iran has worked on nuclear technology for decades. The US has long suspected Iran of using its civilian nuclear program as cover for developing weapons. That suspicion is also held by the Israelis, who have been ensnared in a potentially existential struggle with Tehran since the 1979 Iranian revolution.

A nuclear weapon, or the ability to produce one quickly, would offer Tehran some much-needed security against its real and perceived adversaries. But Iran has vowed to destroy Israel, and Israel fears a nuclear weapon would allow Tehran to back up its provocative talk.

While much of that talk may be for propaganda purposes, Iran has shown the lengths it will go and pain it will endure in order to attack US, Western, and Israeli targets directly or through proxies, giving some weight to its nuclear threats.

To counter that threat, Israeli military and intelligence services have conducted a shadowy covert-action campaign of espionage, sabotage, and assassinations against Iran's nuclear facilities and the people running them.

Israel has also shown that it will go to great lengths to ensure its security, and Tel Aviv is willing to pursue other, more dramatic courses of action in response to threats from Iran.

“We have a duty to be brave and responsible for the fate of our children and grandchildren. We have used force against our enemies in the past, and we are convinced that in extreme situations, there is a need to act using military means,” Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Alon Schuster said in a recent interview.

Indeed, Israel has long followed a no-holds-barred strategy in which the threat justifies the means. Its shadowy campaign against the Iranian nuclear programs uses complementary diplomatic, military, and intelligence tactics.

While Israel’s military has been heavily involved in that campaign, Mossad, Israel’s main intelligence service, has landed many of the blows against Iran itself.

According to a recent report by The Jewish Chronicle, which didn’t name or describe its sources, Mossad successfully infiltrated the Iranian supply chain and used the opportunity to sell Tehran faulty materials that caused fires at the Natanz nuclear-enrichment facility in July 2020.

The report also said Israeli intelligence officers recruited Iranian nuclear scientists who conducted sabotage at Natanz in April 2021 before being smuggled out of the country. Mossad is said to have used an unmanned aerial vehicle to attack the Iran Centrifuge Technology Company, a factory making centrifuges crucial for producing weapons-grade uranium.

Facilities are easier to replace than expert knowledge, and Mossad has also gone after the hard-to-acquire know-how necessary for a nuclear-weapons capability by killing Iranian scientists working on the nuclear program.

Attacks against Iranian scientists have become more brazen. The November 2020 assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, reportedly with a remote-controlled machine gun using advanced artificial-intelligence technology, on a highway in Iran is something straight out of a Hollywood movie.

Israel’s manhunting effort likely draws on experience going back to Israel’s creation in 1948. In the years that followed, Israelis hunted down numerous ex-

Nazis, including Holocaust architect Adolf Eichmann. Following the 1972 killing of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics by Palestinian terrorists, Mossad conducted a similar campaign.

But Tel Aviv understands that this is a stalling tactic that can only frustrate Tehran's efforts and not permanently undo the work its done in pursuit of nuclear technology.

In addition to those clandestine actions, the Israeli Defense Forces has been preparing and presenting Israeli policymakers with military options to take out targets associated with Iran's nuclear program. This is standard planning for any military, and the IDF has received nearly \$3 billion in additional funds to do it.

Israel would also have to take into account second- and third-order effects of such strikes, such as how Iranian proxies, including Hamas and Hezbollah, would react. Those groups, based in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, respectively, would be more likely to try to attack Israel.

Israeli officials are lobbying other countries to take a stronger stance against Iran while refraining from directly discussing what actions they've taken.

"We hope the whole world will be mobilized for the mission. For that, we've allocated a significant sum to increase our readiness. What hit Natanz? I can't say," Schuster, the deputy defense minister, said last month.

As Iran remains committed to its nuclear program, Israel is sure to continue its shadowy campaign against Tehran.

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