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The shadow war between Israel and Iran

The cold war between Iran and Israel is hardly a secret. The two are engaged in a battle of special operations, targeted assassinations, and drone strikes. Although Tel Aviv is not in the habit of talking about its foreign operations, the level of conflict is such that former Israeli chief of staff, Aviv Kohavi, admitted that Israel conducts an operation against Iran roughly every month. Israel has earmarked 2 billion USD for the preparation of an open conflict against Tehran¹.

Nevertheless, Israeli forces were unable to stop the first wave of the Hamas movement's attack on Israeli territory on 7 October. The Palestinian activists neutralised Gaza's border surveillance systems and then carried out a complex attack reminiscent of the operations of the Revolutionary Guards' al-Quds Force. The hypothesis of an "Iranian Involvement in the Attack on Israel"² is widely shared by Israeli analysts, at least the idea that such a large-scale operation could not have been carried out without Tehran's approval³.

In May 2003, Tamir Pardo, commander of the Mossad's Rainbow Unit and future director of Israel's foreign intelligence and special operations, presented to the High Command Forum three options for stopping Iran's nuclear program: "*First: conquer Iran. Second: bring about regime*

¹ Anna Ahronheim, "Israel is capable of striking Iran's nuclear facilities - Benny Gantz", *The Jerusalem Post*, November 9, 2022.

² Sarit Zehavi, "Iranian Involvement in the attack on Israel: A sequence of meetings to approve plans between Iran and terrorist organizations in Lebanon and Gaza", Alma Research and Education Center, October 11, 2023.

³ Sima Shine, Raz Zimmt, "The Dilemma of the Iranian Octopus: The Considerations in Tehran Regarding Expansion of the Fighting", Institute for National Security Studies, October 15, 2023.

change in Iran. Third: convince the current regime that the price of continuing the nuclear project is greater than what they can gain by stopping it"⁴. Realism prompted the choice of the third option.

Iran has always been a favorite target of Benjamin Netanyahu. Since he became Prime minister, security (*bitakhon*) has been at the center of his discourse. Tehran's influence over Palestinian factions and the Shia community in the Middle East puts Tel Aviv within range of rockets and missiles. The recurring theme repeated by Netanyahu of an existential struggle against Iranian denial of Israel's legitimacy has also been fueled by advances in Iran's nuclear program.

For now, the belligerents are showing restraint. Civilians are being spared. Only the enemy's symbols of power are being targeted. Tehran and Riyadh, also sparring, agree on at least one point: the war is secret. At least partly – information is scarce and only trickles out.

Covert attacks began in 2010 with the Stuxnet malware infiltration on Iran's uranium enrichment centrifuges. More recently, the Iranian defense ministry announced (August 31, 2023) that it had foiled a "complex" operation by Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence service, aimed at "*introducing defective components into Iran's missile production process*"⁵. A network of infiltrators operating on Iranian territory had been uncovered.

Key figures in Iran's nuclear industry were assassinated, including Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, deputy director of commercial affairs at the Natanz plant, or Hassan Sayad Khodaei, an IRGC colonel who was due to take command of Unit 840 of the al-Quds Force, involved in planning attacks against Israeli interests in Turkey, Cyprus and Colombia. The targeting and professionalism of the attacks (magnetic bomb, motorcycle bomb, IED explosion) project the familiar shadow of the Mossad.

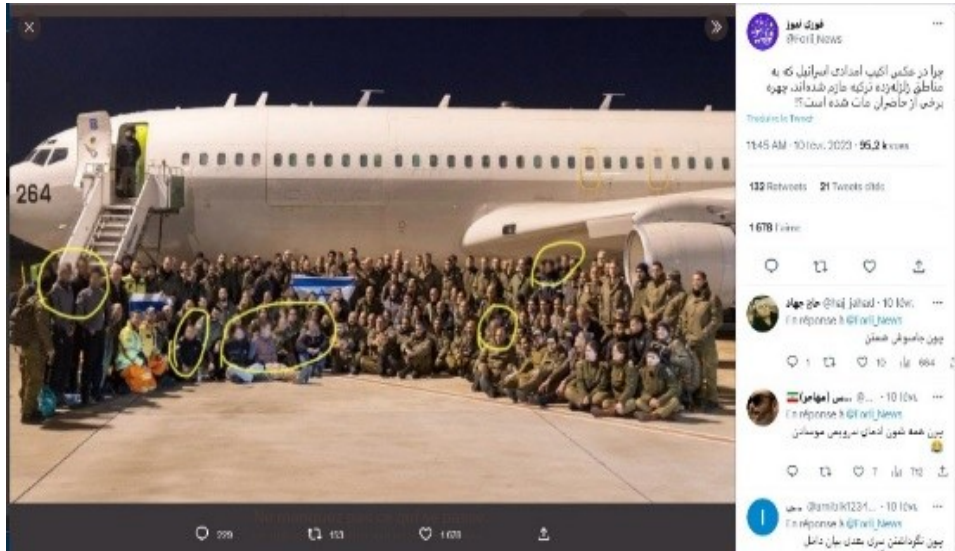
The targeting of Israeli attacks is all the more precise because secrecy allows them to carry out operations of rare audacity. In February 2016, Israeli agents broke into a warehouse storing documents on Iran's nuclear program⁶. They stole half a ton of files, reports, and CDs, which they returned to Israel overnight. The Israeli message was the possession of a real capacity for high quality operational intelligence gathering and operations at a depth previously unknown.

Iran remains suspicious of infiltrations by Israeli services. When Tel Aviv sent aid to Turkey after the 6 February earthquake, a photo (following) of the humanitarian team was taken for security reasons on the tarmac of an unidentified airport. Many pro-Iranian netizens looked closely at the picture and noticed that the faces of some of the aid workers were blurred. They concluded that Mossad agents were present.

⁴ Asa Kasher, "What's Missing from 'Rise and Kill First'", *Mosaic Magazine*, June 13, 2022.

⁵ "Iran Declares Thwarted Israeli Plot to Sabotage Missile Industry", *Al Quds*, August 31, 2023.

⁶ "רה"מ נתניהו בהצהרה על התפתחות משמעותית בעניין הסכם הגרעין עם איראן" [Prime Minister Netanyahu in a statement on a major development regarding the Iran nuclear deal], IsraeliPM (Isr), Youtube, April 30, 2018.



Source: [X/Twitter](#)

Iranian response

The Iranian authorities are determined to confront this allegorical enemy of Khomeinist thought, making Tel Aviv the ultimate enemy to be eliminated. Iran refers to its soldiers and officers deployed in the Middle East as “defenders of the sanctuary”⁷. This expression elevates the defense of the Islamic revolution to an existential value.

As is often the case with Iranians, there is an important distinction between official propaganda and reality in the field. Ismail Qaani, the commander of the IRGC’s Quds Force, boasts that at least fifteen operations are carried out against Israel every day⁸. He does not specify that these are actions carried out by Palestinian factions. What is certain, however, is that in the space of two years, thirteen attempted attacks were carried out by Iranian services against symbolic targets of the Israeli state and Judaism in Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America⁹. In 2022, the director general of MI5, Ken McCallum, said that “Iran is projecting a direct threat to the UK through its aggressive intelligence services”¹⁰. London has reportedly foiled a dozen plots.

Iran is gearing up for hybrid warfare, and its cyber capabilities should not be underestimated. “The Khorramshahr (battlefield) of today is the virtual space”, says Hossein Salami, commander-in-chief of the IRGC¹¹. Electronic warfare units are involved in training IRGC ground forces at the Saman Al-Aimeh camp. An electronic warfare school was established in Iran in December to train future generations of electronic warriors.

The digital battlefield offers the advantage of making Israel accessible at the click of a mouse. Recently, MuddyWater, a group of Iranian hackers backed by the Iranian ministry of Intelligence

⁷ “مدافعان حرم را بیشتر بشناسیم/ روایت مردانی که یک شبه ره صد ساله رفتند حر” [Let’s learn more about the defenders of the sanctuary/the story of the men who made a hundred-year journey overnight], *Khabar Online* (Ir), September 9, 2020.

⁸ “ادعای قاآنی: روزانه 15 عملیات علیه اسرائیل صورت می گیرد” [Qaani: 15 operations against Israel every day], *Farsi Al-Arabiya* (Ir), August 6, 2022.

⁹ Yoram Schweitzer, Anat Shapira, Sima Shine, “Increased Iranian Terrorist Activities: Emphasis on Israeli and Jewish Targets”, Institute for National Security Studies, December 19, 2022.

¹⁰ “MI5 Director General Ken McCallum gave his annual threat update at our headquarters in Thames House, London today”, Security Service MI5, November 16, 2022.

¹¹ “Salami: Iran has power to penetrate deep into enemy’s territories”, Iran Press, February 1, 2023.

and Security¹², launched an attack on the Technion Institute (Haifa), a high-tech university and one of Israel's leading biomedical research facilities. The hackers had already made a name for themselves in 2020 by launching ransomware attacks against Israeli manufacturers. The attack was thwarted.

One of the key activities in intelligence is the recruitment of sources from within the enemy camp. Recruiting reliable human sources is not easy for Tehran, even if it seems to be getting lucky. In 2021, Omri Goren, a maintenance worker at the home of Defense Minister Benny Gantz, was arrested by the Shin Beth. The Israeli had just contacted Omri Goren through Black Shadow, a group of hackers linked to Iran. He wanted to make money from intelligence activities. To demonstrate his direct access to the minister's private life, Omri Goren photographed the interior of the minister's house. He sent a photo of the property tax bill and suggested installing malware on the minister's personal computer. Israeli services intervened before the individual could act.

Sheltered from secrecy

Covert warfare offers tactical advantages. It is a pressure relief valve the belligerents use to dissuade each other from entering an open conflict with the threat of total annihilation between a reputed nuclear power – Israel still refuses to acknowledge its possession of atomic weapons – and Iran, a nuclear power in the making, engaged in an unabashed arms race. The battle currently being waged by the secret services allows Tel Aviv to express its combativeness. Each of its strikes reminds the Iranians that it is capable of delivering decisive blows when it chooses to do so. Until the attack on 7 October 2023, it seemed accepted that Iran benefited from this kind of confrontation, which was both flexible and, all things considered, cheap. It allowed its vindictive propagandists to create a cloud of misinformation that obscured the balance of power.

Ultimately, the only thing that Tehran shares with the Israeli analysis is that the time has come either to prepare for a military option or to reach an agreement *in extremis* that will save peace in the Middle East, which so far seems highly unlikely¹³. The confrontation would then take on an existential dimension, both for Tel Aviv, haunted by the specter of annihilation despite the ongoing normalisation of its relations with Arab countries (Abraham agreements), and for Iran, where the pro-government press never ceases to glorify the ultimate sacrifice. Iran's theocracy has made Israel its allegorical enemy. Defense is elevated to the status of sacrifice. A foundation has even been set up for this purpose, the Foundation for the Preservation of the Works and Publication of the Values of Holy Defense¹⁴. The guiding idea is that if an open conflict were to break out tomorrow between Tehran and Tel Aviv, it would inevitably be devastating for one of the two nations.

The question is whether the 7 October attack should be analysed as a one-off strike by Hamas, an isolated attempt to derail Israeli-Arab *rapprochement* in the name of the unresolved Palestinian issue. Or was it part of a global strategy aimed at creating a front to the north of

¹² "Iranian intel cyber suite of malware uses open source tools", U.S. Cyber Command, Cyber National Mission Force Public Affairs, January 12, 2022.

¹³ "US says Iran can produce bomb in 'about 12 days', UN watchdog finds particle enrichment to 83.7%", *The Arab Weekly*, March 1, 2023.

¹⁴ "بدانیم؟ ارتش شهدای خصوص در باید آنچه / ارتش مقدس دفاع ارزش‌های نشر و آثار حفظ بنیاد فعالیت‌های اهم" [The main activities of the Foundation for the Preservation and Publication of the Values of the and publication of the values of the sacred defence of the army / What we should know about the martyrs of the army], *Tasnim News* (Ir), April 11, 2021.

Israel by coordinating military action with other pro-Iranian armed groups (Syria, southern Lebanon)?

Given the instability of the situation in Gaza, it seems risky to draw up predictive scenarios. However, two trends can be reasonably suggested. The first is the hypothesis of a rise in realism in the face of the sharp deterioration in security caused by the Hamas attack and the Israeli retaliation.

Scenario 1

Iran and Israel know – tactically and intuitively – that they have no interest in provoking a worst-case scenario. The confrontation continues at the current level, with live outbreaks of tension such as the one provoked by the Hamas attack on 7 October. Despite the fighting, the massacre of civilians and the response of the Israeli army in Gaza, Tel Aviv continues to normalise its relations with Arab countries in order to isolate Iran. The Iranian authorities, for their part, continue to finance, operationally support and indoctrinate the main actors of armed violence in the Middle East.

The second hypothesis suggests that sub-regional conflict will be avoided *in extremis*, but that the process of security degradation by armed militias loyal to Tehran will continue or even accelerate.

Scenario 2

In an effort to calm the situation, the major powers agree to put their differences aside and use diplomatic levers to ease the pressure. The aim is to limit the geography of the conflict to Israel's borders and prevent the war from spreading, for example if Israel were to attack the Iranian mentors of the Hamas operation. Tehran could not remain inactive. The hypothesis of an Israeli attack is a subject of debate among strategists because the destruction of the Iranian armed forces in record time is technically beyond Israel's reach, unless we imagine American support, which would have to be massive to be effective. Although a general conflagration has been avoided, the same cannot be said for the multitude of militias and armed groups financed by Tehran, which are engaged in a protracted battle of harassment on Israeli territory.

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