

US and Israel ratchet up threats and aggression against Iran

Jean Shaoul
15 June 2022

The Biden administration is escalating pressure on Iran with provocations that seem designed to blow up the nuclear talks taking place in Vienna. Israel, its regional client, is simultaneously carrying out murderous attacks on Iran and its allies, setting the stage for a dangerous new escalation of conflict in the Middle East.

The talks in Vienna between Iran and the five states still nominally party to the nuclear agreement—Germany, Britain, France, China and Russia—have been stalled since April. Indirect talks have continued, however, with Qatar, Oman and the European Union serving as go-betweens Washington and Tehran.

Iran and the US accuse each other of introducing issues extraneous to the nuclear accord. The reality is Washington continues to impose sweeping unilateral economic sanctions on Iran that are tantamount to war, and Biden is not prepared to suspend them unless and until Tehran accepts many of the demands made by his predecessor, the anti-Iran “war hawk” Donald Trump.

In 2018, Trump abandoned the 2015 nuclear accords—reputedly one of the signal diplomatic achievements of the Obama administration. It then imposed punishing sanctions targeting Iran’s economy, including its oil and gas exports and banking system, above and beyond anything the US had deployed against Iran under Obama or George W. Bush.

While the Europeans bitterly protested Trump’s actions, which cut across their plans for lucrative trade and investment deals with Iran, their claims that they would develop an alternative international financial transfer system to bypass US sanctions proved to be a hollow boast.

As a result, Iran’s economy has been battered. Oil exports, a key revenue source, have plummeted. Iran’s increasingly beleaguered bourgeois clerical regime has responded by incrementally rolling back some of the commitments it made under the nuclear accord, commonly known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCOPA). This includes increasing its uranium enrichment up to 60 percent purity, some way off from the weapons-grade level of 90 percent, so as to demonstrate its unwillingness to buckle to US pressure and strengthen its bargaining position.

While continuing to publicly affirm that Trump’s repudiation of the Iran nuclear accord was a blunder, Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have tried to use the negotiations on a US return to the JCOPA to browbeat Iran into making further concessions, aimed at limiting its influence in the Mideast. At the

same time, they have not foregone the possibility of using a revived JCOPA to bring about a thaw in US-Iranian relations, with the ultimate aim of prising Iran away from Russia and China’s orbit.

Biden, in a highly provocative move, has refused to remove the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) from the US list of terrorist organizations subject to severe economic sanctions, a key Iranian demand.

The US and its European allies are also once again using the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as a political tool to criticise and bully Iran over its nuclear program. Over the objections of Russia and China, and with India and Pakistan abstaining, the US and the European imperialist powers last week pushed through a resolution censuring Iran over its supposed lack of cooperation with the IAEA. IAEA director Rafael Grossi has since said that if this didn’t change over the next three or four weeks, “this would be a fatal blow” to reviving the nuclear deal—something the Europeans have previously suggested would cause them to align still more closely with Washington against Tehran.

Iran’s clergy-led bourgeois nationalist regime has always maintained that its nuclear programme is solely for civilian purposes. The major powers, the IAEA and the CIA, have all concurred that there has been no evidence of Iran having any type of nuclear weapons programme since 2003, as the current CIA Director and former deputy Secretary of State William Burns has acknowledged in his autobiography.

Prior to the IAEA vote, Iran recorded its protest by shutting off two IAEA cameras at the Online Enrichment Monitor (OLEM) and one of its flowmeter systems. Behrouz Kamalvandi, spokesperson for the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, said the cameras went beyond Iran’s commitments under the JCOPA but Iran had allowed their installation to establish “goodwill.” Following the vote, Iran shut a further IAEA 27 cameras at various installations, leaving 40 operational.

At the beginning of June, Grossi paid a surprise visit to Israel, a bitter opponent of the nuclear accords. The visit, which he admitted was at Israel’s request, was a flagrant breach of protocols that demand IAEA impartiality. All the more so since Israel, which has rejected all international nuclear treaties and inspection regimes, has for decades possessed a nuclear arsenal, as then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert tacitly admitted in an interview on German television in 2006. In his meeting with Grossi, Israel’s

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett accused Iran of deceiving the international community by using false information and lies" as it moved towards developing nuclear weapons and called on the IAEA to deliver a "clear and unequivocal message" to Iran.

This is part of a series of highly provocative actions by both the US and Israel.

In April, the US seized an Iranian-flagged tanker carrying 115,000 tonnes of Iranian oil that had run into trouble in Greek waters. The US had designated it along with four others for sanctions, supposedly because of its links to Russia's defence sector. Tehran denounced the ship's seizure as "piracy" and warned it would take "punitive action" against Athens. Last month it seized two Greek tankers in the Gulf.

This follows dozens of confirmed or suspected incidents in a shadow maritime war against Iran playing out from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean. The *Wall Street Journal* reported in March 2021 that Israel had carried out at least a dozen attacks on Iranian vessels, mostly in the Red Sea and eastern Mediterranean, since 2019, a claim consistent with those in multiple Iranian sources.

Meanwhile, the White House has confirmed that Biden will visit the Middle East July 13-16. He will first meet Prime Minister Naftali Bennett—if he is still in power after his government lost its majority this week—and President Isaac Herzog in Israel and the Palestinian Authority's president, Mahmoud Abbas, in Ramallah. He will then go on to Jeddah where he will hold talks with the heads of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq.

A key purpose of the US president's visit is to patch up relations with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, whom the Biden administration initially treated as a *persona non grata*, because of his role in the murder of dissident journalist Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi and other gross violations of human rights. Biden is to discuss "national security" issues with the Crown Prince, along with climate change, increasing Saudi energy exports to ease global oil prices, Iran's nuclear program and the war in Yemen.

With Israel and the Saudi regime serving as its cornerstones, Washington is seeking to cement an anti-Iran alliance, as part of its broader preparations for war with Russia and China, with whom Tehran has forged increasingly close relations.

Such an alliance would involve sharing intelligence, anti-aircraft and anti-drone capabilities, advanced radar deployment and both offensive and defensive cyberwarfare technology to be supplied by Washington and to some minor degree Tel Aviv. While seeking to curb Iran's growing political influence across the region, including in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Gaza, the US is also determined to counter China's economic presence and political influence by offering an alternative to China for investment in building ports, cellular networks and cyberwar capabilities.

Washington's provocations have been amplified by Israel's increasingly reckless military assaults and threats against Iran. Last Friday, Israeli warplanes bombed Damascus International Airport to thwart Iran's efforts to transport weapons to Hezbollah and other regional proxies using commercial flights. Russia, which patrols Syrian airspace, evidently sanctioned the bombing, although it

publicly condemned Israel's attack which has put the airport out of action for weeks.

Last month, the Israeli Air Force carried out 15 attacks against facilities it said were being used by Iran to transport and store weapons and industrial equipment to Syria and Lebanon. Tel Aviv claims that it has stopped about 70 per cent of Iranian arms shipments to the two countries.

Israel has also carried out a series of assassinations inside Iran over the past few weeks, with five senior officials killed in five separate incidents. The dead reportedly include two IRGC officers and three scientists said to be involved in Iran's nuclear, missile production and drone projects. According to a report in the *New York Times*, sources in the Biden administration said that the assassination of Colonel Hassan Khodaei, who was responsible for the development of military technology, guided missiles and drones in the IRGC's Quds Force for the use of Hezbollah and Palestinian groups operating in Lebanon, was an Israeli operation. On Monday, a spokesman for the Iranian government threatened Israel with "reciprocal."

Israeli Prime Minister Bennett has spoken quite openly about creating "a new equation, in which we strike inside Iran in response to attacks on us by their agents." He boasted that Israel's policy towards Tehran has changed and, with Israel having developed the means to conduct operations in Iran on a regular basis, Tel Aviv would not tolerate Iranian attempts to attack Israel or Israeli targets overseas in "silence." Moreover, Israel's operations would no longer be restricted to nuclear scientists, but also people involved in "terrorism," missile production and arms smuggling.

These provocations against Tehran come as Washington's ever tighter economic blockade deepens the poverty of the Iranian masses and strangles the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic which, according to official figures, has claimed the lives of more than 140,000 people. The currency has dropped to its lowest-ever value, with the rial trading in the bazaars at 332,000 rials to the dollar, down more than 4.4 percent since June 1. Iran's currency is now worth one tenth of its value at the time of the 2015 nuclear deal.

In recent weeks there have been mass anti-government protests across the country. They have been sparked by the government's cuts to subsidies that have led to a sharp rise in the price of basic food staples, increasing poverty, a threefold rise in rents, low and unpaid wages, the now worthless pensions and the corruption and mismanagement that led to the May 23 collapse of a high-rise building in Abadan that killed more than 30 people.



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