

Iran-Israel Tensions: The Threat of Nuclear Disaster Looms Large

If Biden doesn't act quickly and decisively there is a real risk that another missile from either side will mark a point of no return

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Israel had a [near-miss of potentially catastrophic proportions](#) on Thursday. As it has done [hundreds](#) of times in the past decade, the Israeli air force attacked Iranian bases inside Syria. In response, Syrian forces fired anti-aircraft missiles of a rather primitive Soviet model, one of which overflew its target and landed [some 30 kilometres](#) from Israel's Dimona nuclear reactor. Israel said recently that it was [bolstering its defences](#) around Dimona for just such an eventuality.

Although an Iranian general [taunted Israel](#), implying that Iran had some responsibility for the attack, that doesn't appear to be the case. But the missile landing inside Israel does show that if Iran wanted to attack Dimona, it has the capacity. And despite Israel's best efforts, an Iranian missile could hit its target.

With that, one of the worst nuclear disasters in the region's history could unfold, including a [Chernobyl](#)-type radioactive leak that could endanger not only all of Israel, but also many of its neighbours.

A US general has [assured a Senate committee](#) that the Syrians weren't intending to attack Israel. Rather, a misguided missile meant to target an Israeli warplane overshot its target. He blamed it on “incompetence”, as if that was supposed to be somehow reassuring; rather, it only reinforces how easy it is even for a mistake to cause a nuclear disaster.

Campaign of terror

Certainly, if either Israel or Iran wanted to bomb each other's nuclear facilities, they could do so successfully. An Israeli attack would probably cause less catastrophic damage, but only because Iran's nuclear programme is not nearly as developed as Israel's. An Iranian direct hit on Dimona would [cause incalculable damage](#) due to the plutonium reactor at the facility.

Nor does this happen in a vacuum: Israel has maintained a decade-long campaign of terror attacks on Iranian military bases and [nuclear scientists](#). Most recently, it bombed the Natanz

nuclear facility, [destroying](#) the power generation source and damaging older-generation centrifuges. It also attacked an Iranian Revolutionary Guard [spy ship](#) off the Yemeni coast this month.

Iran has responded in its own limited way, restrained by its need to maintain good relations with [nuclear-deal](#) signatories.

For Israel, the attacks are a low-risk proposition. It defies US opposition (if there is any) with a wink and a nod, and the attacks look good on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's résumé. To weather his [corruption trial](#) and retain public support, he needs external enemies (and internal enemies, but that's a different story). Iran provides these in spades.

Eliminating Israeli leverage

The US could exert control over this scenario by eliminating Israeli leverage. If it agreed to lift [sanctions](#) in exchange for Iran's return to low levels of uranium enrichment, as designated in the nuclear deal negotiated by the Obama administration, Israel's rejectionist approach would become moot. The problem is that US President Joe Biden is running scared from Republican opposition to any nuclear deal with Iran. Besides, he has designated the Middle East a low priority for his administration.

There is some faint hope in the [US announcement](#) that it is ready to lift a partial set of sanctions. However, the list on offer is quite limited, and will certainly not satisfy the Iranians. Such half-measures present an example of the limitations of the Biden approach. He should instead make a full-throated commitment to end this dithering once and for all.

Israel is [mounting a full-court press](#) this coming week as it sends its Mossad and military intelligence chiefs, along with its army chief of staff, to Washington in an attempt to influence nuclear negotiations as they enter what may be a final stage. According to Haaretz, army chief of staff Aviv Kochavi "will also raise other issues, including Iran's military expansion in Syria and the instability of Lebanon. Israel is concerned about the possibility that Hezbollah will try to ... [foment] conflict with Israel."

The hypocrisy of Israel's refusal to acknowledge its own massive military interventions in Lebanon, Syria, Gaza and even Iraq, while decrying Iran's involvement in Syria, is almost breathtaking.

There is next to no chance that any of this will enter into the considerations of negotiators in [Vienna](#). Unlike Israel, they are interested in doing a nuclear deal, not engaging in wishful thinking.

Combustible Middle East mix

Returning to the Biden administration's global goals, the Middle East doesn't care about presidential priorities. It contains a combustible mix of corrupt elites and overbearing dictators who do not shirk from causing mayhem in their domains. And one of them, perhaps a desperate Israeli prime minister or an ageing ayatollah eager to preserve his honour and legacy, could inadvertently (or intentionally) set the entire region aflame.

If Biden doesn't act quickly and decisively, there is a sizeable risk that another missile from one country or the other will hit a target and cause devastation. That would mark a point of no return, like the assassination of Archduke [Franz Ferdinand](#) in Sarajevo in 1914, which led

to World War One. The difference is that in 1914, armies fought with guns, bayonets and artillery. Today, they will fight with F-35s, ballistic missiles and possibly nuclear weapons.

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