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Israel launches covert war against Iran

Israel has launched a covert war against Iran as an alternative to direct military strikes against Tehran's nuclear programme, US intelligence sources have revealed.

By Philip Sherwell in New York
16 Feb 2009

It is using hitmen, sabotage, front companies and double agents to disrupt the regime's illicit weapons project, the experts say.

The most dramatic element of the "decapitation" programme is the planned assassination of top figures involved in Iran's atomic operations.

Despite fears in Israel and the US that Iran is approaching the point of no return in its ability to build atom bomb, Israeli officials are aware of the change in mood in Washington since President Barack Obama took office.

They privately acknowledge the new US administration is unlikely to sanction an air attack on Iran's nuclear installations and Mr Obama's offer to extend a hand of peace to Tehran puts any direct military action beyond reach for now.

The aim is to slow down or interrupt Iran's research programme, without the gamble of a direct confrontation that could lead to a wider war.

A former CIA officer on Iran told The Daily Telegraph: "Disruption is designed to slow progress on the programme, done in such a way that they don't realise what's happening. You are never going to stop it.

"The goal is delay, delay, delay until you can come up with some other solution or approach. We certainly don't want the current Iranian government to have those weapons. It's a good policy, short of taking them out militarily, which probably carries unacceptable risks."

Reva Bhalla, a senior analyst with Stratfor, the US private intelligence company with strong government security connections, said the strategy was to take out key people.

"With co-operation from the United States, Israeli covert operations have focused both on eliminating key human assets involved in the nuclear programme and in sabotaging the Iranian nuclear supply chain," she said.

"As US-Israeli relations are bound to come under strain over the Obama administration's outreach to Iran, and as the political atmosphere grows in complexity, an intensification of Israeli covert activity against Iran is likely to result."

Mossad was rumoured to be behind the death of Ardeschire Hassanpour, a top nuclear scientist at Iran's Isfahan uranium plant, who died in mysterious circumstances from reported "gas poisoning" in 2007.

Other recent deaths of important figures in the procurement and enrichment process in Iran and Europe have been the result of Israeli "hits", intended to deprive Tehran of key technical skills at the head of the programme, according to Western intelligence analysts.

"Israel has shown no hesitation in assassinating weapons scientists for hostile regimes in the past," said a European intelligence official, speaking on condition of anonymity. They did it with Iraq and they will do it with Iran when they can."

Mossad's covert operations cover a range of activities. The former CIA operative revealed how Israeli and US intelligence co-operated with European companies working in Iran to obtain photographs and other confidential material about Iranian nuclear and missile sites.

"It was a real company that operated from time to time in Iran and in the nature of their legitimate business came across information on various suspect Iranian facilities," he said.

Israel has also used front companies to infiltrate the Iranian purchasing network that the clerical regime uses to circumvent United Nations sanctions and obtain so-called "dual use" items – metals, valves, electronics, machinery – for its nuclear programme.

The businesses initially supply Iran with legitimate material, winning Tehran's trust, and then start to deliver faulty or defective items that "poison" the country's atomic activities.

"Without military strikes, there is still considerable scope for disrupting and damaging the Iranian programme and this has been done with some success," said Yossi Melman, a prominent Israeli journalist who covers security and intelligence issues for the Haaretz newspaper.

Mossad and Western intelligence operations have also infiltrated the Iranian nuclear programme and "bought" information from prominent atomic scientists. Israel has later selectively leaked some details to its allies, the media and United Nations atomic agency inspectors.

On one occasion, Iran itself is understood to have destroyed a nuclear facility near Tehran, bulldozing over the remains and replacing it with a football pitch, after its existence was revealed to UN inspectors. The regime feared that the discovery by inspectors of an

undeclared nuclear facility would result in overwhelming pressure at the UN for tougher action against Iran.

The Iranian government has become so concerned about penetration of its programme that it has announced arrests of alleged spies in an attempt to discourage double agents. "Israel is part of a detailed and elaborate international effort to slow down the Iranian programme," said Mr Melman.

But Vince Canastraro, the former CIA counter-terrorism chief, expressed doubts about the efficacy of secret Israeli operations against Iran. "You cannot carry out foreign policy objectives via covert operations," he said. "You can't get rid of a couple of people and hope to affect Iran's nuclear capability."

Iran has consistently asserted that it is pursuing a nuclear capability for civilian energy generation purposes. But Israeli and Western intelligence agencies believe the 20-year-old programme, which was a secret until 2002, is designed to give the ruling mullahs an atom bomb.