

Five decades of Israeli covert strategy to push US, Iran into confrontation



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OPINION

Before Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met US President Donald Trump, there was good reason to expect that he would use the meeting to discourage any move towards ending hostilities in the Persian Gulf. This expectation is grounded in a historical record spanning more than five decades.

Declassified intelligence, memoirs by senior American officials, investigative reporting, and academic scholarship further reinforce this assessment. Taken together, these sources point to a recurring pattern: successive Israeli cabinets, often with the support of elements within the entity's security establishment, have repeatedly sought to obstruct efforts to end regional conflicts or attempts to manage tension between the United States and Iran.

While the methods have varied — from intelligence operations and public diplomacy to lobbying and political pressure — the strategic objective has remained strikingly consistent: preserving a state of confrontation between Washington and Tehran while opposing diplomatic initiatives that could weaken Israel's leverage in shaping US Middle East policy.

Prolonging the Iran-Iraq war

The logic underpinning this approach emerged during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Several scholars, including Trita Parsi and David Menashri, argue that Israeli strategic thinking at the time favoured preventing either Iran or Iraq from securing a decisive victory or ending the war. A prolonged conflict, from this perspective, would leave both regional rivals militarily and economically weakened. According to several studies of wartime media, Israeli state broadcasting also became part of the broader contest for psychological influence. Broadcasts emphasised Iraqi vulnerabilities when Iranian decision-makers appeared hesitant while highlighting Iranian setbacks when Iraqi and Arab audiences required reassurance. Scholars of wartime communications argue that this messaging sought to influence public expectations on both sides, making political compromise more difficult and reinforcing incentives to continue the conflict.

'Goodwill begets goodwill'

The release of Western captives in Lebanon in 1991 appeared to offer an opportunity for modest conflict management in US-Iranian relations. Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani had encouraged my own cooperation with international mediation efforts, and many observers expected US President George H W Bush's administration to

reciprocate in accordance with his inaugural pledge in 1989 that "goodwill begets goodwill". According to United Nations mediator Giandomenico Picco, who coordinated much of the diplomacy, that opportunity ultimately went unrealised. In his book *Man Without a Gun*, Picco argues that Israeli officials foiled aspects of the negotiated framework. Deliberately impeding the release of remaining American captives, Israel refused to implement agreed-upon arrangements involving the release of Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners.

As the Iranian negotiator, I was suddenly notified by Picco that Israel had stalled the process, pending the resolution of the fate of missing Israeli servicemen, which was the subject of a separate search arrangement involving the fate of four missing Iranian diplomats and an Israeli airman, all of whom had been missing for nearly a decade in Lebanon.

Picco further contends that these disagreements complicated Washington's ability to respond positively even after we found other means to ensure the release of the final American captive. At the same time, domestic political pressures, primarily from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) — including debates surrounding US loan guarantees to Israel — limited the Bush administration's diplomatic flexibility.

From our perspective, American rhetoric about reciprocal confidence-building had not been matched by policy, reinforcing a pattern of mistrust that would shape later negotiations.

'Axis of evil'

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Iran and the United States briefly found themselves pursuing overlapping objectives in Afghanistan. Despite widespread belief, the US did not spend the weeks after September 11, 2001, forging a broad international coalition to topple the Taliban.

As the late US diplomat James Dobbins explained, "It would be more accurate to state that the United States moved to join an existing coalition [put in place by Iran] that had been trying to overthrow the Taliban since the mid-1990s." Former US secretary of state Colin Powell and Dobbins also described Iranian participation in the Bonn negotiations as instrumental in helping establish the post-Taliban political framework.

Within weeks, Israel orchestrated a dramatic shift in political dynamics in Washington. The interception of the *Karine A* ship in the first week of January 2002 was staged by Israel with huge publicity to argue that Iran represented the principal long-term security challenge in the region. David Frum, the speechwriter involved in drafting President George W Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, in which he lumped Iran with Iraq and North Korea as the "axis of



● SÉBASTIEN THIBAUT/BARRON'S

evil," later recalled that Israeli strategic thinking influenced broader discussions about how Iran should be framed within the axis of evil.

During this period, particularly at the time of the summit between Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and Bush in February 2002, senior Israeli officials argued publicly and privately that Iran — not Iraq — posed the more consequential long-term threat.

Contemporary reporting in *The Washington Post* suggests that these arguments were repeatedly conveyed to senior members of the Bush administration. For instance, Israeli defence minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer explicitly briefed the Bush administration that Iran was "more dangerous than Iraq". Lawrence Wilkerson, who was Powell's chief of staff, confirmed that Israeli communications consistently warned Washington: "Iraq is not the enemy — Iran is the enemy".

The nuclear file and the JCPOA

The removal of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein in 2003 al-



Former UN under-secretary general Giandomenico Picco (L) poses for a photo with the UN secretary general Kofi Annan (C) and Mohammad Javad Zarif (3rd-L), who later became the foreign minister of Iran, in 2001.
● [lavocedinyork.com](#)



After more than four decades of direct involvement in efforts to prevent these fundamental differences from erupting into active hostility and all-out war, I have reached an inescapable conclusion: attempts to manage tensions between Washington and Tehran have repeatedly unfolded within a broader strategic contest. That context has been shaped not only by repeated US failures to honour its commitments, but also by the actions of regional actors with profoundly different conceptions of what constitutes stability in the Middle East.

tered the regional balance but did not diminish Israeli concerns about Iran. As the immediate prospect of military confrontation receded, the Iranian nuclear programme increasingly became the central focus of Israeli diplomacy and intelligence efforts. From that point onward, debates over Iran's nuclear activities largely displaced earlier discussions about broader regional security. Several journalists and former intelligence officials have argued that Mossad arranged for information concerning Iran's Natanz enrichment facility to reach the international community through indirect channels that allowed its original source to remain obscured. Journalist Seymour Hersh, former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, and others have suggested that Israeli intelligence deliberately passed classified information regarding the Natanz nuclear facility to the Iranian exile group MEK/NCRI in 2002 — while the group was still on the US State Department's "terrorist" list — to create an international emergency and force International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) action while maintaining plausible deniability.

Israel followed a persistent policy of consistently producing intelligence on Iran to prevent the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue at the IAEA and the UN Security Council from 2004 to 2012 and again

from 2018 onward. In 2004, the contents of a laptop allegedly containing thousands of pages of secret technical documents were turned over to Western intelligence services and the IAEA by the Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK). Western governments treated the documents as compelling evidence that Iran had pursued weapons-related research. Others remained unconvinced. Mohamed ElBaradei, IAEA director-general at the time, later wrote that important questions about provenance were never fully resolved. Several investigative journalists similarly argued that the chain of custody remained opaque. They pointed to Israel's Mossad as the original source passing the files to the MEK to maintain plausibility and mask the direct origin.

The conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 opened perhaps the most significant period of diplomatic engagement between Washington and Tehran since 1979. Israeli leaders, however, viewed the agreement as the collapse of Israeli securitization efforts as well as a prelude to the United States' "pivot to Asia" strategy. Benjamin Netanyahu mounted an unusually visible campaign against the agreement both in Washington and internationally. His address to the US Congress without an invitation from the White House was the culmination of such a rather unprecedented domestic campaign within the US.

Memoirs published by senior American officials reveal recurring tensions between Washington and Jerusalem over the possibility of military action. Former US defense secretary Robert Gates describes repeated disagreements over Israeli pressure for unilateral strikes. His successor, defense secretary Leon Panetta, later warned publicly against policies that might leave the US with no practical alternative but escalation. Former president Barack Obama similarly recalled that Netanyahu consistently pressed for a more confrontational approach than his administration considered prudent.

Drawing Trump into conflict

With the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, positions that had previously remained outside the American foreign-policy mainstream moved to the centre of decision-making. In 2018, Netanyahu publicly presented what Israeli officials described as a cache of nuclear documents stolen from Iran. The presentation became an important element in the administration's broader case for withdrawing from the JCPOA.

The administration's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement soon evolved into the "maximum pressure" campaign, combining sweeping economic sanctions with an increasingly confrontational