

12.83x15.32	1/2	עמוד 1	haaretz-front	14/04/2021	76917277-6
84260 - א					

# Israel is walking open-eyed into a crisis with Iran

## Israeli-owned ship in Arabian Sea attacked; Tehran: We'll enrich uranium to 60 percent

Amos Harel

Most of the people who brought us an unnecessary, preventable war in the Gaza Strip in summer 2014, 51 days with no victory, are also involved in what's happening today – a steady, dangerous slide toward the possibility of an even worse military conflict with Iran.

Benjamin Netanyahu, Benny Gantz and Aviv Kochavi were all there that wretched summer, though the latter two have since been promoted – respectively, from chief of staff to defense minister and

from head of Military Intelligence to chief of staff. Then-Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon is no longer in the picture.

Under their leadership, Israel now risks conflict that's an order of magnitude greater. That's the situation on the eve of our 73rd Independence Day.

Don't be misled by Netanyahu's confident, sometimes arrogant statements at the official ceremonies. Aside from the internal dangers – worsening rifts between rival groups, the destruction of the justice

system and the smell of political violence in the air – the external danger of a clash with Iran is growing.

Tuesday morning brought another escalation, the third attack in two months on an Israeli-owned commercial ship in the Arabian Sea. For three years, Israel quietly sabotaged Iranian ships, mostly tankers smuggling oil to Syria. But following a series of reports on these attacks since February, Iran changed its policy and started responding – a ship for a ship.

Not everything divides along political lines. Netanyahu is walking toward

See IRAN, Page 5

17.12x25.75	2/2	5 עמוד	haaretz-front	14/04/2021	76917278-7
84260 - אח					

## IRAN

*Continued from page 1*

this crisis hand in hand with Gantz, despite their enmity.

With regard to forming a new government, the rift is gaping; Gantz isn't likely to forgive Netanyahu for what he has done to him over the past year. But on the Iranian issue, Gantz seems to think he's leading rather than being led. And effectively, he's fallen in line with Netanyahu.

Beneath them, the relevant officials in the army and the Mossad are all eager to take the initiative. They're vying with each other for influence and achievements – sometimes, it seems, without fully considering the strategic consequences.

What's happening now is somewhat reminiscent of what happened in Gaza several years ago. Then, like now, Israel didn't set goals, examine alternatives or prepare exit plans. Now, too, it is being dragged toward conflict by constantly escalating the blows it deals the enemy. Later, people will talk about a miscalculation in which neither side actually wanted war.

In 2014, at least the government was relatively stable. This time, the security cabinet isn't meeting, the caretaker government barely functions and oversight bodies (the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the state comptroller, much of the media) are sleeping.

And of course, there are the main player's legal problems. The first two weeks of Netanyahu's trials showed how much danger he is in. He desperately needs to form a new government that could somehow stop the criminal proceedings against him.

You'd have to be incredibly naïve, or a diehard Netanyahu fan, to think this doesn't affect his considerations on defense issues. A military crisis is a proven method for bringing about political change. If it doesn't bring in Gantz, perhaps it will be

enough to persuade Bezalet Smotrich's party to join a Netanyahu-led government that relies on support from the Islamists of the United Arab List. Friction with the American government might also appeal to Smotrich's party.

Or perhaps Netanyahu's goals are more limited – using a security crisis to at least prevent his rivals from forming a government, thereby extending his own time as caretaker prime minister. He is acting as an agent of chaos because chaos serves him.

Israel is waging three simultaneous offensives against Iran – the battle

But questions arise about the intensity and timing of the latest actions. There have reportedly been three Israeli attacks in less than a week – sabotaging an Iranian Revolutionary Guards ship in the Red Sea, an air strike on a weapons shipment near Damascus, and the sabotage of the Natanz nuclear facility. And the three latest incidents occurred during the same week that Europe and America began discussing a new nuclear deal with Iran and U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Israel.

The timing wasn't coincidental. Rather, these at-

drone strike. In 2019, for instance, Iran sabotaged Saudi Aramco's oil facilities. But it seems less likely to retaliate via Hezbollah since that organization, worried by Lebanon's enormous economic and political crisis, evidently won't volunteer.

It's still not clear what Washington knew, and when, about the attacks on the Iranian ship and Natanz. Austin, asked while he was here, declined to answer, but stressed the Biden administration's commitment to solving the Iranian nuclear problem peacefully.

Relations with the administration will likely chill further if it turns out the Americans were actually surprised by the Natanz attack. But as Israeli officials point out, the explosion apparently set Iranian's uranium enrichment capabilities back by months, thereby depriving Tehran of a key bargaining chip in the talks on reviving the nuclear agreement. And that actually helps Washington.

Col. (res.) Udi Evental of the Institute for Policy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya wrote on the institute's website Tuesday that Washington's weak point in its negotiations with Iran is its desperation to reach an agreement. This poses a strategic dilemma for Israel, he added – either embark on open conflict with the Biden administration, as Netanyahu did with the Obama administration in 2015, or try to cooperate in an effort to protect Israel's interests during the talks.

Evental isn't optimistic. Israel seems to have chosen the path of confrontation, he wrote, especially if it's behind the recent attacks. And the results are likely to be the same as they were six years ago, when Israel's open opposition didn't prevent Washington from signing the deal.

The deal's other signatories support the Biden administration's position. Thus Israel may once again find itself isolated, with the Iranian nuclear threat downgraded from a global problem to an Israeli one.



The Israeli-owned ship attacked by Iran.

varjag / YouTube

against its nuclear program, which, according to foreign reports, includes assassinations, cyberattacks and sabotage of nuclear facilities; the largely aerial battle against Iran's military entrenchment in Syria and arms smuggling to Lebanon; and the naval attacks on ships smuggling oil and weapons to Syria.

The first has been effective. As Maj. Gen. (res.) Giora Eiland told the public broadcaster Kan this week, in 2001 Military Intelligence thought Iran would have nuclear weapons in four years. Twenty years later, it still doesn't – and not because the Iranians haven't tried.

Israel has also had considerable operational successes on the other two fronts. And in all three cases, Iran's responses have been minimal. Most have failed completely.

tacks were meant to send clear messages to Iran and, perhaps more importantly, Washington.

But they may well push Iran over the brink into retaliating, which it largely hasn't done after previous attacks. Instead, it has opted to focus on getting American sanctions removed in exchange for a full return to the 2015 nuclear deal, which includes a timetable for relaxing the restrictions imposed upon Iran.

Media reports of Israel's operations burnish Netanyahu's image of being aggressive and uncompromising on Iran. But they may also push Tehran to feel that it must retaliate more aggressively to maintain a balance of deterrence.

Retaliation might entail attacks on Israeli shipping, cyberattacks on Israeli infrastructure or even a