

The Shadow war between Israel and Iran

Why in news?

Israel was once ready to supply nuclear missiles to Iran, but its objective in the recent times had changed to stop Iran's nuclear capability.

What are the early relations between Iran and Israel?

- In July 1977, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, sent Lieutenant General. Hassan Toufanian, his Deputy Minister of War and Armaments, to Israel to hold secret talks with the newly formed government of Menachem Begin from the Likud Party.
- In April 1977, the Shah had signed six 'oil for arms' contracts with Shimon Peres, the Defense Minister in the previous Labor party government.
- One of the contracts, code named 'Flower', sought Israel to modify its advanced surface-to-surface missiles and sell them to Iran.
- Gen. Toufanian met Major General Ezer Weizman, Defense Minister in the Begin government, and both of them agreed to build a military co-production line where Israel has to provide the technical know-how and Iran the finances and test sites.
- As part of it, Israel promised to supply Iran ballistic surface-to-surface missiles with a range of 700 kilometers that could carry a nuclear warhead.

Why is there a shift in policy?

- The 1979 revolution brought down the Shah's monarchy in Iran and turned the country into a theocratic republic.
- The shift not just radically altered the Iran but the whole region as well.
- If the Islamic Revolution had not taken place, Iran would have had Israel-supplied nuclear missiles in the 1980s that could strike deep inside the Sunni kingdoms across the Persian Gulf.
- The revolution moved Iran, one of the natural powers in the region in terms of resources, geography and population, from an American ally to its top enemy.
- For the Sunni Gulf monarchies, a Shia theocratic republic across the Gulf waters not only posed geopolitical challenges but also existential and

ideological threats.

- For Israel, the West Asia's only nuclear power country, its most prominent rival was just born.
- Despite their shared concerns, these three pillars could not come together immediately as there were pre-existing contradictions between Israel and the Arab world.
- Four decades later, as Iran's regional profile keeps rising despite American sanctions, Israel and the Arab world, under the aegis of the United States, are coming together to counter their common foe.

What is the Octopus doctrine?

- There is already a shadow war going on between Israel and Iran.
- Israel has carried out covert operations inside Iran targeting its nuclear and missile programmes.
- Former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett termed such operations as the "Octopus doctrine" which means, "Hit the octopus at its head, not just at its tentacles".
- Iran has also responded with drone attacks, targeting Israeli operatives in northern Iraq.
- Also, the naval conflict between the countries, where ships linked to them have come under attacks in the Gulf, Arabian and the Mediterranean waters, is escalating.

How JCPOA deal will transform Iran?

- There is a consensus among West Asia's anti-Iran axis (the U.S., Israel and the Gulf kingdoms) that Iran's nuclear programme should be scuttled.
- If Iran achieves nuclear capabilities (even if it does not make a bomb), it could alter the regional balance of power, which is now in favour of Israel.
- Israel and the Gulf kingdoms were not happy with the JCPOA (or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the deal is known).
- Because in return for limiting Iran's nuclear programme, the agreement promised economic rewards to the Iran, which could transform Iran into a non-nuclear conventional, mainstream power in West Asia.
- Israel wants not just Iran's nuclear programme to be scuttled but also its rise to be contained.
- Israel saw its concerns being heard in Washington when the Trump administration decided to unilaterally pull the U.S. out of the nuclear deal and reimpose sanctions on Iran in 2018.

What is maximum pressure, maximum resistance policy?

- U.S. President Donald Trump thought the administration's "maximum pressure approach" would force Iran to back away and return to the table to renegotiate the deal.
- U.S. wanted concessions from Iran on its weapons programmes and regional activism (support for non-state actors).
- But Iran took a "maximum resistance" policy and carried out attacks in Saudi Arabia and in the Gulf waters.
- It also stepped up support for its proxies, especially the Houthis in Yemen who now pose a direct security challenge to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
- Iran started enriching large amounts of uranium to a higher purity and developing advanced centrifuges.

What are the stakeholders needs?

- The situation in West Asia is more complicated than it was in 2015.
- Different stakeholders in this geopolitical vortex have different views on how it should be resolved.
- The U.S. wants to address the nuclear programme but it wants to do so through talks as it does not want to get stuck in another conflict in West Asia especially at a time when its priorities are in Europe and Indo-Pacific.
- Iran is facing domestic pressure over its economic woes, but the regime, now controlled by hardliners, is highly unlikely to compromise on its weapons programme or regional policy.
- Iran wants the sanctions to be lifted in return for going back to its 2015 commitments but it also wants to emerge from the crisis economically stronger.
- Israel (and its Gulf partners) wants to scuttle Iran's nuclear programme, build stronger region-wide defences and contain its rise.

What is Israel's multi-directional strategy?

- Israel has come up with a multi-directional approach driven by a common goal to escalate the shadow war with Iran and forge a stronger security partnership with the Gulf kingdoms which could prepare them both for any full-scale war in the future, while the U.S. and Europe continue to hold talks with Iran.
- This strategy elevates Israel's role as a new security provider in the Gulf at a time when the U.S. is preoccupied with its priorities elsewhere.

What is the way forward?

- It is true that the rise of a more cohesive anti-Iran axis is a significant

challenge to the Islamic Republic.

- The assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the elite Quds Force chief, by the U.S. in January 2020 seems to have blunted Iran's clandestine operations abroad.
- But, Israel's repeated attempts at sabotage have not stopped Iran from enriching uranium, which is now a step away from weapons grade level or building advanced centrifuges.
- So, if the nuclear talks collapse, Israel would be left with not many options and have to escalate its shadow war further to meet its goals which is a very dangerous slope.

Reference

1. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-shadow-war-between-israel-and-iran/article65617253.ece>

