



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**RELATIONS AND CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN THE IRANIAN
AND ISRAELI SPECIAL SERVICES**

VASIL GHLONTI

208

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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In the last ten years, relations between Iran and Israel have become increasingly tense. The Islamic regime of Iran has declared Israel an enemy of the Shiite Islamic world, and has stated its intention to destroy it, while Israel has identified Iran, which actively finances its opponent Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist organizations, as its number one opponent and the main challenge to its statehood.

What does Iran want? One of the main goals of its foreign policy is the destruction of the state of Israel and the expulsion of its ally, the USA, from the Middle East region. Iranian special services have a great role to play in this endeavor.

What does Israel want? To neutralise the military and terrorist threat from Iran and put a stop to its nuclear program, with the Israeli special services actively engaged in fulfilling these objectives.

The conflict between the parties that started in the Middle East has gone on to gain a global character. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the dynamics of the confrontation between the special services of these two influential countries in the Middle East over the last ten years.

The Middle East

As one of Iran's main strategic goals in the Middle East is the eradication of Israel from the world map and the expulsion of its ally the USA from the region, it pursues its political-economic, military, and religious expansion primarily in those Islamic countries bordering Israel, that is Syria and Lebanon. For Iran, which is under international sanctions and partially politically isolated, having access to the Mediterranean Sea with the help of Syria and Lebanon is of strategic importance, because oil (Navvar Saban, 2023), weapons, and drugs (Baria Alamuddin, 2021) are smuggled into different countries through their ports. The smuggling is overseen by Iran's special service "The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps", which is under international sanctions for its terrorist activities in numerous countries around the world. The representatives of the regime of Bashar Assad of Syria, the Shiite militia of Syria, and also the Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah, are actively involved in the international export of contraband goods. This context leads us to believe that we are dealing with an organized, international criminal syndicate, whose area of activity has gone beyond the Middle East region and operates throughout the world. The drug manufacturing factories connected to Iran's special services and

Hezbollah, operating in Syria under the auspices of the local government (voanews.com, 2023), further validates this assumption. In addition, according to the information of the Ministry of Defense of Israel, under the patronage of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, mini-factories are operating in Iranian military cities in Syria, manufacturing various types of weapons, including drones, missiles and ammunition (Timesofisrael.com 2022).

According to the Israeli special services, there are many Iranian military bases operating in Syria (Ahmad Majidyar, 2018). In order to further use these for their own interests, including against Israel and the USA, representatives of the Iranian Ministry of Defense, the Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Information are training and using in military operations local fighters and Shiite groups from Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, and Afghanistan. These trainees operate throughout the country, including near the border with Israel, in the vicinity of the Golan Heights, and in the provinces of al-Quneitra and Daraa (terrorism-info.org.il, 2018). Iran seeks to create a Shiite Strip of Syria-Iraq-Lebanon, and at the same time to control a section of the Israel-Syria-Lebanon border, a move which is of serious concern to the Jewish state. In this regard, it should be noted that, according to Western media, Russia transferred a significant part of the Russian military contingent from Syria to Ukraine, and gave the vacated bases to the Iranian Guard Corps and Hezbollah (Nikita Smagin, 2023). The decision to do so probably came as a result of secret negotiations with the Iranian authorities. The Kremlin will help its ally Iran and their satellite Hezbollah to control the Syrian territory, while they attempt to achieve their “desired result” in Ukraine. Iran, in turn, will take advantage of Russia’s problematic situation and, with the help of Hezbollah, will turn Syria into one of its political and military citadels in the Middle East.

In view of this, one of the main objectives of the official visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Rais to Syria on May 3 was most likely to develop a joint plan of action against Israel and the US. This is confirmed by Raisi’s statements against Israel and the US in an interview he gave to Syrian TV (sana.sy, 2023), in which he accused them of destructive actions against Syria and attempting to occupy its territory. The Iranian side has actively supported Syria against Israel and the US before (Natasha Bertrand, Hadas Gold and Alex Marquardt, 2023), and, after this visit, this trend is expected to grow.

It is even possible that Iran is behind the events that took place in Israel on October 7 of this year, when members of “ Hamas ” carried out a series of terrorist attacks on Israeli cities (GADI ZAIG, MAAYAN JAFFE-HOFFMAN, 2023). It is interesting that a few days before these processes, hackers connected to the special services of Iran published on social networks “ compromising ” photos of the former Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Barak, and other Israeli politicians who are in opposition to the current government, Benny Gantz and Ehud Olmert, which are supposed to be taken from Benjamin Netanyahu’s office (STAV NAMER/MAARIV, OCTOBER). Allegedly, the goal of the Iranian special services was to further increase the internal conflict in the Israeli political elite.

As Iran has made huge investments in Lebanon’s economy, energy, military, and health sectors, it has a strong position in the country, as it does in Syria. In order to further increase its influence, the Iranian regime, with the help of its special services, is also exporting the ideas of the Islamic revolution in both countries. As a result of its military and financial support, the terrorist organization Hezbollah has become a paramilitary political party serving Tehran’s interests in the Middle East, whose area of activity has gone beyond Lebanon to reach Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and even Palestine. Iran’s goal is, with the help of Hezbollah, to turn Lebanon, especially its southern part populated by Shiite Arabs, into its own outpost, and to establish control over the Mediterranean coast and ports.

Considering that the main target of Hezbollah’s Shiite fundamentalists is the state of Israel, this party is being watched particularly closely by the Israeli special services. The fighters of this paramilitary party are supplied from Iranian military bases in Syria through Syrian Mediterranean ports. At the same time, they are building missile and drone manufacturing factories in Lebanon and carrying out terrorist and military acts against Israel from the territories of both countries, which naturally incites Israel’s response and encourages counter moves (Emanuel Fabian, 2023).

The fact that the fighters of the terrorist organization “ People’s Front for the Liberation of Palestine ” are based in Lebanon together with Hezbollah supports the opinion that the Iranian special services are trying to use the Palestinian fighters who have undergone, with their help, military and terrorist training, against Israel. According to the available information, Iran and its ally Hezbollah also have intelligence centers in Syria and Lebanon (Iran International Newsroom. 2023), and one of their primary tasks is obtaining information about the Israeli military forces and special services.

In particular, according to Israeli military circles and special services, an Iran-Hezbollah intelligence center is operational in Lebanon, providing intelligence information obtained about the Israeli military forces to the terrorist organization Hamas operating in Palestine (Jonathan Schanzer, 2022). These circumstances lead us to presume that Iran is trying to further complicate and worsen the difficult internal political situation in Israel, using the Palestinians. We can thus presume the Iranian goal is to limit Israel's opportunity for activity abroad, making it significantly easier for Iran to protect its interests in Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other countries.

Against this background, the kidnapping/arrest of Russian-Israeli citizen Elizabeth Tsurkova in Iraq (Lahav Tsurkov, 2023) by "Kata'ib Hezbollah", the Iraqi branch of the Lebanese Hezbollah under the control of the Iranian Guards Corps (Lahav Harkov, 2023), shows that the Iranian special services and Shiite organizations under them in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq have begun controlling the movement of Israeli citizens. Tsurkova was working on a doctoral degree at Princeton University in the USA, and was collaborating with a research institute focused on security/terrorism issues (New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy), studying the jihadist and terrorist organizations in the Middle East. This is likely what caught the attention of the Iranian special services. Based on the recent cooperation between the special services of Russia and Iran, it is possible that the Russian side will be actively involved in the release of Elizabeth Tsurkova, who has Russian citizenship.

Without doubt, Iran's activities, and its special services in the Middle East, precipitated the decision of the US, an ally of Israel, to build a huge new embassy in Lebanon (Nadeen Ebrahim, 2023), where the powerful intelligence center of the American special service, the CIA, will be located (Intelligenceonline.com, 2023). The Americans are likely to strengthen coordination with the Lebanese special services and help them obtain intelligence information about the Iranian special services, Hezbollah, and, at the same time, Sunni radical groups. As the USA traditionally provides a lot of assistance to the Lebanese armed forces (Kareem Chehayeb, 2023), it is highly probable that it will cooperate with the military special services that are part of these forces. Accordingly, the proposal of the Republicans in the US Congress to help the Lebanese army (Intelligenceonline.com, 2023) proves that American politicians intend to increase the influence of the US in Lebanon.

At the same time, the USA offered Israel joint military planning of actions against Iran (Barak Ravid, 2023). Israel will probably approach this promising and positive proposal with interest, but at the same time with caution, because if it agrees, it will have to share its plans with the Americans, a fact difficult for the Jewish state to accept, because Israelis traditionally avoid having anyone look into their affairs. That said, cooperation between the US and Israel in the military field to neutralize the expected threat from Iran will need to be further expanded, a fact illustrated by the dynamics of US-Israeli relations in the military field (Jen Judson, Friday, 2023). Americans and Jews carry out military and anti-terrorist actions against Iran in concert, which is confirmed by the active participation of Israel in the killing of the commander of the special unit of Iran's Guard Corps, General Qassem Soleimani, by the US military and special services. According to verified information, it was the Israeli special services that provided their American colleagues with accurate and detailed information on the movement of the Iranian spy (Haaretz, 2021).

In addition to General Qasem Soleimani, the Israelis have in recent years killed and kidnapped several other high-ranking officials of Iran's Guard Corps (timesofisrael.com, 2022) who supplied pro-Iranian Shia groups in Syria and Lebanon, including Hezbollah, with drones and missile technology (David Helleman, 2022). By eliminating and neutralizing the key figures of the Iranian special services, the Israeli special services are trying to reduce the access the local Shiite radical and terrorist groups have to missiles and drones, since they periodically bomb Israeli cities with the help of Iranian military specialists. In addition to the representatives of the Iranian special services operating in Syria and Lebanon, a significant target of the Israeli special services is those Iranian scientists participating in Iran's nuclear program.

If the Iranian regime acquires atomic weapons, it will pose a great threat to the existence of Israel. In order to slow down/stop the development of the nuclear program, many Iranian physicists have been killed by the Israelis in the past years, among them Mohsen Fahrizadeh, who is considered the "father of Iran's nuclear program" (timesofisrael.com, 2022). Despite the assassination of Iranian scientists, the development of Iran's nuclear program continues successfully, and we can assume that in the not-too-distant future, Iran will at the very least collect enough enriched uranium for the creation of nuclear weapons. This has been confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency, according to which a small amount of uranium enriched to 83.7% was found in Iran (Bethany Bell & David

Gritten, 2023). Along with this process, Iran's unconfirmed successes in the production of long-range ballistic missiles in recent years (france24.com, 2023) suggest that Israel faces a serious problem that can only be solved militarily at this stage. The only alternative is the replacement of the Ayatollah regime with a new, civilized government, which will refrain from developing the military components of the nuclear program. However, the Islamic regime of Iran, despite being significantly weakened as a result of serious political upheavals in recent years, remains strong.

The personnel purge initiated by the spiritual leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, in the upper echelons of the special services was largely a result of the assassination of Iranian scientists and special service employees by the Israeli special services on the territory of Iran. It seems Khamenei was no longer satisfied with the quality of his own security, which is why the head of intelligence of the Guard Corps, Hossein Taeb, and the head of the personal protection service, or "Wali Amr", Ebrahim Jabari, were dismissed from their positions (Jason M. Brodsky, 2022). Perhaps the leader of Iran was also angered by the fact that the structure subordinated to Taeb failed to carry out a planned terrorist attack against Israeli businessman Yair Geller in Turkey. The Turkish special services, together with their Israeli counterparts, neutralized the Iranian spy network in time and arrested the Iranian terrorists (Abdurrahman Şimsek, 2022). In addition, in 2023, the arrest of Israeli Mossad employees working against the Iranian special services in Turkish territory, by the Turkish special services (Daily Sabah, 2023), shows that the high degree of confrontation between Iran and the special services is not decreasing. It is likely that the territory of Turkey will remain an area of special interest for both Iranian and Israeli special services in the future.

The South Caucasus

In November 2022, an attempted terrorist attack by the Iranian special services on Israeli businessman Itzik Moshe in Georgia shows that the Iranian government, with its terrorist ideology, also poses a serious threat to Georgia. Although the security service of Georgia arrested the relevant Pakistani citizens on charges of attempting to commit a terrorist attack, thus neutralizing the terrorist group in time, we cannot exclude the possibility of repeat incidents in future. Taking into account the fact that the aforementioned persons were in Georgia under the joint assignment of Al-Quds, Al-Qaeda and units of the Iran's Guard Corps special forces,

and were supervised by operatives of Al-Quds (Lazar Berman and Tobias Siegal 2022), we can easily conclude that the activities of the special service of the Shiite country and the Sunni terrorist network are being coordinated. This is certainly an additional threat to Georgia, and may affect the security of the South Caucasus region in the future. Further, the fact that Georgian special services arrested persons with dual Georgian-Iranian citizenship (resonancedaily.com, Elsa Paposhvili, 2022), who were responsible for supplying weapons to the Pakistanis, leads us to believe that the Iranian special services are actively working to recruit the local population in Georgia.

According to the information published by the Washington Post and received from official US sources, Shahram Fursavi, an officer of the Iranian Guards Corps worked on the assassination of Itzik Moshe, and later also planned to assassinate former American President Donald Trump's advisor, Michael Bolton (Shane Harris, Souad Mekhennet and Yeganeh Torbati 2022). The connection between these two failed terrorist attacks shows that Iran's special services, in connection with Al-Qaeda, operate throughout the world, and the area of their activities has expanded greatly. Therefore, in order to prevent the global threat of world terrorism, there is a need for greater coordination among the special services of the USA, Great Britain, Israel, and EU member states. It is possible that Iran's Guard Corps was planning to attack an Israeli citizen in Georgia in order to take revenge for the killing of its officers in the Middle East.

Despite the Georgian incident, the epicenter of the conflict between Iran and Israel in the South Caucasus is Azerbaijan, which has a direct border with Iran. Israel, in addition to being attracted by Azerbaijan's energy sector, is particularly interested in the fact that a multi-million diaspora of ethnic Azerbaijanis lives in the northern part of Iran. Perhaps the Israeli authorities consider this an Achilles heel for the Iranian regime, something that makes it vulnerable, in addition to the fact that separatist sentiments are vivid in certain sectors of the Iranian Azerbaijanis, which, if used correctly, can be turned into a lever of influence. However, it should be recognized that Azerbaijanis living in Iran are quite well integrated into Iranian society, and the spiritual leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, is an Azerbaijani. Further, in Iran's National Majlis, ministries, and other public offices, the Shia ethnic Azerbaijanis hold various high positions alongside the Persians, and, therefore, serious fluctuations in Iran in terms of ethnic separatism are unlikely at this stage. Nevertheless, Iran's political elite and special services still fear that Azerbaijan, with the support of Israel,

is promoting ethnic separatism in the northern regions of Iran inhabited by Azerbaijanis and Kurds, and they see this as a serious threat to Iran's statehood.

The attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran on January 27, 2023, which was most likely facilitated by the Iranian special services, is probably an echo of this tension (Nadeem Shad, 2023). The aforementioned terrorist attack was preceded by a special operation conducted by the Iranian special services in the regions inhabited by the ethnic Azerbaijanis of Iran. It resulted in the Iranians releasing information about the destruction of the "12-person Israeli spy network" (Tasnimnews.com, 2023). In addition, Iranians are sure that Israel is actively using Azerbaijan and its military bases for intelligence activities against Iran. This topic has even been discussed in the US State Department (Mark Perry, 2012).

Israel likely seeks to prevent Iran from penetrating the South Caucasus and connecting with the Black Sea countries by strengthening its positions in Azerbaijan, running against the strategic interests of Iran, which is under international sanctions. Israel significantly helping Azerbaijan with weaponry and military instructors in the last Karabakh War (Avi Scharf and Oded Yaron, 2023) greatly strengthened its position in that country, which in itself came as a serious concern to Iran. With the help of Israel and Turkey, Azerbaijan defeated Iran's traditional ally, Armenia, the weakening of which is not aligned with Iran's strategic plans. Against this background, the purpose of the official visit of Israeli President Isaac Herzog to Azerbaijan on May 30-31 (Lahav Harkov, 2023) was most likely aimed at deepening the strategic partnership with Iran's neighboring Azerbaijan and to use its convenient geopolitical location in the event of a military conflict with Iran. Considering that the Minister of Defense of Israel, Yoav Galanti, also visited Azerbaijan to discuss the issue of Iran in July of this year (voanews.com, 2023), one cannot excluded that, among other reasons, the retaliatory actions of the Iranian special services - an Afghan terrorist following their directives and attempting to attack the Israeli embassy in Baku – came as a result of these two visits (Timesofisrael.com, 2023).

Europe

In March, the attempted terrorist attack thwarted by the Greek special services with the help of Israel's Mossad (timesofisrael.com, 2023), which targeted a Jewish religious center and its kosher restaurant, highlights an

interesting fact: the Iranian special services are increasingly using foreign citizens with dual citizenship and the right to live/work legally in a specific region or country. Although, in this particular case, we are talking about Pakistanis, in other cases it could be a citizen of any country, even the European Union, which has a large Muslim community. This circumstance is likely to make it very difficult to identify potential terrorists and detect the threat of a possible terrorist attack in time. Only a few special services in the world, including Mossad, have the resources to do so.

The fact that on June 25, the Cypriot special services and their Israeli counterparts neutralized a terrorist group under the control of the Iranian special services, confirms that the Islamic regime of Iran is continuing its efforts to achieve its goals through terrorist means. The fact that Mossad was able to penetrate the territory of Iran, kidnap the leader of this terrorist group, record a confession from him on video and then distribute it (Yonah Jeremy Bob, 2023) demonstrates that, despite the purge of personnel from Iran's special services by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the security system of Iran is literally powerless against the Israeli special services. With the confession of this Iranian terrorist, Israel showed the whole world, and especially the US government, that Iran remains a nest of world terrorism through the hands of clerical circles and the Guard Corps, and holding civilized negotiations with it at this stage is pointless. Another failure of Iran's Guard Corps may well lead to a repeated personnel purge among its leadership.

Africa

In 2023, the arrest of Hamidreza Mohammad Abrah, an officer of the Iranian Guards Corps special unit, Al-Quds, in Tanzania, with the help of the Israeli special service Mossad, on charges of attempting to carry out terrorist acts, shows that the Iranian special services in Tanzania and other African countries were looking to organize terrorist attacks on US, Israeli, Saudi, and Azerbaijani facilities (Trend.az 2023). Analysis of this event illustrates that the Iranian special services, despite the sanctions imposed on them, continue to operate globally; they are not against using terrorist methods to achieve their goals, and clearly do not have serious issues in terms of financing.

Conclusion

1. Taking into account the dynamics of the relations between the Israeli and Iranian special services in the last ten years, as well as the wide range of contradictions that exist between the two countries at this stage, we can conclude that their special services play a major role in the conflict between the two countries. It is a fact that Iran is carrying out its political, economic, and religious expansion in various regions of the world, including in the Middle East and South Caucasus, with the help of its own special services, and in this endeavour the Iranian "Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps" stands out. That the Iranian special services and military circles provide great military assistance to the anti-Israel Shiite paramilitary terrorist organizations operating in Lebanon and Syria, is undoubtedly of concern to Israel. This, in turn, of course, forces their special services and military to take retaliatory actions against the Iranians for preventive purposes. In our opinion, it is possible that Israel sees a particular danger in Iran's attempts to create a Shiite strip of Syria-Iraq-Lebanon and, at the same time, to control a section of the Israel-Syria-Lebanon border, which in itself is against Israeli state interests. As Iran has established intelligence centers and military cities in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, in response Israel is further strengthening its intelligence, counter-intelligence, and anti-terrorist activities in these two bordering countries. We believe the active engagement of Iran's special services in the Middle East played a big role in the USA's decision to build a new embassy in Lebanon, the largest in the region, with plans to house a large intelligence center there.
2. As Iran seeks to escape its international isolation, its special services are becoming more active in the South Caucasus. Most likely, by strengthening its positions in Azerbaijan, Israel is trying to block and control the promising South Caucasian route for Iran. The attempts of the Iranian special services to carry out terrorist attacks against Israeli citizens in Georgia and Azerbaijan are echoes of this circumstance.
3. In addition, the Iranian special services are trying to gain a foothold in European countries and are actively operating against Israeli citizens. However, the retaliatory actions of the Israeli special services make their plans ineffective, which leads us to believe that in Europe, the Jews are much stronger than the Iranians, and have serious intelligence positions.

4. It is highly likely that the conflict between Israel and Iran will deepen and acquire greater dimensions. Through its special services, Iran will continue to try to strengthen its political-economic and religious expansion in the Islamic countries of the Middle East, including Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and even in the territory of the Palestinian autonomy, further strengthening its position among the Shiite population there. At the same time, the Iranian regime will continue to develop its nuclear program, both covertly and overtly, with the aim of creating nuclear weapons at an accelerated pace. In addition, the Iranian side will probably try to become more active in the South Caucasus region, which may cause some difficulties in terms of security there.
5. By carrying out military and anti-terrorist actions, Israel, with the help of the USA, will try to neutralize the activities of Iran's political circles and special services in Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian autonomous territory as far as possible. Its special services will likely continue the process of assassination of senior officials of the Iranian special services and Iranian scientists participating in the atomic program, in an attempt to slow down/stop their process of uranium enrichment. At the same time, Israel will try to prevent Iran's expansion into the South Caucasus in order to limit the access of the Islamic Republic to the Black Sea countries. For Georgia, such Israeli activities can be considered positive as a whole, because it will contribute to neutralizing the threat of Islamic fundamentalism in the region posed by Iran.
6. There is a high probability that the confrontation between the Iranian and Israeli special services will take place on a global scale, and the analysis of recent events seen on the continents of Europe and Africa corroborates this assumption. Due to the fact that Israel has a very influential lobby in European states, and that its intelligence positions are much stronger, it is likely the Iranians will have a very difficult time fighting the Israeli special services.

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