

# Iraq partially reopens Iran trade crossing

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BASRA: Iraq partially reopened its southern Shalamcheh border crossing with Iran on Tuesday after more than three months of closure to combat the spread of the new coronavirus, border officials said.

The crossing was being opened only for the trade of foodstuffs, allowing in some 500 trucks from Iran per week and would open every Wednesday and Sunday from now on, one of the officials said.

Iraq closed its international borders and provincial boundaries in March except for the delivery of essential goods such as food as it sought to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Iran, which shares a long border with Iraq, has been the epicenter of the virus in the Middle East but the spread has also accelerated in Iraq which is registering nearly 2,000 new cases every day. More than 2,500 people have died from COVID-19 in Iraq according to its health ministry.

Iran is one of Iraq's biggest trading partners. Both countries' economies are in crisis. Iran continues to suffer from US sanctions and Iraq is reeling from low prices of oil, which accounts for almost all its state revenue.



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## [Iran factory blast kills two](#)

Tue, 2020-07-07 14:25

TEHRAN: Two people died and another three were injured Tuesday when an pre-dawn explosion rocked a factory south of Tehran, Iran's official IRNA agency reported, blaming human error.

The blast in "a completely industrial zone" of Bagershahr, 23 kilometers (14 miles) from the capital, was caused by "workers being negligent whilst filling oxygen tanks," it quoted the town's governor as saying.

"The explosion... was so powerful that the walls of the Saipapress factory nearby were also totally destroyed," Amin Babai said, without giving details on the function of the factory.

The incident took place inside the Oxijen factory at 3:03 AM local time (22.33 GMT Monday), an emergency services spokesperson told AFP, adding that all the casualties were male and that two of those wounded had been admitted to hospital.

Babai said that "firefighters had been on the scene" since shortly after the explosion and "prevented further fires and explosions."

It was the latest of a string of explosions to have hit the Tehran area and a key nuclear site in the past two weeks.

On July 1, a powerful explosion hit a health center in the upmarket northern Tehran neighborhood of Tajrish, killing 19 people and damaging nearby buildings.

The fire service blamed a fire that had set light to gas canisters.

It came days after a gas tank explosion near a military complex east of the capital, which authorities said caused no casualties.

Then last week, the country's atomic energy agency reported that an "accident" had damaged warehouses under construction at the Natanz nuclear site, some 250 kilometers (150 miles) south of Tehran.

The organization released a photo of a building apparently damaged by fire, with doors hanging off hinges after they appeared to have been blown outwards.

On Friday, Iran's Supreme National Security Council announced that the "cause of the accident" at Natanz had been "accurately determined."

It declined to give further details, citing security reasons.



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## [Iraqi security and political expert Hisham Al-Hashimi killed in Baghdad](#)

Mon, 2020-07-06 21:20

BAGHDAD: An Iraqi security expert and former advisor to the government was shot dead in Baghdad on Monday.

Hisham Al-Hashimi was killed outside his home and died a short time later at a local hospital, an Iraqi interior ministry official told AFP.

Government sources told Reuters that it was a targeted killing but did not point the finger at any particular group.

Al-Hashemi had written about Daesh and the role of Iran-backed militias in Iraq and was an authoritative voice on extremist factions.

He was frequently consulted by media and foreign governments on domestic Iraqi politics.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the killing.



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## [With a view toward Iran, Israel launches spy satellite](#)

Author:

By JOSEF FEDERMAN | AP

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Mon, 2020-07-06 16:37

JERUSALEM: Israel said it successfully launched a new spy satellite into space on Monday as its leaders hinted it was behind a massive fire at an Iranian nuclear site last week – potentially ratcheting up a long-running covert war.

If Israel was responsible for the fire at the heavily fortified Natanz facility, it would mark another in a series of daring strikes against Iran's nuclear program attributed to Israel, while also risking Iranian retaliation on either Israeli or Western targets.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hailed the launch of the new Ofek 16 satellite, the latest addition to a fleet deployed over the past two decades. "The success of the Ofek 16 satellite very much increases our ability to act against Israel's enemies, near and far alike," he told his Cabinet. "It greatly expands our ability to act on land, at sea, in the air and also in space."

Netanyahu did not mention Iran or last week's fire. But the Islamic Republic is Israel's top security concern and a target of its satellite intelligence-gathering efforts.

After initially playing down last Thursday's fire, Iranian officials over the weekend confirmed the blaze was much more powerful than initially indicated and that advanced centrifuges at the top-secret facility had been damaged. Iran's nuclear agency said the damage to the centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium for both civilian and military purposes, could delay research and development for the "medium term."

Iran has not directly blamed the fire on Israel or anyone else.

Israel, which accuses Iran of trying to develop nuclear weapons, has neither confirmed nor denied involvement in the fire. But a growing pile of evidence is pointing toward Israel – one of the few countries with the motivation and capability to pull it off.

In a speech on Sunday, Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi noted that it was Israel's long-term strategy to prevent Iran from gaining the ability to build a nuclear weapon. He made no mention of the Natanz incident but noted that Israel takes "actions that are better left unsaid."

A group calling itself the "Cheetahs of the Homeland" has claimed responsibility for the fire. The fact that Iran experts have never heard of the group, and that Iranian opposition groups denied involvement, has raised questions about possible foreign involvement. The group, claiming its members were dissidents from Iranian security services, referred to the site as "Kashan," the home of a one-time Jewish community, instead of the modern name of Natanz.

Israel and the US are believed to have created the "Stuxnet" computer virus, which attacked Iran's nuclear program a decade ago. At the time, Ashkenazi was Israel's military chief of staff.

More recently, Israel uncovered what it called Iran's "nuclear archive," a collection of thousands of documents seized by Mossad agents from a Tehran warehouse in 2018. Israel says the documents prove that Iran intended to develop nuclear weapons and hid its efforts from the international community. Earlier this year, Israel was suspected of crippling an Iranian port in a hacking attack in response to an alleged Iranian cyberattack that targeted Israel's water supply.

The Natanz fire came less than a week after an explosion in an area east of Tehran that analysts believe hides an underground tunnel system and missile

production sites.

Iran has long claimed its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. The International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN's nuclear watchdog, says Iran has been enriching uranium to about 4.5% purity – below weapons grade but higher than the terms of the 2015 US-led international nuclear deal. Workers have also conducted tests on advanced centrifuges, according to the IAEA. Iran says its breaches are a response to President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the deal and to impose painful economic sanctions. Yoel Guzansky, a senior fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies and former Iran specialist on Israel's National Security Council, said it was difficult to say for sure whether Israel was involved in the fire, either directly or with Western or Arab partners opposed to Iran. He also said that not everything that happens in Iran is necessarily the result of cyberwarfare or sabotage.

"Having said that, some of the things that happened in Iran in the last week are not coincidence," he said.

He said the perpetrators of the fire might have had several goals, most critically to slow Iran's nuclear program. They might also have wanted to send a message to Iran that there is a cost for continued nuclear research. There might be pressure to draw Iran back to negotiations. Some international players might even dream of fomenting regime change.

"Not everything is related to Israel. But I think Israel should be the most concerned about Iran advancing," Guzansky said. How Iran responds is difficult to predict, he added.

Monday's satellite launch did not appear to be directly connected to the developments in Natanz, given the lengthy preparations involved.

Beyond the nuclear program, Israel is alarmed by Iran's development of long-range missiles, its support for hostile militant groups and Iran's ongoing military presence in neighboring Syria. Israel believes Iran also is trying to help the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah to develop a guided-missile program.

Israel does not confirm the number of its operational satellites but Amnon Harari, the head of the Defense Ministry's Space and Satellite Administration, mentioned at least two others: the Ofek 5, launched in 2002, and the Ofek 11, launched in 2016.

In a briefing to reporters, he said that having additional spy satellites improved Israel's ability to gather intelligence.

Foreign threats require "constant monitoring," he said. "You can assume that once you have more than one satellite in parallel in the sky, you achieve better visit times over the targets of interest."

Alex Fishman, the defense analyst of the Yediot Ahronot daily, said the suspicion that Israel was involved in last week's fire made sense, given Iran's economic troubles and coronavirus crisis.

"Someone decided that a window of opportunity had opened, that Iran was in distress, and that now was the time to strike wherever possible," he wrote.



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## [Russia warns Turkey over Hagia Sophia move](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2020-07-06 11:25

MOSCOW: Russian officials and the Orthodox church on Monday urged caution over calls in Turkey to alter the status of Hagia Sophia, the historic former cathedral in Istanbul.

Turkey's top court is debating whether one of the architectural wonders of the world can be redesignated as a mosque, a move that could inflame tensions with the West and the Christian community.

A ruling expected in the coming days on the site, which is currently a museum.

The head of Russia's Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill said he was "deeply concerned" by the moves, describing Hagia Sophia as "one of the greatest monuments of Christian culture."

"A threat to Hagia Sophia is a threat to the whole of Christian civilization, and therefore to our spirituality and history," the Orthodox church leader said in a statement.

"To this day, for every Russian Orthodox person, Hagia Sophia is a great Christian shrine," he said, urging the Turkish government to be cautious. He said that altering the current neutral status of the historic building would cause "deep pain" among the Russian people.

## Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the future of the historic site was a domestic Turkish issue, but added that he hoped Hagia Sophia's status as a World Heritage Site would be "taken into account."

He said the former cathedral was a "world masterpiece" that has "sacred value" for Russians.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin told reporters Russia hopes "the global significance of the object will be taken into account."

Hagia Sophia was first constructed as a cathedral in the Christian Byzantine Empire in the sixth century but was converted into a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

Transforming it into a museum was a key reform of the post-Ottoman authorities under the modern republic's founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

But calls for it to serve again as a mosque have sparked anger among Christians and tensions between historic foes and uneasy NATO allies Turkey and Greece.



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Turkey's Erdogan rejects criticism over Hagia Sophia landmark