

Will the sabotage at the Natanz nuclear facility harm both Iran's nuclear program and the JCPOA?

A day after the Iranian government unveiled its new uranium enrichment centrifuges in the Natanz nuclear plant, on April 11 the facility was sabotaged by an explosion



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By John Solomou A day after the Iranian government unveiled its new uranium enrichment centrifuges in the Natanz nuclear plant, on April 11 the facility was sabotaged by an explosion causing damage both to the central power and the emergency power cable as well as to an unknown number of centrifuges in the facility.

Although the Israeli government did not officially admit that it carried out the sabotage, it is apparent that Israel decided to take matters into its own hands and effectively slow down the Iranian nuclear efforts. Another possible target of the sabotage was to scuttle the talks carried out in Vienna aimed at reviving the 2015 nuclear accord with Iran called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The meeting in Vienna involves senior diplomats from Iran, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, under the chairmanship of the European Union. US officials are staying at another hotel in Vienna, as the previous US President Donald Trump withdrew from the accord in 2018. President Joe Biden, who took office in January, has said he's willing to re-enter the nuclear deal. The talks between Iran and the US are indirect, as Iran insisted that sanctions should be lifted before the agreement is renewed, while the US wants Iran to agree on the JCPOA and then lift sanctions. The diplomats of the five powers are trying to find a way out of this problem.

It is not the first time that the Natanz uranium enrichment facility has been sabotaged. In 2007 in a joint Israeli-US cyberattack, a malicious computer virus called Stuxnet was inserted in the plant's systems and destroyed a big number of centrifuges. Also, in July 2020 there was an explosion in the facility damaging an unspecified number of centrifuges, while last November Iran's chief nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh was killed by a gun operated by artificial intelligence. Tehran blamed Israel for all these attacks.

It is recalled that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly said that he would never allow Tehran to obtain nuclear weapons. Israeli public radio, citing unnamed intelligence sources, reported that the explosion at Natanz was a sabotage operation carried out by the Mossad spy agency. As there was press speculation that the attack had received the green light from the Biden Administration, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki emphatically stressed: "The US was not involved in any manner" and added: "We have nothing to add to speculation about causes or the impacts."

Reacting to the incident, Ali-Akbar Salehi, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, described the blackout as "nuclear terrorism." Iranian Government Spokesman Ali Rabiei said on Tuesday that the sabotage act in Natanz was aimed at preventing constructive diplomacy, adding that Iran was committed to reciprocate proportionally in appropriate time.

Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi on Friday, speaking after a meeting in Paphos, Cyprus, with his Greek and Greek Cypriot counterpart and a UAE senior official convened to discuss stability in the region, repeated that Israel would do "whatever it takes to ensure that Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons." In the wake of the Natanz attack, Tehran declared that it would ramp up its uranium enrichment. Ali Akbar Salehi confirmed that Iran was now producing uranium enriched to 60 per cent purity.

This means that Tehran, although it insists that it does not want to build an atomic bomb, is now closer to the 90 per cent level required for use in a nuclear weapon. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency criteria, it would take Tehran 322 days to produce the amount of 60 per cent enriched uranium needed to make one nuclear bomb.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that the announcement on uranium enrichment "calls into question Iran's seriousness with regard to the nuclear talks". Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who is under strong criticism from Iranian hardliners and the Revolutionary Guards for not responding to the killing of Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh and the two latest attacks on Natanz, apparently wants to avoid a harsh response that could endanger the JCPOA talks and the lifting of the crippling US sanctions.

After the sabotage, some Iranian media and hardliners in the parliament demanded that Rouhani pull out of the Vienna negotiations. Intelligence Analysis expert Dr Ardavan Khoshnood, points out: "Once the US has rejoined the JCPOA, Iran will likely consider itself free to carry out more spirited attacks on Israel and Israeli interests, either directly or through its proxy Shiite militias in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq or Yemen."

As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed not to see the JCPOA deal revived, it is not surprising that many people believe that the aim of the sabotage at Natanz was twofold: One was to delay as much as possible Tehran's plans to build a nuclear weapon and secondly, by heightening tension in the region, to disrupt the talks in Vienna, especially if Iran retaliates against Israel. Mark Fitzpatrick, former head of the Non-Proliferation and Nuclear Policy Program, in an interview with Mehr News Agency said: "Israel does not trust diplomacy to resolve the stop of Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability and thus apparently decided to take matters into its own hands by employing kinetic means to slow Iran's nuclear progress...I believe the primary purpose of the attack was to retard Iran's enrichment program."

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