

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 causing damage both to the central power and the emergency power cable as well as to an unknown number of centrifuges in the facility.

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Representative Image. Image Credit: ANI

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 Fakhrizadeh** 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 Fakhrizadeh** 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." (ANI)