

Washington renews covert campaign to destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure

By Jean Shaoul
14 July 2020

There have been a series of mysterious explosions and fires in Iran over the last weeks. The most serious bear the hallmarks of an attempt by US and Israel's intelligence services to sabotage Iran's nuclear programme.

It is part of Washington's broader campaign aimed at exerting maximum pressure on the country, to cripple its economy and intimidate and starve its people in the hope of effecting regime change and consolidating US control of the resource-rich Middle East.

By far the most important was the July 2 fire at Iran's main nuclear-fuel production site at Natanz, 300 miles south of the capital Tehran, that caused extensive damage to the factory. It took place in workshops and laboratories assembling and testing newly developed centrifuges, known as IR-8, to enrich uranium.

Last November, Iran resumed uranium enrichment at its underground Fordow facility, in the presence of UN inspectors, and confirmed that it was going ahead with a tenfold increase in its enriched uranium production at Natanz. Tehran said it would reverse these steps if Europe offered a way of avoiding US sanctions that, coupled with secondary sanctions on countries trading with Iran, were imposed after US President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal in 2018 from the 2015 nuclear deal, and that were preventing its oil exports.

Behrouz Kamalyandi, Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation spokesman, said the fire had caused significant damage that could "slow down the development and production of advanced centrifuges in the medium term."

"Iran will replace the damaged building with a bigger one with more advanced equipment," he added.

Iran's National Security Council (NSC) warned that it would retaliate against any country conducting cyberattacks on its nuclear sites, after three Iranian officials said the blast at Natanz was caused by cyber sabotage. The Iranian media pointed the finger of blame

at the US and Israel, saying that Israeli social media accounts had claimed that Israel was behind the incident.

According to the *New York Times*, which cited unnamed senior intelligence sources, the explosion was not the result of a cyber-attack, but a bomb smuggled into the site, implying extensive knowledge, contacts and infrastructure. Israel's former Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman made it clear that he thought the *Times*'s senior Israeli intelligence official meant Yossi Cohen, the Mossad chief.

According to DEBKAFfile, which has close links to the Israeli military-intelligence establishment, the targets selected imply "a joint Israel-US-Saudi operation—possibly through local proxies—is likely ongoing against Iran."

The BBC reported that it had received a message sent to its Persian service before news of the incident became public from an unknown group calling itself the "Cheetahs of the Homeland," claiming responsibility for the Natanz attack. In a video, the group said that its members included "soldiers from the heart of regime's security organisations" who wanted to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

WikiLeaks' release of US State Department cables in 2007 indicated that Mossad had planned to use its established links with disaffected minority groups in Iran—Baluchi, Azeri and Kurdish minorities, including Islamist groups—to delay Iran's nuclear project.

Israel has a long record of covert operations against Iran that serve to give the US deniability. In 2010, the United States and Israel jointly developed and employed the "Stuxnet" computer worm to destroy about 1,000 of Iran's 5,000 centrifuges operating at Natanz. In 2011, there were a series of unexplained explosions at Iranian military sites that killed dozens of people, including a senior general in charge of developing long-range missiles and responsible for liaison with Syria and

Hezbollah in Lebanon. Mossad organised the assassination of five top scientists working on Iran's nuclear programme.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refused to answer a question on the Natanz explosion at Thursday's press conference, while Defence Minister Benny Gantz said that Israel was not necessarily behind every incident in the region, a formulation widely construed as confirming Israeli involvement.

The blast at Natanz followed a June 26 explosion at a factory producing liquid fuel for ballistic missiles in Khojir, close to Parchin, east of Tehran, and a fire at power plant in Shiraz that caused an outage in the city, as well as an explosion at a medical clinic in Tehran on June 30 that killed 19 people.

Since the explosion in Natanz, there have been a large fire in Shiraz and an explosion and fire at power plant in Ahwaz, in Khuzestan, home to the country's largest oil fields. This was followed by a chlorine gas leak at the Karoun petrochemical plant in Mahshahr and most recently explosions in the cities of Garmdareh and Qods.

Washington's sanctions on Iran have shattered the country's economy and blocked access to critical food, pharmaceutical and industrial supplies, making it more difficult for Iran to respond to the pandemic that has infected more than 250,000 people and caused nearly 13,000 deaths, the highest number in the Middle East.

Oil production fell to 1.9 million barrels per day in June, nearly half that in 2018 and the lowest level since 1981 after the start of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, while its oil storage facilities are reported to be full. Last month, its currency fell by about 13 percent against the dollar, fuelling the already high inflation that has decimated living standards. Iran's attempt to secure a \$5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund was vetoed by the Trump administration.

Tehran has sought to evade the sanctions, dispatching several oil tankers to Venezuela, which has also been sanctioned by Washington. Last month, both Iran and Venezuela reported that Iran would send regular fuel deliveries. Tehran is also close to ratifying a 25-year deal with China, the Sino-Iranian Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which was approved by President Hassan Rouhani in June in a bid to mitigate the impact of US sanctions.

Under the deal, China will invest \$400 billion in Iran's oil, gas and transport sectors, with Beijing getting a 32 percent discount on crude purchases along with two-year payment breaks. It will also grant China a significant

stake in other projects ranging from security and telecom infrastructure to health and tourism. Crucially, it will permit China to dispatch up to 5,000 troops to protect its interests in Iran as well as significant control over Iranian islands in the country's southern business hubs.

The US has ramped up the pressure on Iran since the start of 2020, beginning with Washington's drone assassination at Baghdad's international airport on January 3 of General Qassem Soleimani, one of the most senior officials in the Iranian government, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, leader of Kataib Hezbollah and deputy commander of the Popular Mobilisation Forces, part of Iraq's armed forces.

Last week, Agnes Callamard, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial and arbitrary killings, in a special report examining the legality of armed drones and the Soleimani killing, described the US raid that killed Soleimani as "unlawful."

The Trump administration has also stepped up its military provocations against Iran in the Persian Gulf with the deployment of a carrier strike group led by the aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower in the North Arabian Sea, within easy striking distance of Iran. This comes atop Trump's April tweet that he had told the US Navy to "shoot down and destroy" Iranian gunboats that "harass" US ships.

The US is also exerting "maximum pressure" on Tehran's political allies in Iraq and Lebanon, while there have been several Israeli strikes on Iranian and allied targets in Syria. Washington's attempts to redraw the political map of the entire Middle East threaten not only region-wide conflict, but the involvement of the nuclear powers it is trying to exclude from this area of vital geostrategic concern, Russia, and China.

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