Attack on Iran nuclear facility linked to Israel

Jean Shaoul
12 April 2021

Sunday's attack on Iran's main uranium enrichment facility at Natanz has been widely attributed to Israel. It threatens to derail talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with Tehran that the Trump administration unilaterally abandoned in 2018, while escalating the years-long shadow war between Iran and Israel.

The incident, at first believed to be caused by a cyberattack, later attributed to an explosion, destroyed the specially protected power system supplying electricity to thousands of underground centrifuges at the Ahmadi Roshan nuclear enrichment facility, Iran's main enrichment program.

Located at Natanz, in the desert in the central province of Isfahan, Iran's uranium enrichment program is subject to monitoring by inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Iran has repeatedly stated that its nuclear programme is for civilian purposes only. It has said that while it intends to steadily resume nuclear activities prohibited under the deal—since January, Iran has acquired 55kg of uranium enriched to 20 percent purity—it will immediately reverse course once sanctions are rescinded.

Iranian news sources reported that intelligence sources had identified the person who had caused the power outage at the site, implying physical infiltration, and were taking action to arrest him.

While Israel has refused to comment on its involvement, American and Israeli officials told the *New York Times* that Israel had played a role and Israeli news outlets, citing intelligence sources, attributed the attack to the Mossad, Israel's spy agency.

Tehran has called the incident "nuclear terrorism," indicating that it believes Israel was behind it, and claimed that those responsible are seeking to derail efforts to restore the 2015 nuclear accord, which President Joe Biden has said the US is conditionally prepared to rejoin.

The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Ali Akbar Salehi, said that the explosion was not an accident but an act of sabotage. Salehi rebutted reports that the explosion would set back Iran's nuclear program at Natanz by nine months, claiming it would operate at 50 percent capacity.

Foreign Minister Javad Zarif on Monday said "the Zionists want to take revenge because of our progress in the way to lift sanctions .... They have publicly said that they will not allow this. But we will take our revenge from the Zionists," according to Iranian state TV.

In addition to its geopolitical ramifications, the blast was incredibly reckless from an environmental standpoint. The loss of electrical power could have led to the release of toxic and highly corrosive uranium hexafluoride gas and the deaths of many workers at the plant. And if there were any large scale nuclear operations conducted at Natanz, the loss of electrical power for any length of time could have had serious consequences. In the 2011 Fukushima disaster in Japan, the earthquake and subsequent tsunami knocked out all the electrical power at the nuclear power station, including the emergency generators that keep the cooling systems running. The result was the second worst nuclear meltdown in history, rivaling Chernobyl.

Iran's foreign office spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh said, "All of the centrifuges that went out of circuit at Natanz site were of the IR-1 type," Iran's first generation of enrichment machines that are more vulnerable to outages, and insisted they would be replaced with more advanced ones. The day before the explosion, Iran marked its National Nuclear Technology Day by turning on a chain of 164 advanced IR-6 centrifuges and testing IR-9 centrifuges that are 50 times faster than the old IR-1s that make up most of the capacity at Natanz.

Khatibzadeh stated that the incident had caused no contamination or injuries but could be considered as an "act against humanity," adding that Iran would take revenge at the "appropriate time." He said, "The answer for Natanz is to take revenge against Israel," and "Israel will receive its answer through its own path."

The explosion took place the same day that US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met Israel's Defense Minister Benny Gantz and later held a private meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the first official visit to Israel by a member of the Biden administration.

In a joint statement on Sunday, Gantz pledged to cooperate with the Biden administration on Iran, promising that Israeli

© World Socialist Web Site

security would be safeguarded under any renewed Iranian nuclear deal that Washington reaches. He said, “We will work closely with our American allies to ensure that any new agreement with Iran will secure the vital interests of the world and the United States, prevent a dangerous arms race in our region and protect the State of Israel.”

Although Austin said nothing about Iran, he reassured Israel that the Biden administration would continue to ensure Israel's “qualitative military edge” in the Middle East as part of a “strong commitment to Israel and the Israeli people.” He insisted that “Our bilateral relationship with Israel in particular is central to regional stability and security in the Middle East. During our meeting I reaffirmed to Minister Gantz our commitment to Israel is enduring and it is ironclad.”

While Israeli and American officials would not say whether the US government had been warned of the attack in advance, or whether the attack had been timed to coincide with Austin’s visit, it is inconceivable that the attack on Natanz was mounted without Washington’s knowledge and approval. Indeed, Tel Aviv’s role is to carry out Washington’s dirty work in the region, thereby enabling Washington to deny responsibility.

On Monday, as if on cue, a White House spokesperson refrained from condemning the attack while denying any US involvement saying, “The US was not involved in any manner and we have nothing to add to speculation about the causes.”

This is Israel’s second attack on Natanz in recent months, following an explosion and fire at the facility last July aimed at disrupting uranium enrichment and research. In 2010, the US and Israel stymied Iran’s nuclear program with the Stuxnet virus that reportedly destroyed a fifth of Iran’s centrifuges, while Israel orchestrated a string of assassinations of Iran’s nuclear scientists in 2010 and 2011, and then in November last year murdered Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a leading Iranian scientist who set up the country’s nuclear programme two decades ago.

Israel has for years been carrying out a covert war against Iran, launching hundreds of strikes on Iranian-linked targets, including Lebanon’s Hezbollah, in neighbouring Syria since the start of the US-led proxy war to topple the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

This has now extended to a naval offensive, with an attack last week on the cargo ship MV Saviz, owned by the state-linked Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, in the Red Sea. It follows revelations by the *Wall Street Journal*, citing US officials, that Israel had attacked at least a dozen ships bound for Syria in the past two and a half years, most of which were carrying Iranian oil, while some were carrying weaponry to Tehran’s allies, including Hezbollah, in Syria.

New York Times ’ revelations of Israel’s involvement in the Natanz explosion serves escalate the likelihood of Iran retaliating, especially since presidential elections are due in June. The faction around President Hassan Rouhani, who signed the JCPOA agreement, faces defeat at the hands of the so-called hardline conservative faction that was and remains opposed to the deal.

While Israel and Mossad calculate that Rouhani is keen to secure relief from US sanctions that have wrecked Iran’s economy and will therefore avoid any major escalation, Danny Yatom, a former head of the Mossad, told the radio station run by the Israeli army, “Once Israeli officials are quoted, it requires the Iranians to take revenge,” adding, “There are actions that must remain in the dark.”

Netanyahu for his part has insisted that there should be no return to the “dangerous” 2015 nuclear accord, saying on Sunday, “The fight against Iran and its proxies and the Iranian armament is a giant mission. The situation that exists today doesn’t say anything about the situation that will exist tomorrow.”

With talks on the nuclear deal set to resume Wednesday in Vienna, Netanyahu is determined to prevent the Biden administration rejoining the JCPOA and lifting sanctions against Iran, or failing that, to force Tehran to agree to tougher and longer curbs on its nuclear ambitions along with restrictions on its ballistic missile program and its support for regional militias.

Furthermore, Netanyahu, who is desperately trying to cobble together a coalition government after a fourth inconclusive election in two years that will save him from an almost certain jail term for corruption, may be gambling that the threat of a major conflict with Iran will persuade his potential partners to join an emergency government.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site