

Iranian ship, petrochemical plant hit by fires amid threats from Israel

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Iran was struck with two major fires in the past two days. The first one ravaged and then sank a naval vessel, the Kharg, reportedly the largest ship in the Iranian fleet. After a 20-hour battle to extinguish the blaze, the ship sank Wednesday near the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

The second fire erupted Wednesday at a petrochemical plant in southern Tehran, sending up a thick cloud of smoke that could be seen throughout the city.

Iranian authorities said that the cause of the fire that sank the Kharg, named after the island that serves as Iran's main oil terminal, was under investigation. The ship was 40 years old and used for support and training purposes. There were 400 crew members and trainees on board when the fire began. There were no deaths or serious injuries reported.

Spokesmen for Iran's petrochemical industry said that the fire at the plant in southern Tehran began in one of its gas pipelines and spread to a gas tank. They said that no one was injured in the fire and rejected the possibility that the blaze was the result of sabotage.

The two blazes have taken place in a tense environment characterized by repeated attacks on Iranian targets by Israel's spy agency, Mossad. It has been standard operating procedure for Israel to neither confirm nor deny such attacks. For its part, Tehran for its own reasons has at times been loath to acknowledge Mossad's ability to strike with impunity against targets on the soil of Iran or off its coast.

Israeli attacks on Iran have included the detonation of a bomb inside the country's main uranium enrichment facility at Natanz in April, which had the potential of triggering a catastrophic chemical or radiation disaster.

This provocation was timed to coincide with the resumption of indirect talks between Tehran and

Washington on the revival of the 2015 nuclear accord between Iran and the major powers, a deal formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The Trump administration unilaterally abrogated the agreement in 2018, imposing a "maximum pressure" sanctions campaign that has led to soaring poverty rates in Iran and stymied the country's attempts to obtain vital medical supplies to combat an accelerating spread of the coronavirus.

The two latest fires erupted just as the latest round of talks between the remaining parties to the JCPOA—Iran, China, Russia, Britain and Germany, along with the European Union—was wrapping up in Vienna.

While the Iranian delegate to the talks expressed optimism that outstanding obstacles to the deal's revival could be resolved, the US administration of President Joe Biden has thus far taken the position that, as a precondition, Iran must roll back its increases in enrichment and stockpiles of uranium it built up in response to Washington's illegally violating the agreement and reimposing sanctions.

Washington is also reportedly pressing Tehran for further concessions on its conventional missile program as well as demanding that it surrender its influence in the broader Middle East, bowing to the US quest for hegemony.

Also in April, Mossad carried out a mine attack on the Iranian military vessel Saviz, which had been deployed in the Red Sea by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as part of its anti-piracy efforts. The mining was part of a continuing campaign of attacks by Israel on Iranian shipping, particularly vessels bound for Syria, which is dependent upon Iran for oil imports.

Tensions in the region have increased in the context of the crisis in Israel, where a change of government was imminent on Wednesday that would end 12 years

in power by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

On Tuesday, presiding over a change in command at Mossad, Netanyahu issued new threats against Iran, signaling that Israel would not be bound by any agreement reached between Washington and Tehran. “If we need to choose—I hope it doesn’t happen—between friction with our great friend the United States and eliminating the existential [Iranian nuclear] threat—eliminating the existential threat takes precedence,” he said.

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, who was on his way to Washington to request another billion dollars’ worth of US military aid to replenish the stockpiles Israel expended in its 11-day onslaught on the besieged occupied territory of Gaza last month, described Netanyahu’s remark as “provocative.”

The incoming head of the Mossad spy agency, David Barnea, was even more explicit, however. “The Iranian program will continue feeling Mossad’s might,” he said. “We are well acquainted with the nuclear program and its various components, we know personally the factors that operate in it and also the forces that drive them.”

The new Mossad chief also indicated that Israel would not limit its actions in deference to a renewed Iranian nuclear accord. “The agreement with world powers that is taking shape only reinforces the sense of isolation in which we find ourselves on this issue,” he said. “I say it clearly—no, we do not intend to act according to the majority opinion since this majority will not bear the consequences for the erroneous assessment of this threat.”

In reality, Washington has voiced no opposition to Israeli attacks on Iran. Biden and his secretary of state, Antony Blinken, have endlessly repeated the refrain that “Israel has the right to defend itself,” even during the recent massive aerial bombardment that claimed the lives of at least 253 Palestinians in Gaza.

For all the bluster by Israeli politicians about a supposed existential threat from Iran’s nuclear program, the greatest danger to the interests of the country’s capitalist ruling class comes from within, as was exposed by the widespread demonstrations and general strike by Palestinian citizens of Israel in opposition to the assault on Gaza and the Israeli police crackdowns and “ethnic cleansing” in Jerusalem.

Underlying this revolt are the immense internal

contradictions of Israeli society as a whole. Among the most unequal of the OECD countries, the country has a poverty rate of over 20 percent and the world’s greatest concentration of billionaires.

The greatest fear within Israel’s capitalist oligarchy is that the emergence of mass opposition among Israeli Palestinians, who make up 20 percent of the population, will be joined by struggles of the Jewish working class, fatally undermining the entire Zionist project.

To counter this threat, the country’s ruling camarilla resorts to fomenting rabid nationalism and anti-Arab chauvinism, on the one hand, and attempting to divert growing social tensions outward through unremitting militarism.

If the Israeli ruling establishment succeeds in forming a new government without Netanyahu, it will do nothing to defuse the attacks and provocations against Iran and the threat that they will precipitate a regional war that would rapidly draw in the major powers.



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