The Attack on Natanz and the JCPOA

by Dr. Ardavan Khoshnood

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In the morning hours of April 11, the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran was attacked, allegedly by Israel. The strike came at a sensitive time, as Iran and world powers are discussing Washington's return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the removal of sanctions. According to Israeli estimates, as the Islamic Republic does not wish to jeopardize a US return to the JCPOA, its response to the Natanz strike will probably be belated and highly circumscribed.

On April 11, 2021, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) announced that its Natanz nuclear facility had had an accident that caused a blackout. A couple of hours later, the head of the AEOI, Ali Akbar Salehi, stated that the accident was in fact sabotage. The attack resulted in an explosion, and according to the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, a culprit has been identified and is being sought.

This is not the first time the Natanz nuclear facility has been attacked. The first strike is believed to have taken place in 2007, when the facility was targeted in a joint Israeli-US cyberattack. The attack inserted a malicious computer virus, Stuxnet, into the facility's systems, resulting in heavy damage. The latest known attack on Natanz prior to the April 11 blackout was in July 2020, when an explosion at the facility caused serious harm to the centrifuges.

The latest attack on Natanz came just one day after the Islamic regime, in breach of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) from 2015, launched advanced uranium enrichment centrifuges at the site.

While it is yet to be determined who was behind the attack, Iranian media put the blame on Israel. The *Jerusalem Post* states that the Israeli intelligence organization, Mossad, is indeed the likely culprit.

Why did the attack occur?

Even before Joe Biden won the US presidential election, it was clear to Iran experts that a Democratic administration would return to the JCPOA, which President Trump had left while in office. The Sunni Arab states and Israel are not satisfied with the way President Biden and his Special Representative for Iran, Robert Malley, are approaching Iran. It is believed by many observers that the US is prepared to lift all sanctions against Iran and blindly return to the JCPOA.

Tehran's launching of its advanced uranium enrichment centrifuges may have been the reason why Israel decided to attack Natanz now. The strike is believed to have caused sufficient harm to the facility to delay the Islamic regime's nuclear weapons program, and was thus a warning to Tehran that Israel will not tolerate these advancements. The attack was also a signal to the Biden administration that Israel will continue its operations in Iran as it deems necessary regardless of any deals the US might make with the country.

Last week, Iran met with world powers in Vienna to discuss the JCPOA. Negotiations will resume next week, and there is a strong possibility that Iran and the US will also meet. As Israel objects to the JCPOA as it currently stands, the attack on Natanz may have been a way for it to increase pressure on Tehran while communicating its position to the Biden administration.

Iran and the US might not choose to bring talks out into the open, but there is no doubt that they are engaged in talks behind closed doors. In view of the progress made in Vienna last week, it could very well be that Iran, the US, and the other world powers have already come to an agreement facilitating the removal of sanctions and a US return to the JCPOA. If that is the case, the attack on Natanz could be an Israeli reaction to any such understanding between the US and Iran.

How will Iran respond?

The Iranian FM blamed Israel for the attack and said Iran will take revenge. The hardline Iranian newspaper *Kayhan*, which is connected to the Supreme Leader, blamed the attack on Israel, the US, and unnamed European states, and said Iran must leave the JCPOA negotiations and punish Israel.

Iran finds itself in a difficult position. The Natanz attack is but one of a series of intelligence and counterintelligence failures the Islamic Republic has suffered in recent years. Though it is constantly threatening to retaliate, Tehran has yet to do so. Will this time be different?

The regime understands that a harsh response could jeopardize the JCPOA talks. Iran wants nothing more than for the US to return to the deal so the crippling sanctions can be lifted. Rouhani will therefore try to convince both the Supreme Leader and the top leaders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to hold their fire until the Vienna talks are over and the US has reentered the JCPOA. This is essential for the Iranian president, whose administration has been under heavy attack and criticism for a long time from other Iranian political factions, including the IRGC.

As the latest Natanz attack is yet another humiliating indicator of the poor quality of Iranian security and intelligence, Rouhani and company may have neither the power nor the will to halt a response from the regime.

Still, according to Israeli sources, Iran will likely keep its powder dry for the time being (or retaliate in a highly circumscribed fashion) so as not to provoke either the Biden administration or Israel-friendly US Democrats who might turn their back on Biden's pro-Iran policy. 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 (Hezbollah), Syria, Iraq, or Yemen.

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