

At Natanz, Massive Damage Sets Back Iran's Nuclear Project By "Years"

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The story is [here](#).

“Nearly three quarters of Iran’s main centrifuge assembly hall was destroyed by the recent explosion there, Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) president David Albright has told The Jerusalem Post....

According to the latest report by the think tank, “High-resolution commercial satellite imagery... shows that the Iran Centrifuge Assembly Center (ICAC) at the Natanz Enrichment Site has suffered significant, extensive, and likely irreparable damage to its main assembly hall section.”

Further, the report says, “This new facility, inaugurated in 2018, was critical to the mass production of advanced

centrifuges, in particular the assembly of rotor assemblies, the rapidly spinning part of the centrifuge and its most crucial component.”...

“Albright said that his institute’s findings are confirmed by Iran’s shifting story.

“While early reporting from Iran suggested that a fire was ‘limited’ and restricted to a ‘shed under construction,’” he said, “more recent Iranian admissions are stating that the damage was ‘significant.’”

Iran has had to continually change its story about the attack on Natanz. At first it was attributed to an “accident” and the damage done was limited to a “shed under construction.” Photographs were released that showed only that partially-damaged shed from a side view. What was not shown by the Iranians was the entire area. Satellite images showed that the roof of the so-called “shed” had blown off, and the entire area underneath had been blackened by fire caused by a major explosion. Debris could be seen strewn 300 feet from the center. It was clear that a major explosion took place. David Albright says that the attack destroyed nearly three-quarters of the main centrifuge assembly hall. Finally, after days of silence, the Iranian government called the incident an “attack,” and said it was still investigating the possible source. But by that time the rest of the world had concluded that the attack was by Israel, though it is still not clear whether it was a cyberattack, or a bomb that been placed inside the facility by Israeli agents – who may have been Iranian nationals – that was responsible.

The Iranians have admitted now that the danger was not, as they originally stated, “minor,” but was “significant” but they still have not admitted that it was in fact, devastating. David Albright says the damage may set back Iran’s nuclear effort not by “weeks” as was originally thought, but by

several years.

Iran now looks foolish as well as impotent. Having first claimed it was an accident, in which the damage was slight, Iran has had to admit – thanks to the West's spy satellites that show the building's roof blown off, and the blackened ruins beneath – that it was an attack and not an accident, and the damage not minor but "significant." Iran will never admit that the attack destroyed three-quarters of the main centrifuge assembly hall at Natanz.

Iran has promised to avenge the attacks. But it has often promised before to settle scores with Israel, and then failed to follow through. Right now it has much else to consume its attention. The regime is now facing two other grave crises. First, there is the country's economic collapse: the 90% decrease in oil revenues since 2018, the steep drop in the black market value of the rial, the rise in unemployment. It has had to slash its subsidies to Hezbollah and the Houthis. Iran has just had to ask the IMF for a \$5 billion loan. Second, there is the catastrophic coronavirus pandemic. Iran's official figures are 200,000 infected, and 10,000 deaths. But other sources from within Iran suggest that as many as 15 million Iranians have been infected, and that there have been 40,000 deaths. Given these two ominous developments, in the economy and in the public's health, can Iran afford to now engage in retaliation against Israel?

The six mysterious attacks on Iran in rapid succession – on the Natanz centrifuge plant, the missile production complex at Khojir Air Base, the power plants in Ahvaz and Shiraz, the so-called "medical clinic" in Tehran that may have been a cover for nuclear operations such as a hidden command center, and another attack south of Tehran on a facility whose exact nature has not yet been determined – were intended not only to set back Iran's nuclear plans, but also to provide the ayatollahs with a small sample of what Israel was capable, so that they wouldn't engage in any more cyberattacks on Israel,

as they had done to its water supply. That attack was identified, and halted, by the Israelis within a few minutes; it did no damage. Israel's response at the time was a cyberattack on the port at Bandar Abbas that snarled Iran's sea and land traffic for days. Some in Israel's government may have thought that aside from delaying "by years" Iran's nuclear project, other targets could be selected for cyberattacks, by way of reinforcing the message of the attack on Bandar Abbas: don't try cyberwarfare with us.

Iran is now in a quandary. For if it does not retaliate against Israel, it looks weak. But if it does retaliate against Israel, it can expect a massive response in return. The six attacks in Iran within little more than a week were designed to show Iran what Israel was capable of, hitting major targets all over the country, and devastating much of the two nuclear-linked sites at Natanz and Khojir. There is still much more damage Israel could inflict, either through cyberattacks, or through bombs placed by agents (which is what is now believed to have happened at Natanz).

The Ayatollahs are not known to be cinema buffs. But they might take a look at, and draw the appropriate conclusion from, the famous words of Clint Eastwood, who tells a malefactor "Go ahead – make my day." They have been warned.

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