

Will Iran 'go nuclear' over its latest nuke site setback?



Getty Images

It looks as though a “nuclear war” of sorts has started in the Middle East. Iran’s centrifuge assembly plant at its main enrichment site of Natanz was destroyed last week, possibly with a bomb, according to some reports. What exactly occurred is the subject of much speculation. Iranian officials have said they know what happened but will announce it “later.”

Don’t expect the truth. The first Iranian report of the incident included a photograph that suggested just one corner of the building was damaged, and a few doors blown open. A satellite image of the facility was published Sunday indicating it was largely destroyed. The original photograph had been taken from the one angle that cast doubt on such an interpretation.

Many people believe that Israel is responsible for whatever happened, as well as a series of recent other unexplained happenings in Iran — an explosion at a Tehran clinic, a blast at a missile research facility, and a fire at a power plant. Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz commented Sunday that Israel wasn’t “necessarily” behind every mysterious incident in Iran. Intended or not, in Washington parlance, that is a non-denial denial.

Although the Natanz enrichment plant itself was an obvious target, the fact that it is buried deep under a concrete and enmeshed steel roof makes it impenetrable to most bombs other than American bunker busters, or a nuclear bomb itself. Israel’s probable fear is that Iran is restarting production of its IR-2m centrifuges.

Currently, Iran relies on IR-1 types, which for design reasons cannot enrich uranium to the level needed for an atomic bomb. Iran’s existing stockpile of the more capable IR-2m centrifuges, some of which it was allowed to retain after the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), have been poorly stored and are probably unusable.

The assumption is that Iran has restarted large-scale production of the IR-2m centrifuges — or at least it had until last week. A centrifuge can be likened to a top-loading washing-machine, except it is taller (several feet) and has a smaller diameter (perhaps a foot or less). A single centrifuge is made up of a basic spinning vertical cylinder — the rotor — plus perhaps 200 smaller bits. A top-loading washing machine makes awful noises if the laundry is badly loaded. An enrichment centrifuge rotor, spinning at 60,000 rpm, can be unbalanced by a fingerprint.

The heavily damaged centrifuge assembly plant at Natanz no longer can be used for assembly of the IR-2ms. Whether it happened because of internal sabotage or a well-aimed drone attack will emerge sooner or later. But it is doubtful that Iran has an alternative facility. Therefore, production of IR-2ms has stopped, and, from Israel's point of view, the likelihood of Iran obtaining enough highly-enriched uranium for its first nuclear weapon has been delayed by months, perhaps even years.

The story does not end there, however. How will Iran respond to this setback? And, if Israel was involved, how will the Islamic regime cope with the probable sense of public humiliation?

According to the commentators who emerge immediately in these circumstances, if Israel took action it may have been in retaliation to an Iranian cyberattack on an Israeli desalination plant a few months ago. The danger is that Tehran will think in terms of a “nuclear” response — an attack targeting an Israeli nuclear facility such as the Dimona research reactor in southern Israel.

Phlegmatically (I am, after all, originally from Britain), I could point out that Saudi Arabia preferred to directly avoid blaming Iran for its attacks on oil installations last September, and President Trump evaded the need to respond to Iranian missile attacks on U.S. facilities in Iraq after the U.S. assassination of Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani in January, even though the attacks thoroughly shook up the brains of multiple U.S. personnel.

Will Tehran be as restrained in its response? We are about to find out.

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