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IRAN: RECENT INCIDENTS LIKELY A COORDINATED STRING OF DELIBERATE ATTACKS

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Since early May, Iranian critical infrastructure and national security facilities have been subject to at least nine fires, explosions, and apparent cyberattacks; eight of these have taken place since 26 June. The nature of the targets and the short period of time in which they have occurred is unprecedented, strongly pointing to deliberate attacks and/or sabotage. Tehran has downplayed many of the incidents as accidents, but unofficially blamed the United States, Israel, and an unnamed Arab state (likely Saudi Arabia and/or the United Arab Emirates), and has vowed to retaliate.

Two of the sites, the Natanz enrichment facility and Khojir military base, are highly secure national security facilities, harbouring sensitive nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, including the IR-4 and IR-6 generation of [modern centrifuges](). At Natanz, an explosion and fire damaged a new, high-value centrifuge production/assembly plant on 2 July; the building is adjacent to underground fuel production facilities where the U.S. and Israel conducted the Stuxnet cyberattack a decade ago. An unnamed [Middle Eastern intelligence official]() claimed Israel was responsible, using a powerful bomb. On 26 June, another explosion took place at [Khojir]() missile production site, a highly secretive facility for missile engines and propellant development and testing near Tehran.

In addition, on 10 July, local witnesses in Garmdarreh, west of Tehran, reported a series of explosions followed by widespread power outages. Multiple reports claimed the explosions occurred at Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) missile depots, possibly the Islam IRGC Aerospace military base; there are also other military facilities, a chemical weapons research site, and power plants in the area.

A number of critical infrastructure facilities may also have been attacked. Also on 26 June, a fire broke out at one of Shiraz's power stations, leaving parts of the city without electricity for several hours. Sina At'har Medical clinic in north Tehran exploded on 30 June, killing nearly two dozen people. There are uncorroborated reports the facility was a cover for nuclear activity. On 4 July, there was an explosion at the Zargan power plant in Ahvaz, and a few hours later, a chlorine gas leak at the Karun petrochemical company in nearby Mahshahr reportedly hospitalized 70 workers. On 7 July a large explosion occurred at Sepahan Boresh factory in the industrial district south of Tehran reportedly killing two and injuring several others.

In addition, a cyberattack stopped shipping traffic at Shahid Rajaee port on 9 May after the computers that regulate the flow of vessels, trucks, and goods all crashed at once, creating massive backups on the waterways and roads leading to the facility and disrupting traffic around the port for several days. Iranian officials acknowledged that an unknown foreign hacker had briefly knocked the port's computers offline.

Tehran has downplayed the incidents, blaming them on gas leaks, and industrial accidents, with the notable exception of Natanz. Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) spokesman Behrouz Kamalvandi told state-run press that damage at the "warehouse designed for final stages of advanced centrifuges and assembly" was extensive, adding it will likely slow the development of advanced centrifuges by several months. He noted investigators believe someone carried a bomb into the building, but are not clear on how or when the explosives were brought in, and government-affiliated media websites asserted the incident was "a deliberate attack."

Israel has indeed hinted at responsibility for the attacks. Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi told reporters on 6 July that Israel's actions in Iran are better left unsaid, adding, "We have a long-term policy over the course of many administrations not to allow Iran to have nuclear abilities." When asked about the incidents, Prime Minister Netanyahu quipped, "Clearly we can't get into that." An unnamed official from the region called the blast a "wake-up call" meant to deter Iran given the advancements in its nuclear program.

Outlook

Reluctance by senior Iranian political and military officials to directly implicate the U.S. or Israel suggests Tehran does not want to be forced into an overt response that can unleash a military escalation. However, former Iranian diplomat Amir Mousavi did blame the U.S., Israel, and "a certain Arab country", and warned Iran is prepared to retaliate "quickly and powerfully" if it proves these states conducted the attack on Natanz. Government Spokesman Rabiei told reporters the international community must "set limits" and address Israel's dangerous actions. The regime will also use the attacks to further crack down on opposition groups and portray its intelligence and security apparatuses as fully capable of protecting the country.

While it is possible domestic opposition groups or accidents are responsible for some of these incidents, it is more likely a foreign state, probably Israel, conducted the attacks, particularly against the high security nuclear/military facilities. These repeated attacks are greatly increasing the prospects for Iranian retaliation, most likely cyberattacks, terrorism, or attacks against Israeli targets on the Syrian front; a direct military response that has the potential to unleash a broader conflict is unlikely. Israel reportedly is preparing for retaliation, and may have already thwarted terrorist attacks against its diplomatic missions possibly in response to these incidents. An attack against a target in the Gulf is also possible given the sensitivity of the Natanz facility and Tehran's assertion of an unnamed Arab country's complicity.