

[Iraqi security and political expert Hisham Al-Hashimi killed in Baghdad](#)

Mon, 2020-07-06 21:20

BAGHDAD: An Iraqi security expert and former advisor to the government was shot dead in Baghdad on Monday.

Hisham Al-Hashimi was killed outside his home and died a short time later at a local hospital, an Iraqi interior ministry official told AFP.

Government sources told Reuters that it was a targeted killing but did not point the finger at any particular group.

Al-Hashemi had written about Daesh and the role of Iran-backed militias in Iraq and was an authoritative voice on extremist factions.

He was frequently consulted by media and foreign governments on domestic Iraqi politics.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the killing.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iraq](#)

[Baghdad](#)

Rocket targeting US embassy in Baghdad intercepted while Iraq condemns Turkish operations against state
Iraqi security forces raid Iran-backed militia headquarters

With a view toward Iran, Israel launches spy satellite

Author:

By JOSEF FEDERMAN | AP

ID:

1594054959869754800

Mon, 2020-07-06 16:37

JERUSALEM: Israel said it successfully launched a new spy satellite into space on Monday as its leaders hinted it was behind a massive fire at an Iranian nuclear site last week – potentially ratcheting up a long-running covert war.

If Israel was responsible for the fire at the heavily fortified Natanz facility, it would mark another in a series of daring strikes against Iran's nuclear program attributed to Israel, while also risking Iranian retaliation on either Israeli or Western targets.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hailed the launch of the new Ofek 16 satellite, the latest addition to a fleet deployed over the past two decades. "The success of the Ofek 16 satellite very much increases our ability to act against Israel's enemies, near and far alike," he told his Cabinet. "It greatly expands our ability to act on land, at sea, in the air and also in space."

Netanyahu did not mention Iran or last week's fire. But the Islamic Republic is Israel's top security concern and a target of its satellite intelligence-gathering efforts.

After initially playing down last Thursday's fire, Iranian officials over the weekend confirmed the blaze was much more powerful than initially indicated and that advanced centrifuges at the top-secret facility had been damaged. Iran's nuclear agency said the damage to the centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium for both civilian and military purposes, could delay research and development for the "medium term."

Iran has not directly blamed the fire on Israel or anyone else.

Israel, which accuses Iran of trying to develop nuclear weapons, has neither confirmed nor denied involvement in the fire. But a growing pile of evidence is pointing toward Israel – one of the few countries with the motivation and capability to pull it off.

In a speech on Sunday, Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi noted that it was Israel's long-term strategy to prevent Iran from gaining the ability to build a nuclear weapon. He made no mention of the Natanz incident but noted

that Israel takes "actions that are better left unsaid."

A group calling itself the "Cheetahs of the Homeland" has claimed responsibility for the fire. The fact that Iran experts have never heard of the group, and that Iranian opposition groups denied involvement, has raised questions about possible foreign involvement. The group, claiming its members were dissidents from Iranian security services, referred to the site as "Kashan," the home of a one-time Jewish community, instead of the modern name of Natanz.

Israel and the US are believed to have created the "Stuxnet" computer virus, which attacked Iran's nuclear program a decade ago. At the time, Ashkenazi was Israel's military chief of staff.

More recently, Israel uncovered what it called Iran's "nuclear archive," a collection of thousands of documents seized by Mossad agents from a Tehran warehouse in 2018. Israel says the documents prove that Iran intended to develop nuclear weapons and hid its efforts from the international community. Earlier this year, Israel was suspected of crippling an Iranian port in a hacking attack in response to an alleged Iranian cyberattack that targeted Israel's water supply.

The Natanz fire came less than a week after an explosion in an area east of Tehran that analysts believe hides an underground tunnel system and missile production sites.

Iran has long claimed its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. The International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN's nuclear watchdog, says Iran has been enriching uranium to about 4.5% purity – below weapons grade but higher than the terms of the 2015 US-led international nuclear deal. Workers have also conducted tests on advanced centrifuges, according to the IAEA. Iran says its breaches are a response to President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the deal and to impose painful economic sanctions.

Yoel Guzansky, a senior fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies and former Iran specialist on Israel's National Security Council, said it was difficult to say for sure whether Israel was involved in the fire, either directly or with Western or Arab partners opposed to Iran. He also said that not everything that happens in Iran is necessarily the result of cyberwarfare or sabotage.

"Having said that, some of the things that happened in Iran in the last week are not coincidence," he said.

He said the perpetrators of the fire might have had several goals, most critically to slow Iran's nuclear program. They might also have wanted to send a message to Iran that there is a cost for continued nuclear research. There might be pressure to draw Iran back to negotiations. Some international players might even dream of fomenting regime change.

"Not everything is related to Israel. But I think Israel should be the most concerned about Iran advancing," Guzansky said. How Iran responds is difficult to predict, he added.

Monday's satellite launch did not appear to be directly connected to the developments in Natanz, given the lengthy preparations involved.

Beyond the nuclear program, Israel is alarmed by Iran's development of long-range missiles, its support for hostile militant groups and Iran's ongoing military presence in neighboring Syria. Israel believes Iran also is trying to help the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah to develop a guided-missile program.

Israel does not confirm the number of its operational satellites but Amnon Harari, the head of the Defense Ministry's Space and Satellite Administration, mentioned at least two others: the Ofek 5, launched in 2002, and the Ofek 11, launched in 2016.

In a briefing to reporters, he said that having additional spy satellites improved Israel's ability to gather intelligence.

Foreign threats require "constant monitoring," he said. "You can assume that once you have more than one satellite in parallel in the sky, you achieve better visit times over the targets of interest."

Alex Fishman, the defense analyst of the Yediot Ahronot daily, said the suspicion that Israel was involved in last week's fire made sense, given Iran's economic troubles and coronavirus crisis.

"Someone decided that a window of opportunity had opened, that Iran was in distress, and that now was the time to strike wherever possible," he wrote.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Israel](#)

[Iran](#)

[satellite](#)

Iran admits fire at Natanz nuclear facility caused 'significant damage' Khojir and Natanz explosions wreck Iran's strategy of deception

Russia warns Turkey over Hagia Sophia move

Author:

AFP

ID:

1594051840699602600

Mon, 2020-07-06 11:25

MOSCOW: Russian officials and the Orthodox church on Monday urged caution over calls in Turkey to alter the status of Hagia Sophia, the historic former cathedral in Istanbul.

Turkey's top court is debating whether one of the architectural wonders of the world can be redesignated as a mosque, a move that could inflame tensions with the West and the Christian community.

A ruling expected in the coming days on the site, which is currently a museum.

The head of Russia's Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill said he was "deeply concerned" by the moves, describing Hagia Sophia as "one of the greatest monuments of Christian culture."

"A threat to Hagia Sophia is a threat to the whole of Christian civilization, and therefore to our spirituality and history," the Orthodox church leader said in a statement.

"To this day, for every Russian Orthodox person, Hagia Sophia is a great Christian shrine," he said, urging the Turkish government to be cautious. He said that altering the current neutral status of the historic building would cause "deep pain" among the Russian people.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the future of the historic site was a domestic Turkish issue, but added that he hoped Hagia Sophia's status as a World Heritage Site would be "taken into account."

He said the former cathedral was a "world masterpiece" that has "sacred value" for Russians.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin told reporters Russia hopes "the global significance of the object will be taken into account."

Hagia Sophia was first constructed as a cathedral in the Christian Byzantine Empire in the sixth century but was converted into a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

Transforming it into a museum was a key reform of the post-Ottoman authorities under the modern republic's founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

But calls for it to serve again as a mosque have sparked anger among Christians and tensions between historic foes and uneasy NATO allies Turkey and Greece.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Russia](#)

[Turkey](#)

[Hagia Sophia](#)

Turkey's Erdogan rejects criticism over Hagia Sophia landmark

[Palestinians seek closure of West Bank crossings to curb virus](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1594047975319386600

Mon, 2020-07-06 13:55

RAMALLAH: The Palestinian prime minister called on Israel Monday to close all West Bank crossings, saying a lack of Palestinian control over the access points was responsible for surging coronavirus cases.

The call from prime minister Mohammed Shtayyeh came as both the occupied West

Bank and Israel continued to see a rising virus caseload, sparking fears of a second pandemic wave that could prove difficult to contain.

"The infection rates reached unprecedented levels in Palestine due to many things, including that we do not control our crossings (and) our borders," Shtayyeh said ahead of a weekly cabinet meeting.

"We are calling on Israel to close all the crossings and for Palestinians working in Israel to stay at their places of work and not return to the Palestinian territories," he said.

There have been more than 4,200 confirmed coronavirus cases in the West Bank, including 16 deaths.

Israel has meanwhile recorded more than 30,000 cases, including nearly 18,000 recoveries and more than 330 deaths.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Monday that it was clear the pandemic was "spreading."

"If we do not act now, we will have hundreds, and perhaps over 1,000, severe cases in the coming weeks, which will paralyze our systems," he said.

His government later announced plans for renewed restrictions, including the closure of event venues, clubs, bars, gyms and public pools – all of which had re-opened in recent weeks.

Fresh curbs on the number of people allowed in restaurants and places of worship were also set to come into force.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Coronavirus](#)

[Palestinians](#)

[West Bank](#)

Israel, Palestinians face new restrictions amid virus surge
Palestinians rally as global opposition to Israeli annexation grows

[Qatar coronavirus cases pass 100,000 mark](#)

Author:

Mon, 2020-07-06 17:27

DOHA: Qatar passed the milestone of 100,000 coronavirus cases on Monday, the health ministry said, as the country presses ahead with plans to re-open its economy.

The gas-rich emirate has one of the world's highest per capita infection rates with 100,345 people, 3.65 percent of its 2.75 million population, having tested positive for COVID-19.

Almost 94,000 of those infected have recovered and 133 people have died, one of the lowest reported death rates globally.

Wealthy Qatar has a higher testing rate than many other countries, having screened 386,111 people – 14 percent of the population.

"Measures taken to tackle COVID-19 in Qatar have succeeded in flattening the curve and limiting the spread of the virus," the ministry of public health said in a statement, adding there were a total of 546 new cases and five deaths in the last 24 hours.

"We are seeing a rise in the number of deaths in recent weeks and this is due to the people who were infected at the height of the virus several weeks ago."

Qatar has continued to reopen segments of its economy in recent weeks subject to strict social distancing measures as the average daily number of new cases has continued to fall.

In the past seven days there were an average of 748 new cases per day compared to 958 the week before.

Sun-lovers and jet-ski enthusiasts braved scorching summer temperatures on July 1 to be among the first to take advantage of reopened beaches, closed since March.

Beachgoers were required to wear masks, have temperatures taken and show mandatory phone-based contact tracing apps, as were customers of cafes and restaurants which resumed limited dine-in services last Wednesday.

Masks remain compulsory in public for those not exercising and private gatherings are limited to five people.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Coronavirus](#)

[COVID-19](#)

[Qatar](#)

Stuck in Qatar: Canadians told they could be fired for leaving COVID-19 hot zone
Qatar Airways will not take new aircraft in 2020 or 2021, CEO says