

Suspected Iranian nuclear production plant hit by drones, Tehran claims 'sabotage attack'

Thu, 2021-06-24 22:21

LONDON: A drone attack on a building in Iran, thought to be a nuclear facility, has caused considerable damage, it was claimed Thursday, despite Tehran stating on Wednesday it had foiled the "sabotage" attempt on the building.

At least one small rotor-powered drone hit a factory owned by the Iran Centrifuge Technology Co. in Karaj, according to a US intelligence tip off published by the New York Times.

The factory, just outside Tehran, is believed to produce aluminium blades for use in Iran's two uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz and Fordow, [UK paper The Times reported](#).

Israeli media also said the building had been hit in an attack, with some reports saying it had involved "several" drones.

There was no immediate comment or attribution of blame from either Israel or Iran.

The incident "left no casualties or damages and was unable to disrupt the Iranian nuclear program," Iranian state television said, before adding that authorities were now working to identify the perpetrators.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN body that monitors Tehran's nuclear program, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The factory was allegedly on a list of targets presented to the administration of former US President Donald Trump last year by Israel, which regards the Iranian nuclear program as a cover for developing nuclear warheads, a claim denied by Tehran.

The incident follows several other suspected attacks targeting Iran's nuclear program that have heightened regional tensions in recent months, amid diplomatic efforts to resurrect Tehran's tattered nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with world powers.

Trump's decision to withdraw from the deal in 2018 has seen Iran, over time, abandon all limitations on uranium enrichment. The country is now enriching uranium to 60 percent, its highest ever levels, although still short of those required to develop weapons.

Iran has said that its nuclear ambitions are peaceful and that it will return to its commitments once the US lifts sanctions imposed after Trump withdrew

from the JCPOA.

Earlier this week, Iran's sole nuclear power plant at Bushehr underwent an unexplained temporary emergency shutdown. Authorities had warned earlier this year of the plant's possible closure because of US sanctions that supposedly prevented Iran procuring equipment for repairs.

In April, Iran's underground Natanz nuclear facility experienced a mysterious blackout that damaged some of its centrifuges. Last July, unexplained fires struck the advanced centrifuge assembly plant at Natanz, which authorities later also described as sabotage. Iran now is rebuilding that facility deep inside a nearby mountain.

* *With AP*



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Iran says US websites seizure unhelpful for nuclear talks
Iranian media: 'sabotage attack' on nuclear building foiled

Iran now has 'international criminal' as president: Panel

Thu, 2021-06-24 22:03

LONDON: Iran now has an "international criminal" as its president, according to a panel of experts who warned that this could mean he faces arrest if he leaves the country and may be unable to attend the UN.

At an event on Thursday hosted by the National Council of Resistance of Iran and attended by Arab News, a panel of diplomats and human rights experts said Ebrahim Raisi's role in the 1988 massacres of political prisoners means he is guilty of crimes against humanity – a label that could seriously harm his global diplomatic standing.

"We now have an international criminal as president ... He's guilty of crimes against humanity, committed in late 1988 by the slaughter of thousands of prisoners," said Geoffrey Robertson, a former UN appeal judge and former president of the war crimes court in Sierra Leone.

Robertson, who has conducted an extensive investigation into the 1988 massacres, added that Raisi and his Justice Department henchmen sent prisoners to their deaths in "two waves."

First killed, Robertson said, were members, allies and sympathizers of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a political group that participated in the 1979 revolution but was later turned upon by the regime following a political disagreement.

"Most of them had actually already completed their sentences. They were executed without pity," said Robertson.

"The second wave was of theocratic dissidents: Communists, atheists, left-wingers. They were executed for being opposed to the theocratic state of Ayatollah (Ruhollah) Khomeini. There we have a crime against humanity."

Most of the people killed were detained for participating in protests in the early 1980s, said Robertson. They were then subjected to what Amnesty International has called "death commissions," in which judiciary officials led by Raisi, who was then a prosecutor in Tehran, asked them apparently innocuous questions.

"They didn't know it, but on their answers their lives depended," said Robertson. Those who gave answers indicating an MEK or atheist affiliation were blindfolded and "ordered to join a conga line that led straight to the gallows," he added.

"They were hung from cranes four at a time ... Some were taken to army barracks at night, directed to make their wills and then shot by firing squad."

Raisi's direct involvement in these crimes could come back to bite Iran in an

unexpected way, Robertson said.

“The UN will have to grapple with the fact that one of its members is led by an international criminal,” he added.

“If ever he ventures out of Iran, any democratic country would be entitled under its law – universal jurisdiction as we call it – to arrest him and put him on trial,” said Robertson

Nick Fluck, president emeritus of the law society of England and Wales, pointed out that Raisi has said in press conferences that he is “proud” of his role in the 1988 massacres.

This “serves as an important wakeup call that we can’t just sit silently on the sidelines. Silence and inaction don’t produce change, and in this case it’s clear that change is radically needed,” Fluck said.

“This is a leader who’ll be widely, I hope, shunned. There will be a lack of credibility about anything he may say.”

Fluck said Raisi’s domestic legitimacy is also seriously lacking, following an election that saw heavy state involvement, with hundreds of candidates barred from running and millions of Iranians boycotting the poll.

“Dissidents and reformists urged voters to boycott the poll. That’s perhaps why, although he inevitably won the election, he did so with a very low turnout,” Fluck added.



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Continuity of aggressive Iranian policies assured with Raisi's election:
Former senior CIA official Norman RouleIsrael army chief says cooperation
with US against Iran 'unprecedented'

300 migrants may have died in recent capsizing of ship off Yemen coast: UN

Author:

Thu, 2021-06-24 19:09

DUBAI: A UN official said on Thursday that as many as 300 migrants may have died after a ship capsized recently off Yemen's coast, highlighting the risks of a longstanding migration route from the Horn of Africa to Gulf states in search of work.

UN resident and humanitarian coordinator David Gressly said the migrants crisis is adding more pressure on an already dire humanitarian situation in Yemen.

A number of bodies washed up at Ras Al-Arah on Yemen's Red Sea coast earlier this month after a migrant boat sank offshore.



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Drowned migrants get 'dignified' burial in Tunisia cemetery
At least 57 migrants drown in shipwreck off Tunisia

[Continuity of aggressive Iranian policies assured with Raisi's election: Former senior CIA official](#)

Wed, 2021-06-23 22:40

LONDON: When Ebrahim Raisi was declared winner of Iran's June 18 presidential election, the world quickly turned its attention to the effect this will have

on the Arab region, where the Islamic Republic's proxy militias and advanced weaponry have long inspired terror and yielded influence over internal affairs.

Raisi has a reputation as an ultraconservative, but Norman Roule, a Middle East expert and former senior official in the CIA, believes that the 60-year-old cleric's rise to power will change little in terms of the scope and direction of Iranian foreign policy.

"(The) election of Ebrahim Raisi means that Iran is transitioning to a new generation of leadership, which will be hard line and which will continue Iran's aggressive policies for the region," he told Arab News in a special interview.

Roule should know: He spent 34 years with the CIA covering the Middle East and is a senior adviser to the Counter Extremism Project and to United Against Nuclear Iran. He predicts the Iranian regime will continue to support its proxies throughout the Arab world as a means to project power abroad.

"Iran's proxies in the region – the Houthis (in Yemen), Kataib Hezbollah and other Iraqi militias, militias in Syria, and the Lebanese Hezbollah – will receive continued strong support from Tehran," he said.

On Monday, in his first comments since his landslide victory, Raisi rejected the possibility of any negotiations, as part of renewed talks on the nuclear deal, about Tehran's ballistic-missile program or its support for regional militias. "It's non-negotiable," he said.

Raisi secured nearly 62 percent of the 28.9 million votes cast in the election, which had the lowest turnout in the history of the Islamic Republic. The candidate list had been carefully manipulated by the regime's powerful Guardian Council to guarantee an acceptable winner.

Even with a strong mandate, however, in reality Iran's new president has very little control over Tehran's foreign and military policies, as the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its extraterritorial Quds Force is under the strict command of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

So when former Islamic jurist Raisi takes the reins from his more moderate predecessor, Hassan Rouhani, he will simply be "more ideologically consistent and supportive of these efforts," Roule said.

The new president's true power will lie in ensuring the hard-line ideology of Wilayat Al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic jurist) that was created by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini – father of the 1979 Islamic Revolution – will live on.

"Now that he is in the position of president, it gives him an opportunity to place hard-line actors, former IRGC personnel in particular, in different parts of the Iranian government, so that when the supreme leader passes on, he will be able to assure a smoother transition to a continued hard-line government, which because of his relatively young age could last another 20 to 30 years," Roule said.

Dubbed the "Butcher of Tehran" by rights activists, Raisi is unrepentant about his bloody past. A protege of Khamenei, he is accused of ordering the execution of tens of thousands of dissidents over the past three decades. Iranian activists also claim that Raisi, as a junior prosecutor in the 1980s, headed "death committees" that buried murdered political prisoners in mass graves in 1988.

His election to the presidency could be an indication of further planned crackdowns on dissent and protest.

"At some point, the Iranian people may decide they've just had enough and I think that will be a moment of blood," Roule said. "The security forces in Iran will push down on that."

"But you just can't help feeling sympathy for the Iranian people, who have to endure such a system at a time of such extraordinary and positive change so close to their border."

Across the Gulf, countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are marching ahead in the fields of technology, entertainment and efforts to tackle the effects of climate change.

"I've spent many years following the region and I'm watching right now the most extraordinary and impressive series of political, social, economic and technological changes; Iran is not part of any of these changes," Roule said.

"The Iranian people enjoy an extraordinary history but they are daily falling further and further behind. Iran is stuck in a time warp. It is stuck in an archaic political system, which is out of sync with where the world is going."

Although Raisi has said there are no obstacles to Tehran and Riyadh mending their relationship, Roule views the president-elect's comments with disdain.

"The obstacles to better relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are in the form of Iranian missiles and drones, which are fired upon innocent men, women and children in Saudi Arabia every day it seems," he said, referring to attacks launched from Yemen.

"Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states are conducting no aggression against Iran but Iran routinely provides proxies with the money, weapons and training to attack innocent civilians throughout the region. That's a terrific obstacle."

Raisi is due to take up his office on Aug. 8 during what is a sensitive time, diplomatically. The US and European powers are trying to revive some version of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran nuclear deal, from which the Trump administration withdrew in 2018, arguing it was not robust enough.

While many believe a new and improved deal could defang Iran and help bring calm to the region, Roule firmly disagrees, predicting that any sanctions relief for Tehran in exchange for nuclear restraint will only fuel its other

activities.

“There is no reason Iranian hardliners should oppose a nuclear deal,” he said. “A nuclear deal does not constrain regional activities or missile activities. It provides them with steady resources to, indeed, support these activities.

“I don’t believe that Iran is going to lessen its regional threat. I do believe that the nature of the regional political dynamic is changing as the conflict in Syria ends and as Iraq stabilizes. The Iranians are going to look to change their proxies, from fighting militias to political elements, and I think we’re going to see a different type of Iran activity in the region.”

To help achieve this, Roule predicts Iran will increase its support for its Lebanese proxy.

“Hezbollah needs to walk a very careful path in the coming months in Lebanon,” he said. “They wish to retain control, their influence, the influence of their political allies over key ministries, but they want to make sure that they are not seen as bearing any responsibility for the economic and political decision-making and the hardships this has imposed on the innocent Lebanese people.

“Imagine that you have \$600-700 million a year being sent to a terrorist organization and militia which holds the Lebanese people hostage. This will increase after a nuclear deal, unfortunately, and the international community has very few options to constrain this.”

Roule also believes the election of Raisi as president will make the possibility of a diplomatic solution to the war in Yemen even more remote, as the Iran-backed Houthi militia is unlikely to accept a package that diminishes its influence.

“I remain generally pessimistic only because the regional actors and the United Nations have worked very hard for years to bring the Houthis to the diplomatic table,” he said.

“They have offered a series of political and financial packages to the Yemeni people, working through the Yemeni government, which is an actor we should never forget, and the Houthis have rejected this.”

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What does Ebrahim Raisi's election victory mean for Iran and the world?

[Israel army chief says cooperation with US against Iran 'unprecedented'](#)

Author:

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JERUSALEM: Israel's army chief on Wednesday hailed "unprecedented" cooperation with the US, as he wrapped up a US visit focused on preventing Tehran from obtaining military nuclear capabilities.

Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi's remarks came the same day as Iran said it had foiled a sabotage attack on an atomic energy agency building, as talks continue in Vienna between Tehran and world powers aimed at reviving their 2015 nuclear deal.

Israel staunchly opposes the deal, which it fears could enable its arch-nemesis to obtain nuclear weapons.

Kohavi's visit, which began on Sunday, also came four weeks since Israel and Gaza's Palestinian Islamist rulers Hamas agreed a cease-fire ending 11 days of heavy fighting.

At the US military's Central Command in Florida, Kohavi met Centcom commander General Frank McKenzie, where he discussed the Gaza war, the Syrian arena and coordination between the countries.

"The IDF's operational cooperation with the US military is unprecedented in its scope and has reached new heights," Kohavi said in a statement, using the acronym for Israel defense forces.

"The mutual and main goal of action for the two armies is thwarting Iranian aggression," he added.

"Iran seeks to establish and entrench terrorists in many countries (and) continues to pose a regional threat in terms of nuclear proliferation, advanced weapons systems including ballistic missile capabilities, and the financing of terrorist armies," the Israeli general said.

Kohavi was also meeting with US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on "Iran's regional entrenchment throughout the Middle East and the flaws" of the nuclear deal with Iran, a statement from the military said.

In meetings with Sullivan and CIA head William Burns, Kohavi was "presenting multiple ways to prevent Iran from acquiring military nuclear capabilities," the army said.

Kohavi was due to return to Israel on Friday.



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Pro-Palestine activists from Palestine Action arrested after protest at Israeli defense factory in UK