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Fire in Iran

Three weeks ago a paper written by the staff at Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya's Institute for Policy and Strategy argued that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's focus on extending Israeli sovereignty to parts of the West Bank was deflecting his attention and that of the world from Israel's main threat: Iran.

The title given to the paper summed it up concisely: "Annexation 'in,' Iran 'out,' Israel harms the struggle against a nuclear Iran."

According to the paper, not only did the incessant chatter about the possibility of annexation mean that the world was focusing on Israel rather than Iran, but the annexation issue led Netanyahu to take his eye off the Iranian ball, and this at a particularly inopportune moment: as Iran continues to test how far the world will let it go beyond the limits of the 2015 nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and as the UN is scheduled to consider lifting an arms embargo on the Islamic Republic in October.

All that was written three weeks ago. Less than two weeks ago, however, something dramatic changed: on June 26 an explosion rocked a facility that produces liquid fuel for ballistic missiles near Tehran, and another massive fire erupted in Shiraz. These were the first of a series of six fires, explosions and chemical mishaps since then, including at a medical clinic in Tehran, the Natanz nuclear site, a power plant in Ahvaz, and at a petrochemical plant in Mahshahr.

That all of this is a mere coincidence is unlikely, and the events indicate that somebody, somewhere – and it is anyone's guess who that is and where – has not forgotten Iran, even amid the world's preoccupation with corona, America's turbulent domestic situation, and Israel's debate (much less intense over the last week) over annexation.

These actions inside Iran send a strong message to the Islamic Republic – already reeling from the coronavirus, crippling US sanctions, a deep economic crisis and domestic foment – that it is vulnerable, that its most sensitive facilities can be reached and penetrated, and that facilities suspected of being used to further its nuclear and ballistic missile program can be severely damaged.

Iran has many proxies doing its dirty work around the region and the world, but whoever planned, green-lighted and carried out what look like premeditated attacks against key Iranian infrastructure has decided the time was right to go for the head of the octopus, and not suffice with hitting one of its many tentacles abroad.

Why now? There are a number of possible reasons. It could be connected to accelerated work the Iranians are doing on their nuclear program, justifying their violations of the JCPOA by saying that the US withdrew from the accord, and the Europeans have not done enough to bypass the American sanctions.

It could be connected to the upcoming UN vote on whether – as the Americans want – the arms embargo clamped on the country should continue. Since the Iranians are so keen on getting this embargo lifted, they may mute any possible response to small-bore attacks on their homeland in order to deprive countries in the UN of a justification to extend the embargo.

And it could all be connected to the remaining window of opportunity to act before the US presidential elections in November. The Iranians are waiting anxiously for November, hoping US President Donald Trump is not reelected, and that Joe Biden – who has said he would like to get back into a nuclear deal with Iran – comes into office.

The Iranians at this time would not be served by a large-scale military response, since that would force Biden to take a more hawkish position toward the Islamic Republic than perhaps he would be naturally inclined.

Whoever is behind the recent attacks in Iran seems to be working on the assumption that – at least for the time being – Iran's hands are tied. A clear signal is also being sent that even with all the other dangers currently facing humanity, to allow the Iranians to march forward with their nuclear ambitions would be utter folly that would make the current threats facing the world seem minor in comparison.