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Signs of sabotage in Tehran's nuclear programme

By James Blitz, Roula Khalaf & Daniel Dombey

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As Iran continues to defy international sanctions, western security analysts say the country is making progress towards the ability to test a nuclear bomb in the next few years.

London/Washington: Iran has suffered a series of technical setbacks to its nuclear programme in the past 12 months, triggering suggestions that western intelligence agencies are sabotaging its likely ambition to build an atomic weapon.

As Iran continues to defy international sanctions, western security analysts say the country is making progress towards the ability to test a nuclear bomb in the next few years.

But a series of recent reverses, notably affecting Iran's ability to enrich uranium, is prompting debate over whether the programme is being undermined by sabotage, sanctions, or the incompetence of the regime's scientists.

In the past year, a dramatic reduction has taken place in the number of centrifuges enriching uranium at the regime's nuclear plant in Natanz.

In May 2009, the International Atomic Energy Agency said there were 4,920 operational centrifuges. Twelve months later the IAEA stated that Iran was running only 3,936, a reduction of 20 per cent.

Efficiency

Iran also appears to be having difficulties on other fronts. Ivan Oelrich, of the Federation of American Scientists, said the centrifuges were only working at 20 per cent efficiency. The latest IAEA report says that 4,592 centrifuges are installed at Natanz — but are sitting idle and doing nothing at all.

Some security analysts see this as evidence of covert sabotage by western intelligence agencies. "There are signs that there has been a concerted intelligence operation which is able to debilitate and set back the Iranian programme," says one academic, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"It is not foolproof. But a large number of Iranian centrifuges have crashed and up to half have had to be replaced in recent times. This success didn't happen entirely accidentally."

Others are less willing to give western intelligence total credit. "Nothing we know can rule out sabotage and clearly something fishy is going on," says Oelrich.

Leading analysts believe western agencies have been trying to sabotage the programme for some time. "The UK, US, the Israelis all want to get companies to help them put bogus equipment into the programme," said David Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security.

Albright said Iran was vulnerable to this kind of sabotage because it needed to import equipment from abroad, often through shady middlemen who help the regime defy international sanctions. "The Iranians really don't make that much; they don't make vacuum pumps, they don't make valves, they don't reverse engineer that well," he said. "So western suppliers are critical."

Michael Adler, an expert on Iran's nuclear programme at the Woodrow Wilson Centre in Washington, said intelligence agencies actively exploited this reliance on imports. "[They] trace the procurement patterns, they find people shipping, say, a vacuum pump for a centrifuge. Then they put in a gremlin. The thing about centrifuges is that they operate in cascades. So when one goes down, you get a domino effect."

Caution

However, these experts, offer a word of caution. They say that Iran faces other problems that would explain the setbacks. For example, its scientists are still using old centrifuges — called P1s and P2s — which were first employed decades ago. "It is hardly surprising these break down," said Adler, "especially given the regime's ambitions for speedy success".

Others argue that the scope for sabotage has been much reduced because Iran has acquired computer systems that allow it to produce its own numerically generated parts for the enrichment programme.

Iran insists talk of sabotage is western propaganda. "I strongly deny Iran's nuclear programme is sabotaged. This is a media war to suggest the Islamic Republic is dependent on foreign help," says Kazim Jalali, a member of the Iranian parliament.