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Iran admits cyberattacks on government departments

State-run media says 'important' attacks occurred Tuesday and Wednesday, does not disclose which departments were targeted but says confirms other departments temporarily took down online services as precaution against further strikes

Associated Press , Ynet| Published: 10.15.20 , 14:17

Iran's cybersecurity authority acknowledged cyberattacks on two governmental departments this week, state media reported Thursday.

The cyberattacks occurred Tuesday and Wednesday and were under investigation, the state-owned IRAN daily newspaper said.

While the report did not say which government departments were targeted, it called the attacks "important" and said some other departments temporarily took down their online services as a precaution against further attacks.

Iran occasionally says it has thwarted cyberattacks on its infrastructure, although it has disconnected much of its infrastructure from the internet after the Stuxnet computer virus, widely believed to be a joint U.S.-Israeli creation, disrupted thousands of Iranian centrifuges in the country's nuclear sites in the late 2000s.

Iran was behind an attempt earlier this year to attack into Israel's water system, aiming to paralyze the country's sewage systems and disrupt the water supply for farming at the height of the pandemic.

Israel reportedly responded by carrying out a cyberattack on computers at Iran's Shahid Rajaei port, causing massive backups on waterways and roads leading to the state-of-the-art facility.

The Washington Post quoted a foreign security official as saying that the attack was "highly accurate" and the damage to the port was more serious than described in official Iranian accounts.

In December, Iran said it halted a massive cyberattack on unspecified "electronic infrastructure," but provided no specifics on the purported attack.

Last year, Washington officials said that U.S. military cyber forces launched a strike against Iranian military computer systems, as U.S. President Donald Trump backed away from plans for a more conventional military strike in response to Iran's downing of a U.S. surveillance drone in the strategic Persian Gulf.

Tensions have escalated between the U.S. and Iran since Trump in 2018 withdrew America from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers and began a policy of "maximum pressure" on Tehran.

Tensions rose further after a U.S. airstrike killed a top Iranian general at Baghdad's airport in January. Iran retaliated with a ballistic missile strike on Iraqi bases housing American troops, wounding dozens of U.S. troops.

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U.S. to hit all of Iran's financial sector with sanctions

Announcement follows months-long debate on best way to proceed with Iran, particularly as Trump faces difficult reelection challenge against opponent Biden who wants to return to nuclear deal

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The Trump administration is poised to announce that it will blacklist Iran's entire financial sector, dealing another blow to an economy that is already reeling under U.S. sanctions. The move could deepen tensions with European nations over Iran.

Administration officials and congressional aides say the decision is expected on Thursday. The move is expected to hit 14 Iranian banks that have thus far escaped the reimposition of U.S. sanctions and, more importantly, subject foreign, non-Iranian financial institutions to penalties for doing business with them. Thus, it will effectively cut them off from the international financial system.

The officials and aides spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly preview the decision, which is to be announced by the Treasury Department in mid-afternoon. It was not immediately clear if the blacklisting would come with a grace period or tailored exemptions that would permit some limited transactions to continue.

European nations have opposed the blanket financial services blacklisting because it will open up their biggest banks and other companies to U.S. penalties for conducting business with Iran that had previously been allowed.

The move comes as the U.S. has stepped up efforts to kill the 2015 Iran nuclear deal that President Donald Trump withdrew from in 2018. Since then, Trump has steadily

increased pressure on Iran by imposing sanctions on its oil sales, blacklisting top government officials and killing a top general in an airstrike.

Last month, the administration unilaterally announced that it had restored all international sanctions against Iran that had been eased or lifted under the nuclear deal. And, having been ridiculed by most members of the UN Security Council for claiming to have retained the right to restore international sanctions despite no longer being a member of the deal, the administration has continued to seek to boost its leverage with Iran.

While almost the entire rest of the world, which has an interest in preserving the deal, has vowed to ignore those sanctions, violating them will come with significant risk of losing access to the U.S. financial system. Some believe that Thursday's expected action could destroy any chance of salvaging the accord by making it impossible for Iranian banks to have any relationships with their foreign counterparts.

Critics say the sanctions will further cut off Iran's ability to import humanitarian goods that are especially needed during the coronavirus pandemic, although U.S. officials insist there are carve-outs for legitimate items such as food and medicine. Relief organizations and others, however, say the exemptions still starve the Iranian people of essentials.

Thursday's planned announcement, which was first published by The Washington Post, follows months of internal administration debate about the best way to proceed with Iran, particularly as Trump faces a difficult reelection challenge against former Vice President Joe Biden, who has said he wants to return to the nuclear deal.

Until Wednesday, the Treasury Department had opposed the step, arguing that it would adversely affect U.S. relationships with Europe. However, Iran hawks in Congress and outside the government have long sought the cut-off.