



The Cambridge Security Initiative

IRAN: LIMITED RETALIATION FOR ASSASSINATION OF NUCLEAR SCIENTIST LIKELY

DECEMBER 2020

Richard C. Baffa

Iran almost certainly will retaliate for the assassination of its top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh; however, Tehran's response probably will be limited, proportional, and in kind, calculated to avoid a broader regional conflict and keep the door open for negotiations and sanctions relief with the incoming Biden administration. Iranian leaders rapidly condemned the assassination and blamed Israel; some also implicated the US in the attack.

Iran's top nuclear scientist was assassinated near Tehran on 27 November, prompting the Supreme National Security Council to convene an emergency meeting. Fakhrizadeh was considered the father of Iran's clandestine nuclear weapons program known as the "Amad project", according to US and Israeli intelligence. A 2011 International Atomic Energy Agency report indicated he was a central figure in suspected Iranian work to develop technology and skills needed for nuclear weapons, including designing a warhead small enough to fit atop a missile and survive re-entry into the atmosphere. Iran repeatedly refused to allow IAEA inspectors access to Fakhrizadeh and has consistently denied it has or has had a nuclear weapons program. Fakhrizadeh would have played a vital role in the event Tehran decided to jump start its weapons program.

Senior Iranian officials began making statements within a few hours of his death, condemning the assassination, blaming Israel and the U.S. and vowing to retaliate. Their response, however, tempered expectations for a rapid, military response. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said Iran's first priority was "definitive punishment of the perpetrators and those who ordered it," but he added, "The Iranian nation is smarter than falling into the trap of the Zionist. They are thinking to create chaos." In a televised cabinet meeting on the same day, President Hassan Rouhani blamed Fakhrizadeh's assassination on Israel, vowed revenge in "due course," and claimed his death would not stop or impact Iran's civilian nuclear program. IRGC commander Major General Hossein Salami maintained, "a harsh response is planned."

Israel has not claimed responsibility for the killing per its normal *modus operandi*, but the *New York Times* quoted three US officials, including two intelligence officers, stating Israel was behind it. Assassinations of Iranian scientists are not unprecedented. Between 2010 and 2012 four Iranian nuclear scientists — Masoud Alimohammadi, Majid Shahriari, Darioush Rezaeinejad, and Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan — were killed, while a fifth, Fereydoon Abbasi Davani, survived an attempted assassination. These were attributed to Israel, which never confirmed nor denied its involvement.

OUTLOOK

The Iranian leadership almost certainly is alarmed by the brazen assassination of its top nuclear scientist, killed near Tehran in broad daylight. Combined with the Soleimani assassination, this represents a strike at the core of Iran's pillars of power: its proxy networks and nuclear program. In addition, the assassination comes in the wake of a number of mysterious explosions and fires at key installations, including Natanz, earlier this year, underscoring the vulnerabilities in Iran's security apparatus and the effectiveness of the covert war against the regime. Tehran may also conclude the killing presages a broader attack on its nuclear program. Finally, the attack almost certainly will exacerbate Iran's concerns about the growing threat to its homeland and its regional ambitions by the strategic realignment exemplified by the Abraham Accords (see CSi Regional Archive- Middle East for further information). If Israel was responsible for the assassination, it reflects an intent to maintain pressure on Iran, and complicate and narrow opportunities for the incoming US administration to re-enter the Iran nuclear deal, otherwise known as the JCPOA.

Tehran almost certainly will retaliate but its options are limited. The Supreme Leader's comments strongly suggest Tehran will bide its time and opt for a measured, proportional response to avoid sparking a broader regional conflict and keep potential negotiations with the incoming Biden administration viable. Lebanese Hezbollah denounced the assassination but note Iran is fully capable of overcoming Israeli terrorism, strongly suggesting it will not be part of any retaliation.

Iran is far more likely to execute an assassination, kidnapping, or terrorist attack against an Israeli target rather than risk a conventional military strike. Most recently, Iran has carried out a string of kidnappings and assassinations in the region, including in Turkey, Iraq, and the UAE. Iran may view the recent arrival of Israeli businessmen and tourists in the UAE and Bahrain as an opportunity to both send a retaliation message and undermine the Abraham Accords. Iran may wait until the new US administration takes office before retaliating, fearing a response from President Donald Trump. Tehran has proven its willingness to play the long game and may wait until conditions become more conducive to success before retaliating.