

The Assassination of Fakhrizadeh: Considerations and Consequences

Amos Yadlin and Assaf Orion

The assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizada invites six questions: Who is responsible for the act? What was the objective? Why now? What are the consequences of the assassination? How will Iran respond? What is the recommended policy for Israel in light of this development? This article contends that barring narrow political considerations, whoever ordered Fakhrizadeh's assassination apparently tried to achieve three strategic objectives: damage Iran's nuclear program; obstruct the Biden administration's return to the nuclear agreement; and perhaps, though less likely, encourage an escalation that would result in a US attack on Iran's nuclear sites. The first objective seems to have been achieved, although the response to the assassination is still ahead and may exact a costly price. Attainment of the other two goals depends heavily on the Iranian response, but in any case, these are far-reaching objectives with slimmer chances of realization.

The year 2020 began with the assassination of Revolutionary Guards General Qassem Soleimani, and approached its close with the assassination of Revolutionary Guards General Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Soleimani was the commander of the Quds Force and led Iran's strategic effort for regional hegemony, primarily through subversive diplomacy, proxy warfare, and arms proliferation. Fakhrizadeh led Iran's second strategic effort – the pursuit of nuclear weapons.

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The United States took public responsibility for the killing of General Qassem Soleimani and in response suffered an Iranian barrage of missiles fired at an American base in Iraq. No responsibility was taken for the killing of Fakhrizadeh, or for actions taken against Iranian targets over the past summer, most notably the attack on the advanced centrifuges facility in Natanz. Although the Pentagon responded with "no comment" regarding Fakhrizadeh's assassination, intelligence sources in the United States pointed to Israel once more as responsible. No official response was given by Israel, but Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu said he "could not reveal everything" related to his actions last week. Iran, for its part, has blamed Israel directly, promising a response "at the appropriate time and place." Previous attempts on the lives of Iranian nuclear scientists have also been attributed to Israel, and in response Iran tried to attack Israeli embassies in India and Thailand. Some of the perpetrators of the planned attacks were released recently in exchange for the release of an Australian citizen arrested in Iran.

Israel and the United States have worked together in the past to combat Iran's nuclear program, for example, with the penetration of the Stuxnet computer worm in the uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz, although they differ in their approaches to offensive activity of this sort. Israel's attack on the nuclear reactor in Syria in 2007 occurred with Washington's knowledge, and even its blessing. However, it should not be inferred from events shortly before the assassination – including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Israel and elsewhere in the region, and the (leaked) meeting between Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman – that the operation in Tehran was coordinated between all parties. At the same time, it is very likely that this time too, Israel did not surprise the US administration, and even received its blessing.

The assassination of Fakhrizadeh was presumably intended to achieve a number of common goals for the Israeli government and the Trump administration. The assassination was certainly intended to inflict direct damage on the future of Iran's nuclear weapons program, in which Fakhrizadeh played a key role: Iranian nuclear weapons were his life's mission. When Iran's military nuclear program was suspended following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Tehran decided to reach the nuclear threshold through a civilian path. Fakhrizadeh, who led the illicit weapons team, which hasn't had and does not have a civilian cover story, preserved its knowledge in various organizations and institutions. If there is a secret Iranian weapons program, it has now suffered a severe blow, and the same is true of Iran's nuclear weapons infrastructure, which is awaiting a renewed launch.

The damage to the nuclear weapons effort, which experts consider to be very significant, is not necessarily due to the loss of scientific knowledge, but due to the loss of project leadership, managerial experience, and access to Iran's top political echelon – salient Fakhrizadeh assets. It is possible that his departure will lengthen the time Iran needs for a nuclear weapons breakout or sneak-out, when it decides on this route. Those with such leadership, management, and professional abilities are few and far between, and their loss leaves a void that is difficult to fill. Indeed, it seems that Mohsen Fakhrizadeh joins others such as Imad Mughniyeh and Qassem Soleimani, whose positions were filled but could not be replaced. It can also be assumed that his assassination is accompanied by a chilling and deterring effect on other scientists in the current and future project.

Following previous assassinations in Iran, including the assassination of senior al-Qaeda operative Abdullah Ahmad Abdullah in Tehran in August, this case again illustrates to the Iranian regime its vulnerability and the deep enemy penetration in its midst. While throughout the world, including in Europe, there have been condemnations of the assassination as an act of terrorism against civilians, it is perhaps more appropriate to treat it as an offensive operation against a key officer in a strategic sector, conducted in a gray realm, where Iran and its rivals are fighting a long, low-intensity strategic campaign, in the twilight zone between war and peace.

As for the US administration, it seems President Trump is determined to leave behind a significant and impressive legacy of attacks on the architects of key threats in the Middle East: on Iran's part, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and pursuit of regional hegemony (Fakhrizadeh and Soleimani); and on Sunni radical terrorism (ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi who was killed by the United States in October 2019; and the abovementioned elimination of Abdullah Ahmad Abdullah). Recently, and perhaps even more so since Trump's loss in the presidential election, the administration has imposed increasing sanctions on Iran and its allies along the axis from Tehran to Beirut. It is clear that in what remains of its tenure, the "maximum pressure" policy it has pursued against Iran will not yield any real political achievement other than the heavy burden on the Iranian regime, which reduces the resources it can allocate to expand its regional influence and consolidate its military power. Therefore, Fakhrizadeh's assassination, coupled with the sanctions pressure by the United States, may aggravate the opening conditions facing the Biden administration when it comes to resumed contact with Iran, whether due to a hardening of Iran's positions or its possible response to actions taken against it. Netanyahu, for his part, is determined to use the rest of Trump's term to score final achievements under his auspices, even at the cost of opening his relations with the Biden administration with a jarring tone. And as the election winds blow again in Israel, it cannot be ruled out that political considerations too influenced the decision on the timing of Fakhrizadeh's assassination.

However, it is apparent that the assassination was timed to take advantage of the final winds of support in the outgoing US administration, anticipating and neutralizing expected barriers to such activity in the incoming Biden administration, and influencing its room to maneuver. The operation was also timed to narrow the risk of a significant Iranian offensive response in the near term, given the fears in Tehran of a severe offensive overreaction on the part of the Trump administration, and an Iranian desire to facilitate the resumption of contact with the Biden administration. Some even go so far as to interpret the assassination as an Israeli-American attempt to drag Iran into a "strategic ambush," that is, to bring about a harsh response that will provide the Trump administration with a pretext to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. This theory is based on

reports of President Trump consulting his advisers on the issue, as well as the reported reinforcements of American aircraft carriers and bombers to the region. However, all of these can be also seen as moves aimed at deterring Iran from escalating while the United States reduces its ground presence in the region, and not necessarily as evidence of an American intent to escalate.

What will be the Iranian response? The Iranian regime has blamed Israel for the assassination, thus freeing itself from having to attack American targets and risking a powerful retaliation. However, it vowed to retaliate, as revenge and to deter further assassinations. Iran may choose to harm Israeli figures and targets in Israel and abroad, given the limitations of its ability to harm Israeli territory from the operational theaters of its proxies – Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen – and the serious consequences such action would incur. When Iran looks ahead to the Biden era, it may delay its revenge mission, despite calls for an immediate response. Expected Iranian non-military responses are in the area of the nuclear program. The Iranian parliament, the Majlis, has made a non-binding decision to raise the enrichment rate to 20 percent, place advanced centrifuges at enrichment sites, rebuild a heavy water reactor, and even withdraw from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Additional Protocol. Measures restricting IAEA inspectors, who were accused of disclosing the details of the assassinated nuclear scientists, were also proposed, along with diplomatic action against those responsible for the assassination.

What should Israel do? First, it is important that official Israel be mindful that “silence is golden,” and avoid winks and hints. The Israeli government must assume that the Iranian response will be directed mainly against Israel, and therefore commit to intelligence vigilance and immediate operational readiness in the defense arrays, including from the Red Sea. It is necessary to prepare for the possibility that Iran will use its missiles from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen to target Israel, as well as Israeli targets abroad. Although the number of Israelis abroad has declined significantly due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Abraham Accords will increase the available Israeli targets in the Gulf states. In these contexts, coordination with the United States is important, as an essential partner and as a multiplier of intelligence, operational, and diplomatic power. Even now, communication channels must be opened up with incoming senior Biden government officials, as the crisis is expected to continue into their term. Not only should the nuclear scientists and military dimensions of the Iranian project be on the agenda, but also the enrichment infrastructure, the accumulating uranium stockpiles, the shortened time to a breakout, the options for thwarting Iran's nuclear program, the overall strategy to prevent nuclear weapons in Iran, and the overarching Israel-US cooperation in upcoming years – including the critical context of Iran's nuclear program.

In conclusion, barring narrow political considerations, whoever ordered Fakhrizadeh's assassination apparently tried to achieve three strategic objectives: damage Iran's nuclear program; obstruct the Biden administration's return to the nuclear agreement; and perhaps, though less likely, encourage an escalation that would result in a US attack on Iran's nuclear sites. The first objective seems to have been achieved, although the response to the assassination is still ahead and may exact a costly price. Attainment of the other two goals depends heavily on the Iranian response, but in any case, these are far-reaching objectives with slimmer chances of realization.