

December 6, 2020

The Elimination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, Iran's Top Nuclear Scientist & The Deterrence Equilibrium In The Middle East

Information

On Friday, November 27, 2020, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a brigadier general in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran's top nuclear scientist, and the head of Iran's secret military nuclear program, was eliminated in Iran. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu specifically named Mr. Fakhrizadeh in a briefing he held in April 2018 when Netanyahu unveiled the Iranian nuclear archives the Israeli Intelligence Services - the Mossad, had smuggled into Israel from Iran.

Shortly after the assassination, Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, tweeted that there was evidence linking Israel to the assassination. The New York Times also claimed that Israel was behind the assassination. Israel and the United States remain silent on the matter. [The Iranian Revolutionary Guards](#) (IRG) vowed to avenge Fakhrizadeh's death.

Assessment

Five days before the killing of Fakhrizadeh, on the early morning of Sunday, November 22, 2020, a Saudi oil refinery in Jeddah, on the shores of the Red Sea, was attacked. At 05:30am a military spokesman for the Shi'ite Houthi tribes in Yemen, claimed responsibility for the incident and said the attack was carried out using an Al Quds 2 cruise missile. He also noted that the missile was recently integrated in the military arsenal of the Houthis following a successful test launch the Houthis conducted deep inside Saudi territory. There are no reports of such an attack on Saudi Arabia. However, in the days leading up to the attack, the Houthis threatened to attack oil facilities in Saudi territory.

The Saudis were quiet the entire day of November 22nd. They did not comment on the attack. Nor did they respond in any way. The same night, it was reported that a meeting was held between the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu the Saudi Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman, and the United States Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. Reportedly the meeting took place in NEOM. A futuristic mega city Saudi Arabia is building from scratch in northwest Saudi Arabia. According to Israeli reports, the Prime Minister was accompanied by the head of the Mossad, and the Prime Minister's Military Secretary.

The next day, on Monday, November 23, 2020, the Saudi Foreign Minister denied such a meeting had taken place. And in parallel, the Saudi Energy Ministry spokesperson published a formal statement that there was a terrorist attack on November 22nd. He said that a rocket hit a Saudi oil storage facility in the port city of Jeddah. He did not specify who was behind the attack.

However, shortly after that statement, the spokesperson of the Saudi-led military coalition fighting the Houthis in Yemen blamed the Houthis and Iran for the attack. The Houthis are backed by Iran.

The attack on Jeddah was just the latest in a string of attacks the Houthis have launched on Saudi Arabian cities using ballistic missiles and attack drones supplied to the Houthis by Iran. The Houthis pull the trigger. But Iran is the one who gives the orders.

Evaluation

In my analysis, Fakhrizadeh's assassination must be examined in a broader context. And that wider context is Iran's attempts to dictate the power equilibrium and secure its deterrence posture vis-à-vis the United States and US allies in the region.

To explain this, I would like to bring your attention to two other incidents that happened before the elimination of Fakhrizadeh. One is the above-mentioned November 22, 2020 attack on Jeddah's oil refinery. And the other is the January 3, 2020 elimination by the United States of General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Al-Quds Force. In my estimation, these three events have a common denominator. They all also have to do with who will be the entity in the region that will have the upper hand? And who will deter whom? Let us zoom in on these events to demonstrate what I mean.

At the end of 2019, General Soleimani ordered Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias in Iraq to attack US forces in Iraq. Iran's goal was to pressure the US to withdraw from Iraq. In response, the US eliminated Soleimani. The missile attack

the Iranian-backed Houthis launched on Saudi Arabian oil facilities on November 22nd was Iran's attempt to realign the balance of power, and to deter the US, the Arab (Persian) Gulf states, and Israel from attacking Iran or its proxies in the region. The reaction? Less than a week later, Iran's top nuclear scientist was killed. It can be assumed that the plan to eliminate Fakhriadeh was prepared in detail long in advance. The green light for the assassination was given following the missile attack on Jeddah. The proximity between the two events is likely not accidental.

I was disheartened, though unfortunately not surprised, to see how some people considered to be professional authorities of knowledge in the West, choose to present the event through a very narrow lens devoid of context and perspective. For example, in response to the elimination of Fakhriadeh, John Brennan, the former Director of the CIA tweeted *'This was a criminal act & highly reckless. It risks lethal retaliation & a new round of regional conflict. Iranian leaders would be wise to wait for the return of responsible American leadership on the global stage & to resist the urge to respond against perceived culprits'*.

Mr. Brennan completely ignored the Iranian attack - via its proxy the Houthis - on the ARAMCO oil facilities in Jeddah. Furthermore, he fails to consider the incident through the wider regional perspective. When analyzing events in the Middle East, first and foremost, it is critical to understand that nothing in the region stands alone. Everything is linked. And it is a professional imperative to identify the chain of connections in order to design accurate and effective policy. The fact that one of the United States' foremost senior intelligence officials, who is regarded as a reliable source of analysis and professional knowledge, is so selective in his outlook, and ignores the context, facts, and sequence of events is deeply and profoundly disturbing and dangerous.

Prediction

Iran's 'Revenge Attack' - Calculations & Options

The Revolutionary Guards threatened severe revenge against Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

There are a plethora of strategic targets Iran could choose. Including, but not limited to commercial maritime and naval traffic or installations in the Arab / Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, embassies, harbors, infrastructure (water, transportation, communication, power plants, etc.), public institutions, refineries, security and science officials, etc.

As far as methods of attack. Iran also could carry out a number of operations such as cyberattacks, swarms of drones, launching precision missiles, placing underwater mines or carrying out some other form of underwater sabotage, detonating unmanned speed boats, terror attack squads targeting officials, embassies, or public buildings, etc.

As far as executors. To expand its control and power in the region, Iran uses a network of agents and proxies. This model has proven to be a highly successful strategy for Iran. The regime has agents and proxies throughout the Middle East. Including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iraqi Shi'ite militias, the Houthis in Yemen, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza in the Gaza Strip, and others. Iran could either choose to carry out an operation itself or dictate one of its subcontractors.

However, all this being said, in my analysis, an Iranian retaliation is not likely to be imminent. There are several reasons for my assessment.

First, Iran's 'revenge attack' must have a significant impact. Both in terms of damage and in terms of rehabilitating or strengthening Iran's deterrence posture. And this takes complex planning and lengthy preparations.

Second, an Iranian 'revenge attack' at the end of President Trump's tenure could lead to a harsh US military response targeting vital Iranian assets. And speaking of the US, Iran hopes the Biden administration will alleviate the harsh sanctions Trump imposed on Iran. If Iran retaliates, it will make it difficult for the US President-elect and the EU to be generous with the Iranian regime.

Third, an Iranian 'revenge attack' faces another challenge. Iran needs to strike powerfully yet it also must avoid possible ramifications and repercussions such as counter military-strike, a counter cyberattacks, diplomatic sanctions, etc. Iran must be careful that whatever action it decides to take, does not get the regime into a military or diplomatic quagmire. This challenge further limits Iran's retaliatory options.

Fourth, if Iran wanted to use its agents and proxies to attack Israel, the easiest platforms are the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria since all three border Israel. However, the current conditions and circumstances inside Gaza, Lebanon, and

Syria restricts and limits the abilities of Iranian proxies to carry out a significant retaliatory operation. And I do not see this changing in the foreseeable future.

Let us take a brief look at each arena one by one .

Lebanon. Lebanon is the home of Iran's most important proxy. Hezbollah. Hezbollah has the military capabilities to cause Israel significant damage. Estimates are that Hezbollah has between 120,000 and 150,000 rockets and missiles aimed at Israel. However, Lebanon is drowning in economic and political crises, and is hanging on by a thread. If Hezbollah launches a military attack on Israel, this could lead to an all-out war that could push Hezbollah and Lebanon over the edge of the cliff. This might help us understand the statement of Hezbollah's Deputy Leader, Sheikh Naim Qassem, who said "*the Iranian response is an Iranian matter, and it is a matter of honor*". According to information evaluated as reliable, General Ismail Qa'ani the Commander of Al-Quds Force (who replaced Soleimani) recently had a secret meeting with the leaders of Hezbollah in Lebanon and ordered them to refrain from any activity against Israel.

Syria. One of Iran's most important projects – and a critical tool for its hegemonic vision is a militarized land corridor from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea that Teheran has been building for the past three decades. Determined to prevent Iran from completing its military infrastructure in Syria, Israel has attacked the corridor hundreds of times. Should Iran – or its proxies – retaliate against Israel from within Syrian territory, Israel will not hold back. It is likely, Israel would take the Iranian provocation as an opportunity to launch a powerful and expansive operation, not only against Iranian targets in Syria - but also against military targets of the Assad regime. Russia, currently engaged in a power struggle with Iran over control of Syria, will look the other way as Israel pummels the Iranians and Assad.

Gaza. As the government in the Gaza Strip, Hamas, has its own challenges. A fledgling economy, high unemployment, a crumbling infrastructure, the daily hardships Gazans endure, the alarming spread of COVID-19, and more. Increasingly, the people of Gaza are holding Hamas accountable for their dreary situation. If Iran decides to use its agents – Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine - to exact retribution against Israel, there is a high probability a war will ensue which will bring Hamas' rule in Gaza to an end. That would not serve Hamas or Iran .

Two possible paths

Given all of this, in my estimation, Iran has two possible paths of retaliation.

The more likely strategy is a cyberattack. From the Iranian point of view, this method has several advantages. First, a cyberattack can cause substantial damage. Second, militarily attacking oil refineries which compromise the flow of oil, or attacking ships and naval trade routes, could have global ramifications. By focusing on a specific target like Israeli or Saudi infrastructure - Iran does not risk disrupting and therefore – angering, the international community. Third, Iran could deny responsibility for a cyberattack or have little fingerprints – if at all. Fourth, a counter cyberattack in response to an Iranian cyberattack, could leave the Iranian regime a space to maneuver. Iran could deny a counterattack or attribute any outcomes of a counter cyberattack to technical problems. This way Iran could contain such a counterattack and avoid unneeded escalation.

Another option for Teheran to retaliate is to use less expected sub-contractors – like Al-Qaeda or ISIS. Although both are [Sunni](#) and are [Salafi jihadist organizations](#) - which are ideologically and theologically hostile towards [Shi'ites](#), both Al-Qaeda and ISIS cooperate with Iran. Accumulating information indicates there has been military cooperation between Iran and Al-Qaeda and that senior members of Al-Qaeda are living very comfortably in Iran. In that context it should be mentioned that according to Western media, in August 2020, Al-Qaeda's second in command -Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, known as Abu Muhammad al-Masri, was liquidated in Tehran, where he had lived for the past few years. When it comes to ISIS, accumulating information also indicates that Iran and ISIS have overlapping interests. And may very likely be cooperating. In fact, in November 2017, IRG Commander, General Mohammad Ali Jafari stated that Iran had no interest in eradicating ISIS because ISIS' activities serve Iran's hegemonic ambitions. From the Iranian point of view, carrying out the mullah regime's revenge using a Sunni Jihadist terror group has a number of advantages. First, using organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS offers Iran almost an unlimited target list - embassies, infrastructure, maritime traffic, officials, ports, public buildings, etc. And finally, perhaps most important - it allows Iran to exact painful revenge - yet be almost completely immune from ramifications and repercussions.

If it surprises you that Iran and Al-Qaeda cooperate – even though they on many levels they virulently oppose each other - read my September 2017 article [My Enemy is my Best Asset...](#)



AVI MELAMED

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"The Middle East is a Chain of Links. What Happens in one-part impacts what happens in another - and what happens in the Middle East does not stay in the Middle East" – Avi Melamed

BIO: Avi Melamed is an Intelligence Analyst and an Expert on Current Affairs in the Arab and Muslim World. He is a former Israeli Senior Official on Arab Affairs. In his public service, he held high-risk government, advisory, and counter-terrorist intelligence positions in Arab communities throughout the region on behalf of Israeli Government agencies.

As an author and educator, Avi provides intelligence analysis, briefings, and geopolitical tours for diplomats, policymakers, influencers, journalists, and a wide variety of international businesses, organizations, and private clients. See: <https://tinyurl.com/AviMelamedBriefings>

- Avi has co-authored **Separate and Unequal: Israel's Rule in East Jerusalem** and wrote *Ubrusi: The Novel*. His newest book, **Inside the Middle East: Making Sense of the Most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth** is a GPS to help navigate the dramatically changing Middle East. The book offers a unique insight into the Arab world, challenges widely accepted perceptions and provides an out of the box idea that could lead to a positive breakthrough in the Israeli- Palestinian conflict.
- He is the Founder of **Inside the Middle East: Intelligence Perspectives (ITME)** – a program he designed during his tenure as the Fellow of Intelligence and Middle East Affairs at the Eisenhower Institute in Washington, DC (2013 - 2018). ITME is a program teaching critical analysis in an innovative and engaging fashion. Its distinct curriculum provides an apolitical education about the contemporary Middle East and uses intelligence methodology to teach critical thinking and media literacy. Through the ITME praxis, Avi transforms students and practitioners into knowledgeable, media literate, critical thinkers. To quote Avi's alumni - *ITME doesn't tell you what to think it teaches you HOW to think.*

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