

IRAN BURIES SLAIN NUCLEAR SCIENTIST, PROMISES RETALIATION

By Donnelly McClelland



Iran has laid to rest assassinated nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, in the capital Tehran as authorities blamed Israel for the killing and repeated vows to avenge it. Fakhrizadeh, a top figure in Iran's nuclear and missile programmes, was killed outside Tehran on Friday [27 November] after assailants targeted his car. (*Al Jazeera*)

Conflicting versions of events

Iranian media has reported vastly different versions of what happened to Fakhrizadeh, but it appears he was mortally wounded when his car was sprayed with bullets in the town of Absard, to the east of Tehran. During the attack, a bomb in a Nissan pickup truck also reportedly exploded. Pictures widely circulated on social media showed a road strewn with wreckage and blood, and a bullet-riddled vehicle. Initial reports from the defence ministry claimed there had been a gunfight between Fakhrizadeh's bodyguards and several gunmen. It was later reported in Iranian media that the scientist had been killed by a "remote-controlled machine gun" or weapons "controlled by satellite". All of the news outlets cited unnamed sources and did not immediately offer evidence to back up their claims. On Monday 30 November, Rear Admiral Shamkhani (who heads the Supreme National Security Council), speaking at Fakhrizadeh's funeral, confirmed it had been a remote attack, using "special methods".

Possible motives for the killing

Israeli and Western security sources say Fakhrizadeh was instrumental in Iran's nuclear programme. According to an article by the *BBC*: "The physics professor is said to have led 'Project Amad', a covert programme that Iran allegedly established in 1989 to carry out research on a potential nuclear bomb. The project was shut down in 2003, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, though Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu said in 2018 that documents obtained by his country showed Fakhrizadeh led a programme that was secretly continuing Project Amad's work. In a presentation, Mr Netanyahu urged people to 'remember that name'." Ali Shamkhani blames Israel for Fakhrizadeh's death. Israel's Intelligence Minister, Eli Cohen, said on Monday 30 November, in an interview with a radio station, that he did not know who was behind the killing. Shamkhani also blamed the exiled opposition group Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK) for "having a role in this," without elaborating. The MEK has been suspected of assisting Israeli operations in Iran in the past. Shahin Gobadi, a MEK spokesman, dismissed Shamkhani's remarks as "rage, rancour, and lies" sparked by the group exposing Iran's nuclear programme years earlier.

Iranian intelligence and security services claim to have been aware of a plot to assassinate Fakhrizadeh, and had even predicted where the attack might take place. If this is true, this would indicate a serious failure in counter-intelligence for Iran's security chiefs. Some analysts point to this as an indication of a possible plot from within Iranian ranks to take out the scientist, perhaps to further foment relations with the US.

Other analysts speculate that the assassination was not meant to cripple the Iranian nuclear programme but rather to end the prospect of the US re-joining the 2015 Iran nuclear deal when President-elect Joe Biden takes office next year. Mark Fitzpatrick, an associate fellow with London's International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) who follows Iran's nuclear programme closely, tweeted: "Iran's nuclear programme is long past the point when it is dependent on a single individual". Thus, some argue that the assassination appears to have been political, rather than relating to Iran's nuclear activities.

Research Associate Massoumeh Torfeh (in a *BBC* article) says: "Two possible motives stand out: firstly, to jeopardise potential improvements in relations between Iran and the new Biden administration in the United States. And, secondly, to encourage Iran to engage in a retaliatory act." Iranian President Hassan Rouhani implied the former reason when he said: "The enemies are experiencing stressful weeks. They are mindful that the global situation is

changing, and are trying to make the most of these days to create unstable conditions in the region." When Mr Rouhani refers to Iran's "enemies", he is evidently talking about the Trump administration, Israel, and Saudi Arabia since Mr Biden made it clear during his election campaign that he wished to re-join the Iran nuclear deal, which was negotiated by his predecessor Barack Obama in 2015 and abandoned by Donald Trump in 2018.

Iran has vowed revenge for the assassination of Fakhrizadeh and called on the international community to explicitly condemn it as an "act of terror".

International response

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), which recently reached a normalisation deal with Israel, issued a statement condemning "the heinous assassination." The UAE, home to Abu Dhabi and Dubai, warned the killing "could further fuel conflict in the region." Though long suspicious of Iran's nuclear programme, the Emirates said it wants to de-escalate the crisis. Bahrain, an island kingdom off the coast of Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf, that also recently normalised relations with Israel, similarly condemned Fakhrizadeh's killing. Jordan's Foreign Ministry voiced similar condemnation. Its spokesman stressed "the necessity of joining forces with all efforts to reduce tension, prevent escalation in the region, and protect security and stability." The UN has urged Iran and other parties to show restraint and avoid any rash moves in response to the assassination.

Possible Iranian response

The *BBC's* security correspondent, Frank Gardner, suggests four possible Iranian responses: firstly, an acceleration of their nuclear programme – within 72 hours of the attack Iran's parliament approved an "acceleration" of its civil nuclear programme, increasing the level of uranium enrichment in contravention of the JCPOA nuclear deal; secondly, the use of proxies – Iran has several "proxy" militias that it funds, trains and arms across the Middle East, and it could activate any one of these to strike a chosen target; thirdly, they could respond in kind – assassinate an equally high-ranking Israeli or American figure; or fourthly, do nothing – at least for now. Gardner maintains that a number of these possible responses carry a lower risk than others – for example, the increased activity in their nuclear programme is reversible, but an action like 'responding in kind' could lead to a massive, and costly, retaliation and escalation.

The fact that a Biden administration is far more likely to want to reach a rapprochement with Tehran could heavily favour the fourth option of 'biding their time'. According to Gardner: "There will now be moderate voices, especially in the foreign ministry and business world, calling for restraint, or at least a delayed response, to give any future dealings with a Biden White House some chance of success."

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The immediate concern among believers, in the wake of the killing of Fakhrizadeh, is the dramatic increase in the presence and activities of the Revolutionary Guards and secret police. Their increased vigilance can expose the activities of 'underground' churches and secret believers, even if that is not their aim.

From a longer-term perspective, there has been tremendous growth in the Church in Iran in recent years – people have become disillusioned with the leadership and some even with Islam – especially as living conditions have grown more difficult, with the increased pressure through sanctions, and their impact on the economy. It will be interesting to see what effect a Biden administration might have on Iran's prospects. If there is greater rapprochement, it may lead to a major improvement in living standards and church growth may slow down, or it could lead to greater cross-cultural mission activities for Iranian believers if they have improved access opportunities. If Iran's economic hardships continue, however, this could lead to greater oppression of the populace, possibly leading to a more wide-scale revolt, which could ultimately tip in favour of a change in government. This was seen in the dramatic change in Sudan in recent times, with the ousting of long-time leader Omar al-Bashir; but it took a shift in the military, and currently, the Iranian military still seems to strongly back the ayatollahs.

Much uncertainty remains, but it is during such times when spiritual growth can truly flourish. Iran needs much prayer at this time, both for believers, and those who are seeking the truth.

Please pray with us:

- For moderate and restrained 'voices' to prevail, that there will not be a further deterioration in the region's security
- For the Iranian Church to flourish amid the uncertainty
- For 'seekers' to encounter Jesus, through other believers, through dreams, through a multitude of ways, that the Kingdom will advance

Image: REUTERS/WANA NEWS AGENCY