



### FAKHRIZADEH: CALCULATING IRAN'S RESPONSE

By  
**Fatima Raza**

Research Associate  
Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA), ISSI

Edited by  
**Najam Rafique**

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



Iran's top nuclear scientist Mohsin Fakhrizadeh was killed on November 27, 2020 when a group of gunmen ambushed his vehicle opening fire on him and his guards on a street just outside Tehran.<sup>1</sup> Mohsin Fakhrizadeh, albeit his low public profile, was very well-respected in Iran as a highbrow nuclear scientist and academic figure. Iranian state media as well as regional and global news channels were in a state of instant uproar after the news of his assassination became public. Predictably, Iran was quick to blame the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad for this covert operation calling it an act of 'terrorism'.<sup>2</sup>

This blatant security breach so close to Iran's capital city is most certainly not the first that the Islamic Republic has faced this year. Another attack took place in early November this year in which a high profile Al-Qaeda leader, Abu Muhammad al-Masri was killed in Tehran by Israeli agents on behest of the US authorities.<sup>3</sup> No official sources confirmed this news from within Iran and Israel both, however, the *New York Times* reported that this secret killing took place with the consent and

<sup>1</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, Ronen Bergman and Farnaz Fassihi, "Brazen Killings Expose Iran's Vulnerabilities as It Struggles to Respond," *The New York Times*, November 28, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/28/world/middleeast/iran-assassinations-nuclear-israel.html>

<sup>2</sup> News Desk, "Rouhani: Israel behind Fakhrizadeh assassination," *Tehran Times*, November 28, 2020.

<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/455151/Rouhani-Israel-behind-Fakhrizadeh-assassination>

<sup>3</sup> Adam Goldman, Eric Schmitt, Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman, "Al Qaeda's No. 2, Accused in U.S. Embassy Attacks, Was Killed in Iran," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/13/world/middleeast/al-masri-abdullah-qaeda-dead.html>

knowledge of several US intelligence agents.<sup>4</sup> Earlier, assassination of the revered Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) commander, General Qassem Soleimani in January this year in Baghdad had offset Iran-US tensions in the region causing Iran to retaliate through a missile strike on American troops stationed within Iraq.<sup>5</sup> This recent killing of the Iranian scientist has exposed not only the internal insecurities of Iran but has also revealed the regional antagonism and animosity that revolves around Iran in general and its nuclear program in particular.

In 2018, Israel had claimed to have stolen classified Iranian documents from within Iran's sensitive nuclear site making them public in a televised presentation in which Prime Minister Netanyahu had introduced Mohsin Fakhrizadeh to the world as the key figure instrumental behind Iran's covert nuclear program.<sup>6</sup> This is one of the reasons that the Iranian state media and officials are blaming Israel for this killing as Netanyahu's particular mention of Fakhrizadeh's name was conspicuous and indicative of Mossad's singular focus on him. Although Israel has not assumed official responsibility for either of these killings that took place in November but as Barbara Slavin writes in the *New York Times*, "The Israeli government, as is its wont, has not taken responsibility for the assassination, but numerous published reports — and the audacious manner in which Mr. Fakhrizadeh was killed — strongly point toward agents of the Mossad."<sup>7</sup>

As far as the nod of approval from the American side is concerned, there has been none, but any official condemnation of the brazen killing is also missing. In the backdrop of US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo's visit to the Gulf, US backing of this killing or at least its tacit approval seems possible, however, the flagrant manner in which this attack was carried out does not point to a direct US involvement. It seems entirely plausible that the attack also was meant to damage the impending US-Iran negotiations over JCPOA after President-elect Joe Biden starts his tenure in the White House. Any act of desperation by Iran in retaliation could severely injure the possibility of mending Iran-US ties.

### What are Iran's Options?

Condemning these killing, Iranian parliamentarians, religious figures and security personnel have all blamed the Zionist forces for this act of violence and have vowed harsh retaliation. Fakhrizadeh was given a state funeral albeit with limited attendance due the coronavirus protocols but his family and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> News Desk, "Iran attack: US troops targeted with ballistic missiles," *BBC News*, January 8, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> David E. Sanger and Ronen Bergman, "How Israel, in Dark of Night, Torched Its Way to Iran's Nuclear Secrets," *The New York Times*, July 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/us/politics/iran-israel-mossad-nuclear.html>

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Slavin, "Why Was Iran's Top Nuclear Scientist Killed?," *The New York Times*, November 28, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/28/opinion/iran-nuclear-scientist-killed.html>

high-profile government officials attended.<sup>8</sup> The attack has certainly emboldened the hardliner factions in Iran that have always opposed normalization of ties between Iran and the West. There is much speculation about how Iran can possibly respond to this attack. These are the few options that are being discussed:

- *Respond Through Proxy Militias in Iraq*

As it had previously launched a missile strike on the US base in Ain-Al Asad in Iraq after Soleimani's killing, Iran could use the same option and use pro-Iran militias operating in Iraq to strike at US troops stationed in the country. This could be an option but different militias in Iraq have refrained from attacking US bases and personnel stationed in the country in response to the US troop withdrawal from the country. Iran is also in favor of America's swift exit from Iraq. Thus whether this option is viable or not, only time will tell.

- *Increase Nuclear Deal Violations*

Measures to utilize this option have already been taken by Iran. On December 1, 2020, Iranian parliament passed a bill titled, "The Strategic Action to Lift Sanctions" which aims to compel the US administration to lift sanctions by doubling down on nuclear activities. It would boost uranium enrichment to levels that were in place before the 2015 nuclear deal and demands that the US and the EU signatories of JCPOA lift sanctions from Iran's oil and banking sectors. Otherwise, the Iranian regime would suspend nuclear inspectors from International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>9</sup> This step could make it harder for the JCPOA negotiations to restart between Iran and the United States.

- *Pragmatism and Restraint*

Iran could also exercise restraint and let the situation play out until Biden formally steps into the White House without getting provoked into adopting a reckless policy approach and risk domestic and regional instability. Iranian President Rouhani also indicated a similar approach in his statement immediately after the attack, "We will respond to the assassination of Martyr

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<sup>8</sup> Maziar Motamedi, "Iran buries slain nuclear scientist, promises retaliation," *Al Jazeera*, November 30, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/30/iran-buries-assassinated-scientist-amid-promises-of-retaliation>

<sup>9</sup> Hira Humayun, Ramin Mostaghim and Jennifer Deaton, "Iran's parliament passes bill threatening to boost uranium enrichment and suspend inspectors," *CNN*, December 3, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/03/middleeast/iran-uranium-enrichment-intl/index.html>

Fakhrizadeh in a proper time”, suggesting that it could be days or weeks before a proper response could be planned.<sup>10</sup>

The main purpose behind this assassination seems to be the derailment of diplomacy relating to a possible US return to the JCPOA as indicated by Biden himself. Although it will be difficult for the Iranian government to not respond especially after pressure from the hardliners, but any escalation at this juncture may actually bring on the strikes by US that President Trump had been considering till he abandoned the idea.<sup>11</sup> As the hawkish Trump administration counts its last days in office, Iran may well choose to wait this one out till the new President-elect takes office.

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<sup>10</sup> Oliver Holmes and Patrick Wintour, “Iran's supreme leader calls for 'definitive punishment' of scientist's killers,” *The Guardian*, November 2, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/28/iran-president-blames-israel-for-scientist-killing-and-vows-nuclear-progress-will-continue>

<sup>11</sup> Trump Sought Options for Attacking Iran to Stop Its Growing Nuclear Program,” *The New York Times*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/16/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear.html>