

Huge explosion at Iranian missile base kills top general

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A massive explosion at an Iranian military base on Saturday killed Major General Hassan Moghaddam and 16 soldiers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp. While Tehran dismissed the blast as an accident, indications have already emerged that it was an act of sabotage carried out by Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad.

Moghaddam, who was trained in China and North Korea, has been described in Iran as the architect of the country's ballistic missile program. The Alghadir base, at which the explosion occurred, housed Iran's Shehab-3 missiles, which are capable of reaching Israel. Such was the scale of the blast that it was heard 40 kilometres away in Tehran.

As is its practice, Israel has neither confirmed nor denied responsibility for the explosion. The Israeli media, however, pointed to the possible involvement of Mossad. The *Yediot Aharonot* newspaper reported that "some assessments" indicated that the blast was "the result of a military operation based on intelligence information."

While admitting nothing, Israeli Defence Secretary Ehud Barak obliquely hinted that more acts of sabotage were to come. "I don't know the extent of the explosion. But it would be desirable if they multiply," he said on Sunday.

A Western intelligence source told *Time* magazine: "Don't believe the Iranians that it was an accident." The official insisted that Mossad was responsible for the explosion as part of an ongoing covert campaign against Iran's nuclear and missile programs. "There are more bullets in the magazine," the official said.

There are indications that the Iranian regime does not

believe its own explanation. The British-based *Guardian* reported on Monday the comments of a former director of a state-run Iranian organisation: "I believe that Saturday's explosion was part of the covert war against Iran, led by Israel." He went on to blame Mossad for a similar blast at a military base near the city of Khorramabad in October 2010.

The latest blast followed other acts of murder and sabotage that are widely attributed to Israeli intelligence, possibly acting in conjunction with its American counterparts. These include the assassination of three Iranian nuclear scientists over the past two years and a failed attempt to kill a top nuclear official in November 2010.

In addition, Israel and the US are believed to be responsible for the Stuxnet computer virus that infected and damaged centrifuges in Iran's uranium enrichment plant at Natanz. A new Duqu virus has now been reported by Iranian officials. According to the software firm Symantec, it has strong similarities to Stuxnet.

Saturday's explosion took place amid calls by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for tough action against Iran's nuclear program following the release of the latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report last week. Under pressure from the US and Israel, the report included a controversial annex purportedly showing that Iran had ongoing projects related to the building of a nuclear weapon.

In a broadcast on Sunday, Netanyahu demanded that the world "stop Iran's race to arm itself with a nuclear weapon before it is too late." In comments to cabinet leaked to the media, he claimed that the IAEA report had only contained what could be proven, adding that "there

are many other things we see.” In reality, the IAEA annex was based largely on intelligence supplied by the US, Israel and European powers, and related mainly to projects that ended nearly a decade ago.

The Israeli media has reported that in recent weeks Netanyahu and Defence Minister Barak have been pressing for cabinet agreement for Israeli air strikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities. The debate in the Israeli press coincided with the testing of an Israeli missile and drills by the Israeli air force at a NATO base in Sardinia for long-range missions.

Within this context, possible Israeli involvement in Saturday’s explosion takes on a menacing aspect. The international media speculate on Israeli covert operations inside Iran as if they were normal and legitimate, but these are acts of war. If Iran were held responsible for similar acts, the media would be flooded with condemnations and demands for retaliation. One only has to recall the bellicose response to dubious US allegations last month that Iran had been plotting to kill the Saudi ambassador to the United States.

Killing a top Iranian general is not likely to greatly impede the country’s missile program. A more likely explanation is that the assassination was part of a campaign designed to goad Tehran into retaliating. Such retaliation would be immediately seized upon to create a climate of fear and hostility, and the justification for a swift escalation of the confrontation with Iran.

At this stage, both Russia and China have declared their opposition to further sanctions against Iran. While supporting tougher economic measures, the European powers, including France and Britain, have ruled out immediate support for military strikes. Israeli leaders might well be seeking to provoke an Iranian response that could be exploited to push for united international action against Tehran.

In a blog entitled “Israel and Iran: Covert warfare raises risks of retaliation and conflagration,” *Time* journalist Tony Karon suggested: “Iran has until now restrained itself from retaliating for covert actions against its nuclear program, sensing that these might, in fact, be designed to provoke Iranian acts of retaliation that would, in turn, serve as a pretext for a full-blown military attack on Iran and its nuclear facilities.”

Pressure is mounting on US President Barack Obama for aggressive measures against Iran, including from his Republican rivals for the presidency. In a debate on Saturday, Republican frontrunner Mitt Romney described Iran as Obama’s “greatest failing from a foreign policy standpoint.” Declaring that he would be willing to take military action against Iran, he said: “If we re-elect Barack Obama, Iran will have a nuclear weapon. If you elect Mitt Romney, Iran will not have a nuclear weapon.”

Seeking to go one better, former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich said that he would institute “maximum covert operations to block and disrupt the Iranian program, including taking out their scientists, including breaking up their systems, all of it covertly, all of it deniable.” Implying that such criminal activity was already underway, he called for the US to coordinate with Israel to maximise the impact on Iran.

In a similar vein, an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* last Friday argued that “the serious choice now before the [Obama] administration is between military strikes and more of the same.” Leaving no doubt where it stood, the *Journal* concluded that “no US president should leave his successor with the catastrophe that would be a nuclear Iran.”

In reality, the push for a reckless new war against Iran is not motivated by its government’s nuclear program, but is driven by US ambitions to dominate the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. While calling for a new round of sanctions against Iran, Obama has not ruled out taking military action and continues to repeat the mantra that “all options are on the table.”



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