Reputed head of Iran's cyberwar program assassinated

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The *Telegraph* and several other Western news sources are reporting that the head of Iran's cyberwar program was killed in an assassination that has all the hallmarks of a Mossad operation.

According to these reports, eyewitnesses and a local police commander have confirmed that Mojtaba Ahmadi was killed by assailants driving motorcycles. The same modus operandi was used in the killing of several prominent scientists involved in Iran's nuclear program. Israeli's intelligence service, Mossad, has generally been held responsible, including by US officials, for the killing of five Iranian nuclear scientists between 2007 and 2012.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards have confirmed that Ahmadi's corpse was found Tuesday in a wooded area near Karaj, a city twenty kilometers northwest of Teheran. He had been shot two times.

Iranian officials have said, however, that it is too early to say who killed Ahmadi and the Revolutionary Guards have denied that he headed its cyberwar program.

In the past, Iran's authorities have not rushed to confirm such assassinations, evidently because it suggests serious lapses in security.

That Ahmadi was involved in Iran's cyber warfare program would appear to be confirmed by information published on a web site linked to the Revolutionary Guards. According to the *Telegraph,* "The Facebook page of the officers of the Cyber War Headquarters confirmed that Ahmadi had been one of their commanders and posted messages of condolence."

Israel's science and technology minister, himself an ex-head of Shin Bit, Israel's internal security agency, told Israel Radio Thursday that Israel was "not necessarily" involved in Ahmadi's killing, while welcoming his death.

"The fact that a cyber commander or this or that scientist was wiped out or killed in this or that assassination does not necessarily mean that Israel's hand is in the matter," said Yaacov Peri. "At the same time, it's definitely the type of operation that can slow the danger in the Iranian issue both in the nuclear realm and in the realm of cyber."

The targeting of an Iranian cyberwar expert would represent an escalation in the ongoing covert campaign that Israel, frequently in cooperation with the US, is mounting against Iran's nuclear program. Iran has insisted its nuclear activities are for peaceful purposes, but the US and its allies continue to use the program as the pretext for the imposition of punishing economic sanctions.

The US and Israel have boasted about their success in disrupting Iran's nuclear program, specifically the operation of gas centrifuges, through the Stuxnet computer worm.

US officials also charged that Iran has mounted increasingly sophisticated cyber attacks—although these claims may themselves be deliberately exaggerated so as to whip up animosity toward Iran.

As the press accounts of Ahmadi's death acknowledged, his killing comes at a critical juncture, when the US and Iran have agreed to high-level negotiations. Israel, meanwhile, has made clear that it opposes in all but name this turn diplomatic turn. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu delivered a bellicose speech at the UN Tuesday in which he labeled the new Iranian president "a wolf in sheep's clothing" and proclaimed that Israel reserves the right to stage a unilateral and patently illegal military strike on Iran. Tel Aviv has a long history of staging provocations to further its ends.

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