

War tensions mount in wake of Israeli assassination of top Iranian scientist

Bill Van Auken
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Iran's top nuclear physicist Dr. Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was buried on Monday, three days after his assassination, carried out by Israel with the support of Washington.

This criminal act of state terrorism has sharply escalated tensions in the region, which was precisely the aim of the killing. US President Donald Trump is still seeking to overturn the results of the US election, with roughly 50 days remaining until inauguration day. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faces the probable dissolution of the Knesset this week and new elections under conditions in which he has been indicted on corruption charges. Both see a new war in the Middle East as a means of advancing their respective domestic political interests.

The Pentagon has steadily built up US offensive forces in the region, dispatching both an F-16 squadron from Germany and B-52 strategic bombers from the US. The USS Nimitz Carrier Strike Group has been ordered into the Persian Gulf.

For its part, Israel is continuing its provocative attacks on Iranian-connected targets inside Syria. Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi visited Israeli units on the border between the occupied Golan Heights and Syria over the weekend, telling them: "Our message is clear. We will continue to operate forcefully as needed against the Iranian entrenchment in Syria and we will remain on high alert for any belligerence against us."

While neither Washington nor Tel Aviv have formally claimed responsibility for the assassination of Fakhrizadeh, the authorship of this crime is hardly in doubt.

The *New York Times* and other media have quoted multiple US and Israeli intelligence officials confirming that the killing was the work of Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, which was responsible for similar state terrorist killings of five Iranian scientists between 2010 and 2012.

Speaking on condition of anonymity to the *Times*, an Israeli intelligence official involved in preparing the assassination declared that "the world should thank Israel" for murdering the scientist, on the grounds that his knowledge posed a threat.

The Israeli government has charged that Fakhrizadeh led a study on the feasibility of Iran building a nuclear weapon. Both the United Nations atomic inspection agency and US intelligence concluded that the alleged program was wound up

in 2003. Tehran has denied ever pursuing nuclear arms, insisting that its nuclear program is strictly for civilian purposes.

Israeli Intelligence Minister Eli Cohen claimed in an interview with Israel's Army Radio that he did not know who was responsible for the assassination of Fakhrizadeh, but went on to denounce those European governments that condemned it for "burying their heads in the sand." He added: "His removal from the world contributed to the Middle East and the whole world. Anyone who takes an active part in creating a nuclear weapon is a dead man walking."

The most grotesque acknowledgment of Israeli responsibility came from the right-wing *Jerusalem Post*, which reflects the politics of Netanyahu. It compared the assassination to the 1985 mafia killing of New York crime boss Paul Castellano, declaring that it showed "the power of those responsible" and that "any Iranian linked to the nuclear program can be found and killed." One could ask for no clearer recognition of the criminal character of the Zionist state.

The assassination came barely a week after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's talks in Israel with the Netanyahu government and a subsequent unannounced trip with Netanyahu to the Red Sea city of Neom for consultations with Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The focus of Pompeo's tour, conducted in what is ostensibly the "lame duck" period between the US election and the inauguration, was to solidify the anti-Iranian axis between Washington, Tel Aviv and the reactionary Sunni oil monarchies led by the House of Saud. It is inconceivable that the impending assassination of Fakhrizadeh was not discussed and approved in the course of these talks.

The act of state terrorism also follows the revelation that Trump met with his national security cabinet on Nov. 12 to propose a strike on the main Iranian nuclear facility at Natanz, using as a pretext Iran's increased stockpile of low-enriched uranium, which is neither a violation of any international law nor evidence that it is pursuing a bomb. While the US president's senior advisors reportedly talked him out of launching such an infamous war crime, it is evident that his administration is continuing to seek a provocation justifying war.

The assassination, in addition to provoking angry spontaneous demonstrations in a number of cities, has also exposed political divisions within the country's bourgeois-theocratic ruling establishment. President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif have urged restraint, essentially adopting a "wait for Biden" approach, with the hope that an incoming Democratic administration will rejoin the 2015 nuclear agreement unilaterally abrogated by Trump two years ago and lift the devastating economic sanctions imposed under Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign for regime change.

Biden, significantly, has made no criticism of the state assassination of the Iranian scientist. He has also indicated that he would condition rejoining the nuclear agreement on extracting further concessions from Iran, including on its missile production. Iranian officials have stated that they may make their own demands, including for compensation for the devastating effects of the illegal US sanctions regime.

Other sections of the Iranian state have called for swift retaliatory actions. The Parliament voted for a resolution to withdraw from the part of the nuclear accord allowing UN inspectors from the IAEA access to Iran's nuclear sites. The daily *Kayhan*, whose editor-in-chief is named by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, called on Sunday for Iran to retaliate for the assassination with an attack on the Israeli port city of Haifa. With presidential elections set for next year, these divisions will likely deepen.

Also on Monday, Iranian officials and media provided a new version of the Fakhrizadeh assassination, asserting that he had been killed by a new Israeli weapons system, a remote-control machine gun directed from a satellite, with no assassins physically at the scene where his car was attacked.

Earlier, state media had reported that Fakhrizadeh's vehicle had been stopped by an explosion of a bomb set off in a parked truck carrying lumber and then set upon by 12 waiting assassins firing automatic weapons, one of whom dragged the scientist from his car and delivered a coup de grâce to ensure that he was dead.

No explanation has been provided for the change in the account of the killing. Clearly the assassination of Iran's top scientist, who had been publicly targeted by Netanyahu two years ago, represented a serious security failure. If the first version of the assassination was true, the story of the remote-control machine gun could be an attempt to deflect criticism of this failure and explain away the fact that none of the attackers have been captured.

Under conditions in which there is mounting anger over increasingly desperate social conditions created by the US sanctions regime and the state's mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a new round of strikes and protests developing, the government cannot afford to appear weak.

The danger that the Trump administration will exploit the assassination or even further provocations to launch a new war

in the Middle East was raised by two former chief officials of the US military-security apparatus.

Appearing on the NBC News program *Meet the Press* on Sunday, former Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Adm. Mike Mullens (retired) pointed to the recent purge of top civilian officials at the Pentagon and their replacement with Trump loyalists and extreme right-wing anti-Iranian ideologues.

He said that "it's pretty difficult to think that over the course of 50 or 60 days you can do something constructive, but you can do something that's really destructive. And a week ago there were certain—many—media reports that there was a debate about action against Iran specifically. The president reportedly [was] turned down. But I would be concerned that those issues continue to be raised."

For his part, ex-CIA director John Brennan, who had described the Fakhrizadeh assassination as an "act of state-sponsored terrorism," expressed similar concerns in an NBC interview on Monday. Referring to the shakeup at the Pentagon, Brennan said: "We all should be concerned about it ... Over the next number of weeks that Trump remains in the White House, I don't know what he might have planned for using the military either on the domestic front or on the international arena."

Brennan did not spell out what he meant by using the military "on the domestic front." However, Trump's firing of Defense Secretary Mark Esper and his replacement with an ex-Special Forces colonel, Christopher Miller, stemmed in large part from the US president's anger over Esper's failure to support Trump's call last June for invoking the Insurrection Act and deploying regular US Army troops on the streets throughout the country to suppress anti-police violence demonstrations.

The threat that Trump may exploit a provoked military conflict with Iran as the justification for carrying through such plans for martial law and the nullification of the US elections continues. Meanwhile, the driving forces for war and dictatorship, which lie in the insoluble crisis of US and world capitalism, will only intensify, no matter who occupies the White House after Jan. 20.



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