



Armed Conflict

27

NOV

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MENA Alert (UPDATE): Iranian authorities confirm killing of leading Iranian nuclear scientist near Tehran on November 27; highly notable event, to escalate regional tensions

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Please be advised:

The incident

- During the evening hours of November 27, Iran's Ministry of Defense confirmed the death of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, head of "Research and Innovation Organization".
- The statement indicated "armed terrorists" targeted a vehicle transporting Fakhrizadeh and that "during the clash between his security team and the terrorists", he was wounded and later died.
- Iranian reports indicate that the assailants targeted Fakhrizade's vehicle with a "bomb", before shooting at him. Several other individuals were reportedly killed in the clashes.
- Fakhrizadeh is widely reported to be Iran's chief nuclear scientist and a senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officer.

Reaction on November 27

- Iran's Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, condemned the assassination act of Fakhrizadeh as a "cowardly act with serious indications of Israeli role".
- Hossein Dehghan, an adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader, claimed that "zionists" are "making every effort to ignite an all-out war by putting pressure on Iran" and added that Tehran "will come upon the killers of this innocent martyr like a thunder and make them regret what they did".
- Iranian Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Mohammad Bagheri claimed that "a severe revenge awaits the perpetrators of Fakhrizadeh's assassination".
- A prominent US-based agency citing three unspecified intelligence officials indicated that Israel was behind the attack on the scientist.
- Reports indicate that the Israeli government has declined to comment on the incident.

Assessments & Forecast:

1. The assassination of the senior nuclear Iranian scientist is a highly notable event with potential ramifications for the Middle East region as a whole. Although there have been frequent reports of attacks against Iran's nuclear infrastructure over recent months, most prominently at a uranium enrichment facility in Iran's Natanz in July, assassinations of Iranian nuclear personnel on Iranian soil constitute a noteworthy escalation, as the last time such events were reported was during a period between 2010-2012 when four Iranian nuclear scientists were assassinated. Tehran openly accused Israel of being complicit in these events, which Jerusalem neither denied nor confirmed.
2. Although it is highly unlikely to confirm its involvement, in order to mitigate the risk of retaliation, the most likely perpetrator of the incident is Israel. This is bolstered by several factors. First, the assassination effort would have required the perpetrator to have significant intelligence-gathering and operational capabilities in order to discover the nuclear scientist's whereabouts and successfully conduct the attack, especially given that the targeted individual was protected by a security team. Although Israeli agents may not have conducted the attack themselves, they may have provided the intelligence to Iranian operational collaborators on the ground. Israel is known to have advanced intelligence capabilities and was attributed by various Western officials of having conducted the aforementioned attacks in 2010-12.
3. Second, Israel has an interest in conducting such an attack at the present time. Given that US President Donald Trump will be replaced by President-elect Joe Biden in late January, and the latter is reportedly willing to consider a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the lifting of sanctions on Iran, Jerusalem likely aims to capitalize on the current "window of opportunity" in which to act. This is because the Trump-led administration, which has consistently sought to apply "maximum pressure" on Iran is likely to not only tolerate but also potentially encourage such actions. Moreover, attacks against Iran by Israel at the current juncture may increase the level of confrontation between Tehran and the West, which would possibly derail any immediate opportunity to return to the JCPOA that the Israeli government firmly opposes. Alternatively, in order to capitalize on the forthcoming change in US administration, Iran may be more reluctant to escalate tensions and may thus prefer to refrain from retaliating against Israel, which may have been a contributing factor in Israel's decision to conduct the attack. In either outcome, Israel would likely see the assassination of Fakhrizadeh as a worthwhile risk and a significant security achievement that will undermine Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program. The importance of the target for Israel is evidenced by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's comment in 2018 alleging that the scientist leads Iran's nuclear program and telling the world to "remember that name".
4. At the time of writing, Iran has refrained from explicitly attributing any specific perpetrator with having conducted the attack, although Iran's Foreign Minister has alluded to Israeli involvement. Should Iran officially accuse Israel, the US, or any other of Tehran's adversaries of conducting the attack, or in the unlikely situation that any of the aforementioned parties claim the attack itself, this would increase the potential for a retaliatory attack as Iran would need to "save face". As Iran has thus far been careful not to outrightly accuse any group, there currently remains a lower risk of a retaliatory attack. However, this risk would be elevated in the event that they do. Iran may choose to retaliate against either Israeli targets directly or through its proxies, primarily Hezbollah. This may materialize in a cross-border attack into Israel from Syria or Lebanon or an act of militancy against Israeli or even Jewish interests abroad. Alternatively, although less likely, Tehran may opt to target the US or its allies, including Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, again either directly, or more likely, through the Yemen-based Houthis, who have a proven ability to launch large-scale attacks on sensitive targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
5. _Regional tensions will remain high over the coming hours and days following this incident. Regardless, it is unlikely that Iran would seek a large-scale escalation given that this would almost certainly imperil any potential return to the JCPOA and the lifting of sanctions by the US under a Biden presidency. Therefore, any Iranian attack will likely be limited and would more likely be against a military target, rather than a civilian one, which would be more liable to lead to an escalation. Moreover, any attack may not occur in the immediate aftermath of the incident but may be delayed until an opportunity over the coming months or even years that is perceived by Tehran as more strategically relevant.

Recommendations:

1. Those traveling to or operating in the Middle East are advised to regularly review emergency and contingency procedures as a basic security precaution. This is especially the case at the current juncture amid the tensions between Iran on one side and Israel, the US, and its allies on the other following the incident in Iran.
2. For on-ground or intelligence assistance contact us at: Operations@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-043.
3. Western foreigners, particularly Israeli or US nationals, conducting travel in the Middle East, are advised to maintain a low profile due to the slightly increased potential for attacks by Iran-backed elements. Practice extra vigilance near US and Western diplomatic missions and interests across the region.