

Iran Reports Killing of Nuclear Scientist in “Terrorist” Blast

By Alan Cowell & Rick Gladstone

The New York Times

January 11, 2012

LONDON — A bomber on a motorcycle killed a scientist from Iran’s Natanz uranium enrichment site and his bodyguard-driver on Wednesday during the morning commute in Tehran, Iranian media reported, in an assassination that could further elevate international tensions over the Iranian nuclear program and stoke the country’s growing anti-Western belligerence.

It was the fourth such attack reported in two years and, as after the previous episodes, Iranian officials accused the United States and Israel of responsibility. The White House condemned the attack and denied any responsibility. The official reaction in Israel appeared to be more cryptic.

Iranian news accounts said the suspected assassin had attached a magnetized explosive device to the scientist’s car and escaped during the rush hour in northern Tehran. News photographs from the scene showed a car, a Peugeot 405, draped in a pale blue tarp being lifted onto a truck. Some photographs published by Iran’s official Islamic Republic News Agency showed what it said was the body of the scientist still inside the car. The head was covered with a white cloth.

The scientist was identified as Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, 32, a professor at a technical university in Tehran, and a department supervisor at the Natanz uranium enrichment plant — one of two known sites where Western leaders suspect Iranian scientists are advancing toward the creation of a nuclear weapon.

The Mehr news agency said the explosion took place on Gol Nabi Street, on the scientist’s route to work, at 8:20 a.m. The news agency said he was employed at the Natanz site as the director of commercial affairs.

“The Islamic Republic of Iran expresses its deep concern over, and lodges its strong condemnation of, such cruel, inhumane and criminal acts of terrorism against the Iranian scientists,” Iran’s United Nations ambassador, Mohammad Khazaee, wrote in a letter sent to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and other U.N. officials. Iran says its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, but is facing a growing battery of international sanctions intended to force it to halt its enrichment program and negotiate with the West. On Jan. 23, European Union foreign ministers are to discuss a possible oil export embargo, adding further pressure.

Despite those pressures, Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization said it would not be diverted from its pursuit of nuclear technology. “America and Israel’s heinous act will not change the course of the Iranian nation,” it said in a statement quoted by Reuters.

The semiofficial Fars news agency, which has close links to the powerful Revolutionary Guards Corps, said the Wednesday bombing resembled the methods used in attacks in November 2010 against two other nuclear specialists — Majid Shahriari, who was killed, and Fereydoon Abbasi, who survived and is now in charge of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization.

Almost exactly two years ago in January 2010, a physics professor, Massoud Ali Mohammadi, was also assassinated in Tehran.

Iran blamed Israel and the United States for the attacks in 2010, and the latest killing is bound to deepen an embattled mood in Tehran as the country's divided leaders approach parliamentary elections in March. News of the blast emerged quickly on Iran's state-run media.

“The bomb was a magnetic one and the same as the ones previously used for the assassination of the scientists and is the work of the Zionists,” Fars quoted Tehran's deputy governor, Safar Ali Baratlou, as saying, reflecting a suspicion that the West and its allies were waging a covert war.

In Washington, Tommy Vietor, a spokesman for the White House's National Security Council, said in reaction to the attack: “The United States had absolutely nothing to do with this. We strongly condemn all acts of violence, including acts of violence like what is being reported today.”

In Israel, which regards Iran as its most significant security threat, the denial was much more vague. Brig. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, the Israeli military spokesman, wrote on his Facebook page that “I don't know who took revenge on the Iranian scientist, but I am definitely not shedding a tear,” Agence France-Presse reported.

Theodore Karasik, a security expert at the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis in Dubai, said the assassination fit a pattern over the past two years of covert operations by the West and its allies to “degrade and delay” Iran's nuclear program. In a telephone interview, Mr. Karasik said other elements of the Western campaign included the deployment of a computer worm known as Stuxnet and the sale of doctored computer software to hamper the enrichment program.

He said magnetic bombs were used in covert operations, describing them as “clean, easy and efficient.”

In recent days, several events have combined to create the deepest tension with the United States since the Islamic revolution in 1979 and the subsequent seizure of hostages at the American Embassy in Tehran.

Last weekend, Iran's top nuclear official said the country was about to start production at its second major uranium enrichment site, in a defiant declaration that its nuclear program would continue despite the sanctions.

The announcement came two months after the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations nuclear oversight body based in Vienna, published a report that Iranian scientists had engaged in secret and possibly continuing efforts to construct a nuclear weapon.

The imminent opening of the site — the Fordo plant, near the city of Qum — confronted the United States and its allies with difficult choices about how far to go to limit Iran's nuclear abilities. The new plant is buried deep underground on a well-defended military site and is considered far more resistant to airstrikes than the existing enrichment site at Natanz, limiting what Israeli officials, in particular, consider an important deterrent to Iran's nuclear aims.

On Monday, Iran announced that Amir Mirzaei Hekmati, a former United States Marine from Flint, Mich., had been convicted of spying for the Central Intelligence Agency and sentenced to death. Mr. Hekmati was arrested in August while he was visiting Iran for the first time.

His family, traumatized by the news, has asserted his innocence, saying he was visiting relatives, and has characterized the prosecution as a grave misunderstanding.

Mr. Hekmati served in the Marines for four years, spent five months in Iraq and took linguistics training in Arabic at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, Calif. He was carrying his former military identification with him when arrested in Iran, atypical behavior for a spy.

Nonetheless, Iranian investigators may have been intrigued by Mr. Hekmati's post-military linguistics work. In 2006, he started his own company, Lucid Linguistics, doing document translation that specialized in Arabic, Persian and "military-related matters," according to its Web site. "Our main goal is to assist organizations whose focus is on the current Global War on Terrorism and who are working to bridge the language barrier for our armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan," the site said.

Possibly more intriguing to the Iranians was work done a few years later by Mr. Hekmati while working for Kuma Games, which specializes in recreating military confrontations that enable players to participate in games based on real events.

A Pentagon language-training contract won in 2009 by Kuma Games, a New York-based company that develops reality-based war games — including one called "Assault on Iran" — lists Mr. Hekmati as a main contact.

That \$95,920 contract, and Mr. Hekmati's military background, his Iranian heritage and some linguistics work he did for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, help explain why the authorities in Iran had him arrested.

At the same time, Iran has intensified belligerency to the naval activities of the American Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf and has threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz, a vital oil shipping route.

The United States Navy has responded with two well-publicized sea rescues in the area within a week.

On Tuesday, a vessel on patrol with the Navy's Fifth Fleet near the Persian Gulf saved a group of distressed Iranian mariners, pulling them to safety from a cargo dhow that was foundering with a flooded engine room, the Naval central command reported.

In a statement, the command said the Coast Guard patrol boat *Monomoy*, on assignment with a Fifth Fleet task force in the northern Arabian Gulf, approached the stricken Iranian dhow, the *Ya-Hussayn*, after the its crew hailed the *Monomoy* with flares and flashlights before dawn.

Last Friday, the aircraft carrier John C. Stennis broke up a high-seas pirate attack on a cargo ship in the Gulf of Oman. Sailors from an American destroyer boarded the pirates' mother ship and freed 13 Iranian hostages who had been held captive there for more than a month.