

Assassination of IRGC officer is new phase in Iran-Israel shadow war - analysis
Aron Rosenthal/The Media Line - The Jerusalem Post



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Israel updated the travel warning for its citizens visiting Turkey after the threat of retaliatory attacks from Iran in the wake of the killing of a top colonel, in what some analysts say is an escalation of the simmering conflict between the two countries.

The Prime Minister's Office released a statement on Monday saying that the Israeli security establishment possesses intelligence of a "tangible threat to Israelis in Turkey. There is also a higher threat level in additional countries bordering Iran."

*This announcement came a week after the **execution of Col. Hassan Sayad Khodayari**, an officer in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who was shot five times by unidentified gunmen on a residential street in Tehran.*

*The head of the IRGC, **Maj.-Gen. Hossein Salami**, accused **Israel of being responsible for the assassination.***

"The martyrs who are murdered by the Zionists are of a much higher status. God willing, we will take revenge against the enemies"

Maj.-Gen. Hossein Salami, head of the IRGC

Accusations of Israel's responsibility were corroborated by a New York Times report in the wake of the assassination, which leaked information from an unnamed American official, claiming that Israel had informed the US that it carried out the killing.

Does Israel fear an Iranian response?

*Now it appears that Israel fears **reprisals by Iran**. However, according to Dr. Tugba Bayar, instructor in International Relations at Bilkent University in Turkey, Iranian retaliatory measures rarely measure up to its strong rhetoric.*

“Iran’s rhetoric is always quite offensive. It calls ‘Death to America,’ ‘Death to Israel’ and swears for revenge, as it did after the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, and several nuclear scientists,” she explained.

“Yet, the only time we saw Iran in action was when it attacked some targets in Iraq calling them Israeli spy centers,” she added. “I do not believe that Iran would target civilians, neither in Turkey nor somewhere else.”

Conversely, Mark Fitzpatrick, associate fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies and former executive director of IISS-Americas and former head of the institute’s work on non-proliferation, told The Media Line that the cycle of sabotage and assassinations is very likely to continue, given Iran’s promise of retaliation.

“Iran has made it clear that it will retaliate in response to the assassination of Khodayari. So, the Iran-Israel gray war will probably escalate further,” he said.

Israel and Iran's shadow war

Israel and Iran have, in recent years, embarked upon a shadow war, also known as a gray war, in which each side covertly, or indirectly, attacks specific enemy targets, without engaging in or acknowledging a state of open warfare.

Israel had repeatedly named Khodayari as a senior officer in Iran’s clandestine military task force, Unit 840, which is accused of allegedly abducting and assassinating foreign targets. The Iranian government has never formally acknowledged the existence of this unit.

Dr. Ely Karmon, senior research scholar at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at Reichman University in Herzliya in central Israel, told The Media Line that the assassination of Khodayari has both tactical and strategic value for Israel.

As the alleged deputy chief of Unit 840, Khodayari was “involved in a long list of attacks, including the February 2012 attack in New Delhi against a car of the military attaché” of Israel, explained Karmon.

On February 13, 2012, Tal Yehoshua Koren, wife of an Israeli Defense Ministry representative to India, was targeted by Iranian government assassins in a bomb attack, which left her with severe and permanent injuries.

Ex-Adviser to Israel Defence Ministry speaks to WION on IRGC officer's assassination.

According to Karmon, Israeli Intelligence has, over the last decade, uncovered numerous assassination plots by Iran’s Unit 840, but has managed to foil most of them due to deep intelligence penetration.

In addition to the New Dehli attack, “there were some 25 or 30 attacks that were foiled,” Karmon said.

“And in the last two years especially, we saw attacks in Cyprus, Colombia, and Korea, all of which were foiled by, probably, intelligence from Israeli Mossad, which neutralized these cells,” he continued.

According to Dr. Alam Saleh, lecturer in Iranian Studies at the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University, shadow warfare is currently the only viable form of conflict for the two parties.

“It seems that there is no possibility of direct confrontation or military attack and that both sides have decided to continue their intelligence, their sabotage, their unconventional confrontation, through proxies, to undermine each other’s security,” he told The Media Line.

Israel justifies assassination operations on the grounds that it is defending its citizens against Iranian terrorism.

Fitzpatrick said that the assassination of Khodayari is “a continuation of Israel’s ongoing policies of defending its citizens and pushing back against Iranian terrorism.”

As such, Fitzpatrick does not view the killing as an escalation of the conflict, but merely a continuation of the Iran-Israel gray war.

Bayar points out that retaliatory murders are illegal according to international law, which instead calls for compensation to prevent armed escalations.

Yet this requires a certain willingness to negotiate, which seems unlikely in the case of Israel and Iran.

“This is only possible when the parties negotiate to settle the dispute. This does not seem viable for the case of Iran v. Israel,” Bayar said.

Numerous observers have speculated upon a link between the assassination of Khodayari, an IRGC official, and the Iran nuclear deal.

One of the key points of contention between Iran and the US, which has served to impede the nuclear agreement, is the US designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization.

Some commentators have postulated that the assassination of Khodayari was an attempt by Israel to further undermine talks in Vienna, by drawing attention to the American designation of the IRGC.

Saleh told The Media Line that this is the first time a member of the Revolutionary Guards has been targeted by Israel.

“So, this might be an Israeli tactic to provoke Iranians to insist on the removal of the IRGC from the terrorist list, because if the Revolutionary Guards are still on the terrorist list, that would legitimize such assassinations, at least for Washington,” he theorized.

However, Mark Fitzpatrick dismissed this explanation on the grounds that talks in Vienna have long been regarded as defunct, and so didn't need to be sabotaged by Israel.

"Since the nuclear deal is effectively dead, the assassination will not have any impact on it. In any case, it has nothing to do with Iran's nuclear facilities," he explained.

Fitzpatrick went on to outline how Israel has been reluctant to sabotage Iranian nuclear facilities during talks in Vienna, so that it would be unlikely to attempt to undermine them now, while talks are technically still ongoing.

"I believe Israel has been reticent to carry out sabotage against those facilities while the negotiations were ongoing. This reticence will probably continue for a while longer since the talks are not formally finished," he added.

However, other analysts argued that Israel is against striking any Iran nuclear deal, especially one it considers a bad deal. Saleh told The Media Line that Israel's definition of a good deal does not currently line up with Washington's evaluation.

"I think Israel's interpretation of a good deal, at the moment, is different from what Washington considers a good deal and, as a result, Israel is still unhappy, or unsatisfied, with what's going on in Vienna," he said.

According to the Prime Minister's Office, Turkey has now been assigned a high-risk status for Israeli travelers, due to the "tangible threat to Israelis in Turkey." An official in the Prime Minister's office declined to provide additional information on the threat.

Karmon says that Turkey has a long history as a launching pad for hostile activity against Israeli targets. For example, a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Mansour Rasouli, allegedly planned to assassinate an Israeli diplomat at the consulate in Istanbul in April but was thwarted by Mossad intelligence.

This was not the first Iranian attempt to attack Israeli targets on Turkish soil. As Karmon recalled, "We know that in the past, Iranians have tried to assassinate our consul in Istanbul; in the 1990s, and recently, they tried to assassinate one of the richest Jewish businessmen, who is also an Israeli citizen."

In February, Turkish intelligence services arrested eight suspects in what was said to be an Iranian plot to assassinate Jewish businessman Yair Geller in retaliation for the killing of Iranian nuclear chief Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in 2020, which was generally attributed to the Mossad.