

Killer Robot? Assassination of Iranian Scientist Feeds Conflicting Accounts

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Humiliated by the killing of a top nuclear scientist, Iranian officials sought this week to rewrite the attack as an episode of science fiction: Israel had executed him entirely by remote control, spraying bullets from an automated machine gun propped up in a parked Nissan without a single assassin on the scene.



FARS News Agency, via Associated Press The scene of the assassination Friday.

Varying reports cited an exploding Nissan, a remote-controlled machine gun and a team of up to a dozen assassins.

Even hard-liners mocked the new spin.

“Why don’t you just say Tesla built the Nissan? It drove by itself, parked by itself, fired the shots and blew up by itself?” one hard-line social media account said. “Are you, like us, doubting this narrative?”

Since [the killing of the scientist on Friday](#), contradictory reports in the official news media about the escape or even existence of a hit team — along with assertions of prior warnings from the Interior Ministry about the attack — revealed tensions between competing Iranian intelligence agencies as each sought to dodge blame for an egregious security lapse.

Iranian officials have [vowed to avenge the killing](#) of the scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a high-ranking official in the Defense Ministry. The prospect of a counterattack against Israel or the West [threatens to hamper efforts](#) by the incoming Biden administration to revive a nuclear agreement with Iran.



Hamed Malekpour/WANA, via Reuters Mourners at the coffin of Mr. Fakhrizadeh on Monday in Tehran. Iranian officials have vowed to avenge his killing.

Mr. Fakhrizadeh, who had overseen Iran's nuclear weapons program, was an obvious target. He had been publicly singled out by Israeli leaders as a threat, and Iran's elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had made his protection a top priority.

His death was at least the fourth assassination this year of a high-profile figure under the protection of Iranian security services, beginning with an American drone strike that killed the Iranian general Qassim Suleimani in January.

The failure to apprehend Mr. Fakhrizadeh's killers has compounded a scandal over the government's failure to prevent the assassination itself. Iranians on social media mocked the new accounts of a fully automated execution as an attempt to minimize the embarrassment of the killers' clean getaway.

Officials in Israel, who have all but publicly acknowledged responsibility, declined to comment on the competing accounts of the killing.

The use of a remote-controlled machine gun was not out of the question. Israel's military has such weapons and has deployed them elsewhere. Some Iranian reports said as early as Saturday that such a weapon was used in the attack on Friday, an afternoon ambush on a country road east of Tehran.



Khodabakhsh Malmir/WANA, via Reuters Iran gave Mr. Fakhrizadeh a hero's funeral.

But early official Iranian reports and witness accounts reported a gun battle between Mr. Fakhrizadeh's bodyguards and as many as a dozen attackers. And current and former Israeli officials have boasted that Israeli intelligence agencies have a track record of safely extricating assassins from hostile territories, including Iran.

Israel is thought to have killed at least five Iranian scientists between 2007 and 2012 as part of an effort to derail Iran's nuclear program, which Israeli officials consider an existential threat.

Tehran has credibly claimed to have caught only one of the perpetrators, an Iranian who confessed on television in 2010 that he had received training in Israel to plant a car bomb that killed a scientist as he was leaving his garage.

The agents behind the other assassination attempts and some larger operations are all believed to have escaped.

The role of a remote-controlled machine gun as part of a complex attack by a team of assassins was first reported over the weekend in an account of the killing posted online by Javad Mogouyi, a documentary filmmaker for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

His father and father-in-law are members of the wing of the organization charged with protecting Mr. Fakhrizadeh, and Mr. Mogouyi's account was adopted as authoritative at the time by several Iranian news organizations.



WANA, via Reuters The ambush took place on a country road in the mountains east of Tehran.

Before the arrival of a dozen assassins, Mr. Mogouyi wrote, a Nissan had been parked at a roundabout, packed with explosives and armed with an automated machine gun.

The remote-controlled gun opened fire first, distracting Mr. Fakhrizadeh and his bodyguards as the assassins lay in wait.

An autonomous machine gun that appears to match that description has been employed by the Israeli military since 2010. Developed by [Rafael Advanced Defense Systems](#), the weapon includes a built-in optical system for aiming and photographs. Its name, which rhymes in Hebrew, means “you see-you shoot.”

Israeli news reports citing a top intelligence official have said the military has used the [weapon](#) to kill Palestinians trying to cross into Israel from Gaza.

The claims that the killing was carried out entirely by a robotic weapon, though, appeared to emanate from the Revolutionary Guards. Two news agencies controlled by the corps, Fars News and Tasnim, first published the claims on Sunday.

Ali Shamkhani, the secretary for the National Security Council, echoed that account on Monday in an interview with Iranian state television. He also asserted that Iranian intelligence had known in advance that an Israeli attack on the scientist would take place on the road where it happened, and that the armed opposition group Mujahedeen Khalq was also involved.

“Definitely,” Mr. Shamkhani said.

On Tuesday, in what seemed to be an attempt to shift blame toward the Revolutionary Guards for failing to stop the killing, a government spokesman said that the Intelligence Ministry had warned the scientist’s security team weeks in advance about the “specific and exact details” of a possible assassination attempt, including potential locations.

“This crime could have been prevented if security protocols has been followed and they had been a little more careful,” the spokesman, Ali Rabeie, said at a news conference.

In the din of conflicting claims, the account of a fully automated killing appeared to gain little traction because it contradicted early eyewitness accounts broadcast on state media as well as comments by the family members of the assassinated scientist.

In the immediate aftermath, an eyewitness who was not identified by name said that he had seen the Nissan explode and described an intense gun battle between the bodyguards and assassins.

“One gunman was sitting on the road and he started shooting at my direction,” said the witness, who estimated that there were about a half-dozen assassins.

“I immediately put my car in reverse, but he kept shooting.”

Other initial reports said one of the bodyguards, Hamed Asghari, had thrown himself on the scientist and taken four bullets from the assassins. Family members said the guard had survived but was in critical condition.

In an interview on state television Saturday night, Mr. Fakhrizadeh’s son Hamed said that he had arrived at the scene within minutes and that his mother had been with his father in the car from the moment of the attack until he died in her arms.

“It was not an assassination but a war zone,” the son said, endorsing the reports of a two-way gunfight with the killers.

The widow of another assassinated scientist told state television that she had met with Ms. Fakhrizadeh after the attack and seen shrapnel wounds across her face and body. The widow, Shohreh Piran, said that Ms. Fakhrizadeh had described “constant gunshots whizzing over our head from left and right.”

Some reports initially claimed that one of the killers had been captured, although those claims have since been abandoned.

The conflicting reports fed a flurry of cynical humor on Iranian social media. After the robot claims were published, Iranian Twitter circulated cartoonish pictures of a Transformer toy with a blue Nissan chassis sticking out of its chest.

The official narratives were so “contradictory,” the writer Abbas Taheri wrote on Twitter, “the heads of Iranian media should all resign over this embarrassment.” But beneath the carping serious concerns festered.

“There is an intelligence crack,” Brig. General Hossein Dehghan, the chief military adviser to Iran’s supreme leader, said on state television. “There are people in the system who are providing our enemies with information, and the enemy is plotting and executing plans based on these leaks.”

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