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Iran: No longer master in its own house?

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In a small circle of family members and envoys of Generals, the nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh Mahabadi was buried on November 30, 2020. The assassination attempt, which claimed Fakhrizadeh's life on November 27, provoked furious reactions in the Iranian press, which were directed both against the possible perpetrators, and the authorities in the country. They were accused of having learned nothing from the series of attacks in the past and of having so many weaknesses that it was easy for an opponent to implement his sinister plans. At the same time, however, the perfection of the assassination even demanded a certain respect from the press.

The perfection of an assassination attempt

The planning and execution of the assassination indeed indicate a high level of professionalism and support from local actors. The nuclear scientist Fakhrizadeh, who had arrived on Friday morning from Rostam in the province of Mazandaran and had been escorted by three other vehicles on his way to Tehran, was on his way to the village of Absard, 45 kilometers east of the capital, when he heard impacts on his armoured car of Japanese make. One of the escort vehicles had previously driven into the village to secure the passage. Fakhrizadeh stopped, probably suspecting engine damage, and got out. At that moment he was hit by a volley fired from a remote-controlled machine gun placed in a pickup truck 150 meters away. After the salvo, the pickup exploded. Hit by at least three bullets, Fakhrizadeh was taken by helicopter to a Tehran hospital, where he soon died.

The media emphasized that not a single attacker had been present during the three-minute attack. The owner of the pickup truck had

allegedly left the country before. Everything indicates that the assassins had an excellent logistical infrastructure on site. Their insider knowledge suggests that they had their sources of information not only in the Ministry of Defence, where the 61-year-old Fakhrizadeh had been employed in the Department for Research and Innovation, but also in the security apparatus and probably also in circles of the Revolutionary Guards.

The known-unknown victim

Iranian media are also insufficiently informed about Fakhrizadeh. The authorities would like to keep it that way. In this respect, the fact that the funeral was only allowed to take place in a small circle because of the Corona pandemic suited them. After all, the short ceremony was broadcast by a television station.

It is likely, however, that Fakhrizadeh had made a career in the Revolutionary Guards parallel to his academic work, where he rose to brigadier general, but then worked in the Ministry of Defence for the "Organization for New Defence

Research" (Persian acronym Sepand). Since 2017, the Sorkh-e Hesar Nuclear Research Center, located in the east of the capital, and the research program called Amad, which aims at the construction of a nuclear warhead, have also been under the control of this organization.

It is hardly surprising that Fakhrizadeh, often just called Dr. Hasan Mohseni, had many enemies. Above all, the Iranian People's Mujahedin had been seeking to denounce him in public together with other leaders of Iranian nuclear research program. After a team of the Israeli secret service Mossad had stolen heavy files of the Iranian nuclear research in January 2018 in a Tehran warehouse, and brought them out of the country, and the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had called Fakhrizadeh a mastermind of military nuclear research in May 2018, it was clear that Fakhrizadeh had been put on Mossad's hit list. Prior to this, six other Iranian nuclear researchers had already been the victims of attacks since 2010. But Saudi Arabia and the USA also had Fakhrizadeh on their radar. And even those responsible in Iran must have been aware that November 28, 2020 would mark the tenth anniversary of the assassination of nuclear scientist Majid Shahryari. The signs were for storm.

The Iranian authorities were aware of the threat to which Fakhrizadeh was exposed. Therefore, more and more concerned voices are raised in Iranian reports that not only accuse the Revolutionary Guards, the State Security Service and the Ministry of Defence of failure, but also speculate about leaks, even covert intrigue. Although the Revolutionary Guards won the recent power struggle with the government of President Rohani following the assassination of Qasem Soleiman, the commanders of the Qods Brigades in Baghdad on 3 January 2020 and the accidental shooting down of Ukrainian International Airlines Flight 752 on 8 January 2020, their reputation and above all their credibility had been severely damaged.

Waiting helplessness

Therefore, the commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Guards, Hosein Salami, hastened to

declare that revenge for the assassination of Fakhrizadeh and the punishment of the assassins was imminent. A little later, however, he was corrected by the Revolutionary Guard spokesman, General Ramadan Sharif: although the perpetrators were known, the government did not want to be tempted to react too quickly.

Thus, one waits also in Teheran spellbound for how the situation will develop further. Hardly anyone expects a military adventure like the one in January 2020 as a reaction to the murder of Soleimani. Although Fakhrizadeh is considered a martyr and school classes are already named after him, he has never been a public figure like Soleimani, and the regime does not want to change that. For any debate about Fakhrizadeh could also contain information about his field of activity, and this could then be interpreted as an admission by Iran to actually be working on a military nuclear program.

But neither Israel nor the USA, the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia will grant Iran this peace. There is also open speculation in the Iranian press about whether US President Donald Trump ordered the assassination in order to provoke Iran in such a way that a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities would be possible. Others even go so far as to fear a wider military confrontation between the new Middle East alliance (USA, Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE) and Iran with its allies. Trump, it is suspected, could use this situation to extend his term of office, as it is unlikely that an orderly transfer of power to Biden can be achieved under wartime conditions.

Why now of all times?

Nevertheless, it is probably not going to happen. However, the timing of the conspiracy does indicate that the United States, in concert with the new Middle East alliance, wants to prevent a rapid return of the Biden administration to a nuclear agreement. Certainly, it was also not about preventing Iran's technological ability to build an atomic bomb by killing one of its specialists. This had been different with the series of attacks from 2010 to 2012. At that time, it was the goal of the USA and Israel to rob Iran of its

technological knowledge. Today, when Iran is hardly in a position to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a single weapon in the next decade, there is more at stake: It should be made clear that foreign powers can operate in Iran in any way they want, that Iran is no longer the master of its own house. It should be made clear to every external ally of Iran that Iran is only a paper tiger, that it can no longer protect its own inner circle, that the country can never protect the interests of Hizbullah in Lebanon, Ansar Allah (Huthi) in Yemen, Assad's Syria or the Shiite pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, and certainly not the Shiite opposition in the Arab Gulf States. The assassination thus had four objectives: To weaken Iran's nuclear competence, to expose the powerlessness of the Revolutionary Guards, to ruin Iran's reputation with its allies and to prevent the coming Biden administration from retrieving a nuclear diplomacy with Iran.

The great offence

It remains to be seen what of this goal will be implemented. But the nerves are bare in Iran. Even more so than in January 2020, Iran, shaken by the Corona crisis with its deep impact on the Islamic-religious constitution of society,

must admit that it really no longer knows what is going on in its own country. On the other hand, the foreign secret services are probably much better informed. The assassination of Fakhrizadeh thus represents an enormous offence, the effects of which will sooner or later affect the regime and its authorities, which are considered incapable. The upcoming presidential elections will show in which direction the insult will drive the population.

Iran will try to make the best of the misery. The country no longer has many options for action. A military reaction is out of the question, unless a hotspur from the leadership of the Revolutionary Guards like General Salami can prevail. President Rohani has already made it clear, as a precaution, that Iran will not let external circumstances dictate the pace and nature of its reaction. It could therefore be that Iran will rather position its allies as proxies and will have needle-sticks carried out here and there against Israel or US institutions. At the same time, however, Iran would have to make it clear that the fact that a foreign power could operate so brazenly in Iran was only a regrettable, one-time industrial accident. But hardly anyone will believe the regime in Tehran anymore.