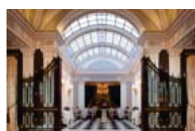




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DIPLOMATIC COURIER

THE INTENSIFYING COVERT WAR BETWEEN IRAN AND THE WEST

Richard Rousseau

20 February 2012

The magnetic bomb – attached to his car – that killed Professor Mustafa Ahmadi Roshan in Tehran on January 11, 2012 is the latest in a series of assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists involved in Iran’s nuclear program. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad accused the Israeli secret service, Mossad, of being behind this murder. As was predicted, the Netanyahu administration totally rejected this accusation. An alternative explanation to Israel’s involvement is based on the growing tension between Ahmadinejad and Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Supreme Leader. There may also be a connection to the upcoming U.S. presidential elections. The Israeli frenzy in calling for a preemptive strike against Iran’s facilities could actually portend a significant turning point in the intricate story of the Iranian nuclear dossier.

Coincidence or not, Professor Ahmadi Roshan was the deputy head of the government’s commercial uranium enrichment site at Natanz. The Iranian Fars news agency reported that he had been involved in a project for the production of polymeric membranes for gaseous diffusions, a technology used to produce enriched uranium.

The Iranian authorities immediately blamed Israel and the United States for this premeditated murder, accusing them of wanting to delay by any means, legally or illegally, the Iranian nuclear program which Tehran assures the international community is solely for civilian purposes. The U.S. has unequivocally denied any involvement in the affair, strongly condemning, in the words of White House spokesman Tommy Vietor, “all acts of violence, including acts of violence like what is being reported today [the assassination]”, including the killing of Professor Roshan. The Israeli authorities, through President Shimon Peres and the official spokesman for the Israel Defense Force (IDF) Yoav Mordecha,

also denied any involvement in the Roshan affair.

Then, on February 13, coordinated car bomb attacks targeted the Israeli embassies in New Delhi and Tbilisi, Georgia. While in Tbilisi, an Israeli Embassy staff member found an explosive device attached to his car and called the Georgian Police to defuse the bomb before it went off; in New Delhi a bomb exploded and injured an Israeli diplomat’s wife, as well as several bystanders.

Minutes after these two events, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused “Iran and its proxy Hezbollah” of being behind both the explosion in New Delhi and the attempted bombing in Tbilisi. “In recent months we have witnessed several attempts to attack Israeli citizens and Jews in several countries, including Azerbaijan, Thailand, and others,” Netanyahu said at a meeting with members from his Likud party. Tehran, however, was swift to deny its involvement in organizing the attacks. A statement from the Iranian government, released by the BBC, called the accusations “sheer lies” and regarded them as part of an Israeli propaganda campaign. As reported by Iran’s state news agency, IRNA, Iranian Foreign Minister Ramin Mehmanparast mused that Israel had itself planned its embassy car explosion in New Delhi and an attempted car bomb in Tbilisi to “tarnish Iran’s friendly relations with India and Georgia,” adding that Netanyahu’s accusation against Tehran is part of Israel’s “psychological warfare against Iran.” Both incidents coincided with the fourth anniversary marking the assassination of Hezbollah’s deputy leader, Imad Mughniyah, which the Islamist group attributes to Israel. Khamenei pledged in January that Iran would seek revenge against international sanctions and the assassination of Iranian scientists involved in the nuclear program.

With the blame nearly impossible to assign, some cryptic past statements, linked in one way or another

to the Iranian nuclear issue, may provide some insight and interpretations of what is going on, or at least some clues as to the actions of covert forces operating within the larger strategic game being played out in the Israeli-Iranian conflict.

The IDF's Yoav Mordechai, having declared that he does not know who was behind the attack on the Iranian professor, added that he did not shed tears over the violent death of Roshan. The timely disappearance of a key element in the continued development of the Iranian nuclear program is seen in Israel as a major setback for Ahmadinejad and the Iranian regime, whose blatant anti-Semitic statements are still causing turmoil and threaten to unleash war in the Middle East.

The latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report released on November 8, 2011 on the Iranian issue has highlighted that the country has made significant progress towards its declared goal of developing civilian nuclear power. However, the report cast heavy shadows on, and expressed suspicions about, the purported civilian uses of the program. In particular, allegations are being made about purported research and studies directly applicable to the development of detonators for nuclear weapons, such as warheads and other components, and the production of long-range missiles. Israel and the United States have been the most active nations in opposing the possibility of a nuclear armed Iran, as Iran is located in one of the most unstable areas on earth. These two allied countries have for years - but more intensively in recent months - been preparing contingency plans for a possible preemptive air attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. As a decision is still awaiting on whether Tel-Aviv and Washington will attack the Islamic state, there are some intriguing interrelated facts concerning the killing of Iranian scientists. Roshan is not the first targeted-killing in Iran, but only one in a long list of professors and scientists falling victim to regional powers' geopolitical interests.

On July 23, 2011, Professor Daryoush Rezaei, 32, another nuclear physicist involved in the development of Iran's nuclear program, was shot by two assassins who then fled on a motorcycle. But even more striking was an assassination attempt on November 29, 2010 on current Vice President and Head of Atomic Energy Organization Ferydoun Abbassi Davani, and then manager of the project on nuclear reactors Majid Shariari. The first was seriously injured, while the second died on the spot following the explosion of two bombs of the same magnetic type used in the Roshan assassination, at least according to a statement by Deputy Governor of

Tehran province Ali Safar Baratloo. Finally, on January 12, 2010 Masoud Ali Mohammadi, an Iranian nuclear scientist who was well known internationally, died in the explosion of a motorcycle which had been packed with explosives and primed to detonate when his vehicle came close.

Possible interpretations

Investigations of these suspicious killings have not yet produced results. Nonetheless, a propaganda war between Iranian and Israeli authorities has ensured, which affects both countries' relations with the United States. Tehran's contention that Roshan and the other scientists killed in the last two years were victims of the Israeli secret service cannot be confirmed.

Assuredly, the similarity of the materials used to kill Roshan this year and Davani and Shariari on November 29, 2010 would suggest that a single organization was behind the attacks on Iranian scientists. Since the highest priority goal of Israel (and other Western countries) is to prevent Tehran gaining atomic weapons, it is easy enough to make the government of Benjamin Netanyahu the main suspect. In addition, some secret operations conducted by Mossad in recent years, and the ruthlessness with which they were executed, may suggest the direct involvement of Israeli intelligence services. Attention should be paid to the case of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh. A senior Hamas military commander and one of the founders of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military affiliate of Hamas, al-Mabhouh was involved in arms trafficking before his murder in a Dubai hotel on January 20, 2010. According to the Police in the Emirate of Dubai, closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras and the images captured by hotel security lead many to believe that the murder was carried out by Israeli intelligence.

Though the involvement of Mossad in the affair cannot be irrefutably proven, it cannot be disproven either, since the stated goal of the Israeli secret service is quite plain: to prevent Iran from producing an atomic bomb. But there is another possible interpretation of the Roshan assassination. Denying any involvement of their own, the Israeli authorities have implicitly hinted that the Iranian authorities themselves might have ordered the killing of the professor. This insinuation makes little sense if we assume that Iran seeks to accelerate its nuclear program. However, looked at from an internal political perspective, it becomes a far more plausible claim to some observers. Indeed, the clash between

President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has in recent months seen moments of high tension, and the timing of the murders might consequently be connected to Iranian internal politics.

Khamenei's decision to reinstate the former head of the Ministry of Intelligence, Eider Moslehi, whom Ahmadinejad had forced to resign in April 2011, and the confrontation over Ahmadinejad's current Chief of Staff, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, who occupied the position of First Vice President of Iran for one week in 2009 before Khamenei ordered his removal from that post, lay bare the bitter rivalry between the two most important officers of the Iranian state. Roshan's murder may have been part of this collision at the highest level. It could serve as a means to further elevate the tension and the stakes and, by the same token, to create a permanent state of siege and reduce the influence of the nationalist front, represented by Ahmadinejad and Mashaei in the face of growing external threats. Although it is doubtful that Iran ever wished to deprive itself of five of its own brightest nuclear scientists over the span of two years, the November IAEA report led to a new wave of more stringent sanctions which seem to be about to affect Tehran much more than previous ones.

2012: the Breaking Point

It appears that the Obama administration's decision to strike the Iranian banking sector, identifying the Central Bank of Iran (BCI) as a possible centre of money laundering and terrorism financing, is causing serious budget problems for Iran, as it discourages international banks and financial intermediaries from dealing with the BCI and undertaking new business with Tehran.

From this perspective, Washington policy's line seems clear: no pre-emptive strike against Iran and its nuclear sites, but heavy sanctions against, and continued diplomatic pressure on, the Iranian regime. This policy is partly determined by the declared intention of Obama to partially withdraw U.S. troops from the Middle East in the short to medium term. The financial crisis and the debate on the U.S. public debt ceiling have actually forced President Obama to progressively disengage the U.S. from the region, as evidenced by the departure of the last U.S. battalion from Iraq in December and the objective to end the engagement in Afghanistan by 2014. Moreover, the upcoming presidential election is likely to dissuade the White House from risking the possible complications arising from another protracted war far away from home.

However, an international crisis forced by an Israeli

attack on Iran could derail American plans and force Washington to offer help and assistance to its ally. The election year, and the increased attention to domestic issues it imposes on the Obama administration, could offer Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu a window of opportunity. The White House has certainly not forgotten what happened on the eve of Barack Obama's inauguration in January 2009.

On December 27, 2008, the Israeli government launched "Operation Cast Lead" against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, while it is true that the U.S. disengagement from the Middle East will proceed at a slow pace, one must also consider that the U.S. has now more leeway in its military policy. If the simultaneous presence of two open fronts once prevented the opening of a third one, the reduction in America's Middle East military commitments could now offer opportunities to settle old scores with Iran and its erstwhile supporters in the region.

If President Obama's election snags were to persist, a war against Iran, which could potentially restore his shattered image among American voters, might be a viable option. The French-led intervention in Libya may be seen as an example of such a gamble, even if there are serious doubts about the success of a military operation in Iran or Washington's willingness to engage its troops in the Middle East again, especially in conditions of severe economic crisis, high oil prices, and world market volatility. These considerations, however, are not in Israel's game plan. If the Jewish state sees its security threatened by an open enemy possessing nuclear weapons, it will counter the threat by any means necessary.

In 2012 Ahmadinejad began his final year as President of Iran. He faces increasing hostility from Supreme Leader Khamenei and several members of the parliament, which threatened to initiate impeachment proceedings against him in May 2011 after he fired three ministers without the consent of parliament. The time may have come for Ahmadinejad to find a diplomatic solution to the current impasse over the nuclear program issue, as the increasingly stringent economic sanctions are eroding his electoral base and further imperiling the overall well-being and standard of living of ordinary Iranians.

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THE ROLE OF FOREIGN POLICY IN THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS – OPEd

Richard Rousseau

February 23, 2012

In the absence of clear domestic political issues, foreign policy, including national security issues, is playing a greater than usual role in Russia's presidential election campaign.

The poor performance of the ruling United Russia (UR) party in the Duma elections of December 4 has been described by its supporters as evidence that the election met "European standards." However, the reality is quite different. Elections held in mature European parliamentary democracies usually focus on key political, social and economic issues. In contrast, the December Duma campaign was largely devoid of debates on these specific issues and at times revolved around nothing more than who could outspend or rig the election better than their opponents.

The United Russia party is the one to blame for failing to formulate a consistent, contemporary and European-type ideology, one based on domestic issues. Its platform is simply that it is the party of power and wants to stay in that place. The party and the executive branch of the Russian government are, to all intents and purposes, one and the same thing, which explains a great deal why United Russia almost invariably takes credit for every "positive action" the Kremlin undertakes, with public money. Opposition parties – if we assume that such parties really exist – were no better – none of the six which participated in the elections managed to present any platform more attractive than the one of the UR to the electorate. In spite of its current standing, the UR has seen in recent years a consistent decrease in the percentage of votes it gets from the populace. Nevertheless, opposition parties have chosen to remain bystanders and watch from a privileged position the effective erosion of the UR mandate among ordinary Russians.

Consequently, debates and exchanges on foreign policy issues were quite limited during the December legislative election. Two factors can explain this omission. First, Russia is not currently at war; no major military conflicts are taking place on its borders. In the absence of a clear and overriding threat to the national security, Russians prefer to fix their attention on domestic issues, as political parties

elsewhere do in similar circumstances.

Second, Russia's foreign policy is within the sole domination of the executive branch, traditionally conducted by the interaction between the Presidential Administration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, although in 2008 the office of the Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, was also added to the mix. The foreign policy function of the Duma is almost purely symbolic, usually limited to the approval of international treaties.

However, international issues have returned to the forefront of public debate during the current presidential campaign, and this issue has been raised by the leading presidential candidate, Vladimir Putin. He has emphasized them in setting his campaign apart from the pack. This is a predictable strategy given that he is the only candidate with previous foreign affairs experience. Putin can easily portray himself as being far more capable than any other in this sphere of expertise.

Putin's sudden interest in foreign affairs is, partly, motivated by tactical considerations. Stability, the main achievement brought about by Putin's leadership, seems to be hit by decreased demand. Standing for election on the same track as President's Medvedev's "modernization" program cannot alone carry the day. Putin might be asked why he, and not the one who proposed the modernization program, Medvedev, is now seeking the presidency. Since Putin's advisors are unable to formulate a dominant theme for the election campaign, especially on the home front, he has no other alternative but to discuss Russia's stormy relations with the outside world.

This subject is not entirely devoid of immediate relevancy. There is growing concern in Russia about the deployment of anti-missile defense systems in Eastern Europe and the need to modernize the Russian military. Russia genuinely believes that these systems, deployed next to its European border, constitute an acute threat to its national security. The Kremlin sees no reason to hide its security fears from the wider public and the international community.

While the attention placed by Russian officials on such concerns is legitimate and understandable, it is

the tone of their rhetoric that is worrying. In a speech at a campaign rally on Manezh Square in Moscow on December 12, Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's former ambassador to NATO, warned that Russia could become the "easy prey" of some (unnamed) antagonistic "forces in Europe." Naturally, it is easy to dismiss such a statement as just another typical piece of extremist anti-Western propaganda from the mouth of the confrontational and hawkish ex-ambassador if not for the fact that the very next day after the meeting, Rogozin became one of the senior organizers of Putin's election campaign. It is clear that such views, and the way they are expressed, are likely to become government practice should Putin be elected.

Putin himself stirred things up a bit by pointing his finger at the United States, and specifically Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for the massive protests which erupted in Russia after last December's State Duma elections. According to Putin, "[Clinton] set the tone for some of the activists inside our country, gave them a signal, they heard this signal and started active work with support from US State Department" (Daily Telegraph, December 8, 2012).

It is inconceivable to any person well-versed in Russian politics that Putin does not realize the absurdity of this accusation. Yet the idea of Russia being stalked by an "enemy at the gate" resonates

with many voters in the ex-communist country, as a new level of mistrust has developed towards the United States, 20 years after the Cold War officially ended. Interestingly, Putin's statement was enthusiastically backed by Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party – Putin's main "rival" in the presidential race, who called the protest meetings an "orange leprosy," and claimed it had been organized by "American secret services." Undoubtedly, the topic of foreign interference in Russia's internal affairs is going to play a prominent role in election debates until March 4, the last day of the election campaign.

Putin's heightened anti-Western rhetoric may act as a cold shower for those who a few months ago opined that the "possible election of Putin as the president of Russia will not signify a fundamental change in the direction of U.S.-Russia relations" (Andrew Kuchins, the Valdai Discussion Club, September 29, 2011). They might still be correct in the final analysis: Soon-to-be President-elect, Putin may well correct his tendency to fire-off malapropos statements while in office after March and effectively return to the characteristically pragmatic approach to foreign policy of his first presidential term. Words, however, are important in politics, even if they are uttered in the heat of election campaigns. They may be taken at face value.



IRAN'S PROSPECTS IN THE EVENT OF WAR WITH THE UNITED STATES AND THE WEST

If attacked, Iran would probably be a much more formidable opponent than any country the United States has locked horns with over the last few decades. The U.S. should act with extreme caution if it is considering making military attacks.

RICHARD ROUSSEAU | FEBRUARY 27, 2012

With U.S. President Barack Obama announcing on January 5 that the Pentagon can expect serious cuts in the near future, hawkish Congressmen who insist on stopping Iran's nuclear program by any means necessary will soon find that the U.S. has fewer levers to deal with the defiant Middle East state. The American military are set to lose about 80 thousand soldiers, a cost saving measure brought about by

record expenditures and deficits. In addition, a broader set of cuts will affect each branch of the armed services. "Operation Iranian Freedom" is now far less realistic than many hardliners had previously thought, especially when the real cost is counted.

The low probability of direct confrontation between the U.S. and Iran is a serious setback for some of these hawks in view of the statement made last month by

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta in which he suggested that Iran could possess nuclear weapons before the end of 2012, even though, he insisted, this is highly unlikely.

Yet while many state leaders do not hide their concern at the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran any decision which may lead to war between the U.S. and the Islamic republic warrants intensive discussion before the American people. Drowning out the voices of those who oppose military intervention in Iran by beating more ardently the drums of war is a surrogate for genuine and open debate.

As American policymakers weigh up available options, consideration should be given to five aspects which nominally enhance Iran's capabilities in a war with the United States. They are especially important as this year's election is getting closer, and pleas for a military solution are increasingly being heard both inside and outside the United States.

The first point is that Iran could defend itself with probably the most efficient army the United States has encountered in decades. Iran's military forces are incomparably stronger than those of Haiti, Panama, Grenada, Somalia, Serbia, Bosnia, Afghanistan or Iraq. In all these cases, the U.S. military faced an adversary unable to compete with overwhelming American land, sea and air superiority. The Iranian armed forces are far more competent and efficient, and after watching and analyzing the 2003 war in Iraq they have gained a good grasp of American tactics and strategy. Some Iranian officers were even trained in the U.S. during the reign of the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919-80).

Adroit at littoral combat, the regular Iranian navy may be able, many military experts believe, to block the Strait of Hormuz for long enough to wreak economic havoc. The recent Iranian naval exercises demonstrate that Tehran has a ready-made strategy that would seek to block the strait while simultaneously trying to sink American – and European – warships in the vicinity. The end result would be significant losses to commercial shipping and a spike in oil prices. However, the Iranian Navy, with its Russian-made Kilo Class submarines armed with torpedoes, agile frigates and fast corvettes, could sustain an attack only for a short while, as the

American retaliation would be massive and overwhelming. Iranian ships would be wiped out in a matter of hours or a few days. U.S. Air Force fighter aircraft would most likely strike at Bandar Abbas and Kish Island ports (part of the Hormozgan Province of Iran) to cut off the Iranian Navy from its rear operating bases.

On the other hand, the proliferation of sales of advanced air defense systems to countries like Iran has given them highly sophisticated and integrated anti-aircraft defense systems. These have the capacity to inflict on American airpower a scale of losses not seen since the Vietnam War. The decline in the U.S. bomber force could result in unacceptable hardware and human losses.

In contrast to Iraq, the first sight of U.S. ground troops will not persuade Iran's regular Army and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to lay down their arms. They are the ones who, more than any other elements of the regime, have studied the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq and learned lessons in how to beat the American Army, which can be achieved by not fighting it directly but by adopting hit and run tactics, or "asymmetrical warfare" in contemporary military parlance.

Second, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and National Security (MOIS) is one of the world's best intelligence agencies. For over thirty years, MOIS agents have shown impressive levels of efficiency. They have hunted down and killed thousands of dissidents and former officials of the Shah's government and valiantly countered real or perceived threats to the republican regime. Despite the precarious economic situation in the country, MOIS still has the means to carry out assassinations, espionage operations and other types of attacks against selected targets. It is also likely that a significant number of Iranian spies are operating inside the United States, which has a large ethnic Iranian immigrant population.

Although the pieces of the puzzle are still difficult to put together, there are reasonable grounds for assuming that Mansoor Arbabsiar, the Iranian who plotted the assassination of Saudi ambassador Adel al-Jubeir in the United States with the help of the Mexican Zetas drug cartel in October 2011, was tied

to MOIS. It is also known that MOIS has targeted Iranian expatriates, imprisoning members of their families and causing them great suffering and personal injury. It is not impossible that some of the 1.5 million Iranian Americans living in the United States become victims of such tactics.

Third, Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran, has a greater ability to carry out terrorist attacks than al-Qaida has ever had. This cluster organization has been honing its combat skills for three decades by fighting the Israelis in Lebanon and northern Israel. It allegedly has links with merciless Latin American drug cartels and can count on a global network of agents. Theoretically, Hezbollah has the resources and competence to execute large-scale attacks against the United States and its interests abroad.

In fact, it is believed that Hezbollah cells are active in Europe, Latin America and Asia as well as the United States, making this terrorist group a real threat to Iran's opponents. The bombing of a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association in Buenos Aires in 1994 and the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996 speak volume about Hezbollah's history of global terrorism. If the U.S. military decides to attack Iran, the risk of Hezbollah undertaking a series of terrorist counter-attacks will be seriously increased, and thwarting these attacks will not be as easy as those of al-Qaeda.

Fourth, although already of superior quality, Iran's cyber-capabilities are being constantly upgraded. An attack on Iranian nuclear facilities is likely to provoke a prolonged cyber-attack of a type not yet seen. Tehran will seek to inflict harm and disable public and private data processing systems.

Fifth, U.S. forces have been conducting military interventions almost nonstop over the last decade and hence they deserve a break from war. Afghanistan and Iraq have left their mark on the men and women fighting for America and also taken their toll on the equipment they use. Even a limited attack on Iran is likely to spill over into a wider war. The U.S. Army would then be exposed to a prolonged campaign in exceptionally adverse battle conditions.

One must also realize that, on the war issue, the U.S. and Iran have asymmetrical interests. For Iranian

leaders the very survival of their regime would be at stake in any armed conflict, while for the United States the stakes are significantly lower.

Even a strike focused purely on Iranian nuclear facilities will trigger a reaction which will push the conflict far beyond the "limited" objectives of the Obama administration. While bringing U.S. troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran's main neighbors, may induce Tehran to put the brakes on the development of a "Shiite bomb," a U.S. strategic attack will conversely strengthen its determination to build one and deepen the regime's worst fears.

The Iranian regime has a greater aversion to risk than many think. Although Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rhetoric and saber-rattling play well to the gallery and make good political theater for insiders and the international press, there is usually little behind them. The suggestion that Ahmadinejad is just words, and will not match them with deeds, is not far from the truth. But ensuring the regime's survival is nevertheless a paramount objective, and this largely explains why it uses a mix of bellicose provocations and olive branch offerings. Pushing Iran to the brink of the abyss may turn empty threats into a real war and certainly jeopardize Obama's efforts to cut America's military budget.

Ultimately, Iran might prove less dangerous than suggested above, and a war on Iranian soil and around the Strait of Hormuz may be less costly in terms of blood and budget than expected. But weighing all "peaceful" options before taking up arms against Iran is of the utmost importance if the best solution is to be found.

For the United States it is crucial to determine what preventing a nuclear-armed Iran is worth. If Americans had understood the costs of the 2003 Iraq war before launching it, one wonders today if they would have gone along with it in the first place.

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