

# What the death of Iran's top nuclear scientist could mean for Biden

The assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, Iran's leading nuclear weapons scientist, could set off a tinder box of violence between Iran, Israel and the United States — and put the incoming Biden administration in a tight spot when it comes to resetting relations with Tehran.

In the wake of Fakhrizadeh's death Friday, Iran's foreign minister, in a tweet, called the death "cowardice — with serious indications of Israeli role," while the Iranian Armed Forces chief of staff warned of "severe revenge" against the scientist's killers.



David Andelman – *Credit: c/o David Andelman*

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had no immediate comment, though it's likely he, along with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, discussed how to work against Iran in a meeting in Neom, Saudi Arabia, last Sunday, where Mossad head Yossi Cohen was also present. (One of Netanyahu's confidants, Israeli cabinet minister Tzachi Hanegbi, said Saturday he had "no clue" who was behind the killing.)

According to Amos Yadlin, the executive director of Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, it's likely the three sides were planning what moves to make before a Biden administration takes office and reengages with Iran. (Saudi Arabia's foreign minister denied the meeting took place). It's also worth mentioning that Fakhrizadeh's assassination follows the pattern of other Mossad attacks on senior officials in the Iranian nuclear program.

Saturday, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani blamed Israel for the killing, but promised a response only at "the right time." Still, the circumstances of the attack — Fakhrizadeh's car was ambushed in daylight just east of the capital — had to be

horrifying and deeply embarrassing to Iran. The nation's inability to protect itself from a strike in its heartland would seem to make it that much more difficult for moderates in Iran to exercise restraint as the country gears up for presidential election in June 2021.

It remains unclear whether the United States had any prior knowledge of the attack. Early this month, President Donald Trump asked senior advisers to explore the possibilities for an offensive strike against Iran's main nuclear site, according to The New York Times, after the International Atomic Energy Agency issued a report that said Iran's stockpile of uranium was 12 times the limit set under the Iran nuclear deal, from which Trump withdrew in 2018. At that meeting, Vice President Mike Pence and Pompeo, along with other aides, warned that such action could lead to a much broader conflict with potentially horrific consequences for the United States.

Following the attack on Fakhrizadeh, Trump retweeted an Israeli journalist, who wrote, "(Fakhrizadeh) was head of Iran's secret military program and wanted for many years by Mossad. His death is a major psychological and professional blow for Iran."

The timing of Fakhrizadeh's death is notable. The United States is entering a potentially dangerous period as the anniversary nears of the death of Qasem Soleimani, a top Iranian general, in a US drone strike in Iraq, January 3. Iran's Revolutionary Guard officers, along with many Iranians who revered the leader, believed Tehran's response — a single missile strike on two US military facilities with enough warning to avoid any casualties — was weak.

Now, the assassination of Fakhrizadeh, who, like Soleimani, was a member of the Revolutionary Guard, only throws more fuel on a fire that Netanyahu, for one, seems to have little interest in extinguishing. After all, there was no apparent indication Fakhrizadeh was planning an immediate operation that could have threatened either Israel or America.

The attack — which may have been timed to take place in the final weeks of Trump's presidency — could spell trouble for the Biden administration. The President-elect is eager to re-enter the Iran nuclear agreement, and a violent Iranian reprisal might scupper the chance at renewed negotiations before Biden even enters office.

Iran will have to weigh competing priorities as it looks ahead. The radical Revolutionary Guard, still smarting over the assassination of Soleimani, will likely call for swift action. But there are also moderates who may be open to cooperating with the incoming Biden administration in a desperate bid to remove the bootheel of sanctions from the nation's economy as it struggles with the Covid-19 pandemic.

The key unanswered question is whether Iran will be able to restrain its reflexive impulses to retaliate for Fakhrizadeh's death. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was seen weeping at Soleimani's funeral, is believed to have close ties to the Revolutionary Guard, which has been instrumental in keeping him in power for more than 30 years. He has already called for revenge and vowed to continue the country's "scientific" activities in a veiled reference to the country's nuclear activities.

But Iranian leaders may also heed moderate forces in the interest of encouraging Biden's hope of returning to the nuclear agreement and relief from sanctions.

Will Iran direct its wrath against the United States or focus on retaliating against Israel in response to Fakhrizadeh's killing? And then, the broader question: If Iran does retaliate against Israel, will it respond in kind?

At least Saturday's comments from Rouhani raise the hope that there may actually be some adults in the room. They may well be capable of exercising the kind of restraint that could allow the incoming Biden administration to move toward a restoration of the nuclear agreement and a control over any Iranian inclination to rush full-tilt toward a bomb.

Above all, it is imperative for Trump to exercise restraint rather than escalate what is already a tense situation. Biden has already signaled on numerous occasions that he will abide by the tradition that there is only one president in charge at a time. But if Trump decides to dive headfirst into this dangerous conflict, Biden and his new national security team will have to be prepared to face a world of hurt when they step into the White House this January.

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