



# Israel Aims To Make Iran's Nuclear Program a Risky Venture

December 1, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman** *Newsweek*

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Iran; Israel

On Friday, the world woke up to news that Iran's leading nuclear scientist had been killed outside Tehran. Earlier that day, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a high-ranking officer in Iran's feared Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, was assassinated in an ambush in a secluded village east of the Iranian capital.

Contrary to much of the media coverage surrounding the incident, Fakhrizadeh was far more than just a preeminent nuclear specialist. He was also the architect of Iran's nuclear weapons program, and a pioneer of the Islamic Republic's effort to clandestinely acquire an offensive-oriented atomic arsenal. And while its policymakers have remained understandably mum on the subject, intelligence officials strongly believe that Israel was behind the killing as part of a new push by Jerusalem to derail Iran's nuclear program.

But why now? As various commentators have noted, the timing has everything to do with American politics. Quite simply, officials in Jerusalem are deeply nervous that, after more than two years of "maximum pressure" against Iran under President Trump, the incoming Biden administration could soon revert to a softer approach. Biden, after all, has pledged to rejoin the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran—the same agreement that helped stabilize the Islamic Republic's tottering economy and embolden an expansion of Iranian regional influence half a decade ago. It's a worry that has persisted among Israeli leaders despite reassuring noises from liberal foreign policy circles in Washington. And it's likely the reason why Israel chose to target Iran's nuclear program now, while it still has comparative freedom of action from Washington to do so.

But Fakhrizadeh had also been in Israel's crosshairs for some time. Some two and a half years ago, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly confirmed that his country's intelligence service, the Mossad, had carried out a daring raid and captured a secret archive detailing the Iranian regime's illicit nuclear work, the scientist's name figured prominently in the resulting revelations. For years, the files detailed, Fakhrizadeh had led the "Amad Plan," as Iran's nuclear weapons program was known, before breaking off nearly a decade ago and heading a separate research organization, the SPND, to further advance the regime's goals. "Remember that name, Fakhrizadeh," Netanyahu had said back then.

Netanyahu's predecessor, Ehud Olmert, was even more explicit. In a 2018 interview with Israeli television channel *Kan*, the former premier suggested that the Iranian scientist represented a target of opportunity for Israel's clandestine service. "I know Fakhrizadeh well. He doesn't know how well I know him. If I met him in the streets, most likely I would recognize him," Olmert remarked. "He does not have immunity, he did not have immunity and I don't think he will have immunity." Israel now appears to have made good on Olmert's warning.

Yet Friday's killing has another facet, as well: It reflects what amounts to a significant shift in strategy on the part of the Jewish state. For years, speculation has abounded that Israel might ultimately decide to act unilaterally against Iran's nuclear program, which represents the gravest external threat to its security. The possibility of an Israeli military strike on Iranian nuclear sites is still very much on the table today, but it is an option hamstrung by a harsh reality: It is simply not possible to bomb knowledge.

Over the past two decades, Iran has amassed a formidable cadre of experts, scientists and engineers to power its atomic effort. In turn, the Iranian regime has taken great comfort in the idea that these specialists, spread over the length and breadth of its national nuclear endeavor, provide a guarantee of sorts that any military strike would turn out to be, at best, a temporary setback to the regime's path to the bomb.

Changing that calculus has naturally become a growing priority for Jerusalem. Over the past decade, no fewer than five high-level Iranian nuclear scientists have been killed in a variety of very public ways. The assassination of Fakhrizadeh is just the latest part of this pattern.

Whether this campaign has any lasting effect on Iran's nuclear trajectory remains to be seen. The larger message it is trying to convey, however, is crystal clear. Israel is putting Iran's nuclear scientists on notice that their chosen vocation could turn out to be downright hazardous to their health, and that they would be prudent to seek other employment.

*Ilan Berman is senior vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, D.C.*