



Today's and Tomorrow's Message

Kurdistan at Risk of Being Caught in a Cross-Fire Between Iran and the West

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The latest assassination of an Iranian nuclear scientist has escalated already serious tensions between Iran and the West. Tehran immediately blamed Israel and the United States for the incident. Israel's Mossad is certainly the leading suspect in the death—the fourth such assassination in less than four years—but it is not the only suspect. In addition to the CIA, both the Saudi and Pakistani intelligence services also had ample motives to use that tactic to impede Iran's nuclear program, since those countries emphatically do not want to see Iran acquire a nuclear-weapons capability.

An odd and ominous aftermath of the assassination was speculation among several Western news media outlets that Israel had recruited and trained Iranian Kurdish exiles living in the Kurdistan region of Iraq to carry out the mission. But since the Kurdistan Regional Government has tried to avoid provoking its powerful Iranian neighbor, that thesis lacks credibility. There are two more probable explanations for the media speculation. One is that Israel or the United States planted a false cover story to throw the Iranian government off the track of the real agents. An even more likely explanation, though, is that the story originated in Tehran, and the Iranian regime may be contemplating using the assassination as a pretext for a new round of military action against targets in Iraqi Kurdistan. From Iran's perspective, such a punitive venture would send a warning to multiple parties—certainly to the KRG, but also indirectly both to Baghdad and Washington—that there will be serious consequences if the attacks on Tehran's nuclear program and personnel don't cease.

Both the KRG and the Kurdish people need to be very concerned if Iran is indeed the source of accusations that Kurds were involved in the assassination. Iran has conducted military incursions into Iraq's Kurdish region before, sometimes unilaterally and on other

occasions in cooperation with Turkey.

Until the cooling of relations between Tehran and Ankara over the past year, numerous high-level meetings occurred involving Turkish and Iranian military officials in which there apparently were discussions about coordinating policies regarding Iraqi Kurdistan. A June 2008 comment by General Ilker Basbug, Turkey's land forces commander, underscored the extent of the policy and logistical cooperation. "We are sharing intelligence with Iran, we are talking, we are coordinating," Basbug stated bluntly. "When they start an operation, we do too." He became even more specific. "They carry out an operation from the Iranian side of the border, we from the Turkish side." The sequential nature of Turkish and Iranian assaults in the spring of 2010 indicated that the coordination was still taking place at that time.

Given the subsequent chill in Turkish-Iranian relations, it is less likely that such cooperation would take place today. And if Iran had to conduct a military campaign without Turkey's de facto assistance, the difficulty would be much greater and the prospects of success significantly reduced.

Still, Tehran's reaction to the assassination bears watching. If the Iranian regime embraces the view that Kurdish agents, working for Israel or the United States, carried out the killing, retaliation against KRG territory becomes a very real prospect. That would create problems for both the KRG and the Baghdad government, since it would involve a violation of Iraq's territorial integrity. It would also increase the already dangerous tensions between the United States and Iran, because U.S. officials would undoubtedly interpret an Iranian punitive campaign as further evidence that Iran is an aggressive "rogue state."

The Kurdish people, of course, would be caught in the middle of such a maelstrom. We may be seeing the onset of the newest confrontation in an especially volatile region.

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