

By Ben West

On the morning of Nov. 29, two Iranian scientists involved in Iran's nuclear development program were attacked. One was killed, and the other was injured. According to Iranian media, the deceased, Dr. Majid Shahriari, was heading the team responsible for developing the technology to design a nuclear reactor core, and Time magazine referred to him as the highest-ranking non-appointed individual working on the project.

Official reports indicate that Shahriari was killed when assailants on motorcycles attached a "sticky bomb" to his vehicle and detonated it seconds later. However, the Time magazine report says that an explosive device concealed inside the car detonated and killed him. Shahriari's driver and wife, both of whom were in the car at the time, were injured.

Meanwhile, on the opposite side of town, Dr. Fereidoon Abassi was injured in a sticky-bomb attack reportedly identical to the one officials said killed Shahriari. His wife was accompanying him and was also injured (some reports indicate that a driver was also in the car at the time of the attack). Abassi and his wife are said to be in stable condition. Abassi is perhaps even more closely linked to Iran's nuclear program than Shahriari was, since he was a member of the elite Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and was named in a 2007 U.N. resolution that sanctioned high-ranking members of Iran's defense and military agencies believed to be trying to obtain nuclear weapons.

Monday's incidents occurred at a time of uncertainty over how global powers and Iran's neighbors will handle an Iran apparently pursuing nuclear weapons despite its claims of developing only a civilian nuclear program and asserting itself as a regional power in the Middle East. Through economic sanctions that went into effect last year, the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China and Germany (known as the "P-5+1") have been pressuring Iran to enter negotiations over its nuclear program and outsource the most sensitive aspects the program, such as higher levels of uranium enrichment.

The Nov. 29 attacks came about a week before Saeed Jalili, Iran's national security chief, will be leading a delegation to meet with the P-5+1 from Dec. 6-7 in Vienna, the first such meeting in more than a year. The attacks also came within hours of the WikiLeaks release of classified U.S. State Department cables, which are filled with international concerns about Iran's controversial nuclear program.

Because of the international scrutiny and sanctions on just about any hardware required to develop a nuclear program, Iran has focused on developing domestic technologies that can fill the gaps. This has required a national initiative coordinated by the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to build the country's nuclear program from scratch, an endeavor that requires thousands of experts from various fields of the physical sciences as well as the requisite technologies.

And it was the leader of the AEOI, Ali Akhbar Salehi, who told media Nov. 29 that Shahriari was

"in charge of one of the great projects" at the agency. Salehi also issued a warning to Iran's enemies "not to play with fire." Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad elaborated on the warning, accusing "Zionist" and "Western regimes" of being behind the coordinated attacks against Shahriari and Abassi. The desire of the U.N. Security Council (along with Israel and Germany) to stop Iran's nuclear program and the apparent involvement of the targeted scientists in that program has led many Iranian officials to quickly blame the United States, United Kingdom and Israel for the attacks, since those countries have been the loudest in condemning Iran for its nuclear ambitions.

It seems that certain domestic rivals of the Iranian regime would also benefit from these attacks. Any one of numerous Iranian militant groups throughout the country may have been involved in one way or another, perhaps with the assistance of a foreign power. A look at the tactics used in the attacks could shed some light on the perpetrators.

Modus Operandi

According to official Iranian reports, Abassi was driving to work at Shahid Beheshti University in northern Tehran from his residence in southern Tehran. When the car in which he and his wife were traveling was on Artash Street, assailants on at least two motorcycles approached the vehicle and attached an improvised explosive device (IED) to the driver's-side door. The device exploded shortly thereafter, injuring Abassi and his wife.

Images reportedly of Abassi's vehicle show that the driver's side door was destroyed, but the rest of the vehicle and the surrounding surfaces show very little damage. A few pockmarks can be seen on the vehicle behind Abassi's car but little else to indicate that a bomb had gone off in the vicinity. (Earlier reports indicating that this was Shahriari's vehicle proved erroneous.) This indicates that the IED was a shaped charge with a very specific target. Evidence of both the shaped charge and the utilization of projectiles in the device suggests that the device was put together by a competent and experienced bomb-maker.

An eyewitness account of the attack offers one explanation why the device did not kill Abassi. According to the man who was driving immediately behind Abassi's car, the car abruptly stopped in traffic, then Abassi got out and went to the passenger side where his wife was sitting. The eyewitness said Abassi and his wife were about 2 meters from the car, on the opposite side when the IED exploded. Abassi appears to have been aware of the attack as it was under way, which apparently saved his life. The eyewitness did not mention whether he saw the motorcyclists attach the device to the car before it went off, but that could have been what tipped Abassi off. If this was the case, the bomb-maker may have done his job well in building the device but the assailants gave themselves away when they planted it.

In the fatal attack against Shahriari, he also was on his way to work at Shahid Beheshti University in northern Tehran in his vehicle with his wife, according to official reports. These reports indicate that he definitely had a driver, which would suggest that Shahriari was

considered a person of importance. Their car was traveling through a parking lot in northern Tehran when assailants on at least two motorcycles approached the vehicle and attached an IED to the car. Eyewitnesses say that the IED exploded seconds later and that the motorcyclists escaped. Shahriari was presumably killed in the explosion while his wife and driver were injured.

The official account of the attack is contradicted by the Time magazine report, which cites a "Western intelligence source with knowledge of the operation" as saying that the IED that killed Shahriari detonated from inside the vehicle. Images of what appears to be Shahriari's vehicle are much poorer quality than the images of Abassi's vehicle, but they do appear to show damage to the windshield and other car windows. The car is still very much intact, though, and the fact that Shahriari's driver and wife escaped with only injuries suggests that the device used against Shahriari was also a shaped charge, specifically targeting him.

Capabilities

Attacks like the two carried out against Abassi and Shahriari require a high level of tradecraft that is available only to well-trained operatives. There is much more going on below the surface in attacks like these that is not immediately obvious when reading media reports. First, the team of assailants that attacked Abassi and Shahriari had to identify their targets and confirm that the men they were attacking were indeed high-level scientists involved in Iran's nuclear program. The fact that Abassi and Shahriari held such high positions indicates they were specifically selected as targets and not the victims of a lucky, opportunistic attack.

Second, the team had to conduct surveillance of the two scientists. The team had to positively identify their vehicles and determine their schedules and routes in order to know when and how to launch their attacks. Both attacks targeted the scientists as they traveled to work, likely a time when they were most vulnerable, an MO commonly used by assassins worldwide.

Third, someone with sufficient expertise had to build IEDs that would kill their targets. Both devices appear to have been relatively small IEDs that were aimed precisely at the scientists, which may have been an attempt to limit collateral damage (their small size may also have been due to efforts to conceal the device). Both devices seem to have been adequate to kill their intended targets, and judging by the damage to his vehicle, it appears that Abassi would have received mortal wounds had he stayed in the driver's seat.

The deployment stage seems to be where things went wrong for the assailants, at least in the Abassi attack. It is unclear exactly what alerted him, but it appears that he was exercising some level of situational awareness and was able to determine that an attack was under way.

It is not at all surprising that someone like Abassi would have been practicing situational awareness. This is not the first time that scientists linked to Iran's nuclear program have been attacked, and Iranian agencies linked to the nuclear program have probably issued general security guidance to their employees (especially high-ranking ones like Abassi and Shahriari). In 2007, Ardeshir Hassanpour was killed in an alleged poisoning that STRATFOR sources attributed to an Israeli operation. Again, in January 2010, Massoud Ali-Mohammadi, another

Iranian scientist who taught at Tehran University, was killed in an IED attack that also targeted him as he was driving to work in the morning. While some suspected that Ali-Mohammadi may have been targeted by the Iranian regime due to his connections with the opposition, Abassi and Shahriari appear much too close to the regime to be targets of their own government (however, nothing can be ruled out in politically volatile Tehran). The similarities between the Ali-Mohammadi assassination and the attacks against Abassi and Shahriari suggest that a covert campaign to attack Iranian scientists could well be under way.

There is little doubt that the Nov. 29 attacks struck a greater blow to the development of Iran's nuclear program than the previous two attacks. Shahriari appears to have had an integral role in the program. While he will likely be replaced and work will go on, his death could slow the program's progress (at least temporarily) and further stoke security fears in Iran's nuclear development community. The attacks come amid WikiLeaks revelations that Saudi King Abdullah and U.S. officials discussed assassinating Iranian leaders, accusations that the United States or Israel was behind the Stuxnet computer worm that allegedly targeted the computer systems running Iran's nuclear program and the return home of Shahram Amiri, an Iranian scientist who alleged that the United States held him against his will earlier in the summer.

The evidence suggests that foreign powers are actively trying to probe and sabotage Iran's nuclear program. However, doing so is not that simple. Tehran is not nearly as open a city as Dubai, where Israeli operatives are suspected of assassinating a high-level Hamas leader in January 2010. It is unlikely that the United States, Israel or any other foreign power could deploy its own team of assassins into Tehran to carry out a lengthy targeting, surveillance and attack operation without some on-the-ground help.

And there is certainly plenty of help on the ground in Iran. Kurdish militants like the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan have conducted numerous assassinations against Iranian clerics and officials in Iran's western province of Kordestan. Sunni separatist militants in the southeast province of Sistan-Balochistan, represented by the group Jundallah, have also targeted Iranian interests in eastern Iran in recent years. Other regional militant opposition groups like Mujahideen-e Khalq, which has offered intelligence on Iran's nuclear program to the United States, and Azeri separatists pose marginal threats to the Iranian regime. However, none of these groups has demonstrated the ability to strike such high-level officials in the heart of Tehran with such a degree of professionalism. While that is unlikely, they have the capability and a history of eliminating dissidents through assassinations. Furthermore, the spuriousness of many contradictory media reports makes the attacks suspicious.

It is unlikely that any foreign power was able to conduct this operation by itself and equally unlikely that any indigenous militant group was able to pull off an attack like this without some assistance. The combination of the two, however, could provide an explanation of how the attacks targeting Shariari and Abassi got so close to complete success.

Read more: [Attacks on Nuclear Scientists in Tehran | STRATFOR](#)

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