

Inside Mossad's War On Tehran

By Marie Colvin and Uzi Mahnaimi

January 16, 2012 "Sunday Times" -- EARLY in Tehran's grey wintry morning last Wednesday, Mustafa Ahmadi Roshan, a young scientist in Iran's controversial nuclear program, got dressed at his home in the northern suburbs. The events of this last hour of his life could have come out of a spy film.

Small groups of Israeli agents were watching key points in the Iranian capital. Their target was Roshan. They would be dead themselves if they were caught.

For Israel it was a classic assassination mission. "What is seen in espionage films as a simple operation is a result of hard work, many months of intelligence gathering and a well trained team," said a source who released details, impossible to verify, to The Sunday Times.

"There is zero tolerance for mistakes. By nature, every failure not only risks the neck of the agents but also risks turning into an international scandal."

Since its foundation in 1948, Israel has used assassination as a national weapon, striking targets abroad ranging from Palestinians who killed Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, to enemies on the streets of Amman and a Hamas leader in a Dubai hotel room in 2010.

Now Iran is the target. In the past two years assassins have attacked five scientists in the state nuclear program, killing four of them. Mossad, the Israeli external intelligence agency, is widely believed to be responsible.

The murder of civilians divides Iran's critics -- and Israel's. Some find it repugnant, others see them as casualties in an undeclared war that is greatly preferable to the alternative of full-scale conflict.

One Israeli source claimed the killings were a precursor to a military strike, not merely an alternative, to make it more difficult for Iran to rebuild facilities if they are bombed.

Last week Iran defiantly announced it was enriching uranium at a new site, Fordo, built under a mountain near the holy city of Qom to protect it from aerial attack. The assassins were ready.

As Roshan, 32, prepared to leave home, he was monitored from a makeshift control room in a safe house nearby. Israeli agents were also watching the entrance to Iranian intelligence headquarters in the city centre. Suddenly they noticed a number of cars and people running; then they saw police rushing into the nearby streets. Another agent monitoring radio traffic between the Tehran police and security forces confirmed unusual activity. Had the operation been exposed?

In 1997 two agents of Caesarea, Mossad's top hit squad, had bungled an attempt to kill a Palestinian leader in Jordan and were arrested before they could flee, triggering a diplomatic crisis. Jordan is relatively friendly to Israel. Iran is its bitterest enemy. There was no point in hesitation. If the agents had been rumbled, they would never escape anyway. The mission commander decided to go ahead.

Just before 8am on Wednesday, Reza Qashqai, Roshan's bodyguard and driver, arrived. Qashqai knew the risks. He checked under the silver Peugeot 405, a state-issue car, and looked beneath the bonnet before slipping into the driver's seat to wait for the scientist.

The house was in the Cheezar neighbourhood of northern Tehran, a village overtaken by the sprawl of the capital but still home to quiet traditional families who support the regime.

Roshan got into the car, ready for a long day as deputy head of the Natanz uranium enrichment site.

It was two years almost to the day since the murder of Masud Ali Mohammadi, an

expert in quantum physics at Tehran University, who had been one of Roshan's mentors at the Iranian nuclear program. Mohammadi, 50, was the first victim of the wave of assassinations.

Iran claims that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, but the West accuses Tehran of working to develop a nuclear bomb. Europe and the US have led an unsuccessful diplomatic effort, based on sanctions, to stop the research. Israeli hawks, knowing their nation would be the target of an Iranian bomb, talk of a bold pre-emptive strike from the air that, Washington fears, would lead to war. So the reality is a secret campaign against soft targets such as the Mohammadis and Roshans fulfilling the mullahs' ambition for an Islamic nuclear weapon.

Roshan, a chemist, was one of the young scientists in the program. He was not the most brilliant but was trusted by an increasingly paranoid regime because he came from a traditional religious family and had remained loyal while many of his fellow students had objected to the restraints of the Islamic regime. He had been talent-spotted at the Sharif Technical University, where he joined the Basij, a militia controlled by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

Soon after graduation he married and was recruited to the Iranian nuclear program to work at Natanz, Iran's main uranium enrichment complex. As the clock ticked towards 8am, an Israeli spotter reported via a secure text that Roshan was being driven from his home. Qashqai was at the wheel, a crucial detail because the bodyguard would be slower to respond if he was driving.

The assassins' commander took the final decision. "Go," he told agents who were standing by with a motorcycle in a hidden garage. They left immediately, weaving through the gridlocked streets of rush-hour Tehran.

In the five attacks on nuclear scientists, the hit squad has used a motorbike every time. The motorcyclist is ubiquitous in the capital's traffic jams, often wearing a surgical mask for protection against the heavy pollution and able to move close to the target between the lines of stationary cars without attracting attention.

They speeded up to reach Gol Nabi Street, which Roshan always passed on his way to work.

At 8.20am they spotted the Peugeot. The masked figure on the pillion seat made a quick check that Roshan was the passenger, then attached a magnetic bomb to the car. The motorbike sped away. The plastic explosive had been shaped to deliver its full force at the passenger. Nine seconds later it exploded. The scientist was killed instantly. Qashqai, badly injured, died in hospital.

At his funeral on Friday hundreds of regime supporters swore revenge. "Two targets were always in Mustafa's mind," Reza Najafi, a friend, said. "To fight Israel and to become a shaheed (martyr). He achieved both his targets."

The US ruled out having any connection with the assassinations last week. "We were not involved in any way with regards to the assassination that took place there," said Defence Secretary Leon Panetta. But he did say enigmatically that he had "some idea" of who was.

The British Foreign Office also said Britain had "no involvement whatsoever" in the attack.

Most experts in the field have few doubts: the assassinations have all the hallmarks of Israeli operations. Israel did not comment but Lieutenant-General Benny Gantz, chief of the general staff, told a parliamentary committee that this year would be "critical" for Iran because of "things that happen to it unnaturally".

The first assassination victim, Mohammadi, one of the leading lights of the nuclear program, was killed by a bomb on a parked motorcycle as he walked from his house to his car. Then came more deaths. In November 2010, motorcycles pulled alongside two cars in different parts of Tehran and then sped away. Bombs attached to the cars killed Majid Shahriari and injured Fereydoun Abbasi-Davani, both nuclear scientists. Davani was named head of the Iranian atomic program when he recovered.

Target number four was Dariush Rezaeinejad, an electronics expert responsible for high-voltage switches, a dual-use item that can be used in nuclear warheads. He was shot in Tehran by gunmen on motorcycles.

There has also been a series of mysterious explosions. Last November a blast hit a military base used by the Revolutionary Guards, killing General Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam, head of Iran's ballistic missile program.

The most effective strike, however, was not deadly. The Stuxnet worm, a cyberweapon, attacked and disabled the centrifuges crucial to Iran's program of enriching uranium. It has been speculated that both Israel and the US were involved.

The nuclear program has also suffered from a CIA operation that infiltrated sabotaged parts into some of Iran's black market supply lines. In December the US made it illegal for an American company to deal with a foreign bank used by the Iranian petrochemical industry. The European Union will on January 23 consider further sanctions.

The worry now is how Iran will react. Sanctions are beginning to bite and the economy is in free fall. Tehran has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Gulf through which 17 million barrels of oil pass daily; Washington has made it clear this is a "red line" that would result in military action. US President Barack Obama telephoned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after the latest killing. According to one Israeli source, Mr Obama urged restraint but Netanyahu refused. The US is thought to have stepped up safeguards at American facilities in the region.

Diplomats believe there is still a chance of luring Tehran back into nuclear talks that could avert a showdown.

"We don't consider an escalation to war an inevitability and we are pursuing a strategy of actions designed to avert conflict. We still think they can succeed," a Western diplomat said.

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