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Whoever Killed the Scientist Was Aiming at Much More

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I haven't read all the commentary — or nearly all the commentary — on the assassination of the Iranian chemist today, but I have the distinct impression that whoever targeted him had a much broader agenda than simply killing yet another scientist working on Iran's nuclear program. I think the prospect of renewed negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran was the bigger target.

My sense of the last week or so was that the mostly verbal confrontation between Iran and the U.S., particularly regarding the Strait of Hormuz, was spinning out of control much more rapidly than anyone had expected and that the possibility of a conflict had suddenly become very real in ways the Obama administration certainly never intended. (See Anne-Marie Slaughter's CNN column, "[Saving Face and Peace in the Gulf](#)," as an example of "this is getting really dangerous all of a sudden". Until last fall, of course, she was Clinton's director of policy planning and a very influential figure in the administration.) So there seemed to be a real effort to dial things back, expressed not only in repeated statements by senior administration officials, including Clinton, emphasizing Washington's readiness to negotiate, but also, if the always well-informed Laura Rozen is to be believed, a [lot of diplomatic — some of it, I'm sure, behind the scenes — manoeuvring](#) to get the P5+1 process back into gear, with Turkey serving as the convenor/mediator.

Under these circumstances, the timing of today's assassination was particularly remarkable. Among other things, it makes me believe that the U.S., which condemned the attack and categorically denied any role in it (See Clinton's statement in her press conference with the

Qatari Prime Minister [here](#)), was not in fact involved.* That leaves two obvious suspects: 1) Israel and 2) a faction within the Iranian regime. If there was indeed an Israeli hand behind it, the assassination was not just an effort to set back the Iran's nuclear program and induce fear among other scientists working on it. I think it was also a provocation designed to 1) blow up prospects for progress in any p5+1 negotiations that might convene over the next month or so; 2) strengthen hard-line factions in Tehran that oppose negotiations; and 3) possibly provoke retaliation that will further escalate tensions, if not armed conflict. Of course, all three of these overlap and reinforce each other. If it was an internal Iranian faction, which, frankly, I find more difficult to believe, both 1) and 2) above also apply.

If it was Israel, I imagine that the administration, as well as key EU countries (although probably not Sarkozy), would be very angry about the timing of this attack precisely because it will strengthen hard-liners in Tehran and thus make it more difficult for Iran's leadership to enter into serious negotiations with the P5+1. Indeed, given the extreme sensitivity of the moment and what I think is a strong desire on the part of virtually all parties to avoid war, at least at this time, the only actors who could possibly see this as serving their strategic interests are the hawkish political leadership in Israel and hard-line factions in Tehran. Assuming for the sake of argument that Israel was behind it, it will be very interesting to see if signs of renewed tensions between the administration and Netanyahu over Iran surface in the coming days.

UPDATE: I see Thursday's *New York Times* [appears to agree](#) with the thrust of my last paragraph:

The statements by the United States appeared to reflect serious concern about the growing number of lethal attacks, which some experts believe could backfire by undercutting future negotiations and prompting Iran to redouble what the West suspects is a quest for a nuclear capacity.

* Today's State Department [briefing](#), which took place before Clinton's remarks, was very disappointing in two ways: 1) no one asked the obvious question of whether the United States considered the assassination an act of "terrorism"; the word didn't even come up. And 2) look at the way the reporters obediently moved to another subject when Victoria Nuland directed them to "move on." Here's the excerpt:

We do not have anything at the top. I assume you all saw the Secretary's strong statement on Iran yesterday. Other than that, let's go to what's on your minds.

QUESTION: Well, let's – can we start with the scientist?

QUESTION: Can we continue with Iran?

MS. NULAND: Sure.

QUESTION: You probably have seen the news that an Iranian nuclear scientist was killed. I wonder what your reaction is. Would you condemn this killing?

MS. NULAND: We've seen the reports of the death of the Iranian scientist as a result of an apparent bombing. We condemn any assassination or attack on an innocent person, and we express our sympathies to the family.

QUESTION: The Iranians have accused Israel and the United States of carrying out this killing. Any truth to that?

MS. NULAND: I don't have any information to share one way or the other on that.

QUESTION: You don't want to deny killing him?

MS. NULAND: Obviously, we – as I said, we condemn the loss of innocent life.

QUESTION: That's not a denial as such.

MS. NULAND: I'm not prepared to speak one way or the other. I, frankly –

QUESTION: You didn't want to deny it.

QUESTION: Would the scientist come under innocent life?

MS. NULAND: Say again?

QUESTION: Would the scientist come under your definition of innocent life?

MS. NULAND: Again, I don't think I have anything further to say on this, that we condemn violence of any kind.

QUESTION: Don't you think he'd be a logical target, given the pressure from Israel and the U.S. against –

MS. NULAND: I'm not going to speak to who may or may not have done this, one way or the other.

QUESTION: Why are you not willing to rule out that the United – I mean, the United States did not – they've alleged this. Why are you unwilling to say, "Of course we didn't do this. We don't –

MS. NULAND: Well, first of all, I don't think this Department has any information further to what I've already said, which we condemn the loss of innocent life.[1]

Let's – guys, let's move on. What else you got?

QUESTION: There was a French journalist who has been killed in Syria.

