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Iran ends 2011 with a blaze of intelligence

By Mahan Abedin

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The appearance on Iranian state TV on Sunday of alleged Central Intelligence Agency spy Amir Hekmati is yet another twist in a string of apparent Iranian counter-intelligence successes at the expense of US espionage.

The 28-year old Arizona-born man of Iranian origin has been accused by Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) of trying to feed disinformation to the ministry with a view to gaining a foothold on the outer reaches of the MOIS.

A former member of the United States Marines Corps, Hekmati was apparently detained in September. News of his detention was released just days ago.

This apparent counter-intelligence success comes on the heels of the capture of the ultra-secret US RQ-170 Sentinel drone in early December. Iran claims that the country's electronic and cyber-warfare units managed to gain control of the drone and forced it to land. Video footage shown on Iranian TV - which appears to show the drone in immaculate condition - support Iranian claims that the unmanned aerial vehicle was manipulated by Iranian electronic and cyber-warfare specialists and directed to land safely.

These stunning achievements in the intelligence, electronic and cyber-warfare fields are taking place against a backdrop of steadily deteriorating relations between Iran and Western powers.

At the end of November, Iranian protestors attacked the UK embassy in Tehran, setting off tit-for-tat embassy closures by the two countries. The attack on the embassy may also be considered

as an extension of the intelligence war between Iran and the West in so far as the British mission in Tehran was a major hub for the collection of an assortment of open source and classified information.

It appears that the Iranian government is determined to minimize the scope for Western interference in parliamentary elections scheduled for early March 2012. More broadly, the Islamic Republic appears to be mobilizing all of its intelligence assets to withstand and ultimately defeat a widely anticipated economic siege.

CIA in retreat

Information from a wide range of Iranian media and Asia Times Online sources in Tehran suggest a complex operation by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to introduce Amir Hekmati as a trusted source to the MOIS.

With previous combat experience in Afghanistan, Hekmati worked for a number of contractors with suspected CIA connections following his departure from the marines.

It is believed that he contacted the MOIS before he flew to Iran in late summer ostensibly to visit his extended family. While Hekmati's approach was unoriginal, his information was sufficiently strong to attract the attention of Iranian intelligence. Nevertheless, it appears that he was suspected of being an American intelligence asset from the outset.

It seems that the information supplied by Hekmati to the MOIS is a clever mix of genuine intelligence, half-truths and bogus intelligence. Most of this information centers on US military, intelligence and political operations in Afghanistan.

While Iranian media, quoting intelligence sources, have identified Hekmati's core mission as one centered on gaining the trust of the MOIS with a view to setting up a penetration operation, the truth is likely much more complex.

For a start, "penetrating" the MOIS or even its most peripheral parts is virtually an impossible task in view of the ministry's multiple layers of robust defenses designed to defeat the most resourceful and deceptive of unfriendly operatives, let alone an American citizen and a former marine.

From a purely conjectural point of view, it is more likely that the CIA was attempting to identify - and subsequently manipulate - Iranian intelligence collection priorities in Afghanistan. Hekmati's clever mix of genuine and bogus intelligence, with the probable promise of a pipeline delivering the same type of material over a prolonged period, points to that conjectural conclusion.

Hekmati's arrest follows a string of MOIS counter-intelligence successes at the expense of the CIA and the wider American intelligence community. The ministry's ability to repeatedly defeat the CIA's ever-innovative methods is indicative of steadily improving counter-intelligence

capabilities and reinforces the MOIS's reputation as one of the major intelligence organizations on the world stage.

The capture of the RQ-170 Sentinel, operated by the US Air Force on behalf of the CIA, significantly adds to US woes by painting a credible picture of Iran as a major counter-espionage, electronic and cyber-warfare hub.

The dramatic blow to US prestige was underscored by US President Barack Obama's humiliating request for the return of the drone. In view of the circumstances surrounding the drone's capture, this was a truly extraordinary request and one that was gleefully dismissed by the Iranians.

Economic warfare

The dramatic spike in CIA activity inside Iran in 2011 has reinforced the Iranian leadership's conviction that the Western powers are set on a confrontation and a possible military showdown with the Islamic Republic.

By the same token, the Iranian leadership is likely to use the recent counter-intelligence victories to achieve three short- to medium-term objectives. First and foremost, the political leadership in Tehran will direct the MOIS to confront the CIA and other Western agencies with a view to withstanding and ultimately defeating the strict sanctions regime imposed on Iran.

The dominant view in Tehran is that the sanctions regime will become even harsher in 2012, possibly to the point of developing into an economic siege by the end of the year. This scenario becomes likelier if the West decides to boycott Iranian oil and gas exports.

Second, the Iranian leadership is keen to deny Western intelligence services the opportunity to meddle in the March parliamentary elections. There is a fear in Tehran that Western agencies - working directly and indirectly with radical opposition elements - will try to incite riots and disorder, similar in style if not scope to the ones that rocked the Iranian capital in June 2009 following the disputed presidential elections.

The attack on the British embassy was likely partly motivated by this concern. The British mission in Tehran has long been recognized as the most active hub of Western intelligence-gathering inside Iran. Its closure denies the UK and the US governments of a wide range of material, including street-level intelligence.

Third, the Islamic Republic is likely to use the MOIS's stunning intelligence and counter-intelligence successes to escalate the security environment that was imposed following the disputed presidential elections of June 2009 and the riots and disorders that followed.

While widely acknowledged as only a temporary solution, it is also felt across every level of the Islamic Republic that the security climate is needed to prepare the country for what increasingly looks like an inevitable confrontation with the West.