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PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Al-Masri Assassination: Another Iranian Intelligence Failure

by Dr. Ardavan Khoshnood

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On August 7, 2020, the number 2 figure in al-Qaeda, Abdullah Ahmad Abdullah (known as Abu Muhammad al-Masri), was gunned down in Tehran. Al-Masri's very presence in Iran exhibited the close relationship Tehran has with the Sunni terrorist organization, and his slaying shows the weakness of Iranian counterintelligence. The regime's frustration at this intelligence failure will likely be expressed through acts of violence. It will probably reform its counterintelligence community and may ask for assistance in this endeavor from both Russia and China.

On Friday, August 7, 2020, at around 9:00 pm, shots were heard in the prosperous Pasdaran district of Tehran. Two individuals on a motorcycle had gunned down a man and a young woman as they sat in a white Renault. Five shots were fired at the car of which four hit the targets.

The next day, the [Iranian Labour News Agency](#) stated in a short notice that the two people who had been killed in the shooting were not Iranian and appeared to have been from Lebanon. [Mashregh News](#) provided more information, stating that the shooting had taken place in the Golestan area on Pasdaran Avenue and that the deceased were a 58-year-old male history professor named Habib Daoud and his 27-year-old daughter, Maryam. The [Hamshahri](#) also said the deceased were not Iranian and spoke Arabic.

Two days later, [Tabnak](#) wrote a longer piece on the matter confirming the information provided by the above news outlets. Curiously, however, Tabnak added that the homicide occurred across the street from the home of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the former commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee, known as al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Al-Muhandis was killed on

January 3, 2020 together with Qassem Soleimani, the previous commander of the Iranian Quds Force, via an American drone strike near Baghdad International Airport.

The facts of the case were recently revisited by [The New York Times](#) (NYT), which disclosed that the two individuals killed in the Pasdaran district were not Habib Douad and his daughter Maryam but Abdullah Ahmad Abdullah and his daughter Miriam. Abdullah, more commonly known by the nom de guerre Abu Muhammad al-Masri, was al-Qaeda's crown prince.

Al-Masri was notorious for his role in masterminding the 1998 attacks on the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam, which caused the deaths of more than 200 people and wounded more than 4,000. According to the NYT report, Israeli operatives are believed to have carried out the assassination at the request of the United States.

Iranian FM spokesperson [Saeed Khatibzadeh](#) denied that al-Masri was in Iran at all, let alone that he had been assassinated inside the country. He advised the American media to resist being "entrapped by the Hollywood-style scenarios fabricated by the US and the Zionist regime's officials."

There are several indications that the individual killed in Tehran was indeed al-Masri. First, the age of the dead man coincides with that of al-Masri. Second, there is no evidence that a Lebanese history professor named Habib Daoud ever existed. Third, the name of the killed female (Miriam) matches the name of al-Masri's daughter (Maryam), as does her age. And fourth, the assassination was carried out on the anniversary of al-Masri's attacks on the American embassies in Africa 22 years before.

The slaying of al-Masri is important for two reasons: 1) the presence of one of al-Qaeda's foremost leaders in Tehran illuminates the close relationship Iran has with that Sunni terrorist organization; and 2) the regime's failure either to protect al-Masri or uncover the plan to assassinate him is yet another in a long string of major counterintelligence failures and embarrassments for the Islamic Republic.

Iran has suffered numerous counterintelligence failures across its different organs, the foremost occurring at the Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

An earlier counterintelligence failure was the assassination of four Iranian nuclear scientists between 2010 and 2012. In all the assassinations a motorcycle was used—the same modus operandi as the assassination of al-Masri. The killings of the Iranian nuclear scientists are alleged to have been

conducted by [Israeli operatives](#). The regime's response to the killings was to arrest more than a dozen Iranians allegedly working with the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence organization. At least one of those arrested, [Majid Jamali Fashi](#), was hanged.

Another major counterintelligence failure occurred in 2018, when Israeli operatives managed to raid a [warehouse in Tehran](#)—closely protected by the counterintelligence organization of the IRGC—and steal more than 100,000 documents, images, and videos related to Iranian nuclear plans. This was a fiasco for Iranian counterintelligence. Because of their access to those documents, Israel and (most likely) US intelligence were able first to identify sensitive locations related to Iran's nuclear program and the IRGC's missile program and then attack those locations through [several mysterious explosions](#) that occurred in Iran in 2020.

The most important counterintelligence failure, which also concerns the IRGC, was the inability to protect former Quds Force chief Soleimani, who was killed by US drone strike in early January 2020. Iran answered that action by executing Mahmoud Mousavi Majd for being ["linked to the CIA and the Mossad."](#)

The repeated counterintelligence debacles demonstrate the regime's serious weakness and incompetence in this sphere. While the MOI as well as the intelligence organization of the IRGC are highly active both domestically and abroad, and are occasionally successful (as seen, for example, in [Iraq](#)), the counterintelligence units of these organizations—primarily the IRGC, which is responsible for safeguarding the most important military sites of the country and the IRGC's missile program, as well as protecting itself from infiltration—are weak, disorganized, and unstructured.

One of the main reasons why the Islamic Republic's intelligence and specifically counterintelligence programs are weak is that the regime insists on employing individuals on the basis of their loyalty to the revolution and the regime, not on the basis of their knowledge or skill. Devaluing knowledge and talent in the service of an obsession with ideological loyalty has contributed to the regime's weakness in intelligence and counterintelligence. The organizations are further weakened by the regime's inability to provide proper counterintelligence training and education.

These weaknesses are used by opponents of the Iranian regime as they conduct covert operations on Iranian soil. While these operations undoubtedly harm the regime, it is vital to beware of its thirst for vengeance. As it is unable to provide effective counterintelligence, the regime will try to

compensate for that deficiency through executions, assassinations, and espionage.

The Islamic Republic's weak counterintelligence division is without doubt its Achilles' heel. The regime knows this full well. After al-Masri's death, it is likely to seriously reform this division with a focus on the IRGC and the MOI. One question that remains to be answered is how big a role the regime's closest allies, Russia and China, will play in training and improving Iranian counterintelligence.

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