

WHERE NEXT FOR IRAN?

Jason M Brodsky reports on the search for the successor to Mohsen Fakhrizadeh

The assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in November 2020 resulted in much handwringing over how Iran will respond. Less discussed is how his death sparked a renewed round of factional and institutional infighting over his legacy and the future of the intellectual wealth of Iran's past nuclear weapons programme. The results of that battle may provide a hint as to Iran's future nuclear ambitions.

Media accounts routinely portray Fakhrizadeh as a nuclear scientist. But he was much more than a mere cog in the wheel of Iran's nuclear programme. Fakhrizadeh held the rank of brigadier general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and was a deputy defence minister and the head of the Organisation of Defence Innovation and Research (SPND). A former US intelligence official recently described him as a hardliner who could engage the supreme leader directly. Indeed, the supreme leader's website recounts Fakhrizadeh's meetings with Khamenei, in which Khamenei warned him to follow security protocols. Such depictions of Fakhrizadeh's role are similar to those of former IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, who also maintained his own line of communication with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Both men also left behind well-entrenched research and regional networks, respectively.

But the similarities end there. After the United States killed Soleimani, the supreme leader swiftly – only hours after – named a replacement for the former Quds Force commander for the world to see. His longtime deputy Esmail Ghaani was a natural candidate. However, in the months after Fakhrizadeh's demise, no successor has been publicly named to date. This is not for lack of talent within the regime. Fakhrizadeh's SPND oversaw multiple units, including the Shahid Karimi Group, which worked on missiles and explosives testing. Its one-time managing director, Akbar Motallebzadeh, also served as an advisor to Fakhrizadeh personally. SPND also has an entrenched bureaucracy, having included individuals like Gholam Reza Eta'ati, who was sanctioned by the United States as a senior SPND manager involved in some of its most sensitive projects. Part of the delay could be traced to

internal systemic feuds as well as security concerns after Fakhrizadeh's assassination.

Immediately following his death, allies of Iran's government circulated pictures of President Hassan Rouhani awarding Fakhrizadeh a medal for his services during the inking of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. He was surrounded by members of Rouhani's nuclear negotiating team. Firing back, conservatives selectively leaked audio and video of speeches Fakhrizadeh made. In one, he warns: "America can't be compromised with." While these battles reflect duelling postures over Iran's nuclear programme, they may have also been evidence of an administrative feud over Fakhrizadeh's replacement.

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Fakhrizadeh's SPND operated under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL), which in theory reports to Iran's defence minister and president. But in practice, the supreme leader has required senior MODAFL appointments, like the defence minister, to be blessed by him, and he has vetoed MODAFL personnel selections in the past, like Rouhani's attempted nomination of Hossein Alaie as defence minister in 2013. It's not only the supreme leader who has equities in MODAFL appointments. The IRGC does as well. Through the years, guardsmen have served as deputy defence ministers, and Fakhrizadeh was only one of them – Qassem Taqizadeh, another deputy defence minister, also holds the rank of a brigadier general in the IRGC. With Defence Minister Amir Hatami being the first such minister without a senior-level IRGC pedigree in years – he is a ranking officer of Artesh – the IRGC is likely to ensure that Fakhrizadeh's portfolio remains in friendly hands. The Rouhani administration may have been anticipating a turf war especially as



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it seeks to engage with the Biden administration. His defence minister announced at Fakhrizadeh's funeral that SPND's budget would double. Back in 2006, Fakhrizadeh reportedly complained that his funding had been cut by Iran's government.

Significantly, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that Fakhrizadeh's replacement may have already been selected – "a top Iranian commander Farhi from the space programme." Other than these few details, not much else is known about Farhi. If this is true, it's an important development for two reasons. First, while Iran's hydra-headed state has more than one space programme – aside from the Iranian Space Agency – it could indicate that the new replacement was taken directly from the IRGC's Space Force or even MODAFL's space department. Even though Fakhrizadeh held the rank of an IRGC brigadier general himself, if Farhi wasn't working under SPND or another space programme previously, it may demonstrate even greater IRGC influence over the future direction of SPND. Indeed, Fakhrizadeh had a somewhat different pedigree before ascending to the leadership of SPND. According to Iran International TV, he previously served as head of the Physics Research Centre, where he played a role in planning and procurement for Iran's first uranium enrichment plant. But this indicates Farhi may have worked inside the IRGC's Aerospace Force itself, which oversees its missile and space programmes, which would be different.

Secondly, the appointment could signal the growing power of the IRGC's Space Force. It was only in April 2020 that the Commander of the IRGC's Space Force, Ali Jafarabadi, first appeared publicly on television, showcasing the recent launch of a military satellite. If the new head of SPND is indeed from this IRGC Space

Force, it's not only evidence that it is emerging as a power centre in its own right within the IRGC. It may also provide a link between the advances in Iran's satellite launch vehicle (SLV) programme – technology of which could be applied to the development of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) – with the ongoing work of SPND. This could signal further advances in Tehran's hedging strategy not only on the nuclear file, but also in the development of an ICBM. In 2019, the US government revealed that SPND was operating in such a way that it was preserving the knowledge of Iran's past nuclear weapons programme. That's not to mention that SPND itself houses an Abu Reihan Group, which, according to the US government: "has provided support for SPND projects related to satellites and plasma technology, and worked on SPND's missile projects." Already Iranian leaders have hinted that Iran's supreme leader's fatwa prohibiting nuclear weapons could be reversed. Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi, who is a member of the Supreme National Security Council himself, in February indicated that despite the fatwa: "a cornered cat may behave differently from when the cat is free. And if they (Western states) push Iran in that direction, then it's no longer Iran's fault." Thus, having someone like Farhi could help SPND advance these projects and options as soon as a decision is made in Tehran.

There are also implications if Fakhrizadeh's replacement is from MODAFL's space department. MODAFL is part of the Iranian government, so if he hails from this wing of the Iranian system, the degree of IRGC influence wouldn't necessarily be as heightened. Nevertheless, MODAFL's space department was

involved in an important test in February 2021 of the Zoljanah SLV. The Israeli government in a letter to the UN Security Council in April wrote that: “[a]nalysis of the technological capabilities of the Zoljanah SLV indicates that by placing it on a different trajectory and prioritising distance over height, the SLV could carry a one-ton warhead as far as 5,000km.” Reconfiguring the SLV to reach that distance would be significant as it would be greater than the 2,000km to which Iran’s current missile programme is limited and could threaten more than just regional countries like Israel and Saudi Arabia, but also Europe. Iranian commanders, specifically from the IRGC, have increasingly hinted that they are prepared to reconsider the self-imposed limitation on their missile programme. The Commander of the IRGC’s Aerospace Force Amir Ali Hajizadeh in January proclaimed that it was not: “eternal.”

FAKHRIZADEH WAS MUCH MORE THAN A COG IN THE WHEEL OF IRAN’S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

That is not to mention the allegations of MODFAL subsidiaries’ cooperation with North Korea over SLVs. A recent UN Panel of Experts report cited information received from a Member-State that the Shahid Hemmat Industrial Group’s (SHIG) – which is a subsidiary of the Aerospace Industries Organization, which in turn is

part of MODAFL itself – Shahid Haj Ali Movahed Research Centre received support and assistance from North Korean missile specialists for a SLV. The Pyongyang connection is important as Fakhrizadeh himself reportedly travelled to North Korea in 2013 to observe a nuclear test. Preserving this pipeline and network since his demise may figure highly on the Iranian regime’s agenda as it seeks to maintain Fakhrizadeh’s work. Hence, even if Fakhrizadeh’s new replacement is from MODAFL, the background in space would show its increasing importance to SPND’s mission.

In the end, Fakhrizadeh was a singular figure as it relates to his institutional knowledge of nuclear weaponisation and in his relationship with the supreme leader. In order to fill the vacuum, an internal debate within the regime emerged, and there is evidence of the prioritisation of space technology informing the selection of Fakhrizadeh’s successor. This offers a glimpse into the importance of SLVs and space technology in the leadership of SPND in a post-Fakhrizadeh era. There is also the possibility in the coming years that with the announcement of multiple members of the IRGC running for Iran’s presidency in June 2021, that a guardsman reclaims the mantle at the helm of MODAFL as defence minister, thus further entrenching IRGC influence in Iran’s government and in turn over SPND itself. Even though Fakhrizadeh left behind a large organisation, it will be difficult to replicate the longevity of his tenure as well as the access he maintained at the highest levels of Tehran. Nevertheless, policymakers should be investing resources in understanding more about the background of this individual as it will provide insight into the regime’s ultimate strategy moving forward ●

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Fakhrizadeh’s death sparked factional and institutional infighting over his legacy

