

The Utility and Morality of Assassination

by **George Friedman** - December 1, 2020

The head of the Iranian nuclear weapons program was killed Friday near Tehran. The assumption is that he was killed by the Israelis, whose motive was to cripple the Iranian nuclear weapons program by killing the one man who was most critical to its success. It might well have been the Israelis, but there are a significant number of other countries that do not want to see Iran with nuclear weapons. The United States is one such country, but several Arab countries feel the same. The Russians might not be thrilled with a nuclear-armed Iran to their south; Tehran and Moscow are friendly now, but adversaries change and nuclear weapons are essentially forever. That said, it is reasonable to assume it was the Israelis, since, given Iran's views, they had the most at stake.

Assassination is not easy. It carries the risk of failure and of retaliation. It is a rational move only in two cases: as a deterrent to frighten an organization or state into changing policy, or when the killing of one person would be decisive in blocking an unwanted development. I will focus on the second category, which appears to describe the attack in Iran. The head of a nuclear weapons program might be a genius, or he might simply be a placeholder, shuffling papers, and his death might achieve nothing. To be a worthwhile target, he must in some sense be irreplaceable. There should not be a cohort of young geniuses the target has nurtured over the years, ready to take his place. The assassination must have a significant impact on a threat to be worth the effort, the risks and the consequences of failure and retaliation.

The strategically significant individual is rare enough, but correctly identifying him is rarer still. To find him, intelligence operatives must collect elusive information, and analysts must determine whether the information is valid, not just a glorious legend concocted by the individual or others. Identifying the indispensable person is not easy, since he may not exist.

Assuming a suitable target is found, his movements must then be tracked. With cellphones, such tracking may be easier, but there are other devices that might, with difficulty and danger, be used for tracking. A pattern must be uncovered so that the assassination team can attack. Most important, it is future movements that must be identified, not past ones. In addition, the target must not be massively and effectively guarded at all times. Ideally, he is minimally protected and follows a highly predictable routine of movement through areas where assassins might wait without being detected. The assailants need enough notice to be able to plan where the target will be most vulnerable.

Another challenge inherent in assassination is the threat of revenge. Iran cannot invade Israel, and bombing Israel opens the door to intense retaliation. The proportional step, if indeed it was Israel that carried out the killing, is counter-assassination – or, more likely in this case, a terrorist attack. A terrorist attack is indifferent to who is killed so long as someone is killed, and it is therefore easier to carry out.

The danger now, however, is that the assassinations and counter-assassinations could spiral out of control. Once that happens, anything – even all-out war – is possible. It is not even important whether the first attack was carried out by Israel or some other country – perhaps a country hoping to prompt a military showdown by putting Iran in a position where it feels it must take military action. At this point what is important is who Iran believes to be responsible.

The “what ifs” are endless. The point is that while assassination is meant to be a self-contained event, its permutations are endless and potentially unexpected. Therefore, the only circumstance under which assassination can be rationally used is when its use is decisive against an extremely significant program. The Iranian nuclear weapons program would seem to fit this condition, but it’s not yet clear that the scientist who was killed was truly significant or that his death won’t create massive collateral damage.

The moral question is, in my mind, simpler than the practical difficulties. It is true that killing the citizen of a country with whom there is no declaration of war is problematic. But declarations of war have gone by the wayside since 1945. There have been many wars and few have had formal declarations. So this feature of international law has become meaningless, which I regard as a pity but a reality. If there are going to be wars, I cannot imagine why it is more legitimate to kill thousands of people than it is to kill one, just because you formally stated your intention in advance. Indeed, if killing one might prevent thousands from dying, then it is not only moral but a moral imperative. So if Israel legitimately feared the annihilation of its nation if Iran built nuclear weapons, then the choices are submission to Israel’s own destruction, a preemptive strike on Iran, or the death of the

indispensable person. There is a strong moral case that can be made against war, but over the millennia such arguments have been made without effect. A moral claim can stand as a marker, but persistently ignored, it cannot guide the action of nations. Nations fear each other, frequently with very good reason. The fears are usually mutual.

I have difficulty understanding the moral argument against assassination, or the practical purpose of pacifism. But I can understand why assassination is rare: It is very difficult to do and has potential consequences that are dizzying. But when a surgical strike against one person can increase the security of the nation that assassinates, it would seem to be at least as legitimate as an invasion. But the circumstances under which you can identify the indispensable figure and kill him are both rare and enormously difficult. The problem is not moral but practical.

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