

Secret war against Iran

Sueddeutsche Zeitung

Dec. 22, 2011

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General Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam was an important man in Iran. In the West, only a few intelligence officials were familiar with his name, but the elite of the Islamic Republic attended his state funeral on November 14 in the capital of Tehran: the influential parliament speaker Ali Larijani, the head of the National Security Council Saeed Jalili, and high-ranking officers paid their final respects. Even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei mourned before the casket, decorated with the green, white, and red flag, a portrait of Moghaddam, and white gladiolas. It was a hero's funeral.

Within the Guards, the General was responsible for the missile program, and was therefore one of the most important men in the elite force. He had directed the program since 1983, according to the semi-official Fars News Agency. He was credited with Iran's development of ballistic missiles with solid-fueled engines in recent years, above all the Sejil, which has already been tested several times, with an estimated range of about 2,000 km.

Western intelligence agencies consider this line of development to be far more threatening militarily than the liquid-fueled Shahab missiles based on old Soviet technology; solid-fueled missiles can be readied for launch more quickly because they do not need to be fueled. They can be transported easily, and Iran can manufacture them largely without outside help. Iran therefore has at least the prospect of a strategic weapon that could someday carry nuclear warheads deep into Europe.

General Moghaddam, the personification of this program, died on November 12 when one or more heavy explosions shook a military base near the village of Bigdaneh, about 40 km southwest of Tehran. Israeli newspapers were quick to speculate that the legendary Mossad had a hand in the incident. For years, its agents, as well as those of the American intelligence services, have been suspected of conducting a secret war against Iran, including assassinations of scientists who may have worked in Iran's nuclear program. They are also suspected of damaging the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz with computer viruses à la Stuxnet.

But just as quickly, Iranian officials tried to present explanations that denied any such inference. The Guards first reported “an accident during the transportation of conventional munitions.” Then a newspaper close to the regime quoted Mughaddam’s brother Mohammad, himself a general in the Revolutionary Guards: Hassan lost his life when he “undertook final testing of a new missile.” Finally, Iranian chief of staff Hassan Firouzabadi told the ISNA news agency that the explosion had “nothing to do with Israel or the United States, except that the outcome of the research carried out in this facility will deliver a hard slap to the face of Israel.”

Western intelligence officials have not contradicted these claims, but rather corroborated the impression that it was an accident, perhaps as the Iranians were trying to assemble missile stages. But independent experts in Europe and the United States have grave doubts. They consider the explosion to have been too violent. Too many questions are posed by the satellite images that are now accessible.

“An accident is not fully consistent with the damage we see at this site,” missile expert Michael Elleman told SZ. He has more than 20 years’ experience with solid-fueled missile engines in the research and development department of U.S. defense contractor Lockheed Martin, worked in the 1990s as a UN weapons inspector, and co-authored a more-than-140-pages-long report on Iran’s missile program by the prestigious International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. “Too many things don’t fit together,” he says.

The picture looks similar to his Munich-based colleague Robert Schmucker. “Solid-fueled engines don’t really detonate,” stated the professor, who conducted development and manufacturing programs in the missile industry. Schmucker recalls previous accidents, such as the one in January 1985 near the American base at Waldheide near Heilbronn. The engine of a Pershing II missile ruptured and three U.S. soldiers died. But there was no shockwave of the sort that occurs in the detonation of a hand grenade or a bomb. The same was the case in other accidents with rocket engines, another European expert confirmed. In Bigdaneh, corrugated iron roofs were damaged even a good 150 meters from the buildings that were apparently leveled by the explosion or explosions. So was there an explosion, a shock wave?

Anomalies in the satellite images

A detailed analysis of the satellite images reveals more anomalies. A picture taken on November 22 showed that seven buildings had been destroyed that clearly had special functions, an imagery analyst for the military analysis magazine *Jane’s Defence Weekly* told SZ. Similarly, two adjacent buildings that perform support functions, such as storage or administration, were badly damaged. However, the destroyed buildings “were next to the remains of other buildings that remained intact.” Also a sports field and trees in its vicinity are largely undamaged, even though they are located “just meters from the destruction.”

The expert, who started in 1992 as an imagery analyst for the U.S. military and later worked for various Special Forces units and for NATO, did not rule out that a series of explosions caused a strange pattern of damage – an out-of-control runaway rocket engine blowing up a fuel depot and thus triggering a chain

reaction. “However,” she says, weighing her words, “the fact that some of the buildings were not destroyed, like the sports fields and the surrounding trees, and the lack of visible traces of the original explosion” that could have set such an inferno in motion, “it seems possible that the buildings in Bigdaneh were attacked individually with precision-guided weapons.”

A second satellite imagery analyst, who has also been in the business for more than ten years, made very similar observations when SZ asked for an independent analysis of the picture, and came to very similar conclusions: based on his experience, it looks “more like targeted destruction with special weapons than the aftermath of an accident.” Like his colleague at *Jane’s*, he pointed out that the Iranians had ten days’ time to clean up the site before a commercial satellite took the first publicly available photograph after the explosion. Both caution that some of the changes could be due to demolition activities. But they stand by their analysis. The possibility of a chain reaction caused by the blowing-up of stored rocket-fuel components seems unlikely to the missile experts. The typical security measures for such storage facilities that can be found in comparable Iranian sites are missing – earthen revetments [or berms] to contain any explosion, or adequate distances between structures, as would be also expected with conventional munitions depots.

A former Pentagon analyst who has himself planned air attacks suggested that this could have been an attack carried out with cruise missiles. A drone attack with small guided bombs is also conceivable. One also cannot exclude the possibility that explosives were smuggled into the compound. But the satellite photos do not reveal that, just as they don’t tell who carried out the attack. The United States has the necessary weapons systems, and Israel probably does, too. But this is sheer speculation.

This much is certain, though: a possible attack, especially from the air, would be the step from intelligence operations to the brink of war. At the same time, therein lies one explanation of why Iran would not accuse the U.S. and Israel, possibly despite knowing better: an airstrike would almost inevitably require a military response, an escalation that the regime probably wants to avoid at all costs. Perhaps for this reason, everyone is most comfortable if the death of General Moghaddam stays a mystery.