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Targeted Assassinations: Implications for National Security

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Synopsis

The latest targeted assassination of an Iranian nuclear scientist sets a dangerous precedent. Although the use of this tactic is intended to reduce national security threats, the various reprisals and actions that states could adopt could actually increase threats to national security.

Commentary

MOSTAFA AHMADI Roshan is the latest Iranian scientist associated with the country's nuclear programme to be assassinated in the past two years. Roshan, a deputy director of the Natanz nuclear enrichment facility, died when a car bomb strapped to his vehicle exploded on 11 January 2012. Last year, Dariush Rezaei-Nejad, a senior scientist with links to the defence ministry, was shot dead by gunmen outside a kindergarten in Tehran. In 2010, Massoud Ali Mohammadi, a nuclear physics professor at Tehran University was killed when a motorcycle exploded outside his home. Majid Shahriari, who had ties with Iran's Atomic Energy Agency, was also killed the same year when a bomb attached to his car exploded.

Iran has blamed Israel and the United States for the recent killing, and has vowed revenge that could involve cross-border bombing attacks. While the US has vehemently denied responsibility and condemned the attack, Israel has remained ambiguously silent.

The 'state' of targeted assassinations

Targeted assassination or extra-judicial killing as it is sometimes called, is a highly controversial tactic that several states have employed to defend themselves against contemporary national security threats, and in particular, transnational terrorism. Pre-emptive self-defence is often cited by the perpetrating state as the basis for carrying out such attacks. However, such justification often contravenes and/or conflicts with international legal, ethical, moral and human rights standards.

The increasing use of drones or unmanned combat aerial vehicles to carry out target assassinations has contributed to the increased use of this tactic as the risks associated with carrying out such attacks on the perpetrating state (e.g. the apprehension of assassins), are significantly minimised.

While there is evidence to suggest that target assassinations are effective in managing national security threats in certain contexts, the perpetrating state must still evaluate if the targeted state or terrorist group is capable of carrying out reprisals, and more importantly, if those reprisals actually increase rather than decrease national

security threats.

Destabilising the enemy

Apart from the elimination of a target or targets involved in terrorist acts and/or in the process of carrying out a terrorist attack, the use of targeted assassination is designed to create high levels of stress on surviving decision-makers of the state or group. This is done to deter the state or group from carrying out more attacks, or to re-evaluate and possibly stop a specific policy (e.g. Iran's nuclear programme).

Despite its intended effects, targeted assassinations do not always guarantee a favourable change in behaviour on the part of the state or terrorist group. Apart from provoking possible reprisals/vengeance on the perpetrators, targeted assassinations can increase recalcitrance or defiance on the part of the targeted state or group. For instance Iran has vowed to continue developing its controversial nuclear programme despite the assassinations.

Traditional and non-traditional reprisals

Contemporary War of the Spooks

Assuming that the targeted state or group has the capability of carrying out their own targeted assassination campaigns (no matter how unsophisticated), a contemporary 'War of the Spooks' could occur. This is a situation where operatives from the state or group engage in a tit-for-tat assassination of high profile individuals from the opposing side. Civilian casualties and fatalities are often high as they can be targeted as well or accidentally killed in the attack (collateral damage). Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) were engaged in a 'War of the Spooks' for several years following the killing of Israeli Athletes at the 1972 Olympics by the Black September Organisation (BSO).

Cyberattacks

If the targeted state or group does not possess the capabilities to carry out its own targeted assassination campaign, it might utilise other retaliatory tactics that could be non-violent in nature. A cyberattack would be the most likely response as the overall risks to the attacker are low. Moreover, as hackers seem to be increasingly collaborating for social causes and aligning themselves with social movements, hackers from the targeted state could enlist the assistance of or learn from hackers from the global community on how to carry out an effective cyberattack on the perpetrator state. For instance, Anonymous, in solidarity with Syrian protesters, hacked into several Syrian government websites in September 2011 and tampered with their homepages.

Emboldening other states

That the assassinated Iranian scientists were all civilians, and that they were killed in their own country by either foreign and/or local operatives, is particularly worrisome. This is because the targeting of civilians implies that state terrorism is justifiable, and if so, can be used by other states as well.

There is also the issue of sovereignty, which the perpetrator state invariably breaches when it carries out targeted assassinations in another country. Relations between allies could be soured or damaged as a result, leaving the perpetrator state isolated in the international community. For instance, US-Pakistan relations have continued to deteriorate as a result of the US' resumption of drone strikes in Pakistan.

A rush by states to acquire drone technology for attack purposes is another likely outcome. At present, it is reported that over 50 countries have begun acquiring, developing and utilising Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)/drone technology for reconnaissance purposes. It would not take long for them to develop and deploy attack drones.

In light of the reprisals and possible consequences of employing targeted assassinations as statecraft, states must carefully evaluate if their use actually minimises national security threats. From a military viewpoint, targeted assassinations are highly effective in reducing national security threats. However, when a broader view of national security is taken, the answer is not as apparent.

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