

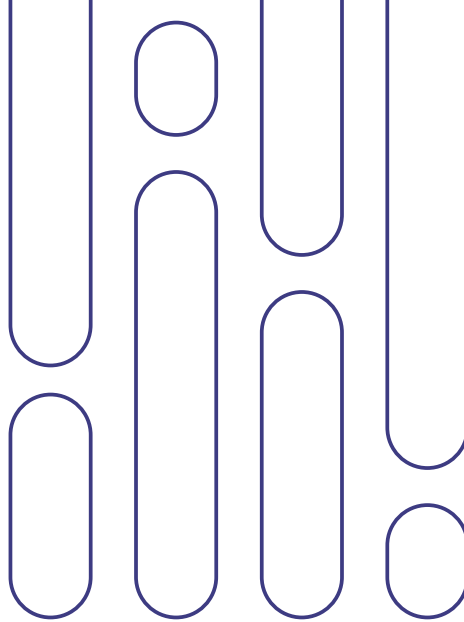
REPORT

Significations of the IRGC's Conflicting Statements on the Fate of Ahmad Motevaselian

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The remarks of IRGC Commander-in-Chief General Hossein Salami on April 1, 2023, in which he described former IRGC Commander Ahmad Motevaselian as a martyr who endeavored to liberate al-Quds (Jerusalem) and implement the conquests of the “Axis of Resistance,” represent an official recognition that he died along with his three colleagues. The remarks come after 41 years of Iranian insistence that the four diplomats kidnapped in 1982 in Lebanon are still languishing behind bars in Israel. This report analyzes the major Iranian narratives on the kidnapping of Motevaselian, the significations of withholding the news of his death and the consequences of the conflicting Iranian narratives — ranging from Salami’s remarks and the swift IRGC denial.

Motevaselian’s Weight and Influence Within the Iranian Regime

Ahmad Motevaselian Yazdi was born in April 1954 in a southern Tehran district. He studied at Mostafavi school and obtained a diploma in 1972. He undertook military service, including a special tank course in the 37th Armored Brigade in Shiraz during the shah’s era. He then served in the army’s third brigade. Motevaselian then went on to obtain an electrical engineering degree from the Iran University of Science and Technology in 1977.

Motevaselian is one of the IRGC’s prominent [commanders](#) who contributed to several Iranian military domains. He participated in the struggle against the monarchy in Iran, which resulted in his arrest in 1977. After the revolution, he contributed to the formation of the [Islamic Revolution’s commissions](#) before joining the IRGC. He participated in the Iraq-Iran War as a soldier. He then rose through the ranks to become the commander of the IRGC’s 27th Mohammad Rasulullah Division. Following the battle of liberating [Muhmarra](#) (Khorramshahr in Persian) from Iraqi forces, Motevaselian gained prominence and the attention of the Iranian leadership.

In 1982, Iran dispatched him to Syria along with a number of fighters to assist the Lebanese Hezbollah in the fight against Israel in southern Lebanon. Before returning home from Lebanon, he was kidnapped along with three others: Seyed Mohsen Mousavi, chargé d'affaires at the Iranian Embassy, Taghi Rashtegar Moghadam, an embassy employee and Kazem Akhavan, an IRNA photojournalist. Since then, Iran has insisted that Motevaselian and his colleagues were kidnapped by Israel and that they are still languishing in Israeli jails.

Iranian Narratives on His Kidnapping and Death

The disappearance of Motevaselian is one of the most complicated issues due to the ambiguity and secrecy that have shrouded it over the past 41 years.

Many narratives have developed since his disappearance. According to one account, he was sent on a military mission by Iran's Supreme Defense Council in 1982 to aid southern Lebanon in repelling Israel's incursion. Before returning to Iran, he toured Beirut with the embassy's chargé d'affaires, an IRNA photojournalist and a driver. However, Kataeb Party troops kidnapped them at the Berbara checkpoint and handed them over to Israeli forces, who imprisoned them in one of Israel's jails.

Another narrative also emerged according to which Kataeb Party troops, accused of collaborating with Israel, killed the four Iranian diplomats days after kidnapping them. Despite this narrative being closer to the truth, the Iranian regime concealed this narrative for many years, insisting that it was untrue. Moreover, Iranian officials have repeatedly asserted that the four Iranian diplomats are still alive in Israeli jails.

The positions of Iranian officials and their remarks over the past four decades clearly indicate that Motevaselian and his colleagues had been killed. For example, former IRGC Chief Mohsen Rezaee visited Motevaselian's mother in 2016 and expressed his hope that her son would return as soon as possible.

At the end of the visit, however, he granted her a copy of the Holy Quran and wrote on it “dedicated to the mother of martyr Ahmad Motevaselian.” Another example is what was revealed by Hamid Dawood Abadi, a researcher in the history of the Iraq-Iran War, who has so far authored three books on Motevaselian. [Abadi](#) stated that former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a US drone strike near Baghdad International Airport in early 2020, was the only person who could have decoded the secret of this frustrating matter. Thus, in March 2019, he went to Soleimani and told him that the four Iranians seized in Lebanon were slain on the same day that they were kidnapped. Soleimani confirmed this, even going so far as to say that Iran had swapped the bodies of some Kataeb Party troops for Iranians. However, DNA analysis revealed that they were not those kidnapped.

Despite all of these accounts which prove that Motevaselian was killed, the Iranian regime has never acknowledged this. Until very recently, particularly in July 2019, [the Iranian Foreign Ministry](#) said that “evidence indicates that the four diplomats kidnapped in Lebanon were handed over to Israeli forces and they were then moved to the Occupied Territories. They now languish behind bars in Israel.” In June 2021, the Iranian Foreign Ministry issued a [statement](#) on the 39th anniversary of the disappearance of Motevaselian and his colleagues. The ministry said that following up on the case to discover the fate of these four Iranians will continue to be a priority on its agenda list. Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah said that there are indications that the four Iranians are locked up in Israeli jails.

Even after the recent comments by Salami in which he plainly revealed that Motevaselian was killed, describing him as the first Iranian martyr to die for the cause of al-Quds, it appears that the Iranian regime prefers to maintain the state of confusion and ambiguity surrounding this matter. IRGC Spokesman Brigadier Ramadan Sharif said that there is no documented informa-

tion about the fate of Motevaselian and his missing colleagues and that the remarks of the IRGC's chief were not understood correctly. He added that Salami wanted to laud Motevaselian and his leading role in paving the way for the liberation of al-Quds and the Palestinian people.

However, this IRGC attempt to twist and give an illogical explanation may be the result of resentment within the Iranian regime's inner circle over Salami's remarks in which he exposed Motevaselian's fate. This is because this revelation limits the regime's ability to manufacture conspiracy theories on which it has depended for more than four decades to execute its internal and foreign policies. Without conspiracy theories, the Iranian people's crisis of confidence in the regime could deepen and resentment toward it could boil over to the verge of an explosion, reminiscent of the era preceding the 1979 revolution. The Iranian recognition of Motevaselian's death would lend credibility to the Israeli narrative while weakening the official Iranian narrative.

Why Has Iran Concealed the Truth About Motevaselian's Death for 41 Years?

Given the ambiguity that Iran has embraced regarding Motevaselian's fate, Salami's remarks on his martyrdom were quickly retracted. There are several potential scenarios which could explain why Iran has concealed his death over the past four decades, including:

- Rushing to blame Israel for kidnapping the four Iranians: The first potential scenario is that Iran, at the time of the kidnapping, hastened to announce that Israel had kidnapped him. Thus, it did not want to backtrack on this accusation in order to prevent the regime's image from being tarnished before the Iranian public, especially as Motevaselian was ubiquitous in Khamenei's speeches in most celebrations, particularly during his meetings with families of IRGC martyrs.

- **Instrumentalizing the incident:** There is another scenario in which Iran was aware of the incident's details but attempted to take advantage of it to support its ambition to deepen hostility toward Israel. During that period, Iran was in an open conflict with the region's countries and was involved in a face-off with Israel, particularly in the Lebanese arena. As a result, it wanted to exploit the incident to rally the Iranian people behind its efforts in Lebanon and garner popular support for its extraterritorial project. Iran has always used its martyrs to mobilize the public and attract backers and supporters.
- **Covering up an internal conspiracy behind the incident:** The last potential scenario is that Motevaselian and his colleagues were the victims of a conspiracy from within the IRGC itself, particularly after some narratives emerged about differences between him and several IRGC commanders. Some IRGC leaders were concerned that they would lose their positions in case Motevaselian returned to Iran due to his high military professionalism and superiority in ranking. This account is based on leaks of a meeting between IRGC commanders in 1984 which disclosed differences between themselves, particularly the commanders close to Motevaselian and their rivals competing for leadership positions within the IRGC. The leaks also indicate that sending Motevaselian to Lebanon was intended to "push him out of the scene" due to his opposition to the way the war was managed by senior IRGC officers—primarily former IRGC Chief Mohsen Rezaee and Ali Shamkhani, the IRGC's deputy head at the time. In this meeting, Shamkhani, who now heads the Iranian National Security Council, described Motevaselian as a decayed tooth which should be removed. Certainly, keeping this issue unresolved will sustain media attention. This issue could be used to condemn the Iranian regime and perhaps accuse it of involvement in Motevaselian's death. Thus, it is better, according to the regime, to close the case, given that the officials involved in the case now occupy senior positions and are expected to play bigger roles within the political system.

The Potential Consequences of Announcing the Death of Motevaselian on the Iranian Home Front

The remarks of Salami — even though walked back by the IRGC, came four decades after adhering to the narrative that the four Iranians, including Motevaselian, were still alive in Israelis jails — could have several repercussions on the Iranian home front:

- **Diminish the influence of conspiracy theories:** After exposing the false Iranian propaganda about Motevaselian's fate, it is expected that the possibilities of using conspiracy theories, which the regime has always pushed at home since it came to power more than four decades ago, will subside. The regime has depended on conspiracy theories to execute its repressive internal policies on the Iranian people as well as to justify its extraterritorial policies against stable nation-states. The regime continues to insist that its foes — particularly the United States and Israel — do not want the Iranian state to be ruled by an Islamic government, interfere in the country's internal affairs, seek to destroy its economic and military potential and target its leaders and figures. By pushing such narratives, the regime seeks to achieve two primary ends:

- Create a huge base of support that believes in the regime's policies, objectives and ambitions at home and overseas:
- Harness the country's economic, political, military and geographical capabilities to serve the IRGC's sectarian projects and schemes as well as of its armed proxy actors in the targeted countries.

- **Deepen the crisis of confidence between the Iranian people and the regime:** Salami's remarks that Motevaselian was killed will further undermine the regime's credibility, thereby deepening the already existing crisis of confidence between the Iranian people and the regime. This confidence has gradually diminished over the years because of the regime's internal and foreign policies which have resulted in the reimposition of crippling economic sanctions and international isolation. As a result of the aforementioned, Iran's economic indicators have deteriorated significantly, sending the Iranian currency into free fall, pushing living conditions to new lows, worsening crime

rates and aggravating the country's unemployment crisis to unprecedented levels. These economic crises have prompted the Iranian people to take to the streets in several rounds of massive protests. Salami's remarks could further fuel popular discontent against the regime.

Conclusion

Salami's remarks in which he described Motevaselian as a Quds martyr have ended decades of fierce debate over whether Motevaselian was alive or had been killed. The remarks represented an official proclamation by the regime about his death. Perhaps his remarks were an attempt to ultimately close the case. The IRGC walking back from the remarks and its unconvincing justifications to the Iranian public clearly reveal that there is a current within the regime that opposes the recognition that Motevaselian was killed — at least for the time being — perhaps due to considerations mainly related to preserving the regime's credibility in light of growing popular anger and discontent.

