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Back to their Old Ways? Iran, Hizbollah, and International Terrorism

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Since the rise of the ayatollah regime in Iran in 1979 and its role in the establishment of Hizbollah in Lebanon in 1982, the two – in the context of their patron-protégé relationship – have used terrorism as a tool in their struggles with enemies at home and abroad. Since the terrorist attacks in the United States, and in light of many states' reduced tolerance for terrorism exported from their sovereign territories, the Iranian regime reined in its terrorist acts and those of its protégé on the international arena. However, the most recent acts against Israelis abroad, carrying the fingerprints of Tehran, may be a sign that Iran and Hizbollah are reverting to their familiar evil ways. If so, the international community and various security establishments will have to face the challenge of foiling continued activity of this sort and attempt to determine the future direction of the Iranian regime, primarily in light of the possibility that the international sanctions and embargo against Iran because of the nuclear issue will intensify.

In the past the Iranian regime operated various terrorist organizations to attack targets around the world, including assassinating Iranian exiles in European countries, and it urged Hizbollah to abduct people and/or hijack airplanes and send suicide bombers on missions all over the world. It also helped upgrade the capabilities of certain groups, turning them into guided “terrorilla” armies, trained and armed with advanced weaponry. This policy was meant to promote Iran's geostrategic interests against its enemies, e.g., Israel – by increasing the military power of Hizbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, and the US – by promoting groups such as al-Sadr's Mahdi militia in Iraq. Until recently, it appeared that the Iranian regime had opted to cut back the use of terrorist organizations in carrying out attacks-by-proxy around the world.

The February 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus, Hizbollah's most senior operations officer, a veteran partner of the Iranian regime in terrorism, and the key contact person in terms of strategic military cooperation between Iran and Hizbollah, triggered a joint Tehran-Hizbollah decision to avenge his death; to them, it was clear that Israel was responsible. Immediately after Mughniyeh's death, Hizbollah agents began

working with Iran toward this revenge, though such a mission has yet to succeed. At the same time, when Iran began suffering acts of sabotage, assassinations, and defections of senior Revolutionary Guards personnel and figures involved in the nuclear program, the desire for revenge merged with the decision to reestablish the rules of the game between Hizbollah and Iran on the one hand, and Israel and its allies on the other. This new determination is also the result of the political and economic pressure being exerted on Iran. Iran means to signal to its enemies that it has extreme responses at its disposal, including terrorism on the international arena.

Nonetheless, despite the close cooperation between Iran and Hizbollah, this is not a partnership of equals. Tehran was and remains dominant, and Hizbollah's policy is greatly subordinated to Iran's considerations, certainly regarding fundamental principles or issues of strategic import. While Iran operates according to the wishes of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his close associates, Hizbollah is not an independent agent when it comes to questions of war and peace or international terrorism. Hizbollah too must receive the green light from Khamenei. In addition, although operationally Hizbollah's international terrorism apparatus has proven independent capabilities to carry out showcase attacks abroad, when necessary its personnel receive operational and logistical assistance from the Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian intelligence services.

It is in this light that the missions Hizbollah and Iran have tried to carry out in recent years, both together and independently of one another, should be examined. Hizbollah, through its international terrorism apparatus, some of whose personnel were apprehended in Azerbaijan, planned to attack the Israeli embassy in Baku (May 2008); the organization planned to attack Israeli tourists in Egypt and Israeli ships sailing in the Suez Canal (late 2008); it gathered intelligence and planned attacks against various targets (ships, planes, synagogues) in Turkey (October 2009); and it attempted to kill the Israeli consul in Istanbul (May 2011). Hizbollah also planned attacks against the Israeli embassy and/or destinations popular among Israeli tourists in Bangkok. For its part, Iran attempted a string of terrorist attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets using Iranian agents or local terrorist cells trained and supervised by Tehran. In January 2012 a local cell in Azerbaijan tried to attack Israeli Chabad representatives in Baku, but the cell was caught. Last week Iranian agents and their proxies tried to attack Israeli consulate personnel in Tbilisi, New Delhi, and Bangkok by attaching explosive devices to their cars. The attempt succeeded only in India. The choice of Asian and CIS locations (though Turkey and Egypt are also on the list) indicates operational capabilities and infrastructures available to Iran and Hizbollah in these countries, and also an assessment that the damage they would sustain as a result of these actions does not represent an actual threat to their interests and certainly does not outweigh the potential rewards.

Predictably, and like any state that supports terrorism, the Iranian regime has denied any connection to the events, and even tried to deflect blame onto Israel as a party interested in sparking an anti-Iranian provocation. At the same time, Iranian Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi declared that Ayatollah Khamenei had instructed the representatives of the various Iranian defense systems to act against the enemies of the regime abroad and not restrain themselves any longer in reacting to attacks on the Iranian nuclear industry. Iran was thereby trying to clarify that it views its “defensive” activities as legitimate and that they would continue. Hizbollah leader Nasrallah, who denied his organization’s involvement in the recent attacks, also announced that his organization is determined to avenge the death of Mughniyeh in a way proportionate to the offense; he thus again committed himself to continue terrorist attacks abroad.

Despite the failed execution by the Iranian and Hizbollah proxies in most of the recent attempts, their abilities to carry out an effective lethal terrorist campaign should not be underestimated. The international political and economic sanctions imposed on Iran, the implied threats about possible military attacks on Iran by Israel and the US, and the weak response of the nations where the recent attacks failed to produce damage and deaths are all liable to spur Iran and Hizbollah once again to pursue intensive terrorism on the international arena. Moreover, the Revolutionary Guards’ attempt on the life of the Saudi Arabian ambassador to Washington in late 2011 indicates that Iran may be trying to expand its attacks to states other than Israel that are partners to the international pressure on Iran.

As for Israel, the recent concerted effort against its representatives, consulates, embassies, and citizens sorely tests the government’s ability to continue its policy of restraint in the face of threats. At this stage, Israel has only increased security of its officials stationed abroad and has issued warnings to Israelis to take precautions. However, it is clear that continued Iranian and Hizbollah action, especially if it succeeds in causing real harm to Israelis, will force the Israeli government to respond more forcefully, and this could touch off a conflagration in the region, if not beyond.

