

## CHAPTER 2

# EVOLUTION OF IRANIAN USE OF TERRORISM IN THE DECADE FOLLOWING THE REVOLUTION

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has employed terrorism as one of its central strategic tools. Over the years, Iran has armed, trained, financed, organized, and supported various terrorist organizations worldwide, in addition to directly conducting terrorist operations through its agents. Iranian support for terrorism has not been geographically limited to neighboring states but extended globally—including the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and South America. This chapter examines Iran’s use of terrorism during the first decade of the Islamic Republic, highlighting the objectives it sought to achieve. It is crucial to emphasize from the outset that Iran often employed terrorism simultaneously with other, more legitimate methods, such as diplomacy, to achieve its goals.

Iran’s objectives in employing terrorism are interconnected. These include ideological-religious objectives and revolutionary zeal—for example, exporting the Islamic Revolution and advancing Khomeini’s worldview, which placed jihad and martyrdom at the ideological forefront; advancing Iranian foreign policy objectives, especially when peaceful means failed; pursuing interests against hostile regional and international states; and ensuring regime survival and stability. These objectives frequently overlapped; for example, exporting the Islamic Revolution often coincided with Iranian actions against neighboring states, while ensuring regime stability involved confronting regional and international adversaries.

### **Iran’s Use of Terrorism to Export the Revolution**

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran identified exporting the revolution as a central goal of its foreign policy. Iran’s clerical leadership considered

supporting revolution in other countries as part of their revolutionary duty. Terrorism became a convenient and effective tool for advancing revolutionary Iranian interests, justified under the guise of support for liberation and resistance movements. As Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini stated shortly after ascending to power: "We must strive to export our revolution to the world...we will confront the world through our ideology" (Byman, 2008, p.170). The constitution of the Islamic Republic and the founding charter of the Revolutionary Guards explicitly mandate the organization to support "freedom-seeking movements" to export the Islamic Revolution beyond Iran (Mansharof, 2019).

Raz Zimmt identifies three principal approaches in the 1980s regarding the export of the revolution. The first argued for promoting revolutionary values strictly within Iran's national borders. A second supported the principle of exporting the revolution, but advocated for achieving this by establishing Iran as an exemplary state to serve as a model for others. A third approach, predominantly supported by radical clerics, argued for exporting the revolution beyond Iran through maintaining a continuous struggle against regional "oppressive regimes," employing all available means, including violence and supplying weapons to Islamist liberation movements. Following the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979, the third approach gained prominence, manifesting in the use and support of terrorism to export the revolution (Zimmt, 2024a).

As noted, Iran employed various means to export its revolution, including presenting itself as a model for emulation, employing extensive informational and propaganda efforts, as well as supporting and even directly engaging in terrorism. In addition to carrying out terrorist operations itself, Iran encouraged radical movements, supported the establishment of revolutionary Islamist groups, and deployed forces from the Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon to form a local Shiite militia aligned with its ideology. Several obstacles prevented Khomeini's worldview from achieving significant influence or becoming a

dominant movement within Islam through informational and propaganda methods. Among these obstacles were the revolutionary regime's failure to effectively address Iran's economic and social issues, diminishing its appeal as a model to emulate. Moreover, governments in Muslim-majority states feared the rise of radical religious movements and thus actively suppressed them. Additionally, the promotion of Khomeini's ideology encountered objective difficulties due to its adoption primarily by the Shiite minority within the predominantly Sunni Muslim world. These challenges gradually made clandestine activities to disseminate Khomeini's ideology and the use of terrorism central instruments for achieving the objectives of the Iranian regime (Shay, 2001).

Khomeini's worldview sought to disregard the religious differences between Sunnis and Shiites as well as national distinctions, aspiring instead to create a unified revolutionary Islamic force. In his view, this vision justified interference in the internal affairs of other Muslim states and societies (Shay, 2001). While publicly claiming to respect the sovereignty of Sunni regimes in the Middle East, in practice, Iran actively sought their overthrow and replacement with Islamist regimes, blatantly violating their sovereignty—as demonstrated by the failed coup attempts in Bahrain in 1981 and Kuwait in 1985 (Mansharof, 2019). Additionally, Iran pursued the export of its revolution by establishing Shiite militias in countries such as Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2012b).

Beyond the importance of exporting revolution through terrorism, it is crucial to note that post-revolutionary Iran was deeply rooted in Khomeini's Islamic worldview and ideology. Beyond supporting and advocating for "revolutionary violence," this ideology placed jihad and martyrdom (*Istishhadiya*) at its ideological forefront. Iran utilized this doctrine during the Iran-Iraq War and continued to encourage and support suicide bombings, which became a prominent feature of Iranian-inspired Shiite terrorism in Lebanon during the 1980s (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2003). Khomeini

strategically leveraged the Battle of Karbala and the legacy of Muhammad Hussein ibn Ali—who holds a central position in Shiite tradition—to cultivate a culture that sanctifies self-sacrifice in pursuit of its objectives. He seized every available opportunity to glorify his death- and destruction-oriented doctrine, using media platforms and Friday sermons to disseminate his ideology. Consequently, suicide bombings became central to Iran’s strategic approach, both in the context of the Iran-Iraq War and the terrorist campaigns supported by Iran, notably the Shiite attacks in Lebanon (Zahed, 2017). Inspired by Khomeini’s revolution, Hezbollah significantly contributed to the global proliferation of modern suicide terrorism by becoming the first terrorist organization to systematically integrate suicide attacks into its operations. Over time, suicide terrorism became a model that was emulated and adopted by other terrorist organizations worldwide (Schweitzer & Goldstein Ferber, 2005).

### **Iranian Use of Terrorism to Implement Foreign Policy**

Alongside exporting the Islamic Revolution, Iran employed terrorism to advance its foreign policy objectives, especially when it could not achieve its goals through conventional diplomatic means. The timing of terrorist operations was carefully chosen to influence political processes during negotiations or to initiate or facilitate such negotiations. It is essential to emphasize that although Iranian terrorist activities are frequently viewed as pragmatically driven by specific Iranian interests, other significant factors have also played a role in shaping these actions. The use of terrorism internationally has been a significant source of contention among Iran’s leadership, particularly between “moderates” and “radicals.” The radicals advocate for an uncompromising stance against the regime’s enemies, supporting a broader and more extensive use of terrorism. Consequently, the scope and objectives of terrorism have often reflected internal power struggles within the Iranian regime. As a result, Iran has frequently adopted an ambivalent policy wherein moderates publicly supported negotiations and compromises, while radicals continued

to conduct terrorist operations, sometimes even undermining the moderates' initiatives. This ambivalent approach has provided Iran with flexibility in political maneuvers during negotiations, complicating its adversaries' efforts to justify hardline responses to Iranian terrorism (Shay, 2014).

Moreover, Iran has employed terrorism to pursue interests against hostile states, both regionally and internationally, independently from diplomatic negotiations. Immediately following the revolution, Iran prioritized cooperation with Shiite movements globally. In many Muslim-majority states, Shiites were marginalized and oppressed communities, and the Iranian revolution inspired many to take action and seek Iranian support. Consequently, Iran supported Shiite groups in Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Kuwait, and other states (Byman, 2008). While not every instance of such support involved terrorism, it often facilitated terrorist activities. Lebanon serves as a prominent example, where Iran successfully established Hezbollah, transforming it over the years from a marginal terrorist organization into a semi-state military force with considerable capabilities against Israel on the one hand, and significant influence within Lebanese domestic politics on the other. Hezbollah also recruited, trained, and directed terrorist organizations in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Nigeria. Throughout the 1980s, Hezbollah perpetrated numerous bombings in Lebanon, notably against the US Marine barracks and the French military headquarters in Beirut (October 1983), as well as kidnapping American civilians, all during its ongoing conflict with Israel and the Israeli presence in Lebanon (Silinsky, 2021).

Iran's actions naturally generated significant hostility among its neighbors, who responded by condemning Tehran, restricting or suspending trade, forming anti-Iranian alliances, and generally seeking to weaken and isolate the new regime. This response was intensified by these states' support for Iraq during the Gulf conflict, creating a strategic rivalry between Iran and many neighboring countries. In this context, terrorism and subversion became primary instruments in Iran's arsenal. At this stage, Iran supported

subversive movements not only for the ideological purpose of spreading the Islamic Revolution or undermining illegitimate regimes but also strategically as leverage in conflicts with neighboring states (Byman, 2008). Thus, terrorism has served as a complementary tool alongside other measures available to the Iranian regime to advance its interests—sometimes in tandem with diplomatic actions, and in other cases, particularly against hostile regimes, as an alternative to diplomacy.

Much of Iran's terrorist activity in this context was directed against Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where numerous attacks were carried out by local Shiite militants and against targets of these states worldwide. In many cases, direct Iranian involvement could not be conclusively proven, enabling Iran to deny involvement and formally maintain diplomatic relations while carrying out covert operations. Examples include car bombings near the French and American embassies in Kuwait, as well as bombings at Kuwaiti public facilities in December 1983 (conducted with Hezbollah operatives' involvement). Another example is the hijacking of a Kuwaiti aircraft in December 1984 by Hezbollah, who landed it in Tehran. Additional examples include a series of bombings by Iranian agents operating under various aliases, just days before the Islamic Conference convened in Kuwait in January 1987, and the bombing of a vehicle belonging to the Saudi ambassador to Morocco in 1987, which Iranian agents openly claimed responsibility for. Other notable incidents include the bombing of an Aramco gas facility in Saudi Arabia in August 1987 and bomb attacks near the Saudi bank in Paris on September 8, 1987, and near the Kuwaiti-French bank on September 10, 1987. From March to April 1988, there was a series of attacks targeting offices of Saudi airlines across several countries in the Far East. These are a mere selection of the many such examples (Shay, 2001).

It should also be mentioned that Iran used terrorism as an auxiliary tool in its military struggle against Iraq and its allies. Here, terrorism served Iran on two levels: first, by conducting terrorist acts against Iraqi targets both within

Iraq and globally; and second, by attacking countries identified as supporters of the Iraqi war effort, such as France (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2003). Furthermore, during the Iran-Iraq war, Iran engaged in what could be defined as “maritime terrorism.” During the conflict, Iranian vessels attacked commercial shipping in the Gulf. Iran also planted sea mines in maritime trade routes. Usually, these tactics would be regarded as acts of war rather than terrorism. Yet, such activities could still be classified as maritime terrorism because they were conducted by individuals not in uniform and they targeted civilian, unarmed nationals from states not directly involved in the conflict. These actions demonstrate Iran’s willingness to use unconventional methods to advance its political and military strategies (Sick, 2003).

Iranian terrorism against France did not solely stem from France’s support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War; additional sources of tension included France hosting Iranian opposition groups, its support for Israel during the First Lebanon War, France’s overall diplomatic and military involvement in Lebanon, and its involvement in Chad against Libya, Iran’s ally during the war with Iraq.

Iranian activity against France operated across multiple arenas. In Lebanon, it conducted terrorism through local Shiite proxies, primarily Hezbollah, with support from the Revolutionary Guards, aiming to expel French forces from Lebanon, diminish France’s influence there, and shift its stance regarding Lebanese allies. A prominent example was the car bombing targeting the French military headquarters in Beirut in October 1983. Another avenue was the hijacking of French aircrafts worldwide, such as the hijacking of Air France flights in August 1983 and July 1984. A third front comprised terrorist attacks on French soil targeting Iranian exiles and opposition groups who sought refuge there. Additional bombings against French targets were also carried out both domestically and internationally. A notable example is the series of bombings in France between 1985-1987, conducted by a pro-Iranian network linked to Hezbollah, led by Fouad Ali Saleh (Shay, 2001). Kuwait, similarly,

was a target due to its position on the Iran-Iraq war and its assistance to Iraq (Shay, 2014).

In this context, it is essential to note that terrorism was also a tool in Iran's struggle against perceived enemies of its regime, primarily the United States and Israel (Byman, 2008). Khomeini famously labeled the U.S. as the "Great Satan," accusing it of seeking to destroy Islam and the Islamic Republic. Meanwhile, Israel was branded the "Little Satan," and calls for its destruction have been recurrent themes among Iranian clerics and supporters (Silinsky, 2021). On November 1, 1979, Khomeini delivered a speech urging revolutionary students to intensify demonstrations against the U.S. and marked November 4 as an appropriate day for such action. Accordingly, on that day, "Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line" seized the American Embassy in Tehran, holding diplomats hostage. The crisis ended with a negotiated agreement after over a year, but the Iranians had learnt an important lesson—the value of terrorism to achieve political goals vis-à-vis the U.S.

One of Iran's initial aims was the removal of American forces from Lebanon. In 1983-1984, a series of suicide bombings against U.S. targets in Lebanon and Kuwait indeed led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Lebanon. Even after the withdrawal, the United States remained a primary target of Iranian terrorism. In the absence of available American military targets in Lebanon, Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah operations shifted toward attacking U.S. embassies, kidnapping American citizens, and hijacking airplanes, such as the TWA hijacking in June 1985. Relations significantly deteriorated during the "Tanker War" in the Persian Gulf in 1987, when the deployment of the U.S. Navy to ensure freedom of navigation led to confrontations between American and Iranian forces, resulting in Iranian assets and vessels being damaged. Iran, in turn, threatened and carried out retaliatory terrorist attacks against American targets, including hostage-taking and attempts to bomb American civilian aircraft (Shay, 2001).

Regarding Israel, from the outset, the Iranian regime identified it as a key enemy. Iran's steadfast opposition to Israel and its support for various terrorist groups against Israel allowed Iran not only to project military strength but also to brand itself and underscore its Islamic character, winning widespread support even in unexpected quarters. While several Arab states signed peace agreements with Israel, Iran consistently portrayed itself as resolute, defiant, and powerful in opposition to Israel—strengthening its standing in the Arab and Muslim world (Takeyh, 2006).

Since establishing the Islamic regime, Iranian leaders have never missed an opportunity to condemn Israel and criticize most Muslim states for insufficient determination against it. Khomeini promised assistance to anyone willing to fight Israel. Besides deploying Revolutionary Guard units in Lebanon to combat Israel and the U.S., Iranian actors strengthened the Amal militia and established Hezbollah, using both to launch terrorist attacks against Israeli and Western targets to advance Iranian interests in Lebanon. Despite Iran and its Shiite proxies' firm stance against Israel, during this period, they generally avoided initiating attacks against Israeli targets worldwide or within Israeli borders. However, Hezbollah kidnapped and killed several Lebanese Jews to pressure Israel into releasing imprisoned Shiites. Additionally, kidnappings of Western hostages and airplane hijackings occasionally included demands to free Shiite detainees held by Israel (Shay, 2001; Takeyh, 2006).

Finally, it's worth mentioning that besides weakening neighbors through terrorism, Iran utilized terrorism to project power far beyond its borders. Given Iran's limited conventional economic and military capabilities—which severely constrained its diplomatic options—terrorism became a tool of influence and leverage in arenas where Iran would otherwise have struggled, effectively supporting its broader foreign policy objectives (Byman, 2008).

**Iranian Use of Terrorism to Ensure Regime Survival and Stability**

Another motive for Iran's support of terrorism relates to the regime's interest in ensuring its own survival and stability. Initially, terrorist activities were mainly directed internally against foreign targets on Iranian soil, such as American or British interests (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2003). The primary example in this category was the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, mentioned previously. America's partial acceptance of Iranian demands led Iran to perceive this event as a significant victory and proof of its ability to compel the United States to concede to Iranian demands—encouraging further terrorist activities against Western interests. Consequently, Iran occasionally threatened similar actions, such as hostage-taking, though these threats were rarely carried out. Iran also arrested, and in some cases executed, Iranians who held foreign passports and dual citizenship, usually on accusations of working as agents of imperialism (Shay, 2001).

The seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, along with Iran's actions against Iranian nationals holding foreign passports and dual citizenship, form the basis of another long-standing Iranian terrorist strategy—hostage diplomacy. The agreement that led to the release of the American hostages from the embassy set off a cycle that persisted for a decade, during which Western citizens were arbitrarily arrested and later released on fabricated charges, serving as leverage to force the West into making concessions to Iran (Brodsky, 2023). A similar pattern emerged in Lebanon, where between 1982 and 1989, 96 foreign nationals from various countries were kidnapped, most of them by Hezbollah. These abductions were used as bargaining tools to achieve both the political and military objectives of Hezbollah and Iran (Shay, 2001).

Another prominent example of Iran's use of terrorism as a tool to strengthen the regime's power is the assassination of dissidents abroad. Following the Islamic Revolution, opposition to the new regime was fractured into various groups, many of which harbored deep animosity toward one another—at times even more so than toward Khomeini and his successors. As Khomeini's

regime grew stronger and consolidated power, and as opposition groups lost foreign governmental support due to their internal divisions—which rendered them ineffective—the Iranian opposition faced mounting difficulties. However, Khomeini’s crackdown on these opposition elements did not cease. The regime continued to pursue them both inside and outside Iran, targeting exiled leaders through Iranian and Shiite terrorist cells. One of the first such attacks was the assassination of Shahriar Shafiq, the nephew of the deposed Shah, in Paris in December 1979. In 1984, Iranian forces assassinated General Gholam Hossein Oveissi, the former commander of Iran’s ground forces under the Shah. In 1989, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, was killed in Vienna. The following year, Kazem Rajavi, the brother of the leader of the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* organization, was murdered in Switzerland. These assassinations continued throughout the 1990s (Shay, 2001).

These actions demonstrate that Iran has operated as both a state sponsor and initiator of terrorism, employing violence to achieve both domestic and foreign political objectives. Alongside the direct results of its actions, Iran also seeks to exert psychological influence to further its strategic goals. It pursues these objectives while simultaneously engaging as a legitimate player on the international stage, leveraging diplomatic and political tools in parallel with its covert operations—all while maintaining plausible deniability.