

# State Sponsor of Terror: The Global Threat of Iran

Statement before the  
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade

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Chairman Poe, distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

It is an honor to appear before you today to discuss the global threat posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is an issue that has received far too little attention over the past year-and-a-half.

Since the start of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 powers in November of 2013, the attention of the United States and its diplomatic partners has focused almost exclusively on one aspect of Iran's activities, its nuclear program. For the Obama administration, reaching some sort of durable compromise with the Iranian regime over its nuclear ambitions has become an overriding objective. As Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes told a meeting of political activists in January of 2014, securing such a deal is considered by the White House to be as significant as its previous success on healthcare, the signature initiative of President Obama's first term.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, with the rise of the Islamic State terrorist group in Iraq, the White House has gravitated toward the notion that Iran also can serve as a constructive security partner. Administration officials have said that they see a role for Iran in the international coalition that Washington is now erecting,<sup>2</sup> and tactical coordination between Tehran and Washington on combat operations is widely understood to be taking place.

In its outreach, the Administration has been driven in no small measure by the belief that current contacts can be successfully parlayed into something substantially

bigger: a true reconciliation between Washington and Tehran. This belief has led officials in Washington to systematically downplay instances of Iranian rogue behavior, chief among them the Iranian regime's fomentation of international terrorism.

## A REGIME IMPERATIVE

Iran's intimate relationship with terrorism is a function of the ideological worldview that continues to animate the present regime in Tehran.

That outlook can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s, when the Islamic Republic's founder, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, languished in exile, first in Iraq and then in France. During that time, Khomeini became convinced of the need for Shi'ite empowerment and global Islamic revolution. As a result, the overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979 was not seen simply as a domestic regime change. Rather, it was also viewed by Khomeini and his followers as the start of a political process that would usher in the dominance of Islam "in all the countries of the world."<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, the preamble of the country's 1979 constitution proclaimed that the Islamic Republic's armed forces "will be responsible not only for safeguarding the borders, but also for accomplishing an ideological mission, that is, the Jihad for the sake of God, as well as for struggling to open the way for the sovereignty of the Word of God throughout the world."<sup>4</sup> Iran's revolution, in other words, was intended from the start to be an export commodity.

The first formative years of Khomeini's regime therefore saw his government erect an elaborate domestic infrastructure for the support and propagation of terrorism abroad—an effort that spanned multiple ministries and agencies, and included the investment of hundreds of millions of dollars in the cause of Islamic "resistance" globally.<sup>5</sup> The Islamic Republic also became a haven and source of support for third world radicals, from Palestinian resistance fighters to Latin American leftist revolutionaries.<sup>6</sup>

The death of Khomeini in the late 1980s—and a period of sustained economic and political stagnation in the 1990s—led many in the West to believe that Iran had entered a "post-revolutionary" era. That hope, however, turned out to be fleeting. During the 1990s, Iran's regime continued to work diligently to improve its global position and "export" its uncompromising version of political Islam—albeit more subtly and judiciously than it had the preceding decade. And over the past dozen years, Iran's revolutionary fervor has returned with a vengeance.

Today, very much in line with Khomeini's famous 1980 dictum that his regime must "strive to export our revolution throughout the world,"<sup>7</sup> the Islamic Republic is pursuing a global insurgent agenda, acting either directly (via its feared clerical

army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC]) or through a broad range of proxy groups and aligned non-state actors, from Lebanon's Hezbollah to the Palestinian Hamas movement to Shi'ite militias in Iraq.

## GLOBAL REACH

While the full scope of Iran's activities is far broader than could be comfortably covered here, several areas of its current activity deserve particular attention.

### *Syria*

Since the start of the civil war there in March of 2011, Iran has waged what amounts to a proxy war in Syria. While publicly it has sought to portray a constructive image vis-à-vis the crisis, the Iranian regime has quietly pursued a much more assertive—and destructive—role. Iran, for example, has deployed a large IRGC contingent to the Syrian battlefield, including hundreds of trained snipers who have helped to reinforce Syrian forces and increase their lethality against Syria's opposition.<sup>8</sup> Together with its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah, it has also played a key role in organizing pro-Assad militias among the country's Alawite and Shi'a communities, as well as coordinating pro-regime foreign fighters from Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and—most recently—Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> Iranian officials have boasted that these “popular committees” now total upward of 50,000 fighters in number, and benefit from training provided to them both in Iran and in Lebanon.<sup>10</sup>

Iran's objectives in this effort are two-fold. Most immediately, Iran's aid is intended to shore up the stability of the Assad regime, its most important regional partner. More broadly, however, Iran sees its involvement in Syria as a direct blow against the “Great Satan,” the United States. “Since Syria was and continues to be part of the Islamic resistance front and the Islamic Revolution, it provokes the anger of the Americans,” IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari explained on Iranian television in April of 2014.<sup>11</sup> Alaeddin Boroujerdi, the Chairman of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, put it even more bluntly. “We have won in Syria,” he told reporters in May of 2014. “The regime will stay. The Americans have lost it.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Palestinian Territories*

In the summer of 2014, a new round of hostilities broke out between Israel and the Hamas terrorist movement in the Gaza Strip. Israeli officials termed the outcome of the fifty-day conflict to be a “strategic tie.”<sup>13</sup> Yet the benefits were undeniably greater for Hamas, which used the war as a bid for continued relevance—and as a way to reestablish strategic ties with Iran, which had been virtually severed over the preceding three years as a result of conflicting approaches to Syria. As a result, the strategic partnership between Iran and Hamas is now back on track—and the likelihood of a future conflict between Israel and an unrepentant, strengthened Hamas is high.

Iran's stake in the Palestinian Territories is far larger than simply Hamas, however. Since the 1990s, the Islamic Republic has played a leading role in the West

Bank and Gaza Strip through its political support of Palestinian violence, its funding for an array of Palestinian “rejectionist” groups, and its provision of weapons to disparate Palestinian factions. That assistance continues; earlier this month, a top commander in Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) called for his government to increase its presence and activities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a way of holding Israel at risk, and preventing the possibility of unilateral Israeli military action against Iran’s nuclear program.<sup>14</sup>

### *Iraq*

Over the past year, the rise of the Islamic State terrorist group has captured global attention, and nudged Tehran and Washington into tacit alignment. This has served to obscure the fact that, over the past decade, the Islamic Republic has pursued a complex multi-pronged strategy on the territory of its western neighbor. That effort has involved, *inter alia*, the cooptation of various Iraqi politicians; political and material support to both Sunni and Shi’ite militias; the massive infiltration of Iranian paramilitary forces and proxies onto Iraqi soil, and; the provision of a wide spectrum of lethal weaponry (including improvised explosive devices) to Iraqi insurgents fighting the Coalition.<sup>15</sup> The human toll of this effort has been immense. In August of 2010, then-U.S. Ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey estimated that fully a quarter of U.S. casualties in Iraq since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 were attributable to Iranian-linked groups operating against the Coalition.<sup>16</sup>

Iran’s geopolitical goals were clear. “Iran has a robust program to exert influence in Iraq in order to limit American power-projection capability in the Middle East, ensure the Iraqi government does not pose a threat to Iran, and build a reliable platform for projecting influence further abroad,” a 2008 study by the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point explained.<sup>17</sup> And today, Iran is closer to this objective than ever before. With Iraq’s government in continuing disarray despite an October 2014 parliamentary election and a change of political leadership, and amid signals from Washington that sustained U.S. boots on the ground are simply out of the question in the fight against the Islamic State, Iran has emerged as what is perhaps the best long-term guarantor of Iraq’s security.

### *Afghanistan*

Over the past decade, Iran has worked diligently to expand its influence on the territory of its eastern neighbor. It has done so by coopting and subverting the independence of the post-Taliban government of Hamid Karzai through political pressure and economic bribes, and by simultaneously forging an alternative center of gravity in Afghanistan’s western provinces. It also has sought to deny influence to others, most prominently the United States and its allies. In its 2012 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, the State Department noted that, “[s]ince 2006, Iran has arranged arms shipments to select Taliban members, including small arms and associated ammunition, rocket propelled grenades, mortar rounds, 107mm rockets, and plastic explosives.” According to the same assessment, “Iran has shipped a large number of weapons to Kandahar, Afghanistan, aiming to increase its influence in this key province.” It also “trained Taliban elements on small unit tactics, small arms, explosives, and indirect fire weapons, such as mortars, artillery, and rockets.”<sup>18</sup>

Iran's assistance has significantly expanded the lethality of these forces, at considerable human cost to the United States and its Coalition allies.

### *Latin America*

In October of 2011, U.S. officials went public with details of a foiled Iranian plot to assassinate Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States at a DC restaurant. Attorney General Eric Holder noted at the time that the plot was "directed and approved by elements of the Iranian government and, specifically, senior members of the Quds Force," the IRGC's elite paramilitary unit.<sup>19</sup> The thwarted plot was far from unique, however; Iran has targeted the U.S. homeland on at least two other occasions over the past decade. The first was an unsuccessful 2007 plot by a Guyanese national linked to Iran to blow up fuel tanks underneath New York's John F. Kennedy Airport.<sup>20</sup> The second was a plan by Venezuelan and Iranian diplomats to use Mexican hackers to penetrate U.S. defense and intelligence facilities and launch widespread cyber attacks in the United States.<sup>21</sup>

These attempts were made possible by an expanding Iranian strategic footprint in the Americas. In its 2010 report to Congress on Iran's military power, the Pentagon noted that the Qods Force has become deeply involved in the Americas, stationing "operatives in foreign embassies, charities and religious/cultural institutions to foster relationships with people, often building on existing socio-economic ties with the well-established Shia Diaspora," and even carrying out "paramilitary operations to support extremists and destabilize unfriendly regimes."<sup>22</sup> These activities, however, are just the tip of the iceberg. In his May 2013 indictment, Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman detailed that over the past three decades, Iran has succeeded in quietly erecting a network of intelligence bases and covert centers in no fewer than eight Latin American countries: Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, Colombia, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname.<sup>23</sup> This infrastructure was instrumental in allowing Iranian proxies to carry out the 1994 AMIA bombing, as well as to plot subsequent attacks, and remains both intact and functioning. (Not coincidentally, Iran is being eyed as a culprit in Nisman's suspected murder last month, which took place on the eve of his testimony before the Argentine Congress regarding his government's collusion with Tehran.)

### *Africa*

In May of 2013, Nigerian security forces raided a house on the outskirts of Bompai, in the country's northern Kano State. They found a massive military stash, including anti-tank weapons, rocket propelled guns and landmines.<sup>24</sup> Three men were subsequently arrested in connection to the raid, all of them Lebanese-Nigerian nationals. In subsequent interrogations, the suspects confessed to having received training from Hezbollah, and one of them detailed that he had gotten orders from a top Hezbollah commander to surveil several targets in the Nigerian capital, including the Israeli embassy there, and to obtain an aerial photo of the city for targeting purposes.<sup>25</sup>

To be sure, Hezbollah has had an African presence for the better part of a quarter century. Beginning in the late 1980s, the group, operating through the continent's numerous and well-established Shi'a communities, transformed Africa

into a major base for fundraising, becoming involved in the continent's notorious "blood diamond" trade and establishing a number of front companies to funnel money from Africa back to the Middle East.<sup>26</sup> The region likewise became a notable recruiting base for the group, which—working in tandem with the IRGC—has made concerted efforts to enlist disaffected African Shi'a in "resistance" against Israel and the West.<sup>27</sup> In recent years, however, the scope and pace of these activities have expanded. "Iran has stepped up its attempts to build a sphere of influence in Africa," according to Israeli counterterrorism expert Ely Karmon, and is working "to develop bases within certain states in Africa for wider terrorist and subversion activities throughout the continent, focusing on Israeli and Jewish targets."<sup>28</sup> These bases extend beyond Nigeria to a number of other regional states, including Kenya, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, and Senegal.

### *Europe*

In July of 2012, a pre-positioned bomb detonated on a passenger bus full of Israeli tourists in the Bulgarian Black Sea resort town of Burgas, killing six people and injuring thirty-two others. In the days after the attack, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu linked the bombing to Hezbollah and its chief sponsor, Iran, terming it to be part of a "global Iranian terror onslaught" targeting his country's interests and citizens worldwide.<sup>29</sup> That verdict was confirmed seven months later, when the Bulgarian government published its official findings, which identified the two suspects in the bombing as operatives of the Lebanese militia.<sup>30</sup>

Like its activities in Africa, Hezbollah's presence in Europe is not a new phenomenon. The organization has been active on the continent since the early 1980s, and engaged in a spate of terrorist activity there during that time (including a plane hijacking in 1984, bombings in Spain, Denmark and France the following year, and a rash of bombings in Paris between 1985 and 1986). Over time, however, the militia shifted its focus back to the Middle East, and Europe—once a target—became seen as primarily a base, and a "launching pad" for operations elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> Of late, however, the growing global activism of Hezbollah's enabler, Iran, has increasingly transformed Europe from a base of operations for Iran's chief terrorist proxy back into a target of it. The August 2012 Burgas bombing was a reflection of this trend, which now poses a real danger to European security.

### *Cyberspace*

Over the past several years, Iran has manifested a growing, and increasingly aggressive, presence in cyberspace. This effort can be traced back, at least in part, to the targeting of Iran's nuclear program by the Stuxnet cyberworm in 2009/2010 and other subsequent intrusions—attacks which convinced Iran's leadership that they were engaged in a conflict with the West in cyberspace. But Iran's cyber activities are not simply defensive in nature; over the past three years, Iranian and Iranian-linked entities have carried out attacks on a number of high-value targets abroad, among them U.S. financial institutions (Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase and Citigroup), foreign energy firms (Saudi AramCo) and several defense contractors.

The scope of Iran's offensive was outlined in detail in December of 2014 by San Diego-based cybersecurity firm Cylance.<sup>32</sup> "Since at least 2012, Iranian actors have directly attacked, established persistence in, and extracted highly sensitive materials from the networks of government agencies and major critical infrastructure companies in the following countries: Canada, China, England, France, Germany, India, Israel, Kuwait, Mexico, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and the United States," the study notes. Targets of Iranian cyber attack identified by Cylance include oil and gas firms in Kuwait, Turkey, Qatar and France, aviation hubs in South Korea and Pakistan, energy and utilities companies in Canada and the U.S., and government agencies in the U.S., UAE and Qatar. This, however, may represent merely the tip of the iceberg. "As Iran's cyber warfare capabilities continue to morph... the probability of an attack that could impact the physical world at a national or global level is rapidly increasing," the report concludes.

#### DEFINING IRAN'S DEVIANCY DOWN

In the 1990s, New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan popularized the term "defining deviancy down" in warning about the dangers of an increasingly lax American criminal justice system. Today, that same admonition could be applied to U.S. policy toward Iran.

In its pursuit of a nuclear deal, the Obama administration has turned a blind eye to the Iranian regime's ideological direction, and to its destructive behavior abroad. Worse still, the White House has become incentivized not to pay any heed to, or call attention to, what the Iranian regime truly thinks, says and does, lest it prejudice prospects for political alignment between Washington and Tehran.

This represents a critical error. Iran's rogue behavior spans a broad spectrum of subversive activities in virtually every corner of the world. Furthermore, the Iranian leadership remains revolutionary in outlook and insurgent in its behavior.

It also increasingly convinced that it is winning. That was the message of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's September 2014 speech to Iran's Assembly of Experts, the regime's premier religious supervisory body. The existing international system "was in the process of change," Khamenei asserted, and a "new order is being formed." These changes, he made clear, are a mortal blow to the West, and a boon to Iran: "The power of the West on their two foundations—values and thoughts and the political and military—have become shaky."<sup>33</sup>

The message is unmistakable. The Islamic Republic sees an increasingly favorable international environment, and is stepping up its activism in response. Responding to it will be one of the most significant challenges facing the United States in the years ahead.

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