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HIZBALLAH *and the* QODS FORCE *in* IRAN'S SHADOW WAR *with the* WEST

Matthew Levitt

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Cover photo: CCTV image showing the suspected suicide bomber, center, with long hair and baseball cap, who killed seven people and injured dozens more at the airport in Burgas, Bulgaria, July 18, 2012. Hizballah is believed to be responsible. The identity of the suspected bomber is still unknown, but a Michigan drivers license that he carried was a fake. (AP Photo/Bulgarian Interior Ministry)

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HIZBALLAH *and the* QODS FORCE

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IN JANUARY 2010, the Qods Force—the elite unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—decided that it and Hizballah, its primary terrorist proxy, would embark on a new campaign of violence targeting not only Israel but U.S. and other Western targets as well. Since then, the two organizations have been cooperating but also competing to launch attacks across the globe. What is particularly striking is how amateurish the actions of both organizations have been: targets were poorly chosen and assaults carried out with gross incompetence. But as the groups brush off the cobwebs and professionalize their operations, this sloppy tradecraft could quickly be replaced by operational success. Indeed, one particularly odd effort might have succeeded were it not for the fortuitous placement of an undercover U.S. government informant: the case of an Iranian-American used-car salesman who pleaded guilty in October 2012 to conspiring with Iranian agents to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States.

Nevertheless, in some ways Mansour Arbabsiar's guilty plea raised more questions than it answered. The plea closed the case, but the U.S. and British governments had both already traced the conspiracy back to its source in Tehran and blacklisted Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani for his role overseeing the plot.¹ Indeed, U.S. officials knew of the plan early on and built an airtight case. Not only had Arbabsiar tried to hire an assassin who was actually a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) informant, but once arrested Arbabsiar quickly confessed to his role in the plot and, at the direction of law enforcement, placed a call to his cousin, a Qods Force handler, Gen. Gholam Shakuri. With agents listening, Shakuri

confirmed that the plot should go forward and as soon as possible. "Just do it quickly. It's late."²

But why was the Qods Force, which had earned a reputation for operational prowess even among its enemies, so eager to move forward with an obviously flawed operation? Arbabsiar, for his part, appears to have been a weak character who "wants to be important," as a government-retained psychiatrist determined, and who was drawn into the plot by his cousin.³ The real question is, What was the Qods Force thinking?

According to the director of national intelligence, the plot "shows that some Iranian officials—probably including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—have changed their calculus and are now more willing to conduct an attack in the United States in response to real or perceived U.S. actions that threaten the regime."⁴ Intelligence officials believe that this new calculus dates back to January 2010 when the Qods Force decided that it and Hizballah would embark on a new campaign of violence focused on Israel along with U.S. and other Western targets.

Tracking Hizballah's Militant Trajectory

Hizballah's anti-Western militancy began in 1983 with attacks against Western targets in Lebanon, then expanded to include attacks abroad intended to exact revenge for actions threatening its or Iran's interests, or to press foreign governments to release captured operatives. At times, such as the 1992 and 1994 bombings in Argentina, Hizballah's own interests in carrying out attacks abroad were magnified by Iran's interests in the same. These coincident interests led to joint operations—such as the 1996 bombing of the Khobar

Towers in Saudi Arabia—that leveraged each party’s strengths and maximized their combined capabilities.

Over the course of the always intimate relationship between Iran and Hizballah, the head of the Qods Force or other senior Iranian leaders might have told Hizballah to jump and the response would have been “How high?” In part, this has been a function of the close alignment between Hizballah’s senior leadership and Iran’s clerical regime. Yet how firmly do Hizballah leaders believe in *velayat-e faqih*, the Islamic Republic’s principle of rule of the jurispudent? According to Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, “the subject of the *velayat-e faqih* and the Imamate is at the heart of our religious doctrine, and any offense to it is an offense to our religion.”⁵ But the close relationship also persists because of Hizballah’s dependence on Iran for financial, material, and political support. For years, Hizballah relied almost exclusively on Iranian largesse, which hovered around \$100 to \$200 million a year or more.⁶ Such generous state sponsorship, however, came with strings attached that Hizballah, as Tehran’s primary pan-Shiite militant proxy group, could not easily ignore.

While it kept up its relentless campaign of military and terrorist activities targeting Israel, and despite unabated tensions with the West, Hizballah had not carried out a successful spectacular attack targeting Western interests since the Khobar Towers bombing. Moreover, Hizballah worked hard under former military commander Imad Mughniyah to establish a measure of independence from Iran. In mid-2008, four months after Mughniyah’s assassination, an Israeli intelligence official concluded that “Hezbollah does not always do what Iran wants.”⁷ But under the leadership of Mughniyah’s successors, Mustafa Badreddine and Talal Hamiyeh, Iran’s role seems to have hardened again.⁸ In February 2012, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper characterized the relationship between Hizballah and Iran as “a partnership arrangement, with the Iranians as the senior partner.”⁹ This “strategic partnership,” as National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) director Matthew Olsen put it, is the product of a long evolution from the 1980s, when Hizballah was just a proxy of Iran. Together, Olsen added,

the two entities pursue their shared “aims against Israel and the United States.”¹⁰

To be sure, Hizballah has engaged in militant, terrorist, criminal, and other activities over the years, from bombings in Argentina and Saudi Arabia to plots in Southeast Asia and Africa.¹¹ Its ability to continue to do so at pace, however, was severely constrained by an act of terrorism not of its own making. Ironically, al-Qaeda’s attacks of September 11, 2001, proved to be a turning point for Hizballah, the terrorist group previously responsible for the most American deaths. Desperate not to be caught in the crosshairs of Washington’s “war on terror,” Hizballah appears to have decided consciously to roll back its international operations and keep its efforts to strike at Israeli targets as focused and limited as possible. But while spectacular embassy bombings were put on ice, Hizballah continued to target Israeli interests, infiltrate operatives into Israel to collect intelligence and carry out operations, and support Iranian interests such as training Iraqi Shiite militants after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.¹²

But the February 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyah led to the resurgence of Hizballah’s international operations arm, which will no doubt regain its former potency—especially when paired with Iranian intelligence and Qods Force operatives. But as the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO)—now under the command of Badreddine and Hamiyeh—first set out to avenge Mughniyah’s death, Operation Radwan (named for Mughniyah, who was also known as Hajj Radwan) experienced a series of setbacks. These ultimately led Iran and Hizballah to reassess how they would prosecute, both separately and together, a three-tiered shadow war targeting Israeli, Jewish, American, and sometimes British interests worldwide.

Reassessing Hizballah’s Place in Iran’s Arsenal

When Nasrallah promised an “open war” to avenge Mughniyah’s assassination, Israeli officials quickly took preventive action—from issuing specific travel warnings to covert disruptive measures—against what they deemed the three most likely scenarios. These included

(1) an attack on current or former senior Israeli officials traveling abroad; (2) an attack on an Israeli diplomatic mission abroad; or (3) an attack targeting a location affiliated with a Jewish community abroad, such as in the 1994 bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) in Buenos Aires.¹³ They knew better than to ignore Nasrallah's warning.

Nevertheless, however committed Hizballah was to carrying out such attacks, the IJO was simply not up to the task. For one thing, Hizballah leaders had actively pared down the IJO's global networks of operatives following the 9/11 attacks. And the "strategic partnership" it had shared with Iran for the past decade appears to have focused on funding, training, and arming Hizballah's increasingly effective standing militia, not on its cadre of international terrorists. And so, Hizballah not only lacked the resources and capability to carry out a successful operation abroad, it also no longer had Mughniyah around to quarterback operations.

Tightened security in the post-9/11 world also meant Hizballah opted to operate in nations with comparatively lax security rather than vigilant Western nations. But even then, in places like Azerbaijan, Egypt, and Turkey, and even with significant support from Qods Force agents, Hizballah suffered a series of embarrassing failures, starting with the May 2008 fiasco in Baku, when a series of spectacular actions, including the planned bombing of the U.S. and Israeli embassies, was disrupted. The event led to the quiet release of Qods Force personnel but the public prosecution of two Hizballah operatives. Operations were soon foiled in Egypt and Turkey too, as well as attempts to kidnap Israelis in Europe and Africa.

A foiled attack in Turkey in September 2009 was a watershed event for Hizballah operational planners and their Iranian sponsors. Despite the massive logistical support Qods Force operatives provided for that plot, Hizballah operatives still failed to execute the attack successfully.¹⁴ Meanwhile by late 2009, Iran's interest in Hizballah's operational prowess focused less on local issues like avenging Mughniyah's death and more on the much larger issue of combating threats to its nascent nuclear program. Malfunctioning

components ruined Iranian centrifuges;¹⁵ IRGC officers defected;¹⁶ and then in January 2010 a bomb killed Iranian physics professor Masoud Ali Mohammadi outside his Tehran home.¹⁷

According to Israeli intelligence officials, furious Iranian leaders reached two conclusions after Mohammadi's death: (1) Hizballah's IJO had to revitalize its operational capabilities and (2) the IRGC would no longer rely solely on Hizballah to carry out terrorist attacks abroad. It would now deploy Qods Force operatives to do so on their own, not just as logisticians supporting Hizballah hit men.¹⁸ Even more than the loss of its scientists, Tehran sought to address its damaged prestige—the image of an Iran so weak it could not even protect its own scientists at home could not stand.

Much finger-pointing ensued between Hizballah and the Qods Force regarding where the blame lay for the two years of failed operations, culminating in the botched attack in Turkey and then another failed plot in Jordan in January 2010. Under Nasrallah's instructions, Badreddine and Hamiyeh "undertook a massive operational reevaluation in January 2010, which led to big changes within the IJO over a period of a little over six months." During this period, IJO operations were put on hold and major personnel changes made. New operatives were recruited from the elite of Hizballah's military wing for intelligence and operational training, while existing IJO operatives were moved into new positions. At the same time, the IJO invested in the development of capabilities and tradecraft that had withered on the vine since the 2001 decision to rein in operations.¹⁹

As part of its IJO shake-up, Hizballah engaged in detailed talks with Iranian officials to lay out Hizballah's role in Iran's larger plan for a coordinated shadow war targeting Israeli, American, British, and Gulf States' interests. The coordinated plan, it was decided, would include operations intended to achieve several different goals, including taking revenge for Mughniyah's assassination, retaliating for attacks on Iran's nuclear program, and convincing Western powers that an attack on Iran would result in—among other things—asymmetric terrorist attacks worldwide.²⁰

To this end, Iranian decisionmakers settled on a campaign of violence based on a three-tiered threat stream targeting the following: Israeli tourists, government figures (diplomats, retired officials), and targets broadly representative of Israel or the Jewish community (community leaders, prominent Israeli companies). It assigned the task of targeting Israeli tourists—a soft target—to Hizballah and maintained for the Qods Force operations targeting Israeli, American, British, or Gulf States' interests. The latter would be carried out by a new Special External Operations Unit known as Unit 400.²¹

Iran's Three-Tiered Terror Campaign

At first, Iran's new terrorism strategy, and the IJO's overhaul, seemed to have little effect. In March and September 2010, authorities disrupted undisclosed Qods Force plots in Azerbaijan and Turkey, respectively.²² In May 2010, Kuwaiti authorities arrested Kuwaiti, Lebanese, and other individuals on suspicion of spying, monitoring U.S. military interests, and possessing explosives for attacks.²³

Meanwhile, Hizballah fared no better. Itching to prove their rejuvenated operational capabilities, IJO leaders reportedly pressed Nasrallah to allow them to carry out an attack abroad.²⁴ In April 2011, the Israeli Counterterrorism Bureau issued an advisory for Passover holiday travel to countries in the Mediterranean Basin and the Far East, warning of Iranian and Hizballah plots.²⁵ In fact, the warning was a planned leak by Israeli intelligence aimed at exposing and therefore frustrating a budding Hizballah plot to target Israeli tourists in Cyprus.²⁶ Israeli officials told the press that under instructions from Nasrallah and Qods Force leader Qasem Soleimani, Hizballah IJO chief Talal Hamiyeh was plotting the attacks with a small group of trusted lieutenants. These included Hamiyeh's "right-hand man and bodyguard, Ahmed Faid," as well as "explosives engineer Ali Najam al-Din and bomb assembly expert Malik Ovayad." False documents were reportedly produced by Majd al-Zakur, aka "the Forger," while logistics support came from Lebanese and Turkish businesspersons.²⁷

Given Hizballah's role in the new three-tiered arrangement, Nasrallah was clearly uncomfortable

with the notion that people might mistake Hizballah attacks against Israeli tourists as the best the group could muster to avenge Mughniyah's death. A few days after media reports exposed the Cyprus plot, Nasrallah gave an interview to a Kuwaiti newspaper underscoring Hizballah's continued commitment to carry out an operation of equal severity to avenge the death of the IJO commander. The point was not retaliation for retaliation's sake, he stressed: "Had we wanted to, we could have retaliated by killing Israeli tourists in this or that country."²⁸ But that was not Hizballah's calculus. Attacks on Israeli tourists were something different—the IJO's part in Iran's shadow war—a threat stream of its own, distinct from Operation Radwan.

In May 2011, Iranian agents shot and killed a Saudi diplomat in Karachi, Pakistan, foreshadowing the plot already under way targeting the Saudi ambassador to Washington, D.C.²⁹ Ten days afterward, Qods Force and Hizballah operatives carried out a far more complex operation targeting an Israeli diplomat in Turkey. Turkish authorities originally assumed the attack was the work of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), intended to have an impact on upcoming Turkish parliamentary elections.³⁰ Within weeks, however, investigators would determine the attack was a botched Hizballah–Qods Force assassination attempt targeting the Turkish-born Israeli consul-general to Istanbul, Moshe Kimhi, intended as retribution for the assassination of Mohammadi, the Iranian physicist. According to *Corriere della Sera*, the Italian paper that broke the story, Qods Force operatives cased the area, recording Kimhi's routine, before Hizballah operatives were called in to place the explosive along a route the diplomat was known to take. Within weeks of the bombing, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)—the body charged with investigating the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri—would indict four Hizballah operatives, including Mustafa Badreddine, for their roles in the murder. Closer to home, Hizballah operatives carried out two attacks that wounded French peacekeepers—six civilians and three soldiers—assigned to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) mission in southern Lebanon, according to the State Department.³¹ But

the plot targeting the Saudi ambassador to Washington was the most brazen of all.

“They Want That Guy Done”

On October 11, 2011, U.S. attorney general Eric Holder announced that charges had been filed in New York against dual U.S.-Iranian citizen Mansour Arbabsiar and a Qods Force commander for their alleged roles in a plot to murder the Saudi ambassador, Adel al-Jubeir. The plot had developed quickly over just a few months, starting in spring 2011 and culminating with the arrest of Arbabsiar in September. According to the Justice Department, Arbabsiar told a DEA confidential source posing as an associate of a Mexican drug cartel that “his associates in Iran had discussed a number of violent missions for [the source] and his associates to perform, including the murder of the Ambassador.”³²

The plot had fallen into the lap of Qods Force planners just as they decided to unleash Unit 400 to attack the West, facilitated by an encounter between the dejected Iranian-American and his cousin while the former visited family in Iran. Arbabsiar sent about \$100,000 in wire transfers as a down payment for the assassination, and the money was deposited in an FBI undercover account he thought belonged to the assassin. In October 2012, Arbabsiar pleaded guilty to charges related to murder-for-hire and conspiring to commit an act of international terrorism.³³

Signaling that U.S. authorities had traced the plot to senior Iranian decisionmakers, the Treasury Department designated IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani as a global terrorist for his role overseeing the officers involved in the plot.³⁴ British officials agreed, designating Soleimani and others involved in the plot themselves as well.³⁵ At the UN General Assembly, member states passed a resolution by an overwhelming majority deploring the plot to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador and calling on Iran to “cooperate with States seeking to bring to justice all those who participated in the planning, sponsoring, organization and attempted execution of the plot.”³⁶ This plot against the Saudi diplomat, director-general of MI5 Jonathan Evans explained in June 2012, was the work of the IRGC, to which he added, “and of course

the IRGC leads straight back to the Iranian leadership.”³⁷ Iranian leaders, U.S. intelligence concluded, now appeared willing to attack the United States in response to actions, real or perceived, that Iranian officials thought were threatening the regime.³⁸

Indeed, Iran correctly perceived it was the target of a string of actions against its nuclear program, although Iranian leaders were wrong to suspect the actions were part of a plot aimed at promoting regime change. In September 2010, Iranian computer networks linked to uranium enrichment at the Natanz facility were infected with the Stuxnet virus, leading to the destruction of some one thousand centrifuges, reportedly part of a U.S.-Israeli effort code-named Olympic Games.³⁹ The next month, an explosion at an IRGC missile base leveled most of the buildings and killed seventeen people, including Gen. Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam, a founder of Iran’s ballistic missile program.⁴⁰

A “Jumble of Overlapping Plots”

The Arbabsiar plot also underscored Qods Force leaders’ willingness to work with criminal elements to further operational planning, perhaps as a means of countering enhanced law enforcement and intelligence efforts. Western officials saw the same trend several more times, perhaps most tellingly in Baku. In October 2011, signals intelligence intercepted emails suggesting Azeri criminal elements with known ties to Iranian intelligence and militant groups were planning to transfer weapons and explosives into Azerbaijan from Iran.⁴¹ Over the next few weeks, weapons and operatives—including at least ten Iranian recruits—were smuggled into Azerbaijan, where they met up with other Azeri criminal recruits. The Azeris were strictly in it for the money and used their knowledge of the area to conduct surveillance of a Jewish school, an American-owned fast-food joint, the office of an oil company, the U.S. embassy, and specific U.S. diplomats. “They were going after individuals,” a State Department official familiar with the investigation confirmed. “They had names [of employees]. And they were interested in family members, too.”⁴²

Over several months, the operatives planned what one investigator described as a “jumble of overlapping

plots,” including assassinating U.S. diplomats and a local rabbi or striking other Jewish targets.⁴³ One subplot involved snipers using rifles with silencers; in another, a car bomb would target U.S. embassy employees or their families. One plot was planned for December 2011, another for February 2012. Together, these were intended to avenge the assassinations of Iranian scientists, the captured leader of the network would later tell investigators.⁴⁴ Some two dozen accomplices were arrested by authorities in a series of raids in Azerbaijan in early 2012, most of whom were local criminal recruits.⁴⁵ U.S. officials concluded the plots were overseen by the Qods Force, with possible support from Hizballah, as part of a coordinated thirteen-month campaign targeting foreign diplomats in at least seven countries.⁴⁶ According to a U.S. law enforcement official, Hizballah paid criminal gang members \$150,000 each to target the Jewish school in Baku.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, Hizballah operatives were busy planning operations to fulfill their end of the three-tiered plan: targeting Israeli tourists abroad. Around the same time that authorities foiled a January 2012 plot targeting Israeli vacationers in Bulgaria—just weeks ahead of the anniversary of Mughniyah’s assassination—another Hizballah plot was disrupted in Greece.⁴⁸ But it was halfway across the world, in Bangkok, where Israeli and local authorities broke up a far more ambitious Hizballah bid to target Israeli tourists.

On January 12, 2012, acting on a tip from Israeli intelligence, Thai police arrested Hussein Atris—a Lebanese national who also carried a Swedish passport—at Bangkok’s Suvarnabhumi Airport as he attempted to flee the country. Another suspect, whose police composite portrait strongly resembled Naim Haris, a Hizballah recruiting agent whose photo Israeli officials had publicized a year earlier, escaped. Within days, police would issue an arrest warrant for Atris’s roommate, a Lebanese man who went by the name “James Sammy Paolo.”⁴⁹

Questioned over the weekend of January 12, Atris led police to a three-story building on the outskirts of Bangkok where he and his housemate had stockpiled some 8,800 pounds of chemicals used to make explosives. The materials were already distilled into

crystal form, a step in building bombs.⁵⁰ Information on international shipping forms found at the scene indicated at least some of the explosives—which were stored in bags marked as cat litter—were intended to be shipped abroad. Intelligence officials surmised that Hizballah had been using Thailand as an explosives hub—Atris had rented the space a year earlier—and decided to use its on-hand operatives and material to target Israeli tourists. The conclusion should not have been a surprise: U.S. officials had already determined that Hizballah was known to use Bangkok as a logistics and transportation hub, describing the city as “a center for a [Hizballah] cocaine and money-laundering network.”⁵¹

Amateur Hour

At the same time that Hizballah operatives were running sloppy operations around the world, the Qods Force was doing the same and worse. While counterterrorism officials worried about the increased operational tempo of Iranian-sponsored terrorism, including both operations carried out by Hizballah and the Qods Force’s new Unit 400, their concern focused on Tehran’s aggressive posture and intent to harm Western interests. The fact that Iran’s intentions were not yet coupled with the capability to act effectively on them gave Western officials only so much comfort. In time, they feared, both Hizballah and the Qods Force would be capable of carrying out deadly attacks targeting Western interests. The pace of Unit 400’s planned attacks underscored just how determined Iran was to attack Western interests. Yet the failure of all these plots pointed to the new unit’s still-limited capabilities.

The American ambassador to Baku may have breathed a sigh of relief when the plot targeting him and his staff was disrupted in February 2012, but other diplomatic missions across the globe would endure their own close calls at the hands of the Qods Force.⁵² Five attacks targeting Western diplomats were scheduled to be carried out as close to the February 12 anniversary of Mughniyah’s assassination as possible. The plot in Baku was foiled; another in Turkey was delayed; others would play out in India, Georgia, and Thailand.⁵³

On February 13, twin bombings targeted personnel from the Israeli embassies in New Delhi, India, and Tbilisi, Georgia. In both cases, Qods Force operatives encountered more sophisticated security arrangements than anticipated and so they settled for modest strikes. In India, an assailant on a motorcycle attached a magnetized “sticky bomb” to a car taking the Israeli defense attaché’s wife to pick up her children at school; the blast injured the woman, her driver, and a few bystanders. About three hours later, in Georgia, a similar sticky-bomb attack targeted a local citizen employed by the embassy, but was discovered and defused before doing any harm.⁵⁴ Just a month earlier, the deputy director of Iran’s uranium enrichment facility at Natanz, Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, was killed in a nearly identical sticky-bomb attack. Roshan was the fifth Iranian scientist to be assassinated, and the use of sticky bombs to target Israeli diplomats was a not-so-subtle message of retaliation from Iran.⁵⁵

The next day, February 14, in central Bangkok, police rushed to the scene of an explosion in the early afternoon at a home rented by a group of Iranians. Two barefoot men fled the house, but a third was injured and tried to hail a taxi to escape. When the taxi refused to stop, the injured man threw a bomb at the car, destroying half the vehicle and injuring the driver and four bystanders. Police soon cornered the injured suspect, who tried to throw another explosive at them but was too weak; the resulting explosion blew off both his legs. The other two men were soon caught—one was detained at the airport as he tried to catch a flight to Malaysia; the other managed to escape to Malaysia, where he was arrested boarding a flight to Iran. A Malaysian court ruled he would be extradited to Thailand. A fourth suspect, an Iranian woman who rented the house, was believed to have fled to Iran.⁵⁶

Unlike the Hizballah plot foiled just weeks earlier in Thailand, in this plot Qods Force operatives were targeting Israeli diplomats, Thai investigators determined. At the scene of the explosion, authorities found several undetonated devices, all homemade magnetic sticky bombs of the same type used in India and Georgia.⁵⁷ In time, investigators would tie the three attacks together not only based on the explosives used but

through phone records, travel documents, and money transfers. About a dozen Qods Force operatives coordinated their preparations for the attacks, which began ten months earlier in April 2011—not long after press reports tied the Stuxnet virus to Israel and the United States and the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Majid Shahriari to Israel. That month, Iranian operatives traveled to India and Thailand to scope out targets, followed by more trips in the summer and fall of 2011 to rent apartments, hire local help, arrange finances, and conduct surveillance. During his 2011 reconnaissance visits to India, Houshang Afshar Irani, identified by Indian police as the assailant who attached the bomb to the Israeli diplomatic vehicle in New Delhi, used a cell phone number that was also used in June 2011 in Tbilisi.⁵⁸ According to Israeli officials, cell phone calls and text messages between operatives in Thailand, India, and Azerbaijan also link the attacks.⁵⁹ Based on these findings and more, U.S. counterterrorism officials concluded that Iran was tied to the terrorist plots in Azerbaijan, Georgia, India, and Thailand.⁶⁰

In the case of the Thailand plot, senior Qods Force commander Majid Alavi reportedly arrived on the scene on January 19, 2012, after traveling through Malaysia on a diplomatic passport bearing a fictitious name. Responsible for Qods Force Unit 400, Alavi previously tracked Iranian dissidents in places as varied as London and Los Angeles. It was Alavi who ordered the attacks on Israeli diplomats to occur as close to the anniversary of Mughniyah’s death as possible.⁶¹

Yet despite the direct oversight of senior Qods Force officers, the attacks not only failed but also demonstrated pathetic tradecraft and operational security—the very strengths for which the Qods Force is usually known. Aside from reusing phone numbers and SIM cards across multiple operations, operatives traveled on Iranian passports, checked in to hotels as Iranians, carried Iranian currency in their wallets, and in at least one instance took off time from their surveillance to party with prostitutes. A group photo on one of the women’s cell phones helped identify accomplices who fled the country.⁶² In the words of one flabbergasted analyst, “It’s as if there’s a systematic policy of Iran recruiting low-rent, downright kooky terrorists.”⁶³

Instead of restoring Iran's damaged prestige, the attacks only further underscored Iran's operational limitations. Following the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran, the Qods Force gained prominence at the expense of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) over the latter's perceived soft-handed approach to suppressing political protests. Within the Qods Force, quick promotions of mediocre managers diluted the group's professional capabilities at the management level.⁶⁴ Desperate to quickly implement its new offensive strategy and exact revenge for covert attacks against Iran's nuclear program, the Qods Force traded speed for tradecraft and cut corners—compounding the problem. Qods Force planners were stretched thin by the rapid tempo of their new attack plan, and were forced to throw together random teams of operatives who had not trained together.⁶⁵

Worse, despite Iran's preference for signature attacks against embassies, diplomats, or other official targets—and despite concerns by U.S. intelligence that Iran was developing contingency plans for such attacks targeting the United States and its allies—Iranian planners found their chosen targets too well protected and settled for less-hardened targets.⁶⁶ In the end, not one of the five planned attacks could be considered an operational success. Ever since, Israeli officials say, the frustrated Iranian operatives have been “trying harder than ever” to execute successful attacks.⁶⁷

Indeed, the operational tempo would continue apace. In March 2012, the Israeli National Security Council's Counterterrorism Bureau warned of terrorist threats against Jewish and Israeli targets in Turkey. According to the Turkish press, the warning came less than a week after Israeli intelligence tipped off Turkish authorities about a Qods Force plot to be carried out by at least four individuals who crossed the border from Iran armed with weapons and materials.⁶⁸ The plot, again targeting Israeli diplomats, had originally been timed to coincide with the other plots in February but was postponed.⁶⁹ In May, yet another Hizballah attack targeting Israeli tourists was thwarted, this time at the Johannesburg airport in South Africa.⁷⁰

Also in March, forty-year-old Hamid Kashkouli, an Iranian PhD student at the University of Pune in India,

was deported for spying on Israeli nationals, a Jewish center, and a synagogue. According to Indian police, Kashkouli, who worked as a paid undercover agent of the Iranian government, traveled regularly to the Iranian consulate in Mumbai, where Iranian government officials met him, according to his driver. Intercepted emails revealed he was providing Iranian officials with pictures of Jewish people in the area and reporting on their business dealings.⁷¹

In June 2012, authorities in Nairobi, Kenya, arrested two Iranian nationals, both of them purportedly Qods Force operatives.⁷² Prior to the two men's arrest, Kenyan police reported, they had scouted out the Israeli embassy, the British High Commission, and other sites, leading authorities to conclude the pair were planning attacks targeting Israeli, U.S., British, or Saudi Arabian interests in Kenya or elsewhere in Africa.⁷³ The day after their arrest, one of the two operatives led authorities to thirty-three pounds of RDX explosives hidden under a bush at the Mombasa Golf Club, overlooking the Indian Ocean.⁷⁴ In a seeming effort to deflect attention from Iran, the Iranian operatives had apparently partnered with al-Shabab, the al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group in Somalia. This tie underscored how desperate Tehran was to see successful attacks carried out. Indeed, that interest has only grown more acute, as efforts to disrupt Iran's nuclear program—from sanctions to assassinations to covert sabotage of equipment—continue to gain momentum.

On July 7, a month after the Kenya plot was exposed, Cypriot authorities raided the hotel room of a twenty-four-year-old Lebanese-Swedish man traveling on a foreign passport. The suspect had in his possession photographs of Israeli targets in Cyprus, along with information on buses carrying Israeli tourists and Israeli flights to and from the island nation. According to press reports, the suspect initially denied ties to terrorist activity but later admitted to being a Hizballah operative.⁷⁵

Tragically, Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, were less fortunate. On July 18, 2012, at the height of the summer tourist season, a bomb destroyed one of seven tour buses in a caravan, killing the Bulgarian bus driver

and five Israelis and wounding some thirty more.⁷⁶ From the outset, Israeli officials publicly insisted—and anonymous American and British officials confirmed—that Lebanese Hezbollah was behind the attack.⁷⁷ “We are confident without any doubt,” Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak told CNN, “about the responsibility of Hezbollah [for] the actual execution of the operation—preparation, planning and execution.”⁷⁸ Nor, officials added, was the attack the work of rogue Hezbollah gunmen. “Nobody pushes the button in Burgas without Nasrallah’s approval,” explained an Israeli official close to the investigation.⁷⁹

In the months that followed, more threats arose, prompting Israeli travel advisories covering countries from Cyprus and Greece to Thailand, Bulgaria, and Ukraine.⁸⁰ All told, more than twenty terror attacks by Hezbollah or Qods Force operatives were thwarted over the fifteen-month period between May 2011 and July 2012; by another count, nine plots were uncovered over the first nine months of 2012.⁸¹ The key to all these attacks, however, whether carried out by Hezbollah or the Qods Force, was deniability. Both Hezbollah and Tehran wanted attacks carried out, but neither wanted to invite a full-fledged military response targeting them back in Lebanon or Iran. Indeed, ever since the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, Nasrallah has reportedly refused to approve any attacks along the Israel-Lebanon border for fear of sparking another full-scale war.⁸²

Contrary to conventional wisdom, however, while Hezbollah and the Qods Force have worked together on some plots—Baku in 2008, Istanbul in 2009, among others—in other cases they failed to deconflict their operational activities and found themselves engaged in completely disparate operations in the same place. When Hezbollah operatives laid the groundwork for a bombing in late 2011–early 2012 in Bangkok, they were apparently unaware that the Qods Force was also preparing for an attack in the same city. Whether the Qods Force was, in turn, ignorant of Hezbollah’s activities there is unclear, but the Iranians appear not to have known Hezbollah was using Bangkok as an explosives distribution hub. And even once Hezbollah operative Hussein Atris was arrested in January 2012, the Qods

Force operation there was not suspended. Similarly, within days after the explosion in Burgas—while the investigation into the bombing and the search for accomplices was at its height—Bulgarian authorities reportedly caught a Qods Force operative scoping out a synagogue in the country’s capital, Sofia.⁸³

Operation Radwan Continues

Even as Hezbollah remains committed to exacting revenge for Mughniyah’s death, IJO leaders grudgingly have begun to appreciate the difficulty of hitting a high-level Israeli abroad. Such targets are typically well protected, so while Hezbollah operational planners have continued to search for viable targets abroad, they have initiated parallel plans for attacks targeting Israeli officials inside Israel.⁸⁴ By leveraging networks of criminal associates who typically trade intelligence for drugs, and sometimes recruiting Israeli Arabs through ideological appeals to spy for the group, Hezbollah pursued at least two plots targeting Israeli officials within the country within a three-month period in 2012, both of which were thwarted.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, Iran has leveraged Hezbollah’s operational capabilities to actively support the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Hezbollah, the Treasury Department revealed in August 2012, had been providing “training, advice and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria’s increasingly ruthless efforts” against the opposition.⁸⁶ Most funerals for those killed in the fighting were quiet affairs, as Hezbollah tried to keep a lid on the extent of its activities in Syria, but news began to leak.⁸⁷ Hezbollah’s “resistance” rhetoric notwithstanding, U.S. officials informed the UN Security Council in October 2012, “the truth is plain to see: Nasrallah’s fighters are now part of Assad’s killing machine.”⁸⁸ Two months later, a UN report confirmed Hezbollah members were in Syria fighting on behalf of the Assad government.⁸⁹ By that time, reports had already emerged that Hezbollah had set up small training camps near Syrian chemical weapons depots in November 2012. According to one senior U.S. official, “The fear these weapons could fall into the wrong hands is our greatest concern.”⁹⁰

Conclusion

The net effect of Iran's shadow war against the West is that Hizballah and the Qods Force have climbed back up the list of immediate threats facing the United States and its allies. In July 2012, NCTC director Matthew Olsen warned that while Iran and Hizballah had not yet hit targets in the United States, U.S. officials worry that could soon change. "We're seeing a general uptick in the level of activity around the world," he noted, adding that "both Hezbollah and the Qods Force have demonstrated an ability to operate essentially globally." In fact, the Hizballah-Qods Force threat has sometimes eclipsed that of al-Qaeda. Olsen continued: "There are times when we are briefing the White House [on terror threats and] at the top of the list are Hezbollah or Iran."⁹¹

These threats are quite real, despite the failure of Hizballah and the Qods Force to register many successes in their recent operational blitz. In the case of Hizballah, this poor track record has much to do with the atrophying of the group's operational capabilities after 9/11. For the Qods Force, it reflects Tehran's desperate desire to exact quick revenge for covert attacks against its nuclear program. Hizballah and the Qods Force traded speed for tradecraft and reaped what they

sowed. In some cases, Iranian agents employed laughable operational security; in others, Iran dispatched bungling agents, like the Iranian-American car salesman Mansour Arbabsiar. But the recent failures of Hizballah and the Qods Force give Western counterterrorism officials little comfort. As the attack in Burgas demonstrated, terrorists learn from their mistakes, evolve, and adapt, and with sufficient determination they may carry out successful attacks even after a long string of failures.

Indeed, officials fear that both Hizballah and the Qods Force are likely to recover from their operational sloppiness. True, the world in general and the West in particular have become far more vigilant over the past several years, making it more difficult than before for terrorist groups to execute successful attacks. But Iranian leaders appear committed to a policy of targeting Western interests, not only in places where countermeasures may be comparatively underdeveloped (e.g., Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, India, Georgia, Thailand) but, if opportunities present themselves, even in world capitals like Washington, D.C. To be sure, Arbabsiar's guilty plea ends one chapter in Iran's shadow war against the West, but authorities must remain watchful for the plots yet to come.

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