

# Iranian Links to International Terrorism:

## The Khatemi Era

Jan 28, 1998



### Brief Analysis

**O**n January 7, 1998, Iran's President Khatemi told America-via CNN-that terrorism "should be condemned . . . and we condemn every form of it in the world." Khatemi also "denied categorically" reports that Iranian officials abroad regularly engage in acts of surveillance against Americans. These are encouraging words. However, a review of Iranian, Arab and American media reports shows that Iran's links to international terrorism appear to have continued unabated since he assumed office in August 1997. U.S. government officials from different agencies responsible for the fight against terror confirmed the thrust of these reports-that Iran remains active in support of international terrorism in each of the areas outlined below-though they did not comment on the veracity of the individual media citations. What is significant about the media reports is their cumulative weight from a variety of different sources, including many from Iran's own news agency. The following pattern of activity leads to continuing concern about Iran's support of international terrorism.

Official meetings/connections with terrorist organizations:

- In January 1998, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammed Sadr reportedly met with Hezbollah representatives in Lebanon, according to London's Al-Sharq al-Awsat.
- In November 1997, Mohsen Rez'ai, secretary of Iran's Expediency Council and former head of the Revolutionary Guards, received delegations of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah representatives in Iran, according to Iran's news agency, IRNA.
- In November 1997, IRNA reported that Hezbollah's Secretary General Husayn Nasrallah met in Damascus with Iran's Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi.
- In late October or early November 1997, a senior Iranian official reportedly met with representatives of the Egyptian al-Jihad and the Islamic Group, including Kamal 'Ujayzah, representing notorious terrorist leader Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Mustafa Hamzah, a primary suspect in the attempted assassination of President Mubarak, according to Cairo's Al-'Arabi.
- In late October 1997, Iranian Intelligence Ministry representatives reportedly convened a meeting in Tehran with members of more than twenty terrorist organizations, including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Egyptian al-Gamaat al-Islamiya, Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), and the Algerian Armed Islamic Group, according to al-Watan al-'Arabi.
- In October 1997, IRNA and others sources reported that Hezbollah's Nasrallah visited Iran and met with several senior Iranian officials, including President Khatemi, Spiritual Leader Khamenei, former President Rafsanjani,

and Commander of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, Yahya Safavi.

- In September or early October 1997, shortly after Secretary Albright's Middle East trip, a meeting reportedly was convened in Iran by several "senior officials of the Iranian security forces" (including Mohsen Rez'ai, Yahya Safavi, Minister Qorban 'Ali Najaf-Abadi, former ministers Ali Falahian and Mohammad Reshahri, and Hoseyn Shaykh-ol-Eslam, former assistant foreign minister) with several representatives of terrorist organizations, including, Ahmed Jibril, Ramadan Abudullah Shallah of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Abd al Hadi Hammadi and Imad Maghniyah of Hezbollah, a representative from Egypt's Islamic Group, and a Kuwait-based member of the Gulf Hezbollah. Rez'ai reportedly "reassured" the representatives that "Iran will never abandon them," according to Al Watan al Arabi.

Provision of military, financial and political support to Hezbollah: Since President Khatemi took office, Iran has continued to send regular weapons shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon through Damascus, according to Pinkerton's Risk Assessment and Israel's Channel 2 TV. This and other assistance Iran provides to Hezbollah amounts to an estimated \$60 million to \$100 million annually. Politically, President Khatemi has personally associated himself with Hezbollah. In October 1997, President Khatemi received Hezbollah Secretary General Nasrallah in Iran, after which Nasrallah noted Khatemi's personal support for both the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance movements against Israel: "I can confirm that the position of the Iranian leadership and of Mohammad Khatemi's government on the Lebanese and Palestinian peoples and their right to fight the occupation and liberate their usurped land has not changed at all from Iran's former position" (see Sharq al-Awsat). During Nasrallah's visit to Iran, both President Khatemi and Iran's Spiritual Leader Khomeini are also reported to have urged Hezbollah to recruit and expand its base of fighters, Reuters reported. Although President Khatemi and other Iranian leaders have drawn a distinction between terrorism-the killing of innocent civilians-and "legitimate resistance," it is important to note that Stefan Smirak, a would-be suicide bomber for Hezbollah with plans to attack civilian targets, such as shopping malls, was intercepted in Israel in November 1997.

Surveillance of U.S. military installations and diplomats abroad: In Bosnia, according to reports in the New York Times, Iranian intelligence agents are said to be "mounting extensive operations . . . and have infiltrated the American program to train the Bosnian army." More than 200 Iranian agents reportedly have been identified as having "insinuated themselves into Bosnian Muslim political and social circles . . . to gather information and thwart Western interests in Bosnia." These Iranian agents could be helpful in planning terrorist attacks against NATO forces or targets in Europe. In Tajikistan, according to reports in the Washington Times, the potential for terrorist attacks against Americans "has increased sharply" based on recent kidnappings, threats and the casing of U.S. diplomats by Iranian intelligence operatives. These reports say that the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security has been "collecting information" about U.S. official sites and individuals that could be used for "terrorist targeting." U.S. officials say they are also concerned that Iran continues its surveillance of U.S. military and diplomatic sites in the Persian Gulf.

Support of Middle East terrorist groups in South America's "tri-border" area: Since President Khatemi took office, the Cultural Attache at the Iranian Embassy in Argentina reportedly was asked to leave and not permitted to return to Argentina due to his possible connection to the 1992 and 1994 Jewish Cultural Center and Israeli Embassy bombings as well as his continued links to possible terrorist activity in Argentina and the "tri-border" area, according to U.S. officials and Pinkerton's Risk Assessment, citing Argentinian sources and documents. Although not publicly mentioning Iran, the Interior Ministers of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil met in mid-December 1997 to discuss increased activity by extremist Islamic organizations, including Hezbollah, in the tri-border area and agreed on steps to stem such activity, according to Paraguay's Asuncion Ultima Hora and Argentina's Buenos Aires Ambito Financiero. Most recently, a former Iranian diplomat has warned of an upcoming terrorist attack in Argentina or elsewhere in the "tri-border" area involving Iran and Argentinian officials reportedly "fear" possible future attacks,

according to Argentinian and Paraguayan reports cited by the BBC.

In addition to these four areas of clear Iranian linkage to international terrorism, there are at least two other areas of concern: Iran's connection to the Afghan-based and other foreign leaders of the Gamaat al-Islamiya group, some of whom claimed responsibility for the November terrorist massacre in Luxor (connection affirmed by the State Department spokesman); and Iran's assassination of Kurdish dissidents, eight of whom have been killed in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq since Khatemi took office. Together, this picture points to a pattern of continuing Iranian support of international terrorism, despite President Khatemi's claims to the contrary.

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