

# What If Iran Was Behind al-Khobar?

## Planning for a U.S. Response

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### Brief Analysis

**E**vidence continues to mount of a link between Iran and the Saudi national arrested in Canada for complicity in the bombing of the al-Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 U.S. military personnel last June. Although proof is not yet conclusive, the answer to "who bombed al-Khobar" may soon be clear. How the United States would respond to a finding of Iranian culpability, however, is far from clear. One route Washington is sure to avoid is the "line-of-least-resistance" taken by European countries after the verdict in the Mykonos case, in which a German court ruled that Iran's "highest political leaders" were guilty of state-sponsored terrorism. Their response, limited to recalling ambassadors and suspending the policy of "critical dialogue," so far amounts to little more than a diplomatic slap on the wrist. In contrast, in the recent past, European states have acted much more severely when there was less evidence of high-level foreign involvement. For instance, London severed relations with Syria for its role in the failed bombing of an El Al airliner in 1986, while both Britain and France lobbied for U.N. sanctions against Libya for the downing of Pan Am 103 in 1988 and UTA 772 in 1989. Iranian terrorism has already prompted the United States to impose a comprehensive economic embargo on Iran; if Iran is found complicit in the al-Khobar bombing it is imperative that the United States respond swiftly and forcefully.

Options for a Response: Essentially, there will be three courses of action available to the United States, in the event Iran is found responsible for the al-Khobar bombing:

International: With sufficiently damning evidence, the United States could take the case to the United Nations Security Council and seek the imposition of economic sanctions on Iran, along the lines of those imposed on Libya for Pan Am 103 and the UTA bombings. Indeed, by bolstering our arguments with the evidence from the Mykonos case and other Iranian misdeeds, the United States might even be able to build a case for comprehensive sanctions such as those currently imposed on Iraq.

Allied: Washington could focus its efforts on pressing Europe and Japan to terminate, not just suspend, their "critical dialogue" with Tehran and join forces with the United States in imposing their own economic sanctions.

Unilateral: Mindful of the need to respond quickly and visibly to any finding of Iranian responsibility for the murder of 19 U.S. servicemen, the United States could retaliate against Iran militarily.

Under present conditions, the third option may be our only realistic alternative. With Russian and Chinese ties to Iran deepening, the chance of getting meaningful sanctions through the Security Council without a veto are slim. Likewise, given the Europeans' reluctance to take economic measures against Tehran in the wake of the Mykonos verdict-where one of their own is the aggrieved party-they are unlikely to sign on to a U.S.-led international embargo. The desire to use al-Khobar to win European support for our tough containment of Iran will be intense, but focusing solely on a political and economic response is likely to absorb the energies of U.S. leaders-as well as the attention-span of the U.S. public-and leave Washington with little to show for its efforts.

Thus, if the FBI concludes that Iran was behind the al-Khobar attack, the most appropriate course is a military response. Moreover, such action must be taken in anger, not in sorrow. It is essential that Tehran recognize that al-Khobar is tantamount to an act of war and that the United States is prepared to respond with its full might.

Lessons from the Past: Since the fall of the Shah in 1978, the clerical regime in Tehran has been seeking to force the United States out of the Gulf. Iran has tried to cajole and coerce the Gulf Arab monarchies to abandon their alliances with the United States, and when these efforts have failed, Tehran has tried to overthrow their governments (e.g., Kuwait in the 1980s and Bahrain in the 1990s) or even launch outright military attacks (e.g., Silkworm attacks on Kuwait). The Iranians have employed terrorism, mined Gulf waters, attacked oil tankers, and threatened U.S. military forces at various times over the last 19 years. Thus, if Iran were behind the al-Khobar attack it would simply represent another escalation-albeit a major escalation-of Iran's campaign to evict the United States from the Gulf so that it can dominate the region.

Since 1979, two characteristics of the Iranian regime have become clear: it is encouraged by signs of weakness and deterred by shows of strength and resolve. U.S. experience in the Iran-Iraq War showed that responding to Iranian aggression in a restrained manner-such as blowing up unmanned oil rigs at sea-only encouraged Tehran to act more belligerently. However, when Washington acted decisively and with overwhelming force-such as in Operation Praying Mantis in April 1988, when the U.S. Navy destroyed half of the Iranian surface fleet-the Iranians backed down. Indeed, one reason that Iran eventually agreed to end the Iran-Iraq War on unfavorable terms was that Praying Mantis and subsequent U.S. actions (including the accidental downing of an Iranian civilian airliner) led Tehran to believe the United States was ready to go to war to compel Iran to concede.

Viewed more broadly, this pattern has been a familiar one throughout the history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East. Only when the United States has responded to attacks with overwhelming force has it succeeded in achieving its political objectives, and at minimal cost in U.S. lives (e.g., against Libya in 1982-1986, against Iran in 1988, and against Iraq in Operation Desert Storm in 1991). On the other hand, whenever the United States has acted with only partial resolve, the result has been heavy casualties with little to show the effort. For example, when we intervened in Lebanon with minimal forces and made clear that we had no interest in a wider conflict, we were defeated, humiliated and suffered the death of 300 U.S. Marines and diplomatic personnel in the process.

This is not to suggest that Washington should contemplate invading Iran or taking other military action whose goal would be to seek a regime change in Tehran. Such actions are unwarranted, unnecessary and impractical. Rather, the goal of any military strike should be to impose such a steep cost that the Iranian regime will be loath to contemplate an attack on American personnel ever again. Iran has a large number of military, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorist-related assets which are vulnerable to U.S. military power. Depending on the target and the expectation of Iranian resistance, many of these could be crippled, if not destroyed altogether, by U.S. air power in a short, sharp blow with a reasonable expectation of minimal U.S. casualties. But we must also be prepared for the possibility that Iran will lash out in response. Consequently, we must brace ourselves for the potential for more Iranian terrorist operations, as well as the possible need for sustained military action until Tehran recognizes that fighting the United States can only be a losing proposition and desists.

Finally, we must recognize that only forceful action will convince our reluctant European and East Asian allies to confront Iran. As the Libyan case makes clear, Washington has rarely been able to convince our allies to impose sanctions on a rogue regime unless and until we have demonstrated our willingness to resolve the situation unilaterally by force. Thus, forgoing a military response to Iran will not make it more likely that we will be able to bring the Europeans around to sanctions, as some proponents of the sanctions route contend; rather, it is likely to convince the Europeans that the United States is not serious about Iran and so they need not adopt sanctions either.

Conclusions: It is always a mistake to rush headlong into war. But a finding of Iranian responsibility for the al-Khobar bombing would constitute an act of war against the United States. The history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East shows that if we do not act forcefully when first challenged, we inevitably will be compelled to do so later, when our adversary is stronger and better prepared for a fight. As the evidence continues to mount and the case against Iran grows stronger, it is essential that Washington begin to lay the groundwork, both domestically and internationally, to ensure popular support and international understanding for U.S. actions.

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