



Policy Analysis /
PolicyWatch 212

Iranian Terror against Americans? Possible U.S. Responses

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Brief Analysis

The past week has seen speculation by Defense Secretary William Perry tying Iran to the recent bombing of U.S. military personnel in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia and a report in Time linking Iran to the downing of TWA 800. How might the U.S. respond if these reports are true?

A New Iranian Terrorist Campaign?

IfAfter reaching a low point in recent years, Iranian-sponsored terrorism is again on the rise. In the first half of 1996 Iran was involved in perhaps a dozen terrorist acts--more than for the entire previous year (seven incidents) and the highest number since 1992. These include the provision of cash rewards to Palestinian groups that carried out a deadly series of suicide bombings in Israel, and the murder of five Iranian oppositionists in Turkey, Pakistan, and Iraq in February and March; an attempt to smuggle a mortar and ammunition into Belgium for use in a terrorist operation in March; the despatch of a Hizballah terrorist to place a bomb on an Israeli El Al airliner in April (the bomber inadvertently blew himself up in his East Jerusalem hotel room); and the discovery of an Iranian-trained network engaged in efforts to overthrow the government of Bahrain in June.

Thus, whereas in recent years Iranian terrorism has almost exclusively focused on the assassination of dissidents abroad, this year Iranian terror has targeted Israel, aimed to subvert the Arab Gulf state of Bahrain, and may have resumed the targeting of American personnel and interests. Concerns that Iran has launched a new terrorist

campaign targeting Americans have been fed by reports that Tehran hosted a terrorist summit in late June in which it urged representatives of various terrorist groups to attack U.S. personnel and interests. Several weeks later, Supreme Leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i warned in a speech to Iranian TV and radio journalists that "all those countries which supported terrorism, especially the United States... will be hurt by terrorism.... We have said that the fire will spread to you too. They did not believe us.... The process has begun...."

The upshot of all this is that the world may be witnessing a new Iranian terrorist campaign, recalling the dark days of the 1980s. Believing that they succeeded in bringing down the government of Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, Iran's mullahs may now be trying to bring about the electoral defeat of President Bill Clinton this November in retaliation for his hard line towards Tehran.

The U.S. Response

If Iran was behind the Dhahran bombing or the crash of TWA 800, the U.S. is unlikely to find proof in the form of a "smoking gun." The U.S. may have to act on the basis of inconclusive data, rather than evidence capable of meeting the standards of a court, where guilt must be proved beyond a reasonable doubt. This could make it hard for the U.S. to convince its allies to support whatever steps it takes against Tehran. These should aim to: isolate Tehran internationally; strengthen economic sanctions on Iran; and deter Tehran from further acts of terror.

On the diplomatic level, the U.S. should lobby the international community to impose tough sanctions on Iran. While sanctions are unlikely to hinder Iran's ability to engage in terrorism, they raise the cost of doing so, feed popular dissatisfaction with the regime, and diminish Tehran's troublemaking potential by denying it the hard currency needed to purchase arms and the means to produce weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. should, moreover, seek to convince its allies to reduce the size of the official Iranian presence in their countries and restrict the movements of Iranian diplomats, to make it more difficult for intelligence personnel to use diplomatic cover to engage in terrorism or to provide logistical support to groups that do. In recent years, Iranian diplomats and officials have been involved in terrorist murders in Paris, Geneva, Berlin, Rome, and Vienna, among other places.

U.S. expectations of success in this area, however, should not be too high. America's European allies are unlikely to act against Iranian intelligence agents, much less cut off lucrative trade with Iran, particularly on the basis of ambiguous evidence. (German intelligence, in fact, has an official relationship with Iranian intelligence.) The U.S. should make it clear to Europe that its failure to more forcefully press Iran to cease its involvement in terrorism is creating a situation where a military confrontation between Iran and the U.S. may become inevitable. Such a confrontation is not in the interest of America, Iran, or Europe.

Military retaliation against Iran is risky. Iran has a high pain threshold, as shown during its long war with Iraq. And the last time the U.S. launched limited strikes in retaliation for Iranian provocations (while escorting oil tankers through the Iranian-mined Gulf in 1987-88) Iran fought back. Thus, the U.S. must be prepared for an escalation of hostilities and for casualties. On the other hand, Iran will avoid a direct confrontation when faced by overwhelming force and firm resolve. Khomeini ended the war with Iraq when he became convinced, inter alia, that the U.S. was entering the fighting on Iraq's side after the accidental downing of an Iranian Airbus in July 1988. The lesson here is that to succeed, retaliation against Iran must be massive. In this regard, specific steps available to the U.S. include military strikes on:

- Iran's terror infrastructure, including intelligence headquarters and terrorist training camps in Iran and possibly Lebanon. Causing real damage to this infrastructure may be difficult, however, since key personnel are likely to disperse and "lay low" if retaliation appears imminent.
- key conventional military capabilities, particularly those capable of disrupting shipping in the Gulf: Iran's advanced Su-24 strike aircraft, its two submarines, and its missile boats, coastal missile batteries, and mine storage depots.

This could dramatically weaken Tehran's ability to retaliate against the U.S.

- Iran's weapons of mass destruction production infrastructure, including declared civilian nuclear facilities and known missile, and chemical and biological weapon production and storage facilities. Experience in Iraq shows, however, that some capabilities are likely to survive an attack.
- oil production and refining facilities, thereby landing a knock-out blow to Iran's economy. Though such a step could be exploited by an unpopular regime to rally the Iranian people to its side (which would be an undesirable outcome for the U.S.), the imperative to retaliate might take precedence.

Counter-terrorism does not work overnight. It requires a sustained, broad-based international effort to succeed. Qadafi's response to the April 1986 raid on Libya was more terrorism: the downing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in December 1988. Only when faced by a strong international response in the form of UN sanctions did Qadafi cease actively sponsoring terror. Accordingly, if Iran has targeted America, a one-time unilateral response--however massive--might not deter further Iranian terrorism. The U.S. might have to strike repeatedly, while taking steps to reduce its vulnerability to potential Iranian retribution. To not retaliate would risk inviting further attacks. Thus, in responding to possible Iranian terrorism, the U.S. might find that it has few attractive options; the challenge for U.S. policymakers may well be to identify which actions are least undesirable.

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Policy #212



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