

Is Iran Looking to Inspire Shia Homegrown Violent Extremist Attacks?

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Amid a social media space rife with inflammatory content, two attacks last year showcased the willingness of Iran-inspired perpetrators to act.

An October 2018 report by the National Counterterrorism Center defined Shia homegrown violent extremists as “individuals who are inspired or influenced by state actors such as Iran, foreign terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, or Shia militant groups but who do not belong to these groups and are not directed by them.” At the time, the prospect of such Shia violence was largely theoretical, and officials could identify no tangible threats on American soil. But the January 2020 targeted killing of Iranian Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani changed the picture, and U.S. officials could now point to a “catalyzing event,” as envisioned in the NCTC brief. Last year’s attack against writer Salman Rushdie and another at a Las Vegas hotel exemplified how Iran-inspired individuals were motivated to act.

In this Policy Note, experts Moustafa Ayad and Matthew Levitt explore lone-offender Shia violence largely through the lens of social media. Closer tracking of online networks, they argue, could illuminate this flourishing virtual activity and how it might lead to real-world harm. ❖

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