

Terrorist Bombings in Iran: Implications and Potential Responses

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Brief Analysis

Although an Islamic State branch claimed the deadly blasts near a restive border zone, Tehran was quick to blame Israel and the United States, promising “severe retaliation” akin to what followed Qasem Soleimani’s death in 2020.

On January 3, exactly four years after Iranian general Qasem Soleimani was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Baghdad, two powerful bomb blasts rocked the roads leading to the cemetery where he was buried in the central Iranian city of Kerman. At least eighty-nine people were killed while gathering in the area for memorial services, and hundreds more were wounded.

Notably, those hit by the explosions were participants and bystanders located far from any VIP attendees. The carnage was reportedly carried out using remote-controlled, military-grade high-explosive bombs filled with metal pellets and nails aimed at inflicting maximum casualties. Both of the blasts were caused by suicide bombers.

Iranian media and officials were quick to point their fingers at Israel and the United States. They continued this line of argument even after the Afghanistan-based Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) officially claimed responsibility for the attack a day later and named the two bombers. According to their logic, the United States supposedly created ISKP’s parent organization, the Islamic State, and is still responsible for its actions.

Why Target Iran Now?

Besides being a radically anti-Shia movement, IS has a history of friction with Soleimani specifically. As commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Qods Force, he was in charge of Iranian efforts to

support Bashar al-Assad's regime in the Syrian civil war beginning around 2013—a campaign that included assembling an international army of Shia militias supervised by Iranian officers and even convincing Russia to enter the war. Soleimani also simultaneously led the combined militia/Qods Force campaign against IS in Iraq between 2011 and 2017.

Since those campaigns, the ISKP affiliate and other radical Sunni elements have repeatedly threatened or conducted terrorist attacks inside Iran. In September 2018, ISKP claimed an incident in which attackers stormed a military parade in the southwestern city of Ahvaz, resulting in the deaths of twenty-five people. Such elements were also deemed responsible for the stabbing attack in a Mashhad shrine on April 5, 2022, the storming of the Iranian parliament and Khomeini mausoleum in June 2017 (which killed seventeen people), and mass shootings at a Shiraz shrine **on October 26, 2022 (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-attacks-islamic-republic>)**, and August 13, 2023.

Notably, the most recent attack took place in Kerman province, the birthplace of Soleimani and a neighbor to the impoverished province of Sistan and Baluchestan. The latter province includes a 1,100-kilometer border with Pakistan and Afghanistan and 300 kilometers of coastline on the Gulf of Oman, making the area a major international drug smuggling corridor. As such, both provinces have seen frequent deadly gun battles between Iranian forces and heavily armed drug smugglers and insurgents.

Possible Iranian Responses

When IS was deemed responsible for past attacks, the IRGC retaliated by launching ballistic missiles and long-range drones against IS targets in Syria's Deir al-Zour province: once in June 2017 after the parliament and mausoleum attacks, and again in October 2018 after the Ahvaz parade attack. Planning and implementing each response took about ten days.

If Iran decides to fulfill its promise of “severe revenge” and singles out IS, then the coming days might see one or more waves of missiles and drones hit ISKP strongholds in portions of eastern Afghanistan bordering Pakistan. To have any serious effect, such strikes would require accurate and timely intelligence with **possible cooperation from the Taliban government (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/next-afghan-jihad-taliban-efforts-contain-iskp>)**, which has publicly condemned the Kerman attack and offered sympathy to the Iranian government and people.

At the same time, however, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, IRGC commanders, and other senior Iranian figures continue to blame Israel and the United States for the bombings. The IRGC can therefore be expected to double down on its indirect attacks in and from Iraq and Syria, perhaps ordering its proxy militias to launch **more drone/rocket strikes (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis>)** at Israeli and U.S. targets around January 8—the anniversary of Iran's ballistic missile strike on al-Asad Air Base in Iraq shortly after Soleimani's death in 2020. The regime might also conduct more maritime strikes similar to the December 24 missile attack on the oil tanker *Chem Pluto*. Finally, Tehran could decide to order acts of terrorism against Israeli citizens in the region or beyond.

Farzin Nadimi is a senior fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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