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Rouhani's Threat to Shut the Strait of Hormuz—More Than Bluster?

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Thirty-five years of historical precedent make clear that Tehran will lash out if it feels cornered.

ast week, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani https://www.cnbc.com/2018/12/04/iranian-president-hassan-rouhani-threatens-to-close-strait-of-hormuz.html) that if the United States blocks Iran's oil exports, then "no oil will be exported from the Persian Gulf." This may be nothing more than hot air, but as tensions mount over the re-imposition of U.S. sanctions and Iran's increasing malign activities around the world—assassination plots (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-denmark-security/iranian-spy-service-suspected-of-assassination-plot-in-denmark-security/chief-idUSKCN1N41N4?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews) in Europe, fomenting instability (https://www.voanews.com/a/us-accuses-iran-of-flooding-unstable-regions-with-advanced-weaponry/4680843.html) in the region, ballistic missile tests (https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/01/politics/iran-medium-range-ballistic-missile-test-pompeo/index.html) , and more—Iranian threats against its Gulf neighbors cannot be ignored.

In fact, one could make the argument that this week marks the unhappy anniversary of three and a half decades of Iranian terrorist proxy warfare in the region. Thirty-five years ago this week, on December 12, 1983, Iran sent Lebanese and Iraqi Shi'a terrorist proxies to carry out a series of coordinated bombings (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/29-years-later-echoes-of-kuwait-17) over the course of two hours. The attacks targeted Western interests in Kuwait, including the U.S. and French embassies, the Kuwaiti airport, a site near the Raytheon Corporation's grounds, a Kuwait National Petroleum Company oil rig, and a government-owned power station. The seventh attack, outside a post office, was defused. Six people were killed and some 87 wounded in the attacks.

The bombings took Kuwaiti officials by surprise, but the damage could have been much worse—perhaps worse than that in the Beirut bombings—had the bombs been properly wired. As it happened, faulty engineering prevented three quarters of the explosives planted at the American embassy compound from detonating, saving many lives. Shoddy planning also reduced the destructiveness of the attacks: a truck carrying two hundred gas cylinders primed to explode at the National Petroleum Company site went off 150 yards from a refinery and just a few yards shy of a pile of flammable chemicals. Had the truck been better placed, some commented, the oilfield might have burned for months. More adept operational planning might also have resulted in the destruction of Kuwait's primary water-desalination plant, located within the premises.

Over the course of the next few years, Iran would continue to dispatch operatives from Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Dawa, and a variety of local Shi'a militants from Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia to carry out attacks on Tehran's behalf across the region. As early as 1985, the CIA would note (https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-

RDP88B00443R001604280005-9.pdf) that "Iran generally employs radical Lebanese or Iraqi Shi'a groups in its terrorist operations." More than three decades later, Tehran has perfected the use of what it now describes as a "Shi'a Liberation Army (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/08/irgc-commander-discusses-afghan-militia-shia-liberation-army-and-syria.php)." under the command of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force, to foment regional instability and project Iranian power beyond its borders.

Seventeen operatives were convicted and jailed in Kuwait for their roles in the December 1983 plots, including three Lebanese Hezbollah operatives. One was a cousin of Hezbollah leader Hussein al-Musawi, while another was Mustafa Badredinne, brother-in-law and cousin of Hezbollah terrorist mastermind Imad Mughniyeh. Their incarceration led to many more terrorist plots around the world aimed, at least in part, in securing their freedom.

For example, on December 3, 1984, Hezbollah operatives hijacked Kuwait Airways flight 221, killed two Americans, and demanded the release of the so-called "Kuwait 17." Hezbollah operatives hijacked Kuwait Airways flight 422 in April 1988, killing a Kuwaiti citizen and again demanding the release of the Kuwait 17.

But the most brazen plot occurred in May 1985, when a car filled with explosives rammed the royal motorcade of the Emir of Kuwait, killing three people and injuring 12, including the Emir, who suffered minor lacerations. "We hope the Emir has received our message," an <u>anonymous caller warned</u>

(https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000256586.pdf) on behalf of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization, "we ask one more time for the release of those held or all the thrones of the Gulf will be shaken." Just ten days earlier, Hezbollah issued another warning to the United States, France, and Kuwait demanding the release of the Kuwait 17. American and French hostages were being held to force Washington and Paris into pressuring Kuwait to release the 17 jailed terrorists, according to a note that accompanied the photos of four American and two French hostages. The note threatened (https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000256586.pdf). "horrible catastrophe" for the hostages if the Kuwait 17 were not released. An anonymous caller (https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000256586.pdf). told a French news agency that "the U.S. government should await the largest military operation it has ever known," adding, "[We have] been preparing this surprise for a long time." The caller also threatened to target Kuwaiti diplomats worldwide. Iranian proxy agents struck ten days later, but instead of targeting American or French interests, or Kuwaiti diplomats, they came very close to assassinating the Kuwaiti emir in his own backyard. Once more, the plot was carried out by a combination of Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Dawa operatives.

In these and other attacks, Lebanese and Iraqi operatives acted in the explicit service of Iran. In 1986, the CIA assessed in a now-declassified report that, while Iran's support for terrorism was meant to further its national interests, including dissuading Kuwait from supporting Iraq militarily in the Iran-Iraq War, this support also stemmed from the clerical regime's perception "that it has a religious duty to export its Islamic revolution and to wage, by whatever means, a constant struggle against the perceived oppressor states."

Iran increased its involvement in international terrorism in 1987, the CIA noted (https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000258644.pdf) in a February 1988 report, including terrorist plots well beyond Lebanon's borders in Europe and the Gulf. For Kuwait, these included bombings targeting Kuwaiti oil installations in January, April, and May. In July, two Kuwaiti brothers who underwent sabotage training in Iran died when the bomb they were placing in front of the building housing the Air France ticket office detonated prematurely. As the year closed out, Iranian proxy operatives carried out arson and bombing attacks at Kuwait University, the Pan American ticket office, the Ministry of Interior, and the office of a U.S.-owned insurance company. "Iranian leaders view terrorism as an important instrument of foreign policy," the report assessed

(https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000258644.pdf), "which in 1987 they were willing to use to advance national goals and to export the regime's Islamic revolutionary ideals." Describing what Iran did in 1987 and could well be planning again today, the report noted that "Tehran used the threat of terrorism, along with attacks on Gulf

shipping, to discourage Kuwait and the other moderate Arab Gulf states from supporting the U.S. reflagging effort."

Even back in the 1980s, Iran understood the utility of having non-Iranian Shi'a forces at its disposal to carry out attacks that provide Tehran with a measure of reasonable deniability. Together, Tehran already understood, Iran and its allied Shi'a militants could achieve asymmetric victories over larger, more powerful adversaries. The CIA assessed (https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000258644.pdf) in early 1988 that "in the Iranian view, Tehran and its Shi'a allies forced the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Lebanon, humiliating the United States and bringing into question the idea that Washington could use its military forces to influence political developments in the Middle East."

Iranian leaders drew parallels between what Iran and its militant Shi'a allies achieved with the 1983 and 1984 U.S. embassy and Marine barracks bombings in Beirut and what they could do then, in 1987, to disrupt U.S. plans to protect Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Gulf.

There are several reasons to be concerned that Iran may be making similar calculations today, and that Rouhani's threat to shut the Strait of Hormuz might be something more than bluster. The sanctions re-imposed by the United States are tremendously impactful, even without full European cooperation. And Europe appears willing to consider some more sanctions in the wake of Iranian assassination plots in Europe and an escalation in Iranian ballistic missile testing in violation of existing UN security resolutions. If Iran feels cornered, it may lash out. And it would have the means to do so through its allies—whether that means rocket attacks against Israel from Hamas and Hezbollah, attacks on coalition forces in Iraq, or attacks targeting Gulf states. In fact, some of the people leading Iran's most capable proxy forces today first cut their teeth in the Kuwait operations back in the 1980s. Consider people like Lebanese Hezbollah leaders Fuad Shukr and Talal Hamiyeh (https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/10/274722.htm), both of whom played key roles in Hezbollah attacks in the 1980s and are senior operational leaders today. Perhaps it should not surprise that under their leadership Hezbollah has not only dispatched terrorist operatives around the world, but also maintained large caches of weapons (https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/10/274726.htm) in places in Nigeria and Kuwait.

But the most prominent example involves Jamal Jafar Muhammad Ali, better known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-

releases/Pages/tg195.aspx), one of the operatives convicted in absentia for his role in the 1983 Kuwait bombings and the 1985 plot to assassinate the Emir of Kuwait. Back then, Muhandis was a young Iraqi Dawa operative who worked hand-in-glove with Lebanese Hezbollah operatives. Muhandis went on to lead the Badr Corps, the militant wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). As head of the Badr Corps, Muhandis worked directly with the Qods Force, became an Iranian citizen, and served as a senior advisor to Qods Force leader General Qassem Suleimani. Today, Muhandis leads Kataib Hezbollah, one of the most extreme Iraqi Shi'a militant groups and a key part of Iran's network of Shi'a militant allies.

"Export of the revolution is a central tenet of the clerical regime in Iran, and terrorism has been a primary instrument in advancing this objective," the CIA assessed (https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP97R00694R000600100001-3.pdf). in 1986. Even after all these years, exporting the revolution remains the prime directive of the Qods Force and its Shi'a militant allies. Retired IRGC commander Brigadier General Mohammad Ali Falaki explained in 2016 that Tehran's proxy forces—from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and beyond—together form "a Shi'a Liberation Army whose commander is [Qods Force leader] Hajj Qassem Soleimani." Iranians may lead some of these units, but "Iranian forces are not meant to comprise all of this army," he explained.

Today, Iran provides weapons, training, funding, and intelligence support to component elements of this Shi'a Liberation Army. On display in a hangar at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in Washington, DC, is a collection of Iranian weapons (https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/29/politics/us-iran-weapons/index.html).—from small arms (https://www.google.com/imgres? imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fgdb.voanews.com%2F92d62a68-60b5-4503-83cf-f1e39846ce05_tv_w650_r1.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.voanews.com%2Fa%2Fus-accuses-iran-of-flooding-unstable-regions-with-advanced-weaponry%2F4680843.html&docid=4jzYu0EPNkdMzM&tbnid=xsBcfla1NXn4cM%3A&vet=10ahUKEwis7c2OpZbfAhWxUt8KHc-bCHQQMwhuKCIwIg..i&w=650&h=366&safe=off&bih=938&biw=1920&q=iran%20material%20display%20small%20arms&ved=0ahUKEwis7c2OpZbfAhWxUt8KHc-bCHQQMwhuKCIwIg&iact=mrc&uact=8) and grenades (https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fgdb.voanews.com%2FEB36CEF9-2F21-4AFD-8D4E-EFEEEB0D838E_w650_r0_s.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.voanews.com%2Fa%2Fus-accuses-iran-of-flooding-unstable-regions-with-advanced-weaponry%2F4680843.html&docid=4jzYu0EPNkdMzM&tbnid=51500N7vZ28o3M%3A&vet=10ahUKEwixr-

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 $\label{limp.019HJRSxmF0\#imgrc=K6R80HPHAh8nrM:} guided \ missiles, \ and \ \underline{drones\ (https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fgdb.voanews.com%2F7ACC4125-3342-497A-BFDA-C9D24E138120_w650_r0_s.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.voanews.com%2Fa%2Fus-accuses-iran-of-flooding-unstable-regions-with-advanced-limp.$

weaponry%2F4680843.html&docid=4jzYu0EPNkdMzM&tbnid=ubfPwtXmfWPf8M%3A&vet=10ahUKEwirwua7pJbfAhWpc98KHQiKCXAQMwhJKAowCg..i&w=650&h=433&safe=off&l —which Iran supplied to proxies in Afghanistan, Bahrain, and Yemen.

Among the other weapons systems on display at the so-called Iran Material Display (https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/29/politics/us-iran-weapons/index.html) were unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) capable of carrying explosive payloads and a remote controlled Shark-33 boat of the type that was filled with explosives and targeted the Saudi frigate HMS al-Madinah in January 2017. Technicians collected ninety sets of GPS coordinates from the boat's remote control computer system, including locations in the Red Sea, in Yemen, in the Strait of Hormuz, and in Iran. GPS coordinates for one of two locations in Tehran corresponds to the Self-Sufficiency Jihad Organization (https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/07/272635.htm), which is responsible for the research and development of Iran's ballistic missiles, among other things. In fact, images found on the Shark-33 computer guidance system show the likely production, assembly, or testing of at least seven additional such computers at this IRGC facility in eastern Tehran. In one picture, an IRGC hat sits on top of one of the boxes. Iran, it appears, is actively producing and providing to its proxies weapons systems specifically intended to threaten freedom of navigation—which explains why officials take seriously the Iranian President's threats to prevent the export of oil through the Strait of Hormuz.

This new evidence of Iran's missile proliferation is compelling, and represents evidence of clear violations of several UN Security Council resolutions banning Iran from exporting weapons. But it is only the latest manifestation of Iran's support for terrorist activities targeting its neighbors in the Gulf and beyond—something that can be traced back to events in Kuwait that took place 35 years ago this week.

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American Interest



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