

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

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Articles & Testimony

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

Last week, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani [threatened](https://www.cnn.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 [anonymous caller warned](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

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.

But the most prominent example involves Jamalafar 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.

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 \(https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/29/politics/us-iran-weapons/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/29/politics/us-iran-weapons/index.html) – from [small arms \(https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fgdb.voanews.com%2F92d62a68-60b5-4503-83cf-f1e39846ce05_tv_w650_r1.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.voanews.com%2Fa%2Fus-accuses-iran-of-flooding-unstable-regions-with-advanced-weaponry%2F4680843.html&docid=4jzYu0EPNkdMzM&tbnid=xsBcfla1NXn4cM%3A&vet=10ahUKewis7c2OpZbFhWxUt8KHc-bCHQOMwHuKCIwlg..i&w=650&h=366&safe=off&bih=938&biw=1920&q=iran%20material%20display%20small%20arms&ved=0ahUKEwis7c2OpZbFhWxUt8KHc-bCHQOMwHuKCIwlg&iact=mrcc&uact=8\)](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=10ahUKewis7c2OpZbFhWxUt8KHc-bCHQOMwHuKCIwlg..i&w=650&h=366&safe=off&bih=938&biw=1920&q=iran%20material%20display%20small%20arms&ved=0ahUKEwis7c2OpZbFhWxUt8KHc-bCHQOMwHuKCIwlg&iact=mrcc&uact=8) and [grenades \(https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fgdb.voanews.com%2FEB36CE9F-2F21-4AFD-8D4E-EFEEB0D838E_w650_r0_s.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.voanews.com%2Fa%2Fus-accuses-iran-of-flooding-unstable-regions-with-advanced-weaponry%2F4680843.html&docid=4jzYu0EPNkdMzM&tbnid=5I500N7vZ28o3M%3A&vet=10ahUKEwixr-CkpZbFhAhXS98KHcJvD2MQMwhpKB0wHQ..i&w=650&h=433&safe=off&bih=938&biw=1920&q=iran%20material%20display%20grenade&ved=0ahUKEwixr-CkpZbFhAhXS98KHcJvD2MQMwhpKB0wHQ&iact=mrcc&uact=8\)](https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fgdb.voanews.com%2FEB36CE9F-2F21-4AFD-8D4E-EFEEB0D838E_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=5I500N7vZ28o3M%3A&vet=10ahUKEwixr-CkpZbFhAhXS98KHcJvD2MQMwhpKB0wHQ..i&w=650&h=433&safe=off&bih=938&biw=1920&q=iran%20material%20display%20grenade&ved=0ahUKEwixr-CkpZbFhAhXS98KHcJvD2MQMwhpKB0wHQ&iact=mrcc&uact=8) to short range ballistic missiles (<https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fcdn.defenseone.com%2Fmedia%2Fimg%2Fupload%2F2018%2F05%2F08%2Fmissile%2Fdefense-large.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defenseone.com%2Fpolitics%2F2018%2F05%2F08%2Fmissile%2Fdefense-next%2F148062%2F&docid=hRy-nEMLUrkrMM&tbnid=9ctnr7lsn4a1jM%3A&vet=10ahUKEwjzudLppJbfAhXsQ98KHVG9BOMQMwhIKAgwCA..i&w=710&h=325&safe=off&bih=938&biw=1920&q=iran%20material%20display%20missile&ved=0ahUKEwjzudLppJbfAhXsQ98KHVG9BOMQMwhIKAgwCA>), surface to air missiles (<https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fforeignpolicy.mg.files.wordpress.com%2F2018%2F11%2Fgettyimages-1066396594.jpg&3Fw%3D1500%26h%3D1000%26crop%3D0%2C0%2C0%2C0&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fforeignpolicy.com%2F2018%2F11%2F29%2Ffacing-sharp-rebuke-on-saudi-ties-u-s-points-to-growing-iran-threat%2F&docid=aT6ip5N5e20ijM&tbnid=WWtPDskyeomk3M%3A&vet=10ahUKEwjzudLppJbfAhXsQ98KHVG9BOMQMwhrKBAwEA..i&w=1500&h=1000&safe=off&bih=938&biw=1920&q=iran%20material%20display%20missile&ved=0ahUKEwjzudLppJbfAhXsQ98KHVG9BOMQMwhrKBAwEA>), anti-tank (https://www.google.com/search?safe=off&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS806US808&biw=1920&bih=938&tbn=isch&sa=1&ei=BuUOXJqAG8fp_Qb-jlAw&q=iran+material+display+shark+33&oq=iran+material+display+shark+33&gs_l=img.3...19033.21014..21246...0.0..0.53.386.9.....1....1.gws-wiz-1066396594.jpg&3Fw%3D1500%26h%3D1000%26crop%3D0%2C0%2C0%2C0&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fforeignpolicy.com%2F2018%2F11%2F29%2Ffacing-sharp-rebuke-on-saudi-ties-u-s-points-to-growing-iran-threat%2F&docid=aT6ip5N5e20ijM&tbnid=WWtPDskyeomk3M%3A&vet=10ahUKEwjzudLppJbfAhXsQ98KHVG9BOMQMwhrKBAwEA), guided missiles, and [drones \(https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fgdb.voanews.com%2F7ACC4125-3342-497A-BFDA-C9D24E138120_w650_r0_s.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.voanews.com%2Fa%2Fus-accuses-iran-of-flooding-unstable-regions-with-advanced-weaponry%2F4680843.html&docid=4jzYu0EPNkdMzM&tbnid=ubfPwtXmfWPf8M%3A&vet=10ahUKEwirwua7pJbfAhWpc98KHQoiKCAQMwhJKAwCg..i&w=650&h=433&safe=off&bih=938&biw=1920&q=iran%20material%20display%20missile&ved=0ahUKEwirwua7pJbfAhWpc98KHQoiKCAQMwhJKAwCg\)](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-weaponry%2F4680843.html&docid=4jzYu0EPNkdMzM&tbnid=ubfPwtXmfWPf8M%3A&vet=10ahUKEwirwua7pJbfAhWpc98KHQoiKCAQMwhJKAwCg..i&w=650&h=433&safe=off&bih=938&biw=1920&q=iran%20material%20display%20missile&ved=0ahUKEwirwua7pJbfAhWpc98KHQoiKCAQMwhJKAwCg) – which Iran supplied to proxies in Afghanistan, Bahrain, and Yemen.

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.

American Interest



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Feb 11, 2022

•
Farzin Nadimi

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Feb 9, 2022

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