

Takfiris in Tehran: The Sectarian Face of Iranian Counterterrorism

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Brief Analysis

While the severity of the Sunni extremist threat inside Iran is debatable, the regime's recent operations against suspected terrorists highlight its pattern of exploiting sectarian sentiment to bolster its regional adventurism.

On June 14, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence launched a series of operations leading to the arrest of ten "Wahhabi takfiri terrorists" in Tehran and three other provinces. Following the initial announcement of the crackdown on June 19, Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi provided further details about the captured suspects two days later. According to him, "their plan was to attack several crowded spots using remote bombs and car bombs"; they had prepared a list of fifty targets in all. Agents also reportedly seized about one kilogram of explosive material and used "sophisticated measures" to prevent the delivery of two tons more to "terrorists." Video clips claiming to show the sting [have been posted to the website of Fars News \(http://www.farsnews.com/MediaDisplay.aspx?nn=13950329000450\)](http://www.farsnews.com/MediaDisplay.aspx?nn=13950329000450), a media outlet affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

The actual scope and severity of this threat remain uncertain for now, but the rhetoric surrounding the regime's response holds clear domestic implications. In addition to treating terrorist infiltration as a political football in recent years, various officials have been using loaded words like "takfir" to rally the public behind Tehran's sectarian regional agenda.

WHAT IS TAKFIR IN THE IRANIAN CONTEXT?

"Takfir" is a derogatory term referring to the practice of excommunicating fellow Muslims. It is typically associated with al-Qaeda, the Islamic State (IS), and other violent Sunni Islamist groups, who often apply the label to Muslims who do not share their worldview as justification for harming or killing them. Although these groups

are not monolithic in theory or practice, such nuances are usually ignored in Iranian media and regime statements, which tend to call all violent Sunni extremists "takfiris" in order to highlight their practice of excommunicating other Muslims. Thus, Iranian discourse often paints Wahhabism, Salafism, and other conservative Sunni movements with the same takfiri brush.

Historically, the definition of takfir was much more limited, and the term was rarely applied. In modern times, however, many Sunni extremist groups have used it to broadly target any Muslims -- whether Shiite or Sunni -- who do not believe in the necessity of establishing an Islamic government that implements sharia, calling them infidels even if they practice the religion devoutly in all other senses. But since anti-Shiism is a common element among Salafists and other Sunni offshoots, their use of takfir comes across differently to Iranian ears -- namely, as a way to target Shiites because they are Shiites, not because of any supposed failure to follow the modern ideological elements of revolutionary Salafism.

Ironically, revolutionary Islam is the ideological basis for the Iranian regime itself, which shares the takfiri belief in establishing rigid Islamic governance. But "takfiri" is nevertheless a loaded word capable of mobilizing the Shiite masses against Salafists and Wahhabis by highlighting the sectarian elements of their identity and appealing to primordial religious sentiments. It also allows the regime to equate the most violent Salafist groups with Wahhabism in general, and therefore with Saudi Arabia, the birthplace and foremost exporter of that brand of Islam. Indeed, Tehran constantly depicts the Saudi government as the main supporter and funder of violent Islamist entities, especially IS. This takfiri approach to anti-Saudi propaganda allows the regime to portray its tensions with Riyadh less as a political/economic rivalry between two countries than as a deeper conflict based on perennial sectarian differences.

The most immediate goal of such rhetoric is to build public support for the regime's heavy military deployments abroad, especially in Syria. Tehran has long sought to convince the people that such interventions are not meant to prevent a foreign state from falling apart, but rather to counter the enemies of Iran and the Shiite community in general -- a fight that is better conducted outside Iran. Whatever real threat IS may or may not pose to the Islamic Republic, the regime needs to portray it as dire, while casting itself as the Shiites' main guarantor of protection against Sunni hegemonic advances in the region. From Tehran's perspective, this is the only way of persuading Iranians to support unlimited political, financial, and military efforts against "takfiri" advances wherever they may occur.

COUNTERTERRORISM AS A POLITICAL TOOL

In recent years, various political and religious officials have gone public with sometimes opaque, even contradictory reports regarding takfiri infiltration of Iran and regime interdiction of supposed terrorist plots. It is unclear whether they are more concerned about stemming the ideological influence of takfiris at home, preventing potential terrorist attacks, or using the issue as a political tool in the factional conflict between Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's hardline camp and President Hassan Rouhani's circle. For instance, Minister Alavi claimed that the latest counterterror sting began on June 14, but two days later, police chief Gen. Hossein Ashtari denied that any takfiri or IS elements had entered the country, stating, "There were only some little efforts made by them on the borders which were dismantled in timely fashion by Iranian military forces."

Numerous other officials have warned about the dangers of infiltration in the past, including judiciary chief Sadeq Larijani and Qom-based religious leader Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi, who is close to Khamenei's camp. For example, on October 17, 2013, Shirazi warned of a Wahhabi/takfiri plan to change Iran's demographic fabric by purchasing lands owned by Shiites, especially in Mashhad, Shiraz, and Urmia.

Alavi has made past claims of infiltration as well, though with a more direct terrorist flavor. In a May 29, 2015,

speech prior to Tehran's Friday prayer sermon, he claimed that authorities had prevented takfiris from carrying out a series of terrorist attacks the previous year on Qods Day gatherings in Shiraz and Zahedan. He specifically referred to several Iranian armed opposition groups such as Ansar al-Furqan and Jundallah; although the leaders of these groups (Hesham Azizi and Abdul Malek Rigi, respectively) were killed by the regime years ago, Tehran has indicated that their cadres remain active. Alavi also claimed that takfiris were planning to poison food at a religious center in Tehran and bomb Masoumeh Shrine in Qom. "All cells and teams affiliated with IS have been discovered and arrested one after the other," he declared.

Yet when officials affiliated with Rouhani have made similar claims, hardliners have been quick to attack them. On December 20, 2015, former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani "revealed" that three takfiris had crossed Iran's eastern borders to carry out bombing plots against a Friday prayer gathering in Tehran, the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad, and the Masoumeh Shrine. In response, Hossein Zolfaqari, the interior minister's security deputy, called the claims inaccurate, while other hardliners accused Rafsanjani of spreading false reports to tarnish the Intelligence Ministry and weaken the Supreme Leader. They also argued that he was using such reports for various selfish reasons: namely, to deflect attention from his close relations with the Saudi royal family, to show that Iran's security and military decisionmaking has been suffering since those portfolios were taken away from him, and to exact revenge for his son's imprisonment on financial corruption charges.

In general, hardliners contend that the secret of Iran's power in the region comes from its revolutionary ideology, and from its military capacity to advance that ideology by extending its strategic depth on two fronts: close to Israel's borders via involvement in Syria and Lebanon, and further into Iraqi territory via Shiite militias and other tools. This plays well in the Rouhani/Khamenei rivalry. In the Supreme Leader's view, only military strength can secure Iran's interests and protect it against superpower bullying, since mere diplomacy is insufficient to counter the hostile policies of the West, especially the United States. In line with his characterization of Washington as an utterly untrustworthy player, Khamenei believes this animosity would not go away if he were to change his policies.

This longstanding propaganda campaign has been so successful in recent years that even Qasem Soleimani -- head of the IRGC's Qods Force and thus the poster boy for foreign interventionism -- has become a national hero in the eyes of many Iranians, including those who otherwise oppose the regime's policies. As the *Daily Mail* reported this week, the general made inflammatory statements about Bahrain on June 20, warning the island's government that its actions against a top Shiite cleric were a step too far. In the process, he signaled that Khamenei's camp will not rely on diplomacy and negotiation to handle regional crises; rather the IRGC will ignore the Rouhani government when it comes to key issues in the Middle East.

Indeed, hardliners have consistently argued that it is IRGC warriors, not Rouhani's diplomats, who are responsible for pushing the enemy back, even at the negotiating table. This claim goes hand in hand with their tendency to exaggerate the IS threat and identify it with Saudis and Salafis. Ultimately, such rhetoric helps the regime portray the national security role of the Qods Force and IRGC as being much more important than what it might be in reality.

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