

Changing Iran Trends in the Worldwide Threat Assessment

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Brief Analysis

The past two editions of the annual intelligence report show a marked shift away from discussing Iran's hegemonic regional ambitions and terrorism sponsorship.

Each year, the director of national intelligence presents Congress with a "Worldwide Threat Assessment" detailing the range of security threats to the United States, with the latest edition released this February. Below is a list of quotes from past and present assessments discussing Iran's regional posture and the role of its proxies.

CALLING OUT IRAN'S HEGEMONIC GOALS

"In the Middle East, Iran and its neighbors see a strategic shift: Iran's influence is rising in ways that go beyond the menace of its nuclear program. The fall of the Taliban and Saddam, increased oil revenues, HAMAS's electoral victory, and Hizballah's perceived recent success in fighting against Israel all extend Iran's shadow in the region." ([page 5, 2007 edition](#))

(<http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/070111/negroponte.pdf>)

"Iran remains a threat to regional stability and US interests in the Middle East...Tehran's leadership seeks to preserve Iran's Islamic revolutionary government, sovereignty, stability, and territorial integrity while expanding Iran's influence and leadership in the region and the Islamic world." ([p. 24, 2008](#)) (<http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/testimony/348.pdf>)

"Iran's leaders perceive that regional developments...have given Tehran more opportunities and freedom to pursue its objectives of becoming a regional power. This perception has produced a more assertive Iranian foreign policy in which Tehran has focused on expanding ties in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Levant to better influence and exploit regional political, economic, and security developments." ([p. 9, 2009](#)) (http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/20090212_testimony.pdf)

"Iran will seek to undermine US influence in the Middle East by sponsoring opposition to US initiatives, backing groups that oppose US and Israeli interests, working to undermine cooperation between Washington and moderate Arab allies, and strengthening its deterrent capability against threats from the United States and Israel." ([p. 15, 2011](#))

(http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/20110216_testimony_sfr.pdf)

"In its efforts to spread its influence externally, Iran continues to support proxies and surrogates abroad, and it has sought to exploit the Arab Spring but has reaped limited benefits thus far." ([p. 17, 2012](#))

(http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/20120131_testimony_ata.pdf)

"In its efforts to spread influence abroad and undermine the United States and our allies, Iran is trying to exploit the fighting and unrest in the Arab world...Iran's efforts to secure regional hegemony, however, have achieved limited results, and the fall of the Asad regime in

Syria would be a major strategic loss for Tehran." (p. 16, 2013)

<http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Intelligence%20Reports/2013%20ATA%20SFR%20for%20SSCI%2012%20Mar%202013.pdf>

SHIFTING TONE IN 2014-2015

Beginning last year, the assessment's focus shifted away from Tehran's efforts to expand its regional hegemony and toward describing Iran as a protector of oppressed Shiites that seeks to reduce sectarian violence:

"In the broader Middle East, Iran will continue to provide arms and other aid to Palestinian groups, Huthi rebels in Yemen, and Shia militants in Bahrain to expand Iranian influence and to counter perceived foreign threats. Tehran, which strives for a stable Shia-led, pro-Iran government in Baghdad, is concerned about the deteriorating security situation in Iraq. Tehran is probably struggling to find the balance between protecting Shia equities in Iraq and avoiding overt actions that would precipitate greater anti-Shia violence." (p. 14, 2014) (http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Intelligence%20Reports/2014%20WWTA%20%20SFR_SSCI_29_Jan.pdf)

"Iran sees rising sectarianism as a dangerous regional development, but we assess that Iran's perceived responsibility to protect and empower Shia communities will increasingly trump its desire to avoid sectarian violence. Hence, Iran's actions will likely do more to fuel rather than dampen increasing sectarianism." (p. 14, 2014)

http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Intelligence%20Reports/2014%20WWTA%20%20SFR_SSCI_29_Jan.pdf

"Despite Iran's intentions to dampen sectarianism, build responsive partners, and de-escalate tensions with Saudi Arabia, Iranian leaders -- particularly within the security services -- are pursuing policies with negative secondary consequences for regional stability and potentially for Iran. Iran's actions to protect and empower Shia communities are fueling growing fears and sectarian responses." (p. 14, 2015) (http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Unclassified_2015_ATA_SFR_-_SASC_FINAL.pdf)

"In Iraq and Syria, Iran seeks to preserve friendly governments, protect Shia interests, defeat Sunni extremists, and marginalize US influence. The rise of ISIL has prompted Iran to devote more resources to blunting Sunni extremist advances that threaten Iran's regional allies and interests. Iran's security services have provided robust military support to Baghdad and Damascus, including arms, advisers, funding, and direct combat support." (p. 14, 2015) (http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Unclassified_2015_ATA_SFR_-_SASC_FINAL.pdf)

TERROR SPONSORSHIP

"L ebanese Hizballah is Iran's main terrorist ally, which -- although focused on its agenda in Lebanon and supporting anti-Israeli Palestinian terrorists -- has a worldwide support network and is capable of attacks against US interests if it feels its Iranian patron is threatened." (p. 12, 2006) (http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/20060202_testimony.pdf)

"We assess that Iran regards its ability to conduct terrorist operations abroad as a key element of its national security strategy: it considers this capability as helping to safeguard the regime by deterring US or Israeli attacks, distracting and weakening Israel, enhancing Iran's regional influence through intimidation, and helping to drive the US from the region." (p. 7, 2007)

<http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/070111/negroponte.pdf>

"Hizballah is the largest recipient of Iranian financial aid, training, and weaponry, and Iran's senior leadership has cited Hizballah as a model for other militant groups. We assess Tehran has continued to provide Hizballah with significant amounts of funding, training, and weapons since the 2006 conflict with Israel, increasing the group's capabilities to pressure other Lebanese factions and to threaten Israel." (p. 11, 2009) (<http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/090212/blair.pdf>)

"We judge Iran's influence and ability to intervene in the region will remain significant and that it will continue to support terrorist and militant groups to further its influence and undermine the interests of Western and moderate regional states." (p. 25, 2010)

http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/20100202_testimony.pdf

"The 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States shows that some Iranian officials -- probably including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei -- have changed their calculus and are now more willing to conduct an attack in the United States in response to real or perceived US actions that threaten the regime." (p. 5, 2012)

http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/20120131_testimony_ata.pdf

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is an ongoing threat to US national interests because of its support to the Assad regime in Syria, promulgation of anti-Israeli policies, development of advanced military capabilities, and pursuit of its nuclear program." (p. 14, 2015) (http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Unclassified_2015_ATA_SFR_-_SASC_FINAL.pdf) (Note: Neither here nor anywhere else in the 2015 report is Iran described as a sponsor or supporter of terrorism.)

HIZBALLAH

"Lebanese Hezbollah continues to be a formidable terrorist adversary with an ability to attack the US Homeland and US interests abroad. Hizballah is a multifaceted, disciplined organization that combines political, social, paramilitary, and terrorist elements, and we assess that any decision by the group to resort to arms or terrorist tactics is carefully calibrated." (p. 8, 2009)

<http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/090212/blair.pdf>

"Hizballah's overseas terrorist activity has been focused on Israel...We continue to assess that the group maintains a strong anti-US agenda but is reluctant to confront the United States directly outside the Middle East." (p. 5, 2013)

<http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Intelligence%20Reports/2013%20ATA%20SFR%20for%20SSCI%2012%20Mar%202013.pdf>

"Iran and Hizballah are committed to defending the Asad regime and have provided support toward this end, including sending billions of dollars in military and economic aid, training pro-regime and Iraqi Shia militants, and deploying their own personnel into the country. Iran and Hizballah view the Asad regime as a key partner in the 'axis of resistance' against Israel and are prepared to take major risks to preserve the regime as well as their critical transshipment routes." (pp. 4-5, 2014)

http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Intelligence%20Reports/2014%20WWTA%20%20SFR_SSCI_29_Jan.pdf

"Hizballah has increased its global terrorist activity in recent years to a level that we have not seen since the 1990s." (p. 5, 2014)

http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Intelligence%20Reports/2014%20WWTA%20%20SFR_SSCI_29_Jan.pdf

"Lebanon in 2014 probably will continue to experience sectarian violence among Lebanese and terrorist attacks by Sunni extremists and Hizballah, which are targeting each other's interests." (p. 15, 2014)

http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Intelligence%20Reports/2014%20WWTA%20%20SFR_SSCI_29_Jan.pdf

"Lebanon faces growing threats from terrorist groups, including the al-Nusrah Front and ISIL. Sunni extremists are trying to establish networks in Lebanon and have increased attacks against Lebanese army and Hizballah positions along the Lebanese-Syrian border. Lebanon potentially faces a protracted conflict in northern and eastern parts of the country from extremist groups seeking to seize Lebanese territory, supplies, and hostages." (p. 15, 2015) (http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Unclassified_2015_ATA_SFR_-_SASC_FINAL.pdf) (Note: This is the only mention of Hizballah in the entire 2015 assessment.)

As these quotes illustrate, the newest assessments show a marked shift in tone regarding Iran and its proxies. While past editions portrayed Tehran as a malign influence and state sponsor of terrorism that was actively seeking to undermine the United States and its allies, the most recent assessments cast a different light.

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