

Iranian Terrorism Under 'Moderate' Presidents

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The Islamic Republic's history suggests that the new president-elect will have neither the inclination nor the authority to curb the regime's sponsorship of terrorism.

Hassan Rouhani's victory in Iran's presidential election has been widely heralded as a protest vote against the hardliners and a window of opportunity for diplomatic breakthrough with Western powers. But such assumptions beg the question: just how much moderation should be expected from a "moderate" Iranian president, particularly with regard to state sponsorship of terrorism? Past precedent suggests that expectations should be tempered.

RAFSANJANI'S TERRORISM REPORT CARD

Rouhani is not the first Iranian "moderate" to win the presidency. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, elected in 1989, was frequently described as a moderate as well. According to U.S. intelligence, however, he oversaw a long string of terrorist plots during his eight years in office.

The CIA linked Rafsanjani to terrorist plots as early as 1985, when he was serving as speaker of parliament. In a February 15, 1985, memo, the agency assessed that "Iranian-sponsored terrorism is the greatest threat to US personnel and facilities in the Middle East...Iranian-backed attacks increased by 30 percent in 1984, and the numbers killed in Iranian-sponsored attacks outpace fatalities in strikes by all other terrorist sponsors. Senior Iranian leaders such as Ayatollah Montazeri,...Prime Minister [Mir Hossein Mousavi], and Consultative Assembly speaker Rafsanjani are implicated in Iranian terrorism."

In August 1990, the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence authored a more in-depth assessment titled "Iranian Support for Terrorism: Rafsanjani's Report Card." According to the agency, the regime's sponsorship of terrorist activities had continued unabated since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini the previous June: "Although Rafsanjani has sought to improve relations with some Western nations since directly assuming the presidency last August, events of the past

year prove that Tehran continues to view the selective use of terrorism as a legitimate tool." Iranian terrorist attacks targeting "enemies of the regime" over the previous year "were probably approved in advance by President Rafsanjani and other senior leaders," the report assessed, but "the planning and implementation of these operations are...probably managed by other senior officials, most of whom are Rafsanjani's appointees or allies." The CIA concluded that "Rafsanjani and [Supreme Leader] Khamenei would closely monitor and approve planning for an attack against the US or Western interests."

Looking forward, CIA analysts assessed in 1990 that "Rafsanjani and other Iranian leaders will continue selectively using terrorism as a foreign policy tool to intimidate regime opponents, punish enemies of Islam, and influence Western political decisions." Two years later, such assessments appeared prescient. In 1992, the CIA recorded a long list of Iranian terrorist activities, from attacks targeting Israeli, Saudi, and American officials in Turkey, to plots targeting Jewish emigres from the former Soviet Union and antiregime dissidents abroad. Most spectacular, however, were the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires (conducted with help from the regime's Lebanese proxy Hezbollah) and the public assassination of four Iranian dissidents at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin that same year.

Germany's highest criminal court would later reject claims that the Mykonos attack was executed by "mavericks," concluding in a 1997 ruling that "the assassination [was] put into action much more through the powers in Iran." By identifying Rafsanjani and the Supreme Leader himself as the orchestrators of the plot, the court found that "Iranian powers not only allow terrorist attacks abroad...they themselves set in action such attacks." Whenever the regime encountered political opposition, the court determined, its solution was simply to have the opponents "liquidated."

Iran and Hezbollah soon struck again in Argentina. According to local investigators, a subgroup of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (the Committee for Special Operations) made the final decision to approve the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. That meeting reportedly included Khamenei, Rafsanjani, Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, and Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati. Also present were Iranian intelligence agents Mohsen Rabbani and Ahmad Asghari, who had firsthand knowledge of Argentina and advised the committee about target selection, the local logistical and intelligence support networks that could be used to facilitate the attack, and the country's political and security environment at the time.

KHOBAR TOWERS: A CASE IN POINT

Seventeen years ago this week, Iranian agents teamed up with Lebanese and Saudi Hezbollah operatives to bomb the Khobar Towers military housing complex in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. The bombing, the largest nonnuclear explosion then on record (it was felt twenty miles away in Bahrain), killed 19 U.S. Air Force personnel and wounded 372 more, along with numerous Saudi civilians and other nationals.

The Khobar plot took place while Rafsanjani was president and Rouhani was secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. Following a massive FBI investigation, a U.S. federal court eventually indicted thirteen members of the Iranian-sponsored Saudi Hezbollah and an unidentified Lebanese Hezbollah operative referred to as John Doe.

Intelligence, forensics, and statements by detained suspects all pointed to Iran. According to FBI director Louis Freeh, "The bombers admitted they had been trained by the Iranian external security service (IRGC) in the Beka Valley, and received their passports at the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, along with \$250,000 cash for the operation from IRGC Gen. Ahmad Sharifi." Freeh would later testify that "the attack was planned, funded and sponsored by senior leadership in the government of the Republic of Iran, that the IRGC principally had the responsibility of putting that plan into operation," and that it was implemented "with the use of the Saudi Hezbollah organization and its members."

TERROR SPONSORSHIP CONTINUES UNDER KHATAMI

In May 1997, Muhammad Khatami was elected as Iran's fifth president after running on a distinctly reformist platform. Supporters of Iranian radicalism, including Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, had strongly supported Khatami's more overtly revolutionary opponent, Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri.

In a December 1997 memo, the CIA asserted that Hezbollah leaders were shocked by Khatami's victory and "scrambled to ensure that his election would not diminish Iran's support" for the group. Their concerns would prove unfounded, however -- when Nasrallah visited Tehran in October 1997, Khatami and other officials pledged their continued support, emphasizing that the regime had not changed its position regarding the group or its operations against Israel. According to the CIA memo, Khatami "probably joins other Iranian leaders who maintain that support to Hezbollah is an essential aspect of Tehran's effort to promote itself as leader of the Muslim world and champion of the oppressed."

More important, the CIA assessed that Khatami would have been unable to withdraw Iran's sponsorship of Hezbollah even if he had wanted to. As the memo put it, Khatami "probably does not have the authority to make such a change without the approval of Khamenei, who has long been one of the group's foremost supporters."

CONCLUSION

The fact that the least radical candidate won Iran's latest presidential election has many observers excited about the prospect of more moderate policymaking in Tehran. Yet regardless of how Rouhani's election might affect the nuclear impasse, the Islamic Republic's history indicates that "moderate" or "reformist" presidents do not translate into moderation of Iran's terrorism sponsorship. Even if Rouhani were inclined to curb such policies, there is no evidence that he has the authority to do so without the Supreme Leader's approval, which seems highly unlikely at present.

Matthew Levitt directs the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. ❖

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