

29 Years Later, Echoes of "Kuwait 17"

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Dec 13, 2012

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Articles & Testimony

The reverberations of the Kuwait bombings still ring loud three decades later, and the threat from Iran and Hezbollah is greater today than it was even then.

Twenty-nine years ago yesterday, December 12, 1983, Hezbollah and operatives of the Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite group Da'wa carried out a series of seven coordinated bombings in Kuwait, killing six people and wounding nearly ninety more. The targets included the American and French embassies, the Kuwait airport, the grounds of the Raytheon Corporation, a Kuwait National Petroleum Company oil rig, and a government-owned power station. An attack outside a post office was thwarted.

The bombings shocked Kuwaiti officials, but the damage could have been much worse 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. More adept operational planning might also have resulted in the destruction of Kuwait's primary water-desalination plant, located within the premises, leaving the desert nation nearly devoid of fresh water.

In these attacks, senior Hezbollah operatives, joined by their Iraqi compatriots, acted in the explicit service of Iran, rather than in the group's immediate interests. Three years after the attacks, the CIA assessed in a since declassified report that while Iran's support for terrorism was meant to further its national interest, 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." The Kuwait bombings were the first in a long chain of such attacks.

Ultimately, seventeen convicted terrorists were jailed in Kuwait -- the Kuwait 17 as they came to be called -- including several Hezbollah members. Over the following years, Hezbollah would carry out many more attacks, at home and abroad, seeking the release of members jailed for the bombings. Hezbollah deputy chief Naim Qassem

would later acknowledge that the Kuwait 17 episode "was the starting point for the idea of hostages, to impose pressure for the release of prisoners in Israel and elsewhere."

One of those convicted -- and sentenced to death -- was Mustapha Badreddine, Imad Mughniyeh's brother-in-law and cousin, who was in Kuwait under the Christian-sounding cover name Fuad Saab. When a Kuwaiti court sentenced Badreddine to death in March 1984, Hezbollah threatened to kill some of its hostages if the sentence were carried out (it was not). The abduction of the CIA's station chief in Beirut, William Buckley, that same month, as well as several other kidnappings in the second half of 1984, are believed to have been a direct response to the arrest and sentencing of the Kuwait 17 bombers. Discussing prospects for the release of U.S. hostages, a CIA memo noted that "Mughniyeh has always linked the fate of his American hostages to release of 17 Shia terrorists in Kuwait, and we have no indication he has altered this demand."

Badreddine was still alive in 1991, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and emptied the country's prisons. After he escaped to the Iranian embassy in Kuwait, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps reportedly facilitated his travel to Iran and eventual return to Lebanon.

Today, echoes of the Kuwait 17 saga reverberate in current events. Mughniyeh was assassinated in February 2008, and succeeded by Badreddine as head of Hezbollah's military and terrorist wings. In June 2011 the UN's Special Tribunal for Lebanon -- the body charged with investigating the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri -- indicted Badreddine and three other Hezbollah operatives for their roles in the Hariri assassination. In a sign of Badreddine's ongoing leadership role in Hezbollah militancy and terrorism, the Treasury Department added him and Talal Hamiyah, "two senior terrorist leaders of Hezbollah," to the department's terrorist designation list "for providing support to Hezbollah's terrorist activities in the Middle East and around the world."

Just as it was 29 years ago, Hezbollah today is engaged in a campaign of international terrorism. Hezbollah operations over the past 18 months include plots in Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, South Africa, Turkey, and Thailand. Some of these were carried out to avenge Mughniyeh's assassination, but others were conceived as Hezbollah's part in Iran's shadow war with the West.

Then, as now, Hezbollah served as a long arm of Iran's security and intelligence services. The only difference today is that when it comes to global operations Hezbollah is even more closely allied with Iran than it was then. At the time of the Kuwait bombings, the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah was that of a sponsor and its proxy. Today, as Hezbollah operatives troll the globe looking for buses of Israeli tourists to blow up, the relationship is more of a strategic partnership.

The echoes of the Kuwait bombings ring loud, three decades later -- and the threat from Iran and Hezbollah is far greater today than it was even then.

Matthew Levitt is director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. ❖

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