

# Why Iran Wants to Attack the United States

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Articles & Testimony

## The Islamic Republic's terror plots may look bumbling today, but what about tomorrow?

**A**n Iranian-American used car salesman pleaded guilty this month to conspiring with Iranian agents to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States. Mansour Arbabsiar's guilty plea would appear to be the end of this story, but in truth it raises more questions than it answers.

The facts were never really in dispute. U.S. officials learned of the plot early on and built an airtight case. The assassin Arbabsiar tried to hire was in fact a DEA informant. Once arrested, Arbabsiar confessed. At the direction of law enforcement, he then called his cousin and Quds Force handler, Gholam Shakuri. With agents listening, Shakuri insisted Arbabsiar go ahead with the plot. "Just do it quickly. It's late."

But why was the Quds Force, which had earned a reputation for operational prowess even among its enemies, so eager to move forward with an obviously flawed operation? Arbabsiar appears to have been a weak character who "wants to be important," as a government-retained psychiatrist determined. He was drawn into the plot by his cousin, a general in the Quds Force, the arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps responsible for external operations. So the real question is: What was the Quds Force thinking?

According to Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, the plot "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 U.S. actions that threaten the regime."

This new calculus, intelligence officials believe, dates back to January 2010, when the Quds Force decided that it and Hezbollah, its primary terrorist proxy, would embark on a new campaign of violence targeting not only Israel but U.S. and other Western targets as well.

In the wake of last July's attack on Israeli tourists in the Bulgarian city of Burgas, a barrage of journalists called asking me to explain the logic of the attack. I was finishing a book on Hezbollah -- Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of

Lebanon's Party of God, due out next year -- but still could not easily place the attack within Hezbollah's established modus operandi. The more I thought about it, the more perplexed I became. So, much to my editor's dismay, I stepped away from my keyboard long enough to meet with diplomats and intelligence and military officials from several countries to try and make sense of the new trend of Shia extremist attacks tied to Iran and its proxies. Here is what I have come to understand.

To understand the decision Iran made in January 2010 to engage in a new campaign of violence, one must hark back to the February 2008 assassination of Hezbollah master terrorist Imad Mughniyeh, who was allegedly responsible for the 1983 U.S. Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, the 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847, and numerous other attacks. Following Mughniyeh's death in Damascus, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah called for an "open war" on Israel. "The blood of Imad Mughniyeh will make them [Israel] withdraw from existence," Nasrallah vowed.

Within weeks, Hezbollah would attempt the first of several failed and foiled plots -- a series of simultaneous car bombings around the Israeli and U.S. embassies, the kidnapping of the Israeli ambassador, and blowing up a radar tower in Baku, Azerbaijan -- intended to make good on Nasrallah's threat. Several additional plots were foiled, leading the Quds Force to partner with Hezbollah and provide extensive logistical support for a large-scale bombing in Turkey in fall 2009. Turkish authorities disrupted a plot in which Hezbollah and Iranian agents posing as tourists intended to attack Israeli and possibly American and local Jewish targets. According to one account, a cell led by Abbas Hossein Zakr was looking to strike Israeli tourists, Israeli ships or airplanes, or synagogues in Turkey. Turkish police arrested Hezbollah operatives who reportedly smuggled a car bomb into the country from Syria while Quds Force agents left the country posing as tourists.

The foiled attack in Turkey was a watershed event for Hezbollah operational planners and their Iranian sponsors. According to Israeli intelligence officials, a blame game ensued between Hezbollah and the Quds Force over the past two years, as the two sides pointed fingers at each other for the failed operations. Meanwhile, by late 2009, Iran was increasingly interested in using Hezbollah to combat threats to its nascent nuclear program. The Islamic Republic was in need of an enforcer: Malfunctioning components had ruined Iranian centrifuges, IRGC officers had defected, and in January 2010 a bomb killed Iranian physics professor Masoud Ali Mohammadi outside his Tehran home.

Iranian officials were furious at Mohammadi's death, and reached two conclusions in its aftermath: First, Hezbollah had to revitalize its operational capabilities. And second, the IRGC would no longer act solely as logisticians supporting Hezbollah hit men -- it would now deploy Quds Force operatives to carry out terrorist attack abroad.

And Iran was in the position to tell Hezbollah where it would fall within Iran's plans. In February, Clapper characterized the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran as "a partnership arrangement, with the Iranians as the senior partner." This "strategic partnership," as National Counterterrorism Center director Matthew Olson put it, is the product of a long evolution from the 1980s, when Hezbollah was just a proxy of Iran.

Under Iran's instructions, Hezbollah's international terrorist wing, the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO), underwent a massive operational reorganization. New operatives were recruited from the elite of Hezbollah's military wing for intelligence and operational training, while existing IJO operatives were moved into new positions. At the same time, the IJO invested in the development of capabilities and tradecraft that had withered on the vine after the group decided to rein in most foreign operations in an effort to keep out of the crosshairs of the post-9/11 war on terrorism.

As part of its IJO shakeup, Hezbollah engaged in detailed talks with Iranian officials to lay out Hezbollah's role in Iran's larger plan for a coordinated shadow war targeting Israeli, American, British, and Arab Gulf state interests. The plan they settled on would include operations intended to achieve several different goals, including taking revenge for Mughniyeh's assassination, retaliating for attacks on Iran's nuclear program, and convincing Western powers that an attack on Iran would lead to asymmetric terrorist attacks worldwide.

To this end, Iranian decision makers settled on a campaign of violence based on three broad targets: Israeli tourists, formal government targets (diplomats, retired officials), and targets broadly representative of Israel or the Jewish community (community leaders, prominent Israeli companies). It assigned the task of targeting Israeli tourists -- a soft target -- to Hezbollah, and gave the Quds Force responsibility for operations targeting Israeli, American, British, or Gulf states' interests. The latter would be carried out by Unit 400, the Quds Force's new special external operations branch.

The operational blitz that followed is now well known. Hezbollah operations included plots in Bulgaria, Thailand, South Africa, and Cyprus. Meanwhile, Quds Force operatives were at work in India, Georgia, Thailand, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Kenya, and -- through Mansour Arbabsiar -- the United States. Tehran was desperate to implement its new strategy and exact revenge for covert attacks against its nuclear program, so the Quds Force traded speed for tradecraft -- and reaped what it sowed. In some cases, Iranian agents employed laughable operational security; in others, the agents, like Arbabsiar, were kooky.

But the threats were real enough. Last June, Jonathan Evans, the director-general of the British intelligence agency MI5, noted that the plot to assassinate the Saudi envoy in Washington "leads straight back to the Iranian leadership."

The Quds Force is sure to recover from its operational sloppiness, and Iranian leaders appear committed to a policy of targeting Western interests. Arbabsiar's guilty plea ends one chapter in Iran's shadow war against the West, but authorities must remain vigilant for the plots yet to come.

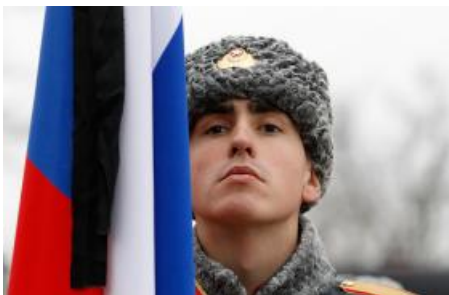
*Matthew Levitt is senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He is the author of the forthcoming study, Hezbollah, the Quds Force, and Iran's Shadow War against the West.* ❖

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