

Deter, Don't Dismiss, the Iranian Threat

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Articles & Testimony

Mustering an effective response to Iran's assassination plot is critical for U.S. national security as well as our already damaged credibility in the Middle East.

Iran's alleged plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington was brazen, sloppy, but, regrettably, entirely plausible. While its tactics vary, the Iranian regime has engaged in direct terrorist attacks in the past, and recent events in the Middle East and changes to Iran's own military command and control structure have raised the likelihood of such attacks. The Obama Administration will be careful to avoid a war of escalation with the regime, but should resist the temptation to confine its response to sanctions.

On its face, the details of the Iranian plot seem amateurish and provoke deep skepticism. An Iranian-American who claims his cousin is a "big general" in Iran makes contact with what he thinks is a Mexican drug gang to blow up a Washington restaurant in a frantic effort to assassinate the Saudi ambassador, heedless of the innocents who will surely perish or the risk of US retaliation. This hardly seems to fit the *modus operandi* of the Quds Force, the external operations arm of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Quds Force has recently tended to operate below the radar, through trusted proxies such as Hezbollah, and while its activities are global, it concentrates its most nefarious activities in Iran's immediate environs, most notably Iraq.

Nevertheless, this conventional wisdom glosses over a significant variability in the IRGC's tactics. In Iraq, Quds Force commanders have been caught red-handed aiding militants. This includes Mohsen Chizari, the Quds Force operations chief who was caught and released by US and Iraqi forces in Baghdad in 2006 and was more recently designated by recent US sanctions for aiding the Assad regime's crackdown. Further in the past, the IRGC did the dirty work itself in bombing the Israeli Embassy and a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994. One of the Iranians wanted for that attack is Iran's current defense minister, and another ran unsuccessfully against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for the presidency in 2009.

Recent developments may have spurred the IRGC to return to such tactics. While Iran initially seemed buoyed by the uprisings in the Arab world, which it touted as anti-American, Islamic revolutions, the regime was stung by events in

Bahrain. The GCC, led by Saudi Arabia, successfully intervened in Bahrain to shore up the Khalifa monarchy against a largely Shiite uprising, while Iran -- which sees itself as defender of Shiite communities worldwide and occasionally asserts an old Persian territorial claim to Bahrain -- stood by impotently. This humiliation may have convinced the regime of the need to act. And the Saudi ambassador may have been seen in Tehran as a fitting target, as he is a close confidant of King Abdullah and a key conduit between Saudi Arabia and the United States, two powers whose hands the paranoid Iranian regime sees in all of its troubles.

While this may explain the Iranian regime's motives, it cannot account for the sloppy tactics it employed. To understand this, one needs to take into account an important change that the IRGC made in its military command-and-control structure in 2005. According to these changes (authored by the IRGC's then-chief strategist, Gen. Mohammad Jafari, who is now the organization's commander), individual IRGC commands were given greater freedom to act without seeking authorization. This change in doctrine was reinforced in practice. For example, the IRGC naval commander who took 15 British sailors hostage in 2007, apparently on his own initiative, was not punished by the regime but rather awarded a medal. This emphasis on distributed command, combined with the IRGC's reliance on asymmetric warfare in the face of America's vastly superior military power, makes seemingly odd terrorist plots such as the one recently revealed far more plausible. It also renders moot the frequently-asked question of whether such plots are approved "at the top" in Iran; as it is regime policy to devolve operational responsibility to lower levels, they should be held accountable rather than excused for the fruits of that policy.

US policymakers are confronted by a classic dilemma in responding to this bolder, more aggressive posture apparently adopted by the IRGC and the Iranian regime. On the one hand, the need to respond is clear -- if carried out successfully, the attack on the Saudi ambassador would have constituted an act of war not only on Saudi Arabia, but on the United States. Allowing such acts to go unpunished is to invite further attack. However, the Obama administration will also be keen to avoid an escalatory spiral, whereby a simmering conflict with Iran turns into something much broader and dangerous at a delicate time in the Middle East.

However, if the allegations are correct, responding only with sanctions would be a mistake. By downplaying the U.S. military option against Iran and ceasing military signaling activities in the Gulf, the Obama administration has allowed American deterrence of Iran to deteriorate. Reestablishing that deterrence is vital to discouraging IRGC activities such as this plot. A sanctions-only response, however, would have the opposite effect; it would have little impact on the IRGC, which in any event operates outside the law, and would be seen as a substitute for serious action. As a result, it would encourage a sense of impunity rather than discouraging escalation.

And the IRGC knows serious action when it sees it. The U.S. crackdown on the Quds Force in Iraq in 2007 had a salutary, if temporary, effect on the security situation there. The Obama administration should take its cue from those actions by seeking international cooperation to roll up IRGC operatives and assets globally in response to this plot. U.S. officials should also consistently make clear, in private and public messages, that the United States does not rule out military responses to Iranian provocations, and should give those warnings tangible expression through signaling activities such as military exercises and carrier movements in the Persian Gulf.

The revelations regarding this plot serve as a reminder that the Iranian regime is a dangerous adversary, and one which will not limit itself to rhetorical fusillades. Mustering an effective response is critical for U.S. national security, and our already damaged credibility in the Middle East.

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