

## A History of Violence

### Is there anyone who still doubts that Iran is a terrorist state?

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

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### Iran's willingness to use brutal means to achieve its foreign-policy goals is nothing new: since the creation of the Islamic Republic, U.S. intelligence agencies have repeatedly identified terrorism as one of the regime's signature calling cards.

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder's announcement on Oct. 11 that a dual U.S.-Iranian citizen and a commander in Iran's Quds Force, the special-operations unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), had been charged in New York for their alleged roles in a plot to murder the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir, represents a brazen escalation in Iran's struggle for regional dominance. But Iran's willingness to use brutal means to achieve its foreign-policy goals is nothing new: Since the creation of the Islamic Republic, U.S. intelligence agencies have repeatedly identified terrorism as one of the regime's signature calling cards.

The timing of this plot suggests Iran feels itself under increasing pressure, both from the international community (led by the United States) and from the regional alliance of Sunni states in the region (led by Saudi Arabia). Intriguingly, the plot seems to have been launched shortly after the Saudi-led military intervention in Bahrain against Shiite protesters, to which Iran objected loudly but was unable to affect.

The plot developed quickly over just a few months, starting this spring and culminating with the arrest of Manssor Arbabsiar, the Iranian-American man, in September. According to a Justice Department news release, Arbabsiar told a Drug Enforcement Administration confidential source (CS-1) posing as an associate of an international drug cartel that "his associates in Iran had discussed a number of violent missions for CS-1 and his associates to perform, including the murder of the Ambassador." Later, after Arbabsiar was arrested and confessed to his role in the plots, he reportedly called Gholam Shakuri, the member of the Quds Force who was also indicted, at the direction of law enforcement. Shakuri again confirmed that the plot should go forward and as soon as possible. "Just do it quickly. It's late," he said.

The fact that Iran plotted attacks in the United States is surprising, and not only because Iranian agents have traditionally carried out such attacks in Europe, South America, or the Middle East. One might assume Iran would behave more cautiously at a time when it has come under increasing international pressure over its rumored pursuit of nuclear weapons, its suppression of human rights at home, and its support of terrorism abroad. Indeed, the U.S. government designated the Quds Force as a terrorist group in 2007 for providing material support to the Taliban, Iraqi Shiite militants, and other terrorist organizations. Most counterterrorism experts expected that future acts of Iranian terrorism would occur in places like Europe where Iranian agents have long targeted dissidents, and not in the United States, where carrying out an attack would risk a U.S. military reprisal.

Iran's use of terrorism as a tool of foreign policy, however, goes back as far as the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Writing in 1986, the CIA assessed in a now declassified report titled "Iranian Support for International Terrorism" that while Iran's support for terrorism was meant to further its national interest, it 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."

In the early 1990s, these interests dictated an increase in operational activities in the Gulf. Shiite extremist violence was primarily the consequence of Iran's geopolitical calculus and its continued enmity toward Sunni Gulf states. To that end, the CIA noted, Iran not only supported and sometimes directed Hezbollah operations but also "smuggled explosives into Saudi Arabia and conducted terrorist operations against Kuwaiti targets." As tensions in the region persisted, the CIA assessed in 1992 that "for now, Iran will sponsor easily deniable attacks on US targets and allow Hizballah to retaliate for [Hezbollah leader Abbas] Musawi's assassination."

A 1989 CIA report highlights several factors that made Iran more likely to take increased risks in support of terrorism -- factors that faded somewhat after the mid-1990s but that are now coming back with a vengeance. The first was the dominance of radical elements within the clerical leadership, which translated into significant Iranian hostility toward the West. Then as now, there was little chance more pragmatic leaders would come to the fore. Furthermore, igniting tensions abroad could shift popular attention away from domestic problems, while asymmetrical warfare provided Tehran with a potent weapon at a time when its military and economy were weak.

Underlying Iranian grievances with the West exacerbated these tensions in the late 1980s in much the same way that they have today. In the late 1980s, Iranian anger was fed by the accidental 1988 downing of an Iranian airliner by the USS *Vincennes*, as well as anger over the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, deemed by Iran to be offensive to Islam. Now, the Iranian authorities' anger is fed by increasing U.S. and European sanctions, plus Tehran's conviction that the West is pursuing a "soft overthrow" of the Islamic Republic by use of modern communications to whip up protests. Tehran thinks that the West caused the 2009 protests in Iran and is behind the protests shaking Syria now.

Iran's competition for regional dominance with the United States and Saudi Arabia is also at least as contentious as it was in the late 1980s and 1990s. Iran is under increasing international diplomatic and economic sanctions, for which it holds both Saudi Arabia and the United States responsible -- and for good reason. From the Stuxnet virus to the assassination of Iranian scientists and the defection of Iranian agents, Iran feels increasingly targeted by Western intelligence services.

A few weeks ago, a Western intelligence official and I were mulling over the string of attempted attacks by Hezbollah operatives targeting Israeli interests over the past three years. From Azerbaijan to Turkey and from Cyprus to Egypt, terrorist operations by Iran's terrorist proxy, often operating jointly with members of the Quds Force, have been foiled time and again. But while attacks in the past were widely seen as acts of revenge for the 2008 assassination of Hezbollah's Imad Mughniyeh, an attack today, this official mused, could just as likely be an Iranian-driven plot in retaliation for the sabotage of Iran's nuclear program. And Iran, he noted, attributes these setbacks to Israel and the United States.

All the evidence available suggests this assassination attempt was a high-level IRGC plot, though authorities have been careful to describe it as "directed by *elements* of the Iranian government" and not more than that. It is, however, noteworthy that the Treasury Department designated IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Suleimani as a global terrorist on Oct. 11 because, as commander of the force, he "oversees the IRGC-QF officers who were involved in this plot."

Despite Iran's apparent attempt to mask its role in the plot by employing a team of assassins from Mexico tied to a violent drug cartel, the indictment -- as well as the parallel Treasury

Department designations of several senior Quds Force officers as specially designated global terrorists -- exposes Iran for the terrorist state it is. It is too early to tell what the consequences of Iran's assassination plot may be, but there should be no doubt the plot lays bare the myth that sufficient carrots -- from offers of dialogue to requests for an emergency hotline to reduce naval tensions in the Gulf -- can induce the regime in Tehran to abandon its support for terrorism, part with its nuclear weapons program, or respect human rights.

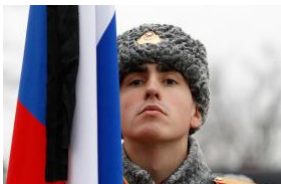
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