

Iran's Double-Edged Sword

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Articles & Testimony

In a four-day journey at the beginning of November that took him through Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, and Benin, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki asserted that the United States was "displeased with the expansion of relations between Iran and African countries," and opined that while the U.S. had a "thirst for power," Iran practiced the subtler "power of logic." He described his top priority in Africa as "the exportation of technical and engineering services."

Less than two weeks later, Mottaki had to hastily return to West Africa to deal with the exposure by Nigerian authorities of another, more nefarious export: rocket launchers, grenades, and other illicit arms disguised as building materials and accompanied, apparently, by two members of the elite "Quds Force" unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

The contrast between Iran's public campaign to drum up diplomatic support and build economic ties to stave off increasing isolation and its shadowy network of arms smuggling, support for terrorism, and subversive activities serve as a stark reminder of the nature of the Iranian regime and the dangers it poses well beyond its own borders, and well beyond the nuclear issue.

This latest revelation of Iranian malfeasance is hardly without precedent. Whether using the Quds Force -- described by the U.S. Department of State as "the regime's primary mechanism for cultivating and supporting terrorists abroad" -- or proxies such as Hezbollah, the regime since its founding in 1979 has sought to project its power and influence far afield, often with lethal results.

The examples are manifold. In January 2009, Israeli forces bombed a convoy in Sudan allegedly containing Iranian arms bound for Hamas fighters in Gaza. That same year, at least three cargo vessels were found to be carrying weapons from Iran, likely bound for terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, in violation of UN sanctions prohibiting Tehran from exporting arms. In 2007, a derailed train in southern Turkey was found to be carrying Iranian arms, also likely destined for Hezbollah arms caches. And for several years, the Quds Force has been supplying militants in Iraq and Afghanistan with weapons, training, and funding.

Iran's activities are not limited to arms smuggling. Earlier this year, Kuwaiti authorities uncovered an alleged Iranian "sleeper cell," souring what had been one of Iran's calmer regional relationships. Morocco in 2009 severed its diplomatic ties with Iran amid accusations that Iran was engaged in subversive activities there. The same year, Egyptian authorities broke up a Hezbollah cell reportedly planning attacks against tourism and infrastructure targets.

The list goes on, geographically and chronologically. U.S. authorities have targeted Hezbollah networks in West Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere. INTERPOL has issued warrants for high-ranking Iranian officials -- one of whom ran for Iran's presidency in 2009 -- in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish cultural center in Argentina. And Iran's complicity in assassinations in Europe and the 1996 terrorist attack on U.S. servicemen in Riyadh stymied EU and U.S. initiatives to repair relations with Tehran in the 1990s.

These activities, taken together with Tehran's refusal to cooperate with the IAEA on its nuclear activities and callous violations of its own people's human rights, paint a picture of a regime which pursues its own security by flouting international rules and norms of acceptable behavior. The recent revelations of Iranian arms smuggling are not an isolated incident, as the list above makes clear, but part of a consistent strategy utilizing terrorism, intimidation, and destabilization to enhance the regime's own power and influence.

As the United States and its allies try to restart negotiations with Iran, the regime's support for terrorism and other troubling activities counsel vigilance and realism. It calls for vigilance, because even as Western officials seek new points of pressure and avenues for outreach to bring Iran to the negotiating table, existing sanctions designed to constrain Iran's ability to sow violence and instability beyond its borders must be vigorously enforced. And it calls for realism, because it demonstrates that even a resolution of the nuclear issue would only begin to address the far broader concerns about the regime and its activities, making a true U.S.-Iran reconciliation far away indeed.

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