

# Iranian State Sponsorship of Terror: Threatening U.S. Security, Global Stability, and Regional Peace

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

On February 16, 2005, Matthew Levitt, senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Terrorism Studies Program, testified in a joint hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia and the Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation, House Committee on International Relations. The following is a summary of his remarks. Read the [full transcript \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=228\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=228) of Mr. Levitt's testimony.

U.S. intelligence chiefs appearing before Congress in their annual statements on the state of the threat reiterated, as they have for many years, that Iran is the foremost state sponsor of terror. Indeed, the threat posed by Iranian-sponsored terror is multifaceted. Iranian-sponsored terror represents the single greatest threat to Israeli-Arab peace. Additionally, not only does Iran support the terrorist activity of groups such as Hizballah and Hamas, but Iranian intelligence operatives themselves are directly involved in terrorist activity. Elements of al-Qaeda and the global jihadist movement are tied to Iran, while both Iranian intelligence agents and surrogates are actively undermining U.S. interests in stabilizing Iraq.

### Targeting Israel and the Peace Process

Hizballah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, all at Iran's behest, are currently attempting to torpedo the nascent peace process. In late January, Hassan Nasrallah and Khaled Mishal, the leaders of Hizballah and Hamas respectively, met in Beirut, where they declared that resistance against Israel was the only option until all of Palestine was liberated. A Palestinian security official confirmed this: "Hizballah and Iran are not happy with Mahmoud Abbas's efforts to achieve a ceasefire with Israel and resume negotiations with Israel. That is why we do not rule out the possibility that they might try to kill him if he continues with his policy."

Palestinian officials are well aware of Hizballah's recent efforts to recruit suicide bombers to carry out attacks that would sabotage the peace process. "We know that Hizballah has been trying to recruit suicide bombers in the name of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades to carry out attacks which would sabotage the truce," said one Palestinian official. Another Palestinian official cited intercepted email communications and bank transactions indicating Hizballah recently increased its payments to terrorists. "Now they are willing to pay \$100,000 for a whole operation whereas in

the past they paid \$20,000, then raised it to \$50,000.”

#### Iranian Intelligence Agents

Iranian agents have long been directly involved in acts of terrorism themselves and in concert with Hizballah networks, beyond the terrorist activities carried out independently by its proxy groups. Iranian operatives are well known for conducting surveillance for potential attacks against U.S. interests, both on American soil and abroad.

Last June, two security guards working at Iran's mission to the United Nations were kicked out of the country for conducting surveillance of New York City landmarks in a manner incompatible with their stated duties. A U.S. counterintelligence official said at the time, “We cannot think of any reason for this activity other than this was reconnaissance for some kind of potential targeting for terrorists.” In the late 1990s, former FBI director Louis Freeh wrote, the FBI wanted to photograph and fingerprint official Iranian delegations visiting the United States because the “MOIS [Iranian Intelligence Ministry] was using these groups to infiltrate its agents into the country.” In 1998 Iranian agents were spotted conducting surveillance of U.S. interests in Kazakhstan. In 1997, a Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report detailed the casing of U.S. diplomats in Tajikistan by Iranian intelligence operatives. These examples highlight the Iranian modus operandi for conducting surveillance of U.S. interests.

Furthermore, several of the Hizballah operatives involved in the 1996 Khobar Towers attack received terrorist training in Iran. The Iranian embassy in Damascus also served as an important source of logistics and support for Saudi Hizballah members traveling to and from Lebanon. Former FBI director Freeh has said that FBI agents interviewed six of those who carried out the attack, and all of them directly implicated the IRGC [Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps], MOIS, and senior Iranian government officials in the planning and execution of the attack.

#### Iranian/al-Qaeda Ties

According to CIA director Porter Goss, Tehran harbors “important members of al-Qaeda, causing further unclarity about Iran's commitment to bring them to justice.” As the 9-11 Commission Report documented, several al-Qaeda operatives were allowed to travel through Iran with great ease in the period leading up to September 11. The report noted a “persistence of contacts between Iranian security officials and senior al-Qaeda figures” and drew attention to an informal agreement by which Iran would support al-Qaeda training with the understanding that such training would be used “for actions carried out primarily against Israel and the United States.” Indeed, al-Qaeda operatives were trained in explosives, security, and intelligence on at least two occasions, with one group trained in Iran around 1992 and a second trained by Hizballah in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley in the fall of 1993.

Iran is apparently a common and convenient meeting place for radical Sunnis affiliated with global jihadist groups and other terrorist organizations, including Hamas and Hizballah. In Pakistan, the leader of a jihadist organization there openly admitted to having person-to-person contacts with other groups, adding, “Sometimes fighters from Hamas and Hizballah help us.” Asked where contacts with groups such as Hamas and Hizballah are made, the Pakistani replied that a good place to meet was in Iran. In September 2001 Abu Musab al-Zarqawi met an associate named Muhammad Abu Dhess in Iran “and instructed him to commit terrorist attacks against Jewish or Israeli facilities in Germany with 'his [Zarqawi's] people.’”

#### Iranian and Hizballah Activities in Iraq

While Iranian ministers assert that Tehran has not encouraged the Iraqi insurgency nor permitted suicide bombers to cross the border from Iran to Iraq, certain actions indicate otherwise. As recently as December 2004, a group calling themselves “The Committee of the Commemoration of Martyrs of the Global Islamic Campaign,” which is affiliated with the IRGC, had registered more than 25,000 volunteers seeking martyrdom to participate in the insurgency facing U.S.-led forces in Iraq. The group used the commemoration of a monument to the 1983 Hizballah

attack that killed 241 U.S. servicemen as a recruiting drive for suicide bombers.

One Iraqi official declared that “[t]he country that penetrates the borders the most and encroaches the most on Iraq is Iran” and that Iran remains “the first enemy of Iraq.” He charged in an interview that Iran has established military positions on the Iraqi-Iranian border, sent spies and saboteurs into the country, and even infiltrated the new government. Most recently, on February 9, 2005, Iraq's interior minister Falah al-Naquib announced that eighteen members of Hizballah were detained in Iraq on charges of terrorism.

## Conclusion

Iran is indeed the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism. The sheer scope of Iranian terrorist activity is remarkable, including both the terrorism carried out by Iranian-supported terrorist groups and by Iranian agents themselves. Iranian sponsored terrorism threatens key United States security interests and American citizens alike.

It is critical that the international effort to rein in Iran's nuclear weapons program include an equally concerted effort to forestall its state sponsorship of terrorism. Failure to do so guarantees that Iran and its proxies will continue to undermine Israeli-Arab peace negotiations, conduct surveillance of U.S., Israeli, and other targets for possible terrorist attack, and destabilize Iraq.

This summary was prepared by Julie Sawyer. ❖

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