

Tactical Terrorism:

Iran's Continued Challenge to the Secular Middle East

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Articles & Testimony

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On November 9, 2001, faced with a journalist's question about Iran's refusal to cooperate with the investigation into a 1996 bombing in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 Americans, Iranian President Muhammad Khatami succinctly declared, "There are no terrorists in Iran." Instead, Khatami insisted, "Iran has been a victim of terrorism itself and not a supporter of it."¹ Such is a bold statement from the titular head of state of a nation that the most recent State Department *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report described as "the most active state sponsor of terrorism...."² Unfortunately, Khatami's declaration appears to be untrue. Examination of Iran's recent activities among her neighbors indicate that the Islamic Republic still very much supports a range of both secularist and Islamist terrorist groups in an effort to undermine and weaken regional secular states.

In compiling its annual *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report, the State Department report focused on Iran's support for Palestinian rejectionist groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and its violent opposition to the peace process as shown by its continued material, financial, and tactical assistance to Lebanese Hizbullah. Tehran's support for these groups remains problematic, but the problem of Iranian terror sponsorship goes beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Islamic Republic is especially active in areas lacking the spotlight of international press or regular American or European diplomatic presence. Some European states and even American officials implicitly excuse Iranian terror because of the multiplicity of Iranian power centers.³ However, distinctions between which Iranian governmental organ is responsible for the death, maiming, and destruction caused by Iran's facilitation of terror remains largely irrelevant to the victims of Iranian terror. While Khatami carves diplomatic space for the Islamic Republic with his rhetorical call for a "dialogue of civilizations," his government continues to support action that destabilize, undermine, and weaken the Islamic Republic's secular neighbors. In the case of Azerbaijan, Iran supports the secular Muslim republic's neighbor Armenia, which continues to occupy nearly 20 percent of that country.⁴ In Afghanistan, journalists report that agents of Iran's intelligence ministry work to undermine the secular interim government.⁵ However, in Turkey and the Kurdish safe-haven of Iraq, Iran actively seeks to sponsor terrorist groups that hope to overthrow the existing order. Quite simply, Iran's actions indicate that the Islamic Republic views any secular Muslim government as a threat, and will actively seek to undermine it, even while seeking to pursue dialogue with the West.

Iran and the PKK

The estimated 37,000 deaths in Turkey since the eruption of the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkari Kurdistan, PKK) separatist campaign in 1984 make the PKK perhaps the region's deadliest terror group. The Marxist PKK and the clerical leadership in Iran at first would appear to have little in common, with the exception of the strong personality cults which both promote. However, both have become partners in an attempt to undermine the Kurdish-administered safe-haven in northern Iraq

In 1991, as Iraqi President Saddam Hussein moved to crush the Kurdish uprising in Iraq, hundreds of thousands of refugees streamed toward the Turkish and Iranian frontiers. Wishing to avoid an influx of refugees into Turkey, Turkish President Turgut Ozal called for the Coalition powers to establish a safe-haven for the refugees within Iraq. The British and American governments obliged. On April 28, US and British forces began to repatriate Iraqi Kurdish refugees from Turkey back into the safe-haven, which initially was centered around the town of Zakho but soon expanded to include the provincial capital of Dahuk as well.⁶ The Kurdish opposition entered into autonomy negotiations with Saddam Hussein, but these failed. In an attempt to starve Kurdish northern Iraq into submission during the winter of 1991-92, Saddam ordered the withdrawal of all Iraqi administration and imposed a blockade against the Kurdish governorates. The plan badly backfired, and the Iraqi Kurdish political parties were able to fill the vacuum.⁷ Because of Saddam's miscalculation, the safe haven expanded from just a few dozen square miles to encompass an area the size of Denmark. After elections in May 1992, Masud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talebani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) agreed to share power, though the two rival factions later split into separate administrations. Both PUK and KDP, however, remain overwhelmingly secular, and thus present an implicit ideological challenge to the Islamic Republic that not only declared Shi'i Islam to be the official governing religion, but also hosts perhaps five million Sunni Kurds on the Iranian side of a porous frontier.

While both the KDP and PUK once cooperated with the PKK, the PKK is no longer a welcome presence in northern Iraq, either among the governing political parties or among the local populace. Residents of the mountaintop town of Amadya show visitors damage to houses caused by PKK shelling in 1994. Throughout the 1990s, PKK guerillas repeatedly destroyed bridges spanning the fierce-running rivers in northern Iraq, creating hardship for local villagers and farmers seeking to transport good to market. Today, four Turkish tanks remains stationed near the police headquarters in the southern edge of Amadya. Since 1995, other Turkish tank units remain entrenched near the towns of Syrie, Diraluk, and Kani Masi. Iraqi Kurds repeatedly said that while they disapprove of the Turks' presence, they did not want a Turkish withdrawal until the PKK threat was removed.⁸

The secular Marxist PKK and the Islamic Republic of Iran share one important goal: the destabilization of Turkey. The PKK seeks nothing more than to create chaos and instability in Turkey for ethnic nationalist reasons, while the Islamic Republic wishes to weaken Turkey, which continues to be the leading alternate model for governments in the Islamic world. A secular, pro-Western, and successful Muslim country on its border remains an intolerable ideological threat for the Islamic Republic's clerical leadership.

The PKK and the Islamic Republic have an established relationship. In 1989, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's brother Osman opened a PKK office in Iran. The following year, the Iranian government allowed the PKK to establish 20 bases from which to strike at targets and population centers across Iran's frontier with Turkey. Ocalan paid homage to the Islamic revolution during his 1990 Nawruz speech.⁹

The Iranian support for the PKK did not cease when Iranian President Muhammad Khatami took office, nor did it cease with Turkey's 1999 capture and imprisonment of the Kurdish terrorist leader. In September 1999, approximately 5,000 PKK fighters crossed from Turkey into both Iraq and Iran, where they either entrenched themselves in the former, or received safe haven.¹⁰

In September 2000, fighting between the PUK and PKK erupted in the Qandil range of northeastern Iraq, where the PKK had seized approximately 50 villages. As casualties mounted into the dozens, local PUK commanders did not hesitate to blame Iran for arming and supplying the PKK.¹¹ The PUK offered the PKK guerillas amnesty and resettlement in exchange for disarmament, but the PKK refused. In December, full-scale fighting erupted. While many PUK officials differentiated between the Iranian government and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (Pasdaran-i Inqilab-i Islami) support for the PKK in Qandil, none discounted the Iranian role. Indeed, perhaps because of the lack of foreign journalists and diplomats in the area, the Tehran government did not hide their

involvement. Iranian-backed Islamist groups centered in Halabja used the PUK-PKK fighting to pressure unsuccessfully the secular PUK administration to extend the territory of Islamist groups like the Islamic Unity Movement of Kurdistan, an Iranian proxy. Simultaneously, PUK leader Jalal Talebani went to Tehran to negotiate an end to the fighting. According to PUK politburo sources, the meetings did not go well.¹² As the PUK (with Turkish artillery and communications support) began to make inroads against the PKK, the Iranians exerted great pressure on Talebani to accept a political solution.¹³ Several Iranian delegations traveled to Sulaymaniyah for talks at the height of the fighting. While Iranian officials talked with the PUK leadership, soldiers returning from the front reported that the Pasdaran continued to supply food and ammunition to the approximately 3,000 PKK fighters stranded at the higher elevations of Qandil.¹⁴

The Iranian threat by PKK terrorist proxy was widely acknowledged across Iraqi Kurdistan. Barzani, whose KDP fought a civil war against the PUK between 1994-96, did not object to allowing Turkish troops transit across territory under his control, even though the Turks were working to assist his chief political rival, whose forces has suffered hundreds of casualties.¹⁵ Simply put, the KDP recognized that the threat posed by Iranian-sponsored terror groups remained far greater than any posed by either the PUK or an augmented Turkish presence.

Why would the Iranian government and security forces bother supporting the PKK? The PUK controls only the Sulaymaniyah governorates and portions of the Irbil and Kirkuk governorates and does not control any portion of the Iraqi-Turkish frontier. The PUK's oil reserves-it has access to the Chamchamal field at Taqtaq and operates a gerrymandered refinery in Sulaymaniyah-are negligible. However, the PKK serves not only as a tool for leverage against Jalal Talebani, but also more importantly against Turkey. If the Islamic Republic can keep the PKK alive and provide them with a safe haven in the mountains of northern Iraq, then they can always threaten Turkey with renewal of a separatist campaign that has already cost more than 37,000 lives and several billion dollars.¹⁶ Iran does not simply rely on the PKK, though. Over the past year, Iran has also provided direct support for two militantly Islamist groups dedicated to terrorism and a violent overthrow of both the secular administration in northern Iraq, and the Kemalist republic in Turkey.

Exporting Revolution, Undermining Democracy

The PKK enjoys widespread press exposure both because of its substantial network of supporters in Europe as well as the publicity that has surrounded the violence of their conflict in Turkey. However, while the PKK seeks territorial concessions, other groups seek Iranian-style Islamic revolution in Turkey. These groups may not enjoy significant popular support in Turkey, but that is irrelevant so long as they have access to weapons, money, and safe haven.

One of the most violent and virulently anti-Western groups to which the Islamic Republic has recently provided support is the Federation of Islamic Associations and Communities, a Cologne-based Islamist group founded in 1984 by Cemalettin Kaplan, but now run by Metin Kaplan, who has declared himself to be "caliph and successor of the prophet."¹⁷ The so-called Kaplanists advocate the re-establishment of the caliphate in Turkey. In October 1998, Turkish police arrested 23 armed members alleged to be planning a suicide kamikaze airplane attack on Ataturk's mausoleum in Ankara. The Turkish daily Radikal alleged that the group had cooperated with al-Qa'ida in the mission.¹⁸ Following the arrests, Kaplan told a Turkish television station by telephone, "We have declared Jihad. Everybody who opposed Islam and an Islamic state will die."¹⁹ Despite Kaplan's repeated calls for violence, the German government refused to crackdown on the group, since as a religious movement, the Kaplanists enjoyed immunity. However, in 2000, German police jailed Kaplan after he issued a fatwa against a religious rival, who was subsequently murdered.²⁰ Nevertheless, the group has approximately 1,200 members in Germany, and 200-300 members in Turkey.²¹

Following the arrest of Kaplan, many of his followers began to depart Germany. Beginning at the end of December 2000, a group of Kaplanists appeared entrenched in the village of Zardawa, near Halabja and the Iranian border.²²

The group is closely monitored in Turkey; the only other entry point to Zardawa would be across the Iranian frontier. Such transit would require the compliance of many different Iranian officials. The Kaplanists would not have likely arrived in Tehran by air, or perhaps in Persian Gulf ports by sea. In any case, they would have had to undergo multiple passport checks as they traveled hundreds of miles. Smuggling a large number of foreigners through Iran and across the border with Iraq could not occur surreptitiously if high-level officials in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or the Ministry of Information and Security (Vizarat-i Ittila'at va Amniyat-i Keshvar) had no involvement. While both the Revolutionary Guards and the Ministry of Information are often considered separate power centers from the presidency and the Majlis, both remain nevertheless important parts of the Iranian government.²³ While many analysts speculate that figures like Muhammad Khatami cannot exert control over the Revolutionary Guards and Ministry of Information, just as likely is that he does not want to, for if Khatami consolidated power he would lose his plausible deniability with regard to his regime's support for terrorist groups.

Iran's Support for Islamist Terror in Iraqi Kurdistan

While Iran provided safe-haven for the Kaplanist group committed to the violent overthrow of Turkey and the murder of Turkey's non-Muslim minorities, there were no immediate deaths as a result of Tehran's decision to facilitate the movement. The same cannot be said of more recent Iranian support for Islamist terror groups active in northern Iraq.

Existent in northern Iraq are numerous Islamist groups that remain largely peaceful. The Islamic Unity Movement of Kurdistan (IUMK) administers Halabja and a small number of surrounding districts near the Iranian border. However, the Kurdish Islamist movement remains rife with divisions, and many violent splinter groups exist, dependent upon Iranian patronage.

One such group was Tawhid, originally a faction of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan. On February 19, 2000, Tawhid gunmen assassinated Fransu Hariri, the KDP majority leader in parliament (and the highest-ranking Christian in Kurdish politics).²⁴ Tawhid targeted Hariri in revenge for an incident in the summer of 2000, when KDP peshmurga (the Kurdish militia, literally, "those who face death") guarding the Iraqi border near Hajji Umran intercepted a group of Tawhid militants infiltrating into Iraqi Kurdistan from Iran. Twenty Tawhid fighters died in the ensuing firefight. Resident of Irbil, though, openly speculated that Tawhid chose Hariri as opposed to any other KDP figure because of his religious. The IUMK refused to hand over the four suspects in the murder, who had been traced to that city by the license plate on the getaway car. A high-ranking KDP official close to the investigation strongly suggested Iranian involvement in a March 27, 2001 meeting.

The Iranian vision for the Middle East becomes clear when groups it finances engage in assassination and target non-Muslims minorities.

Non-Muslims have not been the only targets of Iranian-sponsored terror. The Tawhid Islamic Group, a component faction of Tawhid initiated in the year 2000 a campaign of throwing acid at unveiled women in the Iraqi Kurdistan regional capital of Irbil.²⁵ The KDP cracked down on the movement, forcing many to relocate to Hajji Umran or Halabja, where they enjoyed de facto Iranian protection.²⁶

Iranian assistance for Tawhid was not a one-time occurrence. The Islamic Republic provides the Islamist groups with their only access to the international world. No international travel can occur without involvement by Iranian officials. The roundtrip travel to Afghanistan of two Tawhid members Mullah Abu Bakr Hawleri and 'Abu Qatada' through hundreds of kilometers of Iranian territory on a mission to cement relations between Tawhid and al-Qa'ida could not have occurred without Iranian compliance. While skeptics can doubt the links between Iraqi Kurdish Islamists and al-Qa'ida, on August 8, 2001, Abu Qatada gave a dinner reception in which he regaled his guests with stories of Usama Bin Ladin.²⁷

Theocracy or Death: Iran and the Rise of the Jund al-Islam

On September 1, 2001, the Tawhid Islamic Front and second militant group, the Second Soran Unit, merged to form a new group called Jund al-Islam (Army of Islam). According to an Al-Sharq al-Awsat report on the foundation of the group, three "Afghan Arabs" witnessed the agreement of merger, after which they transferred to the Jund al-Islam an initial grant of \$300,000.²⁸ The report further claimed that 60 of the approximately 400 fighters in Jund al-Islam had trained in Afghanistan, again indicating at least some Iranian in complicity in transit.²⁹ The group acquired a large quantity of weapons, including 106mm. shells, anti-aircraft guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and machine guns.³⁰ If Iran did not supply such weapons directly, the circumstantial evidence indicates that the Iranian security or intelligence apparatus facilitated their transport through Iran.

Unlike the Tawhid, Jund al-Islam did not limit itself to attacks against individuals. On September 11, the group initiated military operations, seizing the strategic Shinirwe Mountain overlooking the town of Halabja.³¹ Twelve days later, the Jund al-Islam destabilization campaign began in earnest. The group attacked a PUK outpost, capturing, beheading, and ritually mutilating 43 peshmurga. Declaring a holy war against "the blasphemers and the secularists," Jund al-Islam released a platform which called for the implementation of God's will, the banning of relations with all secular parties, the establishment of an Islamic administration under the Jund al-Islam's control conforming to the "Islamic Sunni religion," with no permissible exceptions to "the Judgments of Islam."³² As al-Qa'ida lobbied the Taliban for the destruction of the Afghan Buddha statues at Bamian, the Jund al-Islam destroyed two non-Islamic shrines along the Iran-Iraq border.³³ Jund al-Islam assassins killed a secular official and a moderate Muslim scholar. Local security uncovered other assassination plots.

Heavy fighting erupted in October 2001 between the PUK peshmurga and the Jund al-Islam along the Iranian border; dozens of deaths resulted. Despite some losses of territory seized, Jund al-Islam managed to resupply and remain entrenched. Such resupply of weaponry and ammunition could only occur across the Iranian border. And, with fighting waging on the Iranian border, the chance of surreptitious smuggling is non-existent. After all, Iran watches fighting in Iraqi Kurdistan closely, and claims a privilege of intervention. During the December 2000 fighting between the PUK and PKK, Tehran declared that it could "not tolerate" fighting along its frontier.³⁴ Following the October 4, 2001 battle between the PUK and Jund al-Islam for the border town of Tawella, Shawkat Hajji Mushir, a local PUK commander, commented that "if the PUK gets any closer [to the border], PUK bullets and rockets would hit Iranian positions."³⁵

Conclusions: The Islamic Republic's Quest to Destabilize Secularism

Iranian officials like Khatami repeatedly declare that Iran does not sponsor terrorism. Support for groups violently opposing the peace process is an important exception. On January 30, 2002, Expediency Council chairman and former president 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, declared, "The world's superpower...describes the Lebanese resistance, which is defending a wronged nation with its own blood, as terrorist. Hamas, [Islamic] Jihad, Hezbollah...are described as terrorists. It is truly amazing!"³⁶ Some European Union officials implicitly endorse Hizbullah through diplomatic contacts, explaining that the group is merely a legitimate liberation struggle.³⁷

However, Iran's denials of terror sponsorship cannot simply be explained away as a semantic dispute over the nature of Hizbullah and Palestinian rejectionist groups. Iran's repeated attempts to destabilize the northern Iraq safe haven, and its support for anti-Turkish terrorist groups belie the Islamic Republic's true nature.

Iranian intelligence maintains a strong presence in northern Iraq beyond its declared official presence. In Sulayaniyah, the Iranian intelligence headquarters shares a generator with the Italian-run Emergency surgical hospital.³⁸ One university official warned me to take care walking in the area, commenting, "VeVAK [the Iranian Ministry of Information and Security] will shoot you with a smile on its face rather than ever hint that it is in the

slightest bit upset." In Dahuk, Iranian intelligence maintained an office just down the street from the Kurdistan Democratic Party headquarters (though the KDP maintained a tight watch on the Iranian personnel).³⁹

Because the Iranian government is allowed to maintain an official office in Sulaymaniyah in order to conduct business, the additional and significant intelligence presence indicates questionable intentions on the part of the Iranian government, especially given its curious association with material and financial support for Islamist and nationalist groups engaged in terror against both civilians and local administration officials. Indeed, the Iranian government has a strong track record of seeking to sponsor terror through various unofficial offices and front groups. In 1997, the US Embassy in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, was evacuated due to a rising terror threat.⁴⁰ Likely a contributing factor to the decision was the fact that 60 meters away, across Rudaki Street and down a small alley, was the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (Komite Imdad-i Imam Khomeini), which often acts as a front for activities that have much to do with Khomeini, but little to do with relief.

There is little question that the Islamic Republic is violently opposed to the Middle East peace process and the recognition of the State of Israel. Iranian officials acknowledge support for groups labeled by the US government as terrorists. Iran even shelters wanted terrorists like Imad Mughniyeh, responsible for a string of bombings and kidnappings in the 1980s and '90s, and terror suspects like Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Brigadier General Ahmad Sharifi, believed by many American officials to be the mastermind of the 1996 truck bomb of the US military barracks in Khobar, Saudi Arabia.⁴¹

What receives far less attention, though, is the role Iran plays in undermining regional Western-oriented or secular governments. Export of the Revolution, conducted brazenly in the 1980s by figures like Mehdi Hashemi and his Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Office of Liberation Movements, continues more than four years into the administration of Iranian president Muhammad Khatami, and more than a decade since the EU initiated its policy of "critical engagement" toward Iran.⁴² It is clear that engagement of Iran does not have the same impact on actions of the Islamic Republic than it does on the rhetoric of Tehran. Rather, failure to treat terrorism as a black-and-white issue merely removes any disincentive for Khamenei and Khatami to cease terror and subversion.

At its heart, the Islamic Republic remains an ideological regime. Secular administrations in predominantly Islamic countries along its borders threaten the very foundations of the regime. Accordingly, Iran seeks to undermine and neutralize these threats. To neutralize Azerbaijan, Iran supports Armenia which continues to occupy one-fifth of Azerbaijani territory.⁴³ The activities of Iranian intelligence agents working to destabilize the interim government of Hamid Karzai are well documented.⁴⁴ In 1996, Tehran actively plotted to overthrow the government of Bahrain.⁴⁵

It is in this context that Iran's actions in Iraqi Kurdistan must be examined. The government in Tehran is pragmatic. It is willing to work with secular and Marxist groups like the PKK, as well as radical Sunni groups like the Kaplanists or Jund al-Islam. However, Iranian pragmatism has a purpose. The events of the last 18 months show that Iran actively seeks to destabilize the northern Iraqi safe-haven, both to undermine existing Western-oriented secular Muslim administrations there, and also to transform the mountainous region into fertile ground for the Islamic Republic's own proxy groups. Tehran appears to have its sites on undermining Turkey, which still presents the greatest ideological challenge to Iran in the Islamic world. Turning a blind eye for the sake of diplomatic expediency to Iran's activities in northern Iraq will only lead to a much more fundamental challenge to regional stability in the years to come.

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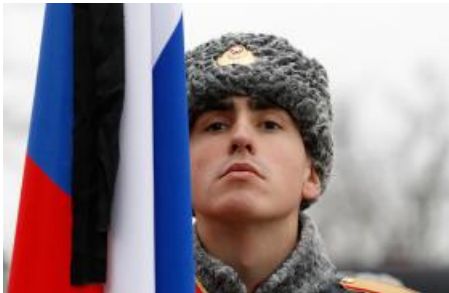
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