

## Iran:

### Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?

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#### Brief Analysis

**B**ritish foreign secretary Jack Straw arrives in Tehran today to "build alliances with every country that we can." In fact, Iran is the acid test of U.S. resolve to fulfill the goal set by President George Bush in his speech to Congress, namely, "From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime." While Iran could be a useful ally vis-à-vis Afghanistan, there is no sign that Iran has any intention of stopping its support for terrorism. The objective of U.S. policy should be finding a way to take advantage of Iran's anti-Taliban sentiment while still pressing ahead with efforts to terminate Iran's own support for international terrorism.

#### Iran Fights the Taliban

Iran is not only geographically convenient for operations in Afghanistan; it has also been the country most actively opposed to the Taliban. Since the Taliban's rapid advance during 1994-95, Iran has been the principal source of military assistance to the anti-Taliban United Front, sending in hundreds of C-130 flights until the United Front lost its last major airport in 1999. In late 1998, when they overran the city of Mazar-e Sharif, the Taliban killed nine Iranians whom Iran described as eight diplomats and a journalist, but who were evidently military advisors. Iran mobilized about 200,000 troops along the Afghan border and was openly debating whether to invade, when cooler heads prevailed.

But if Iran's opposition to the anti-Shiite Taliban is clear, Iran has been decidedly unclear as to whom in Afghanistan it actually supports. After anti-communist mujahedin seized Kabul in 1992 and fell to fighting among themselves, Iran's foreign ministry actively promoted formation of a united front of the former mujahedin. But during the same years (1992-95), Iran's security services undermined that front by providing arms to its favored Shiite group, the Hizb-i Wahdat, which then attacked the forces of other members of the National Islamic United Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, or what Pakistani circles derisively call the Northern Alliance. Indeed, Iranian policy is often characterized by this duality: the foreign ministry says what the outside world wants to hear, while the Ministry of Information and Security (MOIS) provides arms and money to hardliners. MOIS, under the control of supreme religious leader 'Ali Khamene'i, is the most powerful actor in Iran's foreign policy. A test of how serious Iran is about

cooperating against the Taliban is whether MOIS operatives, not just powerless foreign ministry officials, meet with Westerners.

Given the Taliban's anti-Iranian hostility, Tehran has reason to be pleased if the United States takes care of the security threat to Iran's east from the Taliban, much as the United States neutralized the threat Iran faced from the west in Iraq. But will Iran help in the fight against the Taliban? The legacy of Iran's posture toward the U.S.-led action against Iraq is not encouraging: Iran was neutral during the 1990-91 war and has since protected smugglers undercutting UN sanctions. Perhaps the most realistic expectation of what Iran might do is found in the message the United States has sent the Iranian government, which, in the words of a U.S. official quoted by Reuters, is, "We hope you won't stand in the way of what we do." Even that, however, cannot be assured. On September 17, Khamene'i -- who, unlike President Muhammad Khatami, controls MOIS and the military -- warned, "If America were to enter Pakistan and dispatch forces to Afghanistan so as to expand its might in the region, its problems will multiply daily."

In the last three years, one of the few places Iran has been prepared to meet with U.S. officials has been to discuss Afghanistan in the "six plus two" process (Afghanistan's six neighbors plus Russia and the United States). Wanting a say in post-Taliban Afghanistan, Iran may be prepared to consult more closely with the United States. According to the Washington Post, U.S., Iranian, German, and Italian officials met in Geneva last week to assess the political situation in Afghanistan. Any such government-to-government contact is a victory for the long-standing U.S. position that Iran and the United States should have normal diplomatic interaction. The United States should urge U.K. foreign secretary Straw and other Europeans who speak with Iranian officials to press Tehran to talk to Washington -- Iran has the only government in the world that refuses to talk with the U.S. government.

Will Iran Cease Supporting Terrorism?

As Secretary of State Colin Powell said on September 17, "[Iran] may want to make cause against the Taliban, but will they make cause against other terrorist organizations that they have provided support to? And I am willing to explore that, but let's not get any further than that. Some suggested that they are part of the coalition, they're going to be partners. Not so fast." In addressing Iranian support for terrorism, the Hizballah files remains paramount. Some may argue that the anti-Israel Hizballah does not fit the profile of "terrorism with a global reach," which President Bush in his address to Congress defined as the U.S. target. But a review of the exploits of Hizballah's terrorist-in-chief, Imad Mughniyeh, shows otherwise. Mughniyeh was heavily involved in the April 1983 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut; the September 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut; the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires; and the 1994 bombing of a Jewish social center in the same city. Mughniyeh may also have been behind the April 1997 plan to blow up an El Al plane in midair, which went awry when the bomb went off prematurely in the Jerusalem hotel room of its carrier. And, as the Washington Post reported, Mughniyeh's "most recent known residence" is, according to intelligence reports, Tehran.

The sub-text of President Bush's speech, especially its reference to states that "continue" to harbor terrorists, is that state-sponsors of terror have an opportunity now to get out of the business and turn a page in their relations with Washington. The United States needs now to press that message. According to Lebanese media and as reported in the Wall Street Journal, associates of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri say the Bush administration is "calling for the disarmament, if not disbanding, of Hizballah [as well as] prosecution or extradition of terrorists, stopping their movement in and out of Lebanon and Syria, intelligence sharing, and banning organizations that support terrorism." Similar tough demands should be made of Iran.

Specifically, President Bush should reiterate the demand President Clinton made in his 1999 letter to Khamene'i, namely that Iran make available those with information about the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing. After all, Attorney General John Ashcroft has declared that Iranian officials "inspired, supported and supervised members of Saudi Hizbollah" in carrying out that attack. In addition, the United States should demand an immediate end to Iran's

arming and financial support of Hizballah as well as the removal from Lebanon of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards training Hizballah on the use of Iranian weaponry, including long-range katyushas. Iran should also be pressed to end financial support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, stop sponsoring international conferences like the April gathering of groups supporting suicide bombings against Israel, and hand Mughniyeh over for prosecution by Argentina, whose Supreme Court issued an arrest warrant against him earlier this year for the Buenos Aires bombings.

Perhaps Iran will change. After all, unlike the unabashed gloating seen after previous terrorist attacks on Americans, this time, only some Iranian leaders (including Khamene'i) blamed Israel for the bombings. One Iranian group organized a candlelight vigil in central Tehran. But the police broke up the vigil, arresting those who chanted "death to terrorism." That is a frequent slogan used to protest against the terror directed against reformers by Iranian hardliners. Indeed, after years of killing Iranian dissidents in Europe and the Middle East, (again underscoring Iran's "global reach"), the principal terrorist activities of the Iranian security services are today at home against reformers - yet another reason why U.S. policy should be tough on the Iranian government while extending a hand of friendship to the Iranian people.

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