

The Long Shadow of Khobar Towers:

Dilemmas for the U.S. and Iran

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Brief Analysis

The 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, in which nineteen U.S. airmen were killed and hundreds injured, continues to cast a shadow over U.S.-Iran relations. The decision last week by the United States to turn over bombing suspect Hani al-Sayegh to Saudi Arabia for trial, and the revelation this week by State Department spokesman Jamie Rubin that the U.S. government is "investigating information concerning the involvement of . . . Iranian government officials" in the blast, indicates that this issue is still alive and remains one of several potential obstacles to more normal relations with Iran--particularly if the involvement of Iranian officials in this operation is eventually confirmed.

Rogue Operation or State-Sponsored Terror? According to a Canadian government intelligence assessment submitted to the Federal Court of Canada (al-Sayegh tried to obtain asylum in Canada before his extradition to the United States), al-Sayegh was a member of the Saudi Hizballah organization, "a radical Shi'ite movement . . . based in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia," which "carried out [the] bombing [of] the Al Khobar Towers." According to this assessment, "Saudi Hizballah receives much support and assistance from Hizballah . . . at [the latter's] camps in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. The camps are used to teach advanced techniques such as surveillance and counter-surveillance, methods of secure electronic communications, and the production of false identification documents. They also provide instruction in foreign languages, the use of small arms, methods of border infiltration, and the making of car bombs." Moreover, U.S. officials cited by the Washington Post (June 28, 1997) believe that Saudi Hizballah operatives who participated in the bombing had previously been in contact with a senior Iranian Revolutionary Guard intelligence officer, Brigadier Ahmad Sharifi, concerning a plot to attack U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia that some investigators believe may have evolved into the Khobar operation. State Department spokesman Rubin indicated that while Washington has "specific information with respect to the involvement of Iranian government officials," the United States has "not reached a conclusion regarding whether the attack was directed by the government of Iran."

If Iran was in some way involved in the Khobar Towers bombing, experience would suggest that it was probably not a rogue operation. Ever since the Mehdi Hashemi affair in the mid-1980s--in which an ultraradical senior Revolutionary Guard official was arrested and executed for, inter alia, leaking news of "arms for hostages"

negotiations with the U.S. to a Lebanese newspaper and kidnapping a Syrian diplomat in Tehran--the Iranian regime has worked to tighten government control over all key institutions of the state in order to prevent such rogue operations from ever happening again.

Thus, in 1994, U.S. director of central intelligence James Woolsey stated that Iranian terrorist attacks are "not acts of rogue elements" but rather are "authorized at the highest levels of the Iranian regime." Similarly, in 1997, a German court found that the murder of four Iranian Kurdish oppositionists by Iranian agents in Berlin's Mykonos cafe in 1992 was authorized by a committee consisting of Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamene'i, President 'Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Intelligence Minister 'Ali Fallahian, and Foreign Minister 'Ali Akbar Velayati. This information was provided by Abolhassem Mesbahi, a former senior Iranian Intelligence Ministry official who defected to Germany and later testified for the prosecution; details of his testimony were reportedly confirmed by German intelligence.

A strong case can be made that Iranian terrorism has consistently supported the regime's policy objectives, which would seem to indicate state sponsorship. Thus, after the politically damaging Mykonos operation in 1992, the locus of Iran's terrorist activities shifted from the politically sensitive heart of Europe (particularly France and Germany) to the Middle East (Iraq) and South Asia (Pakistan), where such attacks barely make news and thus do not damage Tehran's ties to the West. Furthermore, overseas terrorist acts generally require a high degree of coordination among diverse government agencies and entities, which would almost certainly not be possible without an order from "the top."

In the case of Khobar Towers, the scope and nature of Iran's involvement remains unclear (at least according to information in the public domain). It should be noted, however, that Ahmad Reza'i--the son of former Iranian Revolutionary Guard chief Mohsen Reza'i, and who defected to the U.S. in 1998--has claimed that his father told him that Khamene'i ordered the Khobar Towers bombing in a bid to oust U.S. forces from the Persian Gulf region. This claim has yet to be independently verified, but it would be consistent with the findings of the court in the Mykonos trial.

Finally, Iran has frequently used foreign nationals as surrogates in terrorist operations in order to preserve deniability. For instance, a series of lethal bombings in Paris in September 1986 was coordinated by Iranian intelligence agent Wahid Gorji, who was officially employed by the Iranian embassy in Paris as a translator. The actual bombings were carried out by a network of Lebanese Hizballah and Tunisian- and Moroccan-born agents. The bombings were part of an unsuccessful effort to coerce France to cease its military support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. Likewise, the September 1992 assassination in Berlin of Kurdish oppositionists at the Mykonos cafe was coordinated by an Iranian agent living in Germany (Kazem Darabi) and carried out by Lebanese Hizballah operatives. In other words, if Tehran was involved in the Khobar bombing, the use of Saudi surrogates would hardly be unique.

Conclusions: If Iranian officials were indeed involved one way or another in the Khobar Towers bombing, past experience would offer good reason to believe that this was probably not a rogue operation, but that it was authorized at the highest levels of the Iranian government. And should the U.S. government determine that Iranian officials or the Iranian government were involved in the bombing of Khobar Towers, they will then face the task of making good on President Bill Clinton's pledge that "the cowards who committed this murderous act must not go unpunished."

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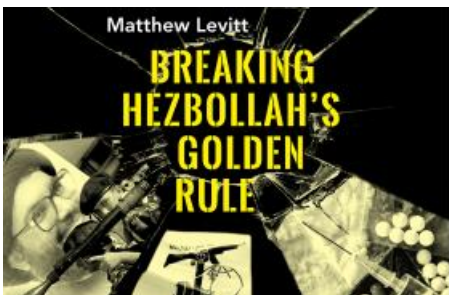
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