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IN THE U.S. WAR ON TERRORISM, IRAN IS THE ENEMY

INTRODUCTION

The muted U.S. response to recent terrorist acts against Americans in the Middle East raises questions about the seriousness and effectiveness of U.S. anti-terrorist policies. While tough rhetoric has been abundant, there is little evidence of tough policies that might punish terrorists and deter subsequent attacks.

Policy makers should ask the important questions, and be prepared to act in response to the answers they find. A key question is: who is behind the wave of anti-U.S. terrorism? Hard evidence points to Iran, with its fanatic, avenging regime. The primary target of U.S. deterrent and retaliatory action, therefore, must be Iran.

Iran has been waging a non-traditional war against the United States that has all but driven it from Lebanon. The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's regime has bombed the American Embassy, Marine headquarters, and the embassy annex in Beirut. U.S. citizens have been murdered and kidnapped; others are being held hostage. Iran trains, equips, and directs the local Lebanese Shi'ite extremists who act as surrogates against the U.S. To all of this there has been no U.S. response.

This violence has a clear, political purpose: to eliminate all trace of U.S. influence from the region. Khomeini effectively has been using a low-cost, low-risk means of imposing his political will upon the U.S. because the Reagan Administration has not yet chosen to make him pay a price for his actions. What the U.S. faces in Lebanon and what will be faced elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond, is not conventional terrorism but war, a low-intensity war. The U.S. must

respond as it would in any war--with a counter-strategy and a vision of victory.

Deterrence of future terrorist attacks may require the kind of massive response that would inflict enough damage on the enemy to cause him to desist. The severity of an attack, however, may not alone assure the enemy that he faces repeated attacks. Indeed, should such an attack have little effect, it may convince the enemy that the U.S. will back down first, that the number of such strikes which can be made is limited, or that the American public will object to the level of violence used. To deter, the action must not appear a one-shot effort. The U.S. must calculate not only its destructive force but also its implicit threat of further action. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki probably would not have ended the war had Tokyo known that the U.S. had no more nuclear bombs ready for use in the near future.

When armed men are trained, equipped, harbored and directed by governments, they are not criminals but soldiers. These unorthodox soldiers wage war against America and thwart U.S. superior military power without paying the consequences. The U.S. must, therefore, make it clear to countries like Syria, Libya, and Iran that they will be held accountable for attacks for which they are responsible. Washington must make it clear that it will make no distinction between an attack by civilian-clad Iranian or Lebanese terrorists and uniformed Iranian soldiers.

Above all, the U.S. must not allow its adversaries to inflict on it continual humiliations. The U.S. must not continue to abdicate the initiative to define the boundaries of the conflict and determine the rules. When the U.S. responds to a terrorist threat or attack, it should use the advantages of its military strength.

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS

One of Iran's chief instruments of terror, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was formed in 1979 in the early stages of the Iranian revolution. Originally, the Corps had two aims: to provide Khomeini and his ruling clerics with an alternative to the existing police and military forces, who were ideologically suspect, and to assist the mullahs in the administration of fundamentalist Islamic codes and morals. Staffed with the Muslim faithful, the Revolutionary Guards ensured that the mullahs' laws and decrees would be carried out.

In the six years since the Iranian revolution, the Revolutionary Guards have expanded in number and extended their mission. At birth there were some 6,000; now, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, there are a quarter-million. While retaining

their original role of security police they have also acquired active military and paramilitary functions abroad.

The Guards are organized into battalion-size units and even possess limited naval and air capabilities. They train terrorists not only in Iran and Lebanon but also in Libya, where a Revolutionary Guard cadre reportedly is instructing recruits from several African countries in sabotage, bombing, and political assassination. In the Persian Gulf region, the Guards have created an organization known as the "Islamic Liberation Movement Unit," which regularly meets representatives of Shi'ite Islamic fundamentalist groups from Kuwait, Iraq, and Bahrain.

Today the Revolutionary Guard Corps is a separate ministry of Iran's government; it is almost certainly the most powerful organization in Iran.¹

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS IN LEBANON

The first Revolutionary Guards contingent arrived in Lebanon in summer 1982, shortly after the Israelis invaded the country. Its original mission was to fight alongside Syrian and Lebanese forces against the Israelis. Near Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley, the Guards later established headquarters, organized a propaganda office, and began giving Koranic lessons to the local Shi'ite Lebanese. The Guards were being directed from Teheran by a secret "War against Satan Committee", determined to exorcise the American presence in Lebanon by using local Shi'ite militant groups such as the Islamic Holy War and the Hezbollah in terrorist operations. Intelligence analysts have gathered evidence that this secret committee directed the U.S. Embassy and Marine headquarters bombings in Beirut and probably the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait in December 1983.²

THE ISLAMIC HOLY WAR

The Islamic Holy War or Islamic Jihad first appeared publicly when it claimed credit for bombing the French Embassy in Beirut in May 1982. The following April it claimed responsibility for the suicide car-bomb attack on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, which killed 49 people

1. For this analysis, the author owes a great debt to R. Perron, who allowed him to read his forthcoming article, "The Iranian Guard Corps: 'Khomeini's KGB.'"

2. See Ariel Merari and Yosefa Braunstein, Shi'ite Terrorism, a Special Report published by the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University.

and injured 120. As the year went on, the Islamic Holy War boasted that it was behind a number of attacks on the soldiers of the Multi-National Force (MNF), deployed in Lebanon in an attempt to bring peace to the country. The Islamic Holy War's campaign peaked in the simultaneous car-bombing attacks on the U.S. Marine and French force headquarters in Beirut on October 23, 1983, and on Israeli headquarters in Tyre on November 4, 1983. Then, on December 12, the American and French Embassies in Kuwait were bombed. The Islamic Holy War again claimed credit.

Another group whose membership may overlap that of Holy War is the Islamic Hope. It has expressed support for the terrorist operations carried out by Islamic Holy War, and has threatened to attack American, French, and Israeli targets. Its leader, Hussein Mussawi, a 42-year-old former school teacher, still receives a salary from the Lebanese Ministry of Education. An important military figure in Islamic Hope is Shaykh Ghareb Harb, described as a local agent of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and referred to as "the ayatollah of the suicides."³

The Islamic Holy War does not have a rigid, hierarchical structure. It appears rather to be a group of terrorists who are assigned to missions planned and organized by the Iranians or the Syrians. According to the best available information, it includes several hundred Lebanese Shi'ites and roughly 500 Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Iran and Syria provide training and supply weapons. Some reports suggest that Shi'ite terrorist activity in Lebanon is actually planned in the Syrian town of Zabdani, about 20 miles from Damascus, which serves as a logistics depot channeling weapons, explosives, and Iranian volunteers into Baalbek. A British intelligence source says that an Iranian known as Abu Musleh, whose own headquarters are also in Baalbek, masterminds the Shi'ite terrorist attacks.⁴

HEZBALLAH

The other, well-advertised Shi'ite terrorist faction is the Hezbollah (Party of God), which adheres to an extreme Islamic ideology and has claimed credit for the attacks on the American and French headquarters in Beirut and the Israeli administration building in Tyre. Hezbollah has its headquarters in Baalbek, where it maintains close links with both the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Islamic Holy War.

3. Ibid., p. 4

4. Ibid., p. 5

Hezbollah is trained and supported by Iran. Its alleged head, Abbas Mussawi, a cousin of Hussein Mussawi, the founder of Islamic Hope, reportedly visited Iran in August 1983, to coordinate future activities against "Zionism and Imperialism." Another individual, Shaykh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah has also been identified as a Hezbollah leader. An unsuccessful attempt to kill him took place last March, shortly after his return from Iran: the car-bombing in the Muslim quarter of Beirut killed 75 others.

The connection between the Teheran directors and these Lebanese Front groups that execute terrorist operations for them is anything but "shadowy," a currently fashionable term used to describe the relationship. Iran controls these terrorists and wields them as weapons. Declared a Hezbollah leader: "Khomeini is our big chief. He gives the orders to our chiefs, who give them to us."⁵

IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS OUTSIDE LEBANON

Violence against American targets has not been confined to Lebanon. The Islamic Holy War, for example, took credit for the December 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards are training African terrorists in Libya. Elsewhere in the Arab world they are organizing radical fundamentalist Shi'ite groups, such as the Ad-Da'wa in Iraq and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain.⁶ In December 1984, radical fundamentalist Muslims hijacked a Kuwaiti airliner, then tortured and murdered two of the American passengers on board. The evidence strongly suggests that the hijackers were receiving their orders from Teheran, as they had been in an early November attempt to blow up the United States Embassy in Rome which was foiled by the Italian police.

Late this January, Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hussein Musavi, believed by some intelligence analysts to direct Iran's overseas terrorist activities, paid a three-day visit to Nicaragua. It was Musavi's third meeting with Nicaraguan Leader Daniel Ortega. Shortly after the visit, intelligence sources speculated that a Nicaraguan vessel bound for North Korea would be picking up arms paid for by Iran.

In April, the Islamic Holy War blew up a restaurant near Madrid frequented by U.S. servicemen. The explosion killed 18 Spaniards and

5. Daniel Pipes, "Undeclared War: Hijackers are the Foot Soldiers in Iran's Jihad," The New Republic, January 7 and 14, 1985, pp. 12-14.

6. Perron, op. cit.

injured 15 Americans, one of them seriously. The bombed restaurant, El Descanso, allegedly became a target because it was a favorite of many of the 4,500 U.S. personnel stationed at the Torrejon de Ardoz joint U.S.-Spanish air base. Security experts believe that the Islamic Holy War is now forging links with European terrorist organizations such as Direct Action in France, the Red Army Faction in West Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Basque separatist organization ETA, and a Spanish leftist group known as GRAPO.

Also in April, leaders of the major Shia movements flew into Britain for a two-day conference to coordinate strategy in Lebanon and the Persian Gulf. They met in considerable secrecy in a college, empty for the Easter vacation, in Derby. Among those present were Hasan Hashim, Chairman of the executive council of the Amal, the largest Lebanese Shi'ite organization, and Sayyid Hussein al-Sadr of the Iraqi Ad-Da'wa party. Representatives of the Shia underground in Bahrain also attended, under the deepest cover.

The Derby meeting was the second conference of Islamic revolutionaries to take place in Britain in four months. The "Shia International" along with the Syrian-sponsored Palestinians' Salvation Front, and Qadhafi's Pan-Arab command have much in common. They share great confidence in unconventional, low-intensity warfare and oppose the so-called moderate Arab Axis--Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Above all, they hate the country that they perceive as the moderates' ringmaster: the United States. Among other subjects, the Derby meeting discussed closer practical coordination between the Amal and the Ad-Da'wa party. In May, Indonesian official on Madura Island off Java seized more than one hundred copies of an Iran embassy publication addressed to all Muslim schools in the region, eulogizing the Iranian revolution and urging Indonesian Muslims to create their own.

TOWARD A COUNTER-TERRORIST STRATEGY

A strategy to fight terrorist violence must focus on the two most fundamental objectives: 1) denial to the terrorists of their underlying political purpose, which is to remove U.S. influence from the Middle East, and 2) deterrence of future attacks.

The U.S. cannot achieve either objective simply by refusing, or claiming to refuse, to accede to the terrorists' immediate, stated demands. It would be naive to assume that the terrorist's purpose is always what he says it is. In any case, such demands are only a tactical step toward the underlying political purpose of U.S. enemies

in Iran and Lebanon to destroy American power and influence. In the short term, it means that they seek to drive the American presence from the region.

Whatever the internal dynamics of Shi'ite Lebanese politics, those who planned the recent attack against the TWA jetliner must have known from past experience that the hijacking, if successful, would again expose America's inability to use its military might to deal with low-intensity war. Muslims throughout the region thus would be reminded of American moral and political inhibitions against using force and would witness the paralysis of even the most apparently hawkish and politically secure of administrations. Accordingly, the terrorists would strike another great blow against Satan.

If the U.S. wishes to use its military power to deter Shi'ite fanatics from taking and murdering American hostages, it must commit itself to instantaneous retaliation, not only when Americans are killed but also when they are kidnapped. Such retaliation should consist of an immediate reprisal strike against Iran linked to a simultaneous rescue attempt of the hostages. A rescue attempt, even if perfectly successful, on its own cannot achieve deterrence. At best, it may make some of the less committed hijackers marginally more reluctant to perform in the future but will not make those who plan and direct such operations against the U.S. abandon their strategy.

The reprisal strike and the rescue attempt must be simultaneous. If reprisal occurs first, it will almost certainly seal the hostages' fate. If it occurs after a failed rescue attempt, reprisal may appear to the world as a product of the failure and not a response to the kidnapping. The lesson would therefore be lost.

The U.S. must also respond forcefully even after a successful rescue attempt. First, a successful rescue by itself will not necessarily deter future terrorist acts; second, a U.S. response would make clear that U.S. policy is always to respond to the terrorist action.

The U.S. can deter terrorism only if every attempt to murder American citizens triggers a reprisal strike, and if every attempt to abduct them immediately triggers an attack to rescue the hostages and an attack on Iran to make hostage-taking too costly an option.

Using military force involves risk. Yet, negotiation, concession, and even total inaction also involve risk. There is no risk-free option, military or diplomatic. In past crises the safety of that moment's hostages has taken precedence over every other

7. See Daniel Pipes, *op. cit.* and more recently "Death to America in Lebanon," Middle East Insight, March/April 1985, pp. 3-9.

objective. This has meant that to preserve one group of hostages, Washington has been putting the lives of other Americans at risk in the future.

TACTICS OF THE U.S. RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

Hostage Rescue

Hostage rescue attacks often have succeeded. In any hostage seizure there is a brief period during which the kidnapper is vulnerable and an opportunity exists to thwart him. Normally, the greater the number of victims, the longer this period. In the case of the hijacking of TWA Flight 847, the opportunity existed from the moment Washington learned that the airliner had been seized until the removal of the remaining hostages from the plane and their dispersal in Beirut. Conditions were best when the aircraft was on the ground in Algeria in a relatively benign environment. At that stage, the Delta Force anti-terrorist commando team might have been used to carry out the 747 rescue mission for which it has carefully trained.

Reprisal

Reprisals are more complicated. Moral inhibitions and fear of responsive violence against U.S. civilians so far have prevented Washington from retaliating against terrorism. The moral inhibitions most often take the form of a desire to base reprisal action on irrefutable, publishable proof of the link between target and crime. Last April for example, Ronald Reagan threatened to "go to the source" of terrorism. He, the Secretary of State, and the National Security Advisor all referred to mounting evidence of Teheran's control over those who were (and are) holding Americans hostage in Lebanon.

When terrorists hijacked TWA 847, Reagan announced that he had no direct evidence of Iranian involvement. Even with direct evidence of ultimate responsibility in a given hijacking case, it probably could not be made public without compromising vital sources of future intelligence. To expect proof of linkage, therefore is to be naive or disingenuous. The terrorist knows this as well as any U.S. advisors or policy makers. He surely relies heavily on this as he makes future plans.

The kind of proof that would convince the hypothetical international court of law likely will remain a mirage. Circumstantial evidence for Iranian involvement in terrorism, however, is very convincing. In the TWA hijacking, the agents belonged to the Hezbollah. In April, Iran's foreign minister threatened precisely such

action. In the weeks preceding the hijacking, three Iranian delegations visited Damascus, which is a short distance from the Bekaa Valley.⁸ Hashemi Rafsanjani, Speaker of the Iranian parliament, was actually in Damascus when the hostages were being held.⁹ What is more, once a week an Iranian Air Force Boeing 747 lands at Damascus Airport and taxis to a remote strip of runway. It carries Revolutionary Guards and military supplies destined for the Bekaa.¹⁰

If self-implication is needed, early in July, Hezbollah leader Abbas Mussawi openly affirmed his group's allegiance to Iran, and declared that its goal is to turn Lebanon into an Islamic republic like Iran, that its supreme leader is the Ayatollah Khomeini, and that it is financed by Iran.¹¹ Add to all of this those Americans previously tortured or murdered under Iran's aegis. Surely this is sufficient evidence to justify a U.S. reprisal strike on Iran. Surely acts of terrorism against the U.S. would greatly diminish if Khomeini were convinced that they would result in severe damage to his Islamic Republic.

THE IRANIAN RESPONSE

Whenever the reprisal option is raised, much of the opposition to it stems from fear of setting off a cycle of escalating violence. This ignores two key considerations: Iran is militarily and economically far weaker than the U.S., and consequently vulnerable; and 2) its weakness and vulnerability would limit its options in responding to any U.S. reprisal.

The Iranian military repeatedly has demonstrated how inept it is during the war with Iraq. The Iranian military and the petroleum economy that sustains it offer the U.S. an ideal target for reprisal.

Iran's military weakness, of course, would not prevent it from launching some response to U.S. actions. Iran's options, however, would be limited and extremely hazardous. If it were to escalate, it would run the high risk of transforming U.S. fear into anger. The Iranians thereby would forfeit the central advantage of their tactic of low-intensity warfare: the fact that the level of violence against America is sufficiently low to allow Washington to avoid replying with

8. Financial Times, June 18, 1985, p. 4.

9. International Herald Tribune, July 6-7, 1985, pp. 1-2.

10. Ibid.

11. International Herald Tribune, July 11, 1985, p. 2.

force. This tactic has served them well till now. It is not Iranian strategy to escalate to a level of violence that would overwhelm U.S. moral doubts and create a conflict which Teheran could not hope to win.

Teheran's other option would be to turn to Moscow. But this, as they very well know, could endanger Iran's religious (and anti-communist) regime, its revolution and hopes of a worldwide Islamic movement. Iran would not take such a potentially self-destructive step easily.

What the U.S. needs is a reprisal strategy to put carefully calculated pressure on Iran to abandon its violent tactics and exert its influence on those outside its borders also to abandon their terrorism.

Iranian Targets

Iran offers a wide choice of morally acceptable military targets. The terrorist training camps, however, are not among them. First, striking at them would require U.S. pilots to fly over hostile, well-defended territory. Accordingly, the U.S. could lose planes and pilots, as happened on December 4, 1983, with the result that the raid would appear more costly to the U.S. than to the enemy, and therefore not frequently repeatable. Second, whether the raid actually caused civilian casualties or not, such casualties inevitably would be claimed and reported by the Western media. Third, the camps are easily replaceable, so that no blow struck at them can be critical. By attacking them the U.S. is more likely to invite escalation and to help the local terrorist recruiters, as Israel's and to a lesser extent the U.S. experience in Lebanon has already shown. Finally, if the U.S. strikes at the terrorist camps it repeats one of the major strategic errors of the war in Vietnam: attacking the symptom rather than the cause, expending effort on a target far from the true center of gravity.

Rather than attacking the terrorist training camps, the U.S. must identify targets that involve few, if any, civilians whose deaths would trigger the adverse reaction that the Administration and U.S. military leaders fear. This anticipated reaction is a crucial ingredient in the terrorist strategy. If the terrorists' targets are civilian while America's are military, the thorny issue of proportion no longer thwarts all action.

The first move in the U.S. counter-terrorist strategy should be directed at Iranian targets outside Iran. The most logical are arms shipments in Iranian carriers at sea or in the air. Such shipments are vulnerable. Attacks on them would take place well away from the camera's eye. Interdiction or destruction would raise few operational problems and loss of the arms would represent a significant loss of Iran's foreign exchange. This would impair severely Iran's ability to

obtain the weapons it needs to prosecute its war against Iraq. Alternative methods of transporting arms would take the Iranians time to develop and would be more expensive, both because foreign flag shipping would cost more (should it make itself available) and because insurance rates would rise.

Striking at such shipments would entail little operational risk. These targets are soft and the U.S. has the forces to attack them without embarrassment, without the capture of U.S. military personnel, and without causing the deaths of innocent civilians. Very few U.S. forces need be involved, so that operational security would be easy to maintain. The U.S. would need no Middle Eastern basing rights since the attacks would take place on the high seas or above them and even, possibly, away from the Arabian Gulf.

Through such action, the U.S. could reclaim the initiative in the war against terrorism, forcing Iran to recalculate. The Iranians no longer would be certain of how far they could push the U.S. before incurring retaliation. They would have to worry--and the U.S. should encourage this--that attacks on their arms shipments might be a prelude to more serious actions, especially since the U.S. suddenly would seem to become a nation emboldened by its successes.

Should the Iranians respond, similar targets would be available for carefully graduated strategic use. These targets also would meet the moral and operational criteria for successful counter-terrorism. Because there absolutely would be no need to commit troops to Iranian soil, the U.S. could escalate its pressure to the degree that suited it. By contrast, all the Iranians could do is what they have been doing--and what they surely will continue to do anyway as long as it costs them nothing.

After attacking arms shipments, the U.S. could strike at Iranian naval patrol boats and reconnaissance aircraft. A whole range of targets would be available before there was a need even to think of taking more drastic measures, such as demolishing naval port facilities or other industrial resources that support Iran's military.

CONCLUSION

Washington must begin looking more than one stop ahead in its battle with terrorism. The U.S. if it chooses, can do far more damage to Iran than Iran can to the U.S. A single, punishing reprisal strike is no answer. It will do little or nothing to end terrorism against the U.S. To fight this new low-intensity war, Washington must be determined to strike back again if tested. Without advance planning for that testing, without the willingness to move beyond a first reprisal, Washington again will have its bluff called by Iran, as

happened in Lebanon in the final months of 1983. Teheran will exploit the U.S. lack of persistence and real strategy to humiliate the U.S. anew. If Washington is not, from the beginning, prepared to do what is necessary to inflict substantial damage on Iran, it should not use military force in the first place.

In that case, the U.S. will have to acknowledge an enormous failure of will for American foreign policy. This would not be lost on those states and individuals around the world who find terrorism a congenial weapon. The U.S. would be fair game for them. Continued inaction, then, prompts escalation as inexorably as any action would do.

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