

foreigners**Proxy Power**

Understanding Iran's use of terrorism.

By Daniel Byman

Posted Wednesday, July 26, 2006, at 12:22 PM ET

Iran and Syria, [Hezbollah's foreign sponsors](#), may hold the key to resolving the violence in Lebanon, or they may play a part in the escalation of the conflict. Syria has received the lion's share of international attention, but Tehran's role in supporting Hezbollah and other terrorist groups is also crucial. Even though Iran is hundreds of miles away from Lebanon, it helped nurture Hezbollah in its early years and even today exercises considerable ideological and operational influence. The Lebanese terrorist organization is the most deadly creation of the clerical regime in Tehran, but it is only one of the many groups that Iran supports. Confusing this picture further, Tehran's backing of terrorist groups has changed considerably in the last decade.

After the 1979 Islamic revolution, Tehran used a wide range of terrorist organizations to export its revolution and to assassinate Iranian dissidents around the globe. Tehran played a major role in forming Hezbollah and helping it conduct attacks in Lebanon, including such devastating strikes as the 1983 bombings of the U.S. Marine barracks and embassy, which together killed more than 300 people. Indeed, before 9/11, Hezbollah had killed more Americans than any other international terrorist organization. Iranian-backed groups also regularly attacked dissidents in Europe, countries that backed Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war, and the governments of pro-Western Arab states. Ten years ago, on June 26, 1996, Iranian-backed terrorists exploded a massive truck bomb outside the Khobar Towers military housing project in Saudi Arabia, killing 19 Americans and one Saudi and wounding almost 400.

On the surface, not much seems to have changed with regard to Iran and terrorism in the last 10 years. The U.S. State Department still lists Iran as the world's "most active" state sponsor of terrorism, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad regularly fulminates against Israel and sings the praises of groups like Hamas. (For more on how U.S. policy is involved, see "[Made in the USA](#)," by Daniel Benjamin.)

Today, as the latest round of violence suggests, Israel is the biggest target of Iranian-backed terrorism, with Tehran supporting several Palestinian groups as well as Lebanese Hezbollah. These groups' attacks against Israel serve three purposes: They support Iranian leaders' opposition to the existence of the Jewish state; they give Iran prestige in the Muslim world; and by keeping violence alive, they undermine the peace process (admittedly, an easy task these days), which in turn reduces the chances that Iran will be isolated in the Middle East.

Although evidence is lacking, past behavior suggests that Hezbollah wouldn't conduct an operation as significant as the July 12 kidnappings without Tehran's approval. Indeed, the close ties between Hezbollah and Iran's theocrats have probably emboldened the former. Even if Israel manages to destroy much of Hezbollah's missiles and facilities, Iran will replenish its stocks. But Hezbollah is more than an instrument of Iranian foreign policy. Its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, enjoys far more prestige in the Arab world than any of Iran's current leaders. What's more, the organization's increased strength in Lebanon since the Syrian withdrawal has boosted its confidence.

While Iran's backing of anti-Israel violence has grown in recent years, it has cut back its interference in other parts of the world. Attacks on dissidents have decreased significantly since the mid-'90s, and Iran appears to have tempered its enthusiasm for exporting revolution. Most important, Tehran has not struck at the United States directly in the last decade. Iran has a healthy respect for U.S. military power, and after 1996 its leaders appeared to realize that the United States might be able to use additional Iranian terrorist attacks on U.S. facilities to gain international support for comprehensive sanctions on the regime. Sky-high oil prices and a new set of Iranian leaders who are less interested in international

investment have lessened U.S. economic clout, but Tehran has remained cautious about direct attacks on the United States.

Iran instead uses terrorism as a way to deter Washington. Terrorists give Tehran a way to strike at the United States in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere. Iran has cased U.S. embassies around the world and has off-the-shelf options for striking American targets. Washington recognizes that if it pushes Iran's leaders, they can push back. Terrorism thus complicates U.S. planning for stopping Iran's nuclear program and other top priorities.

The extent and nature of Iran's contacts with Sunni jihadist groups linked to al-Qaida is unclear. Immediately after 9/11, Iran appeared to be cooperating with the United States and its allies, transferring many jihadists to their home countries to face justice. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and U.S. refusal to turn over anti-Iranian terrorists of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization—a terrorist group that mixes Marxism and Islam and fought on the side of Saddam in the Iran-Iraq war—Tehran became more recalcitrant. Several senior al-Qaida figures, including Osama Bin Laden's son Saad, are in Iran, and some reports linked them to May 2003 attacks in Saudi Arabia. Iran claims to have the Sunni extremists under close watch, but the refusal to turn them in suggests that Tehran at least wants to use them as a bargaining chip and at most wants the option of a partnership should tension with Washington grow.

Iran could also use terrorism to raise the heat on the U.S. presence in Iraq. Iranian intelligence officials are active throughout Iraq but, for now, they have caused only limited problems for the United States. After all, the Shiite leadership taking power in Baghdad includes many leaders with close ties to Tehran. Still, the large U.S. presence leaves the United States vulnerable to Iranian-inspired violence. Iranian commentators speak openly about holding thousands of hostages in Iraq, suggesting that they view the troops as more of an opportunity than a threat. Even a small number of additional trained and motivated fighters could greatly complicate already dimming U.S. hopes of imposing order in Iraq, particularly as they would be likely to strike in Shiite parts of Iraq, where U.S. forces are particularly thin.

An Iranian-backed terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland is less likely but far from impossible. In the past, Tehran's leaders, often as prudent in policy as they are scathing in rhetoric, recognized that killing Americans in Saudi Arabia or other countries overseas was less risky than a strike on U.S. soil—a caution no doubt reinforced by U.S. regime-change efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the FBI has uncovered Hezbollah cells dedicated to fund raising in the United States, and it is reasonable to suppose that additional cells or at least individual operatives might have slipped beneath the bureau's radar screen.

Support for terrorism offers Iran what it craves most today: options. Iran is at best a middleweight economic power, and its military is in a state of disrepair. Terrorism, however, gives Iran a role in the fight against Israel, a strong voice in Iraq's future, and a way to deter the United States. In the end, Iran may decide to push Hezbollah away from the brink or to be a constructive player in Iraq. But as the American track record of predicting Iranian moves ranges from poor to abysmal, we must recognize that Iran's ties to terrorist groups also give Tehran options to escalate such conflicts.

Daniel Byman is the director of the Center for Peace and Security Studies in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and a nonresident senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

Article URL: <http://www.slate.com/id/2146532/>

Copyright 2006 Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive Co. LLC