

# Iran's Support for Terrorism in the Middle East

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Chairman Kerry, Ranking Member Lugar, members of this distinguished Committee, and Committee staff, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Iran has long been one of the most important and dangerous sponsors of terrorism in the world. Although the Islamic Republic's motivations have varied over the years, its leaders have consistently viewed ties to and support for a range of terrorist groups as an important instrument of national power. Disturbingly, Iran's support for terrorism has become more aggressive in recent years, motivated by a mix of fear and opportunism. Iran could become even more aggressive in the years to come, exploiting the perceived protection it would gain if it developed a nuclear weapon or, if thwarted through military force or other means, using terrorists to vent its anger and take revenge. However, under current circumstances Tehran still remains unlikely to carry out the most extreme forms of terrorism, such as a mass-casualty attack similar to 9/11 or a strike involving a chemical, biological, or nuclear weapon.

The United States should work with its allies to continue and expand an aggressive intelligence campaign to thwart Iran and its terrorist surrogates. After 9/11, the United States engaged in a comprehensive campaign against al-Qa'ida: a similar global approach is needed to combat Iranian-backed terrorism. However, as the United States is already exerting tremendous pressure on Tehran via sanctions and diplomatic isolation because of Iran's nuclear program, there are few arrows left in America's quiver and thus the United States will find it hard to place additional pressure on Iran due to terrorism.

In this statement I first lay out Iran's motivations for supporting an array of terrorist groups. I then offer explanations for how, and why, Iran is becoming more aggressive in its use of terrorism in response to a rapidly changing region. I then detail the dilemma regarding terrorism and Iran's nuclear program: allowing Iran to get the bomb is dangerous in and of itself and may make Tehran more aggressive in supporting terrorists, but a military strike to destroy the program is likely to lead Iran to use terrorism to take revenge. I conclude by presenting implications and recommendations for U.S. policy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This testimony draws extensively on two of my books: *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge, 2005) and *A High Price: The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism* (Oxford, 2011). Also relevant to my testimony and to this hearing are my articles, "Iran, Terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction,"

## Iran's Motivations for Supporting Terrorism

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution that toppled the Shah's government, Iran's clerical leadership has worked with an array of terrorist groups to advance its interests. Over thirty years later, this use of terrorism has continued and remains an important foreign policy instrument for Iran in its confrontation with its neighbors and with the United States. In his 2012 testimony, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper warned that Iran continues "plotting against U.S. or allied interests overseas."<sup>2</sup>

Iran's most important, and most well-known, relationship is with the Lebanese group, Hizballah. Iran helped midwife Hizballah and has armed, trained, and funded it to the tune of well over \$100 million a year – perhaps far more, depending on the year and the methodology used for the estimate. Iran's military aid included not only small arms and other typical terrorist weapons, but also anti-tank guided missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, and thousands of rockets and artillery systems, making Hizballah one of the most formidable sub-state groups in the world. Iranian personnel and Hizballah operatives have even done joint operations together.

Although Hizballah was long subservient to Iran, this relationship has gradually evolved. Increasingly, Hizballah is a partner to Tehran – its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has considerable stature in the Arab world, and the group's military resistance to Israel is widely admired. Hizballah makes its own decisions with its own interests in mind.

Despite the increasing parity in the relationship, Tehran continues to work closely with Hizballah's leaders, and its intelligence and paramilitary personnel are tightly integrated with Hizballah's external security apparatus. Hizballah officials see their organization as Iran's ally, and Tehran's considerable financial and military support give it considerable clout with its friends in Hizballah.

Iran, however, has also backed a wide range of other groups. In Iraq it has worked with an array of Shi'a factions. Tehran also has ties to Sunni groups including Iraqi Kurdish organizations, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and Hamas. Perhaps most striking, Iran has even allied at times with al-Qa'ida and the Taliban even though these groups are often violently anti-Shi'a and see Iran's leaders as apostates.

One motivation for backing many of these groups is and remains ideological. At the creation of the Islamic Republic, Iran's leaders made no secret of their desire to extend Iran's revolution throughout the Muslim world. Iran's first Supreme Leader and founding ideologue, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, declared that Iran "should try hard to export our revolution to the world."<sup>3</sup> Khomeini's goal is embedded in Iran's constitution and the charter documents of key organizations such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

To this end, Iran worked with a variety of Shi'a groups, most successfully the Lebanese Hizballah but also Shi'a militants in Iraq, Bahrain, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, organizing them against rival groups and often against their host governments. Iran did this in part because it wanted to spread its revolutionary ideology, and it found some receptive adherents among embattled and oppressed Shi'a groups throughout the Muslim world,

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*Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* Vol. 31 (2008), pp. 169-181 and "The Lebanese Hizballah and Israeli Counterterrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 34 (2011), pp. 917-941.

<sup>2</sup> James Clapper, "U.S. Intelligence Community Worldwide Threat Assessment," January 31, 2012.

<http://www.cfr.org/intelligence/clappers-testimony-worldwide-threat-assessment-january-2012/p27253>

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini* (Routledge, 1995), p. 131.

particularly in the years immediately after the revolution when the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini was able to inspire many Shi'a communities to support his leadership, or at least admire his new regime.

As its revolutionary fervor has worn off, Tehran increasingly employed terrorists for an array of strategic purposes. These include non-Shi'a terrorist groups with whom it gains little ideological sympathy. In addition, Iran has used even its closest terrorist allies, such as the Lebanese Hizballah, for strategic purposes. These purposes include:

- *Undermining and bleeding rivals.* Iran has regularly used terrorist groups to weaken governments it opposes. This has included bitter enemies like Saddam Hussein's Iraq and also lesser foes like the rulers of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Tehran also backs a wide array of insurgent groups that also use terrorism in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. These groups may advance Iran's interests in key countries or, at the very least, undermine the position of rivals.
- *Power projection and playing spoiler.* Tehran has a weak military and only limited economic clout. Its ideological appeal at the height of its revolutionary power was limited, and today it is paltry. Nevertheless, Iran's regime sees itself as a regional and even a world power, and working with terrorists is a way for Iran to influence events far from its borders. Iran's support for the Lebanese Hizballah, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and Hamas make Iran a player in the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab disputes. This in turn gives Iran stature and sway in the broader Middle East. Iran has supported groups whose attacks disrupted Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations – a victory for Iran, which sees the negotiations as a betrayal of the Muslim cause and as a means of isolating the clerical regime. Tehran has also repeatedly assassinated opponents of the regime who lived in exile in Europe or in other supposedly safe areas, using its own operatives and those of terrorist allies like Hizballah to do so.
- *Gaining a voice in opposition councils.* For Iran, it was often important not just that an enemy regime lose power or be weakened, but that particular strands within an opposition get stronger. So in Lebanon, Iran undermined Amal, a Shi'a militia, because it did not share Iran's ideology and interests. Tehran helped found Hizballah to replace it – a risky gamble that paid off but could have easily backfired on Iran. In general, Iran has used weapons, training, money, and other support to try to unify potential militant allies and otherwise improve its position among the opposition.
- *Deterrence.* By having the ability to work with terrorists and to subvert its enemies, Iran is able to press them to distance themselves from the United States or to refrain from joining economic or military efforts to press Iran. Such efforts, however, often backfire: because these states see Iran as meddling in their domestic affairs and supporting violence there, they often become more, not less, willing to support economic or even military pressure directed at Tehran.
- *Preserving options.* As a weak state – one with little ability to coerce via military or economic pressure – in a hostile region, Tehran also seeks to keep its options open. Iranian leaders recognize that in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other turbulent countries, those in

power today may be on the sidelines tomorrow and vice versa. In addition, they may want cordial relations with a neighbor at present but understand that circumstances may change in the future. So Iran courts and supports a range of violent groups even when it does not seek to exploit their capabilities under current circumstances. These groups can then be employed should Iran want to ratchet up pressure or punish an enemy.

Because Tehran's logic is often more strategic than ideological, Iran is willing to work with avowed enemies, though mutual mistrust limits the closeness of any relationship. So although many al-Qa'ida supporters loath Iran, and some of them have killed Shi'a in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere with abandon, Iran has worked with al-Qa'ida, at times allowing its operatives to transit Iran with little interference. Tehran has also given some al-Qa'ida operatives a limited safe haven, though at the same time it often curtails their movements and has even turned some over to the custody of their home governments. Using a similar logic, Tehran at times work with the Taliban, with which Iran almost went to war in 1998, because they have mutual enemies and to preserve Iran's options.

By working through terrorist groups like Hizballah or using its own operatives in a clandestine way, Tehran has been able to distance itself from attacks and thus often evade responsibility. Even in cases like the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, where Iran was ultimately found to be responsible, the time involved in proving Iranian culpability made it far harder to gain political and diplomatic support for a robust response. So deniability also makes terrorism an attractive option, allowing Iran to strike back but avoid the consequences of open aggression. So Iran is less likely to use mines and anti-ship cruise missiles to try to close the Strait of Hormuz, but could instead use terrorist attacks can be hard to trace directly to Tehran.

Although it is always tempting to attribute a strategic motive to all of Iran's behavior, Iran's leaders have at times used terrorism simply to take revenge on their opponents. Tehran struck at France and the Gulf states in the 1980s, for example, because they supported Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war. Similarly, some Iranian attacks on Israeli targets may in part be spurred by Iran's belief that Israel is behind the killing of Iranian nuclear scientists – Iran's actions may be as much about revenge as they are about any putative deterrence. Hizballah, Iran's close ally has also vowed revenge for the killing in Damascus in 2008 of the leader of its operations wing, Imad Mughniyah, believed to be at Israeli hands.

### **How and Why Iran Is Changing**

Iran aggressively supported an array of terrorist groups in the 1980s, especially the Lebanese Hizballah. Since the 1990s, Iran also championed Palestinian groups like Palestine Islamic Jihad and Hamas, supporting their efforts to carry out attacks in Israel and in the Palestinian territories. Tehran also worked with anti-U.S. insurgent groups in Afghanistan and Iraq. In terms of support for terrorism outside these theaters, however, the last Iranian-organized anti-U.S. attack was the 1996 strike on Khobar Towers, which killed 19 Americans. Yet Tehran has shown a renewed emphasis on terrorism outside the Israel/Lebanon/Palestine theater or war zones like Iraq and Afghanistan in the last year. Israel has been a particular focus, but Saudi Arabia and the United States also appear to be in Iran's sights:

- On July 18, 2012, a suicide bomber blew himself up on a bus carrying Israeli tourists in Bulgaria, killing five Israelis, the driver, and himself and wounding over thirty. Israeli officials blamed Iran, though investigations to determine culpability are still underway;
- Several days before the Bulgaria attack, a Lebanese Hizballah operative was arrested in Cyprus, where he was believed to be planning attacks on Israeli targets;
- In 2012, Iranian-linked plots against Israel linked were thwarted in Thailand, Georgia, and Azerbaijan;
- In 2012, Iran carried out bombings in India and Georgia. In New Delhi, an explosion wounded the wife of the Israeli defense envoy and other passengers in her car;
- Kenya authorities arrested two Iranian men believed to be IRGC members in June 2012. The men admitted they were planning attacks. Possible targets included American, Israeli, Saudi, or British personnel and facilities;
- In October 2011 the United States disrupted a plot to kill the Saudi Ambassador in Washington by bombing the restaurant where he often ate lunch. According to U.S. officials, the planned bombing was orchestrated by Iran. Had the bomb gone off as planned, it would also have killed many U.S. citizens dining at the restaurant;
- Israeli security officials claim that in the last two years Iran and Hizballah have plotted attacks in more than twenty countries.

The aggressive pace of attacks against Israel, taken together with the plot against the Saudi Ambassador in Washington, indicates that Iran's use of terrorism is becoming more aggressive. In the past, Iranian-backed groups like Hizballah did not strike in the United States, seeing it instead as a place to raise money and gain valuable specialized equipment, such as night-vision goggles. Now, however, Iran appears willing to risk this access as well as the wrath of the United States. As DNI Clapper contended, "The 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States shows that some Iranian officials—probably including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—have changed their calculus and are now more willing to conduct an attack in the United States in response to real or perceived US actions that threaten the regime."<sup>4</sup>

A mix of fear and opportunism are driving Iran. As with other countries in the Middle East, the Arab spring shook Iran. At first, Tehran tried to portray the revolution as a victory for Islamist and anti-U.S. forces, given that key allies of the United States like Mubarak fell during the turbulence. The new movements, however, evince little sympathy toward Tehran though some new leaders want to normalize relations to a greater degree. Indeed, some of the Islamist movements that are rising to power are exceptionally critical of Iran's form of Islamic governance.

Most important to Iran, however, has been the crisis in Syria where, slowly, Bashar al-Asad's regime has been pushed to the wall. Tehran has few allies in the Arab world, and indeed in the world in general, but Syria is a true friend. The loss of Syria would be a huge blow to Iran, reducing its ability to meddle in Lebanon and in the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab

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<sup>4</sup> Clapper, "U.S. Intelligence Community Worldwide Threat Assessment."

arenas. From Iran's point of view, the campaign against Syria is also part of the broader campaign to weaken Iran. Iranian and Hizballah officials have made repeated statements blaming the United States and Israel for the unrest in Syria, though it is not clear how much they believe their own rhetoric.

Palestinian politics have also shifted markedly and for the worse from Tehran's point of view. After Hamas' founding in 1987, the relationship between Iran and Hamas was polite but limited. Hamas received money, arms, and training from Iran and Hizballah, but Hamas kept Tehran at arms' length, as its leaders were determined to avoid dependence on foreign sponsors, which had often doomed other Palestinian organizations. Ties became far stronger when Hamas seized power in Gaza in 2007 and, facing international isolation, sought more aid from Iran as well as weapons systems. Now this relationship has frayed. Open ties to Iran, always unpopular among many Sunni Islamists, are further tarnished because of Tehran's support for the regime oppression in Syria. Hamas' leadership has largely left Syria, going to Egypt and other countries. Some Hamas leaders have also criticized the Asad regime's crackdown and, in so doing, implicitly criticized Iran's support for Damascus. So Iran has lost influence with its most important Palestinian partner and lost support among Palestinians in general.

Tehran also sees Israel and the United States as on the offensive. The killing of Iranian nuclear scientists, explosions that destroyed Iranian missile facilities, the cyber attack that set back Iran's nuclear program, and other aggressive, but covert, measures are considered part of a low-level but nevertheless real war that the United States and Israel are engaged in – one that has escalated in recent years. From Iran's point of view, its own violence is a response to the war that is already being waged against the clerical regime.

The impressive sanctions the United States and its allies have orchestrated against Iran have hit the regime hard. Regime officials have admitted that the sanctions are causing Tehran serious economic problems, a rare public confession that U.S. policy is having an impact, as opposed to the usual rhetoric of defiance. In addition, the cutback in oil purchases from Iran's important customers has led to a plunge in the price and volume of Iran's most important export and lifeblood of the Iranian economy. Beyond the economic impact, the success of these measures also reinforces Tehran's sense of diplomatic isolation.

Yet even as Iran feels the pressure, it also believes that it can fight back. Iranian officials see the United States as on its heels given its withdrawal from Iraq and the coming drawdown in Afghanistan. In both instances, the United States initially vowed to transform the country and isolate pro-Iranian voices. In Iraq, Iran today is the most influential outside power, particularly in Shia areas though Iran also has sway in the Kurdish north. Iran is less powerful in Afghanistan, where Pakistan is the dominant force backing anti-U.S. and anti-regime elements. However, there too the United States is leaving without achieving its proclaimed objectives, and anti-U.S. forces may fill the void. In both cases, the violence in these countries – supported in part by Iran – was a major factor influencing U.S. decisions to reduce its commitment. So from Iran's point of view, the lesson is simple: hit the United States hard and persistently, and it will back down.

A shift in domestic politics may also explain Tehran's more aggressive policies. Since the early 1990s, it has been common to divide the complex Iranian political scene and describe it as a battle between "hardliners" and "pragmatists." And during the tenure of President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and the so-called "Green Revolution" (2009) there was hope that Tehran would reform and embrace a more moderate foreign policy or even that the clerical regime as we know it would collapse. In crushing the reformist movement and the Green

Revolution, Iran's hardline camp has narrowed the Iranian political scene. Within elite ranks, there are fewer voices that question the value of ties to terrorists. In recent years hardliners from the IRGC have entered politics in greater numbers and assumed more important positions in the national security bureaucracy. For the most part these individuals are not fanatical, but they have a worldview that sees revolutionary violence as valuable for its own sake and an important tool of state.

## **The Nuclear Dilemma**

From a counterterrorism point of view, the question of how to respond to Iran's nuclear program is fraught with problems. The so-called "shadow war" between Israel and Iran, as the Bulgaria attack may indicate, has created a retaliatory dynamic, with Iran feeling compelled to respond to what it sees as Israeli aggression. This sentiment comes from a desire to prove to the Iranian population at large that its government is responding, anger within key elite audiences (particularly the IRGC) and a sense of humiliation, and a strong belief in revenge. So as long as Israel and other states use low-level attacks on Iran and maintain a high degree of economic and political pressure, Iran is likely to attempt terrorist attacks as a response.

If Israel and/or the United States did a direct military strike on Iran's suspected nuclear facilities, the Iranian terrorist response would be considerable. Because Iran supports terrorists in part to keep its options open, now would be the time for Tehran to call in favors. We could expect attempted terrorist attacks around the world – Iran and Hizballah have shown a presence in every inhabited continent. Tehran would also try to call in favors from groups like al-Qa'ida, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and others with whom it has relationships, though these groups would be far less dependable and their personnel are less skilled than those of Hizballah. In addition, Iran would be particularly likely to step up support for anti-U.S. forces in Afghanistan and elsewhere in its neighborhood. The scope and scale of the response would depend on the level of casualties from any attack and the political circumstances of the regime in Tehran at the time the attack occurred. However, Iran would be likely to attempt multiple attacks, and it would also consider strikes on the American homeland as well as American diplomatic, military, and civilian institutions worldwide.

Should Iran acquire a nuclear weapon, however, the picture is likely to change considerably. To be clear, Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon is bad for the United States and its allies in a host of ways, and preventing this should be a top goal of any U.S. administration. If U.S. policy fails and Iran does acquire a nuclear weapon, it is difficult to predict how Tehran would behave. Some scholars have argued the theoretical point that, in general, nuclear weapons make states more cautious as they fear the potentially catastrophic escalation that a nuclear crisis could bring about. Thus Iran, more secure due to the nuclear weapons and more cautious because of the associated risks, would be more restrained in its foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> More likely, though hardly inevitable, is that Tehran might become emboldened by a nuclear weapon. Currently the threat of U.S. conventional retaliation is an important check on Iranian behavior, as Tehran recognizes that its forces are no match for the United States. A nuclear weapon, however, would give Tehran the ability to threaten a devastating response should it be attacked with conventional forces. This "umbrella" would then enable Iran to be more aggressive supporting substate groups like Hizballah or opposition forces against various Arab enemies.

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<sup>5</sup> See most prominently Kenneth N. Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2012), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137731/kenneth-n-waltz/why-iran-should-get-the-bomb>

The model here would be Pakistan: after acquiring a nuclear capability, and thus it believed a degree of immunity from India's superior conventional forces, Islamabad became more aggressive supporting various insurgent and terrorist groups in Kashmir and fighting New Delhi in general.

The silver lining is that Iran is not likely to pass a nuclear weapon to terrorist groups except under the most extreme circumstances. Tehran would not be likely to trust such a sensitive capability to a terrorist group – too much could go too wrong in too many ways. In addition, even a more emboldened Tehran would recognize that the United States and Israel would see such a transfer as a grave threat and would dramatically escalate their pressure on Iran, perhaps including significant military operations. In addition, the United States might be able to gain international support as almost all states, including China and Russia, fear such transfers. Moscow and Beijing have their own terrorism problems. While deniability might stay the U.S. hand from retaliation for a limited conventional attack, this would not be so for a more dramatic chemical attack, to say nothing of a catastrophic nuclear one. After an attack using unconventional weapons, all bets would be off. One indication of Iran's caution on this score is that it has not transferred much less lethal and controversial chemical weapons to Hizballah, despite having these in its arsenal for over 25 years. Groups like Hizballah, for their part, would fear the consequences of going nuclear, recognizing that this could lead to U.S., Israeli, and other countries' military actions that could threaten its position in Lebanon. In addition, these groups have proven quite capable in using rockets, explosives, and small arms to achieve their objectives.

However, should the clerical regime believe itself to be facing an imminent threat of regime change from the United States and its allies – a situation comparable to what Saddam Hussein faced in 2003 say – then the calculus would change dramatically. From Tehran's point of view, the United States and others would have already escalated beyond the point of no return. Tehran would have nothing to lose, and at least a chance of intimidating or deterring the United States, by such transfers. They might also fear that preemptive U.S. strikes would stop them from being able to launch their deterrent so transferring some items to a terrorist group would enable them to keep open the threat of a response even if much of their country were occupied. In addition, Iranian leaders may seek revenge or simply want to vent their rage and use terrorists to do so.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Because Iran's use of terrorism often follows a strategic and rational logic, U.S. policy can affect Tehran's calculus on whether to support groups, and on how much to do so.

A first U.S. step is to expand efforts with allies to fight Iranian-backed terrorism, including by Hizballah. Too often Hizballah has gotten a free pass with U.S. allies because it also engages in political and social welfare activity, leading some states to try to distinguish between its "legitimate" and "illegitimate" sides. By making it clear that any use of or support for terrorism by Hizballah is illegitimate, allies would push the Lebanese organization toward ending or at least reducing its use of violence.

In addition, the intelligence and police campaign against Hizballah and Iran could be ramped up, leading to more investigations, arrests, and disruptions that make it far harder for the group and for Iranian officials to conduct successful attacks. Allies should also be encouraged to

reduce the size of the Iranian diplomatic mission, as in some countries many of its true activities are related to intelligence gathering and support for militant organizations.

The United States has long made Iran's subversive networks and ties to Hizballah an intelligence priority. However, given the global reach of this adversary, a global response is necessary. This requires working with allies around the world, just as the United States has done against al-Qa'ida. Indeed, these friends are often, though not always, the same allies who are partners against al-Qa'ida, but it is vital to ensure – with financial and other support as appropriate – that they are also targeting Hizballah and other Iranian-backed groups. Hizballah, however, is seen as legitimate by many governments, or at the very least is not loathed by all as is al-Qa'ida. So it will be hard to conduct as comprehensive a campaign without considerable and sustained efforts.

Making the challenge harder, the United States has relatively few additional means of pressure to deploy directly against Iran because it is already using most of them to stop Iran's nuclear programs. Sanctions – targeted and broad – are already implemented against an array of Iranian targets. They have been expanded dramatically under the Obama administration and this effort should continue, but it will be hard to do much more under current political circumstances. Any terrorist actions or aggressive ones on the nuclear front, however, should be leveraged for the other issue. So when a terrorist attack does occur, Washington should press for more to be done on the nuclear front, as such actions create an opportunity for political engagement.

The United States must also set clear “red lines” regarding terrorism. For example U.S. officials should emphasize that attacks on the American homeland will meet with a severe response. Vital to the success of this, however, is deciding in advance what a response would be if a red line were crossed and then having the will and ability to carry out the response should this happen. On Iran's nuclear program and on its actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Tehran repeatedly crossed U.S. red lines in the last decade with relatively few consequences, reducing the credibility of future U.S. threats. If the United States is not serious about a response, it is better not to threaten at all.

Another priority is trying to sever the links between Iran and al-Qa'ida. In contrast to Hizballah, al-Qa'ida is not ideologically close to Tehran and does not appear to have done joint operations. On the other hand, al-Qa'ida is far more willing to conduct large-scale indiscriminate attacks, including the use of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons should they ever fall into the hands of Zawahiri's organization. At the same time, Iran has become more important to al-Qa'ida in recent years as regime pressure on the organization there has eased and the drone program in Pakistan has made that country a more difficult haven. Tehran, however, has largely gotten a free pass on the significant al-Qa'ida presence in its borders.

Limited military strikes, which often fail against terrorist groups or quasi-states like the Taliban's Afghanistan, have more of a chance of succeeding against countries like Iran, that have a real military and economic infrastructure. Demonstrative uses of forces, such as the 1987 and 1988 U.S. operations (Nimble Archer and Praying Mantis, respectively) that sank part of the Iranian navy, can reinforce U.S. deterrence if Iran crosses red lines. Because of Iran's severe economic difficulties, even the threat of such strikes would be taken seriously by Iranian leaders.

The fall of the Asad regime in Syria is desirable and would reduce Iran's influence, but it would not dramatically change Tehran's support for terrorism and may even increase Iran's reliance on substate groups. Although Hizballah would lose an important patron should the regime in Damascus change, and it would be harder to ship weapons to Lebanon via Syria, the importance of Hizballah would grow for Iran. It remains relatively easy to send weapons to

Lebanon without transiting Syria, and Hizballah's role in the Lebanese government (and control of Beirut's airport) makes it almost impossible to stop the flow of weapons there. So Iran may end up doubling down on substate groups if it loses its main regional ally.

In the end, Iran's lack of strategic options and desire to respond to what it sees as a hostile world will lead Tehran to continue to work with a range of terrorist groups and selectively use violence. Successful U.S. policy can reduce the scope and scale of Iranian violence, but it is not likely to end it altogether.