

## **Iranian State-Sponsored Terrorism**

by  
*Sean K. Anderson*

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the decade following the overthrow of the Iranian monarchy in 1979 the Islamic Republic of Iran sought to spread its revolution among the Muslim nations and to fight the United States and Israel throughout the Middle East. Beginning with their seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979, Khomeini's followers undertook what some have deemed an undeclared low-intensity war against the United States in the Middle East and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Much of this campaign took the form of terrorist actions, such as vehicle-bombings, hijackings, kidnappings and murders in which Iran or Iranian-sponsored groups have been implicated.

Although terrorist acts against enemies of the new Islamic regime began in 1979 their incidence dramatically increased in the period from 1982 to 1985.<sup>2</sup> While the overall numbers of incidents after 1985 declined, only the Islamic Republic of Iran continued to show an increased reliance on terrorism as an instrument of its foreign policy among state sponsors of terrorism.<sup>3</sup> In addition, until the recent indictment of two Libyan officials, there was a large body of evidence which suggested that Iran had sponsored the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, an event which had underscored the increasing lethality and sophistication of modern international terrorism.<sup>4</sup>

Since 1988, however, major events both in the Middle East and worldwide have begun to affect the course of Iranian involvement in terrorism and other forms of low-intensity conflict. First, the death of Khomeini on 3 June 1989 marked the beginning of a transitional period in Iran. If recent trends persist and the more moderate leadership retains the ascendancy, they might foreswear the use of terrorism completely. With the defeat of Ba<sup>c</sup>thist Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War Iran once again has emerged by default as potentially *the* leading power in the Persian Gulf region. Since then Iran has shown some willingness to improve relations with Gulf Cooperation Council nations. Moreover, the outcome of the war left the United States in a position of predominant influence in the region, an advantage it has exploited to push its own agenda, including advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process. In addition, because of the collapse of the Soviet Union as a cohesive political system, Soviet influence in the Middle East has declined in relative terms to that of the United States, and no longer serves to offset American power there. For Iran, struggling with reconstruction and economic hardships following its eight year war with Iraq, this new reality would also seem to require mending ties with the United States as the necessary price for obtaining reconstruction aid and ensuring the stability of its regime. The recent release of long-held hostages may be a step in that direction. All these events would indicate the prudence and the likelihood of Iran renouncing its reliance on terrorism and insurgency.

Such optimism, however, begs the question to what degree Iranian-sponsored terrorism really is responsive to changes in the international environment. This article argues rather that Iranian sponsorship of international terrorism has been and remains largely a reflection of its internal politics. These domestic politics remain insular and unresponsive to external changes due to the continuing factionalism of the Islamic regime which reinforces a more parochial perspective among Iranian leaders. In addition to arguing that Iranian involvement in terrorism is more an external extension of intramural domestic politics than it is a reflection of deliberate foreign policy this article will also briefly consider whether such terrorism might represent a continuing threat to the West.

### MAINTAINING REVOLUTIONARY DYNAMISM

From 11 February 1978 (when the *Ayatullah* Khomeini proclaimed the Islamic State), up to the present two processes have dominated Iranian politics, namely, consolidating the Islamic state and institutionalizing the Islamic revolution. What distinguished Khomeini's Islamic fundamentalists from other anti-Shah revolutionaries or nationalists was that they held rebuilding Iranian society upon the *Shari'ah*, the sacred law of Islam, to be the main goal and justification of the revolution. In Twelve Imam Shi'ite Islam, which is dominant in Iran, enforcing Islamic law requires its continual authoritative interpretation by the *mujtahids*, the qualified doctors of Islamic jurisprudence who alone are held to possess the learning, piety, and apostolic authority essential for this task.<sup>5</sup>

In effect making Islamic law prevail in Iran required the Islamic clergy to assume direct rule themselves rather than merely advising a republic governed by laymen. Thus the revolution against the Shah ending on 11 February 1979 was followed by a struggle between the Islamic fundamentalists and those nationalists or leftists who had a more secular vision of Iran's future. This began in earnest in August 1979 with disputes within the Constituent Assembly charged with drafting a new constitution and ended with the fundamentalists ousting President Abol Hassan Bani Sadr in the summer of 1981. Since then political conflict within the Islamic Republic has centered on disagreements among the fundamentalists over the nature of the Islamic state and the proper scope of the Islamic revolution. Building even an Islamic state requires creating stability and order, but the companion goal of maintaining the revolution's dynamism often has entailed fighting the re-assertion of routine and bureaucracy required by state-building.

Although the Islamic revolutionaries inherited a fairly intact government bureaucracy and military they perceived that, left unchallenged, these institutions' internal inertia could have resisted Islamization indefinitely. Since in the case of the military this risk was unacceptable, early on the Islamic revolutionaries created the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to protect the revolution against possible military coups. Similarly a network of revolutionary neighborhood watch committees was set up assuming many functions of the municipal police.

In order to initiate the broader masses into the political culture of the revolution, Khomeini created a "Construction Effort" (*Jihad-e Sazandegi*) that

dispatched educated, young city-dwellers to slums and rural areas to aid those living in the margins of Iranian society. This also served to inculcate the values of the revolution into the participating middle class youth. In urban areas the newly-created Martyrs' Foundation and the Foundation for the Oppressed maintained dole funds for a large unemployed class that soon could be deployed as club-wielders against the political opponents of the regime. Alongside the former regime's civil courts, modelled on those of Switzerland, appeared the Islamic Revolutionary Courts which eventually became *Shari'ah* courts replacing the civil court system.

Both the revolutionary foundations that were created alongside existing government institutions and the Islamic associations that sprung up throughout the various offices served to bring the state into the "line of the Imam." In contrast with the various secular parties such as the National Front or the Freedom Movement, which seldom encompassed more than the members of one social class or clique, the Islamic revolutionaries created a three-level political machine that cut across all social strata, mobilizing a mass following. The first level was the Islamic Republic Party which in form resembled any other party in recruiting members, backing lists of candidates, and publishing a daily paper, *Jumhuri-yi Islami*. It drew many of its secular members from the bazaar merchants and also among rank and file employees of the government offices. Yet, parallel to this secular structure was the second level, the revolutionary clergymen who were to become, in effect, the philosopher-kings of the new regime. These parallel networks of laymen and clerics were coordinated by the "Imam's representatives" appointed to every government office, every army unit, and every factory. Each representative conveyed the Imam's instructions and indoctrination to members of local Islamic Republic Party chapters and Islamic Associations that sprung up throughout state and society.

On the lowest level the *Hizb'allah*, literally the "Party of God," consisted mainly of the able-bodied unemployed.<sup>6</sup> They were mobilized and supervised on behalf of the Imam by the Friday Prayers leaders, the clerics attached to local mosques, or the trustees in charge of the religious bequests that ordinarily served as charity and social welfare organizations. The clergymen's work also involved material relief efforts among these poor doled out with a heady indoctrination into the revolutionary version of Islam being promoted by the Imam. In return the *Hizb'allah* would volunteer themselves for "spontaneous demonstrations," to break up demonstrations by non-regime elements, and to provide recruits for the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. Khomeini extolled the *Hizb'allah* as the *mustazafin*, that is, the "humble and dispossessed of the Earth," to whom he had especially promised the blessings of the Islamic Republic and its ongoing revolution.

This three-fold political front formed a mass movement dooming more conventional parties from the start; within the government offices the Islamic fundamentalists would obstruct and neutralize the programs of any nationalists or liberals who already held official appointments or had won elections. Western-educated intellectuals in public life who remained outside of the "line of the Imam" eventually found themselves being attacked by the militant

clergymen's sermons and writings. When the secular and nationalist elements tried to stage their own show of force against the Islamic fundamentalists, the *Hizb'allahis* were already mobilized to riot, fight, and maim on behalf of the Imam.

In the course of the first few years (1979-1982) these revolutionary organizations became institutionalized and the various liberal or nationalistic groups and personalities were isolated and picked off one by one. Having eliminated any viable opposition, the supporters and functionaries of the new Islamic state next turned their rivalries and suspicions inward upon their own ranks. The regime often harnessed these intramural rivalries and ambitions by delegating identical tasks to different government offices. While this caused duplication of efforts, quarreling among officials, and intra-governmental turf-battles, nonetheless such internal competition ensured that efforts to fulfill the goals of the revolution would not languish due to official complacency or quiet obstructionism.

## TERROR SERVING THE REVOLUTION

The tension between state-building and maintaining the momentum of the revolutionary spirit tended to perpetuate sectarian factionalism among the fundamentalists and to encourage ready recourse to manipulative coercion against those in their ranks who failed to conform perfectly to the prevailing doctrine of the hour. As long as there remained a Shah, or nationalists, or liberals to fight against, all Islamic revolutionaries could agree on the priority of purging those enemies. However, after defeating their last secular enemies, they then found it much harder to maintain a consensus on how to translate their revolutionary rhetoric into concrete policy to run the country. Like other revolutionary ideologues who have won power, the Islamic fundamentalists found that the practical demands of maintaining power and running a government required compromises with their perfectionist ideals. An example of this in the domestic dimension can be seen in the rehabilitation of former SAVAK agents in order to rebuild a new intelligence and security capability. In Iran's foreign policy one example was its effective alliance with the Ba<sup>c</sup>thist and anti-fundamentalist Syrian regime against the common Iraqi enemy. Such compromises invariably created dissent by those who sensed pending betrayal of the revolution.

As Adam Westoby noted with respect to the Soviet experience, "the function of personality cults has been to raise ideologies of rule above any danger of being examined for heresy."<sup>7</sup> Leszek Kolakowski similarly argued that the Soviet purges sought to destroy independent criticism among the revolutionaries by convincing them that "they had no ideology or loyalty except to the latest order from on high."<sup>8</sup> Counterparts in the Iranian revolution have been the elevation of the "line of the Imam" above even the decrees of the Quran and the repeated *paksazi* (purging) of those who have failed to conform themselves to the latest twists in that line.<sup>9</sup> Even clergymen as prominent as *Ayatullah* Muntaziri, Khomeini's original choice as successor, have been among the casualties of such purges, though the Iranian clergy have managed to

maintain an outward show of solidarity in spite of the reported intramural tensions and differences that have occasioned these purges.<sup>10</sup>

Both the networks uniting Iran's clergymen and the alignments dividing them predate the revolution, being rooted in their common schooling in the traditional theological colleges and in the hierarchic lines joining each cleric to different spiritual mentors among the senior *mujtahids*. The Iranian clergy are notoriously cliquish and reticent, seldom confiding details of their intramural alliances or divisions to others even among their own lay followers.<sup>11</sup> The network joining the Shi'ite clergymen of Iran and Lebanon began under the auspices of *Ayatullah* al Uzma Burujirdi in the 1950s, but only began to take on a revolutionary character after the arrival in Lebanon of the Iranian clergyman Musa Sadr, founder of *Amal*.<sup>12</sup> Later others, such as *Hujjatulislam* Muhammad Muntaziri, gathered up their arms and followers and went off to Lebanon in order to fight alongside *Amal* against the Phalangists.

As early as 1944 a few clergymen had created a terrorist organization, the *Fida'iyan-i Islam*, the "self-sacrificers of Islam," to assassinate those perceived as being enemies of Islam within Iranian society.<sup>13</sup> Following the fall of the Shah one former *Fida'i*, Sadiq Khalkhali, dispensed free-lance "revolutionary Islamic justice" even prior to the official formation of the Islamic courts. Khalkhali also had ties to the Iranian *chargé d'affaires* in Baghdad, *Hujjatulislam* Dou'ei, who together were engaged in plots against the Iraqi regime long before Iran officially backed the export of the revolution or sanctioned the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Just as the Islamic Republic sought to consolidate the various functions and activities of its partisans within Iran it likewise tried to coordinate rationally such clandestine activities outside its borders. Therefore, the January 1980 Liberation Movements Conference in Tehran and similar subsequent conferences, helped to organize, discipline, and co-opt the Islamic revolutionary movements outside of Iran.

By making the export of the revolution a top priority of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini deflected public attention within Iran from the daunting problems the regime faced in rebuilding a shattered economy for which ready solutions were lacking.<sup>14</sup> From another viewpoint, however, by involving Iran in revolutionary ventures elsewhere, the more adamant Islamic revolutionaries were able to hold the country's internal politics hostage to their own agenda. The seizure of the US Embassy provides the most obvious example of this: by August of 1979 the Islamic fundamentalists saw nationalistic 'liberals', such as Mehdi Bazargan and Bani Sadr, as their closest-running competitors at home and therefore as their natural political enemies. When Bazargan tried to create improved relations between Iran and the United States, the Islamic fundamentalists directed their student following to take over the US Embassy, effectively crushing that effort and discrediting Bazargan. The export of the revolution continues to remain a fulcrum for certain factions to apply their own pressures on Iran's domestic politics.

Presently at least three clerical factions contend for power within Iran. Shifts in alignments and the obscurity of their intramural differences defy efforts

to sort these clergymen into clear-cut categories of “moderates” or “radicals,” but one can discern some major tendencies by noting how individuals and factions rank their priorities for the regime:<sup>15</sup> One pole, whose adherents could be best designated as *institutionalists*, holds that building institutions, public order, and social and economic stability at home should take precedence over pursuing an external revolutionary agenda. The opposite pole, whose adherents could be best designated as *revolutionists*, believes that achieving unfulfilled revolutionary priorities, namely, fighting Israel and the United States, and aiding the ‘oppressed’ while opposing ‘dependent, reactionary regimes’ in the region, are more important than domestic development and prosperity. Among such revolutionists are the former Interior Minister <sup>c</sup>Ali Akbar Muhtashami and the former Prosecutor General, Khoiniha, who was once the Imam’s representative among the students holding the US Embassy hostages. A third category is made up mainly of ‘politicos’ among the Islamic fundamentalists who switch support from one side to the other as politically expedient. Iran’s current President, <sup>c</sup>Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, may be the most prominent example of such pragmatists.<sup>16</sup> None of these factions, however, actually disavows pursuing the export of the revolution or pan-Islamism as strategic objectives of the Islamic Republic nor do any question the propriety of using terrorism or supporting insurgencies against other governments as means to achieve these objectives.

The most burning issue on which the two extremes would disagree would be the question of Iran resuming friendly relations with the Western nations and, in particular, with the United States. While the institutionalists might accept this as a necessary evil, the revolutionists would oppose this as a complete sell-out of the revolution. On this issue the revolutionists could effectively veto any such process of reconciliation by threatening or carrying out terrorist actions against Western or US interests through groups under their sponsorship. Such actions would provoke a hostile public reaction in the West against Iran which would reciprocally enflame the public atmosphere within Iran to make the conciliatory policies of the institutionalists politically infeasible. External terrorism thus becomes a means for keeping the revolution ‘on track’ according to the revolutionists’ own agenda. This suggests that some terrorist actions sponsored by Iran abroad might be better understood in terms of their political utility to revolutionists inside Iran than in terms of some abstract Islamic-cum-revolutionary ideals.

If this hypothesis is true then one circumstance in which these revolutionists might contemplate and carry out a terrorist campaign directed against the United States would be the attempt by the institutionalists to normalize relations with the United States. Such actions could include bombings, or hijacking US air or ocean carriers, or even terrorist actions on US soil. The aim would be to sabotage US-Iranian reconciliation, either by creating the impression that the Iranian government was behind such actions or else by demonstrating the inability of Tehran to control the actions of its erstwhile protégés.

## EXTERNAL TERRORISM REVIEWED

Iran's own revolutionary experience has become the pattern for its attempts to spread its revolutionary message. Wherever Iran has sought to export its revolution, its first task has been to bring together there a nucleus of revolutionary Islamic clergymen dedicated to Khomeini's vision of Islam. These, in turn, would begin recruiting their more educated and talented lay followers into nascent revolutionary organizations. Finally, this network, extending through mosques and associated community institutions, would mobilize the Muslim poor at large in the targeted area.

An important consequence of the foregoing was that Iranian Islamic revolutionaries found the most fertile soil for their revolutionary message in those Muslim lands having the same social elements with which to build a mass movement as existed in Iran. Lebanon had a large number of Twelve Imam Shi'ites, including a native clerical leadership, a small cadre of well-educated and ambitious laymen, and a large number of poor, uneducated followers who had their own peculiar litany of grievances against both the exclusionary confessional system in pre-1975 Lebanon and the Palestinian occupiers in southern Lebanon. Iran has had more success in replicating its own revolutionary pattern there than elsewhere, although it is not an unqualified success. The Shi'a of Lebanon are split between the pro-Iranian *Hizb'allah* and the more indigenous *Amal* movement, and even the *Hizb'allah* appear at times to be more responsive to the peculiarities of Lebanese domestic politics than to guidance from Tehran.

Iran's leaders concentrated on exporting their Islamic revolution to other lands within the Muslim world. They were particularly preoccupied with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf emirates and Lebanon, states forming part of the core of the Islamic world and having large Shi'ite communities. This preoccupation, however, did not rule out directing terrorist operations in non-Muslim lands against governments, institutions, or persons perceived as active enemies of the Islamic Republic.

Two circumstances strongly suggest that Iranian state sponsorship of terrorism abroad has been a decentralized operation, not fully accountable to, or managed by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran; rather, it was subject to being co-opted by maverick political operators. First, there was a repeated pattern of increases in terrorist activities whenever the institutionalists have tried to pursue more conciliatory foreign policies. Second, much of the evidence documenting Tehran's direct promotion of terrorist activities also documents that it chronically lacked direct oversight or control over those operations.

Evidence regarding the conduct and structure of Iranian-sponsored terrorist operations is actually very scant, being based more on signal intelligence than on human sources within the Iranian government or terrorist infrastructure.<sup>17</sup> However, certain deductions can still be made from evidence in the public record. By tracking the events bearing on the implementation of

terrorist policies and programs by the Iranian regime one can make the following observations.

First, multiple organizational structures were created for the conduct of terrorist operations. This permitted duplication without centralization except through the person of the Imam. Moreover, these structures were removed from regular bureaucratic oversight. Not long after the 1979 revolution a department for liberation movements had been set up in the Foreign Ministry. At that time the Islamic fundamentalists perceived the Foreign Minister Sadeq Qutbzadeh as being outside of the Imam's "Line" and not trustworthy. The 1980 Liberation Movements Conference was the occasion used by the fundamentalists to change the jurisdiction of the department for liberation movements from the Foreign Ministry to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a context in which they could pursue their own version of exporting the revolution while side-stepping the detested Qutbzadeh. The eventual creation of the "Department [for support] of Liberation Movements," by decree of the Imam following this Conference, created one command structure for conducting terrorist operations. This office began sending IRGC units to Lebanon in June 1981.

When Khomeini later complained that the export of the revolution had not been pursued with sufficient vigor, the Islamic Guidance Ministry issued a memorandum on 26 May 1984 concerning the creation of "an independent brigade for carrying out irregular warfare in enemy territory."<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, various of the "revolutionary foundations," in particular the Martyrs' Foundation, had also become fronts for rendering support to terrorist activities. This multiplication, without evident centralization, of operational commands lent itself easily to maverick operations.

The lack of a central governing policy seems evident from one striking anomaly: on 9 August 1984 Imam Khomeini declared the use of hijacking and mining to be "against the sentiments of world opinion, against Islam, and against common sense."<sup>19</sup> In fact, however, the Martyrs' Foundation, under the control of *Ayatullah* Karrubi, a Khomeini appointee, continued to run a terrorist training camp outside Mashhad, whose curriculum included hijacking and suicide mission training. Karrubi himself appears to have been intimately involved in the planning of the TWA 847 hijack on 14 June 1985 and of the hijacking of Kuwaiti Airway's Flight 422 on 5 April 1988.<sup>20</sup>

Although this disregard for the Imam's decree evident in his followers' deeds could be counted as a type of official duplicity, a simpler explanation equally consistent with the facts would be that there was never much policy coordination between the Imam, the Iranian state, and the various operational commands. The 1984 Islamic Guidance Ministry memorandum reveals another anomaly: in it, a Mr. "Mir Hashem,"<sup>21</sup> head of the World Islamic Movements office, informed representatives of the IRGC and Iranian Armed Forces that his organization already had suicide groups formed and functioning. If this meeting in May 1984 was, in fact, the first attempt to coordinate the Iranian Armed Forces and IRGC in support of external insurgency and terrorist operations, this at least would imply that the Iranian state had lacked prior supervision of those



operations already carried out by his group, which nonetheless had been able to use the resources of the Iranian state in its many operations. Following the suicide bombings in Lebanon, including the 18 April 1983 and 23 October 1983 bombings in Lebanon, US intelligence intercepted telecommunications indicating the involvement of the Iranian Embassy in Damascus and the IRGC in the Biqa valley.<sup>22</sup> Ordinarily such use of diplomatic facilities and of military personnel would be considered sufficient proof of state sponsorship of terrorism. But, an alternative explanation was that the revolutionary factions within Iran were able to usurp control over part of the diplomatic and military apparatus of the Iranian state while other state offices dominated by the institutionalists were kept uninformed of those activities.

Further support for this interpretation is found in the fact that, even given the grant of authority by Imam Khomeini to pursue this integration of paramilitary operations, Mir Hashem still demanded a cover for the creation of the brigade because of "legal impediments" (*ishkal-i qanuni*) attached to the project. The only such "legal impediments" to be considered would have been those arising under the laws of Iran. In that case, insofar as the brigade would be cloaked under the structure of the regular Armed Forces and the Revolutionary Guard Corps, even the Imam Khomeini himself would have been deprived of regular informed consent and control over their operations. In fact, following Khomeini's frank declaration that hijacking and hostage-taking were contrary to Islamic law, neither did "Islamic Jihad" release any of the hostages already taken nor did pro-Iranian groups desist from future hijackings or hostage-takings.

Another circumstance characterized many terrorist actions that have been strongly linked to Iran, namely, the timing of the incidents. Most of these incidents seem either to have been timed to quash conciliatory diplomatic initiatives by the institutionalists or else were timed to maximize the internal political advantage of the revolutionists. Some examples illustrate this as follows:

On 18 May 1985 Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Faysal visited Tehran, the first such visit by a member of the Saudi ruling family since the 1979 revolution. This trip was aimed at opening channels of communication and reconciliation between Iran and the more conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf. At the same time that he was holding talks with the President, Majlis Speaker and Prime Minister of Iran, parcel bombs exploded in the streets of Riyadh. A terrorist faction, claiming to be the "Islamic Jihad" group, acknowledged responsibility in a message in which it stated:

Nobody should believe that Saudi attempts at rapprochement with the Islamic Republic will make us hesitate to carry out our plans.<sup>23</sup>

This referred to "Jihad's" aim of toppling the Saudi monarchy by violent revolution. The attempted reconciliation fell through.

Just a few days earlier (15 May), "Jihad" had issued an ultimatum to Kuwait and the United States demanding the release of those convicted for the

12 December 1983 bombing of the US and French Embassies in Kuwait City and threatening "terrible consequences" for both if its demands were not met.<sup>24</sup> Following the debacle of the visit of the Saudi Foreign Minister to Tehran, President 'Ali Khamenehi made a rather conciliatory Friday Prayers sermon addressed to the leaders of the Shaykhdoms. But, on the following day, (24 May), a suicide car-bomber tried to ram the limousine of the Emir of Kuwait, exploding his vehicle and slightly wounding the Emir, who was sped away by his guards. Kuwaiti security police were able to identify the bomber as an Iraqi member of the Tehran-based *Al Da'wa* Party. In these two cases (the bombing in Riyadh and the attempted bombing of the Emir of Kuwait) one can see that there were not only certain external targets of each particular terrorist attack but also internal targets as well. On the other hand, not only has the timing of certain terrorist events linked to Iran spoiled the institutionalist politicians' prospects of effecting a more conciliatory foreign policy, but sometimes it also contributed directly to the political fortunes of the revolutionist faction within Iran. The 5 April 1988 hijacking of a Kuwaiti Airways Boeing 747, with some female members of the Kuwaiti royal family being taken hostage aboard, coincided with the Majlis elections being held then in Iran. This event only boosted the political fortunes of *Ayatullah* Karrubi, the political figure linked most directly to the hijackers, who won the second largest tally of parliamentary votes behind Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the Majlis Speaker. This enabled him to succeed Hashemi-Rafsanjani in that capacity once Rafsanjani was elected President in the summer of 1989.

Insofar as control over the terrorist operations sponsored by Iran was not centralized, nor subject to some sort of systematic, non-partisan review, they evidently passed into the control of revolutionist partisans within the Iranian government and military bureaucracy who used these operations to exert internal coercion in the pursuit of their own political agenda. This hypothesized decentralization and politicization of Iran's sponsorship of terrorism abroad fits well with the reports of others specializing in the study of the Islamic resurgence.

Augustus R. Norton's study of the *Amal* movement in Lebanon contains a description of the formal linkage between Tehran and *Hizb'allah*.<sup>25</sup> The Tehran end was the Supreme Defense Council, in charge of Iranian military policy and answerable to Khomeini, consisting of the Iranian President, Majlis Speaker, IRGC Commander, and heads of the Armed Forces. As the Supreme Defense Council was charged with overall policy formulation rather than specifics of operations, the latter would have fallen under the jurisdiction of the IRGC Liberation Movements Department, a preserve of the revolutionist faction. The Lebanese end was the *Majlis al Shura* (Consultative Assembly) consisting of ranking Lebanese clergymen, such as Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, and key laymen, such as Hussein Musawi, who are connected with *Hizb'allah*. Other observers, however, including Robin Wright, maintain that Fadlallah lacks a precise position in the *Hizb'allah* command structure, and that no straightforward identity can be assumed between the *Hizb'allah* militia and the grouping of terrorist operatives known as "Islamic Jihad."<sup>26</sup> As this Consultative Assembly met only infrequently from 1983 until 1987, usually in the presence of either the military attaché of the Iranian Embassy in Damascus

or the Iranian chargé d'affaires in Beirut, the actual on-going link between *Hizb'allah* and the revolutionists in Tehran was the Iranian Embassy in Damascus.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, that Embassy was most actively involved in terrorist activities in Lebanon during 'Ali Akbar Muhtashami's tenure as Ambassador, one of the foremost leaders of the revolutionist faction in Tehran.<sup>28</sup> In short, the actual chain of command was from the revolutionists to the IRGC Liberations Movement office in Tehran, to Muhtashami in Damascus, to IRGC and "Islamic Jihad" operatives in Lebanon rather than through the formal structure of Imam to the Supreme Defense Council in Tehran, to the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, and then to the *Hizb'allah Majlisal-Shira* in Lebanon.

This decentralization of terrorist operations reflects the factionalism within the Islamic Republic rather than being merely a product of institutional compartmentalization meant to maintain the security of such operations. Beginning in 1985 the revolutionists began to encourage increased anti-Western terrorist activity among their sponsored groups in order to neutralize the efforts of institutionalists, such as Khomeini, Foreign Minister 'Ali Akbar Vilayati and Hashemi-Rafsanjani, (who previously had appeared to side with the revolutionists) to seek an end to Iran's diplomatic isolation.<sup>29</sup> When the revolutionists overreached themselves through the kidnapping of Syria's chargé d'affaires in Tehran, Mahmud Ayat, the institutionalists were able to persuade Khomeini to approve the arrest of Mehdi Hashemi, the erstwhile "Mir Hashem," and to close the World Islamic Movements office, transferring its formal authority to the institutionalist-dominated Foreign Ministry. However, this move did not give the Iranian government more control over *Hizb'allah*, whose members had personal ties to Iranian revolutionists rather than to bureaucratic offices as such. Nor did this move by Hashemi-Rafsanjani and the others represent more than a tactical decision to down-play Iran's external revolutionary agenda in order to gain more foreign support with which to pursue the war with Iraq. Indeed, according to Bruce Hoffman the same institutionalists later undertook increased terrorist activity in Europe, largely because they could not rely on the Lebanese terrorist groups that had been sponsored by their own domestic rivals among the revolutionists.<sup>30</sup>

There is another sense in which the terrorist operational capacity has become effectively autonomous: just as these operations tend to reflect the internal political dynamics of the internecine politicking within Iran, so too, have the operations conducted by surrogates in Lebanon come to reflect more the internal dynamics of the power struggles between rival factions within Lebanon, with ever less reference to Iran's own sense of priorities in that region. This was most dramatically shown in the tragic cases of the *Vincennes* downing of the Iran Air Airbus and the murder of Colonel William Higgins in Lebanon. When the *Vincennes* incident occurred on 3 July 1988, the captors of the US hostages in Lebanon did no more than issue some threats against their lives. However, when a *Hizb'allah* leader, Shaykh Abdul Karim Ubaid, was captured by Israeli agents on 29 July 1989, *Hizb'allah* murdered Higgins in reprisal. Had Higgins' captors been fully dependent on and responsive to Iranian wishes, it seems unlikely that they would have left the hostages unharmed following the

*Vincennes* incident, in which over 200 Iranian civilians were killed, only later to have taken revenge for the abduction of one Lebanese Shi<sup>c</sup>ite religious leader. Similarly, it is not entirely clear whether the recent release of Western hostages is the result of influence exerted from Iran or the product of changing political dynamics in Lebanon (such as Syria's effective pacification of the country and the marginalization of extremist groups) and the new context of Arab-Israeli relations in the wake of the Gulf War. It is possible all three factors exerted some influence.

These terrorist groups would have a continuing congruity of interests with the revolutionists, since an institutionalist regime in Tehran might discontinue sponsorship and cut off the considerable material aid that has been given to those groups. The latter, particularly *Hizb'allah* in Lebanon, would share in the domestic political misfortunes of the Iranian revolutionists since, without continuing military aid and diplomatic assistance/protection, they would then be less able to defend themselves against rival military forces, such as the Syrian army or the *Amal* militia. Thus, both revolutionists and their client groups have every motive to cooperate in sabotaging any attempt by the institutionalists to exclude the revolutionists totally from power in Tehran.

## CONCLUSIONS

If regional and world events do not directly influence the domestic politics within the Islamic Republic there is no reason to assume that Tehran will change its fundamental foreign policy in response to those external events. In fact, Khomeini's death, the outcome of Operation DESERT STORM, and the collapse of communism could provide the context for the continuation, and perhaps even increase, in the resort by Iran to low-intensity conflict as a means to its foreign policy ends.

When Khomeini agreed to the cease-fire with Iraq, he legitimized a course of action which otherwise would have remained doubtful for his successors to undertake on their own. Likewise, however, he never renounced the right of the Islamic Republic to resort to violence in order to achieve its goals. Many of his pronouncements in the last year of his life can only be understood as affirming the legitimacy of terrorism and as giving the Islamic state unlimited licence to use such means. On 7 January 1988 Khomeini publicly adopted the position that the Islamic Republic, for reasons of state, was permitted not only to act against the decrees of the Quran, but even to compel Muslim believers to disobey the Quranic injunctions. On 14 February 1989 Khomeini sentenced Salman Rushdie to death on charges of blasphemy, thus dispelling hopes in the West that Iran was embarking on a more moderate path following its cease-fire with Iraq. That Khomeini's successor as *faqih*, Ayatullah <sup>c</sup>Ali Khamenehi, has openly reaffirmed this death sentence against Rushdie on each of the anniversaries of its promulgation only confirms the essential continuity of Tehran's policy in the post-Khomeini era.

The defeat of the Iraqi Ba<sup>c</sup>thist regime during Operation DESERT STORM has done more than merely enhance Iran's relative strategic and military position in the Persian Gulf region. The two main indigenous ideologi-

cal forces hostile to western interests in the Middle East have been pan-Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. Both movements implicitly deny the legitimacy of the existing nation-state system in the Middle East, viewing the current states and boundaries in the Middle East as artifacts of European colonialism.<sup>31</sup> However, both movements are also mutually antagonistic insofar as pan-Arab nationalism has a secular, anti-traditionalistic orientation, and is based on a chauvinistic view of the Arabs' superiority over other nations, including other Muslim peoples such as the Iranians. Khomeini's Islamic fundamentalism, which calls for the rule of the *Shari'ah* in the Islamic nations, abominates the secularism of the pan-Arab nationalists. In this respect one can view the Iraq-Iran war not merely as a border war or clash between two strong-willed leaders, but as an ideological holy war between pan-Arabism, championed in the form of Iraqi Ba'athism, and Islamic fundamentalism, championed by Iran.<sup>32</sup> Saddam Hussein's pretensions and failures in the recent Persian Gulf war may have deflated nationalistic hopes among Arab Muslims, but the defeat leaves intact the aspirations offered by Iran's pan-Islamic alternative. Tehran has been self-consciously seeking to assume the leadership role in opposing Israel that Arab leaders have largely abandoned. The currently cordial relations Iran is pursuing towards members of the Gulf Cooperation Council as tactical friends would be quite compatible with a long-term pan-Islamist foreign policy that views them as strategic enemies.

The collapse of communism also has weakened the radical Arab nationalist regimes by undercutting external Soviet diplomatic and military support for them in opposing Israel. Ahmad Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command, that formerly depended on Syria or Libya for financial support, has found another sponsor in Tehran. Likewise other terrorist or political groups within the Arab world may turn increasingly to Tehran for state sponsorship and resources as a result of the reduced Soviet aid available to Arab states and organizations.

Even following Operation DESERT STORM Tehran has not repudiated terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy. Since the death of Khomeini there have been thirteen violent incidents that bear the marks of Iranian state sponsored terrorism, five of which occurred after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.<sup>33</sup> The most prominent of these was the assassination of former Iranian prime minister, Shahpur Bakhtiyar, along with an aide in Paris on 6 August 1991. One of two men arrested on charges of complicity in this murder implicated the Iranian Ministry of Post, Telephone and Telegraph as having provided forged documents for the assassins.<sup>34</sup> Even if the Iranian state did not order these murders and attacks, they would indicate at least continuing support for terrorist activities by revolutionist factions within the ruling circles.

Fundamental change in Iran's policies would require a degree of consensus among the elite factions within the Islamic Republic that has not been forthcoming in the years since the death of the Imam Khomeini. Ironically, an Iranian initiative for amelioration in relations with the United States, the one political event within Iran that might portend an eventual decrease in official sponsorship of terrorism abroad by Iran, might equally herald an increase in the

number and lethality of terrorist operations against American targets, including possibly civilian targets abroad or at home. Such attacks might not amount to a sustained systematic campaign, such as France experienced during the terror bombing campaign in 1986, but they could achieve the level of shock and outrage that was experienced as a result of the bombing of Pan Am 103. In effect, Iran's external terrorist capacity allows the revolutionists to hold the rest of the Iranian political establishment hostage to a more revolutionist line.

#### Endnotes

1. Alvin H. Bernstein, "Iran's Low-Intensity War Against the United States," *Orbis*, 30, no. 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 149-67.
2. Bruce Hoffman, *Recent Trends and Future Prospects of Iranian Sponsored International Terrorism, R-3783-USDP* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, June 1990), pp. 15-34. The numbers of incidents averaged five per year in 1979-82 but climbed to forty-nine incidents in 1985.
3. *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1989*, (Washington, DC: US Department of State, April 1990), pp. 46-7.
4. *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1988*, (Washington, DC: US Department of State, March 1989), pp. 8-9, Appendix B. Details of Iranian Interior Minister 'Ali Akbar Muhtashami's role in funding the PFLP-GC can be found in Steve Emerson and Brian Duffy, *The Fall of PAN AM 103* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1990), pp. 201-05. The charges laid against Libyan officials are described in an Associated Press report, 15 November 1991.
5. The doctrinal role of the *mujtahid* in Shi'ism is explained more fully in "The Foundations of Clerical Influence," Chapter 1 of Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 1-25. Khomeini's argument for the continuing validity of these claims of the *mujtahid* is found in his work "Islamic Government," translated in *Islam and Revolution* ed. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), pp. 27-54.
6. The name *Hizb'allah*, meaning "Party of God," is taken from the Quran (*Surat al Mujadilah*, verse 22) to describe the true Muslim believers. This term began to be used as a political label in Iran from 1980 onward and later became the name of the new Shi'ite militia in Lebanon in opposition to the older *Amal* militia.
7. Adam Westoby, *The Evolution of Communism* (New York: Free Press, 1989), p. 185.
8. Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth, and Dissolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 86.
9. On the elevation of Khomeini's decrees over those of the Quran see Godfrey Jansen, "Khomeini's Heretical Delusions of Grandeur," *Middle East Insight*, 23 January 1988, pp. 18-19.
10. Shahrough Akhavi, "Elite Factionalism in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Middle East Journal*, 40, no. 2 (Spring 1987), pp. 181-201. Akhavi believes the solidarity of Iran's clergy to be rather brittle while Shahgaldian (see note 11) stresses the resiliency of clerical cohesiveness. *Ayatullah Hossein 'Ali Muntaziri* is perhaps the most high-ranking casualty among the revolutionary clergymen. Once Khomeini's designated successor, Muntaziri was deposed from that position and demoted to the rank of *hujjatulislam* by Khomeini on March 29, 1989.
11. Nikola B. Shahgaldian, *The Clerical Establishment in Iran, R-3788-USDP* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, June 1989), p. 27.

12. In 1968 Musa Sadr created the *Harakat al Mahrumin*, the "Movement of the Deprived," as a means of politically organizing the disenfranchised Shi'a and in 1975, together with Mustafa Chamran, he helped create the *Amal* militia to enable Lebanon's Shi'a to defend themselves with the outbreak of civil war there.
13. The *Fida'iyan* were founded by Navab Safavi in 1944 to kill the anti-Shi'ite intellectual Ahmad Kasravi. A series of similarly spectacular assassinations and near-hits, including one attempt on the late Shah, continued until 1956 when SAVAK smashed the organization. Prominent clerics close to the *Fida'iyan* included *Ayatullah* Kashani and *Ayatullah* Mahmud Taliqani.
14. Khomeini declared exporting the Islamic revolution a top priority in his Persian New Year's Day address of 23 March 1980. Text of speech found in Tehran Persian daily *Jumhuri-yi Islami*, 5 April 1980.
15. The existence of at least major factions within the Iranian Majlis (Islamic Consultative Assembly) was noted by President Hashemi-Rafsanjani in an interview with the Persian daily *Jumhuri-ye Islami* on 17 July 1989 (FBIS-NES-89-147, 2 August 1989, pp. 50-52).
16. Schahgaldian's *The Clerical Establishment in Iran*, pp. 35-82 provides a thorough, updated discussion of the leading personalities and factional alignments among the Iranian Shi'ite clergymen.
17. *New York Times*, 8 August 1989, p. A6, column 1.
18. *Report On State Sponsored Terrorism*, United States, Senate, Judiciary, Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1985), p. 130-34.
19. "Khomeini Speech on Islam, Role of Army, Radio," GF091600 Tehran Domestic Service 1030 GMT, 9 August 1984 (FBIS/SA, 10 August 1984 I1-I2).
20. "Iran's Karubi, Delegation Arrive in Beirut," NC021652 Beirut, Voice of Lebanon (Arabic) 1615 GMT 2 June 1985 (FBIS/MEA 3 June 1985 G5); *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1989*, pp. 44-45; "Millions From Arms Sales Traced To Iran Group Aiding Kidnappers," *New York Times*, 18 March 1987, pp. 1, 8.
21. "Mir Hashem" is an alias; his true name is Mehdi Hashemi. From the 26 May 1984 memorandum it is clear that "Mir Hashem" was a fictitious name, since his capacity as head of the Global Islamic Movements office enables his identification. On 27 October 1986 Imam Khomeini authorized the Iranian Minister of Intelligence to arrest Sayyid Mehdi Hashemi for, among other things, "murder and abduction, illegal possession of fire-arms and explosives, and secret illegal activities." FBIS/SA 28 Oct. 1986 I1. Sayyid Hashemi was then identified as the head of the World Islamic Movements office. *New York Times*, 18 March 1987, pp. 1, 8. "Sayyid" is a title for a descendent of the Prophet and "Mir" is merely another such title.
22. Initial indications of Iranian involvement through *Hizb'allah* was reported in the National Intelligence Digest on 20 October 1983. "Reagan Aides Say C.I.A. Bulletin Warned," *New York Times*, 2 November 1983, p. A1, Col. 3. CIA Confirmation of Iran's role supplying explosives and *Hizb'allah* as the local agent behind the bombings was reported in the *New York Times*, 5 October 1984, p. A1, Col. 4.
23. "Jihad Claims Responsibility," NC191038 Paris AFP (English) 1028 GMT 19 May 1985 (FBIS/MEA 20 May 1985 C4), corroborated in Hoffman, *Recent Trends and Future Prospects of Iranian Sponsored International Terrorism*, p. 20.
24. *New York Times*, 19 May 1985, p. 3
25. Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), pp. 101-02, 205, footnotes, 23, 24.
26. Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1986), pp. 90-97, 104-106.

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27. Amir Taheri, *Holy Terror: Inside the World of Islamic Terrorism* (Bethesda: Adler and Adler, 1987), pp. 136-37.
28. Hoffman, *Recent Trends and Future Prospects of Iranian Sponsored International Terrorism*, p. 14.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. v-vi, 19-30.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.
31. G. Hossein Razi, "Legitimacy, Religion, and Nationalism in the Middle East," *American Political Science Review*, 84, no. 1 (March 1990), pp. 69-91.
32. Khomeini never designated the Iraq-Iran war a *jihād* proper but did refer to it repeatedly as the "war of Truth against Falsehood." The ideological motivation on the Iraqi side is confirmed by Samir al Khalil, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 266. See also Dilip Hiro, *Holy Wars: The Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 292-93.
33. "The Terror List," *Iran Times International*, 16 August 1991, p. 15, col. 1.
34. "Second Bakhtiar Arrest: Man Implicates Islamic Republic Officials," *Iran Times International*, 27 September 1991, p. 16, col. 4.