

Iran: Confronting Terrorism

Charges of terrorist activities have plagued Iran from the earliest days of the Islamic revolution to the present. More than any other factor, they have interfered with Iran's ability to establish a responsible foreign policy image. Yet, terrorism is murky and highly ambiguous. As penalties for terrorism escalate, terrorists try to mask their identities; determining who planned and executed an act of terror is extremely difficult, and it is often virtually impossible to establish with any certainty the policy motives behind such acts. Iran is a particularly complex case.

Iran has a split personality. Some parts of its government—the presidency, the Majlis (parliament), and the functional ministries—though far from a fully functioning democracy, are held accountable for their policies and actions through public review and frequent elections. A second set of government institutions, including the Supreme Leader (*velayat-e faqih*), oversight committees such as the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council, and the security services, are dominated by a conservative clergy who are officially above reproach, essentially accountable only to themselves. These institutions have veto power over government policies and command a shadowy but potent network of influence and protection that grew out of the revolution, permeating Iran's national security structure and economy. The tension between these two unevenly balanced power centers affects Iranian policy at all levels so that, at times, Iran appears to be pursuing different or even contradictory objectives.

Since at least the mid-1990s, the main objectives of the elected government have been to attract foreign political and economic support. Especially since President Muhammad Khatami's election in 1997, Iran has played a significant and constructive role at the United Nations, normalized its rela-

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tions with its neighbors in the Persian Gulf region, and moved much closer toward mutually respectful relations with the European Union. At the same time, some unaccountable elements of Iran's power structure have seemed unwilling to accept this normalization process and have clung to a very different agenda of destabilization, revolutionary vengeance, and violent intimidation, including terrorist acts. The

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two sets of policies, often directly contradictory, reflect the struggle that lies at the very heart of the Iranian revolutionary experience.

The triumph of the Iranian revolution in February 1979 kindled a burst of radical actions by Iran that deserve to be called terrorism.¹ These include kidnappings sanctioned and sponsored by the government itself, such as the

taking of American hostages in the first years of the revolution, and reputed Iranian support for and suspected direct involvement in Hizballah operations in Lebanon, including the bombings of U.S. installations and hostage-taking throughout the 1980s. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran pursued a strategy of maritime terror, using unmarked gunboats and floating mines to attack noncombatant shipping. Numerous assassinations of enemies abroad in the late 1980s and 1990s were widely and persuasively attributed to Iranian official sponsorship, and Iran was accused of sponsoring operations by other militant organizations, such as the Argentinean bombings of 1992 and 1994 and the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, attributed to Hizballah organizations in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Iran is currently suspected of supporting terrorist acts against Israel through its support of radical Palestinian factions.

Given the ambiguities of the public record, if not the intelligence data on which it is based, Iran's actual behavior may be better, worse, or substantially different from the brief survey presented here. We may never have all the facts about many of the terrorist incidents of which Iran is accused. Assuming, however, that the following discussion of Iran's record on terrorism and the main driving forces of that record are at least roughly accurate, certain conclusions can be drawn about Iranian policy on terrorism, the direction in which it is headed today, and possible U.S. responses. Iran undoubtedly behaves differently today than it did nearly a quarter century ago. Iran's postrevolutionary policies of hostage-taking and rebellion promotion among its neighbors have been abandoned, as have its wartime shipping attacks and targeted assassinations of enemies. Today, Iran's promotion of violence

seems to be increasingly focused on support for radical anti-Israeli groups in Palestine. This shift calls for a different and more creative set of responses on the part of the United States.

Iran's Historical Motivations for Terrorism

EXPORTING THE REVOLUTION

The capture of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979 by a band of students and the imprisonment of a large group of U.S. diplomats and private citizens for 444 days with the explicit acquiescence of the Iranian government set the tone for Iran's relations with the United States and many other countries. The United States and much of the world regarded this act as the quintessential example of state-supported terrorism. It traumatized the U.S. public and darkened the lens through which the United States would view the Islamic Republic of Iran and all of its policies and actions during the decades that followed.

In the years immediately after the revolution, Iranian militants—with or without the official support of the government—attempted to export the revolution by stirring up radical Islamist discontent in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states. A botched attempt by Iranian supporters to assassinate senior Iraqi officials, including Tariq Aziz, in April 1980 was one of the catalysts that persuaded Saddam Hussein to invade Iran in September of that year.

Iran's ambassador to Syria in the early 1980s, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, provided financing and support for the creation of Hizballah ("Party of God"), the Lebanese political party and resistance movement.² Hizballah is widely believed to have been associated with the bombings of the U.S. Marines barracks and the U.S. embassy in Lebanon in 1983, although its leadership denies the charge, as well as the killing and hostage-taking of Americans and others throughout the 1980s. Its success in conducting a guerrilla war in southern Lebanon against Israel, ultimately leading to Israel's departure in 2000, won widespread admiration in the Islamic world and made Hizballah a source of inspiration and training for militant organizations throughout the Middle East, many of which adopted the same name. Iran takes pride in its continued support for Hizballah as a national resistance organization but denies having operational control over decisionmaking. In recent years, Iran has openly called on Hizballah to display "prudence and self-restraint" to prevent Israel from finding a pretext to attack Lebanon again.³

ENEMIES OF THE STATE

Just before he died in 1989, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the father of the Iranian revolution, issued his famous *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie. Khomeini regarded Rushdie's depiction of the prophet Muhammad and other Islamic subjects in *The Satanic Verses* as blasphemous, and the *fatwa* in effect incited the general Muslim community to murder Rushdie. It also seemed to signal the beginning of an assassination campaign against individuals associated with Rushdie's book as well as other "enemies of the revolution." The rash of killings that followed included Kurdish leader Abdol Rahman Qasemlu in Vienna in 1989, former Iranian prime minister and opposition leader Shapour Bakhtiar in Paris in 1991, four Iranian Kurds in Berlin in 1992, and several leaders of the opposition Mujahideen-e Khalq movement. In addition, two bombings in Argentina—the Israeli embassy in March 1992 and a Jewish community center in July 1994—were attributed to the Lebanese Hizballah organization, allegedly with Iranian assistance.

To be sure, Iran may often be falsely accused. Many of these crimes were never solved, and the degree of Iranian official responsibility may be overstated. For its part, Iran flatly and unequivocally denied any role in these incidents. A German court that formally investigated the 1992 Berlin murders, however, implicated the highest levels of the Iranian government and indicted the minister of intelligence, Ali Fallahian, for his role. An Argentinean court officially concluded in 2003 that officials in the Iranian embassy provided unspecified support to Hizballah for the 1994 bombing of the Jewish Community Center.

Iran's past reputation for supporting terrorism, the incendiary rhetoric of its ultraconservative clerical leaders, and its almost total lack of transparency concerning issues of national security have created an environment in which it is easy to believe the worst. In fact, Iran's behavior since the revolution has allowed its opponents to accuse it of almost anything and to find a receptive audience for their claims. Iran's vigorous denial in all of the aforementioned cases ultimately undermined its credibility because the formula never varied, even when the evidence was quite incriminating, and there was never any visible effort by Iran to investigate the circumstances or to punish any of the individuals who might have been involved.

MARITIME TERRORISM

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Iranian gunboats—usually small speedboats with hand-held grenade launchers and other weapons—attacked commercial shipping in the Gulf. Iran also seeded the waters of the shipping lanes with floating mines. These tactics were usually regarded as acts of war,

and they have not figured into the terrorism charges against Iran. The case can be made, however, that they represented a form of maritime terrorism.

That Iran used these strikes to retaliate against Iraqi air attacks against its own shipping is obvious. Iran could not retaliate in kind because all Iraqi ports were closed and there were no Iraqi ships in the Gulf. Instead, Iran sent unmarked speedboats to fire at commercial ships en route to Arab ports on the unspoken but entirely valid assumption that countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were serving as a supply channel for Iraq.

Although Iran never formally acknowledged that its military forces were behind these attacks, Iran undoubtedly organized and sponsored them. They were not truly acts of war because they were conducted by nonuniformed personnel against unarmed civilians of non-combatant states; they more closely resembled drive-by shootings or the mining of a busy thoroughfare. These attacks, which threatened the region's shipping lanes, eventually led to direct military clashes between the United States and Iran in the Gulf.⁴ They are significant here because they indicated Iran's willingness to use unconventional, even terrorist, methods to pursue a political and military strategy, even if that meant confronting the United States.

Iran undoubtedly behaves differently today than it did nearly a quarter century ago.

RAFSANJANI AND THE AL-KHOBAR BOMBINGS

Khomeini's death was perhaps an even greater challenge for Iran than war with Iraq. This event brought a new generation of revolutionaries to the top leadership positions and produced substantial changes in the constitution, even though it did not seriously threaten the regime or cause any dramatic shift in policy. Iran's competing foreign policies, however, were dramatically visible during the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997). Rafsanjani's systematic efforts to build constructive political as well as commercial ties with the West were sabotaged repeatedly by a policy that appeared to be driven by revolutionary vengeance and executed by shadowy forces. Tehran never publicly identified the perpetrators or publicly held them accountable, presumably because they enjoyed the protection of individuals at or near the top of the conservative power structure.

A major terrorist event during the last few years of the Rafsanjani presidency was the June 1996 bombing of the U.S. military barracks at Al-Khobar in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia that killed 19 U.S. servicemen and

The border between Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan is far from secure.

wounded 372. Five years later, the Bush administration issued an indictment that identified Saudi Hizballah as responsible for carrying out the attack and asserted that Iran had “inspired, supported, and directed” Hizballah organizations in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Bahrain since the early

1980s.⁵ The indictment specifically identified Iranian contact and exchange of information with various Saudi Hizballah groups during 1993 and 1994, but it contained no evidence of Iranian contact with any of the Saudi perpetrators during the year prior to the Al-Khobar operation and no evidence of Iranian involvement in the operation itself.⁶ When the June 2001 indictment was issued, Attorney General John Ashcroft indicated quite

clearly that it contained only those charges that the administration believed would stand up in court.⁷

The Al-Khobar case is crucially important to understanding Iran’s use or nonuse of terror, at least historically. If, as the Bush administration’s indictment asserts, the Al-Khobar incident shows that Iranian intelligence services maintained active contacts with radical Islamist elements opposed to the United States, that should not come as a great surprise. If, however, the Iranian government deliberately orchestrated an attack on U.S. installations and personnel as a means, for example, of driving Americans out of the Gulf region, that would be evidence of a significant shift in Iranian policy toward the United States and Saudi Arabia. Only the year before, Iran had offered a major offshore development contract to a U.S. company as a signal of interest in improved relations and was engaged in a major strategic effort to develop closer relations with Saudi Arabia.

It is impossible to conclude on the basis of the Bush administration’s indictment that the Al-Khobar attack constituted a major shift in Iran’s willingness to use terror against Saudi Arabia and the United States. As former U.S. national security adviser under the Clinton administration Sandy Berger described the Al-Khobar investigation: “We know it was done by the Saudi Hizballah. We know that they were trained in Iran by Iranians. We know there was Iranian involvement. What has yet to be established is how substantial the Iranian involvement was.”⁸

KHATAMI AND THE NEW IRANIAN DIPLOMACY

With Khatami’s landslide election in 1997, Iran’s official foreign policy focused more intently on integrating Iran into the international community and on presenting a visage of Iran quite different from the scowling fanati-

cism of the earliest days of the revolution. Khatami's determination to change Iran's image became clear in January 1998, early in his first term, when he used the occasion of a CNN interview with correspondent Christiane Amanpour to deliver a message to the people of the United States. In carefully prepared remarks, he addressed all the outstanding issues between the United States and Iran, including terrorism:

We believe in the holy Quran that says: slaying of one innocent person is tantamount to the slaying of all humanity. How could such a religion, and those who claim to be its followers, get involved in the assassination of innocent individuals and the slaughter of innocent human beings? We categorically reject all these allegations. ... Terrorism should be condemned in all its forms and manifestations; assassins must be condemned. Terrorism is useless anyway and we condemn it categorically. ... At the same time, supporting peoples who fight for the liberation of their land is not, in my opinion, supporting terrorism. It is, in fact, supporting those who are engaged in combating state terrorism.⁹

When further asked, "Regardless of the motive, do you believe that killing innocent women and children is terrorism, as for instance what happens on the streets of Israel?" Khatami replied, "It is definitely so. Any form of killing of innocent men and women who are not involved in confrontations is terrorism; it must be condemned, and we, in our term, condemn every form of it in the world."

This statement was and remains the most complete and authoritative to date regarding Iran's formal government policy on terrorism. Khatami's subsequent handling of the "serial murders" of Iranian intellectuals lent some credibility to his statement. At least four intellectuals were brutally murdered in quick succession in November and December 1998 in what may have been an effort to destabilize the Khatami government. Khatami conducted an investigation, and his government arrested a group of ultraconservative officials, headed by Deputy Director Saeed Emami, in the Ministry of Intelligence. These men were hired originally by Ali Fallahian, the former minister of intelligence, and their arrest was widely seen as a public rebuke to the conservatives as well as a rare case of transparency in the security services. Before the case came up for trial, however, Emami reportedly killed himself in prison by ingesting a toxic powder normally used for hair removal.

When Khatami first took office, he had wanted to remove Emami and his associates from the Intelligence Ministry but had not succeeded in overcoming conservative objections. After Emami's arrest, Khatami was able to replace many of Fallahian's people in the ministry and to install an intelligence minister of his choosing. The unprecedented revelations of rogue operations in the security services, including widespread allegations that Emami was

killed to prevent him from implicating other ultraconservative figures at the very highest levels of the clerical leadership, created a public sensation and seemed to indicate that unauthorized terrorist operations might become subject to internal and perhaps even public scrutiny and control. Such a hope was unduly optimistic as no further examples have followed, but Emami's arrest and death did confirm widespread suspicions that pockets of extremists inside and outside the revolutionary structure were operating without the review or approval of the elected government.

SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE IRANIAN RESPONSE

After the September 11 attacks, in sharp contrast to much of the Arab world's scarcely concealed glee that the United States had gotten a taste of its own medicine, Iran responded with official statements of condolences and unofficial candlelight vigils in support of the American people. Although Iran officially opposed the subsequent U.S. attack on Afghanistan, it made no effort to interfere and even cooperated quietly on issues such as humanitarian relief, search and rescue, and other practical matters. After the Taliban government was deposed, Iran participated positively and creatively in the Bonn talks to establish a new interim government in Afghanistan, drawing rare praise from U.S. officials.¹⁰ At the Tokyo donors conference in January 2002, Iran pledged a total of \$560 million for the reconstruction of Afghanistan—the largest donation of any developing country. Speculation emerged among pundits that this would be the beginning of a new U.S.-Iranian relationship. Then, in his 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush identified Iran as the third member of an “axis of evil,” along with Iraq and North Korea, stating that terrorism was a major concern:

Iran aggressively pursues these weapons [of mass destruction] and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom. ... They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. ... The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons.¹¹

Why did the Bush administration go from praising to excoriating Iran in only six weeks? One likely reason was the Israeli intercept and capture in January 2002 of the *Karine-A*, a ship secretly purchased by the Palestinian Authority (PA) that was allegedly carrying some 50 tons of weapons and explosives from Iran's Kish Island to Palestine. Israel arrested the ship's captain, Omar Akawi, who later spoke to the press from his prison cell and identified himself as a member of Arafat's Fatah movement and a lieutenant colonel in the PA's naval police.¹² The Palestinians and Iranians denounced the event as an Israeli

setup intended to influence U.S. policy. If so, it worked perfectly. A senior administration official told *The New York Times* that the incident “was a sign to the president that the Iranians weren’t serious.”¹³

Ties with Al Qaeda?

The United States also began asserting publicly that members of Al Qaeda were taking refuge in Iran across the border from western Afghanistan. Zalmay Khalilzad, the administration’s special envoy to Afghanistan, put the U.S. case succinctly: “Hard-line, unaccountable elements of the Iranian regime facilitated the movement of Al Qaeda terrorists escaping from Afghanistan.”¹⁴ The government in Tehran initially denied that any Al Qaeda partisans were in Iran. The very lengthy border between Iran and Afghanistan and Iran and Pakistan is riddled with drug smuggling routes and is far from secure, however, and after some weeks, Iran announced that it had located Taliban and Al Qaeda supporters within its borders and that they were being returned to their countries of origin. Over the following year, the Iranian government detained and extradited more than 500 fugitives, largely volunteers from various Muslim countries who had gone to Afghanistan to join the jihad against the West.

Claims of an alliance between Al Qaeda and some elements in Iran strain credulity.

Why would members of the Iranian security services look the other way or perhaps even facilitate the passage of these fugitives? No doubt money was the primary reason. Besides money, however, some hard-line elements may have also seen an opportunity to recruit agents or to incorporate some militant Afghan cadres into their own operations. One can only speculate, though, because neither Washington nor Tehran disclosed the identity of these individuals nor suggested their possible motives.

Some reports, usually ascribed to anonymous intelligence sources, have mentioned a connection between Al Qaeda and some elements in Iran, possibly via Hizballah.¹⁵ Those allegations strained credulity, however, given Iran’s vigorous opposition to the Taliban government in Afghanistan and its Al Qaeda supporters. Al Qaeda is a Sunni Muslim group that espouses the views of the most extreme proponents of the Salafi (often called Wahhabi) school of Islamic thought, which regards Shi’ism, the religion practiced most in Iran and by Hizballah in Lebanon, as heretical. One can imagine some low-level tactical contact between the two groups, particularly in view of

their shared opposition to the Western presence in the Gulf region. Claims of an alliance, however, lack evidence and logic.

The issue of potential Iranian ties with Al Qaeda took on much greater significance in May 2003 when three suicide car bombs exploded almost simultaneously in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Thirty-five people, including nine bombers, died in the explosions, which targeted housing compounds for Americans and other Westerners living and working in the Saudi kingdom. The attack was carried out by a group of Saudi militants, who had previously been identified by Saudi security forces and were on the run, operating under Al Qaeda's direction. Many of the perpetrators were arrested in the following weeks, but the United States released unconfirmed intelligence reports that Iran was sheltering some senior Al Qaeda operatives who may have been involved in planning the attack. Iran denied involvement, then announced that it had several Al Qaeda members in custody, reportedly including some very senior individuals.

The United States responded quite sharply, calling the action taken by the Iranian government insufficient and suspending the potentially significant informal talks that had begun to take place on a regular basis between U.S. and Iranian officials. These talks had been warily resumed in Geneva, technically under the aegis of an informal UN committee created to deal with Afghanistan after the Afghan and the Iraq wars had underscored the mutual interests of the United States and Iran on a number of practical issues, such as preparing for refugee movements and search and rescue missions as well as maintaining stability after war had ended. The discussions were reportedly businesslike and many observers saw them as a precursor to a possible improvement in U.S.-Iranian relations, despite the two countries' many differences and the sour taste left by the axis of evil speech. As had happened in the past, U.S. charges of Iranian association with terrorist activities brought potentially constructive contacts to a halt.

Has Khatami Ended Support for Terrorism?

Iran has clearly changed its policies substantially over time. The hostage-taking and regional destabilization campaigns of the early days of the Iranian revolution that were so immensely costly to Iran's image and that continue to plague its international relations have vanished. As Khatami delicately put it in his CNN interview, there is no longer any need for such "unconventional methods."¹⁶ Assassinating enemies of the Islamic Republic in Europe ended in 1994. Later killings outside Europe focused primarily on members of the Mujahideen-e Khalq, but those have also largely ceased in recent years and may have been rendered pointless by U.S. occupation of

Mujahideen-e Khalq camps in Iraq and severe crackdowns on the organization in France and elsewhere.

As far as we can tell, Iranian direct involvement in terrorist activities in the past—kidnappings, maritime attacks, assassinations—seems to have given way in recent years almost entirely to proxy support for non-Iranian organizations. If so, this may be attributable simply to the realization that these actions were doing immense harm to Iran's broader national objectives and that their cost far outweighed whatever perceived benefits may have been gained. Iran may have taken a very long time to reach what might appear a fairly obvious conclusion, but it suggests at a minimum a capacity to modify its policies in the face of persistent pressure and experience.

The most substantial changes in Iran's apparent policies and behavior have come with Khatami's election. Although Khatami has been largely unsuccessful in his attempt to move the ruling clerical elite toward his vision of greater political liberty, civil society, and rule of law, he has changed the political discourse in Iran. His housecleaning of the Intelligence Ministry—one of the few genuine achievements to come out of his many confrontations with the conservative power structure—may have significantly curtailed Iran's earlier tendency toward interventionism and feckless adventurism.

At the same time, Iran undoubtedly continues to consort with and provide support to organizations that are committed to the destruction of Israel. The list begins with Lebanese Hizballah and extends to include Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command. Virtually all elements of the Iranian leadership do not deny this association; they actually take pride in it. Members of these and other militant organizations are brought to Iran repeatedly for various conferences and meetings; their leaders meet openly with Iran's top leaders, including Khatami and his foreign minister; other Iranian officials meet with them on trips to Lebanon and Syria; and Iran provides material support. Iran regards this as legitimate activity in support of resistance movements fighting against illegal occupation of their land. Although Khatami, as indicated earlier, asserts that bombings of innocent people are prohibited in Islam and are opposed by Iran, many other Iranians, including very senior clerics and officials, maintain that such acts are legitimate and may well be prepared to countenance or encourage violence.

The United States and much of the West regard these organizations as terrorists. Iran's more tolerant view, however, is not that different from

Hostage-taking and regional destabilization campaigns have vanished.

popular Islamic opinion (and some official opinion, whether public or private). Iran envisions itself as the true world leader of political Islam, and fierce opposition to Israeli occupation is a touchstone of that core belief. Despite its own strong views, Iran has stated repeatedly that it would accept any settlement that is satisfactory to the Palestinians and that it will not try to impose its views by force. Judging from the fiery anti-Israeli rhetoric of many Iranian leaders and their failure to criticize or condemn even the most extreme actions or claims of its friends in the Palestinian-Israeli arena, including repeated suicide bombings by organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Israel and the West have every reason to be skeptical of those assurances.

The alleged sheltering in Iran of Al Qaeda members and other fugitives, such as the Al-Ansar group in Iraq, is a different problem that is less obvious than it may appear. Even without porous borders and isolated, lawless regions, the apprehension of Al Qaeda operatives is not a simple matter, as evident elsewhere. Osama bin Laden and some of his contingent reportedly move back and forth across the Afghan-Pakistani border almost at will, despite the best efforts of both the United States and the Pakistani government to locate and intercept them. The United States itself has repeatedly discovered cells of Al Qaeda operatives within its own borders, including some members who had recently arrived and were reportedly conducting training operations not far from the nation's capital. Washington is quick to assume the worst with Iran, especially in light of Iran's lack of transparency concerning issues of intelligence and national security. Nevertheless, after massive misjudgments of intelligence concerning Iraq, the United States might be well advised to regard its present intelligence reports on Iran with a bit more caution.

Policy Options

The United States faces two severe problems in dealing with Iran and terrorism. The first is the difficulty of dealing with the legacy of the past. Terrorist acts in which Iran may have had direct or indirect involvement have seriously harmed many U.S. citizens (and others). The U.S. Congress has attempted to address this by passing legislation permitting victims to bring cases to U.S. courts, with awards granted on the basis of uncontested evidence because Iran refuses to appear. The awards are supposed to be paid from Iranian assets, but that would set a precedent that could harm U.S. interests around the world; so, large awards are paid to these plaintiffs from the U.S. Treasury on the presumption that eventually they will be recovered from Iran. The Bush administration fiercely opposes efforts to prosecute

U.S. officials or military personnel for possible violations of international law in the courts of other countries or at the International Criminal Court. Yet, U.S. courts are now routinely prosecuting Iranians and others for alleged support of terrorist actions by Hizballah and other militant organizations, mocking judicial due process. The past must be dealt with, but the present remedy will only complicate future efforts to settle past grievances.

The more immediate problem for the United States and the international community is how to deal with Iran's proxy support for pro-Palestinian groups that oppose Israel and the peace process and who resort to terrorist attacks against civilian targets. At least since Khatami's election seven years ago, this proxy support has been the focus of virtually all accusations about Iran's role as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute would, among other benefits, remove the *raison d'être* of these violent factions and eliminate Iran's rationale for providing political and financial support. Iranian involvement is, of course, not the primary concern of those involved in the peace process. Nevertheless, as the heat of the intifada increased, with resultant devastating pictures on regional television, so too did Iran's rhetoric and its presumed material support to the extremist opposition. Iran insists that its support of the "forces of national liberation" is not terrorism, but its fervor rises and falls with the intensity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Because of its distance from the conflict, Iran can adopt an irresponsible rhetorical stance that is "more Palestinian than the Palestinians" if only because it sounds appropriately revolutionary in speeches and distracts from the many domestic failures of the Iranian leadership. This is not a factional issue in Iranian politics; reformers and conservatives tend to sound very much alike. Pressure tactics and sanctions have been totally ineffective in changing Iran's behavior on this issue in the past, and there is no reason to believe that the future will be any different. Among the side benefits of progress in the peace process almost surely would be a cooling of Iranian rhetoric, a reduction in Iranian temptation to meddle in Palestine, and a corresponding improvement in U.S.-Iranian relations.

The most complex element of Iran's involvement in terrorist activities is the fact that Iran has two different ruling structures. As Khalilzad has noted, Iran's worst behavior often originates with "hard-line, unaccountable elements of the Iranian regime." How can the United States deal with that

Iran undoubtedly continues to support organizations committed to destroying Israel.

reality of Iranian politics? The short answer is regime change. The longer and more thoughtful answer is regime change that grows out of Iranian domestic needs and demands, not imposed by an external power.

One of the few unquestioned positive achievements of the 1979 revolution was its lesson to the Iranian people that they were in charge of their own destiny, rather than blaming every political development on foreign hands. Losing that would be a huge setback. Iran has been in a century-long struggle for freedom that started with the Constitutional Revolution of the

How can the United States deal with the unaccountable reality of Iranian politics?

early twentieth century. It has not been an easy or linear process, and the outcome is far from certain. Any attempt to short-circuit the process by sticking a U.S. finger in the Iranian pie, however, is a formula for disaster. Success in prompting a revolt would bring a crushing response from the conservative forces that would at least temporarily halt the democratization movement. Even if U.S. calls for revolution went unheeded,

they might taint those seeking change as lackeys of a foreign power.

During nearly a quarter century of Islamic revolutionary rule, Iran has changed and continues to change. This is as true of the country's involvement in terrorist activities as it is in any other aspect of its political life. Iran's early ventures into hostage-taking, bombings, and subversion gave way to terror at sea during the long war with Iraq and then to a vicious vendetta of assassination against its perceived political enemies. Increasingly, Iran has shifted its focus to financing, training, and supporting proxy organizations whose actions provided some measure of deniability for Iran but could not overcome suspicion of Iranian involvement, if not actual control. Over the past seven years, the focus of this proxy relationship has been on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Throughout much of this history, there has been a gap between Iran's declaratory policy and the actions of malevolent forces embedded in Iran's security services. Khatami has been successful in weeding out some of these individuals, but the job is far from complete. The magnitude of the problem that remains may be reflected in alleged Iranian support for arms shipments to Palestine and providing refuge to Al Qaeda fugitives. Iran's denial of involvement is insufficient. For the sake of its credibility, Iran must demonstrate a genuine determination to investigate such charges and to remedy any abuses. Its extradition of hundreds of Al Qaeda fighters was a step in the right direction, but Iran needs to clean its house of all known terrorists, including Lebanese and Palestinian figures with long histories of involvement in bombings and assassinations.

Confronting the hard-line elements that distort its foreign and domestic policies goes far beyond allegations of international terrorism. That struggle lies at the heart of Iran's political identity and will determine the course of its future. The United States and the international community can keep the spotlight on Iran's abuses and press hard for change. If the pressure for change is applied fairly and if Washington acknowledges Iran's accomplishments as well as its failures, the world will be assured of staunch allies within Iran. Change is a slow and often uncertain process, but it is something that can be done only by Iran itself.

Notes

1. There is no generally accepted definition of terrorism. For a discussion of the definitional problems, see A. William Samii, "Tehran, Washington, and Terror: No Agreement to Differ," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 6, no. 3 (September 2002), <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2002/issue3/jv6n3a5.html> (accessed July 23, 2003).
2. For details on this episode, see Robin Wright, "A Reporter at Large: Teheran Summer," *New Yorker*, September 5, 1988, pp. 32–72.
3. See Daniel Sobelman, "Hizbollah Two Years after the Withdrawal: A Compromise between Ideology, Interests, and Exigencies," *Strategic Assessment* 5, no. 2 (August 2002).
4. See Gary Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement: The Internationalization of the Iran-Iraq War, 1987–88," in *Neither East Nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States*, eds. Nikki Keddie and Mark Gasiorowski (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 219–246.
5. The indictment is located at www.usdoj.gov:80/opa/pr/2001/June/khobarindictment.wpd (accessed July 23, 2003).
6. For a thorough review of the charges and countercharges, see Elsa Walsh, "Annals of Politics: Louis Freeh's Last Case," *New Yorker*, May 14, 2001, p. 68.
7. See statement by Ashcroft released by the Department of Justice on June 21, 2001.
8. Walsh, "Annals of Politics."
9. "Transcript of Interview with Iranian president Mohammad Khatami," CNN.com, January 7, 1998, www.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/07/iran/interview.html (accessed July 23, 2003) (hereinafter Khatami interview).
10. Richard Haas, the U.S. special coordinator for Afghanistan, complimented Iran's "constructive role" in talks on the future of Afghanistan and providing the Afghan people with humanitarian aid. Agence France Press, December 6, 2001.
11. George W. Bush, State of the Union address, Washington, D.C., January 29, 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html (accessed July 23, 2003).
12. For a detailed review of reportage on the incident from an Israeli perspective, see "Operation Noah's Ark," Ha'aretz.com, www.haaretzdaily.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=114367&contrastID=3&subContrassID=0&sbSubContrassID=0 (accessed July 23, 2003).
13. David E. Sanger, "Bush Aides Say Tough Tone Put Foes on Notice," *New York Times*, January 31, 2002.

14. Zalmay Khalilzad, speech to the American-Iranian Council, Washington, D.C., March 13, 2002.
15. For a detailed examination of the facts and allegations concerning Iranian terrorist activities for the first year after the September 11 attacks, see Samii, "Tehran, Washington, and Terror."
16. Khatami interview.