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Timely Reminder of Iranian Support for Terrorism

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Over the past several years, Iran's nuclear activities have commanded the attention of the international community. But the recent assassination of Hizballah foreign operations chief Imad Mughniyeh is a reminder that Iran has been -- and continues to be -- a key player in global terrorism, as its explicit sponsorship of Hizballah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) demonstrates. Moreover, a recent terrorism case in Bahrain suggests that Iran's assistance to al-Qaeda operatives may still be continuing today, echoing the regime's implicit support of the group in the past.

Longstanding Support for Terrorism

U.S. officials describe the Iranian regime as the world's "central banker of terrorism." Indeed, Tehran has a nine-figure line item in its budget to support terrorism, sending hundreds of millions of dollars to various groups each year; the payments to Hizballah alone are as much as \$200 million annually. According to Canadian intelligence, "[I]n February 1999, it was reported that Palestinian police discovered documents that attest to the transfer of \$35 million to Hamas from the Iranian Intelligence Service (MOIS), money reportedly meant to finance terrorist activities against Israeli targets." Illustrating how such support is part of official government policy, from 2001 to 2006, Iran transferred \$50 million to Hizballah fronts in Lebanon by sending funds from its central bank through Bank Saderat's London subsidiary.

Iranian support for terrorism goes well beyond the financial realm, however. Its well-known sponsorship of Palestinian terrorist organizations, for example, has included training and related contributions. Shortly after the second intifada erupted in September 2000, the regime assigned Mughniyeh himself to help Palestinian militant groups. According to a former Clinton administration official, "Mughniyeh got orders from Tehran to work with Hamas"; he was tasked with assisting PIJ as well.

Similarly, according to the U.S. government, Iran's al-Qods Force -- a wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) -- has a "long history" of providing all types of support to Hizballah, including training, guidance, and arms. In addition to running training camps in Lebanon, al-Qods has trained more than 3,000 Hizballah operatives at its own facilities in Iran. The unit also played an important role in rearming Hizballah following the summer 2006 war with Israel. According to the Treasury Department, al-Qods has provided a wide variety of weapons and financial support to the Taliban as well, in support of the group's anti-coalition activity in Afghanistan.

Elsewhere, an Azerbaijani court convicted fifteen Iranian-supported individuals of treason in December 2007, on charges of plotting to overthrow the government in an attempt to establish a Shiite regime. The cell was also charged with counterfeiting and possession of weapons and drugs. According to local security officials, two of its members traveled to Iran and received training, equipment, maps, and more than \$10,000 to finance their activities. In addition, the cell reportedly passed information on American, British, and Israeli activities in Azerbaijan to Iranian intelligence.

The Azerbaijani case also illustrates Iran's practice of using humanitarian and diplomatic footholds as a cover

for IRGC or MOIS operations. The leader of the convicted cell reportedly ran a suspect charity in Baku. Similarly, in 1998, *Time* magazine reported on a case of Iranian surveillance of Western interests in Kazakhstan. And in 1997, a Defense Intelligence Agency report quoted in the *Washington Times* detailed Iranian plots targeting U.S. interests in Tajikistan; the plots including kidnappings, threats, and the casing of U.S. diplomats by Iranian intelligence operatives.

Bahraini Terrorist Cell: An Iranian Link?

The Bahraini government recently convicted a five-member cell for terrorist activities. The defendants were charged with a variety of offenses, including receiving explosives and weapons training, engaging in terrorism overseas, and terrorism financing targeting "friendly countries." Two of the suspects, a Bahraini and a Qatari, remain at large -- presumably in Afghanistan, according to Bahraini authorities -- and were convicted in absentia.

The limited media coverage of the case has focused on the defendants' light sentences -- six-month prison terms. In fact, after the trial, one of the defense lawyers maintained that "the six-month jail sentence is nothing, and we consider this to be an acquittal"; for their part, prosecutors bemoaned the light sentence and their inability to appeal. Lost in the coverage, however, was the important role Iran played, either explicitly or implicitly. According to Bahraini investigators, several of the cell members traveled from Bahrain to Afghanistan via Iran. First, they flew to Tehran and met up with several al-Qaeda-affiliated individuals at the airport. Al-Qaeda facilitators then passed the cell members along from "person to person" until their arrival in Afghan training camps. One of the individuals who returned to Bahrain from Afghanistan was successfully prosecuted after acknowledging that he had traveled there to fight coalition forces.

Bahraini authorities do not know whether the Iranian government actively facilitated the cell members' travel to Afghanistan. But given the regime's track record, Iran's possible involvement with the cell is worth exploring further. The 9-11 Commission found that Iranian officials often helped al-Qaeda members reach Afghanistan by facilitating their travel through Iran. Border guards were instructed not to put stamps in al-Qaeda members' passports, presumably so their home governments would not suspect that they had traveled to Afghanistan. Although the commission found no evidence that Iran was "aware of the planning for what later became the September 11 attacks," it did highlight "strong evidence" that Iran facilitated the travel of eight to ten of the hijackers through Iran to Afghanistan. There is also "circumstantial evidence" that senior Hizballah operatives were "closely tracking" some of the hijackers' trips into Iran in late 2000.

In light of these findings, the Bahraini investigation that discovered the passage of al-Qaeda operatives into and through Iran -- a country with strict border controls -- raises real questions about Iran's implicit, if not explicit, support for al-Qaeda.

Greater International Focus Needed

The international community's focus on Iran's nuclear program is understandable, but the scope of the regime's terrorist activities should pose serious concerns as well. After all, the nuclear activities are not the only ones that violate UN resolutions; Iran's support for terrorist organizations does as well. Although Hizballah has not been designated a terrorist organization by the UN or European Union, Iran's efforts to rearm the group violate Security Council Resolution 1701 (passed following the 2006 war) and 1747 (which prohibits Iran from exporting arms). Moreover, any post-1999 support for al-Qaeda would violate Resolution 1267, which targeted the Taliban along with Osama bin Laden "and his associates." Iran is also clearly not in compliance with Resolution 1373, which requires member states to build robust regimes against terrorism financing. Finally, Iran's support for PIJ and Hamas should trouble the EU in particular, which has blacklisted both organizations.

In the wake of Mughniyeh's death, IRGC commander Muhammad Ali Jafari stated, "In the near future, we will witness the destruction of the cancerous germ of Israel by the powerful and competent hands of the

Hizballah combatants" -- a warning to be taken seriously given Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah's implicit threat to respond by targeting Israeli interests abroad. Indeed, Iran's continued support for terrorist groups, Sunni and Shiite alike, should cause the international community to pause and reflect on the regime's behavior. Sending a strong, unified message to Tehran that its terrorist activities are unacceptable would be a good step forward.

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