

This web site was frozen on September 20, 2004 at 12:00 AM, EDT. It is now a Federal record managed by the National Archives and Records Administration. External links were active as of that date and time. For technical issues, contact webprogram@nara.gov. For questions about the web site, contact legislative.archives@nara.gov.



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES

[About the Commission](#) | [Report](#) | [Hearings](#) | [Staff Statements](#) | [Press](#) | [Archive](#) | [For Families](#)

Third public hearing of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States

Statement of Mark Gasiorowski to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States July 9, 2003

Iranian Support for Terrorism

Changing Patterns of Iranian Support for Terrorism.

Iran's involvement in terrorism has changed considerably during the past decade. From the early 1980s until about 1996, Iran was directly involved in a wide variety of terrorist activities. It provided extensive support to Islamist terrorist groups such as Hezbollah (in Lebanon), Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI),

Current News

The Commission has released its final report. [\[more\]](#)

The Chair and Vice Chair have released a statement regarding the Commission's closing. [\[more\]](#)

The Commission closed August 21, 2004. [\[more\]](#)

Commission Members

Thomas H. Kean
Chair

Lee H. Hamilton
Vice Chair

the Afghan Northern Alliance and its precursors, and probably lesser-known groups in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Algeria, and other countries. It seems to have worked closely with Hezbollah and perhaps other groups to carry out major terrorist attacks against U.S. and Israeli or Jewish targets in Lebanon, Argentina, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere. Iran also carried out a series of assassinations of Iranian exiles in Europe and the Middle East during this period.

As revolutionary fervor in Iran dissipated and international pressure to end its involvement in terrorism increased, the scope and magnitude of Iran's role in these activities changed considerably in the mid- and late 1990s. Iran's assassination of Iranian exiles ended, except for occasional attacks against the Iraq-based Mojahedin-e Khalq in retaliation for its terrorist attacks inside Iran. Iran apparently ended its support for Islamist groups in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, and probably also for those in Egypt and Algeria. And Hezbollah, which has always been closely linked to Iran, ended its attacks against U.S. and extra-regional targets in the mid-1990s and seems to have ended its attacks against Israel following the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000.

Nevertheless, despite these changes, Iran still supports a number of terrorist groups in the region. We can distinguish four main categories:

1. *Groups with which Iran has close, long-standing connections based on ideological, religious, or ethnic affiliation:* Hezbollah and SCIRI, which share Iran's Shi'ite Islamist ideology; and the Afghan Northern Alliance, which has ethnic links with Iran.

2. *The Palestinian Islamist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad,* which Iran supports because of the prominence and prestige of the Palestinian cause and because they are Islamist, even though they are Sunni rather than Shi'ite.

Richard Ben-Veniste
Fred F. Fielding
Jamie S. Gorelick
Slade Gorton
Bob Kerrey
John F. Lehman
Timothy J. Roemer
James R. Thompson

Commission Staff

Philip D. Zelikow
Executive Director

Chris Kojm
Deputy Executive Director

Daniel Marcus
General Counsel

3. *Secular Palestinian groups* that have turned to terrorism since the al-Aqsa Intifada began in September 2000, which Iran supports because of the prominence and prestige of the Palestinian cause, even though they are secularist.

4. *Al-Qaeda and related groups* (such as the Iraqi Kurdish group Ansar al-Islam). U.S. officials allege that members of these groups currently are active in Iran and may have been involved in recent terrorist attacks against U.S. targets. It is not clear whether Iranian officials have been helping them and, if so, whether this has been perpetrated by top officials or simply by rogue members of Iran's security forces.

Iran's Motives in Supporting Terrorism

Iran's involvement in terrorism is motivated by three distinct sets of factors. The relative importance of these motives has changed over time. Moreover, Iran's motives vary from one terrorism-related activity to another. The three sets of motives are:

1. *Ideological and organizational imperatives.* Before the mid-1990s, Iran's involvement in terrorism was driven mainly by its revolutionary Islamist ideology and carried out mainly by specialized branches of its Revolutionary Guard Corps and Intelligence Ministry. However, revolutionary zeal declined considerably in Iran during the 1990s, leaving only a relatively small number of Hardliners today who still strongly advocate involvement in terrorism. These Hardliners are concentrated mainly in the Revolutionary Guard Corps and, until recently, the Intelligence Ministry. They are most strongly committed to Hezbollah and SCIRI, with which they have worked closely for over 20 years. They are also strongly committed to the Palestinian cause, preferring Palestinian Islamists to secularist groups, and to the Persian-speaking and Shi'ite groups that make

up the Afghan Northern Alliance, with which they also have long-standing ties.

Iran does not have long-standing ties to al-Qaeda, and its Islamist ideology differs substantially from that of al-Qaeda, which is based on Sunni-Wahabi rather than Shi'ite Islamic principles. Moreover, al-Qaeda and its affiliates have generally been very hostile toward Shi'ism and have killed many Iranian, Afghan, and Pakistani Shi'ites in recent years. This hostility led Iran to become the main supporter of the Northern Alliance, which fought a long, bloody war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda that culminated in the Taliban's defeat in late 2001, after U.S. forces entered the war. And, indeed, Iran itself almost went to war with the Taliban in 1998. Although a few Iranian Hardliners may advocate supporting al-Qaeda because of its anti-American activities, most Hardliners strongly oppose it for these various reasons.

In addition to these Hardliners, many mainstream Iranian politicians support these terrorist groups in varying degrees, regarding them - with the notable exception of al-Qaeda and its affiliates - as freedom fighters pursuing just causes. Support for these groups is clearly stronger among members of the Conservative faction than among Reformists, and almost all Reformists, including President Mohammad Khatami and members of his cabinet, oppose their use of blatant terrorism, while generally supporting the causes they pursue. Much the same holds for the general public in Iran.

2. *Tactical uses.* As Iran's ideological motivations have receded, its leaders increasingly seem to regard terrorism-related activities as tactical instruments they can use to advance their military and diplomatic objectives. Although Hezbollah has, for now, apparently ended its own use of terrorism, it retains extensive capabilities, supplied primarily by Iran, to mount terrorist attacks against a variety

of targets. Many analysts believe that Iran in recent years has promoted Hezbollah's latent terrorist capabilities to serve as a form of asymmetrical deterrence against possible attacks by Israel and the United States. Iran's support for SCIRI and members of the Northern Alliance gives it powerful instruments for influencing internal events in Iraq and Afghanistan, complementing its various diplomatic initiatives toward these countries. Iran's support for various Palestinian groups - together with its support for Hezbollah, SCIRI, and Northern Alliance members, as well as any assistance it may be giving to al-Qaeda and its affiliates - gives it bargaining chips it can use to negotiate explicit or implicit agreements with the United States, Israel, and perhaps other countries.

3. *Foreign policy constraints.* Iran's support for terrorism has been increasingly constrained since the early 1990s by its desire for better foreign economic and diplomatic relations. Its decisions to end assassinations of Iranian exiles in Europe and support for radical groups in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait were clearly due in large part to its desire for rapprochement with the European Union (EU) and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, respectively. Iranian officials in recent years have repeatedly denounced terrorist attacks, strongly denied supporting terrorist groups, and even moderated their public stance toward the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, thus reducing their overt support for terrorism in an effort to limit its adverse consequences. Similarly, Iran recently has extradited an unknown number of al-Qaeda members to their home countries in an apparent effort to defuse criticism from the United States.

Iran's Decision-Making Apparatus

As discussed above, it is not clear whether top Iranian officials have been involved in supporting members of al-Qaeda and affiliated

groups located in Iran. However, Iran's decisions to support the other groups mentioned above - and almost all of its earlier terrorism-related activities - undoubtedly have been made by the country's highest officials.

These decisions probably are made in one of two ways. First, many undoubtedly are made by the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), a decision-making body composed of top officials from the relevant branches of government, which is formally empowered to make decisions on major security-related matters. Although President Khatami and Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi are members of the SNSC, this body is dominated by Conservatives and a few Hardliners appointed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Second, many of the most sensitive decisions about terrorism-related activities are probably made outside of the SNSC, typically in meetings among Khamenei, his very closest advisors, and top officials in the Revolutionary Guard Corps or other security agencies, almost all of whom are appointed by Khamenei. The main advantage of bypassing the SNSC in this way is that Khatami, Kharrazi, and other moderate members can thereby be excluded from these decisions. Consequently, while Khatami and Kharrazi probably participate in some decisions on terrorism-related matters, they have little influence over these decisions; and many key decisions probably are made by Khamenei and other officials without consulting them.

However these decisions are made, the decision-making process amounts to a pragmatic weighing of the benefits and drawbacks of any given terrorism-related activity, carried out largely by Supreme Leader Khamenei. For the most part this involves balancing the Hardliners' ideologically and organizationally based pressures and their arguments about the tactical utility of a given activity against the adverse foreign economic and diplomatic consequences this activity might produce, which are

articulated mainly by Khatami, Kharrazi, and other moderates. This pragmatic weighing of pros and cons explains why Iran abandoned its most blatant terrorism-related activities in the mid-1990s and has reduced its overt support for terrorism in recent years, while continuing secretly to support some terrorist groups and maintaining latent terrorism capabilities that can be activated if needed. It also suggests that Iran's decisions about terrorism-related activity can be influenced by other countries with appropriate incentives.

Prospects for Change

The declining revolutionary fervor that has been partly responsible for Iran's reduced involvement in terrorism-related activities in recent years has largely played out. Moreover, the country's top leadership now is very aware that these activities have both tactical benefits and foreign economic and diplomatic drawbacks. Consequently, in the absence of domestic or international changes that might substantially alter Iran's decision-making calculus, we should not expect a major reduction in Iran's involvement in terrorism in the coming years.

However, two such changes might well occur and could have a big impact on Iran's behavior. First, the power struggle that has been raging inconclusively between Iran's Reformists and Conservatives might be resolved one way or another in the near future, leaving either the Reformists or the Conservatives fully in control over the decision-making apparatus. A Reformist victory almost certainly would bring a sharp, long-term reduction in Iran's involvement in terrorism-related activities, while a Conservative victory probably would produce little change.

Second, since Iran's leaders are very aware of, and concerned about, the foreign economic and diplomatic consequences of their terrorism-related activities, a more concerted effort by the

United States and its allies could produce a further reduction in these activities. Although the EU and GCC countries used mainly positive incentives to change Iran's behavior in the mid-1990s, the diplomacy that elicited these changes took place at a time when the United States was expanding its economic sanctions and using other negative incentives to influence Iran's behavior. Moreover, Iran has responded to U.S. threats and pressures in the last few years by extraditing al-Qaeda members and taking other conciliatory steps. Consequently, it seems clear that both positive and negative incentives can have a useful impact on Iran's involvement in terrorism.

A detailed discussion of the positive and negative incentives that might be appropriate is beyond the scope of this statement. However, several general points can be made. First, the United States and its allies are also very concerned about Iran's efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which undoubtedly pose a greater threat than its involvement in terrorism-related activities. Consequently, any effort to influence Iran's behavior should probably be aimed primarily at its WMD development and only secondarily at its involvement in terrorism. Second, since Iran's involvement in terrorism-related activities now seems partly motivated by its need for tactical instruments to advance its military and diplomatic objectives, initiatives that reduce threats to Iran's security would, at least in theory, reduce its need to engage in such activities. In particular, initiatives that substantially lower the threats to Iran posed by Israel and by U.S. forces in the region would reduce its need to support Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorist groups, SCIRI, and Northern Alliance members for tactical purposes. Finally, while there is little the United States and its allies can do to help the Reformists, they should be careful not to undertake initiatives that would undermine them or otherwise adversely affect Iran's domestic power struggle, since a

Reformist victory could have a very beneficial impact on Iran's behavior.

National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States
The Commission closed on August 21, 2004. This site is archived.