

Iranian Terror Operations on American Soil

Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence
and the Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Management

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I'm going to primarily talk about operations, about how I have observed the Iranians over 20 years to go back a little bit in time to when I was an Iranian targets officer in the Central Intelligence Agency.

Now, a great deal of conversation occurred after the plot was revealed many quarters, many sensible quarters that they couldn't really believe the Iranians were responsible, they couldn't believe that al-Khomeini who they described is being a cautious man because they have been involved in this. And most importantly, they couldn't believe that the Iranians were involved because the operation was so lame that the hiring of someone like Arbabsiar couldn't have happened because this is the A-team.

Let me tell you, the truth is that Iranian operations are almost always sloppy. That's the way they have been. Do not mix up the notion that this operation was sloppy and that it cannot be lethal. I mean, when this first occurred it reminded me of perhaps of my favorite Iranian bombing run, which was in Paris in 1986 where the Iranians let loose against the French.

Probably we know for commentary later by Iranian officials and the retaliation of French support of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. They bombed Paris repeatedly. My favorite, they culminated the most lethal bombing of a place called Tati, which was an inexpensive department store on the rue de Rennes, best known for its inexpensive women's underwear.

The individual who was responsible for that was a Tunisian. There were several people who were, but probably (inaudible) was a Tunisian Muslim who converted to Islam. He was taken back to Iran and was trained who had been a failed seller of vegetables and fruit in the streets of Paris. Yet, the Hezbollah and the Iranians found him to be an ideal candidate to bomb Paris.

Within about less than a (inaudible) DST, the French Internal Security Service that ripped the whole thing apart. It was patently obvious the Iranians had done it.

I tracked Iranian operations all over the place in the 1980's and 1990's. Many of those operations succeeded, that is they killed individuals. Most of those operations again, it didn't take you very long to put all the pieces together again. The Iranians really don't hide all that much. That is the real truth.

I might make a slight digression and just say all intelligence services aren't as good as you think they are. And the Iranians are no exception. They make a lot of mistakes. So it's important to remember that as when you think about the Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Quds Force too is that these services largely reflect their domestic ethics.

Now, the way the IRGC works, the Pasdaran and the Revolutionary Guard Corps works inside of Iran is usually one of brute force and coercion. They are not a subtle organization. The ethos that you see inside the country is the same ethos that you see outside of the country. They do not have one body of very sophisticated folks who are the Persian version of James Bond working outside of the country, and then just the brutes -- the thugs -- inside. It's the brutes and the thugs in both places.

So do not, for a moment, buy the argument from those who said it cannot be because this is too sloppy. This is the nature of the game. This is how it is done. You know, (inaudible) your mind back again to something that obviously hurt us. If you go back and you look at Al Qaida's operations for the millennial bombings in their attempt to go after the USS Sullivans in the Port of Aden, it is positively comical.

Yet, Al Qaida was able to recover in it's consistently sloppy and they were almost able to sink the USS Cole.

The Iranians will -- in the intelligence game in this type of dark art system, the prize goes to the -- to those who just do if you just persist at it. And what the Iranians do is they persist. And it's important to note here that it is our -- it is better than a 50- 50 guess. In fact, it's more like a 90-10 guess that every single Iranian terrorist operation since 1989, since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, has been approved by Khomeini.

He has been a somewhat cautious man occasionally inside of Iran. I would argue that since the uproar of June 2009 and the explosion of the (inaudible) and its collapse, that actually even that analysis is overrated. He has centrally turned a consensual theocracy into a dictatorship. He has moved members of the guard corps like they are musical chairs. He is in control of that system.

Lord help Qasim Soleimani. If he engaged in the operation to kill Americans in Washington, D.C., without his approval, I guarantee you he will be gone soon. He will most likely be dead soon.

The -- what we need to look at in the future, and I suspect this is where the operational aspect of this is going to get worrisome, what I -- I think the Iranians are going to do, and I say the only reason the Iranians haven't hit the United States in the past is because they feared an American response. They have had very active operations throughout the west, except in the United States. The only incident to that was immediately after the revolution in the assassination of a former Iranian diplomat in Bethesda, a fellow by the name of Tabatabai.

Since then, they have not engaged in lethal operations as far as we know in the United States. I think the reason for that is they have been scared. They have been scared of the possible outrage coming from the United States. They have been scared of American military.

My -- I would emphasize to you that the reaction in Tehran in 2001 after the invasion of Afghanistan, in 2003 after the invasion of Iraq, which just had silence and fear. It add -- it went away because Americans started talking about Afghanistan and more importantly Iraq is a failure, the Iranians said, "Oh, it's a failure." Their attitude about what they could do to Americans started the change and they started to push, push, push.

If they think they can get away with it, they will push forward, and they did get away with it.

Now, even though it is very invidious to say this, there is I think it's crystal clear that they have the conception that now, today, in Washington, D.C., they could have a terrorist operation that could hit the two people that they detest most -- the Americans and the Saudis. And they could get away with it.

Now, the only way that I would argue that you are going to stop that type of mentality and attitude is that you have to convince them that you will escalate. You don't want to run away from that word, you want to run towards it. You do not want to say that we don't want to have another front in the war and terror. Say you are more than willing to have another front on the war and terror.

I would just end with this. Operationally, what I would suggest the committees look at is that they look at Canada. I think that's where the Iranians have had much more success in developing contacts, networks. And I suspect what they will try to do is move the type of operations they have in Canada, move them south and all in there.