



IRAN'S GLOBAL REACH

By Steve Young

In 1979, then U.S. President Jimmy Carter failed to understand the depth of dissatisfaction and anger against the United States by the Iranian populace when the shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was overthrown and allowed to receive cancer treatment in New York. Following the United States' refusal to extradite the shah back to Iran, this anger eventually translated into the November 4, 1979, takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran by Iranian students resulting in a hostage situation lasting for the next 444 days.

Mahmoud Ahmedinajad meeting supporters on May 9, 2009. Photo: Kamyar Adl

The hostages were not released until the day of President Ronald Reagan's inauguration. However, the Iranian people's distrust of the United States did not originate with the shah's overthrow, but with the 1953 coup that brought him to power. At that time, with assistance from the CIA and British intelligence, Pahlavi's supporters overthrew then Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, installing Pahlavi as the new Iranian monarch.¹ The United States became a strong supporter of the shah's effort to modernize the country—an effort that included the United States' involvement in establishing Iran's first nuclear capability. In 1957 the United States and Iran signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement as part of the U.S. Atoms for Peace program. Ten years later, the United States supplied 5.545 kg of enriched uranium—5.165 kg of which contained fissile isotopes—to Iran for fuel in a research reactor. The United States also supplied 112 kg of plutonium—104 kg of which were fissile isotopes—for use as “start-up sources for research reactor.”² At the time, the United States encouraged further development of Iranian nuclear power.

Fast forward to 2010 and the political situation is entirely different. With the establishment of a clerical theocracy in Iran, the United States became the Great Satan; Iranian assets have been frozen as a result of the 1979 U.S. Embassy takeover; and U.S. sanctions have been placed on Iranian imports, exports to Iran, and various Iranian-owned banks.³ More importantly for U.S. and regional Middle East security, Iran has embarked on a program of uranium enrichment for its nuclear program. Currently, Iran has nuclear production-related facilities in the following Iranian cities: Arak (heavy water plant); Isfahan (uranium conversion plant); Bushehr (nuclear

power station); Natanz (uranium enrichment plant); and Qom (uranium enrichment plant).⁴ The Natanz plant has come under International Atomic Energy Agency scrutiny and is the most concern to the United States because it has the capability of producing 220 pounds of enriched uranium monthly.⁵ Iran only revealed the Qom facility in September 2009 after it was discovered by unnamed foreign intelligence sources. This second uranium enrichment facility is scheduled to become operational in 2011.⁶

Although Iran has repeatedly stated that its nuclear activities are for peaceful purposes, the United States and its allies, China and Russia's tepid support notwithstanding, believe otherwise. In late 2009 the United States proposed that Iran ship a large quantity of low-enriched uranium to France and Russia for processing into higher-enriched, but not weapons grade, material suitable for a research reactor. Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has since rejected the deal leading to the decision by the United States and the other five countries involved in Iranian nuclear negotiations—Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China—to decide whether to impose harsher sanctions or to resort to military force to halt further enrichment progress. There are proponents of both courses of action, but additional sanctions appear to be the only pragmatic choice. However, the outcome of additional sanctions is uncertain and may affect only the Iranian general population, not the government it is intended to influence.⁷

Alternatively, Israel, the country considered to be most susceptible to potential Iranian nuclear aggression, is trying to decide whether an air strike against Iranian nuclear facilities is feasible. Iran has made numerous threats to wipe out the Jewish state, most recently in late January 2010.⁸ Disconcertingly, Israel lies

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Recently freed Americans held hostage in Iran disembark Freedom One, January 27, 1981. Photo: DOD via pingnews.

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within Iranian missile range and within rocket range of Hezbollah from the north and Hamas from Gaza.⁹ With the most to lose in a region with a nuclear-armed Iran, the Israelis have the hardest decision to make, but currently have opted for diplomatic initiatives to play out.

In the latest development to dissuade the Iranians from further nuclear development, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Kuwait recently accepted delivery of U.S. antimissile defense systems. In addition, Aegis cruisers are on permanent patrol in the Persian Gulf. These cruisers contain ship-to-air capabilities that could intercept Iranian incoming missiles.¹⁰

THE JUNE 2009 ELECTION PROTESTS

Enmeshed within the Iranian nuclear situation is the Iranian opposition's reaction to Ahmadinejad's June 12, 2009,

reelection. Not since the 1979 revolution have so many Iranian citizens become involved in protesting the results of an election whose results were regarded to be highly questionable. On multiple occasions since the election, Iranian students and ordinary citizens have taken to the streets to protest the election's results. The government's crackdown on the protesters began quickly after protests started and one of the first casualties was 26-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan, whose death by gunshot was documented quickly on the Internet.¹¹ Iranian government sources were quick to claim Western influence over the protests and accused the CIA or British intelligence for Agha-Soltan's death or stated that her death was initially faked and she was shot on the way to the hospital.¹² Protests in December 2009 resulted in additional deaths, including a nephew of Mir Hosein Mousavi, the



Protesters in Tehran, 2009. Photo: [Protected] from Tehran, IRAN



A picture of a Hezbollah sign over the highway in South Lebanon. Photo: Eternalsleeper

former prime minister widely believed to have legitimately won the June election.¹³ The violence against protesters was particularly noticeable because it occurred on the holy day of Ashura, a day of mourning for the Shi'a martyr Hosein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson.

More alarming to the regime, though, may be the number of clerics who have become critical of the way protesters have been treated by the baseej, hired thugs of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), to handle crowd control. Chief among the critics had been Grand Ayatollah Hosein Ali Montazeri until

his death on December 20, 2009. To minimize the number of possible reformist protesters at his funeral, the Iranian government saturated crowds with baseej, significantly reducing any protester's impact. And on January 28, 2010, two men were hanged for alleged crimes against the state, while the Iranian government depicted them as among the persons arrested during the late December protests.¹⁴ Whether or not their involvement in the protests is true, their hangings are intimidating to future protesters who believe their pursuit of free speech will be dealt with harshly. Most

recently, former Iranian vice president, Hossein Marashi, began serving a one year sentence for spreading propaganda against the ruling clerics.¹⁵

Protests of the June 2009 election present multiple problems for the regime. First, the world's first theocracy has now been exposed for the oppressive government it has become.

The protesters may have set off a domino effect within the country that may eventually topple the regime from within. This creates political problems for countries such as China and Russia who have long supported a kid-glove approach for dealing with Iran in light of their economic interests there. Moreover, the United States and others anxious to do a nuclear deal with Iran must wait until the Iranian government has a sense that it can control its own population. Harsher sanctions may be coming soon if the Iranians cannot appear to be compliant with the peace offerings now on the table. Meanwhile, during all the turmoil surrounding election protests and nuclear standoffs, the Islamic Republic of Iran, through its official government institutions such as the IRGC and its proxy, Hezbollah, has been quietly extending its influence in areas such as Africa and South America.



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EXPORTING THE REVOLUTION: THE IRGC AND AL-QUDS

Formed in 1979 shortly after the shah's overthrow, the IRGC, or Pasdaran (meaning "guard" in Farsi), was initially established to augment the Iranian army and to act as the primary protector and guarantor of the Iranian regime. Today, the IRGC has evolved into a military, political, and economic powerhouse. Current military forces consist of naval, air, and ground components, and total roughly 125,000 fighters. Moreover, the guard controls the country's strategic missile forces and conducts foreign and domestic intelligence operations. As part of its responsibility for protecting the regime, the guard has sole jurisdiction of securing Tehran.¹⁶ In addition, the IRGC founded and controls the volunteer militia group, the baseej, aka basij, who gained worldwide notoriety for its role in subverting, beating, and allegedly killing anti-regime protesters and reformists following the disputed June 2009 election.

In recent years, the IRGC has solidified its political and economic clout within Iran. Although most often presented as a unifying and uniform force, as in most bureaucracies, there exists within the IRGC a degree of political infighting. In fact, rival IRGC

members have stood against each other in recent elections. Nevertheless, during Ahmadinejad's first term, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei appointed IRGC members as various ambassadors, mayors, undersecretaries, and provincial governors. At the time, 14 of the country's 21 cabinet members were formerly affiliated with IRGC.¹⁷ The economic influence of the IRGC began shortly after the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1989. What began as modest investments in agriculture, road building, and mining eventually allowed the IRGC to expand into military industrial contracts. In fact, it has been estimated that the value of IRGC businesses could approach \$12 billion.¹⁸ Today, the Khatam al-Anbia company, controlled by the IRGC, is Iran's chief engineering arm and is analogous to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.¹⁹ It has also been identified by the U.S. government as a contributor to Iran's proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and recently its assets were frozen in line with newly imposed U.S. sanctions.²⁰

As a primary component of Iranian hegemony plans, the IRGC created the al-Quds Force, the Iranian version of the U.S. Special Operations Forces. The al-Quds Force's mission is simply to provide resources to export the Iranian revolution overseas. Its traditional area of responsibility has been Lebanon,

Since its inception, Hezbollah has received armament and financial support from Iran.

Iraq, and Gaza. In Lebanon, the al-Quds Force, as part of the IRGC, was instrumental in the creation of the Hezbollah terrorist group. It has provided Hezbollah financial resources, weapons, and training in Iran as well as in south Lebanon and Hezbollah's traditional stronghold in Lebanon's Beqa'a Valley. The result of their efforts has been the creation of a military infrastructure that fought Israel to a stalemate in the summer of 2006. According to the Asymmetric Operations Working Group Newsletter, the al-Quds Force corps include Corps Five, Turkey; Corps Six, Persian Gulf Region (allegedly responsible for the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia); Corps Seven, Lebanon; Corps Eight, Africa (principally focused on Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, and Egypt); Corps Nine, Europe, North America, and East Asia; Corps Ten, Bosnia (considered the springboard for Europe); and one independent unit, Malek Ashtar Brigade, with two of its battalions currently deployed in Lebanon.²¹

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*Anti-US mural, Tehran, Iran, 2004.
Photo: Bertil Videt*

Al-Quds forces are believed to support anti-U.S. militia in Iraq such as the Mahdi Army of the anti-U.S. cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, and elements of the Badr Brigade, which is linked to the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a Shi'a political party. In addition to firearms, al-Quds operatives were allegedly supplying radical Shi'a groups advanced improvised explosive devices such as explosively formed projectiles and possibly more than 100 Austrian Steyr HS50 .50 caliber sniper rifles.²²

In the Middle East, theological differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims sometimes devolve into open conflict. Nowhere is that more evident than in Iraq where the Shi'a-dominant government of Iraq is subjected almost daily to attacks by either Sunni-dominated al-Qaeda or Sunni extremists. Recently, long-standing skirmishes between Shi'a Houthi rebels in Yemen and the Sunni-dominated Yemeni government have developed into a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Following military clashes in December 2009 between Houthi rebels in Saada province and Saudi border forces, the Yemen government claimed to have stopped shipments of Iranian arms via sea from Eritrea. However, to avoid a Saudi naval blockade of that smuggling route, it has been alleged that Iran now smuggles weapons to the Houthis via land.²³

HEZBOLLAH EXTENDS IRANIAN INFLUENCE

The founding of Hezbollah by the IRGC in approximately 1982 and subsequent support from the al-Quds Force as a counterweight to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon is well known. Because of Hezbollah's involvement in the deaths of numerous Americans, including 242 U.S. Marines in 1983, Hezbollah was designated by the U.S. State Department as an international terrorist group in 1995.²⁴ In addition, Hezbollah's media outlets, al-Manar television and al-Nour radio station, are specially designated global terrorist entities.²⁵ The consequences of designation involves freezing of assets by the U.S. Treasury Department.

Since its inception, Hezbollah has received armament and financial support from Iran. This armament and Hezbollah's fighting capabilities were on display during the summer 2006 war with Israel when up to 4,000 Kaytusha rockets were fired at Israel and the AT-14 E Kornet missile, an advanced Russian-made anti-tank weapon, was used effectively against Israeli tanks. The Kornet was allegedly purchased from Syria by Hezbollah using Iranian funds.²⁶ Iran has also recently smuggled weapons to Hamas in the Gaza strip, which borders Israel on the south.²⁷ In Gaza, Hamas would likely not be in control today of that desert strip of land were it not for the support of elements of al-Quds and Hezbollah operatives.²⁸ Recently, Hamas military commander Mahmoud Mabhuh was killed in Dubai for his long-time role in smuggling

weapons to both Hezbollah and Hamas from Iran.²⁹ The Iranians have not limited their activities to the Middle East. By exploiting Lebanese businessmen, Iran and Hezbollah have extended their reach into such places as South America and Africa.

IRAN AND HEZBOLLAH IN SOUTH AMERICA

During the 1970s Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay founded three border cities along their common border in central South America and established a free trade zone there. During the Lebanese civil war that began in 1975, many Lebanese immigrated to the tri-border area (TBA) and established a vibrant business community. Seen as a potential funding source, Hezbollah began sending operatives to the TBA to recruit and acquire resources during the late 1980s. Eventually, from its TBA base, Hezbollah launched attacks in March 1992 against the Israeli embassy and a Jewish community center in July 1994, both located in Buenos Aires. By mid-2000 U.S. intelligence estimated there were 460 Hezbollah operatives in the TBA.³⁰ In addition, the TBA reportedly hosts terrorist operatives from Egypt's Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group) and Al-Jihad (Islamic Jihad), al-Qaeda, Hamas, and al-Muqawamah (the Resistance), another pro-Iran wing of Hezbollah.³¹ Most disturbing to U.S. national security though are reports from Argentine intelligence services that al-Qaeda and Hezbollah were linking up with local drug dealers to use existing smuggling routes through Mexico into the United States.³²

During a visit to Venezuela in 2007, Ahmadinejad pledged to invest \$1 billion in Bolivia over a five-year period.³³ As a result of Ahmadinejad's overtures, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has backed Iran's continuing development of its nuclear program. Ahmadinejad has also recently visited Ecuador and Nicaragua, and has received

pledges of support from their respective governments. Iran is also expecting a visit from Brazil's President Lula da Silva this year. The question remains as to what Iran expects in return for these overtures. Analysts such as Ely Karmon suggest three objectives: first, Iran is seeking support from "revolutionary" South American countries for Iran's nuclear policy as a diplomatic counterweight to U.S. and European pressure; second, Iran seeks to destabilize moderate or Western-leaning governments; and lastly, Iran wants to show the home front that it is a player on the international stage.³⁴

It is evident that Ahmadinejad's presence in South America has led to an increased Hezbollah presence. In June 2008 the U.S. Treasury Department designated Ghazi Nasr al Din, a Venezuela-based Hezbollah supporter born in Lebanon, as an individual that facilitated financial support to Hezbollah in Lebanon. A Treasury Department press release stated that Nasr al Din

counseled Hezbollah donors on fundraising efforts and specific deposit information related directly to Hezbollah. Similarly, Treasury designated Fawzi Kan'an, a Venezuela-based Hezbollah supporter born in Ba'albeck, Lebanon, a financial supporter of the terrorist group.³⁵

IRANIAN INFLUENCE IN AFRICA

In addition to the previously mentioned visits to South America, Ahmadinejad has been active in Africa for principally the same reasons: diplomatic support for the Iranian nuclear program, destabilization of pro-West governments, and home front appeal. With promises of cheap oil and business cooperation, Iran has made diplomatic inroads into countries such as Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Nigeria, and others such as South Africa and Sudan. As a result, Senegal and South Africa have endorsed

During a visit to Venezuela in 2007, Ahmadinejad pledged to invest \$1 billion in Bolivia over a five-year period.

Iran's right to nuclear power; Sudan has signed a military cooperation pact; and the South African cell phone company, MTN, now covers more than 40 percent of Iranians.³⁶

Somalia has been a nation in turmoil since the overthrow in 1991 of then President Mohammad Siad Barre. Finally, in February 2009 Sheik Sharif Sheik Ahmed became president and now represents a modicum of hope

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for stability in the country. That potential stability is regularly threatened by elements of Harakat Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen (the Warrior Youth Movement in Arabic) also known as al-Shabab, a military wing of the former Islamic Courts Union, whose extremist brand of Wahhabi Islam is patterned after that of al-Qaeda.³⁷ The goal of al-Shabab is the overthrow of Sheik Ahmed's government and the establishment of a strict Wahhabi-based form of Shari'a law. The source of al-Shabab's weaponry is murky, but a recent STRATFOR (a global information company) report has Iran supplying arms to the group.³⁸ U.S. security officials are worried about successful attempts by al-Shabab to recruit American citizens of Somali ethnicity as suicide bombers. That this effort has been partially successful was first seen in October 2008 when a Somali American male from Minneapolis, Minnesota, blew himself up in Somalia.³⁹ What causes U.S. officials even greater concern is the potential for these recruits to return to the United States with their U.S. passports and blow themselves up in the United States.

Other Iranian activities in Africa include exploitation of the illicit diamond trade in West Africa by Hezbollah to raise significant funds. This illicit trade has been primarily carried out in Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), and the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁴⁰ In May 2003 Belgian police arrested Antwerp-based Kassim Tajideen for fraud, money laundering, and conflict diamond smuggling involving

a number of businesses in Lebanon and Africa. Tajideen passed proceeds of these activities to his brother, a Hezbollah commander in Lebanon, amounting to tens of millions of dollars.⁴¹ Because of these illicit activities, in May 2009 the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Tajideen a terrorism supporter resulting in the freezing of Tajideen's personal as well as his companies' assets. Abd al Menhem Qubaysi, a Cote d'Ivoire-based Hezbollah supporter, has also had his assets frozen for facilitating Hezbollah fund-raising events there.⁴²

CONCLUSION

By continuing to protest against the legitimacy of its government, the Iranian people are involved in a long-term struggle to replace the current theocracy with a government more concerned with righting a decrepit economy and rejoining the world community than in maintaining ultimate power. Thus far, Iran gives every impression that it will do everything it can to become a nuclear power. Iran's success could result in an arms race that extends far beyond the Middle East. While these two issues dominate media headlines, Iran has expanded its influence to the Gaza strip, Iraq, and selected countries in Africa and South America by increasing its diplomatic presence and through its proxy Hezbollah and the al-Quds Force. At home, the IRGC and the baseej keep the regime in power.

Countering Iran requires numerous approaches and requires the United States to act in concert with other concerned

parties. Unilaterally, though, there are obvious actions the United States can take. For example, securing its borders becomes more important to dissuade would-be attackers. Diplomatically, it will be important to keep countries already friendly to the West within that sphere. In addition, focused sanctions against Iran must be in place to convince the world that the United States is doing all it can to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power before military action can realistically be contemplated. Militarily, it appears that every effort should be made to establish the United States African Command on the continent and expand effective special operations forces activities wherever possible. Although President Barack Obama extended an olive branch to Iran, it appears that with Iran's rejection of that overture, the relationship of these two governments will grow increasingly adversarial. ●

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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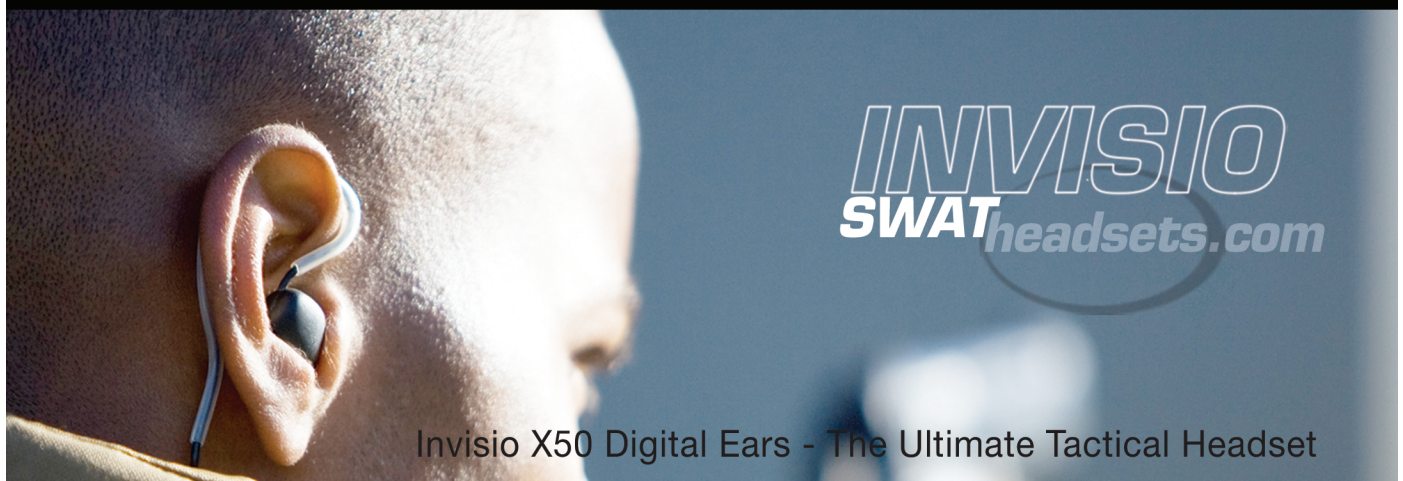
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