

HSPI Commentary Series

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE A-TEAM OF TERRORISM? A BRIEF ASSESSMENT OF HIZBALLAH AND IRAN'S ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS

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Since at least May 2011, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) – operating through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its affiliated organizations¹ – seems to have been engaged in a high-risk, high-profile, and not entirely successful campaign to murder perceived enemies of the régime of Ayatollah Khamenei.

On 16 May 2011, Hassan al-Qahtani, a Saudi diplomat working out of the consulate in Karachi, Pakistan, was gunned down on the street by a team of assassins on motorcycles.² Initially considering it the product of sectarian (Sunni v. Shi'a) strife in Pakistan, U.S. and Saudi intelligence now believe the killing was carried out by agents of the IRGC's Quds Force.³

On 29 September 2011, Federal agents took Manssor Arbabsiar into custody. Arbabsiar, a 57-year-old naturalized U.S. citizen from Iran, was tasked by the IRGC's Quds Force with hiring a team to kidnap the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States.⁴ Unfortunately for Mr. Arbabsiar, the representative of the Mexican drug gang he was seeking to hire was a US DEA informant.⁵ As the plot progressed, \$100,000 was transferred from a known IRGC bank account to Arbabsiar, with which he was to pay the ostensible Mexican assassins.

On 12 January 2012, Thai police arrested a Lebanese man, Hussein Atris, who was traveling on a Swedish passport.⁶ He subsequently led the authorities to a warehouse in Bangkok containing a large cache of materials commonly used to make explosives. An accomplice remains at large. At the time, Atris assured Thailand that the explosives were meant for an operation in another Asian country, and that there would be no such attacks in Thailand.

Gelareh Bagherzadeh was an Iranian women's rights activist. She was shot once in the head and killed while driving home late at night on Monday, 16 January 2012.⁷ No progress has been made in the case, and while the FBI has expressed only passing interest in the matter, anyone in the United

States who may be viewed by the IRI as an enemy needs to keep in mind that she may well have been assassinated. Her killing certainly fits the pattern of an IRI assassination, and she would not be the first person the régime has successfully murdered in the United States.⁸

Also in mid-January of 2012, a group of Azerbaijani criminals with known connections to Iranian intelligence were arrested in Baku⁹ as they prepared to assassinate the Israeli ambassador to Azerbaijan.¹⁰ Echoing the plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to the U.S., the IRGC promised \$150,000 to the criminals as payment. A portion of this money was provided up front to cover operational expenses. This was also not the IRGC's first attempt to strike in Azerbaijan. In 2008 two Lebanese IRGC operatives were captured in Baku.¹¹ They had entered the country on Iranian passports, and had plans to attack the Israeli embassy, a Jewish community center, and the Gabala Radar Station, which allows Russia to monitor Iranian missile launches.¹² The two men, Ali Mohammad Karaki and Ali Huseyn Najmaddin, were sentenced in 2009 to 15 years in prison.¹³

On 13 February 2012, presumed IRGC agents again struck. In New Delhi, India, they succeeded in placing an explosive charge on an Israeli embassy van. In the resulting explosion the driver and passenger were both injured; the passenger – Tal Yehoshua Koren, wife of an Israeli military attaché – quite seriously. On the same day, in Tbilisi, Georgia, a similar attack on an Israeli embassy vehicle was attempted, but the device attached to the car failed to detonate, and was subsequently disarmed.¹⁴

Events the following day in Bangkok, Thailand, largely put to rest any doubts as to who was behind this recent spate of attacks. Three Iranian agents in a safe house were preparing explosives when one of their devices detonated prematurely. The comedy of errors that followed left one of the Iranians without any legs, as a bomb he threw at police hit a tree or pole and landed at his own feet. Within a day all three were in custody, including one who had managed to get to Malaysia, but was captured before he could board a flight to Tehran.¹⁵ Three additional suspects have been identified, but are thought to have returned to Iran.

These plots and their frequently lackluster outcomes have caused many to ask, whatever happened to the A-Team of Terrorism? I view these events in light of my own direct experience with the IRGC. During the 2006 war between Hizballah and Israel, Internet Haganah had more success getting the website of Hizballah's¹⁶ al-Manar TV station removed from servers around the globe than the Israeli Air Force had in taking out al-Manar's satellite transmitters. For me, the taking down of terrorist websites has always been a means to an end, namely to gather information about the people and organizations behind those sites, and to observe how the targeted group responds to the pressure.

In the case of the IRGC, they got reckless. Reckless in this case meaning that – in order to keep a website online – people who might not otherwise have been exposed as IRGC agents were tasked with assisting to keep al-Manar online. In the United States that included Javed Iqbal and Saleh

Elahwal, who were already engaged in providing satellite transmission services to al-Manar when the war began. In response to repeated takedowns of the al-Manar site, Iqbal and Elahwal first hijacked a server at a datacenter in Texas in order to keep the site online, and when that failed, they attempted to operate the al-Manar site from Iqbal's home on Staten Island, New York.¹⁷

In light of that experience, I see nothing out of the ordinary in recent events. As for what happened to the A-Team of Terrorism, I don't have answers, but I do see this as an opportunity to ask some questions.

Maybe they were never that good in the first place?

This is in no way meant to diminish the pain and suffering the IRGC has inflicted over the years, but I think it fair to ask: how much of previous Iranian success in covert/overseas operations had more to do with operating in relatively permissive environments (e.g. Lebanon, Argentina, Germany, Iraq), than with operational skill?

Perhaps they are not as good as they used to be?

The Islamic Revolution was 33 years ago. People of that generation lived in Iran under the Shah, or overseas as part of the diaspora. Either experience would build skills useful in covert operations. But expertise is not transferred from one generation to the next without effort. Most Iranians today were born after the revolution.¹⁸ Even if Iranian agents practiced good tradecraft in the 1980's and 1990's that doesn't mean the current generation will do so.

Are their efforts suffering from the fracturing of the régime?

It is hard to ignore the many fractures in the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Perhaps tellingly, there has been a fight over control of the Intelligence Ministry between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad.¹⁹ One possibility is that the IRGC is striking out on their own, due to distrust for the intelligence service and/or resistance from within the Intelligence Ministry to the course Khamenei has charted for Iran. This could be another explanation for the seemingly poor tradecraft: Perhaps the A-Team has been sidelined.

Has the world become generally less hospitable to these kinds of operations?

It is possible that the difficulties encountered by the IRGC are at least partly a result not of what they are doing wrong, but what the rest of us are doing right. Global counter-terrorism efforts, while not necessarily designed to thwart covert operations by intelligence agencies, have undoubtedly complicated matters. There is also every reason to believe that the Israeli intelligence community, in partnership with others, has made thwarting these operations a high priority. That

said, a number of these plots got to the point of being executed, which is clearly an intelligence failure.

Reckless doesn't mean not dangerous. Quite the opposite. They may fail spectacularly, or be wildly successful, but one thing I believe we can count on: the IRGC will take risks, and will burn as many assets as they have to in order to do what Khamenei wants, and what Khamenei wants is to kill.

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¹ For the purpose of this commentary, I am using IRGC as shorthand for organizations such as the Quds Force, the Basij Militia, Hizballah, Islamic Jihad Organization, and individuals recruited by any of the above or otherwise serving as their agent.

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/16/saudi-diplomat-killed-pakistan>

³ http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/intelligence-links-iran-to-saudi-diplomats-murder/2011/10/13/gIQAFzCPiL_blog.html

⁴ The IRGC wanted the ambassador kidnapped (and subsequently killed?). It was the informant who suggested a bombing at a D.C. restaurant.

⁵ <http://forum.internet-haganah.com/showthread.php?216>

⁶ <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/security/275394/stockpile-of-explosive-materials-found>

⁷ <http://abcnews.go.com/US/iranian-student-activist-shot-death-texas/story?id=15380227>

⁸ http://openchannel.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2011/10/13/8294871-the-last-alleged-iranian-assassination-plot-on-us-soil-was-a-success

⁹ <http://news.az/articles/society/53027>

¹⁰ <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64908>

¹¹ <http://osint.internet-haganah.com/archives/001582.html>

¹² <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/russia/qabala.htm>

¹³ <http://www.jpost.com/International/Article.aspx?id=156692>

¹⁴ <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4188985,00.html>

¹⁵ <http://forum.internet-haganah.com/showthread.php?586>

¹⁶ As noted at the start of this commentary, I am speaking here of Hizballah in their role as the IRGC's unit in Lebanon.

¹⁷ <http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/005711.html> Iqbal and Elahwal subsequently pled guilty to a single count of providing material support to a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. They were never charged in relation to the website.

¹⁸ For information on the demographics of Iran, see

<http://www.mercatornet.com/demography/view/5365> And as a case in point, Masoud Sedaghatzadeh and Leila Rohani, two of the operatives in the failed Bangkok operation, were born in 1981 and 1980 respectively.

¹⁹ A battle which Ahmadinejad seems to have lost. There are also unconfirmed reports that both the IRGC and the Intelligence Ministry have officers posted at IRI embassies.