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Iranian Terrorist Policy and “Export of Revolution”

- First Draft -

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Preface

Since its inception, the Islamic regime in Iran has been committed to jihad and to “propagation of Islam” (*tablighi eslami*) or “export of Revolution” (*sudur inqilab*). The former is viewed by the regime as a fundamental Islamic duty and the latter as a prime tenet of the regime’s ideology, enshrined in the Constitution and the works of the Imam Khomeini. The targets of these ideological concepts are Israel and the West against whom jihad is waged and Muslims to whom the Iranian Revolution must be exported.

Terrorism has played both a tactical and strategic role in this context. It has served as a tactical weapon in the struggle against the Iranian opposition, the American presence in the Middle East and Israel and as a means to export Iran’s influence in the Arab World and in the wider Muslim world. On the strategic level, it has played a central role in Iran’s deterrent posture vis-à-vis its enemies by creating an image of a state, which holds a formidable terrorist capability, which it is willing to employ. This image is promoted by justification of (while denying involvement in) acts of terrorism against Israel and the United States, support of Islamic terrorist organizations from all parts of the globe and “predictions” of massive Muslim reaction to American and Israeli policies.

This study focuses on the key drivers and motivation affecting Iran’s policy of export of Revolution and use of terrorism. Particular attention is given to description of the different drivers: Islamic, Shiite (including the Sunni-Shiite conflict), strategic, nationalistic, apocalyptic visions and perceptions of history and of the enemy and the role of domestic regime politics – the balance of power between the faction of the Supreme Leader/the traditional conservatives and that of Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi/ Ahmadinejad/the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These drivers are the basis for Iran’s doctrine of use of terrorism and its objectives vis-à-vis Islamic terrorist organizations (Hizballah, Hamas, PIJ, and al-Qa’ida). Attempting to look ahead, the study takes a look at possible implications for Iranian policies of terrorism as a result of various scenarios in the Middle East and the Muslim world.

This study is based on a variety of sources: a series of “round tables” held at the Institute for Policy and Strategy in Herzliya with the participation of leading Israeli experts on Iran and radical Islamic movements; regular coverage of open sources dealing with the issue, Iranian ideological material found in Hizballah bases in South Lebanon, interviews with relevant individuals, etc. On many issues discussed below, a wide consensus of the participants in the project existed; on others – differences of opinion ranging from nuances to basic ones. Many of the generalizations that were made in the course of the round tables have been substantiated by documents. Others however remain in the realm of “feelings” of individuals who have been observing Iran for decades. The final judgments of the study are the responsibility of the project leader and author of this paper.

Ideological Drivers

Iran's use of terrorism is both ideological and utilitarian. The ideology of the Islamic regime is multifaceted; it projects to the outside world and to itself different aspects of its identity under different circumstances. These faces include: the layer of an **Islamic** regime, which strives to appeal to all Muslims, beneath it lays **Shiite** identity and at the core – a strong **Iranian nationalist** identity. All these layers form a worldview that sees Islamic Iran as a nation with a “**manifest destiny**”: to lead the Muslim world and to become a predominant regional “superpower”, in the Gulf, the heart of the Arab world and in Central Asia. This vision is in consensus among moderates and radicals, liberals and conservatives.

Presumably, Iran's sense of strategic inferiority and perception of the enemy as waiting in the wings for an Iranian *casus belli* (see below – Iran's strategic assessment) should make the Iranian leadership shy away from actions that may be perceived as provocative towards its enemies. This is not the case. Iran regularly denies involvement in acts of terrorism. At the same time it cultivates its reputation of control over terrorist elements and willingness to use terrorism against its enemies. The Iranian perception of Western aversion to human (and particularly civilian) casualties, the cost-effectiveness of terrorism as the “weapon of the weak” and the regime's experience in achieving deniability makes terrorism an attractive and low-cost weapon for the regime.

Iran's support of terrorist organizations serves a number of goals:

1. To maintain its commitment to Khomeini's doctrine of jihad and export of Revolution.
2. To pose a threat to Israel both for ideological reasons and in order to deter Israel from acting against it.
3. To further Iran's national objectives of hegemony in the Gulf and the Sunni Arab world, by promoting Islamist opposition to the pro-Western regimes in those countries.
4. To serve as a strategic deterrent against the US as long as Iran lacks a nuclear deterrent by posing a threat of wide spread terrorism in retaliation to acts of hostility towards Iran.
5. To enhance Iran's standing in the eyes of radical Sunni Islamist organizations as the only state willing to challenge Israel and the US, to draw them into its orbit and accord Iran a foothold in the heart of the Arab Middle East.
6. To serve as a bargaining chip to trade when the time is ripe in return for concessions on other issues important to itself; this is exemplified in Iran's links with al-Qa'ida, despite the Wahhabi anti-Shiite ideology of that organization.

Pan-Islamism

The upper layer of the Iranian ideology of “export of Revolution” is (pan-) **Islamism**. The Iranian Revolution did not portray itself to the Muslim world as a “Shiite” revolution, but as an **Islamic** Revolution for Muslims throughout the world. This inclusive attitude is part of Khomeini's original doctrine even before the Revolution and was set forth by him in countless documents and speeches. Khomeini did not restrict his revolutionary vision to re-Islamization of the Muslim Umma, but saw in the Islamic regime in Iran a basis for renewing the spread of Islam to the “oppressed” peoples around the world. The general Islamic frame of reference of the regime entails a belief in the universalism of the Islamic mission of the Revolution. Hence, the ideology of the regime motivated the various arms of the state to forge alliances against the “world arrogance” (i.e. the United States) not only with groups and states whose ideologies were closely compatible with that of Iran, but also with any element, which saw the US as a nemesis.

The “Islam” that the Iranian regime markets to Sunnis in Central Asia, South-East Asia and Africa is a “neo-Shiite” (“Shi'ah-Lite”) ecumenical Islam which is designed to be palatable to all Muslims – Arabs and non-Arabs, Sunnis and Shiites, and through which even heterodox sects (e.g. Alawites) are to be brought back into the fold. This Islamic model highlights the Shiite self-image as the faith of the “oppressed”, as opposed to the corrupted Islam of the Gulf Arabs, which are linked to the “oppressor”. The influence of this model is stronger in countries, which lack a strong Sunni tradition of their own, and therefore do not see in the Shiite Islam that is being offered to them a significant deviation from their own religion. Paradoxically, at the same time, Iran is succeeding in proselytization of Sunni Moslems even in Arab countries on the basis of an image of strength and not weakness – an image of Iran and Hizballah as successful opponents of Israel and the West.

Iranian “ecumenism” is both legitimized by religious principle and utilitarian. From the religious point of view, it was endorsed by Khomeini at the onset of the Revolution and is permitted by the Shiite doctrine of *taqiyya* (dissimulation), which allows downplaying or even total denial of affiliation to Shi’ah when it serves one’s interest. On the practical level, ecumenism supports Iran’s claim for recognition as a legitimate superpower. This ecumenism is translated into five main areas:

1. Declared identification of the basic interests of Iran with those of the (hypothetical) “Muslim Ummah”. The Iranian regime reiterates whenever possible that the security of the Iranian nation-state is tantamount to that of the Islamic nation, and there can be no issue that serves Iranian interests but contradicts the wider interests of the Islamic Nation.¹
2. Obfuscation, as much as possible, of the Shiite identity of the regime. During the twenty-eight years since the Revolution, there have been almost no direct references at the leadership level of the Shiites as a separate identity or of Iran as leading the Shiites in particular.²
3. Universality of leadership – neither Khomeini, nor his successor Khamene’i viewed themselves as the leader of Iran alone or of the Shiites alone. The essence of the authority of the “Ruler-Jurisprudent” (*vali faqih*) was seen as transcending these differences and as an authority for all Muslims.³
4. Foreign Policy – Iran made great efforts to cultivate relations with the Sunni Muslim world (particularly the non-Arab Sunni world) and to forge out a position in the Organization of Islamic Conference. Iranian relations with the CIS (ex-USSR) countries (mainly Sunni) are based on a general Islamic identity.
5. Organizations – Shortly after the Islamic Revolution the regime formed organizations for promoting the idea of unity of all Islamic “schools” and legitimizing the Shi’a as the *Ja’fari* school within a generic Islam – neither Sunni nor Shiite (see below – Organs of the Regime). The *raison éd’État* behind these efforts though was clear: a Sunni Muslim may accept the authority of any Sunni Sheikh – whatever the school he and the Sheikh follow, and if the *Ja’fari* (Shiite) school is just another school, any Sunni Muslim may follow the authority of a Shiite scholar without having to cross the lines and become a Shiite.

The tendency of the Iranian Revolution to downplay its Shiite identity has become particularly relevant in the light of the Sunni-Shiite civil war in Iraq and the growing anti-Shiite sentiments in fundamentalist Sunni circles. Despite the burgeoning anti-Shiite attitudes among the Sunnis (and particularly the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia), Iran has not resorted to sectarian Shiite anti-Sunni rhetoric. This was true as well during and after the Israel-Lebanon fighting of summer 2006, which exacerbated – or at least exposed – the Sunni-Shiite rift. Iran supported Hizballah and Lebanon but refrained from any focus on Hizballah’s Shiite identity.⁴ The fact that Iran has not entered the Sunni-Shiite fray in Iraq as a player on the side of the

¹ Nevertheless, any practical application of this principle is subject to Realpolitik. This becomes evident in the cases of relations with non-Muslim nations, with which Iran has a national interest to maintain good relations, but which are involved in domestic struggles with Muslim, or even Islamic-oriented, insurgents. In all cases of a conflict between Iranian political interests and the interests of a foreign Muslim (and even Shiite) minority, the former has almost always prevailed. This was the case regarding the relations with India (despite Kashmir), with Armenia (despite the struggle in Nagorna Karabach), with China (despite the oppression of the Uighur Muslims in Western China), with the Philippines (despite Mindanao), with Malaysia (despite the fact that *Shi’a* is outlawed in the country), and in Russia (despite Chechnya). Of course, one may add the cases of Muslim regimes involved in conflicts with Islamic terrorism. (The Syrian regime’s massacre of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982, the Iraqi suppression of the Shiite rebellion after Desert Storm, restraint in the face of Taliban massacres of the Hazari Persian-speaking Shiites). In a candid statement, Rafsanjani admitted (2003) that had the Islamic constitution been rewritten, it would have been kept more ambiguous regarding Iran’s mission to combat oppression of Muslims everywhere. These elements would have been written in a “more relative and limited” fashion, and priority would have been accorded to preserving the independence of Iran over fighting oppression. “Analyses of Approaches towards Iranian Foreign Policy: An Interview with Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani,” *Rahbord*, Journal of the Center for Strategic Research, 27, (2003), pp.: 7-31.

² Oblique references have been made to Shiite mythology during the war against Iraq and in statements in support of Hizballah in Lebanon. These references mention the martyrdom of Ali and Hussein but stop short of imputing to the Shiites interests that may differ from those of the Muslims in general.

³ See the Deputy SG of Hizballah, Naim Qassem: “The Jurist–Theologian’s native land has no relation to the scope of his dominion. The same is true of the spiritual authority and the geographical scope of such authority... His nationality is thus not related to his qualifications, for he carries the toll of Islam and works for this religion... As guardian of Muslims, Imam Khomeini governed the Islamic state in Iran as a guide, leader and supervisor of the Islamic system on that territory; but defined the general political commandments for all Muslims anywhere... His successor, Imam Khamenei, assumes the same role and authorities.” Naim Qassem, *Hizballah – the Story from Within*, (London: Saqi, 2005), pp. 55–56.

⁴ A rare exception to this restraint was an article in *Jomhuri Islami* (a daily close to the clerical establishment) which attacked the Sheikh of al-Azhar as the servant of Pahlavah and called for an “eternal curse” on the Muftis of the Saudi court for their opposition to Hizballah during the war. *Jomhuri Islami* (Iran), July 25, 2006.

Shiites underscores both Iran's ambition to play a leadership role for the entire Muslim world (including Sunnis and Arabs) and the predominance of the Iranian national interest for the Iranian leadership.⁵

Shiite Revolutionarism and Supremacy

Iran's **Shiite** identity is clearly a major feature of the Iranian Revolution and plays a central role in its policies of terrorism and export of Revolution. Shiite proxies are more susceptible to the revolutionary message of the Iranian regime, which in their case may dispense of the ecumenism that the regime uses to gain support of Sunnis. With Shiite organizations, the Iranian regime has a free hand to market a purer version of its ideology, based on the traditional Shiite narrative that the Shiites were deprived of their role of leadership of the Muslim world through Sunni conspiracies and counter-attacks. It has now become the role of the Islamic Revolution to rectify that historical injustice.

This Shiite motif manifests itself in two inter-relating planes: in the regime's self-appointed role as defender of the "oppressed" Shiites from Lebanon to Pakistan, expressed in Iran's attempts to bring those communities under its auspices; and in a Shiite narrative of moral supremacy despite a perennial state of being oppressed, conquered, and humiliated by outside forces (including the Sunni Muslims), and identification with the downtrodden and with self-sacrifice. This latter facet of the Iranian self-image is epitomized by identification with the Imam Ali and his son the Imam Hussein⁶. It is noteworthy that the Shiite emphasis and anti-Sunni tendencies are some of the characteristics of the Hojatiye movement (see below – Mahdism and apocalyptic tendencies). The movement is said to have a strong following in the IRGC and among the followers of Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, of whom President Ahmadinejad is one.

The Shiite doctrine of the Iranian regime diverges from traditional Shiite Islam to such a degree, that it warrants being defined as a new "sect" of Shiite Islam. The latter's model of a forbearing and long-suffering community of "oppressed" that waits patiently for the salvation of the Hidden Imam has been replaced in the Iranian version of Shiite Islam with a proactive Weltanschauung – which draws more on Iranian national traditions than on Shiite theology – in which the role of the "oppressed" (the Shiites, Iran) is to rebel against the "oppressor" and take their rights by force. Furthermore, this neo-Shiite creed is missionary both towards Muslims and vis-à-vis non-believers; it is destined to become the Islam of all Muslims and eventually of the entire world. Consequently, along with the "general" Islamic activities that Iran is engaged in vis-à-vis Shiite Muslims, there is massive Iranian missionary activity in Sunni countries. This activity is particularly evident in Syria. There are dozens of Shiite institutions in Damascus the aim of which is to convert Sunnis and Alawites (who are recognized by the Iranian regime as Shiite Muslims) to Shi'a. These Shiite institutions draw foreign students from around the Muslim world, who have initially come to Syria to get a Sunni religious education and are recruited by Iranian intelligence.

In what may seem as a paradox, along with the downplaying of its Shiite nature, Iran is actively encouraging the phenomenon of conversion of Sunnis to Shiite Islam (*tashayu*).⁷ This is not a totally new

⁵ While Iran has not opened an anti-Sunni front, it is launching a counter-attack against all those who are raising the anti-Shiite hysteria. For example, Khamane'i (December 24, 2006): "Today any divisive action in the Islamic world is a historical sin. Those who ... declare large groups of Muslims as infidels, ... insult the sanctities of various sects of Islam, those who betray and put a dagger in the back of the Lebanese youth ... those who speak of the fabricated threat of a Shiite crescent in order to please the Americans and the Zionists, those who incite fratricidal hostilities and lawlessness in Iraq to defeat its Islamic and popular government, and those who put pressure on the elected Hamas government in Palestine, ... will be regarded as criminals, detested by history and future generations and looked upon as mercenaries of the brutal enemy..". <http://www.leader.ir/langs/EN/index.php>

⁶ Hussein is frequently referred to in Iranian ideological texts as the "Prince of Martyrs" (Sayed al-Shuhada).

⁷ On the trend in **general**, and its manifestations in **Jordan** and **Syria**, see Muhammad Abu Rumman, "Al-Tashayyu' al-Siyasi kDhahirah Tughadhdhiha Intisarat Hizb Allah" ("The Political Conversion to Shi'ism: A Phenomenon Nurtured by Hizbullah's Victories"), *Al-Ghad*(Jordan), October 4, 2006, www.alghad.jo/index.php?news=1254898; Muhammad Abu Rumman, "Al-Tashayyu' fi al-Urdun: Ab'aduh al-Siyasiyya wa-l-Amniyya" ("Conversion to Shi'ism in Jordan: Its Political and Security Dimensions"), *Al-Ghad*, October 5, 2006, www.alghad.jo/index.php?news=1257388; Tariq Dilwani, "Hamas wa-al-Ikhwan wa-Iran", *Majallat al-'Asr*, April 13, 2006 www.alasr.ws/index.cfm?method=home.con&contentID=7670.

On **Syria**; Hassan Hassan and Abdullah Ta' ai, "Hizbullah in the Eyes of Syrians during the War," *SyriaComment.com*, September 8, 2006, www.faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/Syriablog/2006/09/hizbullah-in-eyes-of-syrians-during.htm; "Istratijiyyat Iran li-Nashr al-Tashayyu' fi Suria ("Iran's Strategy of Spreading Shi'ism in Syria)", *Al-Watan al-'Arabi*, June 12, 2006, www.alwatanalarabi.alqanat.com/arabi/login.asp?Section_ID=1&Sub_ID=190.

On **Egypt** see Rasha Saad, "Labyrinths of the Sect", *al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue no. 817, October 19-25, 2006, www.weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/817/sc1.htm; *Al-Arabia*, September 26, 2005 (www.alarabiya.net/Article.aspx?P=17156), May 9, 2006 (www.alarabiya.net/Article.aspx?P=23577), May 14, 2006 (www.alarabiya.net/Article.aspx?P=23751); www.albainah.net/index.aspx?function=Item&id=7163&lang=; and L. Azuri, "Debate Over the Status of Shi'ites in Egypt," *Middle East Media*

phenomenon. It appeared for the first time after the Iranian Revolution – then also as a result of admiration for the achievements of the Revolution in toppling the pro-American Shah. For example, when the founder of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Fathi Shikaki was arrested back in the 1980s, he used utterly Shiite elements in his interrogations, though at the time he did not consider himself to be a Shiite (in 1995, he officially converted).

Exaggerated as the Sunni complaints about “Shitization” might sound, the problem preoccupies the minds of prominent Sunni scholars. The ripple effects of the Sunni support of Hizballah during the war of summer 2006 brought Sunni 'ulama that had initially supported Hizballah to change their positions. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, for example, argued in the summer that the Shiites were good Muslims and that they differed from the Sunnis on secondary matters only.⁸ By August however, after Sunni converts to Shi'a quoted his ruling to justify their conversion, he launched⁹ scathing attacks on the Shiites, accused them of trying to exploit Hizballah's victory to convert Egyptians into Shiites and warned that if this were allowed to continue, Egypt could turn within the next two decades into a second Iraq. Similarly, the eminent radical Saudi Sheikh Salman al-Odah, who had also supported Hizballah during the war, began to warn against *tashayyu'*, and ruled that the difference between Shiites and Sunnis lies in the fundamentals (*'usu'l*) of Islam. Notably, the only MB branch to attack the Shiites is the Syrian one, which objects to the Syrian regime's alliance with Hizballah, and maintains that the Shiite activity in Syria is a subversive attempt to change the nature and character of the Syrian people.

Iranian “Manifest Destiny”

The core element of the Iranian regime's identity, and ultimately its overriding frame of reference is **Iranian nationalism**. The Islamic regime does not differ from any of its predecessors in its cultivation of a nationalist pride of belonging to an ancient noble and imperial nation which controlled most of the Middle East, experienced civilization centuries before Islam, and (unlike most of the nations conquered by Islam who adopted Arabic) maintained its national language and culture even after the Islamic conquest. For Iranians, all that was great in what is commonly referred to as Islamic or Arab culture was actually Persian. This self-image even has certain racial overtones: it links Iran to a primordial Aryan (i.e. noble) world of settled civilization, far superior to the “primitive” nomadic Arabian culture. The sense of cultural superiority is echoed in the iconic status of the tenth-century Iranian national epic *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*), which recounts the history of ancient Persia from mythical times to the Arab conquest and ridicules the Arabs as “Drinkers of camel-milk and eaters of lizards ... [who] came to dare aspire to the throne of the Kings of Kian [an ancient Persian dynasty].”¹⁰ It is also expressed in the continued use of classic Persian names with pre-Islamic and even pagan symbolism.¹¹

Even in the context of its Islamic mission, it is, ultimately, the Islamic mission of the Iranian nation to spread the message of the Islamic Revolution. This mission is, as pointed out above, the “manifest destiny” of Iran and a sort of rectification of the centuries in which Iran did not play its rightful regional role.¹² While Iranian nationalism plays a major role in motivating Iran's export of the Revolution and terrorist policy, the regime realizes that this element must be downplayed. One of the primary obstacles that Iran has to overcome in these efforts is the very fact that it is Persian (*'ajami* – in the eyes of the Arabs). To overcome this difficulty Iran takes advantage of its Arab proxies as go-betweens with other Arab organizations.

Research Institute (MEMRI), December 27, 2006, www.memri.org/bin/latestnews.cgi?ID=IA31106.

⁸ That is on “branches” (*furū'*) and not “roots” (*usul*). In Islam there is tolerance for disagreement on the former but not on the latter. There is not, however, a consensus regarding what constitutes “branches” as opposed to “roots”.

⁹ On August 31 and November 26, 2006

¹⁰ Zeev Maghen, “The New *Shu'ubiya*, Iranian Dissidents Resurrect an Ancient Polemic,” *Ha-Mizrah He-Hadash* (Hebrew), 42, (2001,pp.): 185-208. Modern Iranian history books depict the Arabs as violent tribal idol-worshipping tent-dwellers who practiced the live burial of infant girls, as opposed to the Iranian civilization, which included athletics (before the Greeks), a developed ethical religion (Zoroastrianism, based on “good thought, good speech and good behavior”). See Gil Aloni, *Revolutionary Messages in Elementary School Textbooks in Iran* (Jerusalem: Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, 2002), pp. 28-31.

¹¹ Such as Hormoz, a contraction of Ahura Mazda; Jamshid, after the great King Houshang; Leila, from mythology; or Ardeshir and Mandana from ancient Persian history.

¹² See for example the announcement of the IRGC in response to the UNSC discussions on sanctions: “The straw powers must accept the undeniable reality that in today's world, there is a rising power that is challenging their baseless ideologies.” Ansar News, December 26, 2006.

Mahdism and Apocalyptic Tendencies

One of the most concerning recent trends in the Iranian regime, which potentially affects the regime's terrorist policy is the expectation of the imminent re-appearance of the Hidden Imam. A leadership, which anticipates an imminent eschatological event, may be expected to be more risk-prone and willing to engage in provocative behavior towards its enemies. A point in case of the influence of the Mahdist tendency on terrorist policy is the strategic thinking of the Head of the "Center for Strategic Studies" of the IRGC, Dr. Hasan Abbasi. Abbasi is also behind the "Center for Recruiting Suicide Volunteers". He is said to be affiliated with Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi and a supporter of the Hojatiyeh movement (see below) and of Ahmadinejad. Abbasi has been quoted as calling to "wipe liberal democracy off the face of the earth in order to prepare the ground for the appearance of the Hidden Imam," and to "cut down the roots of Anglo-Saxon civilization for good."¹³

The basis of this trend is the highly publicized claim of Ahmadinejad that he is in contact with the Hidden Imam, who has informed Ahmadinejad of his imminent re-appearance. Since Shiite eschatology links the re-appearance of the Hidden Imam with various apocalyptic events, the anticipation of the immanent return of the Imam raises significant questions regarding the willingness of the Iranian regime (or part of it) to take risks, that otherwise may seem reckless.

Ahmadinejad, it is claimed, has a "timeline" for the reappearance of the Imam. He claims to engage in regular *khalvat* (solitude) with the Imam who has told him that he will re-emerge within two years. The President's supporters have spread the claim that Ahmadinejad himself is one of the "pegs" (*owtad*), which hold the world together in each generation pending the return of the Imam. Ahmadinejad attributes his running and winning the presidency to this personal link with the Imam and hence sees himself as the agent of the Imam, bound to perform his mission, more than the representative of his constituency. Accordingly, he has taken concrete steps to prepare for the Imam: rebuilding the shrine at Jamkaran where the Imam is expected to appear and "depositing" his government's platform in the well at the shrine where Shiites place messages for the Imam (the well is where the Imam is believed to have disappeared).

The belief in the imminent re-appearance of the Imam is not characteristic of Shiite Islam and was not prevalent even in the early days of the Khomeini era. For all his revolutionarism, Khomeini was not apocalyptic or Mahdist; the Revolution was seen as serving the will of the Hidden Imam and a **first** stage towards his appearance but not an event which adumbrated or hastened his imminent re-appearance.¹⁴ Khomeini even went as far as banning the Mahdist Hojatiyeh movement (see below), which had at its core tenet the idea that the actions of the Muslims could hasten the advent of the Imam (a religious tendency known as *ta'jiliyān* or "hastenings").

From this point of view, Khomeini remained true to the traditional attitude of the Shiite 'ulama throughout the ages to reject intercessors with the Hidden Imam and forecasts regarding his imminent return. Since the final "greater occultation" (*ghayba*) of the Imam in 945, all religious decisions in Shiite Islam were made by the professional jurists and theologians (*'ulama*, *fuqaha*), who had, from then on, a vested institutional interest in keeping the eschatological authority of the Imam at arms length. "Hastenings" and "Mahdists" were seen by the traditional Shiite 'ulama as a threat to their authority, which was now based principally on the absence of the authority of the Imam or of any intercessor who may claim that he is in touch with the Imam and transmits his will to the believers. Mahdism has thus been anathema to orthodox Shiite Islam; the Shiite clerical establishment dealt with this enemy brutally over the centuries, excommunicating and hunting them down from the *ghulāt* of the Middle Ages to the shooting of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Babis and Bahais. Consequently, the Sunni world has had to deal with far more Mahdist movements than appeared on the Shiite stage.

The modern Mahdist tendency is linked to the Hojatiyeh Association. The Hojatiyeh Society was established in 1953 by a preacher from Mashhad, Sheikh Mahmud Halabi who first supported Prime Minister Mosadeq and then the Shah. The essence of the Hojatie doctrine is that true Islamic government

¹³ http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/FF26Ak03.html

¹⁴ Khomeini declared a short time after the Revolution:

"We place this Revolution into the hands of the Mahdi: if God please, let this Revolution be the first step toward the appearance of The One God Has Preserved, and let it pave the way for his arrival!"

must await the return of the Hidden Imam. Therefore, the Hojjatie Association opposed Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of Islamic government and *velayat-e faqih*, called for collective leadership of the religious community, and opposed religious involvement in political affairs.¹⁵ While the movement was essentially "quietist" and eschewed political involvement, it was "hastener" from the religious point of view; the underlying premise is that the defining characteristic of the Imam is his compassion for the believers. Therefore, creating "order" reduces the chances that he may appear, whereas when the situation would be intolerable and absolute chaos will reign, the Imam will feel obliged to reappear and to save the believers. This is the element of the Hojjatie doctrine which implies willingness to incur risks that otherwise would be unreasonable.

The association came under attack of Khomeini and announced its dissolution in July 1983. Both conservatives and reformists accused their rivals of Hojjatie tendencies. The former claimed that the latter believe, like the Hojjatie, in separating government and religion and in tolerance of "vice" (un-Islamic behavior) until the appearance of the Imam; the latter claimed that the former represent the obscurantism and apocalyptic tendencies of the movement. In addition, clerics of the Qom Howzeh claim that the Hojjatie are followers of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Najaf (thus posing a threat to the institutional interests of Qom) and point at his rejection of *velayat-e faqih* as proof of his association.

Ahmadinejad and his circle vehemently deny any link to the Hojjatie.¹⁶ Be that as it may, a central component of Ahmadinejad's declared objective – like that of the Hojjatie – is to hasten the appearance of the Hidden Imam. This is to be accomplished through the precipitation of a clash of civilizations between the Islamic world and the West. Ahmadinejad's claim to a mystical "one on one" relationship with the Hidden Imam seems sincere. Such a claim does not serve his political interests, either domestically or vis-à-vis the Muslim world. In Iran such a claim, particularly by a person who is not even a cleric, is viewed with a degree of derision. From the point of view of Iran's relations with the Sunni Muslim world, anticipation of the Imam's advent (when one of his actions is supposed to be to convert the Sunnis into Shiites) only exacerbates the sense of sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites and feeds the Wahhabi-Salafi line against the Shiites.

Hence, it must be taken into account that Ahmadinejad is truly driven by an apocalyptic Weltanschauung, truly "confers" with the Hidden Imam who informed him of his imminent advent, truly believes that he is destined to play an instrumental role in hastening that advent and truly "saw" a mysterious "halo" whilst speaking at the UN. Thus, the rise of Ahmadinejad has injected a new element into the religious motivation for "export of Revolution". His policy of confrontationalism (including his strident call for "wiping Israel off the map" and Holocaust denial) then should not be seen as mere populist bravado or jingoism or as political brinkmanship, based on a calculated risk that the US and Israel will not lift the gauntlet, but it may reflect a willingness to take risks that his predecessors found expeditious not to take including military collision with the US and Israel. These risks may be seen as the necessary "test of faith" that the Imam expects of his believers in order for them to be worthy of his re-appearance. The expectation that the Imam will reward the believers by manifesting himself and giving them victory is a factor that potentially distorts any normal strategic calculus.

The high public exposure of Ahmadinejad's Mahdist statements notwithstanding, he remains a minority within the Iranian regime. Except for his spiritual mentor, Ayatollah Taqi Mesbah Yazdi (and perhaps Ayatollah Janati), there seems to be no serious high-ranking cleric in Qom who sides with Ahmadinejad's Mahdism. The elections to the Experts Council in December 2006 imply that the traditional conservatives still have a strong hold on the reins of power and have the ability to restrain the President.

¹⁵ After the Islamic Revolution the Hojjatie supported *velayat-e faqih* in the December 1979 referendum and many Hojjatie members or sympathizers succeeded in integrating into the regime. These included Ahmad Azari-Qomi, Mohammad Reza Mahdavi-Kani, Abolqasem Khazali, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, Kamal Kharrazi (former FMforeign inister), Ne'matzadeh (former IM, industries minister) Haddad Adel (Head of the Academy of Language and Literature), Ali Akbar Velayati (former FMforeign inister) and Ali Akbar Parvaresh (former EMeducation inister). Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, for example, became the Speaker of the Fifth Parliament and currently serves on the Expediency Council and as an adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali 'Khamenei. Ali-Akbar Parvaresh served as Deputy Speaker of Parliament and EMeducation inister. Ayatollah Ahmad Azari-Qomi-Bigdeli served as Public Prosecutor, represented Khomeini during a parliamentary review of the constitution, represented Qom in the legislature, served on the Assembly of Experts, and headed the Resalat Foundation (the regime eventually put him under house arrest for questioning the system of *velayat-e faqih* and questioning the qualifications of Supreme Leader 'Khamenei; he died in 1999). In any case, since such a large number of the Iranian clerical oligarchy (particularly those from Mashhad) were connected in their youth with the Hojjatie, such a history does not necessarily suggest any present ideological propensity.

¹⁶ Head of Presidential Office Gholamhossein Elham to Iran Daily, Number 2434, November 24, 2005.

Perception of History

Another salient factor in the Iranian Weltanschauung that affects the regime's policy of terrorism is its singular view of history. For a variety of cultural, religious and historic reasons, Iranians tend to lend much credence to elaborate conspiracy theories, and assume that appearances, by definition, hide ulterior and dark motives.¹⁷ According to the common Iranian narrative, the West supported by ubiquitous, secretive and devious Machiavellian coalitions,¹⁸ has woven these conspiracies against Iran as far back as the confrontation between ancient Persia and Greece, with the latter conspiring to annihilate Iran's spiritual essence and political predominance. According to this outlook on history, the "dark forces" that operate against Iran/the Shiites/Islam are so powerful and devious that they justify extreme measures to combat them.

The prevalence of these theories is so great that they are widely perceived as a distinctive mark of the Iranian national psyche. God is perceived as intervening in human affairs on a regular basis. Consequently, Iranian political thinking tends to impute to political antagonists an uncanny level of premeditation of events and to accept complex theories involving multilateral conspiracies between strange political bedfellows.

This conspiratorial view of history has been attributed to a variety of cultural, religious and historic causes. Social psychologists attribute it to a combination of political, social, and psychological elements: the history of colonial interference in modern Iran; the pre-Islamic Manichean belief in the efficacy of the Satanic forces in the world; the Islamic (including Shiite) belief in divine determinism (*taqdir*) into human affairs, giving birth to an exaggerated belief in pre-meditation in human affairs; and the need for a collective defense mechanism in times of national weakness and humiliation. On the cultural level, it is claimed that the propensity of Persian historiography to mythological descriptions and the acceptance of poetic license in normal discourse also contribute to the acceptability of conspiracy theories.

The Islamic regime in Iran has internalized the conspiratorial narrative and made it into a fundamental element of its ideology. The regime tends to "connect the dots" of a multitude of regional and global events into a picture that indicates the brewing of a demonic plot against Iran. Great Britain is also seen as almost the prime mover of Iranian history during the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries by way of its infiltration into the Iranian economy and manipulation of the Iranian elite. Since the mid-twentieth century, Britain has been joined by the United States and Israel. The US is depicted as "the Great Satan" or "Global arrogance."¹⁹ These theories are taught in schools and are widely accepted by academic circles in Iran.²⁰ The interpretation of current events through the prism of these theories tends to create a focus on issues or facts that may seem totally irrelevant to the outsider who is not aware of the current theory. Thus for example, Iranian government websites explain that Hollywood acts upon orders by the US government to project an American image as the savior of mankind and to facilitate the British-American-Jewish conspiracy to redraw world borders that no longer serve their goals²¹.

¹⁷ The receptivity of Iranians to conspiracy theories may be attributed to a combination of cultural, religious, social and psychological elements. On the cultural level, it is said to feed off the Zoroastrian dualistic belief in the struggle between good and evil (Satanic) forces in the world, in which the human individual is little more than a pawn. To this, one may add Islamic and Shiite religious concepts such as a self-image of the oppressed, the narrative of the deaths of Ali and Hussein who were tricked by their enemies, the belief in predetermination, the inherent contradiction between *zahir* (that which appears) and *baten* (the inner truth), and *taqiya* (the principle of dissimulation).

¹⁸ The Freemasons are considered either a tool in the hands of the British or an extension of Israel and the Zionist movement, and are said to have control over tribal chiefs, *u*lulama, politicians, bankers, etc. The Bahai and World Jewry, or Zionism, work hand-in-hand to destroy Iran. Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopedia Iranica*, VI, (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, p.):139.

¹⁹ The concept "arrogance" (*estekbar* or *takabor*) is used to describe the defining character of the Islamic Satan – an entity which competes with Allah and aspires to be great like Allah.

²⁰ Some of the historic facts that contribute a great deal to Iranian conspiracy theories include: British intervention in Iranian politics throughout the Twentieth century; American/CIA influence on the policies of the Shah's regime since the mid-twentieth century (including the Mosadeq affair); Israeli relations with the Shah's regime and with the United States.

²¹ "After the year 2000 the US according to the global village theory of McLuhan and the theories of Fukuyama and Toffler decided to project itself as a kind of savior of the earth, the Messiah of the apocalypse and the redeemer of mankind. Thus it designed new policies for Hollywood. Based on these, Hollywood pursues two goals. One is presenting an image of what it calls Satan that is after destroying the whole world and is dangerous for the earth's inhabitants. The other goal is presenting the image of a so-called savior in the face of this supposed Satan. In Hollywood films this savior of the earth would be introduced as a kind of spiritual father figure for human beings, an American who is a Jew. ... Here we must point to another issue. The crafty British drew (world) borders in a way to intensify nationalistic and ethnic differences and for creating crisis in what has become known as hot spots of the globe. But based on McLuhan's global village these borders are no longer effective now. The Americans intend, if possible, to redraw borders of world countries, but they know that this will lead nowhere." <http://english.irib.ir/IRAN/Leader/Illumination.htm>

Along with the “conspiracy” theory, the Iranian regime tends to accept a Hegelian-Toynbeeian view of history. According to this view, the US (and the West) is declining while Iran is the new sun rising over the world. Clear proofs, in Iranian eyes, of the West’s decline are the debacles of Iraq and Lebanon, the perceived failure of the US in the war on Terror, a lack of unity between the US and Europe and various domestic phenomenon in the West, which are exaggerated and interpreted as signs of moral decay. Hence, even though the Iranian “sun” is not yet at its peak, it will definitely rise on the West’s expense.

The decline of the West is also attributed to lack of resolve. The West is reluctant to make self-sacrifices, whereas Iran (and the Muslims) will be victorious because of their belief in martyrdom and jihad for the sake of Allah. The civilization, which elevates the sublime objective over the value of the individual human life, will prevail. The Iranian regime believes that Iran will become a superpower within 10-15 years, mainly thanks to the West’s suicidal tendencies.²²

Not only is the West sinking, but also the Arab world. It is dysfunctional and practically non-existent, while many forces are trying to tear parts of this Arab “corpse”. The leaders of the Arab countries have “sold out” to the West and are their agents within the Muslim world. Therefore, the Arabs cannot lead the Muslims and must move aside and allow Iran to return to its rightful role as the leader of the Umma. Iranian perceptions of history point out that the pinnacles of Muslim strength and achievements were all due to Persian influence, and that Iranian leadership will again lead the Muslims to victory.

This view of the decline of the West integrates into the regime’s perception of its own “manifest destiny”; as the West declines, it is incumbent on Iran to spread the message of Islam. This is the philosophy behind numerous organs of Islamic proselytization that Iran employs throughout the world – including in the Western world. This is also behind Ahmadinejad’s letters to world leaders, in which he suggests that they repent for their deeds and accept Islam.

Jihad and “Export of Revolution”

Iran’s sponsorship of terrorist organizations is frequently mentioned in the context of other Middle Eastern regimes, which have supported various terrorist organizations for their own interests. Iran however is *sui generis* insofar as this policy is not a mere tool in its strategic arsenal, but a fundamental element of the regime’s identity. This is represented by two separate tenets of the regime’s ideology: the duty of every Muslim to support **jihad**; and the mission of the Islamic regime in Iran to “**propagate Islam**” (*tabligh-e islami*) or “export the Revolution” (*sudur enqelabi*). These two pillars of Iranian doctrine are both characterized by support of proxy organizations that make use of terrorism. The former is exemplified by Iranian patronage of Hizballah in Lebanon and of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The main theatres of the latter are **Iraq and Lebanon**, with lesser theatres among the Shiites of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and radical Islamic movements in Africa and Central Asia.

This distinction is not always clear-cut. Hizballah is both a model of jihad against Israel and of a proxy for Iranian efforts to export revolution to other Muslim countries. Hamas, on the other hand, cannot serve Iran’s wider cause, as the brand of Islam that it would propagate would be that of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi trends from which it sprang. In many ways they complement each other. The two goals however always complement each other and at least in the case of the jihad that was declared against Saddam Hussein, the Iranian regime justified its cessation by the argument that the *jihad* against Iraq had to end because the primary mission of the Islamic regime of Iran was “export of Islam”, and the war prevented it from engaging in this mission.

²² In a lecture in October 2005 Abbasi described the global balance of power as in a state of flux, wherein the Western powers, led by the “Anglo Saxons” and particularly the United States, still hold immense military and economic power but are in decline and are unable to use that power because their populations have become averse to risk and hostile towards their governments. Hence, the US intervention in Iraq was the last of its kind. The US knows that the only power capable of and willing to challenge it across the globe is the Islamic Republic. In his opinion, even economic sanctions against Iran will fail due to opposition from the Western public opinion and the refusal of most countries to implement them. Threatened by economic sanctions, Iran would be able to bring the price of oil to \$110 per barrel and in case of a military attack, to over \$400 mark. His conclusion therefore is that a military confrontation between Iran and the US would be brief and is even desirable as it would only serve to strengthen Iran.
<http://www.iranvajahan.net/cgi-bin/printarticle.pl?l=en&y=2005&m=10&d=08&a=4>.

The pivotal significance of "export of Revolution" for the regime was underscored by former President Rafsanjani, who stated that "revolutionarism" is the essence of the regime; if it loses it – Iran will become "an ordinary country".²³ This principle was formulated by Khomeini and enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. This doctrine also plays a practical strategic role in Iran's national strategy by spreading Iran's influence in the Muslim world. To paraphrase Clausewitz, "Religion is an extension of politics by other means". By "exporting" its model of Islam and of a political regime, Iran aspires to strengthen its hold within the Arab world and to re-incorporate it into a modern Iranian Empire. The linkage between the acceptance of the Iranian ideology and becoming an Iranian satrap is the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*. The acceptance of this principle entails the acceptance of the temporal leadership of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution – the Leader of Iran

The Iranian *jihad* doctrine has its roots in traditional Shiite doctrines of *jihad* and *difa'* (defense). This doctrine distinguishes between the "initiated *jihad*" (*al-jihad al-ibtida'i*) and the "defensive *jihad*" (*al-jihad al-difa'i*). The former is the military struggle for spreading Islam in the world under the command of the (Hidden) Imam, and it is in abeyance pending the re-appearance of the Hidden Imam. The latter (*keshwar* in Farsi or *defa'*) is defense of the lands, faith or the honor of the Muslims or protection of the "oppressed" from infidels. This *jihad* is a duty for all Muslims when they face aggression.

The tendency to make the defense of Iran a religious duty was evident in the war with Iraq, which Khomeini declared a "*defa-e mughaddas/jang-i mughadas*" (holy defense) or *jehad fi-sabil Allah/jehad dar rah-i Khuda* (jihad for the cause of God). Participation in the war was declared a *fard 'ayn* (personal religious duty) incumbent on every able bodied Muslim – man, woman, and child.²⁴ Nevertheless, Khomeini accepted the ceasefire with Iraq – a decision that was described by him as a "poisoned chalice". In his letter to the Commander of the IRGC, Mohsen Rizai²⁵, he justified his decision in terms of the national interest of Iran. This precedent serves those in Iran who call for a more pragmatic approach on the basis that Khomeini himself gave priority to the national interest over *jihad*.

The concept of *jihad* as it is taught in the Revolutionary Guards can be construed from documents found in the hands of Hizballah in South Lebanon. The lion's share of these documents seems to have been prepared originally for the IRGC and translated from Farsi to Arabic (occasionally leaving the traces of the Farsi original or the direct reference to the IRGC).

According to these documents, *jihad* is not a means alone to obtain a political objective but a "pillar" of faith in itself; a "doctrine and a program of action", through which a Muslim may "sacrifice his life for the sake of Allah and attain paradise." It has intrinsic value as a means to test the belief of the Muslim by putting him through trials and tribulations (in emulation of the Imams Ali and Hussein) and is the path towards unity with Allah's will; it serves the interests of the believers, and by doing so fulfills the Islamic obligation to serve the community (over and above the individual)²⁶ and it is rewarded in this world by Allah who will give the believers victory.²⁷ The *mujahid* derives his power from his "revolutionary sentiment". The *mujahid* does not succumb to deprivation, but rather challenges it. This is the secret of the victories of Islam throughout the ages.²⁸

Martyrdom (*shahada*) "for Allah's sake" is not a necessary evil but the greatest reward that is accorded to a *mujahid* and the pinnacle of *jihad*. The Imam Ali is quoted as saying that: "Jihad is one of the gateways to paradise, which Allah has opened unto His most loyal believers [only]." The role models are the Imams Ali and Hussein, who went into battle knowing they were heavily outnumbered and that they were going to

²³ Rafsanjani to Iranian TV, August 23, 1994.

²⁴ Saskia Gieling, *Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 44–50; Shmuel Bar, *Iranian Defense Doctrine and Decision Making*, p. 47.

²⁵ The letter was not published at the time of its writing, but was leaked in 2006 by Rafsanjani.

²⁶ Jihad is described as activity which plays a societal role, as by its very nature (the willingness of the individual to sacrifice himself) it demonstrates the primacy of the needs of society rather than those of the individual alone: religious piety; independence and protection of the homeland against the avarice of the infidel imperialists; and the struggle to abolish oppression

²⁷ See Na'im Qassem, *Hizballah, The Story from Within*, (London: Saqi books, 2005), pp. 34–39.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 34.

become martyred.²⁹ The slogan of Hizballah, chosen by the Iranians – “For verily Hizballah (the Party of Allah) will overcome,”³⁰ relates specifically to the dauntlessness of the organization in its waging of jihad.

It noteworthy that some of the concepts used in this context are not common in Shiite doctrine and are usually more characteristic of Sunni Salafi thought. However, in contrast to the Sunni jihadi–Salafi concept of “defensive jihad”, the Iranian interpretation of this concept is not a spontaneous defense of the homeland, but a decision to be taken by the Ruler-Jurisprudent (*wali faqih*). He – and he alone –has the capability and authority to weigh all considerations and to take the decision whether the jihad should proceed or not. This Shiite doctrine fits more the Sunni orthodox doctrine of wali al-amr, i.e. the ruler has the final and ultimate saying regarding the waging of jihad. This is how al-Azhar justified its refusal to allow young volunteers to go to Iraq to help the Iraqi people defend their nation against the American occupation.

The centrality of this creed is such that disarmament is seen as “suspension of jihad” which cannot be countenanced from a religious point of view. Such a suspension (and more so any permanent peace with the “oppressor”) is not a pragmatic political concession in light of the adversary’s superior power, but rather forsaking of a cardinal Islamic principle.

On the other hand, this doctrine of jihad leaves room for determining whether the jihad should take the form of actual fighting or alternative forms of preparation for jihad, which are equally important at a time that the *wali faqih* determines that actual fighting is in abeyance. These include: “patience” (*sabr*), steadfastness” (*sumud*), training, self-education, “jihad of self-reliance” (*jihad khodkafai*)³¹ and the “jihad of construction” (*jihad sazangadi*).

As opposed to the elaborate legalistic discussion regarding the jihad against Iraq and Israel, clerics of the Iranian regime have been relatively silent on the legal status of the jihad against the West. Unlike Sunni scholars, who are not in power and vie among themselves in issuing *fatwas* that justify various aspects of jihad, neither Khamene’i nor Khomeini before him have provided a comprehensive picture of their concept of the rules of engagement in the jihad against the West.

Palestine

The ideology of the Iranian regime places great emphasis on support of the jihad in Palestine and ultimate destruction of Israel. The hostility of the Iranian regime towards **Israel** is a pure ideological matter, a substantial ingredient in Khomeini’s worldview and intimately linked to Iranian anti-Semitism.³²

The justification of terrorism against Israeli civilian targets is based on an ideological hostility towards Israel, as an extension of the “impure” Jews, an illegitimate political entity occupying Muslim lands and a “lesser Satan” (in contrast to the greater Satan – the US). As such, Israel is perceived not as simply an enemy regime, but an enemy entity, all of the components of which are anathema to God and legitimate targets. In Iranian ideological texts (including those “exported” to Hizballah), Israel seems like the evil Manichean “negative” of “godly” Iran – a civilization, which is the total antithesis to the Iranian civilization. The two are destined to irreconcilable conflict from which only one – Iran – can emerge.

²⁹ *Al-Jihad* (Pamphlet found in South Lebanon), The Imam Khomeini Cultural Center, Harat Huriék, Beirut.

³⁰ Surat al-Ma’ida (5:56). The context of the verse is the warning against “taking Jews and Christians as friends” and the prophecy that Allah will choose those who “love Him, lowly before the believers, mighty against the unbelievers, wage jihad for Allah’s sake and do not fear censure” to be victorious.

³¹ “Self reliance” has the status of an ideological tenet of the Iranian regime, similar to the slogan of juje in North Korea.

³² Since Iran is not Semitic, and anti-Arab sentiments are rife, German anti-Semitism and Aryan supremacy was popular in Iranian intellectual circles prior to World War II.

Demonization of Israel is not constituted only of attribution of diabolically evil traits to Israel, but includes attribution of power. Israel does not wield its own power alone but disproportional power that it derives from its "patron" – the US – and from "World Jewry". Israel's strategic and conventional military advantages do not testify to its inherent capabilities but to its status as an outpost of the colonialist West, which bolsters its "agent" in the Middle East. The Israeli society is depicted as an artificial society (the "cobweb" simile of Hizballah's leader, Hasan Nasrallah); unlike the Shiites who are accustomed to suffering with patience and forbearing, the Jews in Israel are seen as rootless agents of their masters, who remain in place as long as they enjoy benefits and will flee if they will be caused to suffer or if their endeavor turns out to be a failure. Israel is also perceived in Iran as a failure, abandoned by the West and suffering from many domestic problems. Therefore, it will not take long before the Zionist project will have broken down and collapse. This image serves as the underlying ideological justification for use of all measures against Israel and for "optimism" that Israel can be, ultimately, destroyed.

The "jihad" in Palestine is perceived by Iran not as a local struggle but as the archetypical jihad, which is expected to ignite the larger jihad against "global arrogance" (i.e. the US).³³ The model of the Palestinian jihad is expected to play a role in other regions. The model of Iranian justification of jihad in Palestine is therefore indicative of ideological trends that may be incorporated vis-à-vis other enemies.

Iran's support of terror against Israel also has a practical side to it. It is linked to a practical assessment of Israel as a strategic threat to Iranian national interests in the Middle East and as a strategic proxy of the US. Furthermore, it serves Iran as a convenient instrument for penetration of the Sunni Arab world through support of terrorist organizations that act against Israel.

Under Ahmadinejad the **Holocaust** has been elevated to an element of Iranian foreign policy. Holocaust denial in Iran is not new. It was rife as far back as the 1960s and has been linked to Iran's pro-Nazi heritage during the 1930s. From the religious point of view, suffering and victimization are a source of legitimacy and are defining attributes of the Shiite self-image that the Iranian regime attempts to build. Thus, acceptance of the historic truth of the Holocaust would elevate the Jews to a level of suffering that transcends that of the Shiites, "stealing" the birthright of the Shiites and according legitimacy to the Jewish claim. The current emphasis on Holocaust denial seems to also reflect a belief in the Iranian regime that Europe – and particularly Germany – is interested in "freeing" itself from the guilt feelings towards the Jews that were "imposed" on them by the Holocaust and would welcome a "down-grading" of the Holocaust from a historic certainty to a disputed issue. The Iranian activity therefore is intended to serve a number of political goals: to drive a wedge between Israel/the Jews and the US and the rest of the world, particularly Europe. This belief was expressed in Ahmadinejad's letter to Chancellor Angela Merkel. Ahmadinejad is also said to have been influenced by the teachings of Ahmad Fardid, a pro-fascist Iranian intellectual who was a pupil of the German philosopher Heidegger and whose writings are based upon racial perceptions, expressing admiration to a supreme leader (a Führer-style leader) and to the supremacy of the Iranian race.

This unique attitude towards Israel is evident in the Iranian regime's differentiation between the 9/11 terrorist attacks against civilians in the US and attacks of a similar nature – albeit on a smaller scale – against Israeli civilians. Iranian clerical authorities denounced the attacks of 9/11 on theological grounds ("no man may bear the burden of another") and on the grounds that they took place in a land which is not the disputed Muslim land which is occupied by infidels. These arguments are not valid in the Israeli case. Israeli civilians cannot be considered "innocents" since they are perceived as committing the crime of occupying a Muslim land by the very fact of their being in it..

³³ See Khamane'i to the 3rd International Conference on the Holy Quds and Support for the Palestinian People's Rights on Friday, April 14, 2006: "The present age is the era of Islamic awakening, and Palestine lies at the center of this awakening.... the Palestinian nation is at the center of the arena of a difficult and long-term jihad, which is not only for the cause of Palestine, but which also constitutes a major part of the Islamic world's jihad on vast fronts against the aggressive, ruthless, plunderous arrogant powers." . <http://www.khamenei.ir/EN/Speech/detail.jsp?id=20060414A>

Apparatuses of Terrorism

The Iranian apparatuses for export of Revolution and terrorism can be divided into general areas of responsibility, though there are grey areas of congruence in which different organs of the regime compete for achievements. In some particularly important theatres, cases have been observed of actual competition between different Iranian organs, which have vied for influence over a given foreign person or organization.

The organs of the regime that are involved in planning, providing logistic support, ideological indoctrination and implementation of terrorism are as follows:

1. Pasdaran (IRGC – particularly the Qods Force).
2. VAVAK (MOIS).
3. Auxiliary organizations involved in recruiting, logistics and other support of terrorism such as:
 - A. *Majm'e jahani-ye ahl-e beit* (in Arabic – *AMal-A-Amajma' al-y. 'alami lilahl al-bait*)
 - B. Islamic Propagation Organization (*Sazeman-e Tablighat-e Islami*).
 - C. *Majma'-e jahani baraye taqrib-e bein-e mazaheb-e eslami*.
 - D. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Propaganda. (Society for Reconciliation between the Schools).
4. Other government institutions that have regular functions but also aid an abet terrorism such as the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), Iran Air, Bomnyad Mostazafan (isn't it Bonyad?) and other commercial organs of Iran.
5. Non-Iranian proxy organizations (Hizballah, PIJ, Turkish Hizballah, The Mahdi's Army, "*Tahrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-'Jafariyya*" in Pakistan, etc.).

Organs of the Regime

IRGC/QODS Force

The IRGC is arguably the most active of the organs of the Iranian regime in organizing terrorist groups and in planning, supporting and directing terrorist activities. The theatres of operations of the IRGC are many. They extend from Lebanon, where the Qods Force is predominant in directing Hizballah, to Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and other areas.

The elite of the IRGC is traditionally affiliated with the Supreme Leader (who is also the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces) and appointed by him directly. Many of these officials are associated with the Haqani Madrasa in Qom, which has been one of the main bastions of the revolutionary regime and the provider of a great many of the senior officials in the IRGC and MOIS. This affiliation with the Haqani school in Qom and the Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi is the source of a new alliance between the IRGC and the President. This alliance may come to the fore in a more active policy of terrorism or initiatives to raise tensions with the West and Israel for domestic reasons or in order to create multiple flashpoints.

The Basij is conventionally considered as part of the IRGC – ideologically and in terms of intelligence sharing. It may even be claimed that the Basij is a reflection of the IRGC as it was originally founded – an ideological militia imbued with the zeal of the Revolution.³⁴

MOIS

The MOIS – Ministry of Intelligence and Internal Security (or VAVAK – (*Veزارat-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Keshvar*) is the successor of the Shah's Savak. MOIS was officially founded in 1984 and is headed by a cabinet member of the rank of minister – usually a cleric of the rank of Hojjat al-Islam. Since it was founded

³⁴ It has been claimed that the vote for Khatami in both elections among members of the IRGC was at the same level of the general population. The recruitment to the IRGC is from the general population and it may be assumed that this has impaired the revolutionary zeal among its troops. The Basij, on the other hand, remains a voluntary militia. It provides positions and salaries to the lower levels of society whose religious zeal and loyalty to the regime is greater than the general populace.

the MOIS was headed by five ministers³⁵ and has gone through a series of organizational upheavals. For most of its existence, MOIS has operated directly under the aegis of the Supreme Leader and has not been accountable to either the President or the Majlis. In the wake of the revelations regarding the involvement of MOIS in assassination of reformist opposition leaders in the early 1990s, the organization went through a reform and has attempted to change its public image.

It is also widely claimed that the former chief of MOIS (1984-89), Ali Fallahian, and other former senior figures in MOIS such as Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, Asghar Hejazi and Ali-Reza Akbarian, still have direct influence over MOIS through the Rahbar's Office, bypassing the line of command. This alternate line of command is known as the "shadow MOIS", which answers to the Rahbar (i.e. the Supreme Leader) through officials in his office and not to the Minister of Intelligence himself. The agendas of MOIS and the conservatives in the Supreme Leader's office have re-converged since the election of Ahmadinejad (at least in the area of domestic intelligence) and the appointment of Mohseni-Ezheji as minister, and it is not clear how the relations between the official MOIS and the "shadow MOIS" have been affected.

Ministry of Culture and Islamic Propagation

Another Iranian government body, which is deeply involved in "export of Revolution" is the Ministry of Culture and Islamic propagation. The ministry – currently under former IRGC general, Mohammad Hossein Saffar Harandi, is formally responsible for: domestic censorship, promotion of "ethical virtues based on belief and piety"; "informing the world community about the basis and aspirations of the Islamic Revolution"; expansion of cultural ties with various nations and Muslims and with "the oppressed people in particular"; running the affairs of the Haj, operation of facilities for domestic and international tourism; and – "preparing the ground for spread of the culture of Islamic Revolution and Persian language in other countries". It controls the Culture and Islamic Communication Organization, the Islamic Republic news Agency (IRNA), the Printing and Publication Organization, the Haj and Pilgrimage Organization.

The ministry operates in various countries through Iranian "Cultural Centers" within the Iranian embassies. These are particularly active in the periphery of the Muslim world – South East Asia, the CIS countries and Africa.

An illustration of its activities can be seen in the case of the Cultural Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Beirut, which serves as one of the most important overt representations of the Iranian regime in Lebanon. The head of the center is the former Iranian Cultural Attaché in Beirut – Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Hashemi. Most of the overt employees of the Center are Lebanese Shiites. The Center is at the forefront of the Iranian effort in Lebanon to gain followers (*moqalidun* – Shiites who accept a certain cleric as their *marja' taqlid*) for the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i. The Center was involved in the struggle between Hizballah and Sheikh Fadlallah due to the refusal of the latter to recognize Khamene'i as the *marja'* of the Shiites outside of Iran. The Center collaborates with the Ahl al-Bayt Foundation (see below).³⁶

"Ecumenical" Organizations

The involvement of Iranian "ecumenical" organizations in recruitment and direction of Sunni terrorists has been observed in the peripheral areas of South East Asia, the CIS countries and Africa. The main organizations operating under the Iranian regime in this spirit are: *Majma'-e jahani-ye ahl-e beit* (in Arabic – *Al- majma' al- 'alami lilahl al-bait*)³⁷; *Majma'-e jahani baraye taqrib-e bein-e mazaheb-e eslami* (Society for Reconciliation between the Schools)³⁸; and the Islamic Propagation Organization (*Sazeman-e Tablighat-e Islami*).³⁹ These organizations convene conferences and organize studies for Sunni Muslims in the

³⁵ These were: Mohammad Reyshahri (under Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi), Ali Fallahian (under President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani), Ghorbanali Dorri-Najafabadi (under President Mohammad Khatami, resigned after a year), Ali Younesi (under President Khatami, until August 24, 2005), and Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ezheji (under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, from August 24, 2005).

³⁶ Ahl al-Bayt - *Majma'-e jahani-ye ahl-e beit* – was headed until 1999 by Hoj. Ali al-Taskhiri, then by Ali Akbar Velayati, and since October 2002 by Sheikh Muhammad Mahdi Assefi. Its goal is to spread the "Ja'fari legal school among Sunnis on the basis that the Shi'a is not a separate sect of Islam but rather just another school (*madhhab*) of legal jurisprudence."

³⁷ Headed until 1999 by Hoj. 'Ali al-Taskhiri, then by 'Ali Akbar Velayati, and since October 2002 by Sheikh Mohammad Mahdi Assefi.

³⁸ Headed by Hoj. Mohammad Va'ez-Zadeh Khorasani.

³⁹ Wilfrid Buchta, "Teheran Ecumenical Society (Majma' al-taqrib): a veritable ecumenical revival or a Trojan Horse of Iran?" in R. Brunner and W.

madrasas of Qom and send teachers and preachers to Sunni populations abroad. The target of much of this activity is non-Arab Muslims, who are more attuned to the Shiite message and less hostile to Iranian patronage. Many of these students have been later accused in their home countries of operating for the Iranian intelligence.⁴⁰ Such cases have been uncovered in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

In the former USSR countries, Iran could use its “auxiliary” organizations to penetrate Sunni communities. The Muslims in the Republics and especially in the Russian Federation –Tatars, Bashkirs, Uzbeks, Tajiks and other nationalities are particularly susceptible to Iranian Shiite missionaries who offer the Iranian brand of “Shi’a-Lite” as the “true Islam” or even converting Sunnis into Shiites (“to bring them the light” (*istibsa*⁴¹). An interesting point in case is Russia. In 1996, Ahl al-Bayt opened its first branch in Russia, headed by Musa Kurbanov, and subsequently formed a youth community “Sahib al-Zaman” (Lord of the Time – an appellation of the Hidden Imam) and a women community “Fatima-Zahra”. Dozens of “Husaynias” were also founded in Moscow.⁴² According to observers, there already exists a trend for Sunnis to join Shiite mosques and to adopt Shiite customs. This trend is facilitated by the fact that the Muslims in these communities have little knowledge of their own regarding their Sunni faith.

On its “about us” web-site page the organization claims to “struggle with religious extremism and terrorism” and to “enjoin Good and distance from Evil”.⁴³ This goal is taken from Koran 3:104: “And from among you there should be a party who invite to good and enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong, and these it is that shall be successful.” This verse is a generic Islamic verse which, in its Iranian and radical interpretation justifies “correcting Evil/oppression” by way of violence if other means are not available. Some associates of Ahul al-Bayt in Russia have been in the forefront of radical Shiite declarations.⁴⁴

Non-Iranian Terrorist Proxies

Iran’s terrorist proxies can be divided into four main models:

1. Absolute proxies of existing organizations such as Hizballah in Lebanon, al-Moqtada Sadr in Iraq, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. These organizations are characterized by: their presence on the ground, which is not totally dependent on Iranian patronage. These organizations have a constituency and a membership that can operate even without Iranian oversight. Nevertheless, despite these organizations’ apparent independent potential, they are all characterized by total loyalty to Iran, based on acceptance of the Iranian leadership and the concept of *velayat-e faqih*.
2. Virtual organizations with small memberships such as the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain/Abu Dabi/Qatar, Hizballah Hijaz or Turkish Hizballah. Some of these organizations are no more than a name and a department in the Qods Force HQ or MOIS. Without regular Iranian involvement, they would cease to exist.
3. “Allied” organizations which do not accept the Iranian model of Islam and have an independent existence separate to their alliance with Iran but find it convenient to accept Iranian patronage. Such organizations include the Pakistani *Tehreek- Jafria Pakistan* (TJP).
4. Palestinian organizations such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC) (Ahmad Jibril) and Hamas.
5. Radical Sunni organizations which may even be outwardly anti-Shiite but maintain clandestine relations with Iran. These include al-Qa’ida and the Egyptian al-*Gam’ah Islamiyya*.

Since the mid-1990s Iran has become more prudent in its support of those organizations, which are openly involved in terrorism against countries with which Iran has diplomatic interests. This was due to: a

Ende (eds.), *The Twelver Shi’a in Modern Times, Religious, Culture and Political History*, (Brill, Leiden 2001)p., 349. The use of the concept ahl al-Bayt (the household of the Prophet) derives from the *hadith al-Thaqalayn* in which the Prophet is said to have told the believers that he leaves them two precious things: the Qur’an and his household. <http://rafed.net/aalulbayt/>

⁴⁰ Shmuel Bar, *Iranian Defense Doctrine and Decision Making*, (Herzliya: Institute for Policy and Strategy, October 2004), pp. 29, 55.

⁴¹ Shiites call Sunnis who became Shiites “Mustabsirun”, which means-the ones who saw the light.

⁴² www.ahlibeyt.ru: The official site of Ahl al-Bayt in Russia.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ For example: a Russian journalist by the name of Anastasia Fatima Ezhova, who has converted to Shi’i Islam, and goes by the pseudonym of “Fatima Hizbullah” has a blog “The Black Banners of Khorasan” with the slogan: “Every day is Ashura, all the World is Karbala”. Another similar case of a radical convert of Ahul Bayt is her friend and a colleague Danyal Thulencov, who is the founder of “Ahul Bayt’s branch in Ekaterinburg. <http://fatima-hizbulla.livejournal.com/profile>.

series of accusations against Iran of terrorism in Europe and Argentine; the ascendancy of the reformist government in Iran which embarked on a policy of improving relations with the West and its Arab neighbors; the crisis in the MOIS as a result of its involvement in domestic terrorism; the decline in tolerance of the international community towards terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11; and the exacerbation of the Sunni-Shiite conflict that has made patron-proxy relations with radical Sunni organizations more complicated for Iran than in the past. Consequently, Iran's terrorist "assets" in many countries have atrophied over the last decade. The Iranian threats of "thousands" of suicide bombers prepared to sacrifice their lives against Western targets reflect Iran's need for such deterrence, but not the existing state of its capability.

Since the election of Ahmadinejad and the ascendancy of a revolutionary revivalist faction based on the IRGC and the Basij, Iran has made concerted efforts to revive its terrorist capabilities. The main theatres of these efforts are the Palestinian and Iraqi ones. However, Iran is aware that in order to effectively terrorize the West in the event of a conflict, it must have capabilities in the Western countries themselves or in theatres in which there is a strong Western presence (Central Asia, S.E. Asia, Africa, Latin America) and where striking at Western interests would hurt.

Absolute Proxies

Hizballah

Iran's relationship with **Hizballah** is *sui generis*. The links between Iran's two main organs of intelligence and terrorism – IRGC and MOIS – and Hizballah play an important role for the activities of those organs. Hizballah operatives and assets are considered as belonging to Iran. Cases have come to light in which an Iranian auxiliary organ of intelligence such as Ahul Bayt has recruited local Muslims and dispatched for religious indoctrination and training in Iran, where they were then handed over to Hizballah handlers.

Hizballah was – and remains – the "jewel in the crown" of Iran's "export of Revolution". It was founded as an extension of the Islamic Republic into Lebanon; its symbols, ideology and goals were set down by Tehran and are for the most part identical with those of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. The commitment of Hizballah to the principle of *velayat-e faqih* places the movement under complete control of the Iranian Supreme Leader, who is not seen as the leader of Iran, but as a transcendental spiritual guide. There is virtually no major step taken by the organization, which is not coordinated with Iran. The Deciding Consultative Council of Hizballah includes as full members two senior Iranian representatives who sit on the Council *ex officio*. No less important is Hizballah's almost total dependence on Iran for its budget; the Iranian annual support of Hizballah was estimated at \$100 million though during the last year it has gradually grown and is said to reach \$200 million. Other sources put the annual Iranian funding at approximately 1 billion dollars, with expenses on the military apparatus and the Resistance activities not included.⁴⁵

Hizballah serves Iran in a number of roles:

1. A model for the Iranian doctrine of "export of Islamic Revolution" to Shiite communities elsewhere through the formation of an Islamic Republic in Lebanon along the lines of that of Iran.
2. A proxy "frontline" organization in the struggle against Israel.
3. A "long arm", not only against Israel, but also against other enemies such as Iraq (during the Iraq-Iran War) and the West.
4. A direct foothold in Lebanon, within the heartland of the Arab Middle East.
5. A "sub-contractor" for Iranian terrorism against Israeli targets abroad.
6. A weapon of deterrence and retaliation in case of an attack on Iran's nuclear installation.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizballah*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), p. 63.

⁴⁶ Nasrallah: "We all feel solidarity with Iran from the political, moral and popular aspects, since it is the attacked party. However, any discussion of a military response (to an attack on Iran) is premature. If I say 'yes', we may not do anything and if I say 'no', I will calm Israel and the US without any reason."

While Hizballah is a proxy of Iran, it cannot be compared to other such organizations, which are directed by mid-level intelligence officials in the Iranian regime and have little room of maneuver to express their own particular interests. The patron-proxy relationship between Iran and Hizballah has evolved into an almost total identification of the two with each other. Hizballah is virtually an organ of the IRGC and totally committed to the interests of Iran. The Iranian involvement in the operational planning of Hizballah is extensive, particularly in regards to acts of terrorism outside of the Lebanese arena. However, in the Lebanese theatre the organization enjoys a high degree of autonomy. Once the strategy has been put down, Hizballah does not have to seek authorization from Iran in order to launch attacks on Israel. Nevertheless, the close proximity of IRGC officers and their participation in the deliberations of the key institutions of Hizballah ensure coordination. Since Ahmadinejad was elected President, Iran has upgraded its contacts with Hizballah and senior figures in the regime have been charged with developing the Iranian interests vis-à-vis Lebanon.⁴⁷

The Iranian link is evident as well in the ideological writings that have been found in operations against Hizballah. These are almost all based on Iranian texts. In many cases, it is obvious that the source of the texts is documents originating in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).⁴⁸ Iranian control over Hizballah is both vertical and horizontal; it is implemented both through the Secretary General, Hasan Nasrallah and between Iranian officials from various branches of the Iranian government and Iranian apparatuses and their Hizballah counterparts.

On the Iranian side, there is no one body, which can be said to have comprehensive responsibility for making decisions regarding Hizballah. The bodies involved in directing Hizballah include: IRGC; MOIS; the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Propagation. The contacts of these bodies with Hizballah frequently overlap and even contradict, reflecting the internal competition within the Iranian regime between the various bodies. The Iranian regime has set no clear schedule of authorities for the various apparatuses. A case in point is the activity of the Cultural Attaché in Beirut, which acted at once for MOIS, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Propagation. Obviously, the Supreme Leader and the Office of the Supreme Leader have the final say, leaning on the Supreme National Security Council.

The most important link between Iran and Hizballah is that with the IRGC. The IRGC link is maintained through the al-Qods (Jerusalem) Force. The al-Qods Force headquarters in Lebanon has responsibility for supply of arms, logistic support, training and operational guidance to Hizballah. The Force trains Hizballah operatives in its camps in Lebanon and sends them to advanced training in Iran. It also handles Hizballah's operational links with Palestinian organizations inside the West Bank and Gaza through a special body (Number 1800). Until the war of summer 2006, it was believed that the al-Qods Force had direct responsibility for the long range rockets which Iran had supplied Hizballah. The events of the war have not proven that such a distinction existed – at least at the time of the war. It may well be that Iran was initially hesitant to give Hizballah direct control over its strategic arsenal, but later relinquished control to the top level of the organization.

Hizballah's Achilles' heel is its dependence upon money and weapon supplies from Iran and via Syria. Without the full cooperation of the Lebanese government and Syria, Iran will not be able to provide Hizballah with money and weapons. Hizballah has been the go-between Iran and the Palestinian organizations, via their headquarters in Damascus or straight into Gaza and the West Bank. Large sums of money, weapons and ammunition, in addition to ideological instruction of Palestinian terrorists reach through Iran by means of weapons' smugglings, money transfers via foreign banks and charity institutions, the penetration of preachers and trainers into the PA territories, and the training of Palestinians abroad.

Iraqi Shiite Proxies

While Hizballah is Iran's main Shiite proxy, the significance of Iran's Iraqi assets has grown since the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime. Before the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, Iran's main proxies in Iraq were the "Supreme Council (Assembly) of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI/SAIRI) and the Iraqi

⁴⁷ Among the figures mentioned: the Minister of Defense Mustafa Mahmud Najjar (a former IRGC commander who served in Lebanon), the President's advisor Mohsen Dahkan who served as commander of the IRGC forces in Lebanon and the Ambassador in Damascus, Hasan Akhtari.

⁴⁸ See for example the booklet "al-Jihad" that was found in Maroun al-Ras in South Lebanon during the fighting in July 2006. Expert analysis of the booklet indicates that it was written originally as motivation material for IRGC troops and translated into Arabic for Hizballah.

Da'wa Organization. These organizations however never reached the level of absolute identification with Iran that Hizballah has. Since the fall of the Iraqi regime, Iran has shifted the focal point of its Iraqi alliances to Moqtada Sadr and his Mahdi's Army.

The relationship between Iran and Moqtada Sadr is complex. Like Hasan Nasrallah of Hizballah, Moqtada Sadr accepts the Iranian predominance and the religious authority of *velayat-e faqih*.

Virtual "Front" Organizations

Over the years since the Revolution Iran has founded a number of virtual organizations. These organizations such as the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, *Hizballah Hijaz*, The Islamic Front for the Liberation of Saudi Arabia, et alia do not exist as independent political or military entities and can be counted as merely "virtual" branches of the Iranian MOIS or IRGC/Qods Force.

For the last few years, Iran has reduced its projection of subversive potential through these organizations and they have become almost defunct. However, since they do not require any real infrastructure (leaning totally on that of Iran), they can be re-activated with relative ease and new organizations can be added to them.

"Allied" Shiite Organizations

Iran's attempts to co-opt Shiite organizations in central and south Asia focus on Pakistan and Afghanistan. In Pakistan, IRGC/Qods Force is deeply involved in supporting the *Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan* (SMP) offshoot of *Tehreek-e-Jafria Pakistan* (TJP). Iran also supports another offshoot of SMP which calls itself Hizballah. The Shiite groups in Pakistan however are not considered by Iran as true proxies. Their main agenda remains Pakistani and defensive; the Iranian doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* has not taken root in these organizations and therefore they cannot be considered as totally reliable.

The Iranian links to the Shiite Hazari community in Afghanistan were developed over a long period of time. The key Iranian interlocutor in this community is Hizb-e Vahdat. This party however remains relatively independent of Iranian patronage and maintains an "Afghan-centric" orientation. Hizb-e Vahdat has also not accepted the Iranian religious predominance and it is claimed that the majority of the Hazari Shiites are supporters of Ayatollah Sistani as their *marja' taqlid*. Iranian assets in Afghanistan though are not limited to the Hazari community inside Afghanistan. Iran has hosted a large number of Afghani refugees – many of them who have been recruited by Iranian intelligence – MOIS or IRGC. These refugees are potential operators for future terrorist activities of Iran in this area.

Palestinians

Iran annually gives the **Palestinian** terrorist organizations about ten million dollars for training camps and guidance outside Iran's borders. From the point of view of encouraging terrorism, Iran has become a major factor in the motivation of Palestinian terrorism; almost seventy percent of terrorist attacks inside Israel and the WB/Gaza areas have been attributed directly or indirectly to Iranian support. From the point of view of political assets on the ground, however, Iran's inroads into the Palestinian theatre (in contrast to Lebanon and Iraq) have not been impressive to date. The Iranian influence has been implemented through three main channels: direct recruitment and handling of terrorists; pure proxy organizations; and attempts to achieve influence through support of organizations that are not in total agreement with the Iranian ideology.

Direct Involvement

Iran is directly involved in the Palestinian theatre through recruitment of Palestinians and directing their operations. Most of these cases are handled by Hizballah, but may be considered direct Iranian funding and handling, as the timing and nature of the activities are totally under Iranian control. This form of involvement is preferred by Iran as it is not subject to any local Palestinian political constraints.

For the last few years there has been a steady increase in this form of Iranian involvement in the Palestinian theatre. Given the constraints of the other channels (see below), it stands to reason that Iran

will continue to increase its activities in this area in order to guarantee operational assets that can be depended on when needed.

Proxy Organizations

Iran encourages terrorism of Palestinian proxy organizations. The main Iranian proxy in this regard is the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (though there are other minor organizations in Lebanon such as that of former Fatah Colonel, Munir Maqdash).⁴⁹ These relations are relatively under Iranian control, though these organizations must also take into account their Palestinian constraints.

Iran's main proxy in the Palestinian theatre is the **Palestinian Islamic Jihad** (PIJ). PIJ was actually formed by Iran through Fathi Shikaki (who was impressed by the Islamic Revolution and developed an ideology which was deeply influenced by it) and therefore is willing to accept Iran's ideological authority. The Iranian control over PIJ even grew after Shikaki's death and the appointment of Ramadan Shalah as the leader of the organization.

PIJ acts almost exclusively on Iran's orders and according to Iranian interests. As such it is a convenient tool for proxy terrorism and for recruitment of Palestinians for Iranian apparatuses. Unlike Hamas, PIJ does not rely on a "popular" base and therefore is less susceptible to local Gazan/WB "public opinion" in its terrorist policy. This was evident during a long period in which Hamas refrained from terrorist attacks out of local considerations, but PIJ continued even though the same considerations were relevant for its own local forces.

Despite the total subordination of PIJ to Iran, it does not enjoy the status that Hizballah has as almost an Iranian organization. The fact that PIJ is a Sunni organization operating in a Sunni milieu makes it less reliable in Iranian eyes than its Shiite counterpart.

Hamas

Iran attempts to acquire a foothold in the Palestinian arena by way of political, moral, financial and military support of Hamas. This tendency has grown since the victory of Hamas in the February 2006 elections and the formation of a Hamas government. For Iran however, the Hamas option is by far the most problematic. Unlike Shiite Hizballah and "Shiitized" Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas is a Sunni Salafi Muslim Brotherhood type movement that cannot survive without its popular base in the Palestinian populace. Excessive intimacy with Shiite Iran would not be popular with this base. Therefore, the Iranian regime realizes that its influence over Hamas is bound to remain limited in contrast to the two other channels of influence.

Iran sees **Hamas** as an independent organization with which it is cultivating a relationship. Iran was the first country to recognize the new Hamas government in 2006 and has demonstrated its support since. Iran would have preferred to have Hamas totally dependent upon them since it would have given it greater legitimacy and strengthened its status in the Arab and Muslim world as defenders of the Palestinians.

But, the Hamas leadership both inside the WB/Gaza region and in Damascus is acutely aware that a popular perception of the organization as having an intimate relationship with Shiite Iran would be a political liability as a fundamentalist Sunni Muslim Brotherhood type organization that seeks to strengthen its popular legitimacy in an orthodox Sunni constituency and to maintain close ties with other Muslim Brotherhood organizations and with Wahhabi Saudi Arabia. Even at present, the close relations between Hamas and Iran are a source of an ideological dissonance for it. During anti-Hamas demonstrations in Gaza, the Fatah demonstrators hurled invectives of "Shiite" at their Hamas adversaries. After the execution of Saddam Hamas the organizations was torn between manifestations of popular support for Saddam inside the territories and Iranian expressions of joy and gloating at the hanging.

⁴⁹ <http://www.intelligence.org.il/eng/bu/aug/aug4.doc>

Sunni Salafi Organizations

Iran has cultivated relations with Sunni terrorist organizations since the mid 1980s. These relations included the Egyptian *Gihad* and *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya*. These organizations though preferred to publicly downplay their relations with Iran out of deference to their more important ideological affinity in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Muslim Brotherhood movements.

The behavior of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world in the wake of the Israeli-Hizballah confrontation of summer 2006 is of particular interest. The Muslim Brotherhood has so far refrained from any formal position against Hizballah or Iran. The MB leadership maintained that it would not criticize the Shiites since Hizballah is leading the struggle against the enemies of Islam, and so far successfully, and therefore, as long as the struggle continues (until the Muslims regain their rights) the Sunni-Shiite conflict is marginal and cannot be guiding the Islamic Nation. MB leaders continue to be in contact with Iran despite the exacerbation of Sunni-Shiite relations. There is however no evidence of direct Iranian support of major MB organizations (with the exception of Hamas).

As for **al-Qa'ida**, while Iran claims it has no ties with the organization, fugitives' reports reveal that Iran has been giving shelter and refuge for al-Qa'ida terrorists. Iran does wish to preserve Afghanistan's stability, but only according to its own terms and interests. There are more than two million Afghan refugees staying in Iran at the moment, which Tehran does not really want in its territory, but it continues to regard Afghanistan as its region of influence. The Iranians are willing to assist the Shiite-Afghan population, but Iran does not wish to handle the day-to-day existential problems the Afghans are going through.

Possible Future Trends

Iran's behavior in regards to terrorism and export of Revolution has gone through various stages since the inception of the Islamic regime. The initial drive to export the Revolution was fueled not only by ideology but by a wide range of contributing factors: the fact that the "founding father", Ayatollah Khomeini was at the helm of the regime and saw the fall of the Shah as only a first step in a grander plan; the ease with which the Shah's regime had been toppled was perceived as a potential first domino in a series of victories for Islam; the outburst of enthusiasm – including on the part of Sunni Islamists – with which the Revolution was met also contributed to the feeling in the new regime that the Revolution was poised for further victories. At the same time, the regime's sense of insecurity and of being besieged by domestic and foreign enemies (including the US, Israel, the UK and almost the entire Arab world during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s) who were bent on its downfall strengthened its tendency to use violent means against opposition elements, including abroad and to attempt to deter enemies by means of terrorism.

By the mid 1990s though much of the initial revolutionary élan had petered out. Khomeini had died and his successor was occupied with building up his legitimacy; the war with Iraq had ended and Iran began to mend its fences with the Arab world, reducing the sense of threat from that quarter; the regime had stabilized and the exiled opposition had proven itself to be a "paper tiger". Last but not least, the exposure of Iran's involvement in terrorist attacks in the West during the 1980s heightened the regime's concern of international ostracization and changed the regime's cost-benefit calculus regarding **most** acts of terrorism. The presidency of Rafsanjani, and even more so of Khatami, focused on achieving international legitimacy, a goal that necessitated reducing the regime's involvement in subversion and terrorism.

These factors however are already changing and certain emerging circumstances have the potential of reviving the regime's motivation for export of Revolution and terror. First and foremost of these emerging factors are the virtual take-over of the regime by the IRGC, the affiliation between this force and radical elements in Qom and the apocalyptic vision of the President. The struggle between the "old guard" of the Revolution and the second generation of the IRGC will certainly continue to escalate, with revolutionary rhetoric and behavior (including support of terrorism) an important lever in the domestic struggle.

At the same time, the Middle East is going through important processes that will affect Iran's regional policies – both towards the nuclear issue and towards support of terrorism. Although the number of variables and potential scenarios is very large, the most salient theatres and developments are as follows:

1. Iraq – a possible coalition withdrawal from Iraq leaving behind either a Shiite government presiding over a disintegrating nation, or a nation which has already divided into at least three parts.
2. Lebanon – a possible take-over of Lebanon by Hizballah and change in the structure of the Lebanese political system or civil war in that country.
3. Syria – a possible decline of the regime, disintegration at the periphery (including a burgeoning jihadi-Salafi movement in the north), or conversely, an attempt to restore its international status by opening negotiations with Israel.
4. The Palestinian theatre – further disintegration and civil war between Fatah and Iran's proxies – Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or conversely a re-opening of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process that would strengthen the PA President, Mahmoud Abbas.
5. The nuclear crisis – actual sanctions on Iran that would include blocking Iranian shipping in the Gulf, restricting imports of refined oil, etc., or a major breakthrough in the Iranian nuclear program.
6. The Muslim world – Iranian success in achieving religious influence among Shiite and Sunni populations outside of the Middle East.

Iraq

The present situation of chaos in Iraq benefits Tehran as long as it does not bring about a total split in the country between the three main parts. Iran's strategic preference is a united Iraq under a predominantly Shiite rule with a strong affinity to Iran. The alternatives – a breakup of Iraq into three mini-states or a national conciliation which would strengthen the Sunni component – are both anathema to Iran.

An independent Shiite Iraq in the south is seen as potentially developing its own interests that would contradict those of Iran. In the economic field, a stable Shiite Iraq would have an interest in attracting

Western investments in order to modernize its oil industry and would compete with Iran in the oil market, possibly ignoring OPEC quotas. A steady increase of Basra oil would enable the international community to impose stronger sanctions on Iran on the assumption that the effects on oil prices would be reduced. Iran therefore would probably increase its intervention in the Shiite area, mainly through its proxies, to preclude any such trend. Such intervention may include active rebellion of pro-Iranian groups against the Shiite government, claiming that it is a lackey of the Western powers, sabotage of the oil industry and support of Sunni groups that would attack the nascent Shiite state.

Signs of national conciliation between Shiites and Sunnis would probably also galvanize Iran into actions to foil such a development. In this case too, Iran would probably continue, as it is doing today, to encourage provocative actions on both sides.

Lebanon

The crisis in Lebanon is more than a crisis between government and opposition; it is a showdown over the continued existence of the Lebanese entity as such. The "victory" of Hizballah in the summer of 2006 is seen from Tehran as an opportunity that may culminate in changing Lebanon into an Iranian-model Shiite Islamic regime. The non-Shiite communities of Lebanon are well aware of this danger and will have to weigh the consequences of continued confrontation and possible civil war against the loss of their status as communities in the existing paradigm of the Lebanese state. At present it seems that three possible scenarios exist:

1. Renewed accommodation – seems unlikely in the long run, even if some agreement is reached in the current phase of the conflict.
2. A Shiite take-over and the end of the Lebanese system – will be resisted by the other communities which will, no doubt, seek and receive support from the rest of the Arab world. Such support may re-arm the militias of the other communities, returning Lebanon to the pre-Taif era.
3. The end of the Lebanese paradigm and decline into a period of civil war and disintegration – this scenario becomes more and more probable as the impasse continues.

Today, Iran's presence in Lebanon and use of Lebanon for terrorist activities abroad is partially constrained by Hizballah's need to accommodate the relations with the other communities. If this situation changes, Iran will find in Lebanon – either as a Shiite dominated state or as a disintegrated one – an opportunity to restore the presence it had in the early 1980s.

Syria

Iran conducts massive missionary activity in Syria. There are dozens of Shiite institutions in Damascus the aim of which is to convert Sunnis and Alawites (who are recognized by the Iranian regime as Shiite Muslims) to Shi'a. These Shiite seminaries draw foreign students from around the Muslim world, who have initially come to Syria to get a Sunni religious education. After these students return to their homelands, Iranian embassies (mainly in Africa and Asia) keep in touch with them, thus promoting the spreading of the Shiite religious message globally.

At the same time, the future of the Syrian regime has become more and more uncertain. The burgeoning strength of terrorist Salafi organizations in northern Syria, influenced by al-Qa'ida in Iraq and a sense of erosion of the regime's authority may lead to disintegration of the regime over a protracted period of time. Under these circumstances, Iran may act to preserve its foothold in Syria by support of local factions. Foremost among these would conceivably be the Alawites, who would be under a threat of the Salafi movements. The identification of the Alawites as Shiites and the existing Iranian religious activity among them would facilitate Iranian involvement in this community. The ongoing relations between Iran (and Hizballah) and the current Alawite regime would also facilitate such relations.

Such a development may turn Syria into an Iranian sphere of influence in which Iranian apparatuses and proxy organizations would have relative freedom of operation.

Palestine

Since the outbreak of the second Intifada, Iran has become a prime source of terrorism in the Palestinian theatre. The Iranian modus operandi in this theatre is based on three types of proxies.

The crisis in the Palestinian Authority weakens all the local parties involved and plays into Iran's hands in a number of ways:

1. The willingness of the internal Hamas leadership to openly demonstrate its alliance with Iran exposes itself to criticism as a "Shiite" proxy. The exacerbation of the Palestinian civil disorder and the conflict between Hamas and Fatah will increase the need of the former to rely on an external patron. Whereas in the past, Hamas could have relied on Saudi Arabia, the Saudi regime has to now take into account the explicit American position against such support. This quandary will increase the dependence of Hamas on Iran.
2. The atomization of all factions in the Palestinian theatre opens new opportunities for Iran. This is particularly true in the case of Fatah. The authority of the formal leadership of Fatah (Mahmoud Abbas and the "old guard") vis-à-vis the warlords who are "nominal" members of the Fatah movement has already diminished and will continue to wane. The material needs of these local factions will facilitate Iran's attempts to gain influence over them for relatively small amounts of financial aid.
3. The financial crisis of the Palestinian Authority also opens opportunities for Iranian penetration. Much of Iran's successes in recruiting individuals and small groups have been through "humanitarian" aid (mainly medical treatment) and Iran had already attempted in its dealing with Arafat to gain a foothold in Gaza by founding an Iranian hospital there, that would be manned by IRGC personnel. It may be expected that Iran will renew these efforts with a Hamas government or with local elements in Gaza.

The Nuclear Issue

The apocalyptic tendency of Ahmadinejad and his group naturally raises the question if the willingness to take risks may extend to possible actual use of nuclear weapons (e.g. not only as a deterrent or as a weapon to brandish in order to achieve regional objectives).

On the other hand, traditional Shiite dogma may still serve as a bulwark against such adventurism. This is, *inter alia*, due to the fact that Shiite apocalyptic thought does not necessarily equate the re-appearance of the Hidden Imam with the Islamic "day of judgment" (*yawm al-qiyama*) on which the dead will rise. According to traditional Shiite doctrine, the Mahdi will not necessarily arrive in the wake of cataclysm, and he does not bring such a cataclysm in his wake. The appearance of the Imam is expected to bring about a new rule of justice and relief for the oppressed (the Shiites), but it does not necessarily abrogate natural laws. Therefore, the belief in the imminent advent of the Imam does not necessarily imply abandonment of a normal risk calculus. The Mahdist ideology does link the advent of the Hidden Imam with a military struggle that will be waged on his behalf by the believers. Ayatollah Hossein Nouri-Hamedani, a leading religious authority at the Mahdaviat Research Institute (an institute dedicated to the study of the Hidden Imam) called (April 14, 2005) to "fight the Jews and vanquish them so that the conditions for the advent of the Hidden Imam be met."⁵⁰

The absence of an intention to trigger a nuclear confrontation, though, does not neutralize the risk of such an eventuality. The Iranian regime under Ahmadinejad conducts a policy of brinkmanship, based on the assessment described above that the enfeebled Western enemy does not have the willpower to respond. This attitude may be carried over into the policies of a nuclear Iran. Unlike nuclear powers in the past, which did all they could not to accord a nuclear dimension to their conflicts, Iran would probably use its nuclear capability as leverage in local conflicts. Such leverage would probably be viewed by the regime as a safety net against repercussions of its involvement in terrorism and subversion, and would enhance its motivation to engage in such activities.

Until now, aware of its strategic vulnerability, the regime has denied its involvement in acts of terrorism and even in the case of terrorism against Israel by Hizballah and Hamas it has usually owned up only to

. 50 <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP89705>

“moral” support of these movements. The sense of inviolability that would come with a nuclear capability could change these calculations and encourage the regime to use terrorism against its perceived enemies with greater audacity.

Domestic Developments

The internal struggle between Ahmadinejad's faction and his rivals in the regime will also affect Iran's proclivity to use terrorism.

Since his election, Ahmadinejad has created tensions with the West that have served his domestic agenda against the reformists. The current struggle between the “old guard” conservatives (Khamene'i, Rafsanjani, Qalibaf et alia.) and Ahmadinejad's faction will probably continue to be the central element of Iranian domestic politics for the foreseeable future. Ahmadinejad's influence over some of the organs of terrorism could possibly be used by him to initiate terrorist acts which would exacerbate tensions with the West or neighboring countries in order to force domestic issues.

The Muslim World

Iran is encouraged by what seemed to be “grass-roots” Sunni support for Hizballah during the 2006 war. This may be seen as a “bandwagon” phenomenon, similar to the support of Iran immediately after the Revolution. Iran is perceived in the Arab street as a strong Muslim country which is defying the West and Israel. The pro-Hizballah trend has also been affected by the relatively new phenomenon of Shiite communities in Jordan and Syria (mainly from Iraq) who are active in organizing support for Iran and Hizballah.

This is seen in Tehran as proof of the success of the Iranian policy of “export of Revolution” and serves the agenda of the President and the IRGC to bolster the regime's efforts in this direction. This may take the form of extended support to radical Sunni organizations that will agree to accept undeclared Iranian aid (similar to the relations that existed between Iran and the Egyptian *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* in the 1990s) and efforts to duplicate the Hizballah phenomenon in other countries with a large Shiite minority (mainly in the Gulf and in Saudi Arabia's eastern coast). In Saudi Arabia Shiite organizations such as the *al-Tajammu' li-'Ulama al-Hijaz* (the Assembly of the Scholars in Hijaz) and *al-Haraka al-yano need of italics/Islahiya* (the Reform Movement) could become more active in their fight for greater cultural and political rights.

This possibility has not evaded the Sunni Arab regimes in the region or their religious establishments. The Sunni-Shiite fracture has evolved over the last few years to be a major factor in the Muslim world in general and in the Middle East in particular. Sunni hostility towards Shiites and Iran has existed for ages and the fear of the combination of Shiite revolutionarism and Iranian nationalism manifested in the Iranian regime has been evident since the Revolution. It was this fear that motivated most of the Arab countries to support Iraq during the war. This criticism may adumbrate Saudi behavior in the case of a crisis with Iran about its nuclear program.

The weight of this factor was evident as well during the Israeli-Hizballah fighting of summer 2006. The Saudi criticism of Hizballah was not directed against the organization, per se, but against what the Saudi leadership perceived as one more step, after Iraq, in an Iranian attempt to achieve Shiite predominance in the region. The Sunni consternation is strengthened by a trend of Sunnis who are converting to Shiite Islam (*tashayyu*), as discussed above. This phenomenon, notwithstanding its rather small extent, sends a message of Iranian and Shiite strengthening. The fact that members of the Arab and Muslim intelligentsia, Nasserists, Arab nationalists and liberals (such as pro-Western Sa'ad al-Din Ibrahim, well-known for his defiance of the Egyptian regime for many years) turn to Shiite Islam in admiration, with some of them even converting to Shi'a, is indicative of an identification with the stronger side, i.e. the Shi'a.

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