

## Iran, Hezbollah, and the Threat to the Homeland

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Over the past decade, the mission of the New York City Police Department has expanded greatly to address the evolving threat of international and homegrown terrorism. Grounded in existing law and fully in accordance with the US Constitution, we have built an intelligence and counterterrorism program that has served as a deterrent and has helped to protect the city from fourteen terrorist plots since September 11, 2001.

As the Director of Intelligence Analysis for the New York City Police Department, my responsibility is to dispassionately assess the impact of geopolitical trends and tensions, including the increasing threat of war – on the security of New York City. Dating back to at least 2005, we have considered the possibility that efforts to halt the development of Iran's suspected nuclear weapons program could trigger a full blown conflict in the Persian Gulf involving Iran, Israel and potentially the United States.

In light of New York's symbolic importance as a terrorist target, its large Jewish population, locations of Israeli interest, and status as one of two outposts of Iranian diplomatic presence in the US via its United Nations mission, the city remains the most likely venue for global tensions with Iran to spill over onto American soil. A terrorist attack by Iran or Hezbollah in New York City could serve as retaliation for real or perceived US support or involvement in military action against Iran's nuclear facilities or against its regime.

While it is not my role to weigh in on potential US diplomatic and military strategy, the NYPD is responsible for considering all of the possibilities and taking all the precautions necessary to keep New York City safe.

Over the last six months, our analysts have studied terrorist plots with a plausible nexus to Iran that have been attempted or carried out in Azerbaijan, India, Georgia, Thailand, as well as here in Washington. What we have learned has heightened our concerns. Disconcertingly, these plots demonstrate that Iran and/or Hezbollah remain committed to striking against Israeli and Western targets. Further complicating the task of law enforcement is the diversity of methods evinced by these plots, including differences in the profile of perpetrators, types of explosives used, delivery method, and tradecraft.

For example, In Baku, Azerbaijan in mid-January 2012, Azerbaijani authorities detained three men on charges of planning to attack two Israelis employed by a Jewish school in Baku. According to Azerbaijani authorities, the men received smuggled arms and equipment from Iranian agents – including a sniper rifle with silencer, pistols, sixteen pieces of plastic explosives

and detonators which were smuggled into Azerbaijan from Iran via the Caspian Sea, overseen by Iranian intelligence services. Just last Wednesday, March 14, Azeri officials announced the arrest of 22 Azeri citizens for cooperating with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Azeri National Security Ministry alleged that the individuals, some of whom were recruited by Iran as far back as 1999, received weapons and spying training at Iranian military facilities. The suspects were reportedly directed by the IRGC to stage attacks against Western embassies and their employees, including those of the U.S. and Israel.

In Bangkok, Thailand, on January 12, 2012, Thai police arrested Hussein Atris, a Lebanese man carrying a Swedish passport, at the Bangkok airport and raided a three-story commercial building to which he was linked, recovering bomb-making materials including 4,380kg of urea-based fertilizer and 290 liters of ammonium nitrate. These materials were believed to be intended for use in an attack in Thailand or to be shipped abroad for use elsewhere. According to Swedish media reports, one of his relatives, Germany resident Muhammad Atris, was involved in the Iranian assassination of four Kurdish opposition figures in 1992.

In Tblisi, Georgia, on February 13, 2012, a “sticky bomb” was affixed to a vehicle carrying an Israeli diplomat; the bomb was detected and diffused without causing harm.

In a rare coordinated attack, at approximately the same time as the failed bombing in Tblisi, a motorcyclist attached an almost identical “sticky bomb” to a minivan belonging to the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi. The explosion injured four people, including the wife of an Israeli Ministry of Defense representative. Reports indicate that the embassy may have been targeted and surveyed by an Indian national who used his press credentials to obtain access and escape scrutiny.

The next day, in Bangkok, Thailand, a cache of explosives kept in a rented house in downtown Bangkok by a group of Iranian nationals was detonated in an accidental explosion. An Iranian man, one of the occupants of the house, escaped armed with grenades, which he then threw at a taxi and at police, grievously wounding himself and causing no other casualties. Following the explosion and his attempt to flee, Thai authorities identified three other Iranians wanted in connection with the explosion, including a woman who had already returned to Iran, and arrested one Iranian national attempting to fly to Malaysia. Interestingly, telephonic analysis suggests a direct connection between the Bangkok and the New Delhi plots.

While the timing of some of these foiled plots around the world suggest a linkage to and retribution for the fourth anniversary of the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah’s infamously effective operational leader, they also seem to be calibrated to provide direct retaliation for the assassination of several Iranian nuclear scientists in Iran in recent months.

While these incidents all occurred overseas, another plot uncovered in the past six months has forced a recalculation of the odds that Iran and its surrogate, Hezbollah, might seek to strike out against targets on American soil if hostilities commenced in the Persian Gulf or even as the Iranian regime feels itself increasingly under pressure. This was the plot foiled last October –

obviously absent overt hostilities – in which a naturalized U.S. citizen of Iranian descent, directed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, hired an individual whom he thought was a member of a Mexican drug cartel to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States. The plan involved blowing up a Washington, D.C., restaurant—potentially killing hundreds of Americans in the process.

In the wake of this plot, the Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified in January to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that Iranian officials "are now more willing to conduct an attack in the United States in response to real or perceived U.S. actions that threaten the regime."

The NYPD has long been concerned about the possibility of asymmetrical attacks by Iran and/or Hezbollah occurring in New York City. Thus we also have spent significant time and effort studying the *modus operandi* of Iranian and Hezbollah terrorist attacks worldwide that occurred prior to the ones discussed above.

Most notable are the 1992 and 1994 bombings of Israeli and Jewish targets in Argentina, which killed 29 and 85 people, respectively. With this in mind, we sent a team to Argentina to study the *modus operandi* of those attacks and to meet with Argentine security officials who worked the investigations. Coupled with open source information, this is what the NYPD learned:

Iran has a proven record of using its official presence in a foreign city to coordinate attacks, which are then carried out by Hezbollah agents from abroad, often leveraging the local community—whether wittingly or not—as facilitators. In the Argentinian cases, Iranian agents were sent to Argentina years before the attacks, where they integrated into society and became Argentine nationals. For example, Mohsen Rabbani is believed to have been in charge of coordinating the 1994 attack and is subject to an Interpol arrest warrant for his involvement. He first came to Argentina, eleven years earlier, in 1983, where he subsequently became the main imam at At-Tauhid, an Iranian-funded mosque in Buenos Aires.

After traveling to Iran in August 1993 to participate in a meeting that allegedly gave the planned attack the green light, Mr. Rabbani returned to Argentina as a cultural attaché to the Iranian Embassy, conveniently providing him diplomatic immunity. Then, Hezbollah agents from abroad received logistical support from members of the local Lebanese-Shiite community and the Iranian Embassy to carry out the attack.

Besides a better understanding of the operational and logistical relationship between Iranian and Hezbollah personnel on the ground for these two attacks, our team returned from Buenos Aires with two other important takeaways: First, the high priority that the conspirators gave to hitting specifically Jewish and Israeli targets in a third country; and secondly, the strong belief that both of these attacks did not happen in Argentina by accident – rather they were designed to pressure Buenos Aires to resume nuclear cooperation with Iran – something Argentina had backed out from, under American pressure.

So now in 2012, with pressure from the United States and the West over Iran's nuclear program increasingly escalating, the NYPD must assume that New York City and its plethora of Jewish and Israeli targets could be targeted by Iran or Hezbollah in the event that hostilities break out in the Persian Gulf. Moreover, like Buenos Aires, the presence of Iran's U.N. mission in New York City allows officials from Iran's Ministry of Intelligence to live and operate in New York with official diplomatic cover.

We believe this is neither an idle nor a new threat. Between 2002 and 2010, the NYPD and federal authorities detected at least six events involving Iranian diplomatic personnel that we struggle to categorize as anything other than hostile reconnaissance of New York City.

The first event occurred in June of 2002 and involved Iranian Mission security guards. The second event occurred at 2AM on November 16, 2003 when uniformed NYPD officers riding a southbound 7 train observed two males filming the subway train tracks. The men, who initially claimed diplomatic immunity, turned out to be security guards at the Iranian Mission who had recently arrived in New York. Despite two warnings from the State Department about this inappropriate behavior, in May 2004, two more Iranian Mission security guards were observed videotaping infrastructure, public transportation and New York City landmarks. One month later, the guards were expelled by the United States for "engaging in activities that were not consistent with their duties" -- in other words, spying.

However, this official reprimand was not sufficient and suspicious activities by Iranian diplomatic personnel have continued. In May 2005, six individuals associated with the Government of Iran were interviewed by the NYPD in response to a lead called into the NYC safe hotline. The individuals were on a local sight-seeing cruise, and the captain of the ship deemed their behavior suspicious. The individuals had divided into groups of two, each with a map, while photographing and videotaping NYC landmarks such as the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges. They were also reportedly speaking on their cell phones in an unusual manner. Responding to the lead, the NYPD learned that one of the individuals was employed at the Permanent Mission of Iran to the UN, and the other five had diplomatic immunity based on their individual positions within the Iranian government. After sharing the information with federal authorities and conferring with the United Nations Law Enforcement division, the individuals were released without incident.

In September 2008, during the United Nations General Assembly, several members of the Iranian Delegation were observed taking photographs of the MTA railroad tracks inside of Grand Central Station. The NYPD was able to interview three of the individuals, who confirmed that they had been inside the station, but claimed that no photos were taken. One individual produced a camera that contained photos of the Brooklyn Bridge, a location the three had also visited. Again, the information was shared with federal authorities and the individuals were released without incident.

Finally, in September 2010, again during the United Nations General Assembly, Federal Air Marshals observed suspicious behavior at the Wall Street Heliport. Four individuals were

taking still photos and videotaping the waterline and structural area of the heliport landing pad from the vehicle parking lot area. According to the Air Marshals, the individuals were not behaving like other tourists at the location. For example, one individual held his camera at waist level while filming, and the footage was focused on the structure of the heliport instead of the actual helicopters coming in and out of the location. In a field interview, all four of the individuals stated they were employed at the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Company (IRIB), and produced UN Press access cards as identification. Information on the subjects was shared with the JTTF/NYC, NYPD Counter Terrorism Bureau and Intelligence Division, and the individuals were released without incident.

Moreover, the Iranian government also has an unofficial presence in New York via the Alavi Foundation, a nonprofit ostensibly devoted to charity works and promoting Islamic culture. In December 2009, Preet Bharara, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, described Alavi as having "effectively been a front for the government of Iran." A contemporaneous complaint filed by Mr. Bharara's office led to the seizure of Alavi's assets—including the Islamic Institute of New York, the largest Shiite mosque in the city and the location most closely affiliated with Iran's U.N. mission.

Hezbollah and its supporters have a presence in New York and the surrounding area as well. Their provision of aid to Hezbollah manifests in a variety of ways for this community of supporters. For example, in 2008, two Staten Island men pleaded guilty to providing material support to Hezbollah for hosting Hezbollah's satellite television channel, *al Manar*. In another notable case, 26 people—including a former Brooklyn resident—were indicted in federal court in Philadelphia in 2009 for conspiring to provide material support to the terrorist group by procuring weapons and using proceeds from the sale of fraudulent passports, counterfeit money and stolen money.

In addition, there have been some cases of Lebanese-linked businesses in the tri-state area and elsewhere being implicated in a variety of illegitimate and semi-legitimate business activities, including trademark counterfeiting, car exports, and money-laundering—all believed to be benefiting Hezbollah. The details of a massive money-laundering scheme were revealed in a civil suit filed against several Lebanese financial institutions, including the Lebanese Canadian Bank, last December by the Drug Enforcement Administration and the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

In light of what we have learned about events in Argentina and elsewhere, we must assume that familial, political, and military links between Hezbollah supporters in New York City and the Hezbollah organization in their towns of origin in Lebanon are robust and dynamic. For example, individuals of concern hail from Hezbollah strongholds in southern Lebanon, including towns like Bint Jbeil, Yaroun, and Yatar, which were the battlefields for Israeli forces and Hezbollah fighters in their 2006 war. Some individuals in New York are family members of Hezbollah political leaders or Hezbollah fighters who have been killed, are associates of known ranking members of Hezbollah, or have received military training from Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Simply put, the risk that Hezbollah agents from abroad would seek to leverage the local community in New York as facilitators —whether wittingly or not—must be considered.

Given a spate of recent Iranian-linked attacks abroad, the alleged IRGC plot against a foreign diplomat in Washington, Iran's increasingly bellicose rhetoric, and its long history of sponsoring terror attacks, the NYPD must remain vigilant in attempting to detect and disrupt any attack by Iran or its proxies. Anything less would be abdicating our duty to protect New York City and its residents.