

The United States and Iran: Intelligence Wars By Fred Burton

There has been a clear uptick in tensions between the United States and Iran recently. The most obvious aspect of this -- but the least interesting, in our view -- has been the escalation of rhetoric concerning Iran's nuclear program. Much more intriguing, from an intelligence perspective, is a series of lower-level events -- including the continuation of a spate of bombings in Khuzestan province, some creative blame-throwing by Iranian leaders over those bombings and over the recent explosion at the Golden Mosque in As Samarra, and the creation of a new Iran office at the U.S. State Department that will place special emphasis on a democratic transition in Tehran.

The public rhetoric is only one part of a much larger game that is always being played, and in which much of the action occurs in the shadows. It long has been our view that the nuclear program is not an end in itself for Iran; if Tehran really wanted to develop nuclear weapons, it would do so with utter secrecy. Rather, it is a mechanism that can be used as political leverage as Tehran pursues other goals. Like North Korea, Iran has found discussion of its nuclear program useful for cranking up or turning down tensions with West, and, in this case, for managing the way it is perceived within the Muslim world. To the extent that the matter is publicly discussed, the nuclear issue is basically a sideshow.

But Iran, like all nation-states, has other tools as well -- and its intelligence apparatus is an important one. Whether friends or enemies, states are constantly collecting intelligence against each other. Given certain geopolitical realities -- including the situation in Baghdad, where Iranian influence is strong but certainly not as strong as Tehran has dreamed it might become, and Iran's support for Hezbollah -- there is every reason to believe at this juncture that intelligence collection is being stepped up on both sides. What is intriguing about Tehran's reactions to the mosque bombing in Iraq, the attacks in Khuzestan and other events is that its statements on these events convey the mindset of the regime -- both its fears and what it sees as its options -- more clearly than the highly public and carefully orchestrated exchanges over the nuclear program.

In short, it appears the stage is being set on the tactical side for a covert intelligence war. If history serves as any guide, the implications of such a shift could be far-reaching: Following the 1979 revolution, Iran engaged in an assassination campaign that targeted Iranian dissidents around the world as well as Western and Jewish diplomats and businessmen, sometimes in retaliation for what it viewed as strikes against Iranian interests by Western intelligence agents. Certainly the rules of the game have changed significantly for the post-9/11 world, but a covert campaign, particularly of the sort that has been successful in the past, well could remain a viable option if an embattled Tehran feels the need to start pushing back at the West.

A History of Covert Campaigns

Western intelligence agencies first became aware of Tehran's covert campaign against its enemies soon after the revolution. The first targets were Iranian monarchists in exile, who were trying to foment a

counterrevolution in Iran. Later, after many of these opponents had been eliminated and the threat brought under control, the Ministry of Information and Security (MOIS) shifted its sights to target exiled dissidents and other opponents of the regime. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, influential leaders of these groups were targeted and assassinated in a sophisticated campaign that spanned the globe.

It is interesting to note the tactics that were used in these strikes. Although Hezbollah pioneered the use of suicide bombings during the 1980s, and certainly was acting for Iran's interests at that time, there was a very different signature to MOIS assassinations. These frequently employed stealth and deception to get the assassins within close range of their targets -- close enough to kill them with pistols or knives, often in the target's home. Though many Iranian agents were caught in time, most escaped serious consequences. Meanwhile, dozens of the ayatollahs' political opponents were killed or injured in France, Italy, Germany, Turkey, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and other places.

Iranian agents also engaged in more overt attacks, including kidnappings, highly public shootings and grenade attacks in public places, and bombings. Hezbollah was quite active on this front; notable actions included the abductions of CIA station chief William F. Buckley in 1984 and U.S. Marine Lt. Col. William R. Higgins in 1988 (both men died in captivity) and the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina. That strike was in retaliation for the death of a Hezbollah leader, Abbas Musawi, who was killed by Israeli forces in an ambush.

Another significant action, never publicly linked to the Iranians, was a well-planned strike in 1995 against U.S. consulate employees in Karachi, Pakistan. A van shuttling the employees to the consulate was ambushed and blockaded by three vehicles: a "blocking car" that cut the van off in traffic, another that boxed it in from behind, and a command-and-control vehicle from which observers never emerged. Gunmen from the first two cars slowly and methodically paced the sides of the consulate van, taking careful aim at the passengers before opening fire with their assault rifles. Two consulate employees were killed, and a third was wounded. It is believed that the MOIS staged the Karachi attack in response to the killing of an Iranian agent, for which the United States was blamed.

Covert campaigns of this sort are an important tool for a country like Iran, which has a sophisticated and highly disciplined intelligence service but which could not afford to risk an overwhelming military strike by the United States. Kidnappings and assassinations, carried out with sufficient deniability, have proved an effective way of eliminating enemies and leveraging the country's geopolitical position without incurring unacceptable risk.

Intelligence Tactics

This history of operations has had significant implications for intelligence missions on both sides of the fence.

For the United States, intelligence efforts would include maintaining databases on every known Iranian diplomat around the world, seeking to

identify which ones are also MOIS agents. These files would be continually updated with information about the officials' personal lives, travel patterns and meeting partners. The nuclear program and potential links between Iran and militant groups in other countries also would be areas of focus. The United States could expect assistance with collections from Israel's Mossad, which has always had a robust collection operation on Iran, and from friendly Arab services such as the Jordanians and Egyptians.

Technical means of collection also would be brought to bear: satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles and communication intercepts. All U.S. national assets, including signals intelligence (sigint), imagery intelligence (imint) and human intelligence sources (humint), would be used to correlate information flowing in, in order to form as complete a picture as possible of what the Iranians are doing and what they are likely to do next.

Given its connections to militant groups like Hezbollah, Iran has shaped its collection efforts in the past toward gathering information on potential targets and planning possible retaliatory attacks. In today's setting, collections likely would be conducted by MOIS as well as by Hezbollah agents and Iranian proxies active in Iraq. If strikes were to be carried out, they likely would consist of easily deniable one-off hits and possibly attacks against the assets of governments allied with Washington or American proxies in the region. Strikes against U.S. and British troops in Iraq also would be a possibility. Target selection would be tied to what types of attacks would send the most appropriate signal to the West. It would be imperative that Iran's involvement in the action was not immediately obvious, but could be revealed to or discovered by Western intelligence after the fact.

The Game Today

All of which brings us back to recent developments and what it is that Iran seems to be thinking.

First, there was the Feb. 22 bombing of the Golden Mosque in As Samarra, a highly significant Shiite shrine. One of the interesting things about the attack was that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei very quickly, and very publicly, blamed the United States and Israel for the bombing, while urging Iraqi Shia not to retaliate against their Sunni countrymen. The statement was attention-getting, considering the degree to which the United States and Iran were cooperating on Iraqi matters prior to the Iraqi elections in December 2005. Khamenei clearly was reiterating to Washington something that has been said before: Iran, with its influence over the Shiite majority, has the means to create considerable problems for the United States in Iraq if that should become necessary. The fact that others have said this as well -- notably senior diplomat and former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani -- signals the level of unease that Tehran has in its dealings with Washington.

Iran also has continued to blame "foreigners" for a continuing string of bombings in Khuzestan province, in the oil-producing southwestern region just across the Shatt al Arab from Iraq. The attacks began last summer, around the time of Iran's presidential elections, and ethnic Arab separatists -- the majority group in the province -- have claimed

responsibility for some of the bombings. Given Khuzestan's economic significance to Iran, Tehran is particularly sensitive to any instability there. And at least partly because of Khuzestan's proximity to the part of Iraq occupied by British forces, Tehran suspects that dissidents in the province are receiving covert support from MI6 -- which, from an intelligence perspective, is virtually synonymous with the CIA.

In recent weeks, Tehran has shown itself capable of some truly spectacular contortions in its claims about the activities of Western intelligence units. Among other statements, Iran's interior minister recently claimed that Tehran had "specific intelligence" proving that U.S. agents have infiltrated al Qaeda and now are ordering terrorist attacks as part of their attempts to prove their bona fides. During the same speech, the minister -- Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, who had a long career with Iran's secret police and intelligence agencies -- said that large amounts of explosives found in one of Khuzestan's cities indicated that "there was an extensive plan to deal a blow to the Islamic Republic." Though he did not supply details, the statement itself would seem to indicate that Tehran fears -- or wants to generate fears of -- an escalation in what has been a relatively low-level bombing campaign up to this point.

Iranian media also have carried several claims during the past year that Western agents have been caught spying inside Iran, that U.S. reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicles and manned aircraft have overflowed its airspace, and even that the British have erected towers on the Fao Peninsula to collect sigint from Khuzestan province.

The claims, or at least the fears behind them, are not illogical. Certainly, Tehran is not deriving any comfort from the fact that the U.S. State Department is now creating an Office of Iran Affairs and publicly has stated that one of its purposes will be to promote a democratic transition in Tehran. Up to this point, the State Department has treated Iran as part of a larger bloc of Persian Gulf states; there are only a small number -- less than a dozen -- countries that have their own regional "office" in this sense. The move reflects the importance the Bush administration is placing on Iran as a long-term priority. Or, from Tehran's viewpoint, Washington is stepping up the pressure as well.

With this in mind, it is noteworthy that there have been reports of more executions in Iran of late. According to Amnesty International, Tehran carried out 29 executions in January and February -- nearly one-third of the total (94) in the entirety of 2005. By itself, of course, this statistic means little; Amnesty's reporting could be wrong, or the rate of executions might drop off later in the year, and so forth. And, of course, executions in Iran can be carried out for a wide variety of crimes, and the number of political dissidents among the total is not known.

Nonetheless, this is an indicator worth monitoring. As history has shown, political dissidents are among the first to be targeted when the Iranian regime feels threatened. That is no accident, as it is members

of dissident groups who are most likely in Tehran's eyes to be working with foreign intelligence agents seeking to destabilize the regime.

Should Iran's true level of tensions with the West continue to escalate, it is possible that Tehran might return to tactics it has used successfully in the past to safeguard its interests. The movement, then, would not come in the public sphere of nuclear discussions and rhetoric, but in other, much quieter ways around the globe.