

# **Implications of the ISIS Attacks in Tehran**

**Ely Karmon**

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The sophisticated ISIS attack in Tehran is a major operational success for the group. This is an early attempt to analyze the event based only on Iranian official sources.

After two years of efforts, first to penetrate the well-guarded Iranian border with Iraq, then build an infrastructure in the Sunni provinces of Ahwaz (or Arabistan), Kurdistan and Baluchistan from where to reach the capital Tehran, ISIS finally succeeded to strike at the heart of the Islamic Republic's symbols, during the holy month of Ramadan: Ayatollah Khomeini's mausoleum and the Parliament, and probably a third target of civil infrastructure.

It is of note that on March 26, 2017, ISIS published a 37-minute video accusing Iranian Shi'ites of committing many crimes against Sunnis and oppressing the Sunni population of Iran, "exporting the revolution," spreading Shi'ism, and secretly collaborating with the US and Israel. The video ends with a statement: "We tell you, oh Zoroastrian Rafidites: Our hands are not far from you. Just as you tasted our power in Iraq and Syria, thus, Allah willing, we will conquer Persia and restore it as a Sunni country."

Last year Iranian authorities foiled a plot by Sunni militants to bomb targets in Tehran and other cities during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

For the background on this period, see this author's article "ISIS and the Sunni Separatists Aim Fire at Iran," published on June 7 at <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2022/is-is-and-the-sunni-separatists-aim-fire-at-iran>

## **Operational aspects of the attacks**

The Iranian intelligence ministry announced that three terrorist teams attempted to launch attacks in different parts of Tehran adding that members of a terrorist group were arrested before taking any actions (the foiled third attack possibly involved an underground station near the mausoleum).

Four gunmen dressed as women burst through Tehran parliament's main entrance by shelling security, killing at least two guards, deputy interior minister

Mohammad Hossein Zolfaghari said. The shooting reportedly continued inside the building and then the suicide blast occurred. Two terrorists were captured and one of the attackers blew himself up inside the building, which was under renovation for security improvements. None of the Iranian lawmakers or staff members were injured by the attack on the parliament.

Several attackers, probably three, raided the shrine of the late founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, South of the capital Tehran. The attackers started shooting at the visitors of the shrine. One of the attackers detonated himself in front of a police station opposite the shrine, killing one person while a second attacker was shot dead by security guards. The shrine is a main destination for tourists and religious pilgrims. According to Iranian news agencies, one attacker has killed himself by swallowing a cyanide pill, although another account said the militant had been shot to death by security forces. Three guards were wounded. A female assailant was arrested at the mausoleum.

The attacks killed at least 17 people and wounded over 40.

ISIS claimed its first attack in Iran, reporting through 'Amaq that its fighters hit the Khomeini shrine and parliament in Tehran. A video purportedly from inside the parliament building was posted by ISIS, although Iranian authorities claimed it is fake.

Iran's Intelligence Ministry, [in a statement on June 8](#), revealed the first names of five killed Iranian terrorists: Abu Jahad, Ghayom, Fereidoun, Saryas and Ramin, but for "social and security considerations" their family names were not exposed. The terrorists were affiliated to "Wahabi and Takfiri groups who joined Daesh terrorist group overseas and were red handed in the crimes of the terrorist group in Mosul of Iraq and Raqqah in Syria." They penetrated into Iran in August 2016 under the command of Abu Ayeshe, a top ISIS commander, in order to carry out terrorist operations in Iran's religious cities. But after annihilation of the network and killing of Abu Ayeshe they escaped from Iran. The ministry did not identify the men's hometowns, nor say how they were able to evade authorities.

Significantly, the March 2017 ISIS video staged one Abu Faruq al-Farisi, speaking Farsi, Abu Mujahid al-Baluchi, speaking Baluchi, and Abu Sa'd al-Ahwazi (from the Ahwaz region). The three speakers call on Iranian Sunnis to rise up against the current Iranian regime and "join the path of jihad." The group is comprised of "Persian" fighters belonging to the Salman Al-Farisi Brigade, training in urban combat.

The Tehran attacks resemble the famous November 2008 Mumbai terror operation, when 10 members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, an Islamist militant organization based in Pakistan, carried out a series of 12 coordinated shooting and bombing attacks lasting four days across the city (Lashkar-e-Taiba attacked also the Indian Parliament in New Delhi in December 2001).

*However, if the planning of the attack seems brilliant, less so its execution.*

Although the gunmen, at least seven, were armed with automatic weapons and explosive belts, the number of casualties was relatively low, compared with other such attacks. They run out of AK-47 bullets quite quickly and switched to handguns. The belt explosives were used against isolated policemen and guards but not crowded civilians. The hostage situation to extend the event and negotiate with the authorities did not materialize, as it is not clear at all if the terrorists intended to take hostages. They did not reach the Majlis (parliament) amphitheater where the parliament members continued their deliberations. One terrorist in the parliament exposed himself foolishly at a window while firing on guards on the ground below. Iranian police arrested six suspects (possibly also outside the two attacked targets), a fact that will permit the authorities to thoroughly investigate the plot.

## **Political and strategic implications**

### *The internal arena*

There is need of more information about the ethnic composition and the background of the individuals involved in the attacks for a better understanding of its internal implications and especially the possible cooperation of ISIS with Ahwazi or Baluchi separatists.

On September 27, 2016, *Pars News* reported that security forces had killed the new leader of ISIS in Iran, code-named "Abu Aisha al-Kurdi," in one of the border cities of Kermanshah. He was supposed to be announced as the emir of Daesh [ISIS] in Iran.

Abu Aisha al-Kurdi is probably the man identified by the Iran's Intelligence Ministry, above, as the original leader of the cell which was responsible for the twin June 7 attacks.

On June 11, Iran's Intelligence Minister informed that "the mastermind and main commander" behind the twin attacks in Tehran on June 7 was killed by Iranian security forces. He fled the country (probably to Iraq or Iraqi Kurdistan) and was

caught “with help from friendly intelligence services.” Mahmoud Alavi maintained that 42, 43 terrorists were identified and arrested following the attacks, some of them in connection with the Tehran twin attacks and some of them planning terrorist acts in the future. “Over 100 terrorist plots have been neutralized in Iran; this shows the skill of security, military and police forces that can identify terrorists with no specific features and signs,” he stressed.

According to other sources Iranian forces have captured at least 62 suspects and also seized lots of weapons and explosive devices.

The Ministry of Intelligence identified one gunman, Serias Sadeghi, as an Iranian Kurd from the city of Paveh, in the country’s west near the Iraqi border. A community leader from Paveh confirmed that some of the attackers were from there.

A video posted on the ISIS media channel Amaq News shows a group of five men with their leader, possibly Sadeghi, dressed in black with his face masked, claiming responsibility for the attacks in both Arabic and Kurdish. “This is a message from the soldiers of Islamic State in Iran, soldiers of the first brigade of Islamic State in Iran which, God willing, won’t be the last,” the man says. “This brigade will mark the start of jihad in Iran, and we call on our Muslim brothers to join us.” He concluded his message with a threat to Saudi Arabia, saying that it, too, would be targeted.

The Kurdish connection is now clear and it validates this author’s evaluation that ISIS cells and terrorists could cooperate with or join Sunni separatist movements in Ahwaz, Kurdistan and Baluchistan, and thus increase the efficiency and the lethality of the attacks inside Iran.

A violent backlash against the Kurdish minority in Iran by the IRGC could be one of the results of the Tehran attacks. This poses a major threat to the stability of the regime, as it could develop into a sectarian civil war similar to the one in Iraq or Syria.

One important issue in this context, not really tackled by the intelligence and academic experts, is the attitude and the political trends vis-à-vis the regime among the Shiite Azeris, the largest minority ethnic group in Iran, representing according to different evaluations some 16% to 25% of the population.

The attacks destroyed the myth the Iranian security and defense authorities tried to build: Iran as an island of stability, beyond ISIS’s reach.

Elena Dunaeva, senior research fellow with the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Oriental Studies, [described the terrorist attacks](#) as a very strong and very tough blow to the very heart of Iran, just as its importance and prestige in the international arena were growing. It demonstrated that Iran is not fully protected and ceases to be the most stable country in the Middle East.

Political attempts of downplaying the significance of the event for Iran's internal stability already began.

Iran's Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, who continued to chair a session of the Parliament gathered in the attacked building, said after the attacks that terrorist shooting inside parliament was a "minor incident."

In a meeting with university students in Tehran several hours after the attacks, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, declared: "The Iranian nation is moving forward. These fireworks that happened today will have no impact on the people's resolve. They are too weak to affect the will of the Iranian nation and that of the officials."

The attacks could [exacerbate tensions in Iran](#) between newly re-elected President Hassan Rouhani, who positions himself as a reformer, and hardline clergy, judiciary and the Revolutionary Guards. Rouhani said Iran would be more united and more determined in the fight against regional terrorism and violence. "We will prove once again that we will crush the enemies' plots with more unity and more strength," he said.

In an appeal for unity, Rouhani's chief of staff, Hamid Aboutalebi, took to Twitter to praise the security services. "Applause to the power and firmness of our revolutionary guards, Basij (volunteer militia), police and security forces," he wrote.

However, two senior government officials, who asked not to be named, said the attacks might prompt a blame game. "They (hardliners) are very angry and will use every opportunity to grow in strength to isolate Rouhani," said one. The other said the attacks would push Iran towards "a harsher regional policy."

The attacks were a serious blow to the security forces and high-level people in the security establishment could pay the price for the failure.

However, in light of the opposition of large parts of the Iranian people to Iran's regional interventions in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Palestine, as expressed during the

two election campaigns of President Rouhani, pressure could grow to get Iran out of Syria and Iraq and reduce its footprint in interventions with groups fighting Israel.

### ***International aspects***

The attacks could push Iran, under IRGC pressure, towards "a harsher regional policy" against ISIS, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps accused Riyadh of being behind the attacks and vowed to seek revenge. "This terrorist attack happened only a week after the meeting between the US president (Donald Trump) and the (Saudi) backward leaders who support terrorists. The fact that Daesh has claimed responsibility proves that they were involved in the brutal attack," an IRGC statement said.

President Donald Trump said in a statement that he prayed for the victims of the attacks but added that "states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote." The US State Department and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres both condemned the attacks.

Iran Foreign Minister, Zarif, said Trump's reaction to Tehran terror attacks was "repugnant."

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir said he did not know who was responsible for the attacks and said there was no evidence Saudi extremists were involved.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, in a phone conversation with Rouhani, extended his sympathy over the tragic incidents, and said the attacks on Tehran once again proved the necessity for promotion of international cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

The international messages of condemnation of the deadly attacks and sympathy for the Iranian people should not obscure Iran's and its Shiite militias' nefarious role in the civil wars in Syria, Iraq or Yemen, nor should they overlook [Iran's and Hezbollah's international terrorism in 2012](#), against Israel, the US and local targets in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Thailand, India, Kenya, Nigeria, Georgia, and other places on the globe, or the 2014 plots in Thailand and Peru.