



INSS Insight No. 356, July 24, 2012

Behind the International Terrorism Campaign of Hizbollah and Iran

Yoram Schweitzer

The deadly terrorist attack in Burgas, Bulgaria, which killed five Israeli tourists and one Bulgarian citizen, is part of a combined, planned, and ongoing terror campaign waged by Iran and Hizbollah in the international arena over the last year against Israeli and Jewish targets. The immediate background is the desire for revenge and the drive to create a balance of terror against Israel in light of what Iran and Hizbollah see as Israel's campaign against them. Nevertheless, the central question is whether behind this deliberate provocation there is a strategy designed to serve a broader Iranian interest.

Hizbollah's international terrorism campaign against Israel began shortly after the February 2008 assassination in Damascus of Imad Mughniyeh, Hizbollah's most senior military commander, who for over two decades, with Iranian support, directed Hizbollah's campaign of terror, both in Lebanon and throughout the world. Hizbollah and its Iranian patron, for whom Mughniyeh was the most trusted member in the Lebanese organization, attributed his death to Israel. Already during the mourning period for Mughniyeh, Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah swore publicly to avenge the death of his right hand man and promised that his organization would not rest until it had exacted a very heavy price of Israel. And indeed, the organization tried – unsuccessfully, until the attack in Bulgaria – to realize this threat in several countries, including Azerbaijan, Egypt, Turkey, Thailand, and Cyprus.

Iran's recent direct involvement in this Hizbollah activity was given public expression by an admission by leaders of the Lebanese organization whereby Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei is the highest religious authority who approves actions with strategic significance, including terrorist attacks abroad. With the seal of approval of Islamic law, commanding officers in Iran's Revolutionary Guards operating in Lebanon and Iran are entrusted with approving and coordinating the operational side of these missions. Alongside Hizbollah's apparatus for terrorist attacks abroad, Iran itself has joined in directly operating the terrorist campaign against Israel by means of their own agents and local proxies in various countries. In 2012 there were attempted attacks by Iran in Azerbaijan, Turkey, India, Thailand, and Kenya. However, except for one attack in New

Delhi in February 2012, in which the wife of an Israeli diplomat was wounded, all the attempts were intercepted. Perhaps this record propelled the Iranians to take meticulous care in the Burgas attack in order to guarantee success, so as to rehabilitate their wounded prestige and ensure that their violent message for Israel would be heard loud and clear by the country's leaders. Moreover, the message is not limited to Israel, but is also meant to signal the leaders of the international coalition committed to sanctions against Iran, that Iran is again capable of using the international terrorism weapon as it did for over a decade and a half after the rise of the regime of the ayatollahs.

At this stage it is hard to determine definitively what Iranian strategy underpins its deliberate provocation via Hizbollah against Israel. Presumably the critical situation in Iran – with its nuclear scientists harmed on Iranian soil and its nuclear industry under cyber attack, with clear threats of impending military attack knocking at its doors and the movement of American battleships in the Gulf threatening Iran's hegemony there, with the economic siege tightening its grip as part of the international sanctions campaign – is partly responsible for tipping the decision by Iranian leaders to embark on an international campaign of terrorism. This weapon allows it to send threatening messages while at the same time preserving plausible deniability. Furthermore, it may be that Iran decided to act to end the calm on the Israeli-Lebanese front that has been maintained over the past six years, since the end of the Second Lebanon War. What is clear is that unlike the situation that has prevailed along the Lebanese-Israeli border, Israel's deterrence against Hizbollah has not been effective with regard to its activities against Israeli targets abroad over the past four years.

The challenge facing the Israeli intelligence community is identifying whether the combined terrorist campaign abroad is meant to signal Israel that Iran will not tolerate Israeli aggression towards it, and that harming Israeli targets abroad will end only when Israel also ends its activities against Iran and Hizbollah, or whether Iran's considerations are broader. It may be that Iran is determined to draw Israel into a harsh reaction against Hizbollah in Lebanon in response to terrorist attacks abroad. This could drag Israel into an all-out war in Lebanon, which would take a heavy toll on Hizbollah but also on Israel and divert it from preparations for what is seen in Tehran as Israel's immediate intention to attack Iran, and perhaps even intended to divert attention away from what is happening the backyard of its ally, Syria. It may be that information gained from the Hizbollah operative detained in Limassol after the recent discovery of the plot to launch another terrorist attack by a Hizbollah cell against Israeli targets in Cyprus may shed light on Iran's true intentions. According to media reports, he was in possession of intelligence about Israeli tourists and an Israeli plane landing on the island. Should it become clear that the intention of the cell was to harm tourists, perhaps even in tandem with the attack in Bulgaria, and certainly if an attack against an Israeli airplane was planned that would have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Israelis, this would have constituted a *casus belli* and Israel

would have been forced to respond very harshly against Hizbollah in Lebanon and perhaps also against Iran.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's declaration immediately after the attack that Iran is responsible for the international terrorist campaign against Israel and that Israel would respond to the attack is part of Israel's concerted campaign to denounce Iran's rogue involvement in terrorism and nuclear arms development. Nonetheless, the upheavals in the states surrounding Israel and the general regional instability confront Israel with complex security challenges, requiring its leaders to consider, clearly and soberly, Israel's responses to intentional provocations by terrorist organizations operating against the country, at times in the service of foreign interests. These elements would like to see Israel embroiled in fighting with its neighbors, and precisely for this reason it is best for Israel to adopt a restrained policy and respond at a time of its own choosing, in a targeted and covert fashion, against the perpetrators and those who dispatch them, rather than be drawn into a violent war that can only help elements on the losing side of historic processes. These would like to divert the rage directed at them towards Israel. Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah are certainly interested in doing so, and Israel must not play into their hands.

