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Iran's other ticking time bomb

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By William Wunderle and Gabriel Lajeunesse

As the new American administration completes its review of strategy vis-a-vis Iran, policymakers would be advised not to fixate on a nuclear threat that all agree is one to five years away from realization. President Barack Obama's recent attempt to reach out to Iran is part of a correct push for engagement; yet if Iran does not change its behavior, robust action will be needed. This should include significant and simultaneous actions to address the other Iranian threat that could drag the world into regional conflagration in the Middle East at any moment - what we call "Iranian malign influence."

Nowhere is the threat of strategic miscalculation spurred by Iranian-sponsored terror as great as it is in the Levant - in Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egyptian Sinai, Jordan and the Palestinian territories. The Al-Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps provides hundreds of millions of dollars to Hezbollah each year, along with arms, including medium-range rockets and surface-to-air missiles. These transfers violate UN Security Council Resolution 1747, which prohibited Iran from transporting arms or related material, in light of Iranian proliferation concerns. Iran transports this lethal aid overland through neighboring countries, such as Turkey, or by sea, as seen in the recent case of the Cypriot-flagged ship the Monchegorsk.

Iranian aid allowed Hezbollah to carry out rocket attacks on Israel that provoked armed conflict in 2006. It also strengthened Hezbollah's position at home, facilitating the organization's "coup" in Beirut last May, when Hezbollah gunmen gained power after taking to Beirut's streets following a showdown with the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. With elections set for Lebanon this June, the country is a powder keg waiting to explode under the weight of Iranian pressure and manipulation.

Similarly, Hamas leaders have attributed their improving rocket technology and general military prowess to training by the Al-Quds Force. Iran's incitement in Gaza led to catastrophic results earlier this year, as Israeli forces conducted operations in the Strip intended to destroy the sanctuary of Hamas rocket-launching teams.
In Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran's adventurism puts hopes of regional stability at risk. Information extracted from captured terrorist leaders, Lebanese Hezbollah operatives, Iranian Al-Quds Force officers, and analysis of arms caches reveal a pattern of Iranian proxy warfare under way against the U.S. in both countries. Iranian support has also fueled sectarian violence in Iraq.

The Al-Quds Force has provided lethal support to the Taliban in Afghanistan and Shi'ite militants in Iraq, in the form of weapons, training, funding and direction. For example, it is now known that such Hezbollah operatives as Ali Mussa Daqduq were dispatched to Iraq to assist the Al-Quds Force develop terror cells there, modeled on those of the Lebanese group. In addition to Iran's support to the Taliban, information declassified in the recent January 16 U.S. Treasury financial designations of Al-Qaida leaders reveals that Iran has had a clandestine relationship with Al-Qaida dating back to the 1990s, and that it continues to harbor prominent members of that organization.

Iran's malign interference in regional affairs is not limited to the Levant, Iraq and Afghanistan, but has extended at various times to support for terrorists and militants involved in destabilizing Turkey, Azerbaijan, Sudan and the Gulf states. This capacity for asymmetric warfare breeds an exaggerated confidence among Iranian leaders, who believe that the days of a renewed Persian empire are imminent.

Yet Iran is not inviolable. In fact, its reliance on human intelligence and covert operations is a critical vulnerability that is susceptible to direct and indirect influence. To exploit this vulnerability, however, the international community - and Middle East leaders in particular - must acknowledge the threat posed by Iranian agents, dedicate the proper resources to the problem, and then work together to identify and neutralize Al-Quds Forces and operations. While the governments of Israel, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Morocco have been ratcheting up pressure on Iranian networks, far more multilateral cooperation and intelligence sharing is needed. Regional law-enforcement and intelligence officers, for example, must pay careful attention to Al-Quds Force officers working out of Iranian diplomatic establishments, commercial entities and other establishments that provide non-official cover. Front companies can be identified and closed, finances seized, diplomats declared personae non gratae, and officers in non-official cover positions arrested or detained.

The international community must be diligent, and work with regional leaders to press Iran to renounce its interventionist
methods, and to neutralize Al-Quds Force and its proxies. Without increased international pressure, Iran will continue to provide support to terrorists, revolutionaries and insurgents, and will use violence and the threat of violence as a means of bullying its neighbors.

Iran's current course needs serious correction. This effort cannot wait and must occur in concert with the effort to deal with Iran's nuclear aspirations. Members of the international community must work together to stand up to Iranian malign influence and aggression before Iran drags the world into additional conflict in the Middle East.

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