Terror Attacks in Tehran: an Evolving Iranian Security Landscape

Overview

Iran enjoyed nearly a decade without experiencing a major terror event, but following several recent attacks, it is clear the country remains susceptible to the threat of terrorism. On June 7, the Iranian parliament and the Khomeini mausoleum in Tehran were the targets of a complex attack, resulting in 17 deaths and 43 injuries over the course of several hours. Several additional, smaller attacks have occurred since then. This report will explore the severity of these attacks, their implications for OSAC constituents, and the broader terror threat landscape in Iran.

The June 7 Tehran Attacks

Early on June 7, two Iranian news agencies began reporting on a shooting taking place at the Iranian parliament in Tehran. More official news sources soon verified the story’s legitimacy and, despite conflicting reports of the number attackers involved, media concluded that four assailants were involved in the gun attacks on parliament. Within the first hour of this reporting, news of a near-simultaneous attack inside the mausoleum of the Iranian revolutionary founder, Ruhollah Khomeini, began to circulate as well. One of the attackers at the parliament complex blew himself up; at the mausoleum, a female suicide bomber did the same. The gun attacks were ongoing for several hours before an Iranian official announced that security forces had surrounded the parliament attackers.

Approximately four hours after the attack began, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) claimed responsibility. Shortly after, it posted a video through its news agency, Al-Amaq, showing one of the gunmen at parliament. The Sunni group then released a statement threatening to conduct more attacks against Shi’a Iran, highlighting continued ISIS targeting of non-Sunni Muslim populations.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard quickly promised to retaliate against ISIS. It did so by launching ballistic missiles into eastern Syria, targeting ISIS fighters. Iran spent the following week making numerous arrests. On June 8, Iranian security services identified five suspects who had apparently joined ISIS in Iraq and Syria before returning in the summer of 2016. As of June 11, just four days after the attacks, the country had arrested approximately 50 people suspected of having connections to the Tehran attacks. News also circulated about a purported third terrorist plot that had been foiled by the Iranian intelligence ministry.

The Future of Terrorism in Iran

The risk of terrorism continues in Iran, as demonstrated by this recent incident. Extremists may attempt to carry out attacks anywhere, but tourist locations tend to be targeted more frequently. However, the last successful major attack in the country prior to the June 7 attacks was a suicide operation in 2010 in the southeastern Sistan-Baluchistan province, which borders Pakistan and Afghanistan. Bombings and small-scale attacks are common in this region in
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Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei dismissed the attacks as merely “fireworks” that mean nothing for Iran’s security landscape and would not weaken the country’s fight against terrorism. However, Iran also arrested a group with ties to ISIS on June 24, reportedly disrupting plans to complete suicide attacks and bombings in various religious centers in the country.

In the month after the complex attack in Tehran, Iran experienced a few smaller-scale terror events. One incident occurred on July 15, when police forces shot a man who attacked several people with a knife on a metro train in Tehran. Another occurred on July 16, in cross-border fire from Pakistan that killed two Iranians. The attack was said to be conducted by a Pakistani insurgents with possible ties to al-Qa’ida.

The Iran-Iraq border is also at potential risk for spillover violence. As Iraq declared victory over ISIS on July 9 by liberating Mosul, there is the potential for remaining ISIS fighters to return to their home countries and/or focus on conducting operations elsewhere in the region. Iran’s proximity to the fighting in Iraq and Syria combined with its ISIS-targeted Shi’ite population means there is a significant risk for ISIS targeting in-country.

Overall, Iran appears to be experiencing an uptick in terror attacks. Despite the country’s denial of any internal terror plotting, several terror cells may be operating inside Iran or at least plotting attacks against Iran. On July 17, 14 Kuwaitis who had recently been convicted of forming a terror cell with ties to Tehran fled Kuwait for Iran. Although they were purportedly plotting attacks in Kuwait, they had reportedly been trained in Iran.

U.S. Iran-Relations and Implications

Western travelers should always be wary when traveling to Iran, due to prevalent anti-Western sentiment. In the near term, this sentiment will likely be exacerbated, as Iran’s Revolutionary Guard claimed that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia were involved in the June 7 attacks—a claim made in relation to President Trump’s recent visit to Saudi Arabia. In a statement released on June 9, Khamenei declared that the attacks only “reinforce hatred” for the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. On June 28, Iran also responded to the U.S. travel ban on nationals from six majority-Muslim countries by promising to take “reciprocal action”.

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The U.S. does not maintain any diplomatic or consular relations with Iran; travelers are not able to get assistance from the U.S. while traveling the country. (The U.S. does operate a “virtual embassy,” which serves as a “primary official resource for the Iranian people to get information directly from the U.S. government about U.S. policy and American values and culture,” but “is not a formal diplomatic mission, nor does it represent or describe a real U.S. Embassy accredited to the Iranian Government.”) The Swiss Embassy in Tehran can serve U.S. citizens in case of any major issues, but their reach is limited, and the Iranian government does not allow this embassy to provide services to those holding both U.S. and Iranian citizenship. It is highly common for dual national Iranian-Americans to be negatively treated in Iran. Detention and prevention from leaving Iran are common risks for dual nationals.

Recently, the U.S. discussed the potential of categorizing Iran’s Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization. On July 17, a senior commander of the powerful security force threatened that such designation “could be perilous for U.S. forces in the region,” highlighting a negative trend in already adverse relations between the two countries.

If operating in or sending travelers to Iran, organizations should consider the difficult security environment for U.S. citizens. Iranian security forces have arrested numerous U.S. citizens holding dual citizenship within the last year. The most recent case occurred on July 17, in which Iran imprisoned a Chinese-American dual national for 10 years after accusing him of espionage. The June 7 Tehran attacks and recent political events only served to worsen tension between the two countries. Therefore, the threat to U.S. citizens in Iran remains high.

For Further Information

For additional information on this report and other developments in Iran and across the region, please contact OSAC’s Middle East and North Africa Analyst.

- U.S. Virtual Embassy Iran
- Iran Travel Warning
- Executive Order on Visas
- U.S. Department of State Country Information
- Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP)