

Terror attack in Iran exacerbates war tensions in Gulf

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Nineteen people, including all six assailants, were killed as the result of a coordinated terrorist attack Wednesday morning that targeted Iran's Parliament complex in central Tehran and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic's founder-leader, some 15 miles to the south.

The attack, which took Iranian elite forces close to two hours to end, also wounded 43 people, some gravely.

Islamic State (ISIS) quickly claimed responsibility for the twin assaults, which showed a considerable degree of sophistication. The assailants, five men and a woman, were armed with AK-47s, hand grenades and explosive vests.

ISIS has long vowed to target Iran. Not only does the Sunni fundamentalist terror group view Shiite Muslims (who comprise the vast majority of Iran's population) as apostates, but Iranian fighters and logistical support have played a major role in the Syrian government's largely successful military campaign against ISIS.

Yesterday's attack comes in the midst of a major geopolitical crisis in the Middle East, triggered by Saudi Arabia's attempt to force Qatar, a tiny oil-rich Gulf emirate, to drastically curtail its economic and diplomatic relations with Iran. On Monday, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Maldives and the embattled Saudi-supported government of Yemen severed all relations with Qatar and initiated an economic blockade against it—punitive measures that stop just short of war.

Iranian authorities charged that Saudi Arabia and Washington orchestrated yesterday's terror attack. Little more than two weeks ago, Donald Trump made Saudi Arabia the site of his first foreign visit as US president. While there, he denounced Iran as a terrorist menace and proclaimed America's unstinting support for the Saudi effort to forge a Sunni Arab military alliance against Iran.

On Tuesday, Trump issued a series of tweets hailing the Saudi action against Qatar.

In a clear reference to the Saudi absolutist regime, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tweeted in response to yesterday's attack: "Terror-sponsoring despots threaten to

bring the fight to our homeland. Proxies attack what their masters despise most: the seat of democracy."

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were more explicit. In a statement issued Wednesday they noted the attack came shortly after a "joint meeting of the US president with the heads of one of the reactionary regional states that has constantly been supporting" terrorists.

The IRGC referenced the Saudi regime's long history of colluding with the US military-intelligence apparatus to support Islamist terrorist groups, including ISIS. It said "public opinion in the world, especially the Iranian nation ... believes" that (ISIS's) acknowledgment of responsibility for the terror attack in Tehran indicates Riyadh's and Washington's "complicity in this wild move."

The Revolutionary Guards' statement threatened retaliatory action, saying the "IRGC has proved that it would not leave unanswered the shedding of innocent blood."

Yesterday's attack exacerbates an already explosive situation.

The US-armed Saudi regime has repeatedly threatened Iran. According to news reports, on Tuesday, just hours before the attack in Tehran, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said: "Iran must be punished for its interference in the region."

Last month, Saudi Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman vowed the Saudi regime would ensure that the "battle" with Tehran was waged "in Iran," not the Saudi homeland.

The US political establishment, Democrats and Republicans alike, and the Pentagon, continue to threaten and bully Iran, which they view as an intolerable obstacle to unbridled US hegemony over the world's principal oil-producing region.

Yesterday, the Senate voted overwhelmingly to proceed with legislation imposing new sanctions on Iran. As it is, existing US sanctions are so threatening that most European businesses continue to refrain from extensive business dealings with Iran, despite the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and the lifting of the punishing economic sanctions that the

European Union imposed on Tehran in concert with Washington

Although the US elite is determined to settle accounts with Tehran, and plans for war with Iran are under constant review, there are sharp divisions in Washington over the Saudi blockade against Qatar.

US officials were reportedly informed of the action just before it was publicly announced.

Qatar plays a pivotal role in US military operations. It is the site of the forward operating base of the US Central Command, from which the US wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan are largely organized and directed, and an air base that is home to 11,000 US troops.

While Trump has supported the Saudi campaign against Qatar, the US military has publicly declared its appreciation for the emirate's support, and various members of Trump's administration have indicated they believe the Saudi action threatens the unity of the US-backed Gulf Cooperation Council.

Yesterday, Trump, under intense pressure, appeared to pull back somewhat. A day after he called King Salman of Saudi Arabia to draw up a list of demands for Qatar to fulfill, he called the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin HamaAl-Thani, to offer to mediate the dispute.

The US president combined this with actions meant to underscore his administration's hostility to Iran. Only after many hours did the White House issue a pro forma statement condemning the ISIS attack on Tehran. In the statement, Trump repeated his and the Saudis' stock propaganda denunciation of Tehran, declaring: "We underscore that states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote."

Washington's encouragement of Saudi belligerence against Iran has thrown the relations between its client regimes in the Gulf into turmoil.

Qatar is threatened with food shortages due to the closing of its only land border, that with Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the emirate is roiled by fears the confrontation with Saudi Arabia could escalate. According to the *Financial Times*: "As tensions swirl, (the Qatari capital) Doha has been gripped by fear of military escalation or a Saudi-backed coup against the emir."

The *New York Times* reported that Trump's support for Saudi Arabia has "sent a chill through other Gulf states, including Oman and Kuwait, that fear that any country that defies the Saudis or the United Arab Emirates could face ostracism as Qatar has." The *Times* cited Gerald M. Feierstein, a former top Middle Eastern diplomat in the Obama administration, as saying: "Everyone in the region is looking over their shoulder, thinking, 'This is potentially us'."

The Saudi's anti-Iran offensive and the support provided it by Washington are not just raising the hackles of Iran and various Gulf states; they are exacerbating tensions between various regional and great powers.

Israel is egging the Saudis on. Meanwhile Turkey has come to Qatar's support. Ankara has become increasingly estranged from Washington, including because of the US readiness to use Kurdish forces as its shock troops in the Syrian war and its role in the failed July 2016 Turkish coup.

Yesterday, Turkey's parliament rushed through legislation authorizing the dispatch of Turkish troops to Qatar. Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif flew to Ankara yesterday for talks with Turkish leaders about the crisis in the Gulf.

The tensions in the Middle East have also become a new source of frictions between Germany and the US.

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel published a blistering attack on US policy in the region. "Apparently, Qatar," he complained, "is to be isolated more or less completely and hit existentially. Such a 'Trumpification' of relations in a region already susceptible to crisis is particularly dangerous."

Gabriel made clear he was not just objecting to Trump's tweets about Qatar, but US policy toward Iran. "Trump's recent giant military contracts with Gulf monarchies raise the risk of a new spiral in arms sales," he wrote. "This policy is completely wrong and is certainly not Germany's policy."

Berlin is no less rapacious than Washington. But it views the US drive against Iran as an impediment to its own predatory ambitions, which include capturing Iran's markets and oil resources through the development of closer economic ties.

The eruption of a war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which would rapidly bring in the US and other powers, cannot be excluded. Whatever the immediate outcome of the current crisis, it points to the unravelling of geopolitical relations, and the consequent surge in inter-state rivalry and great power conflict, in the Middle East and around the world.



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