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Security Nexus Perspective

IRAN'S TERRORISM AND INSURGENCY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. AND ITS PARTNERS

By Dr. Lumpy Lumbaca



An Israeli embassy car up in flames after a 2012 Iranian bombing in New Delhi. (Press Trust of India Photo)

When one thinks of terrorism and insurgency in the Indo-Pacific over the past three decades, certain organizations and countries immediately come to mind. The list is exhaustive: ISIS and Al Qaeda and their associates, Jemaah Islamiyah, Abu Sayyaf, Communist rebels (Marxist-Leninist, Maoist, and the like, including the CPP/NPA and Naxalites), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), Tamil Tigers (LTTE), Aum Shinrikyo, and right- and left-wing extremists - particularly those found in Australia and New Zealand. To this list can also be added North Korea (a [State Sponsor of Terrorism](#)) and groups such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and active remnants of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines like the Maute Group; Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) and East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT) in Indonesia; Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (uM), and the Indian Mujahideen in South Asia; the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other Pakistan-based jihadist organizations; insurgent and separatist groups in India's northeast such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the People's Liberation Army (PLA–Manipur), and the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP); as well as militant movements in Myanmar and Papua, including the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB/OPM) – although their designations as terrorists is disputed. Together, these organizations represent a diverse terrorist and insurgent history across the Indo-Pacific.

Despite its designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, Iran is not often in the foreground of discussions about Indo-Pacific threats. And while Iran is not considered an existential threat in the region, its exportation of terrorism and insurgency in the Indo-Pacific, usually through proxies, is widespread and persistent. To illustrate this point, the below section lists some - not all - Iranian insurgency and terrorism-related operations specific to the region. These events are linked to Iran, some directly and others through proxies. All involve the targeting of Israelis. If one were to include [attacks](#) on Israelis in the Indo-Pacific perpetrated by Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah, the list grows longer and also goes back further in time.

Iran's Terrorism and Insurgency in the Indo-Pacific over the Past 30 Years

1994. A hijacked truck laden with explosives was intercepted on its way to carry out an attack against the Israeli embassy in Bangkok, after hitting a local motorcycle. In 1996, Shahriari Far was [convicted](#) of murder, sabotage, membership in a criminal gang, and possession of bomb-making material for the attack. Witnesses identified Shahriari Far as the driver of the rented truck abandoned at a Bangkok intersection. In 1998, Thailand's Supreme Court ordered Shahriari Far released, saying witnesses who testified against him were unreliable and evidence casting doubt on his guilt had been ignored.

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2009. An [aircraft](#) laden with weapons from North Korea was en route to Iran and seized in Bangkok, where it had stopped to refuel. The Ilyushin-76 was carrying 35 tons of missiles, including surface-to-air missiles and rocket launchers.

2012. Iranian nationals carried out a [car bombing](#) near the Israeli embassy in New Delhi. The blast wounded the wife of Israel's defense attaché, her driver, and two bystanders. Interpol subsequently issued arrest warrants for four suspects. According to the police investigation, Houshang Afshar Irani approached the Israeli vehicle on a motorcycle and affixed a "sticky" explosive device to it.

2012. A Thai court [convicted](#) two Iranian nationals, Saeid Moradi and Mohammad Khazaei, for their involvement in a failed bombing plot in Bangkok targeting Israeli diplomats. Moradi was sentenced to life imprisonment for attempted murder and possession of explosives, while Khazaei received a 15-year sentence for explosives charges. The case arose from a series of blasts in February, during which Moradi lost both legs after attempting to hurl a bomb at police.



Saeid Moradi, 29, in the wheelchair, and Mohammad Khazaei, 43, are taken to prison to begin serving their sentences for their roles in the Valentine's Day 2012 bombings in Bangkok. Moradi lost both legs and his right eye after a bomb he attempted to throw at a taxi ricocheted and detonated at his feet. (Source: Bangkok Post; Photo: Apichart Jinakul).

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2013. Mohsin Khosravian, an Iranian using a fake Israeli passport, was [arrested](#) outside the Israeli embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal.

2016. Philippine authorities [foiled](#) a plot by Iranian agents to hijack or bomb a Saudi Arabian Airlines plane at Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport. The plot was allegedly in [retaliation](#) for Saudi Arabia's execution of a prominent Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr.

2018. Esmail Kazem Hosseinitaghi, an Iranian national from Tehran, was [arrested](#) in Nepal for attempting to travel with a forged Israeli passport. He had planned to reach Europe via New Delhi, but Indian authorities intercepted him and returned him to Kathmandu.

2018. The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [sanctioned](#) Thailand-based My Aviation Company Limited for operating on behalf of Mahan Air, an Iranian airline previously blacklisted for supporting terrorist activities.

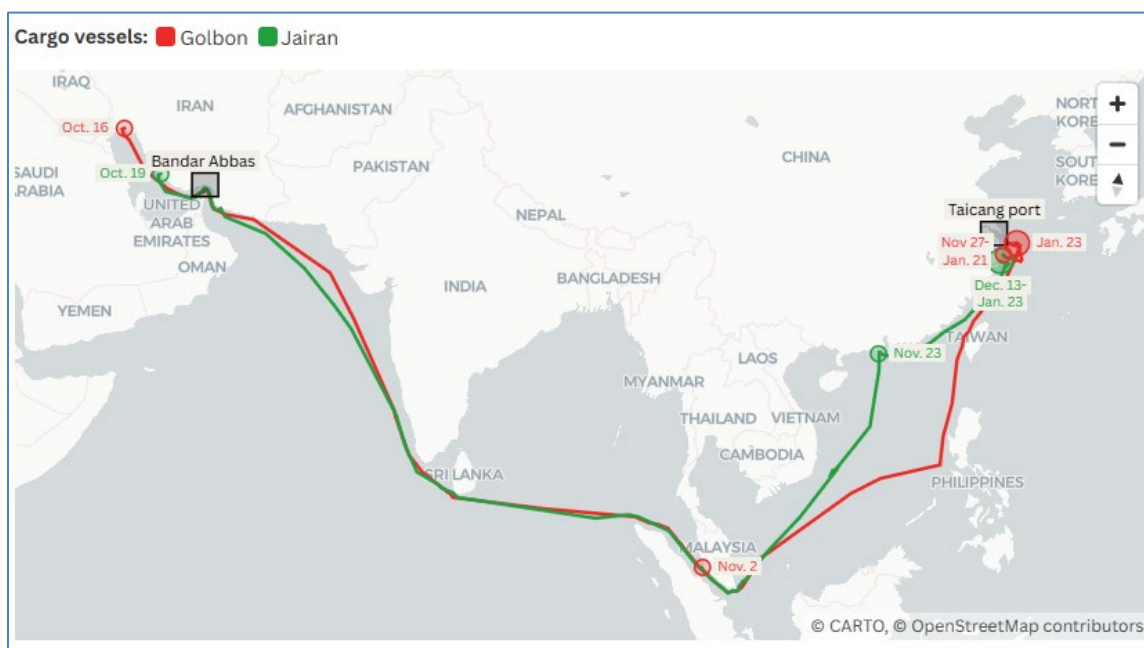
2021. A small IED [detonated](#) near the Israeli Embassy in India. Indian and Israeli officials publicly raised suspicion of an Iranian/IRGC link. Subsequent reporting continued to describe an Iran angle under investigation, although the case remains contested.

2023. A minor [explosion](#) occurred near the Israeli Embassy in India. Indian media and international outlets cited investigators' interest in an Iranian link, referencing the 2021 case.

2024. Yaghoub Vardan, an Iranian, was [arrested](#) inside India while trying to cross the border into Nepal with fraudulent passport and visa documents.

2025. The Iranian cargo ship *Jairan* departed China a month later than scheduled as part of an operation to [import](#) missile propellant materials to Iran. In January and February, *The Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and CNN identified the *Jairan* as one of two Iranian ships being used to transport 1,000 metric tons of sodium perchlorate from China, the other [vessel](#) being the *Golbon*. According to unnamed Western intelligence sources, the shipment could be converted into ammonium perchlorate — a critical solid-fuel propellant — sufficient to produce 260 medium-range Iranian missiles.

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Golbon and Jairan departed Iran's Imam Khomeini port and the port of Asaluyeh, respectively, in late 2024, before arriving in Chinese waters a few weeks later in early 2025. (Sources: MarineTraffic, Global Fishing Watch, and Newsweek)

2025. Australia [accused](#) Iran of directing antisemitic arson attacks on its territory the previous year and, in an unprecedented move, expelled the Iranian ambassador. Following the intelligence assessment, Canberra also announced plans to legislate the designation of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization.

Iran's Objectives in Exporting Terrorism to the Indo-Pacific

Iran's strategy of targeting Israelis in the Indo-Pacific is part of its broader asymmetric warfare campaign. This approach has several objectives, all aimed at expanding Iran's influence and weakening its adversaries without engaging in direct conventional conflict. Decades of Iranian insurgency and terrorism-by-proxy in the Indo-Pacific reveal the regime's goals:

1. Expanding the "Axis of Resistance" and Projecting Global Reach. Iran's core strategy is to build a network of allies and proxies, known as the "Axis of Resistance," to challenge U.S. and Israeli influence. While this network is most prominent in the Middle East (e.g., Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, Houthis in Yemen, and the former Syrian regime), Iran is working to extend its reach and operational capacity to other regions, including the Indo-Pacific. By orchestrating attacks or plots in the countries listed above, Iran demonstrates its ability to strike Israeli interests anywhere in the world, signaling that Israel has no safe haven.

2. **Deterrence and Retaliation.** Targeting Israelis abroad is a key part of Iran's strategy to deter Israeli military and covert actions against it in the Middle East. For years, Israel has engaged in a "shadow war" against Iran. By striking Israeli citizens and tourists abroad, Iran sends a clear message: "If you harm us, we can and will harm your people, even in far-flung locations." This creates a psychological cost for Israel and aims to make it think twice before acting.
3. **Exploiting Soft Targets.** Unlike hardened military bases or government facilities, Israeli tourists, diplomats, and businesspeople abroad are considered soft targets. They are more vulnerable and less protected, making them easier to attack. This allows Iran to inflict psychological and political blows on Israel at a relatively low cost and with a lower risk of direct military retaliation against Iran itself. These attacks generate fear and can disrupt normal life for Israelis traveling or living abroad.
4. **Creating a Diversion.** Targeting Israelis in the Indo-Pacific helps Iran create a sphere of influence beyond its immediate neighborhood. It forces Israel to expend intelligence and security resources to protect its citizens and interests globally, diverting attention and resources from Iran's nuclear and missile programs or its activities in the Middle East. This strategy stretches Israel thin and keeps it on the defensive.
5. **Plausible Deniability.** As noted in the examples above, Iran often uses proxies to carry out these plots, which allows the regime to maintain a degree of plausible deniability. While intelligence agencies can often trace the plots back to Tehran, the lack of a clear, direct military link reduces the likelihood of a full-scale military response from Israel or the United States. This keeps the conflict in the "shadow war" realm, where Iran is more comfortable operating.
6. **Gaining Influence and Signaling Resolve.** These attacks also allow Iran to signal its resolve to its domestic audience, regional allies, and adversaries. By appearing to stand up to Israel, Iran strengthens its position as a leading anti-Israel and anti-Western force. This is particularly important for the regime's image during times of economic and domestic pressure.

Conclusion

Iran's export of terrorism and insurgency in the Indo-Pacific poses challenges to regional stability, prosperity, and peace. The record of Iranian-linked activities underscores the persistence of this threat and its implications for all. Countering Iran's activities begins with strengthening regional intelligence-sharing networks to identify and disrupt plots before they materialize. Cooperation with partners and allies has proven valuable, as past incidents have demonstrated the need for early warning and coordinated responses. Targeted sanctions and financial restrictions against companies and individuals supporting Iranian operations—like the 2018 case of My Aviation Company Limited—are another essential tool, cutting off funding and complicating Iran's logistics. At the same time, efforts to dismantle proxy networks through law enforcement training, improved border security, and the prosecution of operatives can reduce Iran's operational reach. Diplomatic pressure, exemplified

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by Australia's 2025 expulsion of Iran's ambassador and move to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization, further isolates Tehran and signals regional unwillingness to tolerate destabilizing behavior. Protecting soft targets, such as diplomatic missions and tourists, remains critical, while stronger maritime and customs enforcement is necessary to prevent illicit shipments like those involving the Jairan.



Iranian ambassador to Australia Ahmad Sadeghi being expelled from the country in August 2025 due to alleged arson attacks by Iranian agents. (Photo credit: Lukas Coch/EPA)

For the United States and its allies, Iran's activities carry several important implications. The targeting of Israeli and Western interests abroad creates heightened security risks that demand vigilance and resource allocation. Attempts to inflame sectarian tensions risk destabilizing fragile environments and complicating regional partnerships. Beyond security, the economic consequences of a less stable Indo-Pacific undermine U.S. trade and investment interests, highlighting the broad strategic impact of terrorism and insurgency. To respond effectively, the United States must work closely with partners such as Australia, India, and Japan to ensure coordinated action, recognizing that unilateral measures could weaken alliances. At the same time, America is forced to balance attention to Iran with other pressing regional concerns, particularly North Korea and the Chinese Communist Party, while acknowledging that Iran's links to North Korea demonstrate the interconnected nature of proliferation and terrorism threats.

For USINDOPACOM, these realities demand an increased understanding of the threat environment. While Iran may not represent an existential challenge, its persistence in deploying proxy networks, terrorism plots, insurgency, and illicit shipments cannot be ignored. Furthermore, while Iran's exportation of instability to the region is troubling, increased [CCP-Iranian cooperation](#) for malign and nefarious purposes in both the Indo-Pacific *and* the Middle East is equally concerning. For INDOPACOM, this means that building partner capacity through training, intelligence platforms, and joint exercises is essential, ensuring that these countries are prepared to counter Iranian-linked threats. Coordination with other U.S. commands, particularly CENTCOM, helps track operatives and financial networks that operate across America's artificial boundaries. Resource allocation remains a challenge given competing demands, but lower-cost measures such as intelligence sharing and targeted enforcement can mitigate pressure. Finally, USINDOPACOM's support for U.S. diplomatic initiatives, through reassurance of allies and joint military activities, reinforces the credibility of collective responses to Iran's actions.

Iran's activities in the Indo-Pacific highlight the enduring importance of security cooperation and vigilance. The challenge is not only to prevent individual attacks or shipments, but also to deny Iran the ability to project influence and instability in a region vital to global security and economic prosperity.

Dr. Jeremiah "Lumpy" Lumbaca, PhD is a retired US Army Green Beret and current professor of irregular warfare, counterterrorism, and special operations at the Department of Defense's Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. He can be found on X/Twitter [@LumpyAsia](#).



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