



Bangkok, New Delhi, and Tblisi: Iranian Connections?

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Summary

On February 14, a series of explosions rocked the central Bangkok neighborhood of Ekamai. The blasts came a day after improvised explosive devices (IED) targeted Israeli diplomatic interests in New Delhi, India, and Tbilisi, Georgia. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused Iran of masterminding the plots, suggesting the involvement of Hezbollah or Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Qods Force. While no organization has claimed credit for the attacks, the timing, targets, and circumstances suggest one of those two organizations may have been behind the attacks.

The wide variety of locations of the attacks, and particularly the attack in India, challenges previous conceptions of which countries Iran or Iranian-backed groups would most likely target. This presents a difficulty to the U.S. private sector, as it will make it more difficult to assess the level of risk of Iran-affiliated terrorist attack world-wide.

Bangkok

According to the Royal Thai Police (RTP), the first explosion occurred at approximately 2:20 p.m. local time in the second story of a house near Soi Chareng Choi. After the initial explosion, two Iranian individuals fled the scene. Police arrested one of the suspects as he attempted to board a flight out of the country at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport. Another suspect fled to Malaysia, but Malaysian authorities arrested him on February 15.

A third suspect, who fled the house alone, attempted to hail a taxi. When a taxi driver refused to stop, the suspect threw what appeared to be a grenade at his vehicle, destroying its front half. The suspect then continued to flee and attempted to throw additional explosive devices at approaching police officers, but in the process, blew himself up while handling the device. Upon inspecting the man's belongings, the RTP found a hotel receipt that indicated the suspect was Iranian. Police also found Iranian currency in his wallet and an Iranian passport, which identified the man as Said Moradi. Immigration police are trying to trace Moradi's movements, and initial reports indicate he flew into Thailand from Seoul, South Korea, on February 8. He reportedly landed at the resort town of Phuket and stayed several nights at a hotel in Chonburi, approximately two hours southeast of Bangkok. A fourth person of interest, a female, remains at large.

According to a housekeeper, the suspects had been renting the Soi Chareng Choihouse for the past month. According to Thai police, explosives and magnets were found inside the partially destroyed house. A senior Thai intelligence official told the press that "these three Iranian men are an assassination team and their targets were Israeli diplomats including the ambassador...their plan was to attach bombs to diplomats' cars." The Thai National Security Council Secretary-General Wichan Photephosree went on to say that the bombs that exploded were likely intended for use in attacking individuals, not for mass

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casualty terrorism or sabotage, and were not powerful enough to cause large-scale destruction. News articles have also indicated that Thai authorities believe the February 15 suspects were targeting Jewish and Israeli assets.

Bangkok security forces had been on alert since police arrested a Lebanese man on January 12 and raided a property housing chemicals that could have been used to make a bomb. Thai authorities allege this man had links to Hezbollah, although they are being cautious in linking his case with the February 15 explosions.

Explosions in Bangkok are somewhat common, although most go unsolved. They are often blamed on political factions or pinned to business disputes. However, blasts usually take place late at night and away from crowded areas, indicating they are designed more to send a message than to cause casualties. While information is still being gathered in this latest case, the initial blast appeared to be accidental, but the ensuing two were clearly intended to cause damage. U.S. Embassy Bangkok issued an [Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens](#) in response to these events.

New Delhi

A somewhat more precisely targeted attack [occurred in New Delhi on the afternoon of February 13](#). An Israeli diplomat's wife was driving her diplomatic vehicle to pick up her children from school when she stopped at a red light on Aurangzeb Road. A motorcyclist reportedly drove up to the vehicle from behind and attached a magnetic explosive device to the door of the vehicle. The woman was injured seriously in the attack, as were two passers-by. Israel has blamed Iran for the attack, although Indian officials have not identified a suspect.

At first glance, Iran or Iranian-backed groups would not appear to be the most likely culprit for this kind of attack in India. India is one of the few remaining major importers of Iranian oil, making New Delhi's goodwill critical to Tehran as sanctions begin hitting hard. It would seem odd that Iran would choose to jeopardize that relationship. There are other groups operating in India that have motive and means to attack an Israeli diplomat as well. For example, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) directly targeted a U.S.-based Jewish organization during the 2008 Mumbai attacks. As in Bangkok, [occasional IED attacks are somewhat common in India](#). However, magnetic IEDs would be a significantly new armament for India-focused groups. Additionally, LeT and other India-focused terrorist groups have not shown interest or ability in striking targets near-simultaneously in countries outside of South Asia, such as Thailand and Georgia.

Tbilisi

Israeli diplomats were also targeted on February 13 in Tbilisi, Georgia. According to the Georgian Interior Ministry, a locally hired driver for the Israeli embassy noticed a suspicious package attached to the underside of his diplomatic vehicle. Georgian security officials promptly responded and defused the bomb.

Hezbollah and Iran Circumstantially Linked to Attacks?

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While there has been no proof that these attacks are linked, there is strong circumstantial evidence suggesting that an Iranian organization, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Qods Force, or an Iranian-allied group such as Lebanon-based Hezbollah, is behind the attacks.

The New Delhi and Tbilisi attacks were targeted against Israeli diplomats, known targets of IRGC and Hezbollah. The Thais have also indicated their captured terrorists had a similar target set. Taken by itself this fact is not compelling, as several terrorist groups would be interested attacking Israeli embassy officials abroad. However, most of those groups would likely be unable to operate simultaneously in Thailand, India, and Georgia. Hezbollah and IRGC do not have a history of conducting attacks in India, Georgia, or Thailand, but given their worldwide networks and state-backed resources, they likely have the capability to conduct these near-simultaneous worldwide attacks.

The Bangkok attack appears to have been botched before it could be completed. While the identities of the New Delhi and Tbilisi attackers are unknown, Thai authorities have arrested several Iranians in connection to the Bangkok attack. This by itself, once again, is not damning evidence of Iranian complicity in the attack, but is certainly circumstantially significant.

No known claims of responsibility have been made for any of the attacks. That would also seem to discount most major worldwide terrorist groups known to target Israeli interests. It would also seem to suggest a state-backed terrorist group, which may prefer anonymity to prevent a direct link-back to their sponsor.

Current investigations also suggest that the explosives used in India, Thailand, and Georgia were superficially similar. Magnetic attachment was the likely intended method of delivery in all three cases.

Finally, all three attacks happened within two days of the anniversary of the death of Imad Mughniyeh, a top Hezbollah commander who was killed by a car bomb in Damascus, Syria, on February 12, 2008. Hezbollah claimed Israel was behind the attack and over the past several years has publicly vowed to avenge Mughniyeh's death. The coincidence of the timing cannot be discounted and suggests that Hezbollah or Iran was involved.

Iran-supported targeting of diplomats abroad could be consistent with current information on the intent of the Iranian government, as the [U.S. Department of State made clear in its October 2011 Travel Alert](#) in the aftermath of a disrupted Iranian plot on U.S. soil: "The U.S. government assesses that this Iranian-backed plan to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador may indicate a more aggressive focus by the Iranian Government on terrorist activity against diplomats from certain countries, to include possible attacks in the United States."

Observations and Implications

The U.S. private sector should keep three important things in mind when assessing how these attacks may affect their security posture abroad.

First, it may be impossible to assess which country might next be the next victim of a Hezbollah or IRGC terrorist attack. While Iran- or Lebanon-based decision makers might not think twice about attacking Israeli or Saudi diplomats in Georgia or the United States, it seems very odd that they would want to risk angering Thailand or India. This suggests that strategic decision makers in Iran may not have directly

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ordered the attacks but rather that, tactical-level operatives with their own interests independently decided to conduct them. It is also possible that Hezbollah undertook the attacks on its own, without seeking authorization or support from Iran, knowing Iran might counsel against the attacks. The other possibility is that analysts do not correctly understand the strategic decision-making of Tehran, over-estimating the Iranian government's desire for good relationships with India, Thailand, and Georgia or under-estimating its desire to attack Israeli targets.

Second, if the three attacks were meant to kill Israeli diplomats, they were unsuccessful. One was easily foiled by an embassy driver; one seriously – but not critically – injured an Israeli diplomat's wife; and a third was disrupted when the plotters' bombs accidentally exploded. If the plot to assassinate the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the U.S. and the previously disrupted Bangkok plot can be attributed to the same organization(s), the success rate is even lower. If the IGRC or Hezbollah are indeed involved in any or all of these plots, a reassessment of their operational capabilities may be in order.

Third, with the exception of the Saudi Ambassador plot in the U.S. and the unknown targeting preferences of the Bangkok attackers, it would appear that Israeli diplomats or interests remain the primary target of these attacks. U.S. organizations are likely not yet directly at risk unless they are associated with those target sets. As the October 2011 Travel Alert pointed out, however, U.S. citizens and organizations should continue to be on alert as tensions with Iran continue to simmer.

For further information, please contact [OSAC's Regional Analyst for Near East Asia](#).