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The politics of terror

The recent suicide attacks in Tehran have inflamed tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia

On Wednesday 7 June, at least 12 people were killed when suicide bombers and gunmen launched simultaneous attacks on Iran's Parliament building and the tomb of the republic's revolutionary founder. Iran's revolutionary guards are claiming Saudi Arabia supported ISIS in the twin attacks, an accusation likely to infuriate the Sunni kingdom. Hannes Alpen spoke to Iran expert Adnan Tabatabai about the background to the accusations.

Iran has seen twin attacks on both its parliament and the shrine of the Republic's revered founder, Ayatollah Khomeini. Can you give us some background?

Iran has experienced repeated terrorist attacks in the past few years, although they have tended to occur near the border with Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq. Those attacks by various terrorist groups have generally targeted Iranian border police.

The latest attacks in the capital, Tehran, are intended to send a clear political message: the suicide bombing and shooting in Parliament is an attack on the political representatives of the Iranian people; the bombing of Ayatollah Khomeini's shrine is an attack on a place of remembrance which has great significance for the current regime. Currently, all the attackers are believed to be Iranian citizens, although the authorities haven't yet revealed which regions they come from. And of course, the fact they are Iranians doesn't preclude the possibility the attacks were planned and coordinated abroad.

Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammad bin Salman, has made some particularly worrying comments recently, saying any struggle for influence between his own Sunni Muslim kingdom and Shi'ite Iran ought to take place "inside Iran, not in Saudi Arabia". Saudi Arabia's foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir has been equally provocative, declaring on the day before the twin attacks that Iran should be "punished" for its role in the region. These types of comments have of course led to speculation within Iran that Saudi Arabia might have been behind the attacks. Initial statements made by Iran's revolutionary guards, who

were present in great number at the scene of the attacks, point the finger firmly towards Riyadh. As far as Tehran is concerned, it's already clear who the guilty party is.

What impact will these various accusations of guilt have on Sunni-Shiite relations in the region?

Molavi Abdul Hamid, the spiritual leader of Sunni Muslims in Iran, condemned the Tehran attacks in no uncertain terms. In May's presidential elections, the incumbent moderate, Hassan Rouhani, scored his best result in the provinces of Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchistan, which have a high Sunni presence, obtaining 73% of the vote. Religious differences play less of a role in Iran than we outsiders are sometimes led to believe. But of course, mounting ideological pressure can trigger geopolitical conflicts between Sunnis and Shias. And while it's true that the fighting in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Bahrain has a definite religious dimension to it, geographical security interests are still the most important factor.

We can assume therefore that these accusations are a way of stepping up the rhetoric and projecting each country's power. Saudi Arabia wants to prove that Iran is vulnerable. Likewise, Iran wants to show Saudi Arabia that it can hit back at any time. Following a meeting with German foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel, the Saudi foreign minister replied "no comment, next question" to a journalist who asked for his reaction to the terrorist attacks in Tehran. Iranians took this very badly, just as they were offended when the US told them, with almost malicious glee, that Iran "reaps what it sows". These kind of statements will only increase feelings of hostility in the region. Their religious dimension is merely an expression of this hostility, and not its origin.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain earlier this week broke off diplomatic ties with Qatar, accusing the country of sponsoring terrorists. But the key issue is surely that Saudi Arabia objects to Qatar's closeness to Iran.

Iran will not be displeased to observe the obvious lack of cohesion between the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. However, allowing new conflicts to grow and fester in its immediate neighbourhood is not in Iran's interest. All the statements coming out of Iran following this quarrel with Qatar have called for dialogue. Iran's relationship with Qatar is complex and somewhat dysfunctional. But the two countries have clear, shared interests due to the gas fields that straddle their territories and that are protected in the Persian Gulf by the revolutionary guard marines, through a shared

security arrangement. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have always condemned the Qataris' support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

While Qatar supports the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Ennahda Movement in Tunisia, Saudi Arabia wanted to keep Hosni Mubarak (Egypt's dictator for 30 years who kept the Brotherhood illegal) in Cairo and Ben Ali (the former president of Tunisia) in Tunis. Iran did not play a particularly important role in these proceedings and has always tried to make contact with the increasingly strong political movement. Tehran wasn't bothered that this movement is connected with the Muslim Brotherhood, an out and out Sunni organisation. It was principally concerned with building political relationships. A recent state visit to Turkey by Iran's foreign minister Javad Zarif, and his meeting with Turkish president Erdogan, shows that Iran is trying hard to calm tensions that exist between the region's most important players, rather than simply siding with Qatar. We also know that Zarif has discussed the latest developments with EU High Representative Federica Mogherini. All this demonstrates that Iran is aiming at damage control, rather than using the current quarrel to its own advantage. Otherwise it would risk inciting new conflicts close to its borders.



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