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Iran and the Sleeper Threat to North America

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During a bristling confrontation between Iran and the U.S. in recent months, fears have mounted about Iran's capability and intention to retaliate with a strike on the U.S. homeland. A tit-for-tat escalation of attacks—particularly the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, in response to his involvement developing plans for an alleged imminent attack on Americans, and retribution after the death of an American contractor at an Iraqi military base—has emboldened the perception that America is vulnerable to an Iranian-backed attack on North American soil. Dr. Bessma Momani explains that “Iran knows it cannot win a head-to-head conventional war against the U.S., so it will use asymmetric warfare on its allies that can give the cloud of deniability and yet deliver the message of war.”¹

According to Momani, a proxy war would “continue to come at the expense of civilians in and fragile democratic politics of Iraq and Lebanon, and to a lesser extent Syria and Yemen.”² The consensus among analysts is that Iran would continue to target American military infrastructure and personnel in the region. Iran did just that when it launched ballistic missiles at two military bases in Iraq that house American troops. The strikes resulted in no deaths and some believe it could have been a show of force that was carefully crafted not to provoke the U.S. and provide an off-ramp for both sides.

Nevertheless, #IranVSAmerica trends on Twitter, news headlines, commentary, and social media posts invoke fears of Iranian sleeper cells waiting to attack in North America. The idea of a “sleeper” often evokes the image of a Russian spy or terrorist living next door, laying low, blending in, and waiting to be called upon to carry out an operation. This concept, and the fear of an enemy operating from within, is particularly jarring and plays on society's perception of security. America's fear of sleepers is primed by an historical sense of broader cultural fears of an enemy within, drawn particularly from the idea of a German Fifth Column in the Second World War and Soviet deep cover illegal agents during the Cold War.

After Gen. Soleimani's assassination, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said the security threat to the city changed significantly. The escalation of tensions with Iran meant “a world of difference” and “we have to assume this action puts us in a de facto state of war.”³ Former CIA officer Bryan Dean Wright told *Fox News* that potential

terrorist sleeper cell operations in the U.S. represent a credible threat in the wake of Iran's missile strikes on January 8. If Iran hits inside the U.S. homeland, he suggests, it would be tantamount to "a new 9/11."⁴ Michael Morell, a former deputy director of the CIA, warned that Iran might turn their proxies loose to go after civilians and conduct a terrorist strike to kill a senior American official in any city where Iran has sleeper cells. Such action would most likely be in Iraq, but he warned that major U.S. cities could also be a target.⁵ Former CIA operations officer Sam Faddis also said that "it is more than possible that Hezbollah has sleeper cells in the United States ready to strike.... Based on what we know we must assume they do and that they can hit targets on U.S. soil at anytime without warning."⁶ Such commentaries featured by various news outlets and social media posts on sleepers lurking promote a narrative based on fear and paranoia. This contrasts with the reassuring message of Chad Wolf, acting secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, whose agency is working with law enforcement officials and is ready to respond to any retaliatory threats, though none had been detected.⁷

Terrorist operational security has long embraced having a group on the ground doing logistical work with a bombmaker coming in and completing preparations. This includes Palestinian terrorism in the 1960s and 70s, with Hezbollah establishing a record for such infiltration and security protocols. In December 2019 Ali Kourani was sentenced to 40 years in prison for charges ranging from the provision of material support to Hezbollah to receiving military training from the terrorist organization. Kourani, who came to the U.S. from Lebanon in 2003 and became a citizen in 2009, initially told investigators that he was a "sleeper" and, after scouting targets in New York City, the plan was for him to become a suicide bomber. He tried to cooperate with authorities in 2016 but was subsequently arrested. Subsequently, he insists that his statements to officials were false and that his ties to Hezbollah were strictly political.⁸

While it is ultimately unclear what kind of capabilities Iran has within North America, historical analysis of al Qaeda sleepers in the U.S. before and after 9/11 holds important lessons.⁹ Al Qaeda did not use sleepers in any classic Russian espionage sense, as there are elements of this that never fit (such as long periods of cover creation and extended dormancy). Instead, al Qaeda had an interest in deploying operatives, often to foreign countries, who had sufficient security awareness to avoid detection by authorities, and who were meant to be in place to execute missions. Operatives were in place usually on a shorter rather than longer time frame. It is important to remember that a sleeper has an extremely difficult operational mandate. For success, agents require extensive training and complete confidence of the country or organization that sent him or her to accomplish the mission. The reality is that no "true 'sleeper' agents" were identified in the U.S. after 9/11.¹⁰

Often when driven by fear and anxiety, particularly after 9/11 when homeland security concerns and exaggerations of the threat posed by al Qaeda helped prolong a fear of catastrophe, perceptions of the sleeper threat became so formidable that they often became vastly disproportionate to reality. This led to the construction of an alternate reality that adapted a loose "sleeper" label, which converted belief into an established truth. This consequently perpetuated fear, paranoia, and anxiety. In turn, this idea has had a

powerful influence over policies that sought to root out sleepers wherever they hid, at the expense of American civil liberties. Mischaracterizing and inflating the threat posed by sleepers often proved self-defeating to America's efforts to defend against it, as the balance remained tipped in favour of security and Muslims remained suspect. U.S. authorities sought to root out sleepers at all costs to stop the next attack but this obsession inflamed old biases and fostered racism against American Muslims.¹¹

Before and after 9/11, loose applications of the term "sleeper" served to simplify and misrepresent the methodology behind al Qaeda's operational success. This led to a lack of widespread awareness of al Qaeda's operational security tactics and the changing nature of the threat. Clarifying the threat, and just how divorced al Qaeda methodology was from any classic use of sleepers, could have further elucidated how to regard the threat and provided an element for preventative action. For example, even though Osama bin Laden and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed may have had longer-term plans to adapt the sleeper concept for operational planning after 9/11, they never had the capability to give this strategy any effect. This was in part because of homeland security measures and U.S.-led global anti-terrorism operations, which led to changes in al Qaeda's capabilities and perceptions of its ability to penetrate American security. The terror threat morphed in the years after 9/11 to those inspired by, rather than directed by, al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.

A feeling of vulnerability often leads to a feeling of persecution, which latches on to theories of a vast conspiracy. Fears of terrorist infiltration continued to be promoted and supported by some U.S. officials and media sources, which were disproportionate to the evolving reality of the threat. Excessive imagination that fostered the idea that the terrorist-next-door could be here and waiting persists, and its repercussions continue to have potentially dangerous consequences. How sleepers are discussed and included in threat assessments is important because, as an emotionally-charged concept, the idea plays on society's inherent fears of an enemy within and exposes vulnerabilities within a society, especially the fault line privileging security over civil liberties. The idea of sleepers evokes fear and fear guides policy. There are dangers in indulging these fears, especially if they are misdirected.

¹ Bessma Momani, "With Soleimani dead, the U.S. must brace for the wrath of Iranian hardliners", *The Globe and Mail*, 3 January 2020, Available Online: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-with-soleimani-dead-the-us-must-brace-for-the-wrath-of-iranian/>

² Ibid.

³ Daniel Trotta, "U.S. Sees no domestic threat but New York braces for Iranian retaliation." *Reuters*, 3 January 2020, Available Online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-blast-new-york/u-s-sees-no-domestic-threat-but-new-york-braces-for-iranian-retaliation-idUSKBN1Z21ZR>

⁴ Julia Musto, "Former CIA officer: Iranian sleeper cells in US a 'real threat', but attack on our soil would be 'new 9/11'", *Fox News*, 8 January 2020, Available Online: <https://www.foxnews.com/media/bryan-dean-wright-cia-iran-sleeper-cells-us-threat>

⁵ Emily Crane, "There will be dead Americans because of this", *Daily Mail*, 3 January 2020, Available Online: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7849833/Ex-CIA-deputy-director-warns-Iran-kill-American-civilians.html?ito=social-twitter_dailymailus

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⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Trotta, *Reuters*, 3 January 2020

⁸ Emily Palmer, "A Sleeper Agent Wanted to Cooperate. He Just Got 40 Years in Prison." *The New York Times*, 4 December, 2019, Available Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/04/nyregion/new-york-terrorist-hezbollah.html>

⁹ See my work on this topic: Shannon Nash, *Perception vs. Reality: The Idea of Al Qaeda Sleepers as a Threat to American National Security*, PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2017.

¹⁰ "Secret FBI Report Questions Al Qaeda Capabilities", *ABC News*, 9 March 2005, Available Online: <https://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Investigation/story?id=566425&page=1>

¹¹ Risa A. Brooks, "Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States: How Serious is the Threat? *International Security*, Vol.36, No.2, Fall 2011, p.45.