

Even after the Islamic State took responsibility for deadly bombings, Iran's government, facing public anger, blamed Israel.

By Farnaz Fassihi

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For years Iran justified its military presence in Iraq and Syria, to its own people and the world, as a strategy for keeping terrorist groups at bay. Iranian officials frequently boasted that fighting terrorists directly or through proxy militias in the region meant they didn't have to fight them at home.

That sense of security was shattered on Wednesday, with the deadliest terrorist attack since the 1979 founding of the Islamic Republic — two suicide explosions in the city of Kerman that killed 88 people, including 30 children, and injured more than 200. The Islamic State, a mortal enemy of Iran, claimed responsibility.

Yet even after the statement by the terrorist group, Iranian officials and pundits close to the government insisted — as they had in the immediate aftermath of the attack — that another enemy, Israel, was to blame. Tasnim News Agency, the media arm of the Revolutionary Guards, went as far as claiming that “Israel ordered ISIS to take responsibility for the attack.” And President Ibrahim Raisi, speaking at a ceremony in Kerman honoring the victims on Friday, said Iran would retaliate and blamed both Israel and the United States.

Whatever the officials really think, blaming Israel and the United States is far more convenient, some analysts and opponents of the government say, than admitting that the state cannot protect its people from terrorism. The attack punctures the image of Iran as capable of flexing its might in wars around the region without suffering such large-scale retaliation at home.

The ministry of intelligence said on Friday that 12 people in six different provinces had been arrested in connection with the attack, but did not elaborate on their identities or affiliations. It said one of the suicide bombers was from Tajikistan but the identity of the second one was not yet confirmed. The statement also said security agents had discovered the place in Kerman where the attackers had stayed and arrested two of their accomplices.



The scene of the bombing on Wednesday in Kerman, in a photo released by Iranian state media. Wana News Agency, via Reuters

The statement said police discovered two suicide vests, remote control devices for detonating explosives, grenades, thousands of pieces of shrapnel to use in suicide bomb vests and wires and explosive devices that, officials said, suggest the attackers were planning other attacks. The Islamic State issued a new statement on Friday threatening more attacks and saying the Kerman explosions marked “the beginning of our war,” with Iran.

It is not clear how widely Iranians accept allegations of Israeli responsibility. But if Iran’s leaders were hoping to unite the public against a common enemy, they did not appear to be succeeding. Many ordinary Iranians, both critics and supporters of the Islamic Republic, were instead venting their anger at the government.

Conservatives loyal to the ideology of the clerics who rule the country said Iran’s timid response to Israel’s security breaches had emboldened it or other actors such as the Islamic State to strike. Israel has carried out numerous strikes over the years against Iran’s military and nuclear facilities, and assassinations of its nuclear scientists and others, but those attacks have been narrowly targeted, not the indiscriminate mass killings claimed by the Islamic State.

“The opinion among the revolutionaries is overwhelmingly upset and not satisfied. Right now we are getting hit over and over and we are doing nothing,” Aboozar Nasr, a 44-year-old business owner in the religious city of Qom, said in a telephone interview. He called himself a conservative follower of the hard-line government.

“If the policy is restraint, then officials should stop the threatening rhetoric,” he said. “It sounds empty and fake.”

Iran backs and helps arm Hamas, the Palestinian group that led the Oct. 7 assault on Israel, which has retaliated with a devastating bombing campaign and invasion of the Gaza Strip. It also arms Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, which have stepped up attacks on Israel during its war with Hamas.

The Houthis have also attacked vessels in the Red Sea and barred ships heading to Israel from the waterway, disrupting international shipping, while Iranian proxies have launched nearly daily attacks on U.S. bases in Syria and Iraq.

During multiple town hall-style discussions on social media platforms, speakers from different cities and different political factions inside Iran have questioned why and how — given the surge of tensions in the region — security forces had not foreseen the threat of an attack and taken more precautions to prevent it.

“The Islamic Republic always bluffs. All it knows well is to bully its own people. They are not able to guarantee the security of this country,” said Mohsen, a 39-year-old engineer, in a telephone interview from Tehran. He asked his last name not be used for fear of retribution.

The suicide bombings on Wednesday struck a memorial for Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, on the anniversary of his killing in 2020 by a U.S. drone strike in Iraq. General Suleimani had directed the crucial role played by Iran and its allies in the military defeat in Syria and Iraq of the Islamic State, a Sunni Muslim extremist group that sees Iran’s Shiite Muslim majority as heretics. But the U.S. accused him of orchestrating attacks on American military in the region, enabling Iran to gain dominance in postwar Iraq, and arming militant groups fighting Israel.

Memorials in 2020 at the Baghdad airport, where Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, a top Iranian commander, was killed by an American drone strike. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

The Islamic State also took responsibility for a 2018 attack at an Iranian military parade that killed 25 people — and the government vowed revenge against the United States, Gulf Arab nations and Israel. ISIS also claimed two separate attacks by gunmen raiding a Shia shrine in Shiraz in 2022 and 2023 that killed about a dozen people.

Several women interviewed in Tehran said the terrorist attack this week reinforced their underlying feelings that they are not entirely safe in public spaces in Iran. They said women defying the hijab rule and not covering their hair already risked violent confrontation with security agents and monetary fines.

“After the recent attacks, I have decided to not go to any crowded places. The fear of insecurity is always there,” said Arezou, a stay-at-home mother in Tehran, in an interview.

For Iran's leadership, the threat of large-scale terrorist attacks adds to their growing list of challenges, domestically and internationally. The economy remains in shambles because of U.S. sanctions, mismanagement and corruption. Prospects for a return to a deal with the West to limit Iran's nuclear program, which would bring sanctions relief, appear dim.

Facing months of mass demonstrations in 2022 demanding the end of clerical rule, the government responded with brutal violence, killing hundreds of protesters — just as it did to quell protests in 2019.

The war between Israel and Hamas poses new challenges for Iran's leadership, with its allied militias actively engaged in the fight. Iran has avoided direct involvement or consequences on its own soil.

But in the last two weeks, a senior commander of its Revolutionary Guards Corps was killed in Syria and the deputy political leader of Hamas, one of the group's liaisons to Hezbollah and Iran, was killed in Beirut, both in strikes widely attributed to Israel; and the United States killed a senior commander of an Iraqi militant group close to Iran, in a drone strike in Baghdad.

Mourners at the funeral of a victim of the bombings in Kerman, after Friday prayers in Tehran. Arash Khamooshi for The New York Times

“The Islamic Republic is extremely conscious that these attacks taken together could be a trap to spread the war to Iran,” said Sasan Karimi, a Tehran-based political analyst. “Everyone is furious. They want to react with restraint and calculation to avoid a strategic mistake that could jeopardize their grip on power domestically and regionally.”

Even as the rhetoric of war was escalating, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei instructed military commanders to pursue “strategic restraint” and avoid a direct military confrontation with the U.S. at all costs, according to two Iranians familiar with the internal debates.

Still, some hard-liners are calling for Iran to make a strong show of force.

“The new campaign of assassinations before they reach a tragic pivotal point must result in a joint attack otherwise our hands will remain on the trigger. Every day we have to cry for more martyrs. This is not entering war, this is deterrence,” said Mahdi Mohammadi, the adviser to Iran's speaker of parliament and a former commander in the Revolutionary Guards, in a post on X.

On Thursday, Gen. Ismail Ghani, General Suleimani's successor as head of the Revolutionary Guards' powerful Quds Force, visited the cemetery in Kerman that was the scene of the suicide attack. Dressed in black rather than a military uniform, he knelt at General Suleimani's grave, placed his hands on the tombstone and prayed.

A large crowd around him chanted, "Revenge, Revenge."

Leily Nikounazar contributed reporting.

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