

U.S. Secretly Alerted Iran Ahead of Islamic State Terrorist Attack

Washington passed actionable intelligence to Tehran about the plot that killed 84 and wounded many more

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The blasts killed dozens of people earlier this month in Kerman, Iran. PHOTO: WANA NEWS AGENCY/REUTERS

WASHINGTON—The U.S. secretly warned Iran that [Islamic State](#) was preparing to carry out [the terrorist attack](#) early this month that killed more than 80 Iranians in a pair of coordinated suicide bombings, U.S. officials said.

The confidential alert came after the U.S. acquired intelligence that Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan, ISIS-Khorasan, known as ISIS-K, was plotting to attack Iran, they said.

American officials said the information passed to Iran was specific enough about the location and sufficiently timely that it might have proved useful to Tehran in thwarting the attack on Jan. 3 or at least mitigating the casualty toll.

Iran, however, failed to prevent the suicide bombings in the southeastern town of Kerman, which targeted a crowd that was commemorating the anniversary of the death of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds force. Soleimani [was killed in a January 2020 drone attack](#) near the Baghdad airport ordered by then-President [Donald Trump](#).

The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the pair of explosions that killed dozens of people in Iran. The attack happened during a ceremony to mark the anniversary of the death of Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in 2020. Photo: Morteza Nikoubazl/Zuma Press

“Prior to ISIS’s terrorist attack on January 3, 2024, in Kerman, Iran, the U.S. government provided Iran with a private warning that there was a terrorist threat within Iranian borders,” a U.S. official said, using an acronym for Islamic State. “The U.S. government followed a longstanding ‘duty to warn’ policy that has been implemented across administrations to warn governments against potential lethal threats. We provide these warnings in part because we do not want to see innocent lives lost in terror attacks.”

Officials with Iran’s mission to the United Nations didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

Despite the American warning, some Iranian hard-liners have suggested that Islamic State perpetrators were linked to the U.S. and Israel. At a ceremony in Kerman honoring the victims, Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, the most senior Revolutionary Guard commander said Islamic State “has disappeared nowadays,” arguing the jihadists “only act as mercenaries” for U.S. and Israeli interests.



Iranian Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami suggested U.S. and Israel were responsible for the attack. PHOTO: SEPAHNEWS/ZUMA PRESS

U.S. officials declined to say what channels were used to warn Iran or divulge details of what was passed. Nor did they say if this was the first time Washington has passed such a warning to the Iranian regime.

Iranian officials didn't respond to the U.S. about the warning, said one American official. It wasn't clear why the Iranians failed to thwart or blunt the attack, several officials said.

The U.S. routinely shares warnings of potential terrorist activity with allies and partners. In some cases, it also warns potential adversaries. In December 2019, Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) thanked President Trump [for sharing intelligence](#) that helped the Kremlin thwart a plot in St. Petersburg.

The bombings in Kerman, which killed 84 Iranians and wounded hundreds more, were the bloodiest terrorist attack inside Iran since the current government took over in the 1979 Iranian Revolution.



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi honored the victims of the suicide bombings. PHOTO: IRANIAN PRESIDENCY/ZUMA PRESS

Islamic State claimed responsibility after the attack, saying that two of its operatives had detonated explosive belts. The ideology of Islamic State, a hard-line Sunni group, considers Shiite Muslims, a majority of Iran's population, to be apostates. Islamic State and Iran have previously clashed.

ISIS-K first emerged in Afghanistan in 2015 after Islamic State militants declared a caliphate in Iraq and Syria. It was responsible for the bombing near the Kabul airport in August 2021 that killed 13 American troops and about 170 Afghan civilians as the U.S. military withdrew from Afghanistan.

The group has been a mortal enemy of the Taliban and had been greatly weakened during the American military presence in Afghanistan by attacks from U.S. and Afghan government forces and by the Taliban themselves.

With the departure of U.S. forces, ISIS-K has grown in strength. U.S. officials say it is one of the most dangerous groups in the region, eclipsing al Qaeda, with ambitions to strike targets in the West.

Biden administration officials confirmed soon after the Jan. 3 attack in Iran that they had information that ISIS-K was the culprit. But they didn't reveal that the U.S. had advance intelligence about the attack or that they had tipped off the Iranians.



Revolutionary Guard members carried the flag-draped coffin of a victim of the attack. PHOTO: VAHID SALEMI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A U.S. intelligence community directive known as “duty to warn” requires spy agencies to warn intended victims, both U.S. citizens and non-Americans, if they are the target of a terrorist attack. There are exceptions, including if the intended victims are themselves terrorists or criminals, or if issuing a warning would endanger U.S. or allied government personnel, or intelligence or military operations.

In the case of Iran, Washington alerted an adversary that has armed multiple proxies, including Yemen’s Houthis as well as militias in Syria and Iraq that have carried out more than 150 attacks on American forces since mid-October.

One former U.S. official said there could be a number of reasons for Washington to warn Iran. In addition to protecting innocent civilians, such a warning might be intended to prevent Tehran from responding to the attack in a way that could create further instability in the region and potentially undermine U.S. interests.

Other former officials said that providing such a warning might also be a way to spur dialogue on foreign policy issues.



Relatives mourned family members killed in the explosions. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

“With Iran, it gets gray,” said former CIA officer Douglas London, because the U.S. has designated Iran’s Revolutionary Guard as a foreign terrorist organization and yet most of the intended victims of the ISIS-K attack were civilians.

London, who worked on counterterrorism including duty-to-warn issues at the spy agency, said the decision to tip off Iran was likely made by senior officials at the White House and CIA. Passing the intelligence, he said, allowed the U.S. to take the moral high ground and could also be intended to encourage Iran to be receptive to dealing with Washington on some security matters.

Within the U.S. government, the warning to Iran has been a carefully guarded secret, a U.S. official said, suggesting that Washington was trying to minimize the risk that its contact with Tehran, even indirect, might be disclosed.

The ISIS-K bombings have posed a conundrum for Iran’s hard-liners, who have portrayed the U.S. and Israel as the regime’s enduring foes.

After ISIS-K took responsibility for the attack, Iran on Jan. 15 fired four Kheibar Shekan ballistic missiles at targets Tehran claimed were linked to Islamic State in Syria's Idlib province. Fired from Iran's Khuzestan Province, it was Iran's longest missile strike, according to the IRGC Aerospace force commander.

An investigation by Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, published on Jan. 10, reported that the attack was carried out by a team of Tajik operatives based in Afghanistan—where the local branch of Islamic State's ISIS-Khorasan Province is based.

Alex Vatanka, director of the Iran program at the Middle East Institute, a Washington think tank, said that the ISIS-K attack was a humiliating setback for Tehran, whose strategy calls for training and equipping proxies across the Middle East so it doesn't have to fight its foes at home.

"ISIS operatives were able to come in and attack in the birthplace of Soleimani," Vatanka said. "The headlines wrote themselves: the Islamic Republic cannot protect the Iranian homeland."

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