

# After Ahvaz; the Repercussions of a Terrorist Attack in Iran



An Iranian soldier carries an injured comrade at the scene of an attack on a military parade that was marking the anniversary of the outbreak of its devastating 1980-1988 war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, September 24, 2018, southwestern Iranian city of Ahvaz. Photo AFP

Iranians have never forgotten September 22, 1980 as the start date of one of the deadliest and longest wars in their country's history - the war between **Iran and Iraq**. It lasted eight years and cost the nation an estimated half a million "martyrs" as well as hundreds of billions of dollars. Likewise, they will remember for decades to come **the same date**, in the "sacred defense week" 38 years later, in 2018, for one of its most horrifying terrorist attacks hitting Iran in recent decades. Roughly 100 Iranian citizens witnessed the attack—25 of whom were **killed**, including four-year-old **Mohammad Taha Eghdami**. At 9am on 24 September 2018, in the city of Ahvaz in south-west Iran, , four gunmen opened fire on a military parade commemorating the start of the Iran-Iraq war; an annual ceremony that Iranians have held ever since the war ended in 1988. While the attack only lasted 12 minutes before all the attackers **were gunned down**, its repercussions are likely to last for years to come.

The **Islamic State** (IS)'s had claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack. If this is confirmed, the Ahvaz attack would mark the second, and the deadliest, Islamic State attack to happen deep inside Iranian territory. On June 7, 2017, the first two-fold attack hit **Iran's parliament** and the **Mausoleum of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini** in Tehran, leaving 17 civilians dead and 43 injured. Shocked and angry about the new attack, Iranians have now started searching for "who did it." While a spokesman of the separatist Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (or Al Ahwazia) **claimed responsibility**, the claim was later **refuted by the organization**, with the Islamic State (IS) **claimed responsibility and releasing a video** of the alleged attackers. The disturbing news for Iranians was that all attackers were not foreigners, but locals who seem to have joined IS in recent years. Accordingly, there are repercussions, both internal and external, to be taken into consideration.

Externally, the attack will lead to an even more assertive regional policy, for it will sideline moderates calling for dialogue and strengthen the revolutionary-minded radical elements within Iran's political and military elites. Apart from IS, which the Iranian government never **perceived** as an independent actor but a proxy of, or at least very much supported by the US and its allies, there were others to point to. A single tweet by a UAE political analyst, who is believed to be an advisor to the UAE's crown prince **Mohammed bin Zayed** (MbZ), sparked a huge clash between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Tehran. **He tweeted** that "an attack aiming at a military target is not a terrorist act," adding that "taking the fight deep into Iran is an announced option [by the UAE and KSA] and will increase in the next phase." Iranian were outraged by both positions. And taking into account this political analyst's closeness to MbZ and the low level of freedom of speech in the UAE, most Iranian officials concluded hastily that this was a reflection of what **Mohammad bin Salman**, the Saudi crown prince, said in May 2017: "we will work to have the fight within Iran rather than in Saudi Arabia."

Therefore, an avalanche of angry responses, both official and non-official, started sweeping the news circle and flooding social media. Mohsen Rezaee, secretary of Iran's Expediency Discernment Council, was first official to **respond**: "you will deeply regret [your comments]." The Supreme Leader of Iran **Ayatollah Khamenei** claimed that the attack came in accordance with "conspiracies of America's puppet states in the region who aim at destabilizing our beloved country." President **Hassan Rouhani** said that "we know exactly who they [the attackers] are and who supports them." He also **stated** that "those who support these terrorists... should be held accountable." These, as well as numerous statements by military and political figures, suggest that Iran saw the attack in line with the regional rivalries and the US mounting pressure on Tehran. As such, although Iran **summoned the ambassadors** of the Netherlands, England and Denmark to protest the presence and activities of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz in their respective countries, the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE got the main share of blame.

The obvious effect externally is the consolidation of the revolutionary foreign policy, which insists on the need to confront the "enemy" out of Iran not to face it within. This argument is a well-known one in Iran, brought up time and again by the **Supreme Leader** and the commander of the Quds Force from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), **Qassem Solaimani**. On the other hand, the moderate camp has nothing to offer when tension is rising. A good example is when the Arab Spring swept the Middle East. Then, the revolutionary-minded Quds Force consolidated its position in forging Iran's security-based regional policy and in doing so, developed and promoted its own vision of "**forward defense**" policy—which can be summarized as fighting outside Iran to prevent threats from approaching Iranian borders.

Though all three countries mentioned by Iranian officials as being the supporters of the attack in Ahvaz—the **US**, **UAE** and **Saudi Arabia**—have dismissed the claim, it is going to be hard for Tehran not to retaliate against IS in one way or another. In the 2017 attack in Tehran, the IRGC only waited 11 days before launching missiles against IS targets in Syria. With IS defeated, the retaliation will happen with the same speed. On the night of October 1, nine days after the Ahvaz attack, the IRGC launched

a missile barrage that **hit IS targets** in Syria's Abu Kamal. Besides the missiles, the attack was also carried out by Iranian drones—to mark the first time Iran uses drones in such an operation. According to the Chief of Staff of Iranian Armed Forces, General **Mohammad Baqer**, this was only the first phase of the retaliation. He expects that there will be more phases to come. As such, in the coming weeks and months, Iran is expected to focus on IS operatives in and around its territories. Iranian security authorities have already announced the **arrest** of 22 suspected IS members in Iran. Still, since IS is not an independent actor according to Iranian military and political officials, Iran is expected to increase the pressure on Saudi Arabia and UAE—most probably through regional cases, including **Yemen**.

Internally, the attack is expected to affect the factional balance within Iran. It is to increase the country's bipolar politics and in effect, to lower the moderate voices within. Indeed, an increase in bipolarity has always served the revolutionary and conservative camps. It has come at the expense of the moderate and reformist camps. In such times of national significance, the general mood takes a similar shift. In addition, making its regional and internal arguments resonate all around Iran, the attack is already elevating the revolutionaries and conservatives' chances in future elections. That is why moderate figures, including those of the **Rouhani government**, have moved into a tougher position to keep their public appeal and relevance.

Besides those repercussions, taking into account that the attack took place in an overwhelmingly Shiite-majority province, IS's success to attract and recruit the attackers, who seem to have converted to **Wahhabism**, is not only a sign of security breach but an indicator of how the Iranian society can become more vulnerable. Besides its efforts aimed at internal and external damage control and face-saving, the Islamic republic is facing a challenging threat: IS is infiltrating its territories, not only through the porous borders but also by winning its angry youth. This can turn into one of Iran's biggest challenges in the four decades since the **Revolution of 1979**.