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The Other Embassy Attack
Wall Street Journal Review & Outlook
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Tehran tries to turn Yemen into another Lebanon.

Government emails from Libya released this week show Foggy Bottom's finest knew within hours that an Islamist terror group was behind the September 11 attacks that killed four Americans. Maybe this truth drip will force President Obama to explain why his Administration so strenuously downplayed a terrorist connection and insisted an anti-Islamic video was to blame. But amid media and Congressional efforts to uncover the truth about Benghazi, it's worth paying attention to another attack on a U.S. diplomatic mission last month.

On September 13, several hundred people, mostly young men, stormed the Embassy in Yemen's capital of Sanaa. The American staff had been evacuated, but the compound was overrun. In the melee four Yemenis died. At the time the event was lumped in with other anti-American protests in Tunisia, Pakistan and Egypt that week.

Yet it has since become clear that the Yemen assault was also well coordinated, likely by one or more militias. More alarming is an Iranian connection that signals that Tehran is expanding its long and quiet war on America to a new front.

The U.S. isn't ruling out the possible complicity of a Yemeni army faction loyal to ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh. He stepped down from power in February as part of a U.S.-backed political transition. Since his departure, the military has been divided amid jockeying for control in this tribal society. The Salehs deny the accusation.

During months of anti-government protests in 2011, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) also gained control of territory in central Yemen. The group has several times tried to strike the U.S. mainland, and it may have been behind the assassination this month of a Yemeni security officer employed at the U.S. Embassy.

However, the leading culprit is a Shiite rebel force backed by Tehran. Taking their name from a deceased commander, the Houthi militia have since the mid-1990s fought against the Sunni-dominated government in Sanaa. According to Western officials in Yemen, Iran has provided assistance for a Houthi resurgence in the past year. Their fighters have gone to Iran and Lebanon for training, and money and arms have flowed from both into Yemen, officials say. The Houthis run a satellite TV channel, al-Maseera, from Beirut.

In July the Yemeni government said it had uncovered an Iranian spy ring in Sanaa. That got the attention of the Saudis, who are anxious about Iranian efforts to stir up their co-religionist Shiites in Bahrain, Yemen and most of all in the Kingdom itself.

Tehran's strategy in Yemen calls to mind Lebanon in the 1980s, when Iran built up Hezbollah into what has become the leading political power in Lebanon. The Iran-backed terrorists burst onto the scene by bombing the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut. If the Houthis were in the lead last month, the command and control chain runs straight to Tehran.

The interim Yemeni government is also grappling with a separatist armed uprising in the south. One of the leaders of the fractured rebel force lives in Beirut and has tried to build a pro-Iran movement in the south, according to a Western diplomat in Sanaa.

The Houthis and the southerners are separate groups with somewhat different agendas. But Iran may be facilitating a partnership, as well as reaching out to al Qaeda. They have one goal in common: To bring down the pro-American government in Sanaa. "Despite the fact that they're on opposite ends of the religious spectrum, al Qaeda and Iran will cooperate," a Western diplomat says. "You see indications that Iran is helping al Qaeda by trying to forge relations between AQAP, Houthis and southern rebels."

The U.S. supports a "national dialogue" to stabilize Yemen, while waging a drone campaign against the AQAP. Both are commendable goals. Yet Tehran has emerged as a new threat to Yemen's future and is fighting the U.S. through terror proxies. Congress can seek more clarity about Iran's designs with an inquiry into the Sanaa attacks.

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