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NATIONAL SECURITY

College campuses could be ground zero for Iranian sleeper cells plotting to harm Americans, experts warn

Experts warn Iranian operatives could be leveraging anti-Israel protests after Biden's border policies enabled terrorist entry



By **Julia Bonavita** · Fox News

Published June 26, 2025 4:00am EDT



Expert weighs in on Iran's use of sleeper cells, campus protests in retaliation against US

Barak Seener, a senior fellow at the Henry Jackson Society, speaks with Fox News Digital about Iran's possible use of sleeper cells to retaliate against the United States after airstrikes targeting key Iranian nuclear sites.

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As the threat of Iranian retaliation looms, the potential for [terror proxies](#) to leverage new-age methods remains front of mind for experts pointing to antisemitic campus protests and social media propaganda as possible methods of creating chaos within the United States.

After strikes on Iran's key nuclear sites by U.S. forces Saturday, the [Department of Homeland Security](#) (DHS) issued a National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin warning of the heightened risk of domestic terrorism from Iranian-backed or domestic attackers.

"The likelihood of violent extremists in the Homeland independently mobilizing to violence in response to the conflict would likely increase if Iranian leadership issued a religious ruling calling for retaliatory violence against targets in the Homeland," the bulletin says.

['OPEN BORDERS' UNDER BIDEN COULD HELP IRAN RETALIATE WITH US TERROR SLEEPER CELLS: FORMER FBI BOSS](#)



Iranian worshippers shout anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli slogans as one of them holds a portrait of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during an anti-Israeli rally to condemn Israeli attacks on Iran June 20, 2025. (Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

Sleeper cells are groups planted within a country by a foreign government to live and work among citizens with the ultimate goal of eventually carrying out a terror attack or politically motivated act of violence.

Due to depleted funding and resources, terror organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas have been forced to "sit this one out" when it comes to [aiding Iran](#) in its attacks, significantly depleting the regime's show of force when looking to retaliate against the U.S. and Israel, according to Barak Seener, a senior fellow at the Henry Jackson Society.

"Iran's ability to react militarily is increasingly minimalized," Seener told Fox News Digital. "We have to remember that Iran's terrorist proxies have been severely degraded."

[HOSPITALS IN SANCTUARY CITIES COULD BE MOST VULNERABLE TO IRAN TERROR ATTACKS, WARNS EXPERT](#)



Map of US strikes on Iran. (Fox News)

In response to the loss of Iran's usual terrorist proxies, Seener points to the government utilizing sleeper cells to carry out its agenda on the soil of its adversaries.

"Iran will be seeking to flex by activating sleeper cells in the U.S., Britain, Europe or even Asia," Seener said. "[It's] about conducting surveillance and then targeting either community centers or policy officials. So, Iran is not new to this game."

The threat to Americans' safety has U.S. officials on high alert, and DHS and the FBI are ramping up security measures throughout the country. Since the bombing of Iran's nuclear sites over the weekend, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrested 11 Iranian nationals in the country illegally, including an alleged sniper in the Iranian army, [according to DHS](#).

IRAN MAY ATTEMPT 'FACE-SAVING' RETALIATION AGAINST US FOR STRIKES, EXPERT SAYS

"It is our duty to keep the nation safe and informed, especially during times of conflict," DHS Secretary [Kristi Noem](#) said in a statement to Fox News Digital. "The ongoing Israel-Iran conflict brings the possibility of increased threat to the homeland in the form of possible cyberattacks, acts of violence and antisemitic hate crimes."

The FBI declined Fox News Digital's request for comment.

WATCH: Obama-era DHS secretary warns of security threat



"A number of Lebanese, Iranian, South American operatives with Iranian connections have come through the borders," Seener said, referencing the Biden administration's previous open border policies. "[There's] just no way of tracking."

However, Seener also raised the possibility of Iranian operatives commandeering [anti-Israel campus protests](#) throughout the U.S. while using cyber warfare to launch disinformation campaigns on social media.

"Much of the opposition to U.S. foreign policy toward Israel and Gaza has been people that have been coming to the [country] on student visas," Seener said. "They're not U.S. nationals. And, yet, they're able to create a disturbance and contribute to an enormous disruption."

THEY WANT AMERICANS DEAD, TOO – THE THREAT FROM IRAN AND ITS PROXIES



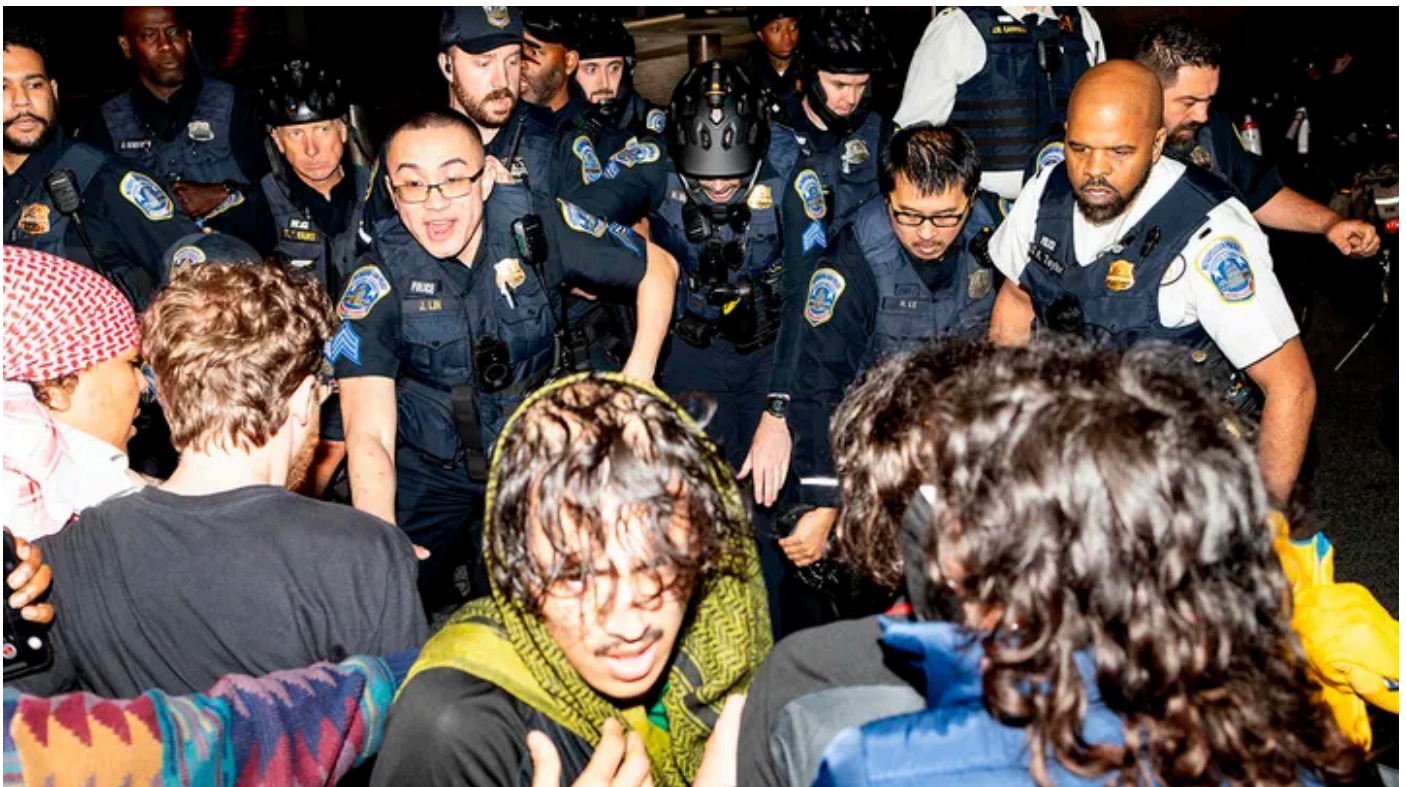
A protester stomps on an Israeli flag during an anti-Israel demonstration in Midtown Manhattan Nov. 2, 2023. (Julia Bonavita/Fox News Digital)

In response to the ongoing anti-Israel protests on college campuses, President [Donald Trump](#) has ordered his administration to revoke hundreds of student visas belonging to known activists.

However, the risk of Iranian sleeper cells pales in comparison to the possibility of an individual radicalized by the regime choosing to carry out an attack on U.S. soil, according to Paul Mauro, a retired NYPD executive officer with the Intelligence Operations and Analysis Bureau.

"If [Iran] was looking to insert an asset into America, why would you not go through a porous southern border," Mauro told Fox News Digital. "Insert foreign agents here and embed them in these campus protests."

IRAN THREATENS TO HIT US BASES IN THE MIDDLE EAST: WHAT IS THE THREAT LEVEL?



Demonstrators clash with officers from the Metropolitan Police Department at George Washington University in Washington May 8, 2024. (Sage Russell/GW Hatchet via AP)

The campus protests provide the Iranian government an attractive target to embed with, with the primary goal of creating disruption and dissent on American soil, according to Mauro.

"They can be the recipient of funds," Mauro said. "They can contextualize what is going on for you. They can tell you who the big players are, how the disruption could go. And it just saps our blood and treasure here on the home front and creates chaos."

Like Seener, Mauro pointed to the possibility of the Iranian regime using social media and online platforms to radicalize Americans in an attempt to build [homegrown terrorists](#) from the ground up.

[CNN ANALYST SUGGESTS TRUMP COULD GO DOWN AS 'HERO' AFTER IRAN STRIKE](#)

"That is a real low-rent, easy-to-run operation," Mauro said. "You get somebody who is leading a slipping down life [who] doesn't have much of an identity, somebody who is looking for a persona, and you give them one. It's subtle, and it's a seduction process."



Anti-Israel protesters climb a fence during demonstrations at the City College Of New York April 30, 2024, in New York City. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

While the use of propaganda and targeted social media is historically aligned with ISIS, Mauro pointed out changing digital times affecting how attacks can be waged.

"Traditionally, that's not the Iranian MO," Mauro said. "That's not the Hezbollah MO. But we're in a new world."

However, the possibility for [terror groups](#) to come together with new strategies to use against a common enemy remains front of mind.

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"Right now, the enemy of my enemy is my friend," Mauro said. "You could have the kind of elements that previously, people in remnants of Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Syria, Iraq could [be] figuring right now that America is going to be a soft target because you have all this unrest among the progressives."

While the bulletin released by DHS does not cite any specific threats to the American people, local, state and federal law enforcement agencies throughout the country are on high alert as they encourage people to remain vigilant with tensions between the U.S. and Iran continuing to rise.

"There are no rules of engagement to a rogue regime like Iran," Seener said. "Everything is fair game. Western democracies don't operate in that manner, and it's alien to us, but that is how Iran operates."

Julia Bonavita is a U.S. Writer for Fox News Digital and a Fox Flight Team drone pilot. You can follow her at [@juliabonavita13](#) on all platforms and send story tips to julia.bonavita@fox.com.

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