

## CHAPTER 3

# TRENDS IN IRAN'S DIRECT INVOLVEMENT IN TERRORIST ATTACKS

This chapter explores the trends that have characterized Iran's direct involvement in terrorist attacks throughout its years as a state sponsor of terrorism, emphasizing recent trends over the past five years and how these differ from previous periods. The data presented here rely on publicly available information and an interactive map published by the [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#), within the limitations noted in this memo's introduction.

Although there have been shifts in Iran's use of terrorism from the immediate post-revolutionary period to recent years, many trends and goals have remained consistent. The dynamics of terrorist operations have shifted mainly regarding operational patterns, target selection, the scale of attacks, and the degree of consideration Iran gives to international constraints. Nonetheless, the fundamental Iranian perception of terrorism as a legitimate instrument for advancing its strategic goals and regime interests remains unchanged.

Moreover, Iran's willingness to execute global terrorist attacks reflects its view of the entire world as an arena for confronting its revolutionary opponents. When acting against Iranian dissidents in exile, Iran has operated nearly without restraint within host countries and against Western adversaries, diligently working to conceal its involvement and maintain deniability. Iran rarely faced significant diplomatic or political repercussions—due primarily to its effective deniability—which further encouraged this approach, incentivizing the continued, and even intensified, use of terrorist activities when considered necessary. When Iranian involvement was undeniable, Iran resorted to hostage diplomacy to secure the release of its operatives detained in foreign states.

As outlined in earlier chapters, the main targets of Iranian terrorism can be classified into four categories: Israeli or Jewish targets; Iranian opposition

and exile activists; Western targets; and Arab targets. A historical examination since the Islamic Revolution shows evolving priorities in targeting these groups, reflecting how Iran perceived its interests over different periods. Despite the common assumption that Iran acts primarily from ideological motives, Iran has frequently prioritized strategic, pragmatic considerations over ideology, aiming to best serve its national interests (Zimmt, 2024b). Such strategic priorities influenced both the decision to use terrorism and the selection of terrorist targets over time.

Initially, in the first two decades after the Islamic Revolution, Iran's direct terrorist involvement largely focused on Iranian opposition abroad to solidify regime stability. These activities included assassinations and assassination attempts against figures from the former regime or outspoken critics of the current regime, primarily in Europe but also occasionally in the United States and Asia. Notably, in the 1990s, Iran sought the assassination of author Salman Rushdie and assassinated two translators of his book *The Satanic Verses* in Italy and Japan. Though seemingly directed at Western targets, these actions were primarily aimed at regime stabilization.

During these years, alongside actions against regime opponents, Iran was indirectly involved—through proxies such as Hezbollah—in terrorist attacks against Israeli, Western, and Arab targets. Notable examples include two major attacks in Argentina in 1992 and 1994, and proxy attacks in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Lebanon. Regarding attacks in Argentina, Iran leveraged Hezbollah's organizational revenge motive and operational expertise, which provided plausible deniability for Tehran, enabling it to remain internationally legitimate. Attacks in Arab states similarly provided logistical ease and allowed Iran to portray them as local grievances, thereby preserving its deniability.

Only in the early 2000s did isolated reports emerge of Iranian operatives arrested while gathering intelligence on potential Israeli, Jewish, or Western targets. For example, in 2004, Iranian operatives were arrested in Nigeria and Azerbaijan for collecting information on Israeli embassies. Similarly, Iranian

diplomats were arrested in New York after surveilling various targets. However, these incidents involved intelligence-gathering without subsequent attacks.

During this period, there were no significant reports of Iranian operations targeting regime opponents internationally. This could reflect the presidency of reformist Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). Yet, even after the more conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took office, this trend did not immediately change, possibly due to different priorities early in his presidency.

A turning point occurred with the 2008 killing of senior Hezbollah operative Imad Mughniyeh, attributed to the CIA and Mossad, followed by the assassination of five Iranian nuclear scientists (2010-2012), attributed to Israel. In response, Iran intensified its efforts against Israeli, Jewish, and Western targets, exemplified by attempted attacks on Israeli and Western embassies in India, Georgia, and Nepal, among other places. Additionally, several Iranian operatives were arrested abroad while collecting intelligence against these targets during this period.

The decline in Iranian activity targeting opposition figures abroad continued until 2015, at which point a new wave of attacks emerged. For instance, in December 2015, Iran assassinated Mohammad-Reza Kolahi Samadi, a Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) member, in the Netherlands. In April 2017, Iran assassinated opposition activist and regime critic Saeed Karimian in Turkey, and in November 2017, opposition activist Ahmad Mola Nissi was assassinated in Turkey. In 2019, Iran assassinated Masoud Molavi Vardanjani, and kidnapped Ruhollah Zam, later executing him following a trial. During these years, several Iranian operations aimed at surveillance and intelligence gathering about opposition activists abroad—indicative of an increase in activity—were also uncovered. Most likely, this increase can be linked to the wave of domestic unrest, regime criticism, and political instability within Iran during this period, motivating the regime to intensify its operations against the opposition abroad.

In contrast, between 2015 and 2020, there was a noticeable reduction in Iranian terrorist activities directed against Jewish, Israeli, and Western

targets. This reduction may reflect Iran's strategic interests during this period, including a desire to avoid international backlash, particularly as the regime pursued diplomatic engagements and sought to reduce external pressures. Although no direct attacks occurred during this period, several Iranian plots aimed at gathering intelligence on Jewish, Israeli, and Western targets were discovered—indicating Iran's continued interest in such actions despite a temporary reduction in overt activity.

However, in early 2020, a significant turning point occurred, marked by notable escalations following key events. On January 3, 2020, the United States, reportedly aided by Israeli intelligence, assassinated Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, in Iraq. Later that year, on November 27, Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was assassinated in an operation attributed to Israel. These events triggered intensified Iranian terrorist activity against American targets in Iraq through proxies, as well as against Israeli, Jewish, and Western targets internationally.

In 2024, against the backdrop of the Swords of Iron War (the current Israel-Hamas conflict), Israel and Iran entered direct military confrontation. This escalation began when Israel assassinated senior Quds Force official Mohammad Reza Zahedi (known as "Mahdavi") in Damascus. In retaliation, Iran launched a combined attack involving drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles against Israel overnight between April 13–14. Israel responded, escalating tensions further, and in a dramatic step, assassinated Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in July 2024. Following this assassination, Iran openly entered direct military conflict with Israel, launching ballistic missiles against Israeli territory on October 1. Israel responded militarily on October 26. Despite this conventional escalation, Iran continued and even increased its attempts to conduct terrorist attacks against Israeli targets both domestically and internationally, highlighting that direct military confrontations had not replaced terrorism as a strategic tool. Reports from 2024 also indicated increased Iranian efforts to stage attacks and surveillance activities against

Israeli targets worldwide, alongside attempts to execute terror attacks inside Israel itself.

Overall, the shifts in Iranian terror activity internationally reflect a rational approach by the Iranian regime. Iran chooses when and how to utilize terrorism based on its strategic perceptions and interests. According to researcher Raz Zimmt (2024b), despite Iran's ideological rhetoric, the regime consistently prioritizes strategic, pragmatic considerations across three main arenas: regional influence, nuclear policy, and international terrorism.

Against the backdrop of this understanding of Iran's regime as rationally choosing when and how to employ its available tools, we will now examine trends that characterize Iranian terrorism internationally over the past five years. Below, we identify several key trends in Iran's terrorist activities during this period and analyze the factors driving these developments.

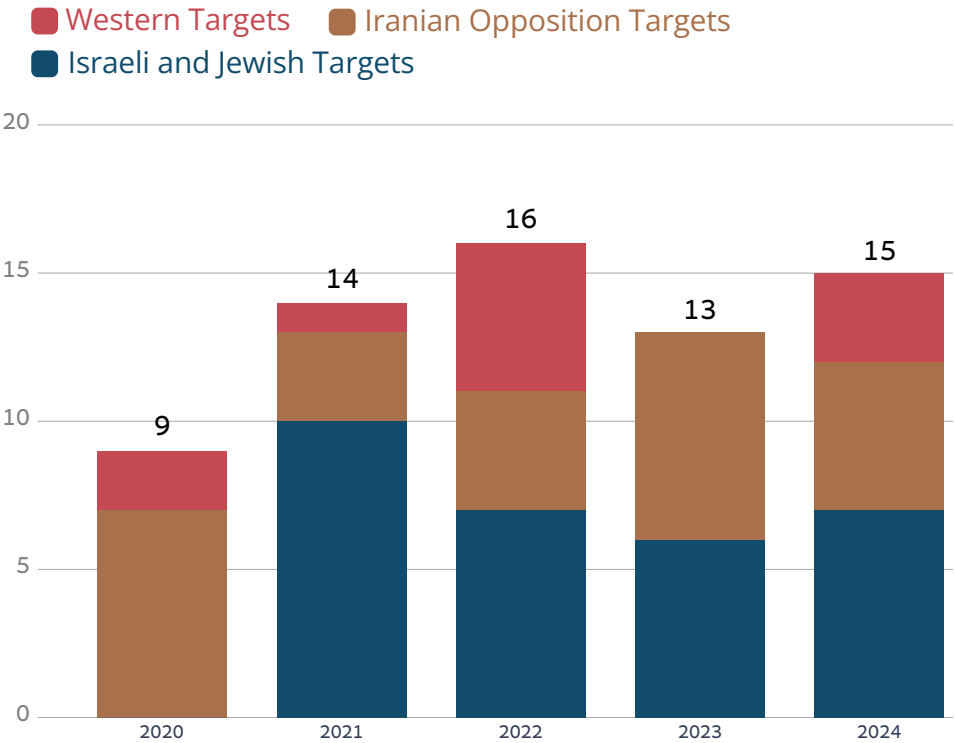
### **The Expanded Scope of Attempted Attacks**

A primary trend is the significant increase in attempted terrorist attacks by Iran over the past five years, particularly targeting Jewish, Israeli, and Western interests. There has also been some increase in activities targeting Iranian exiles, though this rise has been less dramatic compared to the surge in attempts against Jewish, Israeli, and Western targets.

According to available data, since 2020 there have been 67 documented Iranian terrorist operations. In 2020, nine such incidents were recorded; in 2021, there were 14 incidents; in 2022, 16 incidents; in 2023, 13 incidents; and in 2024, 15 incidents were reported—the most recent being the kidnapping and murder of the Chabad emissary to Dubai, though questions remain regarding Iran's responsibility for this incident.

A notable trend over the past five years has been a significant increase in Iranian attempts to carry out terrorist attacks, especially against Jewish, Israeli, and Western targets. There has also been some increase in activities against Iranian opposition groups, though this increase was less dramatic

## Targets of Terrorist Activity



## Total Number of Iranian Attempted Terror Attacks, 2020-2024



compared to the rise in attacks targeting Jewish, Israeli, and Western interests. Between 2015 and 2019, most Iranian operations targeted Iranian opposition figures (10 incidents), with fewer directed against Jewish or Israeli targets (five incidents), and none primarily targeting Western interests. However,

since 2020, there have been 30 actions against Jewish and Israeli targets, 11 against Western targets, and 26 against Iranian opposition targets. It should be noted that some operations targeted multiple objectives and were therefore counted more than once in this classification.

This acceleration in Iranian terrorist activities against Jewish, Israeli, and Western targets appears to be a response to successful U.S. and Israeli operations against Iran's terrorist infrastructure and nuclear ambitions. In addition to the assassinations of Qassem Soleimani and Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, notable incidents included the explosion at the centrifuge assembly plant in Natanz in September 2020 (attributed to Israel); the exposure and interrogation of Mansour Rasouli, an Iranian drug trafficker plotting attacks against Jewish and Western targets, in July 2021; the assassination of Hassan Sayyad Khodaei, deputy commander of Unit 840 of the Quds Force, in May 2022; the suspicious deaths of two Iranian nuclear scientists in June 2022; and a quadcopter attack targeting the TESA centrifuge manufacturing facility in Iran. Such incidents reinforced the Iranian perception that expanding international terrorism provided strategic advantages at relatively low diplomatic and political cost. The desire for deterrence against the U.S. and Israel, alongside domestic considerations—especially the need to demonstrate resilience in response to internal criticism after high-profile Iranian losses—likely influenced Iran's decision-makers to escalate terrorist operations abroad.

Despite intensified direct confrontation between Iran and Israel during 2024, and heightened tensions between Iran and the United States, Iran retained the option of international terrorism as a tool, precisely because such actions allowed plausible deniability and minimized the risk of direct conventional military escalation.

Parallel to the increased activity against Jewish, Israeli, and Western targets, activities against opposition groups abroad also rose significantly, though the magnitude was somewhat smaller. Between 2015–2019, Iran conducted 10 operations against opposition figures, whereas from 2020 to 2024, there were

26 such incidents. This increase could reflect the Iranian regime's response to ongoing internal unrest and intensified protests following the killing of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, whose death triggered widespread protests and international scrutiny of the regime's domestic repression.

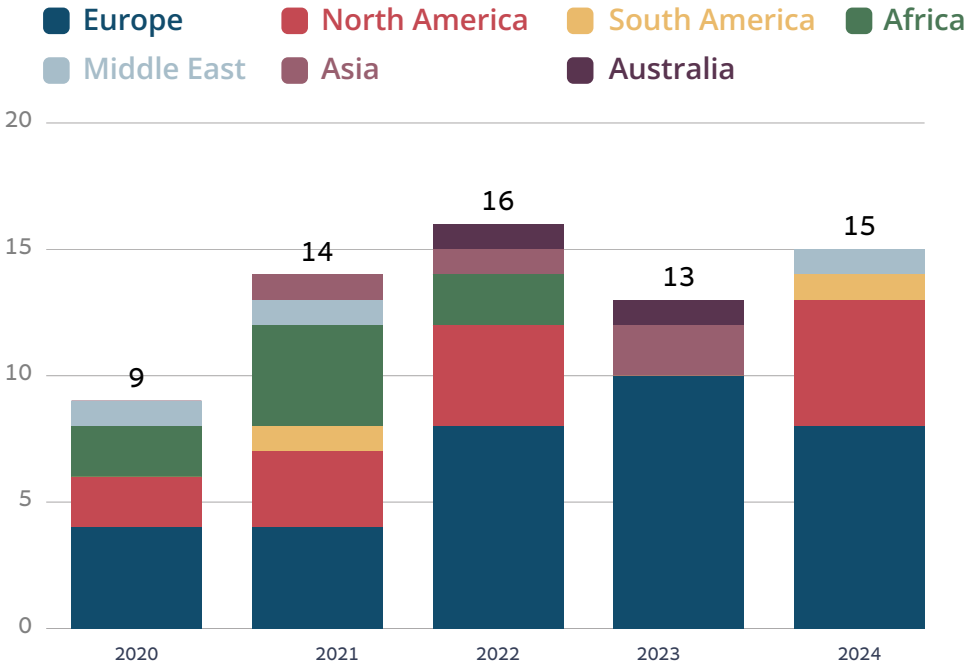
### **Expansion of Operational Arenas**

In addition to the increase in the number of operations, another trend concerns the expansion of Iran's operational arenas. After the early years following the revolution, during which Iran sought to stabilize the regime by assassinating Iranian exiles across Europe, it seemed that Iran had relatively restrained its activities in Western countries. In the early 2000s, very few operations were recorded in these countries, both due to concerns about harming diplomatic relations and because the security services in these countries were perceived as more efficient, reducing the chances of successful operations. However, in the past five years Iran has been active across the globe, including in countries where it had previously refrained from operating, such as Australia. There has also been an expansion of its activities in the United States and the United Kingdom.

During the decade that began in 2010, Iran increased its activities in Europe. Between 2010 and 2014, it carried out several operations against Israeli and Jewish targets across the continent. However, these were mainly conducted in countries perceived as weak, with less robust security services, such as Bulgaria and Georgia. Since 2015, Iran has grown bolder, operating more extensively in Western Europe. However, this boldness was mainly reflected in operations against exiles, which Iran considered "internal" actions. Iran carried out assassinations in the Netherlands and Turkey and attempted operations against Mujahedin-e Khalq activists in Albania and Paris. Alongside these actions, Iran also expanded its infrastructure activities in Europe. Several Iranian operatives were arrested while gathering intelligence for planned attacks, both against Iranian opposition figures and against Jewish, Israeli,



## Geographical Breakdown of Iranian Terrorist Activity



## Total Iranian Attempted Terror Attacks According to Geographical Area



and Western targets. However, during these years, there were no successful attacks against the latter.

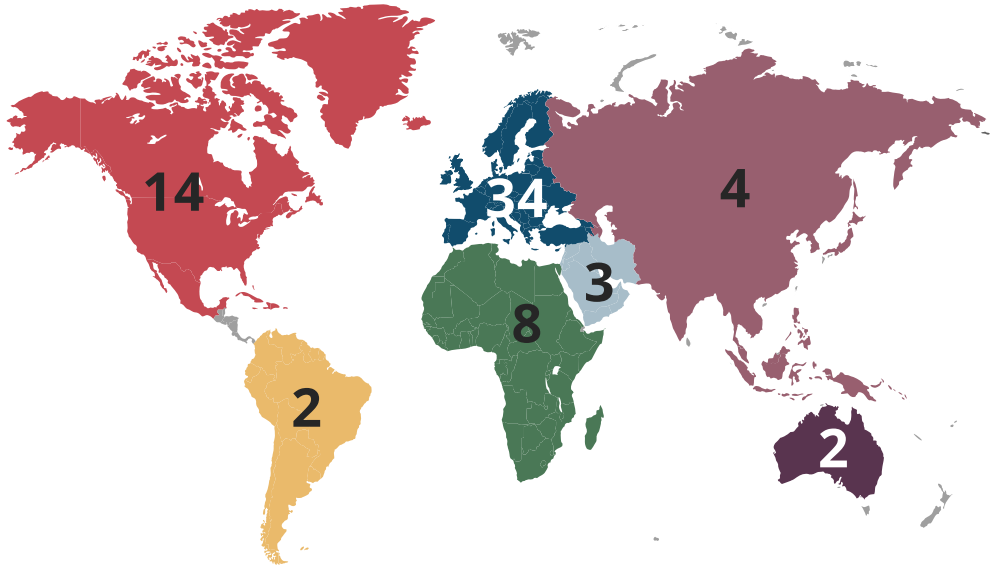
Between 2020 and 2024, Iran continued to intensify its activities across Europe, attempting numerous operations even in strong states with effective

counterterrorism agencies. The scope of Iranian operations against all its target categories in Europe has increased significantly, in line with the overall rise in Iranian activity. Particularly notable is the expanded targeting of Israeli and Jewish entities across the continent. Until recently, even when Iran operated in Europe, its primary focus was on Iranian exiles and dissidents. However, in recent years, Iran has also been conducting extensive operations against Israeli and Jewish targets in Europe.

A historical comparison helps put this escalation into perspective. During the first decade of the Islamic Republic, Iran conducted widespread operations against exiles and opposition activists across Europe. Between 1979 and 1989, it carried out 12 different operations against such targets on the continent (out of a total of 16 worldwide). Iran continued its activities against exiles in Europe during the 1990s, conducting 11 operations (out of 12 total). However, from the late 1990s onward, Iran significantly reduced its activity in Europe. In the 2000s, it did not carry out any attacks in Europe and generally operated at a low level. In the 2010s, Iran conducted 12 operations in Europe, mostly against exiles, out of a total of 26 operations—meaning fewer than half took place in Europe.

In contrast, since 2020, Iran has conducted 34 operations in Europe out of a total of 67. In 2020, Iran carried out four operations against exiles in the UK, the Netherlands, and Albania. In 2021, Iran conducted four operations in Turkey, Sweden, Germany, and Cyprus—three against Jewish and Israeli targets and one against an Iranian opposition target. In 2022, Iran carried out eight operations in Europe—five against Jewish and Israeli targets and three against Iranian opposition figures. These took place in the UK, Germany, France, Turkey, Georgia, and Albania. In 2023, Iran conducted 10 operations in Europe—in the UK, Switzerland, Greece, France, Cyprus, Spain, and Germany. Some countries saw multiple operations. Four of these targeted Jewish and Israeli entities, while six were aimed at Iranian opposition figures, including one against a Spanish politician known for supporting the Iranian opposition.

## Global Distribution of Iranian Activities by Continent, 2020-2024



In 2024, Iran carried out eight operations in Europe—three in Sweden, two in the UK, one in Belgium, one in Germany, and one in the Netherlands. Four of these targeted Jewish and Israeli entities, while the other four were aimed at Iranian opposition figures.

Additionally, there has been a significant expansion of Iranian activities in Africa. While in the past (primarily between 2010 and 2015), Iran conducted limited activities in Kenya and Nigeria, in recent years, it has expanded its terrorist operations to additional countries, including Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, Ghana, and South Africa. Notably, alongside its growing terrorist activities in Africa, Iran has also been expanding its political engagement on the continent and increasing its arms sales to African nations (Citrinowicz, 2024).

Finally, it is worth noting that Iran has also intensified its activities in North America. In 2020, Iran carried out two operations in North America. In 2021,

it conducted three such operations. In 2022, the number increased to four operations. In 2024, five operations were recorded. This is in stark contrast to earlier years: Between 2015 and 2019, Iran carried out only one such operation. Similarly, between 2010 and 2014, Iran carried out just one operation. The majority of Iran's operations in North America have been directed against senior U.S. government officials and Iranian opposition targets, with only a minority targeting Jewish and Israeli entities.

### **Operational Objectives and Their Nature**

Regarding the objectives of Iran's operations, as noted above, reports do not always specify the targets of these actions, but several notable trends can be identified. When it comes to Iranian opposition targets, a significant portion are journalists and media figures, particularly those affiliated with *Iran International* in the United Kingdom—a network known for its particularly harsh criticism of the Iranian regime's oppressive actions. Iran appears to place great importance on the exposure of opposition figures in the media and seeks to deter them through both threats and intelligence gathering, hoping to pressure them into “lowering their profile,” and, when deterrence fails, to harm them in ways that instill fear and prevent them from continuing their activities.

Regarding Western targets, in recent years, Iran has increasingly targeted high-profile figures in the United States. This contrasts with the past, when Iranian operations against Western targets primarily involved intelligence gathering on infrastructure such as embassies, buildings, and transportation systems. Recently, there have been numerous reports of Iranian efforts to harm U.S. government officials and representatives, including the U.S. ambassador to South Africa in 2020, former National Security Advisor John Bolton, and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo beginning in 2021. More recently, it was revealed that Iran also targeted former President Donald Trump and senior officials from his administration. These actions may be motivated by

a desire to “avenge” the killing of Qassem Soleimani, both as a response to the perceived personal responsibility of Trump administration officials for his death and as a means of sending an unequivocal deterrent message to future U.S. administrations.

When it comes to Israeli and Jewish targets, Iran does not hesitate in attempting various attacks, and its targets are highly diverse. These include Israeli embassies and official representations, but also Israeli businesspeople, Israeli tourists, and popular tourist sites among Israeli travelers. Iran has also sought to attack synagogues, Chabad centers, and other Jewish community institutions, as well as Jewish businesspeople known for their ties to Israel. It appears that as Israel becomes more successful in thwarting Iranian operations, Iran expands its pool of potential targets, hoping that the sheer number of attempts will eventually lead to success.

This marks a shift from the past when Iran was more selective in its choice of targets. As mentioned earlier, during the first two decades of the current Iranian regime, there was no direct Iranian activity conducted against Israeli targets. In the early 2000s, Iran focused on intelligence gathering related to Israeli targets, primarily concerning Israeli embassies in Abuja and Baku. With the start of Iran’s first significant wave of attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets in 2010, it slightly expanded its target list but remained primarily focused on embassies and official representatives, such as the Israeli military attaché in India, alongside intelligence-gathering efforts concerning synagogues and Chabad centers. Since 2015, Iran has further expanded its target pool, conducting surveillance and intelligence gathering not only on embassies and synagogues but also on senior figures within Jewish communities and community institutions. However, during this period, no attacks were carried out. It is likely that the extensive intelligence gathering served as groundwork for expanding Iran’s target selection in the wave of attempted operations that began materializing in 2020.

This approach has likely influenced the nature of Iran's operations, particularly concerning Israeli and Jewish targets. In the 1990s, Iran, through its proxies, focused on executing "high-profile" attacks, such as the bombing of the Israeli embassy in Argentina in 1992 and the Jewish community center building in 1994, both of which resulted in numerous casualties. In contrast, while Iran has recently attempted several attacks aimed at causing mass casualties—such as the attempted bombing of the Israeli embassy in India in 2021 and intelligence-gathering efforts targeting a Chabad House in Greece in 2023—these attempts either failed to cause significant casualties (in the former case) or were thwarted at an early stage (in the latter). Most Iranian operations in recent years have been assassination attempts—targeting Israeli and Jewish businesspeople, Israeli tourists, and other Israeli officials. These attempts have largely been successfully foiled by Israeli intelligence agencies in cooperation with local intelligence services. Additionally, Iran has conducted lower-profile but lower-impact operations, such as the firebombing of synagogues in Germany in 2022 and gunfire and grenade attacks on the Israeli embassy in Sweden in 2024. Many of these operations involve local criminal organizations and criminals hired by Iran, a topic that will be expanded upon later.

It is important to note that this shift in the nature of operations has coincided with a parallel change in Iran's success rates. As mentioned earlier, in the first decade following the revolution, Iran carried out numerous assassinations against exiles and regime opponents, achieving relatively high success rates. Iran successfully assassinated 12 Iranian exiles and activists, while two additional attempts failed to kill the intended targets but resulted in the deaths of close associates. Two other attempts were outright failures. In the 1990s, Iran also had relative success in assassination operations, carrying out nine successful assassinations or kidnappings of opposition figures, as well as the Hezbollah-perpetrated bombing of the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin, which was directed by Iran. Iran also successfully assassinated the Japanese

translator of *The Satanic Verses* and attempted, but failed, to assassinate the book's Italian translator. However, following this period of relative success, Iran's operations significantly declined.

With the resumption of Iranian assassination attempts in the early 2010s against a wider range of targets, Iran's success rates declined. In 2011, an Iranian assassination attempt on the Saudi ambassador to the United States failed. In 2012, an operation intending, among other things, to assassinate the Israeli ambassador to Azerbaijan, was thwarted before it could be carried out. The attempted assassination of Israel's military attaché in Delhi also failed, as did an attempt to assassinate Israeli tourists in Nepal. Iran's only successful assassination during this period was the killing of a Saudi diplomat in Pakistan in May 2011. The resumption of assassinations against Iranian exiles in 2015 slightly improved Iran's success rates, but not by much. Between 2015 and 2019, Iran successfully assassinated four Iranian exiles but failed in an attempt to assassinate Mujahedin-e Khalq activists in Albania. However, since 2020, Iran has attempted 17 assassinations targeting a variety of objectives—Western, Israeli, Jewish, and opposition-related—but the vast majority have either failed or been thwarted. Iran's poor success rate in recent years highlights the effectiveness of security efforts by intelligence agencies in various countries and possibly a decline in Iran's operational capabilities, despite its intensified efforts in this regard.