

## CHAPTER 5

# UTILIZING EXTERNAL ENTITIES TO EXECUTE ATTACKS

### **Use of Proxy Organizations**

The Iranian regime's use of proxy organizations is an integral part of its asymmetric warfare strategy, stemming from its perception that Iran's military capabilities are inferior compared to those of some of its regional and international adversaries—foremost among them, the United States and Israel. This approach constitutes a central pillar of Iran's national security strategy, enabling it, among other objectives, to extend its reach far beyond its borders and consolidate its regional influence. However, since this memorandum focuses on the implementation of “classic” terrorism, it will not delve into the training, funding, and operational preparation of foreign terrorist organizations and proxy armies for conventional warfare or their targeted use against military objectives in their home countries. Nevertheless, any discussion of the characteristics of Iranian terrorism would be incomplete without addressing Iran's use of proxy organizations to carry out “classic” terrorist attacks and their place within Iran's broader terror strategy. Therefore, this issue will be briefly examined below.

From Iran's perspective, supporting proxy organizations allows it to advance its strategic interests in the region at a relatively low cost through a third party. Moreover, the use of proxies grants Iran plausible deniability and reduces the risk of retaliatory actions against the Iranian regime (Zimmt, 2024a).

In addition to the benefits that Iran derives from its ability to rely on its proxy network, the proxy organizations themselves also gain from their relationship with Iran. Iran provides these proxies with weaponry, material support, and assistance, often undermining counterterrorism efforts and military actions against them. This dynamic is evident, for example, in the

case of the Houthis in Yemen, where Iran has significantly aided them in their struggle against Saudi Arabia (Byman, 2013).

Iran's proxy network is not homogenous, and different organizations within the network serve different purposes for Iran—sometimes fulfilling multiple objectives simultaneously. These objectives include: 1) Restraining the American presence in the region by exacting a cost for the United States' military deployment in their areas of operation; 2) Deterrence, whereby organizations function to deter Iran's regional adversaries; 3) Stabilization or support, whereby organizations assist in bolstering Iran's allies, such as the Syrian regime; and 4) Establishing Iranian influence in political institutions across the region (Tabatabai et al., 2021). This memorandum primarily concerns organizations serving the first two objectives and will therefore minimize discussion of those serving the latter ones.

It is important to emphasize that Iran's use of its proxy network for international terrorism has evolved in recent years, particularly following the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. While Iran's proxy network was always somewhat loosely connected—its members bound primarily by shared interests and ideology, alongside shared enemies—the network has become even more decentralized in recent years. Iran still wields significant influence over its proxies, but it does not necessarily maintain full control over each entity (Zimmt, 2024a). This phenomenon was particularly evident during the Swords of Iron War, when Iran denied its ability to control the activities of various organizations involved in the fighting, while numerous media reports highlighted Iranian efforts to influence and restrain its proxies.

Furthermore, proxy organizations can assist Iran in its broader conflict by launching rockets, missiles, and UAVs, effectively participating in conventional warfare. At the same time, certain organizations are used by Iran to carry out terrorist attacks against its adversaries—who are often also adversaries of the proxy organizations themselves. Some proxies serve both purposes, such as the Shiite militias in Iraq, which operate as an arm of Iran, launching

UAVs and missiles at targets relevant to both Iran and themselves, as seen during Swords of Iron, as well as in attacks against American targets in Iraq.

In this context, Iran's use of proxies to perpetrate attacks occurs on two main levels. First, these organizations carry out attacks within their own countries, such as the attacks by Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq against US forces or the attacks launched by the Houthis against commercial ships in the Gulf of Aden since November 2023. Another example is the past attack by Saudi Hezbollah, with Iranian support, on the US military complex in Khobar (Leonnig, 2006). Additionally, these organizations carry out attacks in Western and other foreign countries, such as the 2012 attempted attack in Thailand, where Hezbollah sought to target Israeli tourists using an explosive device (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2012a). Another example is the attempted assassination of the Israeli consul in Istanbul in May 2011, executed by Hezbollah operatives with the support of the Quds Force Unit 400 (Jerusalem Post, 2011).

Regarding the second level of activity, which complements Iran's direct terrorist operations, it is often difficult to discern when proxy organizations act independently to further their own perceived objectives and when they act in alignment with Iranian directives to advance Iran's interests. In many cases, operations incorporate elements of both. An example of this ambiguity can be seen in the 2012 terrorist plots in Bulgaria—just weeks after Hezbollah's attack in Burgas, Quds Force operatives conducted surveillance around a synagogue in Sofia, but the two operations did not appear to be coordinated.

In recent years, as Iran has intensified its efforts to execute terrorist attacks while maintaining plausible deniability and as proxy organizations have increasingly focused on internal conflicts within their respective countries, there has been a growing trend of Iran relying less on its proxies for attacks and instead directly utilizing Iranian operatives, expatriates, dual citizens, or non-Iranian nationals—sometimes via intermediaries from criminal organizations, as detailed in the following section. An example of this approach was Iran's

series of attempted operations against Israeli targets in Turkey in June 2022, which were carried out by Iranian and criminal organizations, without reported involvement from proxy organizations.

The use of small terrorist cells whose members are not affiliated with institutionalized organizations grants Iran greater deniability than utilizing well-known proxies, which are directly linked to Tehran and implicate it in their activities. However, this approach sometimes results in lower operational efficiency compared to established organizations or Iran's official operational units. Additionally, there appears to be a growing sense of confidence within Iran, based in part on the assessment that its regional adversaries are not inclined toward broad-scale confrontation (Zimmt, 2024a).

### **Use of Criminal Organizations and Criminals**

Alongside the direct terrorism that Iran carries out through its operational bodies within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Ministry of Intelligence, and the indirect terrorism it exercises through its proxy organizations, the IRGC regularly employs gangs, drug cartels, and international criminals to execute terrorist activities in various countries. Iran is, of course, neither the first nor the only state to use criminal organizations in this way. The phenomenon of “crime terrorism” is well known, wherein terrorist organizations utilize organized crime in its various forms to generate funds for military and organizational expansion, as well as to pay salaries to terrorists and individuals associated with the organization. The Iranian IRGC maintains ties with Afghan drug-trafficking organizations and other international crime syndicates with the goal of establishing a network for distributing drug shipments in Western countries to finance their terrorist activities (Dostri, 2022).

For instance, in May 2024, the King of Jordan emphasized the involvement of pro-Iranian militias in the drug trade and drug smuggling into his country. Furthermore, reports indicated that drug smuggling infrastructure and routes

are also used to smuggle weapons, turning a criminal issue into a security concern (Valensi & Avraham, 2024).

In recent years, Iran has leveraged its ties with organized crime not only to raise resources for terrorism but also to carry out such activities directly. As previously mentioned, the unit responsible for managing relations with criminal organizations is Unit 840 of the Quds Force. The use of organized crime allows Iran to maintain and even expand its plausible deniability, as it can claim not only that it has no connection to assassination operations but also that these acts are criminal rather than terrorist in nature.

One characteristic of Iran's use of criminal organizations for terrorism is its exploitation of conflicts and rivalries between competing criminal groups. For example, amid revelations of Swedish criminal organizations' involvement in attempted attacks on the Israeli embassy in Sweden, it was claimed that Iran is operating crime syndicates in both Sweden and other countries in Europe—leveraging the relative strengths of each group and, at times, even their rivalries (Eichner, 2024a).

Another feature of Iran's use of criminal organizations involves granting sanctuary to fugitives from Europe in exchange for their assistance in carrying out operations on behalf of the Iranian regime. One such case is Ümit Bulbul, a drug dealer from Lyon, France, who was granted asylum in Iran in return for aiding the regime in attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets. Another example is the protection provided by Iranian authorities to drug trafficker and crime gang leader Naji Ibrahim Zindashti, whose criminal network has carried out multiple operations on behalf of Iran—including assassinations and kidnappings in several countries—in exchange for Iranian authorities shielding him and his associates (Levitt & Boches, 2024).

A further case is that of Ramin Yektaparast, a member of the German "Hells Angels" gang, who was granted asylum in Iran to escape murder charges in Germany. In addition to financial compensation, he has since been operating under the Quds Force to execute attacks against Jewish and Israeli

targets (Dolev, 2024; Patrikarakos, 2024). In November 2022, it was reported that Yektaparast had recruited an Iranian cell tasked with attacking Jewish community institutions in various German cities, leading to the issuance of an international arrest warrant against him (Gil-Har & Stein, 2022; Weinthal, 2022). Yektaparast was suspected of directing the attacks from his residence in Tehran through his criminal networks in Germany on behalf of the IRGC (Morris & Mekhennet, 2023).

While evidence of criminal organizations' involvement in Iranian terrorism dates back to at least 2011—when it was reported that an Iranian agent attempted to enlist the Mexican drug cartel “Los Zetas” to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington—there is no doubt that this phenomenon has significantly intensified in recent years. This escalation is the result of multiple factors. Firstly, the declining operational capabilities of Iran's proxy organizations in the international arena, as evidenced by a review of Iran's attempted attacks in recent years, has led to a relatively low success rate and has allowed its adversaries to claim success at thwarting operations. Consequently, Iran has reduced its reliance on these groups. While Iran has increased its direct operations through its designated operational units, there are still cases where it seeks to maintain plausible deniability and reduce the risk of retaliation, leading to the use of criminal organizations.

For example, in the wake of revelations in May 2024 regarding criminal organizations conducting attacks on behalf of Iran against Israeli and Jewish targets, intelligence officials from the Mossad noted: “Iran's use of proxies and exploitation of the rising tide of antisemitism against Israel is its way of avoiding a political fingerprint in the terror acts it sponsors, thereby minimizing the political, legal, and public consequences it may face” (Eichner, 2024a).

However, alongside its advantages, the use of criminal organizations and criminals for security and political interests has significant drawbacks. A major disadvantage is that the individuals Iran employs are often untrained and lack the necessary expertise to carry out complex missions, resulting in

frequent failures and thwarted operations. Additionally, since members of criminal organizations are driven by financial incentives rather than ideological commitment to Iran, there is always a risk that the opposing side could “buy them off.” In this context, it is worth noting that Iran prefers to use criminals with Iranian citizenship or a Shiite identity to minimize the risk of defections (Dostri, 2022).

Examples of Iran’s use of criminal organizations include the extensive exposure of an Iranian terrorist infrastructure in Albania in 2019. In this case, Albanian police announced the discovery of a terrorist network established by Unit 840 of the Quds Force, which utilized a Turkish crime organization led by Abdülsem Turgut, specializing in human, weapons, and hazardous material trafficking. One of the missions assigned to this network was planning an attack in March 2018 during a Mujahedin-e-Khalq event in Tirana. Another example is the foiling of an assassination attempt on Jewish businessmen in Colombia in June 2021, where a Quds Force operative allegedly paid \$100,000 to Colombian nationals to carry out the killings (Solomon, 2021).

Furthermore, in May 2024, reports indicated that criminal organizations in Europe were advancing terrorist attacks against Jews and Israeli embassies worldwide under Iranian sponsorship and direction. Mossad sources stated that Iranian-backed terror networks were being operated by major criminal organizations across Europe, whose leaders receive direct orders from Iran. Following an attempted attack on the Israeli embassy in Sweden in January 2024, an international investigation involving European intelligence and security agencies was launched. It was suspected that the Swedish crime syndicate ‘Foxtrot’ was behind the operation on behalf of Iran. The organization’s leader, Rawa Majid—a Swedish citizen of Kurdish descent—had been under Iranian protection for months and was directed to orchestrate attacks in Europe, particularly against Israeli and Jewish targets (Eichner, 2024a).

Beyond its actions against Western and Israeli targets, Iran also uses criminal organizations to target Iranian dissidents and exiles. For example, in

December 2015, Mohammad Reza Kolahi Samadi was assassinated in Almere, Netherlands, by local mercenaries hired by Iran. Similarly, in November 2017, Ahmad Mola Nissi was assassinated in The Hague under the same circumstances (Boffey & Chulov, 2019).

In August 2022, New York police arrested a suspect in an assassination attempt on Iranian journalist and regime opponent Masih Alinejad. According to US authorities, the Iranian intelligence officer leading this plot was also managing a network of Iranian agents targeting victims in Canada, the UK, and the UAE (BBC, 2021; Borger, 2021; Human Rights Foundation, 2022). In January 2023, the US Department of Justice announced the arrest of three members of an Eastern European crime organization known as “Thieves in Law” with links to Iran, for their involvement in the attempted assassination of Alinejad (Mangan, 2023).

As part of Iran’s efforts to minimize the risk of defection among the criminals it employs, it frequently relies on Azerbaijani mercenaries for its operations—exploiting both the geographical proximity between the two countries and the Shiite identity of its recruits. According to reports, Iran is actively working to recruit assets from within Azerbaijan’s large and influential Shiite community for espionage and sabotage missions.

In recent years, Hassan Shaabani Galvani, a cleric and diplomat, has been identified as a key recruiter and operator on behalf of the Quds Force. His role is to identify and recruit individuals for Iranian terrorist activities. He operates through an institution called The Cultural Front of the Islamic Revolution of East Azerbaijan Province in the city of Tabriz—located in Iran but with a predominantly Azerbaijani population. This “cultural” institution also serves as a cover for Galvani to bring in candidates who will function as “intelligence assets” in countries such as Turkey and Azerbaijan. These individuals are invited to Iran under the guise of “religious” activities, where they undergo a vetting and recruitment process (Dostri, 2022).