

## CHAPTER 6

# CASE STUDIES OF MAJOR IRANIAN TERRORIST ATTEMPTS IN RECENT YEARS

This section provides an in-depth analysis of several significant Iranian terrorist attempts in recent years, highlighting the operational methods characteristic of Iran's actions as demonstrated by these incidents. The analysis includes Iran's activities in Cyprus over the past few years and two major attempts to carry out attacks against Israeli targets, Iran's failed attacks in Turkey in June 2022, and the 2023 assassination attempt on an Israeli businessman in Georgia. Additionally, Iranian operations against Iranian opposition figures and American targets in the United States, as reported in the media, are examined.

The focus on these events is due both to their relatively extensive media coverage and their effectiveness in illustrating key principles of Iranian terrorism operations. At the end of this section, insights into Iran's operational methodologies are presented.

### **Iranian Terrorist Plots Thwarted in Cyprus**

Over the past four years, several prominent Iranian-backed assassination attempts targeting Israelis in Cyprus have been foiled. Below, we examine two such cases, which share many common characteristics.

In the first case, Cypriot police reportedly thwarted an Iranian attempted terror attack when they arrested an Azerbaijani citizen named Orkhan Asadov—who also held a Russian passport—on September 27, 2021. Later reports claimed that Asadov had used five different names and possessed four Russian passports and multiple driver's licenses (Channel 13 News, 2021).

According to Cypriot media, Asadov was caught in his car after returning to it on an electric scooter (Schlesinger & Avni, 2021). Inside his rental vehicle, police found a Glock pistol, two magazines, a silencer, gloves, three mobile

phones, and a USB storage device. The equipment was sent for forensic examination to extract information regarding his communication patterns and the firearm's criminal record (Solomon, 2021).

Asadov was suspected of planning a crime—a contract killing. His mobile phone reportedly contained a logo associated with Hezbollah and the Pakistani militia Liwa Zainebiyoun, linking him to Iran and Unit 840's branch in Damascus. Cypriot authorities suspected he was a member of the Russian mafia and had planned five contract assassinations, as a hit list containing the names of five Israeli businessmen was found in his possession (Azoulay, 2021; Solomon, 2021). Additionally, Cypriot police obtained security camera footage showing the suspect conducting surveillance and preparations for his planned attack (Ben-Menachem, 2021a).

Journalist Ronen Bergman reported, citing a Cypriot source involved in the investigation, that Cypriot authorities overheard the assassin reporting to his Iranian handler—who was in Turkish-controlled Northern Cyprus—that he had lost track of his target. In reality, the assassin was at a restaurant opposite the wife of the Israeli businessman he was supposed to kill. He requested permission to assassinate her instead but was denied. While searching for the missing target, Cypriot authorities arrested him (Bergman, 2022).

On October 12, 2021, Muzaffar Abbas, a 27-year-old Pakistani citizen residing in Paphos and working as a food delivery courier, was arrested. Abbas was reportedly connected to the Pakistani militia affiliated with the IRGC and claimed to have been recruited for the mission by a Syrian citizen. He led investigators to a handgun buried in a plastic bag in a field near his residence. On October 23, two more Pakistani citizens, aged 25 and 31, were arrested. Their phones contained images of Israeli targets they had been tracking. Asadov and the Pakistani resident of Paphos had reportedly begun recruiting the rest of their cell in 2018—comprising three Pakistani citizens and a Cypriot-Lebanese national. The group entered Greek Cyprus via Turkish Cyprus. While

some members later returned, Asadov remained and was captured (Amir, 2021; Theodoulou, 2022).

A *Washington Post* report from December 2022 claimed that the IRGC was responsible for hiring a network of Pakistani nationals for reconnaissance and intelligence gathering—one of whom used his job as a motorcycle delivery courier as cover. In the fall of 2021, this operative reportedly relayed the intelligence he gathered to his handlers in Tehran and another individual in Cyprus who was supposed to carry out the assassination (Harris et al., 2022).

The Israeli Prime Minister's Office stated that the attack was an Iranian terror initiative aimed at Israeli businessmen (Azoulay, 2021). Bergman also reported that the intended assassination target was an Israeli employed at a local cybersecurity firm, whom Iranian intelligence believed to have previously served in military intelligence (Bergman, 2022).

In November 2021, Nicosia police published the names of the five Israeli businessmen who were targeted for assassination—though only their initials were released. Cypriot authorities also stated that all six suspects were Shiite Muslims, and that Asadov was likely the cell leader (Channel 13 News, 2021).

It was reported that Asadov frequently crossed the Agios Dometios checkpoint—separating Greek and Turkish-controlled Nicosia—using an electric scooter. While in Northern Cyprus, Asadov reportedly stayed in Famagusta, a Turkish port city, for logistical planning, including obtaining a firearm, purchasing local phones, and renting a car through a local company. He then returned to Greek Cyprus, specifically the Angomi suburb, about three kilometers southwest of Nicosia (Solomon, 2021).

In February 2022, Cypriot authorities reported that one of the six additional defendants, a 21-year-old student, pleaded guilty to two charges—collaborating with criminal suspects and failing to report knowledge of a terrorist attack. He allegedly assisted Abbas by delivering him a bag of clothes after Asadov's arrest and transported him in his car (Theodoulou, 2022).

In August 2022, the Iranian opposition news outlet *Iran International* identified senior IRGC official Reza Saraj, former head of Unit 4000, as responsible for the failed attack in Cyprus (Iran International, 2022b).

Two years later, in June 2023, another terrorist plot in Cyprus was thwarted with the assistance of the Mossad and American intelligence agencies. According to reports, the IRGC planned the attack to target a Jewish real estate agent, a Chabad House, and hotels frequented by Israelis. Seven members of the terrorist cell were arrested, while the main suspect managed to escape; however, his equipment was seized, and his identity is known to security authorities. An international arrest warrant was issued against him (Bob & Harkov, 2023). The suspect is an Iranian agent who traveled from Iran to Istanbul and then to Turkish Cyprus, where he crossed onto the Greek side to gather intelligence on Israeli targets. Subsequently, he recruited a cell that remained under constant surveillance (Eichner, 2023a; Intelli Times, 2023). Reports indicate that during his time in Cyprus, the assassin established contact with Iranian, Pakistani, and local accomplices who assisted him in acquiring weapons, communication devices, and transportation to the area where the target resided. The assassin planned to follow the target at night when he left his home and assassinate him in an isolated location. Under orders from his Iranian handler, he visited the target's residence multiple times, took photographs, and gathered intelligence on the home's security measures (Eichner, 2023a). According to reports, he received a picture of the target and the GPS coordinates of his residence (TOI staff, 2023b). Among the members of the cell were also Pakistani citizens, who were arrested by Cypriot authorities (Eichner, 2023b).

Further reports detailed the chain of command responsible for the operation within the IRGC's Intelligence Organization's Section 800, led by Mohammad Kazemi. The section was overseen by Reza Saraj, while senior official Javad Saraei managed the handler of the cell, Hassan Shushtari Zadeh. Zadeh, a veteran and well-known operative within the organization, was responsible

for “special operations”—a code term for overseas terrorist attacks. He directly managed the cell leader, Yousef Shahbazi Abbasalilu. When local security agencies began tracking him, Zadeh instructed Abbasalilu to dispose of the weapon. He hid it in a remote location in Limassol and fled from the Greek side of the island to the Turkish-controlled north before returning to Iran (Eichner, 2023a). Abbasalilu was later captured by the Mossad, interrogated, and provided a recorded testimony that revealed key details about the planned attack, those responsible, operational methods, the weapons supplied to him, and communication methods. Leaked reports from conversations between Abbasalilu and Zadeh indicated a promised reward in exchange for carrying out the operation (Eichner, 2023b).

Alongside the reports of the arrests and interrogation of Abbasalilu, it was also revealed that Greek security forces had arrested seven Pakistani nationals recruited by Iran for terrorist attacks. While it is likely that these arrests were connected to the foiled operation in Cyprus—as well as to the thwarted attack in Greece in February 2023, which also targeted a Chabad House—no definitive information was released on the matter (TOI staff, 2023a).

The combination of these operations in Cyprus, along with reports of additional Iranian attempts to act in the country in recent years, underscores Iran’s broader strategy of exploiting the ease of entry into EU territory via the crossing point between Turkish and Greek Cyprus to initiate and execute terrorist operations.

### **Foiling Iranian Terrorist Activities in Turkey**

Over the past four years, several significant Iranian attempted terrorist attacks have been carried out in Turkey, a favorable operational environment for Iran partly due to the fact that Iranian citizens are not required to obtain a visa to enter the country. Moreover, the deterioration in relations between Israel and Turkey in recent years has also impacted the extent of operational freedom that Turkey grants Iran in its activities against Israel. This situation

complicates cooperation between Israeli and Turkish security agencies, making it more challenging to thwart Iranian terrorist activities. Consequently, Iran's operational presence in Turkey is not only unlikely to decline but may even increase.

The most extensive Iranian operation in Turkey during this period occurred in June 2022, when a planned terrorist attack in Istanbul was thwarted. According to reports, a group of eight individuals—some Iranians and some Turkish citizens—split into four teams to conduct surveillance on Israeli targets in the country. The Mossad, having identified the Israelis at risk, flew them back to Israel. Subsequent reports indicated that the intended targets included former Israeli Consul General in Turkey, Yosef Safri, as well as Israeli tourists (Ynet, 2022).

Some of the suspects were identified as Iranian intelligence operatives, while others were designated assassins. According to reports, the agents split up into several groups to more easily track Israeli targets. “The hitmen on the assassination team, who were positioned in two separate rooms on the second and fourth floors of a hotel in the Beyoğlu district, were arrested with a large quantity of weapons” (Haaretz, 2022). Turkish intelligence reported that the suspects posed as students, businessmen, and tourists to monitor Israelis. The suspects were arrested at the Sol Hotel and in three rental apartments in the Beyoğlu district (Eichner, 2022b).

On July 10, 2022, additional details about the case emerged as Turkish media outlets published new images documenting the Iranian cell. The images showed two of the cell members along with the guns they intended to use. It was also reported that one of the Iranian suspects purchased a motorcycle from a local resident in Istanbul. Eventually, during a raid on June 16, Iranian cell members were apprehended along with three handguns, three silencers, and two laser sights for firearms. Their interrogation in Turkey was ongoing, and some were suspected of espionage. According to some reports, several Iranian suspects were detained on different dates.

Furthermore, it was reported that the Iranian cell had planned to assassinate three Israeli women who were traveling in Turkey and that they were being directed by an “Iranian mafia.” According to reports, Iran’s intelligence agency did not instruct them directly but used this “mafia” as an intermediary to convey orders. The Turkish investigation revealed that one of the Iranian cell members had traveled to Iran four times within two months and, during his last visit, met with the “mafia leader” four days before his arrest. In their final phone conversation, the assassin assigned to carry out the killing asked, “If we shoot inside the hotel, will the noise be too loud?” Other questions included, “Is the gun not good enough to get the job done?” The mafia leader replied that the gunfire would make “very little noise, like a balloon popping.” He later reassured him, saying, “It’s even quieter than that. Don’t worry, there won’t be a problem” (Ynet, 2022).

It should be noted that the term “Iranian mafia” likely refers to a criminal organization involved in terrorism for financial gain rather than ideological motives. This is not the first time the Iranian regime has used criminal organizations for its objectives. According to an Israeli intelligence source, the IRGC regularly employs gangs, drug cartels, and international crime syndicates to carry out terrorist activities in various countries, including Turkey, Cyprus, and South American nations (Dostri, 2022).

On August 19, 2022, the Iranian opposition website *Iran International* revealed that the IRGC’s Counter-Espionage Unit, also known as Unit 1500, led the failed assassination attempts. According to the report, the unit was headed by Ruhollah Bazghandi (Iran International, 2022b).

### **Foiling Iranian Terrorist Plots in Georgia**

In November 2022, Georgia’s State Security Service announced that it had thwarted an assassination attempt on an Israeli citizen named Itzik Moshe in Georgia. According to reports, the IRGC orchestrated the attack using multiple teams operating from different countries. A Pakistani assassination squad

linked to al-Qaeda gathered extensive intelligence on the target in Tbilisi and reached an advanced stage of operational readiness. One of the squad members was arrested by Georgian security forces after displaying suspicious behavior. Weapons and other incriminating evidence were found in his possession. Among those arrested was a 32-year-old Pakistani national named Amir Khan, who claimed he was initially instructed to assassinate Moshe by slitting his throat but later stated he could not go through with it, leading to a change in the mission plan, where he was provided with a firearm instead. During his interrogation, Khan stated that “Sufiyan,” a 45-year-old man with ties to an international terrorist organization and Iranian authorities, had arrived in Georgia before him and was the one who ordered the killing. Khan also disclosed that he had lived in a safe house for a month with an Iranian agent before being informed of his mission. He provided detailed information on Moshe’s security arrangements. In return for carrying out the assassination, members of Khan’s group who were imprisoned in Iran were to be released.

Additionally, a cell composed of two operatives with dual Georgian-Iranian citizenship was identified. They were responsible for transferring weapons to the operational team with the help of arms smugglers operating between Turkey and Georgia. The cell was reportedly paid for delivering the weapons. Both individuals were arrested by local security forces, and additional firearms intended for the attack were found in their possession. Among the arrested suspects was a woman believed to have assisted in gathering intelligence on the target. Other reports suggested that, during Khan’s interrogation, a Pakistani citizen and two Persian-language translators were also detained on suspicion of being his accomplices in the assassination attempt. However, it remains unclear whether these reports refer to the same individuals.

Since 2011, the cell had been operated by an Iranian citizen named Mohammad Reza Abadi Arbalou, a long-time Quds Force operative who had previously operated inside Georgia. His handler was Ali Pichichi Pour, a Quds Force operative advancing terrorist activities across multiple global



theaters. An Israeli security source noted that this was not the first known Iranian-directed terrorist plot in Georgia, as both official and unofficial Iranian agents had orchestrated multiple assassination attempts throughout 2021 and 2022 (Karish Hazoni, 2022; Maariv Online, 2022).

In January 2023, *Iran International* revealed that five members of Unit 400 of the Quds Force were behind the attempted assassination of Itzik Moshe. According to the report, a hacker group named *Backdoor* provided the website with documents detailing the identities and addresses of the cell members, who were described as “key operatives in the assassination team of Unit 400 within the Quds Force.” The names of the operatives were identified as Hassan Rahban, Mohammad Reza Arbalou, Mohsen Rafiei Miandashti, Farhad Pashaei, and Ali Pichichi Pour. The Iranian news website also published photos of the cell members and their commander, Hossein Rahban—a 45-year-old senior IRGC officer and commander within the Quds Force who had overseen the operation from Iran. “It is rare for him to leave Iranian soil, and in recent years, he has only traveled abroad a few times, primarily to Iraq,” stated the *Iran International* report. The mission commander on the ground was identified as Ali Pichichi Pour, a 40-year-old operative. The report indicated that as the field commander, he received orders directly from the head of Unit 400, General Hamed Abdollahi, in addition to directives from the overall operation commander, Hossein Rahban. The intelligence-gathering phase was reportedly assigned to a Pakistani team with ties to al-Qaeda, which later traveled to Tbilisi to execute the mission (Salameh, 2023).

### **Foiling Iranian Terrorism in the United States**

In recent years, Iran has also operated in the United States, targeting both Iranian dissidents and American figures. In July 2021, Iranian intelligence operatives associated with the IRGC attempted to abduct Iranian journalist and human rights activist Masih Alinejad and forcibly transfer her to Iran via a

third country—likely Venezuela. Four Iranian agents and a California resident were arrested in connection with this plot.

The indictment alleged that the operatives offered money to Alinejad's relatives in Iran to betray her. They also hired private investigators to track Alinejad and her family and even set up a live video feed of her residence. Additionally, they researched high-speed military-style motorboats to facilitate an escape from New York and studied maritime routes to Venezuela (BBC, 2021; Borger, 2021; Human Rights Foundation, 2022).

According to U.S. authorities, the mastermind behind the operation was Iranian intelligence officer Alireza Shavaroghi Farahani, with the cell comprising operatives Mahmoud Khazein, Omid Noori, and Kiya Sadeghi. The group hired private investigator Michael McKeever to surveil, photograph, and record Alinejad, her family, and her associates. Sadeghi acted as the primary liaison between the cell and McKeever. Another Iranian operative, Niloufar Bahadorifar, facilitated money laundering to pay the private investigator (Weiser & Rashbaum, 2022).

Sadeghi also ran a network of Iranian agents operating against other dissidents in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates. Reports indicated that he attempted to hire private investigators in Canada to track Alinejad and other exiles. To disguise his true motives, he claimed to be working for a Dubai-based company seeking individuals who owed money or had stolen from its clients, when in reality, he was gathering intelligence for the planned abduction (Anderson et al., 2022).

In July 2022, Iran attempted to target Masih Alinejad again. On July 31, 2022, U.S. media reported the arrest of an Azerbaijani citizen named Khalid Mehdiyev in Brooklyn, New York, who was suspected of planning Alinejad's assassination (Dostri, 2022). According to reports, Mehdiyev had surveilled Alinejad for several days. During this time, he ordered food to his car, approached her residence, peered inside through the windows, and even attempted to open the door. On July 29, he was pulled over for running

a stop sign and was found to be driving without a license. Police searched his vehicle and discovered a suitcase containing an AK-47 rifle with its serial number removed—indicating it was manufactured by the Chinese company *Norinco*. The rifle was loaded with a round in the chamber and a magazine inserted, with an additional magazine nearby—amounting to a total of 66 bullets. His car also contained two extra license plates and \$1,100 in cash. After his arrest, it was revealed that Mehdiyev had also received a parking ticket near Alinejad’s home on July 23, suggesting he had been tracking her for several days. Initially, he told police he was searching for a new apartment in Brooklyn and had intended to knock on the door to inquire about renting a room but decided against it, assuming the residents were asleep. Without being prompted about the firearm, Mehdiyev volunteered that he “did not know anything about the rifle in the car.” Later, he admitted he had been in Brooklyn looking for someone and that the gun belonged to him but then refused to answer further questions without a lawyer. Alinejad herself posted videos of Mehdiyev outside her home on social media (Human Rights Foundation, 2022; Sgueglia, 2022; Vargas, 2022).

Additional individuals were later prosecuted in connection with this case. In January 2023, Georgian national Polad Omarov was charged with conspiracy to commit murder, acting as a hitman, and money laundering in connection with the assassination plot against Alinejad. Omarov, a member of the Eastern European crime syndicate *Thieves in Law*, was recruited by another gang member, Rafat Amirov, to coordinate the plot. Omarov ordered Mehdiyev to carry out the killing. Amirov transferred \$30,000 to Omarov, of which \$10,000 was given to Omarov’s partner in Eastern Europe, while the remaining sum was intended for Mehdiyev. Omarov was arrested in the Czech Republic on January 4, 2023, and his indictment was filed on January 27. Amirov was arrested in a third country and extradited to the United States on January 26, with an indictment against him also filed on January 27 (Cohen & Shechtman, 2023).

In addition to targeting Iranian exiles in the United States, Iran has also attempted to assassinate high-ranking American officials. In August 2022, it was revealed that the U.S. Department of Justice had filed charges against IRGC operative Shahram Poursafi, also known as Mehdi Rezai, for plotting to assassinate former U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton. The motive behind the plot was retaliation for the assassination of Qasem Soleimani. Another reported target was former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Poursafi operated in coordination with senior Quds Force official Mohammad Reza Ansari, a member of the Quds Force's external operations unit responsible for covert operations abroad—including intelligence operations and assassinations against Iranian dissidents and international figures in the United States, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. Ansari and Poursafi orchestrated the plot to target senior U.S. officials (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2023).

According to reports, Poursafi began planning the assassination in October 2021. As part of the plot, he approached a U.S. citizen and requested photographs of Bolton, claiming they were needed for a forthcoming book. The citizen connected him with an undercover agent. In November 2021, Poursafi received photos of Bolton's office. He then contacted the agent through an encrypted messaging app and offered \$250,000 to assassinate Bolton, later increasing the sum to \$300,000. Poursafi instructed the agent to open a cryptocurrency account for payment. He stated that he did not care how the assassination was carried out but that his "organization" wanted video proof of the killing. The U.S. Department of Justice revealed that Poursafi also offered \$1 million for an additional "job," likely referring to the assassination of Pompeo (Ynet & Agencies, 2022).

On August 10, 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted Poursafi on charges of providing and attempting to provide material support for an international assassination plot. Following intelligence disclosures by Georgia's counterintelligence agency, a planned assassination attempt on an

Israeli citizen in Georgia was thwarted, and a security official reported that Poursafi had also been involved in efforts to orchestrate attacks against Israeli targets in Georgia between 2021 and 2022 (Eichner, 2022c; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2023)

## **Conclusion**

From the analysis of the extended case studies presented above, along with additional examined incidents, several recurring characteristics of Iranian terrorist activity emerge:

1. Recruitment of non-Iranians or former Iranians with dual national identities to provide Iran with plausible deniability regarding its responsibility for attacks. These individuals may serve as direct operatives or as part of their support networks.
2. Coercion and pressure on operatives through various means. Iran frequently threatens operatives' family members to compel their recruitment. Another method of coercion involves presenting recruitment as an alternative to imprisonment or criminal charges. In some cases, financial incentives are offered, exploiting personal hardships to facilitate recruitment.
3. Use of criminals and local crime syndicates. The IRGC routinely employs gangs, drug cartels, and international criminal networks to carry out terrorist operations in various countries, including Turkey, Cyprus, and South American nations. In other instances, criminals affiliated with Shiite communities worldwide are targeted for recruitment. For example, Iran consistently seeks collaborators within Azerbaijan's Shiite community for sabotage and espionage missions. Additionally, utilizing criminal organizations and criminals allows Iran to disguise ideologically motivated assassinations as criminal acts.
4. Payments for operations using cryptocurrency. This payment method is considered more difficult to track than other forms of financial transactions, allowing Iran to better maintain its deniability. Furthermore, in line with

the use of criminal networks, Iran also exploits its own and its proxies' criminal networks for fundraising and money laundering, which serve to finance its terrorist operations.

5. Prominent use of Turkey, Northern Cyprus, and Azerbaijan as operational bases. The selection of specific countries where multiple attacks have been attempted is based on their operational advantages. Turkey provides key strategic benefits for Iranian operations: Proximity to Iran and relatively easy operational mobility (by air and land); accessibility to the rest of the world, as Turkey serves as a major transit hub for international flights; no visa requirement for Iranian citizens entering Turkey; a central geographic location, attractive for covert meetings with terrorist operatives from the Middle East, Europe, and Southeast Asia; and collaboration with terrorist organizations operating from Turkey and neighboring countries such as Syria and Lebanon. Iran has frequently attempted attacks within Turkey while also utilizing Northern Cyprus as a base for operations in Greek Cyprus. Since Northern Cyprus is not internationally recognized as a sovereign state, it allows for operational freedom that would not be possible in internationally recognized states. The Zindashti drug cartel, which has been linked to several Iranian terrorist initiatives, also operates extensively in Turkey. Azerbaijan, with its large Shiite population—many of whom have extensive ties to Iran—serves as a fertile recruitment ground for Iranian operatives.
6. Use of diplomatic cover to enable unobstructed intelligence operations. The Iranian Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) maintains an intelligence unit within the Foreign Ministry, comprising diplomatic representatives and cultural attachés engaged in intelligence gathering through the recruitment of assets and Quds Force operatives. Additionally, as evidenced by attempted attacks on Iranian opposition conferences, Iran also uses its diplomatic representatives to smuggle explosives for terrorist operations.

7. Use of “honey traps” or family members to lure targets for abduction. While this tactic has primarily been used against Iranian exiles, its high success rate among Iranian operations suggests it may be deployed against additional targets in the future.
8. Exploitation of hostage diplomacy—arresting random foreign nationals on fabricated charges as a means of extortion to pressure foreign governments into releasing detained Iranian terrorists or securing other concessions. This aspect serves as a “force multiplier” for Iran’s broader strategy.
9. Iran’s modus operandi exhibits several recurring patterns across its operations:
  - Providing operatives with intelligence about their intended target in advance.
  - Instructing operatives to gather updated intelligence on their targets prior to and leading up to the attack.
  - Supplying operatives with weapons either through Iran’s logistics network or via criminal intermediaries.
  - Applying pressure on operatives to ensure mission completion and maintaining their motivation through messages and videos of Iranian commanders who “sacrificed themselves,” such as Qassem Soleimani.
  - Facilitating the operative’s escape following the attack.