INTRODUCTION

This memorandum examines Iran's policy of utilizing terrorism, with a particular focus on the past five years, during which Iran has significantly increased terrorist activity in the international arena. During this period, Iran has demonstrated unwavering commitment to executing terrorist activities on a broad geographical scale, showing willingness to risk friction with multiple nations in pursuit of its violent policy. This alarming trend necessitates close attention—not only because of its immediate implications but also as an indicator of Iran's growing audacity and confidence in violating international norms and national sovereignties while disregarding international law. The same can be observed in its involvement in other military domains, including its nuclear activities, support for terrorist militias across the Middle East, and its recent direct military confrontation with Israel.

Some may argue that Iran's engagement in international terrorism is secondary to its involvement in more strategically significant global and regional issues—such as the development of nuclear weapons and the financial, logistical, and military support it provides to terrorist militias. These threats, particularly given the recent escalation in the Iran-Israel conflict—where, for the first time, both nations engaged in direct military attacks on each other's territories—underscore Iran's dangerous trajectory.

Nevertheless, we contend that Iran's systematic use of international terrorism—through its formal security and intelligence structures—poses a clear, tangible, and acute threat. This danger stands both independently and as an integral part of Iran's comprehensive operational strategy, which includes additional military and strategic domains. At the time of writing, most of Iran's recent terrorist attack attempts worldwide have been thwarted, despite its extensive efforts and investments. However, this does not guarantee that future attempts will also be neutralized. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms and logic behind Iran's terrorist activities and analyze their

characteristics, in order to ensure greater success of counterterrorism measures against them.

The foundations of this study rest on three core arguments:

1. After a period of relative decline, Iran has, in recent years, escalated and expanded its terrorist operations, dedicating greater resources to such activities. This has allowed it to advance its interests while maintaining plausible deniability regarding its responsibility for these attacks.

2. In its expanded efforts, Iran has been operating across the globe, treating all countries as if they were its "local playground," where it can carry out terrorist activities without accountability.

3. Iran has increasingly turned to criminal organizations and illicit actors to carry out terrorist operations—further reflecting its blatant disregard for international norms.

In addition to these three claims, this memorandum also examines Iran's use of hostage diplomacy as a complementary tool to its terrorist activities. In cases where Iranian operatives involved in terrorist plots have been captured and their ties to Iran exposed, Iran has employed hostage-taking as a form of coercion, leveraging foreign nationals to negotiate the release of these operatives while evading the consequences.

To substantiate these arguments, the first two chapters of the memorandum provide theoretical and historical context. The first chapter outlines the principles of state-sponsored terrorism, including the motivations behind state engagement in terrorism and the various strategies employed. It also examines how state-sponsored terrorism has evolved due to technological advancements and shifts in the operational needs of terrorist organizations.

The second chapter briefly reviews Iran's use of terrorism in the first decade following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. It explores Iran's motivations for using terrorism, its targeted objectives, and the operational patterns that characterized its terrorist activities during this period.

The third chapter offers a comparative analysis of the trends in Iranian terrorism in recent years. It first reviews the historical waves and trends of Iranian terrorism leading up to the past five years and then focuses on the specific characteristics of Iran's terrorist activities in this period, analyzing the scale, geographic distribution, targets, and execution methods.

The fourth chapter examines the Iranian institutions responsible for carrying out terrorist activities, providing insights into their organizational structure and areas of responsibility. It first analyzes the entities within the Revolutionary Guards, particularly the Quds Force and the Intelligence Organization of the Revolutionary Guards, which play key roles in Iran's terrorist operations. This chapter also reviews the role of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence in executing terrorist activities.

The fifth chapter explores Iran's use of external actors to carry out terrorist attacks. It discusses Iran's reliance on proxy organizations for terrorism, differentiating this from its other uses of its extensive proxy network. It then examines Iran's growing use of criminal organizations to facilitate its terrorist activities—a trend that has accelerated in recent years.

The sixth chapter presents detailed case studies of key Iranian terrorist plots that were thwarted in recent years, particularly during the period when Iran's terrorist activities have intensified. The case studies include Iran's attempted operations in Cyprus, Turkey, Georgia, and the United States. These incidents were selected due to the extensive media coverage they received, which allowed for greater transparency in analyzing Iranian methods and tactics. We conclude the chapter by outlining the typical operational patterns observed in Iranian terrorism.

The seventh chapter focuses on Iran's use of hostage diplomacy. It provides a brief overview of hostage diplomacy as a broader state practice, followed by an in-depth analysis of Iran's unique application of this tool to further its strategic objectives. The Iranian use of hostage diplomacy is a direct continuation of Iran's terrorist activity due to the fact that in both instances Iran operates in a

way that preserves its ability to maintain plausible deniability to its criminal nature – in the terrorist activity by denying its direct involvement and in the use of hostage diplomacy by camouflaging its actions as law enforcement. Furthermore, the use of hostage diplomacy serves as a supportive measure for Iran's terrorist activity because it enables it to release Iranian operatives suspected of involvement in terrorist activity and arrested by other nations.

The final chapter summarizes the memorandum's key insights and presents policy recommendations aimed at countering Iranian terrorism and leveraging its unbridled nature to exemplify the threat posed by Iran to other countries and to amplify the need to act against it in a multifaceted manner.

Before delving into the content of this memorandum, several clarifications are required. First, it is important to emphasize that this document relies upon information from open sources. Such information is inherently limited, and it can be challenging to ascertain its reliability. Although we have made every effort to verify the credibility of the information and cross-reference multiple sources, readers should remain mindful of this limitation. It must also be recognized that open-source reporting often lacks official attribution directly linking Iran to specific terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, given the objectives and operational patterns typical of Iranian activities, one can infer Iran's involvement. Furthermore, open sources frequently do not precisely identify the specific Iranian entities responsible for such attacks, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions regarding the division of labor among various Iranian agencies. In addition to concerns about reliance on open sources, it should be noted that many planned operations were thwarted in their initial stages of intelligence gathering. Consequently, the precise target or even the intended nature of the attack is not always clear, complicating the classification of these activities.

To address these methodological challenges, we have chosen to include only events supported by multiple sources or by a single highly credible source, such as indictments filed in various countries against perpetrators or official

statements made by state authorities. Furthermore, in cases involving a series of preparatory actions aimed at enabling an attack, we have counted the entire series as a single event, rather than separately enumerating activities such as recruitment of operatives, surveillance of targets, or execution of the attack itself. Similarly, operations involving multiple targets were treated as singular event, focusing first and foremost on the apparent primary target. Finally, when reporting was general in nature—such as interviews with security officials referencing several Iranian activities without going into details—we did not count these as separate events but rather focused only on the operations themselves.

Moreover, given our decision to focus exclusively on Iran's international terrorist operations and the challenges inherent in identifying responsible entities, cyberattacks attributed to Iran have not been included in this research. We have also excluded actions carried out in Israel and the West Bank, focusing instead solely on the international arena, despite the significant acceleration of Iranian activities within Israeli territory revealed in 2024, which may warrant separate research. Consistent with the definition of terrorism provided in Chapter Two of this memorandum, we have also excluded attacks explicitly directed against military targets.

In addition to these methodological limitations, it is important to stress that this memorandum does not address Iran's support for terrorist organizations within the Middle East, which have long served as a central branch of Iranian terror policy. Instead, our focus remains on Iran's terrorist activities internationally. Although there is no doubt that Iran's wider involvement in the region influences its ability to conduct "classic" terrorist operations, this memorandum does not extensively explore the methods by which Iran trains, finances, or arms traditional terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen, due to the limited scope and desire to concentrate specifically on the issue at hand—the initiation, direction, and execution of terrorist attacks by Iran.

This memorandum provides a systematic and comprehensive overview of Iranian terrorist activities in recent years, identifying the entities—both Iranian and others—involved in their execution, and analyzing the characteristics of these activities. Our aim is to is to illustrate that Iran has increasingly adopted overtly aggressive behavior on the international stage, openly flouting international laws and norms, indeed actively working to evade and disregard them.

In light of these findings, we recommend the dissemination of this research internationally to highlight Iran's re-emergence as a rogue state, actively involved in terrorism, collaborating with international criminal organizations, and engaging in extortionary practices—such as coercing the release of intelligence operatives involved in terrorist activities by targeting innocent foreign citizens who happen to be within Iran's reach. Our aim is to encourage more countries to counteract this conduct.