Iran's Involvement in International Terrorism

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CONTENTS

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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.

CHAPTER 1
PRINCIPLES GOVERNING STATE-SPONSORED TERRORISM

The concepts of "state-sponsored terrorism" and "state sponsor of terrorism" became integral components of the international terrorism landscape over five decades ago. State support for terrorism, whether through direct involvement or via proxies, has significantly enhanced terrorist organizations' power and operational capabilities, without which they would struggle to sustain their effectiveness, let alone achieve their current prominence within international relations. In past decades, several states actively supported terrorist groups as proxies to further their strategic interests, notably Libya, Syria, Iraq, and at times Algeria, Sudan, the former South Yemen Republic, and Cuba. Today, Iran stands alone as the primary state intensively supporting numerous terrorist organizations from diverse ideological backgrounds, including but not limited to Shiite groups, using them to carry out its objectives and operating worldwide through its state apparatus. It even maintains terror networks executing attacks with the involvement of Iranian citizens, dual nationals, and foreign nationals. This chapter provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing how Iran employs terrorism strategically to advance its interests.

Defining Terrorism and State-Sponsored Terrorism
Given this memorandum's narrow focus within the broad phenomenon of terrorism, we adopted Bruce Hoffman's widely accepted definition of terrorism, encompassing five main characteristics: politically driven goals and motives; the use or threat of violence; the intention to inflict significant psychological impact beyond immediate victims; identifiable chains of command within organizations or inspired networks; and actions conducted by sub-state or non-state actors (Hoffman, 2017). However, aligning with Hoffman's definition and the focus of this memorandum, terrorism is also

clearly employed by states directly through their agents or indirectly through supporting organizations. Thus, for our purposes, the defining characteristics of terrorism are the political nature of its motivations, the use of violence or threats thereof, and extensive psychological impact that extends beyond the immediate outcomes of attacks.

Just as terrorism can be defined in varying manners, the definition of state-sponsored terrorism similarly lacks wide consensus. Paul Wilkinson defines state-sponsored terrorism as a government's direct or indirect involvement, through formal or informal groups, in generating psychological and physical violence against political targets or other states to achieve tactical and strategic objectives (Wilkinson, 1977). Wilkinson's broad definition captures general terrorist traits as well as various forms of state involvement, directly or indirectly, through various organizations. It is noteworthy that many scholars use the term "state terrorism" to describe the use of violence by a state against its own citizens or individuals whom it is obligated to protect (Blakeley, 2010). Although such violence, notably exemplified by Iran's suppression of protests such as "Women, Life, Freedom," is significant, it lies outside the definition of terrorism or state-sponsored terrorism discussed here and will not be explored in depth.

Terrorism can serve as an additional or alternative tool to the use of military force in pursuit of a state's objectives. This scenario typically materializes when a state supports terrorist activities against another state with which it is engaged in conflict. However, terrorism may also occur between two states not formally in a state of hostility (Shay, 2001).

State Motivations for Employing and Supporting Terrorism
Various motivations drive states to employ terrorism as a means of advancing their policies. Understanding these motivations is crucial, as it enables us not only to predict when a state might resort to terrorism to further its policies, but also to identify actions that could lead states to cease their use

of terrorism. Typically, no single reason exclusively motivates states to use or support terrorism. Nevertheless, we can identify three primary categories of motivations behind state-sponsored terrorism: ideology, domestic factors, and strategic considerations. In most cases, the decision to support terrorism arises from a combination of these motivations (Byman, 2005b).

For certain states, there is no doubt that ideology—particularly an ideology aimed at reviving or promoting a political system rooted in historical or revolutionary ideals—plays a significant role in the decision to utilize terrorism, at least initially. Many states strive to export their ideology and political systems, employing terrorism and terrorist organizations as instruments to achieve this objective. Terrorist groups are often instrumentalized as proxies to realize these ideological ambitions. In such cases, states perceive terrorist organizations as a kind of vanguard force that will pave the way for establishing an Islamic state, Marxist regime, or any other revolutionary system (Byman, 2005b). For example, they might serve as vehicles through which states attempt to disseminate their political ideology abroad. A notable example is the case of Libya. After seizing power, Muammar Qaddafi supported and orchestrated terrorist activities aiming to encourage revolutions throughout the Arab world and Africa. Another example is China's support for terrorism under Mao Zedong (leader of China from 1949 to 1976), who cooperated with terrorist organizations espousing revolutionary violence as a means of exporting China's ideological influence worldwide (Byman, 2023).

Other countries support terrorism as a means of advancing domestic political agendas. This perspective is prevalent primarily among regimes that aim to internally demonstrate support for organizations promoting issues of importance to the public, thus enhancing their domestic popularity. An example of this phenomenon can be observed in the support provided by the regime of Hafez al-Assad (the leader of Syria from 1970 to 2000) to Palestinian organizations, which enabled him to showcase his commitment to the Palestinian cause and thereby gain additional support specifically

from his own citizens (Byman, 2023). Less frequently, regimes utilize terrorist organizations to act against domestic opponents (Byman, 2005b). At times, support for terrorism also serves regimes by eliminating internal political rivals or foreign enemies (Byman, 2023). Libya and Syria acted in this manner in the past, and Iran has employed this approach consistently since Ruhollah Khomeini rose to power.

Nevertheless, it is clear that strategic motivations are most prominent. Terrorism enables states to compel their rivals to invest resources and military forces in counter-terrorism measures, and it also draws international attention to their demands. Many states use terrorism as a cost-effective means of projecting power, allowing them to wield influence well beyond their borders. Thus, for many Third World countries, providing assistance to terrorist organizations can be an inexpensive and effective method of expressing their strength and acquiring influence (David, 1991). Frequently, states turn to supporting terrorist organizations when few conventional military options are available, or when they believe terrorism may effectively achieve objectives that direct military confrontation may not necessarily accomplish, such as destabilizing the political order of the target state or harming its diplomatic and economic ties with other countries (Shay, 2001; Byman, 2005b, 2023). Finally, support for terrorism theoretically provides plausible deniability, enabling states to communicate violent messages without bearing direct responsibility, and consequently, without paying a price (Schweitzer, 1986) that may outweigh the benefits. Hence, even when ideological reasons may be the initial motive for states' support for terrorist organizations, strategic considerations often gain increasing significance over the course of the relationship.

Modes of State-Sponsored Terrorism

States employ various strategies in their utilization of terrorism. The most fundamental distinction lies between terrorism carried out directly by the state, through its agents or official personnel, and terrorism indirectly supported

through state aid to terrorist organizations. Additionally, states may passively support terrorism by turning a blind eye when terrorist groups train, organize, or even plan operations from their territory. Such passive support stems from different motivations to those driving active and direct support. For example, regimes might tolerate such activities because the costs of intervention outweigh perceived benefits or because tacit support advances particular political agendas (Byman, 2005a). Indeed, different states may follow different strategies regarding their use of terrorism. Nonetheless, some countries, such as Iran, combine multiple methods simultaneously.

State terrorism can take multiple forms. The primary distinction is between direct terrorism, carried out by state agents against regime opponents, and indirect terrorism, in which states support external terrorist organizations. Iran, as discussed later in this memorandum, frequently uses state agents to conduct terrorist operations.

State sponsorship of terrorist organizations can vary in degree. At one end of the spectrum, there are cases whereby a state effectively establishes a terrorist organization to carry out its objectives. For example, as part of Libya's activities as a state sponsor of terrorism, Muammar Gaddafi personally founded a Palestinian terrorist organization called the *Arab National Youth Organization* (ANYO), which operated briefly in the early 1970s, ostensibly on behalf of the Palestinian people, and carried out several deadly terrorist attacks. Similarly, the organization *Al-Saiqa* was established by Syrian President Hafez al-Assad (Merari & Elad, 1986).

Further along the spectrum, there are states that support existing terrorist organizations to varying degrees. It is important to note that states' support for terrorist organizations can be classified according to the type of support they provide, the level of this support, and its overall scope. A state may provide limited but multifaceted support to a terrorist organization, or alternatively, offer a single form of support on a broad scale.

At the most basic level, states can provide ideological support to terrorist organizations, for example, through political, religious, or ideological indoctrination of the organization's members by state agents or institutions. This is partly because cooperation between a state and a terrorist organization is often based on some form of affinity—whether religious, ideological, or political—and sometimes also on shared interests (Shay, 2001). This is especially true in the case of revolutionary states seeking to export their ideological framework, such as the former Soviet Union with communist ideology or Iran with Khomeinist ideology. In this context, the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (PFLP) serves as an example, having received extensive support from the former Soviet Union (Merari & Elad, 1986).

A higher level of support can be seen in financial assistance, where a state sponsor of terrorism allocates resources to a terrorist organization to sustain its operations (Ganor, 1997). For example, in the past, Libya provided financial assistance—alongside other forms of support—to a wide range of organizations, including European groups such as *ETA, IRA, FLNC*, the *Red Brigades*, *Action Directe*, the *Red Army Faction*, and the *Japanese Red Army*, as well as South American terrorist organizations and Palestinian terrorist groups (Schweitzer, 2004; Byman, 2005b).

An even higher level of support occurs when a state provides a terrorist organization not only with financial assistance but also direct military support. This type of aid may include the provision of weaponry, military training, and tactical and command-level instruction. It can also encompass training in advanced technological expertise (Schweitzer, 1986). Such assistance can have a significant impact, as terrorist recruits often lack combat experience and the necessary skills to carry out attacks. Iran, for example, has provided training to Hezbollah operatives and has even used Hezbollah members to train and instruct Palestinian terrorists and militants from other extremist organizations (Byman, 2005b). Another example is Libya, which trained Palestinian militants within its territory in preparation for attacks—such as

the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (PFLP) operatives who carried out the *Nitzanim* attack in 1990.

An even more substantial level of state support is operational aid, involving direct assistance in executing specific terrorist operations. States can provide forged documents allowing terrorist operatives international mobility, specialized weaponry for targeted operations, and a safe haven after attacks. For instance, Iraq previously provided weapons and refuge to various anti-Iranian and anti-Turkish terrorist groups. Reports indicate that Syria supplied Hezbollah with intelligence during its attacks on American forces in Beirut in 1983 (Byman, 2005b). Another example is the direct involvement of Libyan intelligence in specific attacks by Abu Nidal's *Fatah–Revolutionary Council* organization abroad, including the hijacking of an Egypt Air aircraft in 1985, attacks on El Al airline counters in Rome and Vienna that same year, and hijacking Pan American flights to Karachi in 1986 (Merari & Elad, 1986).

The next category of state involvement in terrorism pertains to the initiation and direction of terrorist activities. This category includes cases in which a state sponsor of terrorism does not merely support a terrorist organization but actively initiates attacks, defines their objectives, and directs their execution. In some instances, state sponsors employ terrorist organizations for specific attacks that serve the state's interests. In such cases, the terrorist organization acts as a proxy for the state and a means of advancing its strategic goals (Schweitzer, 1986). An example of such an operation is the 1986 bombing of the *La Belle* nightclub in Berlin, carried out on behalf of Libya.

Alongside these forms of support, it is also important to note that states may provide diplomatic support to terrorist organizations. This type of assistance involves using the state's influence and prestige to officially endorse and promote a terrorist organization or the cause it represents. Such support can help the organization gain international legitimacy, recruit members, and secure resources. A clear example of this is the support various Arab states have provided to Palestinian terrorist organizations (Byman, 2005b).

It is crucial to recognize that when a state sponsors a terrorist organization, their relationship is dynamic and has far-reaching implications. On the one hand, state support significantly enhances the operational capabilities of terrorist organizations. On the other hand, such support can also serve as a restraining mechanism, as the sponsor state may seek to curb the terrorist group's actions to align with its own strategic interests. Additionally, a state sponsor may attempt to control the terrorist organization, sometimes leading it to support rival groups to maintain leverage (Byman, 2005b). For example, beginning in 1983, Syria supported the *Fatah* rebels led by Abu Musa, as part of its criticism of Yasser Arafat's leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Conversely, terrorist organizations that receive state sponsorship are not merely tools in the hands of their benefactors—they often pursue their own independent agendas (Byman, 2005b). For instance, while Hezbollah is frequently perceived as an instrument of the Iranian regime, independent factors also influence the organization's policies and operational conduct, making it more than just an Iranian proxy (Schweitzer et al., 2023). Similarly, while the Basque separatist group *ETA* and the Irish *IRA* received support from Libya, they pursued their own independent objectives respectively against Spain and the United Kingdom.

Changes in State Terrorism Strategy

It is noteworthy that the technological advances and evolving needs of terrorist groups have altered state strategies for supporting terrorism, arguably making them easier to implement in certain cases. As noted, one motive for choosing terrorism as a strategy is the plausible deniability it grants. Today, cyberspace provides additional potential for concealing state involvement; consequently, many states—including China, Israel, North Korea, Russia, and the United States—incorporate cyber-attacks into their (counter)terrorism strategies (Byman, 2022). Although Iran is also occasionally involved in cyber-

attacks, as stated in the introduction, this memorandum focuses on Iran's "classic" forms of terrorism; therefore, this issue will not be explored further.

Another example of strategic change stems from the evolving needs of terrorist organizations. Today, it is easier for terrorist groups to acquire explosives and weaponry independently, decreasing the value of state assistance in obtaining light weaponry weapons. However, state support remains significant for obtaining advanced systems, such as ballistic missiles (Byman, 2022). Notably, Iran provides extensive assistance to Hezbollah through funding and transferring highly advanced weaponry, typically possessed only by advanced states. Thus, Hezbollah has acquired numerous precision missiles and high-quality advanced drones, transforming it into a highly sophisticated "terror-guerrilla" army (terror and guerrilla warfare) (Schweitzer, 2009). Without Iranian support, Hezbollah, Hamas, and even Islamic Jihad would have remained lethal and effective terrorist groups but would not have achieved the military-terrorist proficiency and technological sophistication that characterize them today.

Technological advancements also facilitate terrorist organizations in recruiting operatives and supporters due to the widespread proliferation of social media and globalized communications. This is evident in the recruitment of foreign fighters by ISIS for combat in Syria, and the influx of foreign combatants into Ukraine to counter the Russian invasion (though foreign fighters also joined forces in support of Russia). Consequently, terrorist organizations have reduced their dependence on state assistance for recruiting operatives and supporters (Byman, 2022).

EVOLUTION OF IRANIAN USE OF TERRORISM IN THE DECADE FOLLOWING THE REVOLUTION

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has employed terrorism as one of its central strategic tools. Over the years, Iran has armed, trained, financed, organized, and supported various terrorist organizations worldwide, in addition to directly conducting terrorist operations through its agents. Iranian support for terrorism has not been geographically limited to neighboring states but extended globally—including the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and South America. This chapter examines Iran's use of terrorism during the first decade of the Islamic Republic, highlighting the objectives it sought to achieve. It is crucial to emphasize from the outset that Iran often employed terrorism simultaneously with other, more legitimate methods, such as diplomacy, to achieve its goals.

Iran's objectives in employing terrorism are interconnected. These include ideological-religious objectives and revolutionary zeal—for example, exporting the Islamic Revolution and advancing Khomeini's worldview, which placed jihad and martyrdom at the ideological forefront; advancing Iranian foreign policy objectives, especially when peaceful means failed; pursuing interests against hostile regional and international states; and ensuring regime survival and stability. These objectives frequently overlapped; for example, exporting the Islamic Revolution often coincided with Iranian actions against neighboring states, while ensuring regime stability involved confronting regional and international adversaries.

Iran's Use of Terrorism to Export the Revolution
Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran identified exporting the revolution as a central goal of its foreign policy. Iran's clerical leadership considered

supporting revolution in other countries as part of their revolutionary duty. Terrorism became a convenient and effective tool for advancing revolutionary Iranian interests, justified under the guise of support for liberation and resistance movements. As Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini stated shortly after ascending to power: "We must strive to export our revolution to the world…we will confront the world through our ideology" (Byman, 2008, p.170). The constitution of the Islamic Republic and the founding charter of the Revolutionary Guards explicitly mandate the organization to support "freedom-seeking movements" to export the Islamic Revolution beyond Iran (Mansharof, 2019).

Raz Zimmt identifies three principal approaches in the 1980s regarding the export of the revolution. The first argued for promoting revolutionary values strictly within Iran's national borders. A second supported the principle of exporting the revolution, but advocated for achieving this by establishing Iran as an exemplary state to serve as a model for others. A third approach, predominantly supported by radical clerics, argued for exporting the revolution beyond Iran through maintaining a continuous struggle against regional "oppressive regimes," employing all available means, including violence and supplying weapons to Islamist liberation movements. Following the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979, the third approach gained prominence, manifesting in the use and support of terrorism to export the revolution (Zimmt, 2024a).

As noted, Iran employed various means to export its revolution, including presenting itself as a model for emulation, employing extensive informational and propaganda efforts, as well as supporting and even directly engaging in terrorism. In addition to carrying out terrorist operations itself, Iran encouraged radical movements, supported the establishment of revolutionary Islamist groups, and deployed forces from the Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon to form a local Shiite militia aligned with its ideology. Several obstacles prevented Khomeini's worldview from achieving significant influence or becoming a

dominant movement within Islam through informational and propaganda methods. Among these obstacles were the revolutionary regime's failure to effectively address Iran's economic and social issues, diminishing its appeal as a model to emulate. Moreover, governments in Muslim-majority states feared the rise of radical religious movements and thus actively suppressed them. Additionally, the promotion of Khomeini's ideology encountered objective difficulties due to its adoption primarily by the Shiite minority within the predominantly Sunni Muslim world. These challenges gradually made clandestine activities to disseminate Khomeini's ideology and the use of terrorism central instruments for achieving the objectives of the Iranian regime (Shay, 2001).

Khomeini's worldview sought to disregard the religious differences between Sunnis and Shiites as well as national distinctions, aspiring instead to create a unified revolutionary Islamic force. In his view, this vision justified interference in the internal affairs of other Muslim states and societies (Shay, 2001). While publicly claiming to respect the sovereignty of Sunni regimes in the Middle East, in practice, Iran actively sought their overthrow and replacement with Islamist regimes, blatantly violating their sovereignty—as demonstrated by the failed coup attempts in Bahrain in 1981 and Kuwait in 1985 (Mansharof, 2019). Additionally, Iran pursued the export of its revolution by establishing Shiite militias in countries such as Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2012b).

Beyond the importance of exporting revolution through terrorism, it is crucial to note that post-revolutionary Iran was deeply rooted in Khomeini's Islamic worldview and ideology. Beyond supporting and advocating for "revolutionary violence," this ideology placed jihad and martyrdom (Istishhadiya) at its ideological forefront. Iran utilized this doctrine during the Iran-Iraq War and continued to encourage and support suicide bombings, which became a prominent feature of Iranian-inspired Shiite terrorism in Lebanon during the 1980s (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2003). Khomeini

strategically leveraged the Battle of Karbala and the legacy of Muhammad Hussein ibn Ali—who holds a central position in Shiite tradition—to cultivate a culture that sanctifies self-sacrifice in pursuit of its objectives. He seized every available opportunity to glorify his death- and destruction-oriented doctrine, using media platforms and Friday sermons to disseminate his ideology. Consequently, suicide bombings became central to Iran's strategic approach, both in the context of the Iran-Iraq War and the terrorist campaigns supported by Iran, notably the Shiite attacks in Lebanon (Zahed, 2017). Inspired by Khomeini's revolution, Hezbollah significantly contributed to the global proliferation of modern suicide terrorism by becoming the first terrorist organization to systematically integrate suicide attacks into its operations. Over time, suicide terrorism became a model that was emulated and adopted by other terrorist organizations worldwide (Schweitzer & Goldstein Ferber, 2005).

Iranian Use of Terrorism to Implement Foreign Policy
Alongside exporting the Islamic Revolution, Iran employed terrorism to advance its foreign policy objectives, especially when it could not achieve its goals through conventional diplomatic means. The timing of terrorist operations was carefully chosen to influence political processes during negotiations or to initiate or facilitate such negotiations. It is essential to emphasize that although Iranian terrorist activities are frequently viewed as pragmatically driven by specific Iranian interests, other significant factors have also played a role in shaping these actions. The use of terrorism internationally has been a significant source of contention among Iran's leadership, particularly between "moderates" and "radicals." The radicals advocate for an uncompromising stance against the regime's enemies, supporting a broader and more extensive use of terrorism. Consequently, the scope and objectives of terrorism have often reflected internal power struggles within the Iranian regime. As a result, Iran has frequently adopted an ambivalent policy wherein moderates publicly supported negotiations and compromises, while radicals continued

to conduct terrorist operations, sometimes even undermining the moderates' initiatives. This ambivalent approach has provided Iran with flexibility in political maneuvers during negotiations, complicating its adversaries' efforts to justify hardline responses to Iranian terrorism (Shay, 2014).

Moreover, Iran has employed terrorism to pursue interests against hostile states, both regionally and internationally, independently from diplomatic negotiations. Immediately following the revolution, Iran prioritized cooperation with Shiite movements globally. In many Muslim-majority states, Shiites were marginalized and oppressed communities, and the Iranian revolution inspired many to take action and seek Iranian support. Consequently, Iran supported Shiite groups in Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Kuwait, and other states (Byman, 2008). While not every instance of such support involved terrorism, it often facilitated terrorist activities. Lebanon serves as a prominent example, where Iran successfully established Hezbollah, transforming it over the years from a marginal terrorist organization into a semi-state military force with considerable capabilities against Israel on the one hand, and significant influence within Lebanese domestic politics on the other. Hezbollah also recruited, trained, and directed terrorist organizations in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Nigeria. Throughout the 1980s, Hezbollah perpetrated numerous bombings in Lebanon, notably against the US Marine barracks and the French military headquarters in Beirut (October 1983), as well as kidnapping American civilians, all during its ongoing conflict with Israel and the Israeli presence in Lebanon (Silinsky, 2021).

Iran's actions naturally generated significant hostility among its neighbors, who responded by condemning Tehran, restricting or suspending trade, forming anti-Iranian alliances, and generally seeking to weaken and isolate the new regime. This response was intensified by these states' support for Iraq during the Gulf conflict, creating a strategic rivalry between Iran and many neighboring countries. In this context, terrorism and subversion became primary instruments in Iran's arsenal. At this stage, Iran supported

subversive movements not only for the ideological purpose of spreading the Islamic Revolution or undermining illegitimate regimes but also strategically as leverage in conflicts with neighboring states (Byman, 2008). Thus, terrorism has served as a complementary tool alongside other measures available to the Iranian regime to advance its interests—sometimes in tandem with diplomatic actions, and in other cases, particularly against hostile regimes, as an alternative to diplomacy.

Much of Iran's terrorist activity in this context was directed against Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where numerous attacks were carried out by local Shiite militants and against targets of these states worldwide. In many cases, direct Iranian involvement could not be conclusively proven, enabling Iran to deny involvement and formally maintain diplomatic relations while carrying out covert operations. Examples include car bombings near the French and American embassies in Kuwait, as well as bombings at Kuwaiti public facilities in December 1983 (conducted with Hezbollah operatives' involvement). Another example is the hijacking of a Kuwaiti aircraft in December 1984 by Hezbollah, who landed it in Tehran. Additional examples include a series of bombings by Iranian agents operating under various aliases, just days before the Islamic Conference convened in Kuwait in January 1987, and the bombing of a vehicle belonging to the Saudi ambassador to Morocco in 1987, which Iranian agents openly claimed responsibility for. Other notable incidents include the bombing of an Aramco gas facility in Saudi Arabia in August 1987 and bomb attacks near the Saudi bank in Paris on September 8, 1987, and near the Kuwaiti-French bank on September 10, 1987. From March to April 1988, there was a series of attacks targeting offices of Saudi airlines across several countries in the Far East. These are a mere selection of the many such examples (Shay, 2001).

It should also be mentioned that Iran used terrorism as an auxiliary tool in its military struggle against Iraq and its allies. Here, terrorism served Iran on two levels: first, by conducting terrorist acts against Iraqi targets both within

Iraq and globally; and second, by attacking countries identified as supporters of the Iraqi war effort, such as France (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2003). Furthermore, during the Iran-Iraq war, Iran engaged in what could be defined as "maritime terrorism." During the conflict, Iranian vessels attacked commercial shipping in the Gulf. Iran also planted sea mines in maritime trade routes. Usually, these tactics would be regarded as acts of war rather than terrorism. Yet, such activities could still be classified as maritime terrorism because they were conducted by individuals not in uniform and they targeted civilian, unarmed nationals from states not directly involved in the conflict. These actions demonstrate Iran's willingness to use unconventional methods to advance its political and military strategies (Sick, 2003).

Iranian terrorism against France did not solely stem from France's support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War; additional sources of tension included France hosting Iranian opposition groups, its support for Israel during the First Lebanon War, France's overall diplomatic and military involvement in Lebanon, and its involvement in Chad against Libya, Iran's ally during the war with Iraq.

Iranian activity against France operated across multiple arenas. In Lebanon, it conducted terrorism through local Shiite proxies, primarily Hezbollah, with support from the Revolutionary Guards, aiming to expel French forces from Lebanon, diminish France's influence there, and shift its stance regarding Lebanese allies. A prominent example was the car bombing targeting the French military headquarters in Beirut in October 1983. Another avenue was the hijacking of French aircrafts worldwide, such as the hijacking of Air France flights in August 1983 and July 1984. A third front comprised terrorist attacks on French soil targeting Iranian exiles and opposition groups who sought refuge there. Additional bombings against French targets were also carried out both domestically and internationally. A notable example is the series of bombings in France between 1985-1987, conducted by a pro-Iranian network linked to Hezbollah, led by Fouad Ali Saleh (Shay, 2001). Kuwait, similarly,

was a target due to its position on the Iran-Iraq war and its assistance to Iraq (Shay, 2014).

In this context, it is essential to note that terrorism was also a tool in Iran's struggle against perceived enemies of its regime, primarily the United States and Israel (Byman, 2008). Khomeini famously labeled the U.S. as the "Great Satan," accusing it of seeking to destroy Islam and the Islamic Republic. Meanwhile, Israel was branded the "Little Satan," and calls for its destruction have been recurrent themes among Iranian clerics and supporters (Silinsky, 2021). On November 1, 1979, Khomeini delivered a speech urging revolutionary students to intensify demonstrations against the U.S. and marked November 4 as an appropriate day for such action. Accordingly, on that day, "Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line" seized the American Embassy in Tehran, holding diplomats hostage. The crisis ended with a negotiated agreement after over a year, but the Iranians had learnt an important lesson—the value of terrorism to achieve political goals vis-à-vis the U.S.

One of Iran's initial aims was the removal of American forces from Lebanon. In 1983-1984, a series of suicide bombings against U.S. targets in Lebanon and Kuwait indeed led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Lebanon. Even after the withdrawal, the United States remained a primary target of Iranian terrorism. In the absence of available American military targets in Lebanon, Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah operations shifted toward attacking U.S. embassies, kidnapping American citizens, and hijacking airplanes, such as the TWA hijacking in June 1985. Relations significantly deteriorated during the "Tanker War" in the Persian Gulf in 1987, when the deployment of the U.S. Navy to ensure freedom of navigation led to confrontations between American and Iranian forces, resulting in Iranian assets and vessels being damaged. Iran, in turn, threatened and carried out retaliatory terrorist attacks against American targets, including hostage-taking and attempts to bomb American civilian aircraft (Shay, 2001).

Regarding Israel, from the outset, the Iranian regime identified it as a key enemy. Iran's steadfast opposition to Israel and its support for various terrorist groups against Israel allowed Iran not only to project military strength but also to brand itself and underscore its Islamic character, winning widespread support even in unexpected quarters. While several Arab states signed peace agreements with Israel, Iran consistently portrayed itself as resolute, defiant, and powerful in opposition to Israel—strengthening its standing in the Arab and Muslim world (Takeyh, 2006).

Since establishing the Islamic regime, Iranian leaders have never missed an opportunity to condemn Israel and criticize most Muslim states for insufficient determination against it. Khomeini promised assistance to anyone willing to fight Israel. Besides deploying Revolutionary Guard units in Lebanon to combat Israel and the U.S., Iranian actors strengthened the Amal militia and established Hezbollah, using both to launch terrorist attacks against Israeli and Western targets to advance Iranian interests in Lebanon. Despite Iran and its Shiite proxies' firm stance against Israel, during this period, they generally avoided initiating attacks against Israeli targets worldwide or within Israeli borders. However, Hezbollah kidnapped and killed several Lebanese Jews to pressure Israel into releasing imprisoned Shiites. Additionally, kidnappings of Western hostages and airplane hijackings occasionally included demands to free Shiite detainees held by Israel (Shay, 2001; Takeyh, 2006).

Finally, it's worth mentioning that besides weakening neighbors through terrorism, Iran utilized terrorism to project power far beyond its borders. Given Iran's limited conventional economic and military capabilities—which severely constrained its diplomatic options—terrorism became a tool of influence and leverage in arenas where Iran would otherwise have struggled, effectively supporting its broader foreign policy objectives (Byman, 2008).

Iranian Use of Terrorism to Ensure Regime Survival and Stability

Another motive for Iran's support of terrorism relates to the regime's interest in ensuring its own survival and stability. Initially, terrorist activities were mainly directed internally against foreign targets on Iranian soil, such as American or British interests (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2003). The primary example in this category was the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, mentioned previously. America's partial acceptance of Iranian demands led Iran to perceive this event as a significant victory and proof of its ability to compel the United States to concede to Iranian demands—encouraging further terrorist activities against Western interests. Consequently, Iran occasionally threatened similar actions, such as hostage-taking, though these threats were rarely carried out. Iran also arrested, and in some cases executed, Iranians who held foreign passports and dual citizenship, usually on accusations of working as agents of imperialism (Shay, 2001).

The seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, along with Iran's actions against Iranian nationals holding foreign passports and dual citizenship, form the basis of another long-standing Iranian terrorist strategy—hostage diplomacy. The agreement that led to the release of the American hostages from the embassy set off a cycle that persisted for a decade, during which Western citizens were arbitrarily arrested and later released on fabricated charges, serving as leverage to force the West into making concessions to Iran (Brodsky, 2023). A similar pattern emerged in Lebanon, where between 1982 and 1989, 96 foreign nationals from various countries were kidnapped, most of them by Hezbollah. These abductions were used as bargaining tools to achieve both the political and military objectives of Hezbollah and Iran (Shay, 2001).

Another prominent example of Iran's use of terrorism as a tool to strengthen the regime's power is the assassination of dissidents abroad. Following the Islamic Revolution, opposition to the new regime was fractured into various groups, many of which harbored deep animosity toward one another—at times even more so than toward Khomeini and his successors. As Khomeini's

regime grew stronger and consolidated power, and as opposition groups lost foreign governmental support due to their internal divisions—which rendered them ineffective—the Iranian opposition faced mounting difficulties. However, Khomeini's crackdown on these opposition elements did not cease. The regime continued to pursue them both inside and outside Iran, targeting exiled leaders through Iranian and Shiite terrorist cells. One of the first such attacks was the assassination of Shahriar Shafiq, the nephew of the deposed Shah, in Paris in December 1979. In 1984, Iranian forces assassinated General Gholam Hossein Oveissi, the former commander of Iran's ground forces under the Shah. In 1989, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, was killed in Vienna. The following year, Kazem Rajavi, the brother of the leader of the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* organization, was murdered in Switzerland. These assassinations continued throughout the 1990s (Shay, 2001).

These actions demonstrate that Iran has operated as both a state sponsor and initiator of terrorism, employing violence to achieve both domestic and foreign political objectives. Alongside the direct results of its actions, Iran also seeks to exert psychological influence to further its strategic goals. It pursues these objectives while simultaneously engaging as a legitimate player on the international stage, leveraging diplomatic and political tools in parallel with its covert operations—all while maintaining plausible deniability.

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

🔴 Western Targets 🟤 Iranian Opposition Targets
🔵 Israeli and Jewish Targets

Total Number of Iranian Attempted Terror Attacks, 2020-2024

67
Total

11
Western
Targets

26
Iranian
Opposition
Targets

30
Israeli and
Jewish Targets

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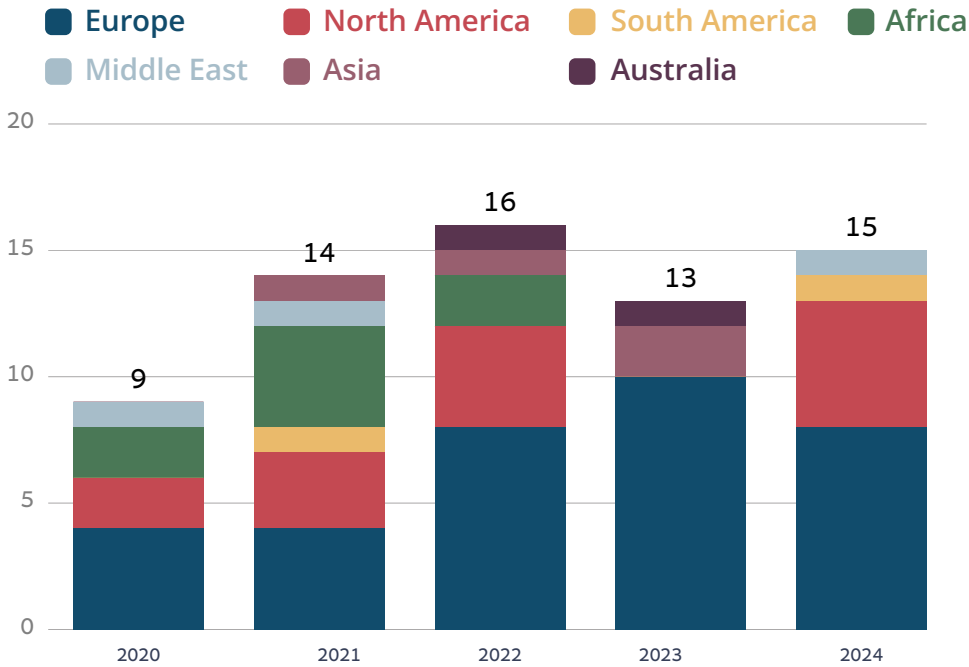
26 such incidents. This increase could reflect the Iranian regime's response to ongoing internal unrest and intensified protests following the killing of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, whose death triggered widespread protests and international scrutiny of the regime's domestic repression.

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

● Europe ● North America ● South America ● Africa
● Middle East ● Asia ● Australia

Total Iranian Attempted Terror Attacks According to Geographical Area

67	2	4	3	8	2	14	34
Total	Australia	Asia	Middle East	Africa	South America	North America	Europe

and Western targets. However, during these years, there were no successful attacks against the latter.
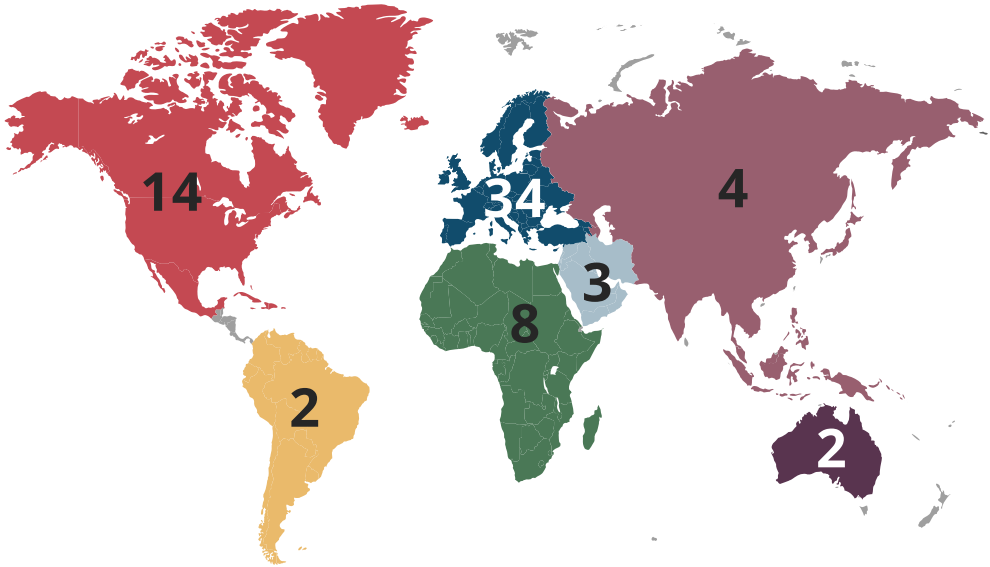
Between 2020 and 2024, Iran continued to intensify its activities across Europe, attempting numerous operations even in strong states with effective

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.

CHAPTER 4
THE INSTITUTIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR CARRYING OUT IRANIAN TERRORISM

The execution of terrorist attacks by Iran is managed and overseen by several key bodies. This is consistent with the broader structure of the Iranian government, which often relies on institutional duplication in many aspects of its operations. Such institutional redundancy is characteristic of the Iranian regime, allowing the Supreme Leader to encourage competition among different power centers with overlapping authorities, thereby preventing any single entity from accumulating excessive power (Zimmt, 2020). Accordingly, several governmental bodies are responsible for executing Iran's terrorist activities, each subordinate to different organizational frameworks.

In recent years, most terrorist operations abroad have been carried out under the responsibility of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), specifically the Quds Force and the IRGC Intelligence Organization. Other attacks fall under the purview of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence. A third

Supreme Leader

Revolutionary Guards — President

Quds Force · Air Force · Ground Force · IRGC Intelligence Organization · Basij Militia · Naval Fleet · Ministry of Intelligence

Information Dpt. · Dpt. 3 (Foreign Operations) · Borders · Technology · Internal Problem-Solving · Security · Counter Espionage · Nuclear Energy Unit · Unit 853. Foreign Intelligence

Dt. - Directorate
Dpt. - Department

category of attacks, which will only be briefly addressed in this document, are conducted by Iranian proxy organizations, primarily Hezbollah, with Iran's general approval, occasional assistance, and, at times, direct collaboration with its agencies.
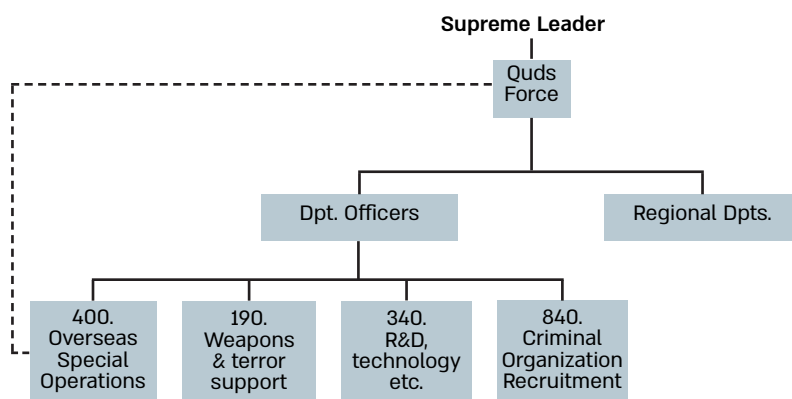
Entities Subordinate to the IRGC

The first section outlines the entities operating under the IRGC. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established by Ayatollah Khomeini shortly after he rose to power, as he distrusted the Iranian army, which had been loyal to the Shah, and needed a force that was both loyal to him and directly subordinate to his authority. The organization was initially composed of young religious men, primarily from lower social classes, who were drawn to Khomeini's vision. From the outset, the IRGC was characterized by deep ideological commitment and the belief that violence was a legitimate response to perceived threats to the Islamic Republic, both domestically and abroad (Takeyh, 2016). The IRGC was given several central objectives: Ensuring the ideological purity of the revolution; maintaining internal security in Iran and preventing coups; serving as a counterbalance to the regular Iranian military, though it was required to coordinate with it; exporting the Islamic Revolution beyond Iran's borders (Pinko, 2019; Wherey et al., 2009)

The Iran-Iraq War transformed the IRGC into a more conventional fighting force, with a structure akin to Western militaries. The organization consists of several branches: Ground forces stationed across various Iranian provinces; a separate naval force (distinct from Iran's regular navy); a separate air force (distinct from the Iranian Air Force); an intelligence organization; the Basij militia, initially an independent force, now under IRGC command. Additionally, since its involvement in the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC has supported and financed armed groups across the region. The Quds Force was created as Iran's primary external military and intelligence arm, developing relationships with militant groups in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and beyond, providing them with

training, weapons, funding, and military advice, while also conducting terrorist operations itself (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023; Ostovar, 2016; Silinsky, 2021).

Among the different units within the IRGC, two main bodies are involved in conducting terrorist attacks: the Quds Force and the IRGC Intelligence Organization. The Quds Force was established in 1990 to replace the *Office of Islamic Liberation Movements*, under the direct guidance of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Notably, the Quds Force is directly subordinate to the Supreme Leader, who also appoints its commander (Khoshnood, 2020; Tabatabai, 2020). Its establishment aimed to create a structured framework to conduct Iran's external operations and implement the doctrine of exporting the Islamic Revolution beyond Iran's borders.

Dt. - Directorate
Dpt. - Department

Over the years, the Quds Force has evolved into Iran's central terrorist arm, operating beyond its borders against various adversaries. It primarily works through proxies, attempting to conceal Iran's direct involvement to maintain plausible deniability. Quds Force operatives are stationed at Iranian

embassies abroad and work under the cover of charitable organizations, religious institutions, and educational centers operated by Iran worldwide (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2012a).

In 1998, Qassem Soleimani was appointed as commander of the Quds Force. Under his leadership, the organization flourished and expanded its operations, partly due to his close relationship with Khamenei, who trusted him deeply. During Soleimani's tenure, the Quds Force developed into a fully bureaucratic entity with various departments, each responsible for different aspects of its operations. Soleimani was assassinated by the United States in Iraq in January 2020, after which Esmail Qaani, his former deputy, was appointed as the new commander (Tabatabai, 2020).

It is important to note that while the Quds Force primarily operates as a military entity, its leadership and senior officials are often integrated into Iran's diplomatic service. The Quds Force actively influences and advances Iranian foreign policy by appointing its members as diplomatic representatives and, in some cases, even as ambassadors. Additionally, Quds Force operatives who do not hold official diplomatic positions sometimes carry out diplomatic missions (Khoshnood, 2020).

There are two main reasons for the Quds Force's involvement in Iranian diplomacy. First, from both a strategic and operational perspective, and given the central role of Iran's proxies in its defense doctrine, as well as their presence in key regional countries, it is logical for the Quds Force to operate through diplomatic channels alongside its military activities. Second, the personal influence of Qassem Soleimani enabled him to establish significant relationships with key figures across the region, allowing Iran to leverage these connections to further its agenda (Tabatabai, 2020).

The Quds Force operates in a wide range of regions across the world, including Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq, South America, Asia, Africa, Afghanistan, Syria, Western Europe, and North America (Khoshnood, 2020; Wigginton et al., 2015). The force comprises headquarter divisions, specialized command

units, and regional directorates, each with designated geographical areas of responsibility (Cohen, 2012).

In addition to its regional structure, the Quds Force has specialized units responsible for specific aspects of its operations. The two units directly responsible for international terrorism are: Unit 400, which specializes in overseas special operations (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2012a); and Unit 840, which recruits foreign operatives and criminal mercenaries to carry out attacks (Solomon, 2021). Other supporting units include Unit 190, which handles weapons smuggling and logistical support for terrorist networks (Mansharof, 2019) and Unit 340, which serves as the Quds Force's technical department, developing and transferring weapons technology to Iran's regional militias, including the Houthis in Yemen, Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas (Kais, 2023)

Various types of attacks against a wide range of targets have been attributed to the Quds Force. Among these actions is the foiled 2011 assassination attempt on the Saudi ambassador to the United States, carried out in collaboration with a Mexican drug cartel (Banerjea, 2015). The force is also extensively involved in attempts to execute attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets through Units 400 and 840, as detailed below.

One of the units involved in Iranian terrorist operations is Unit 400, whose existence was revealed in 2012. This unit operates clandestinely within the Quds Force and is assigned to special operations abroad. It is responsible for planning and executing terrorist attacks outside Iran and for assisting opposition groups and militias in various countries (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2012a). According to reports, the unit is tasked with establishing covert and operational infrastructure outside Iran to support all Quds Force activities, including the clandestine transfer of weapons, drug trafficking, and terrorist operations—though its members do not personally carry out assassinations (Pinko, 2022).

Unit 400 operates under the direct authority of the Supreme Leader, who issues directives to execute attacks when a decision is made in Iran to advance an operation. Upon receiving such an order, the unit recruits foreign operatives for the execution team, trains and prepares them in Iran, and then dispatches them to the target location through a third country, in order to obscure Iran's "fingerprints" (Cohen, 2012). Unit 400 has been linked to, among other actions, the attempted assassination of the Israeli consul in Istanbul, Moshe Kamhi, in May 2011, in coordination with Hezbollah (Harel & Mana, 2011). Another operation attributed to this unit is the attempted assassination of businessman Itzik Moshe in Georgia (Salameh, 2023).

The second key unit within the Quds Force engaged in perpetrating attacks is Unit 840. This unit focuses on managing intelligence assets in target countries and maintaining ties with criminal organizations and dormant cells composed of local operatives (Solomon, 2020). Unlike Unit 400, this unit relies on foreign operatives and mercenaries from local crime organizations. It is responsible for the kidnapping and assassination of foreign civilians worldwide, including Israelis and individuals fulfilling official roles (Fassihi & Bergman, 2022).

According to open sources, the unit's commander is Yazdan Mir, also known as "Sardar Bagheri" (Ben-Menachem, 2021b). Its deputy commander was Hassan Sayyad Khodayari until his assassination by Israel in May 2022. Khodayari was allegedly responsible for the unit's operations in the Middle East and neighboring countries, and in the two years preceding his assassination, he was involved in attempts to carry out attacks against Israeli, European, and American civilians and officials in multiple countries, including Colombia, Kenya, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates, and Cyprus. The assassination of Khodayari was reportedly intended as a signal to Iran to halt Unit 840's activities (Fassihi & Bergman, 2022). Another senior figure within the unit is Mohammad Reza Ansari, who commands the unit's operations in Syria and also implements directives to target Jewish sites in South America (Eichner, 2022c).

Unit 840 has been involved in numerous attempted attacks against Israeli and Western targets as well as Iranian opposition figures. For example, in October 2019, an Iranian terrorist network established by this unit was uncovered in Antalya, utilizing a Turkish organization controlled by Abdulselam Turgut, who specializes in smuggling humans, weapons, and hazardous materials. The investigation into this network indicated, for instance, that Unit 840 was involved in planning a bombing attack in March 2018 during an event held by the Iranian opposition group Mujahedin-e Khalq in Tirana, Albania. Another attempted attack linked to this unit likely took place in Colombia in June 2021 (Solomon, 2021; Azarmehr, 2021).

Further reports on Unit 840's involvement in executing attacks surfaced following the public disclosure of the arrest of an individual named Mansour Rasouli by the Mossad in Iran. He was interrogated, filmed, and later released. Rasouli, allegedly a member of Unit 840, had been dispatched to establish an operational network in Turkey by recruiting local citizens to carry out several attacks (Eichner, 2022a). The Iranian opposition website, Iran International, claimed that Rasouli had been recruited into the unit by Khodayari (Iran International, 2022a). According to reports, Unit 840 was also involved in the attempted assassination of Israeli businessman Yair Geller in Turkey in February 2022 (Pinko, 2022). In September 2022, it was revealed that in the preceding months, operations by Quds Force's Unit 840 had been thwarted, including plans to target American personnel as well as a Chabad House in Kinshasa (Intelli Times, 2022).

Alongside the operations of its various units, it is important to note that the Quds Force utilizes Iran's diplomatic missions, as well as a large number of civilian, religious, economic, and humanitarian organizations, to smuggle weapons, financial aid, and even militia operatives into target countries (Mansharof, 2019).

The second entity within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) involved in carrying out terrorist attacks is the Intelligence Organization. This

body, in its current form, was established in 2009 as a successor to the IRGC's intelligence unit, which was originally founded in 1979. Similar to the IRGC's decentralized operational characteristics, the Intelligence Organization operates through intelligence centers across Iran's 31 provinces. Based on partial and sporadic information regarding the organization's structure, it appears to be composed of several thematic departments, each responsible for different intelligence-related domains in accordance with assigned missions. These tasks include counterterrorism efforts, suppression of political subversion, active participation in quelling protests and riots, combating "Western cultural infiltration and moral offenses," surveillance and enforcement in the virtual domain, suppression of ethnic separatism and "religious deviation," countering serious crime and smuggling, and fighting economic corruption. In recent years, the organization has taken on additional missions—some of which were previously the exclusive domain of the Ministry of Intelligence—including the capture of regime dissidents abroad and the arrest of foreign nationals with dual citizenship for the purpose of facilitating prisoner exchange deals between Iran and Western countries or advancing various economic interests. Furthermore, the organization has become increasingly involved in suppressing domestic opposition and critics of the regime (Zimmt, 2020).

Until June 2022, the Intelligence Organization was led by Hossein Taeb, who had previously commanded the IRGC's Basij force and was considered close to Supreme Leader Khamenei (Banerjea, 2015). In June 2022, Taeb was dismissed—likely due to his failure to prevent the assassinations of senior Iranian figures and nuclear scientists on Iranian soil in recent years, which were attributed to Israel, as well as his inability to retaliate effectively (N12, 2022). His dismissal occurred shortly after Iranian attempts to carry out attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets in Istanbul were thwarted. According to reports, Taeb was replaced by Mohammad Kazemi, who had previously headed the IRGC's Intelligence Protection Organization (Segal, 2022). Some argue that following Kazemi's appointment, the organization's priorities shifted

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                        IRGC Intelligence
                          Organization
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Unit 4000: external enemies | Dt. 1500. Counter Espionage | Dt. 800 Foreign Intelligence | Technical Unit | Documentation Center | Procurement Dpt. | Social Dpt. | Operations Dpt. | Political Dpt. | Technology & Mapping Dpt. | Information-Gathering Dpt. | Security Dpt.

Dt. - Directorate
Dpt. - Department

somewhat, with a newly defined objective to focus intelligence efforts on the West Bank and Israel's home front, in addition to protecting the regime, preventing Israeli infiltration into Iran, and thwarting the assassinations of senior Iranian figures (Buhbut, 2023).

Relatively little is known about the internal structure of the Intelligence Organization. According to information detailed in a February 2012 blog post affiliated with the Iranian opposition, the organization is composed of several departments, including an Intelligence-Gathering Department responsible for amassing intelligence and distributing it among different units; a Mapping Department in charge of mapping all Iranian cities; a Political Department that receives information from the Intelligence-Gathering Department and conducts analysis and research on political parties and figures; an Operations Department responsible for planning the physical activities necessary to execute missions; a Social Department tasked with combating crime, monitoring religious minorities, overseeing activities in social organizations and mosques, and tracking non-governmental organizations while also countering economic corruption, smuggling, and fraud; a Procurement Department responsible for acquisitions, logistical support, and preparing intelligence units' operational needs; a Security Department; a Documentation Center in charge of preserving documents and maintaining a computerized intelligence database; and

a Technical Center responsible for preparing and managing surveillance, imaging, and computing equipment for the various units (Zimmt, 2020).

Another assessment of the organization's structure suggests that it consists of seven different intelligence and security departments, one of which is the Supreme Leader's personal intelligence office, also known as Department 101. It also includes the Internal Security Directorate within the Ministry of Intelligence, the Security Directorate of the Basij forces, and additional policing units. The Intelligence Organization also oversees the Cyber Command (Banerjea, 2015).

Beyond its division into departments, the organization is also structured into various directorates, although the precise relationships between these divisions remain unclear based on publicly available information. One known division is Directorate 800, responsible for foreign intelligence, which is led by Reza Saraj (Eichner, 2022b). Saraj previously headed Unit 4000, tasked with addressing "external enemies" outside Iran, a role now held by Mostafa Javad Rafari (Iran International, 2022b). Another senior figure within Directorate 800 is Javad Sarai, who was responsible for handling the operative who attempted an attack on Israeli targets in Cyprus. That operative, Hassan Shushtari Zadeh, is a well-known senior official in the Iranian Intelligence Organization, overseeing "special operations" (Eichner, 2023c).

Another division involved in terrorism is Directorate 1500, also known as the Counterespionage Unit, which is responsible for countering espionage and subversion within Iran. While this is its official mandate, its leader, Rouhollah Bazghandi, has been implicated in failed attempts to attack Israelis in Istanbul in June 2022. In light of these failures, Iran International reported significant dissatisfaction within the Intelligence Organization regarding Bazghandi—not only due to his failures in Turkey but also because Directorate 1500, as the counterespionage unit, was supposed to prioritize internal security within Iran. Instead, Bazghandi chose to focus on operations outside the country. This shift in focus allegedly led to the neglect of domestic counterintelligence

efforts, contributing to the failure to prevent high-profile assassinations and attacks on sensitive facilities and bases within Iran—actions attributed to Israel in various foreign reports (Iran International, 2022b).

As part of its political suppression efforts, the IRGC's Intelligence Organization is actively involved in capturing dissidents abroad. For instance, in 2019, the organization was implicated in the abduction of journalist and regime critic Ruhollah Zam at Baghdad airport. According to reports, Zam had traveled to Iraq under the false impression—likely induced by individuals connected to the IRGC's Intelligence Organization—that he was to conduct an interview with Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Upon his arrival in Iraq, Zam was arrested by local authorities and handed over to Iran. He was subsequently tried, sentenced to death for corruption, and executed in December 2020 (Harris et al., 2022).

Moreover, the organization plays a central role in the arrest and imprisonment of tourists, most of whom hold dual citizenship from Western countries, who are detained while visiting Iran and accused of espionage or activities endangering national security. These arrests are often part of Iran's hostage diplomacy, which will be discussed further below. They are typically intended to facilitate prisoner exchange deals between Iran and Western nations or to advance various economic interests (Zimmt, 2020).

In addition to these activities, as previously mentioned, the organization is sometimes directly involved in carrying out attacks against Israeli and Western targets. For example, in June 2023, reports surfaced regarding the thwarting of an Iranian attack in Cyprus, which was to be executed by Directorate 800 of the Intelligence Organization. The primary suspect was an Iranian operative who had traveled from Iran to Istanbul and from there to Turkish-controlled northern Cyprus. He then crossed into the Republic of Cyprus to gather intelligence on the intended targets (Eichner, 2023b), later recruiting a team of operatives. Reports also indicated that during his time in Cyprus, the agent established contact with Iranian, Pakistani, and local accomplices (TOI Staff, 2023b).

Furthermore, and even more intensively since Kazemi's appointment, as noted above, the Intelligence Organization has been involved in financing and initiating terrorism in Israel. Iran-funded terrorist activities manifest in several ways, the most prominent of which is a method dubbed "terror spraying." This approach exploits instability in the West Bank to channel large sums of money to fund weapons and attacks. The second method involves what has been described as pinpoint terrorism, consisting of concrete attempts to carry out attacks against senior figures in Israel, including intelligence collection on the target, execution planning, and selecting the timing of the attack. Additionally, Iran engages in classic intelligence operations using various espionage methods against Israel. Another key Iranian effort focuses on influencing the internal environment within Israel by exacerbating tensions and societal divisions (Buhbut, 2023).

Ministry of Intelligence

In 1979, Khomeini established his own intelligence service, primarily tasked with domestic security and intelligence gathering on Iraq. In 1984, the service underwent restructuring, with Mohammad Reyshahri appointed as its head, and it was renamed the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). As part of this reorganization, the ministry expanded its intelligence operations against Iraq and other foreign targets, playing its part in the broader mission of exporting the revolution. Thanks to generous funding and a large workforce, the Ministry of Intelligence accumulated significant power within the Iranian regime. Although it is officially subordinate to the president, in practice, its heads have been appointed from among the Supreme Leader's close associates and have effectively operated under his directives (Shay, 2003).

During its early years, under Reyshahri's leadership, the Ministry of Intelligence focused on eliminating Iranian opposition leaders, particularly members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK). After 1989, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's loyalists gained influence within the ministry, leveraging his support. As a
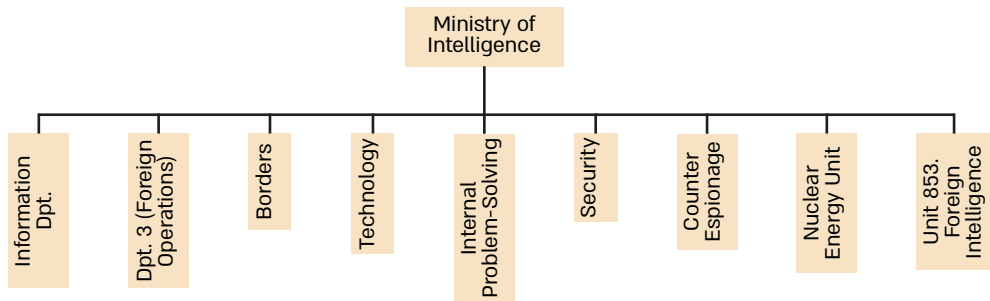
result, the ministry redirected its focus to assassinating Iranian exiles under the leadership of Ali Fallahian. In parallel with its external operations, the ministry was also involved in the arrests and killing of numerous activists and writers within Iran.

Following Mohammad Khatami's victory in the 1997 presidential elections, a compromise between the new president and the Supreme Leader led to the appointment of Ghorbanali Dorri-Najafabadi. During the early part of his tenure, political assassinations continued. Following public criticism of the ministry's involvement in these assassinations, the ministry admitted partial responsibility but attempted to portray the killings as a foreign conspiracy. Several operatives were arrested and tortured until they confessed to being Israeli agents. As a result, Dorri-Najafabadi resigned in 1999 and was replaced by Ali Younesi.

In 2005, newly-elected President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad appointed Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei as Minister of Intelligence. Under his leadership, the ministry focused on neutralizing internal threats—particularly plots perceived to be related to the "Color Revolutions"—while continuing the policy of abducting Iranian exiles abroad. However, Mohseni Ejei was dismissed due to his failure to suppress the Green Movement protests and was replaced by Heydar Moslehi, who conducted another purge within the ministry, dismissing many reformist-affiliated members. With the assistance of other security agencies, the ministry ultimately succeeded in quelling the Green Movement.

Nevertheless, the ministry failed in several of its other missions. For example, it was unable to prevent the assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists— allegedly carried out by Israel. Likewise, Iran's attempts at retaliatory attacks, such as the failed 2012 bombing in Bangkok, were unsuccessful. Additionally, tensions developed between President Ahmadinejad and the ministry.

Upon his election, President Hassan Rouhani appointed Mahmoud Alavi as Minister of Intelligence. This appointment was a compromise supported by Khamenei, who had already shifted much of his backing to the IRGC

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                        │   Ministry of   │
                        │  Intelligence   │
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Ministry of Intelligence

- Information Dpt.
- Dpt. 3 (Foreign Operations)
- Borders
- Technology
- Internal Problem-Solving
- Security
- Counter Espionage
- Nuclear Energy Unit
- Unit 853, Foreign Intelligence

Dt. - Directorate
Dpt. - Department

Intelligence Organization. Due to Alavi's demonstrated ineffectiveness and this shift in priorities, the Ministry of Intelligence was sidelined in internal security matters, focusing instead on foreign intelligence. In February 2017, its official powers were expanded, leading to increased involvement in external operations, including extensive surveillance and even the planning of attacks against exiles, defectors, and Iranian dissidents (Golkar, 2021). In 2021, Esmail Khatib was appointed Minister of Intelligence (Khoshnood & Fard, 2021).

In 2024, it was reported that the Deputy Minister of Intelligence for Internal Security, Yahya Hosseini Panjaki, was responsible for overseas assassination operations (Pourmohsen, 2024). Panjaki is said to have close ties with the IRGC and has traveled multiple times to Syria and Lebanon, where he collaborated with Hezbollah and the Quds Force, facilitating intelligence exchanges between the IRGC in Iran and the Ministry of Intelligence. Furthermore, in addition to his role as Deputy Head of Internal Security, Panjaki is also in charge of "Israeli Affairs." This dual responsibility was reportedly assigned to him under Khamenei's directives, with the Supreme Leader allocating increased financial and human resources to offensive operations against Israel (Eichner, 2024b).

It is important to note that, given the overlap between the responsibilities of the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC Intelligence Organization, the

ministry's status has weakened in recent decades compared to that of the IRGC's intelligence apparatus. Several factors have contributed to this decline, including the ministry's subordination to the president and Khamenei's efforts to weaken the presidency amid power struggles between the Supreme Leader and successive presidents. These struggles have reinforced Khamenei's desire to strengthen the IRGC Intelligence Organization, which is directly accountable to him (Zimmt, 2020). Nevertheless, the Ministry of Intelligence continues to play a significant role in carrying out attacks against Israel, and recent regional and domestic developments could potentially expand its role.

As noted earlier, reliable and publicly available information on the structure of Iran's intelligence agencies is limited. Reports suggest that the Ministry of Intelligence consists of 12 departments, the most critical of which include the Information Department, responsible for collecting and analyzing intelligence on Iran's adversaries, and Department 3, tasked with foreign operations (Solomon, 2020).

The interrogation of an Iranian intelligence officer arrested in Tanzania in November 2022—after being dispatched to establish an unofficial branch for recruiting agents and facilitating terrorist activities—provided significant insights into the Ministry of Intelligence's structure and operational methods. The officer detailed the responsibilities of the ministry's various divisions, including: Foreign Intelligence Division—responsible for intelligence collection and operational activities outside Iran, organized into geographic units based on Iran's areas of interest, with each department overseeing a specific country or region; Counterespionage Division—tasked with capturing foreign agents and uncovering espionage operations conducted by rival states inside Iran, subdivided according to the countries Iran considers adversaries; Security Division—focused on preventing sabotage activities within Iran; Internal Affairs Division—responsible for suppressing riots, protests, and public disturbances; Operations Division—oversees field activities, including surveillance, arrests, interrogations, and other operational tasks; Technology Division—a large

division responsible for the ministry's cyber activities. While various technical departments exist within the different divisions, all are connected to this main unit; Border Division—handles intelligence operations at Iran's border crossings; Nuclear Energy Affairs Division—tasked with preventing threats to Iran's nuclear program, including protecting nuclear facilities and personnel from intelligence threats (Eichner, 2023a).

One of the Ministry of Intelligence's key advantages is its ability to collaborate effectively with other government ministries, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to coordinate terrorist activities beyond Iran's borders. Reports indicate that Department 3 of the Ministry of Intelligence integrates intelligence units within the Iranian Foreign Ministry, composed of diplomatic representatives and cultural attachés engaged in intelligence gathering through the recruitment of assets and Quds Force operatives (Solomon, 2020).

The Ministry of Intelligence employs two primary channels for deploying its agents abroad. The first channel consists of intelligence officers operating under the cover of diplomatic representatives, often stationed in embassies. The second channel involves the deployment of military intelligence officers masquerading as economic operatives. These agents plan assassinations, kidnappings, and acts of sabotage, which are frequently carried out by proxy organizations to maintain plausible deniability. Prominent drug traffickers often serve as contractors for these missions (Pourmohsen, 2024).

Examples of the first channel—deploying agents under diplomatic cover—can be found in the involvement of Iranian diplomats in terrorist attacks and the support provided by Iranian embassies worldwide for terrorist operatives. For instance, an American citizen who converted to Islam and worked in the Iranian department at the Algerian embassy in Washington assassinated Ali Akbar Tabatabai, a former press attaché at the Iranian embassy in Washington who opposed the Ayatollahs' regime. After the assassination, the perpetrator fled to Geneva, where he found refuge at the Iranian consulate before traveling to Iran (Zahed, 2017). Another example is the expulsion of two Iranian diplomats

from Bosnia and Herzegovina in April 2013 after they were discovered to be Iranian intelligence officers (Levitt, 2018).

Beyond the use of diplomatic cover, the interrogation of an Iranian intelligence officer captured in Tanzania revealed an additional operational method employed by the ministry—establishing "unofficial branches" in various countries. According to the officer, his superiors in the Ministry of Intelligence had tasked him with recruiting three agents per year and developing relationships with ten individuals from the Baloch community in Tanzania to solidify his cover. This method allows the organization to position its operatives in different countries without requiring approval from the host nation, enabling them to recruit agents and advance terrorist operations from within these locations. The personnel of these unofficial branches operate under civilian-business cover and do not engage with Iranian embassies or official diplomatic missions to avoid raising suspicion among local authorities. The officer also indicated that additional unofficial branches of the ministry exist beyond those in Tanzania (Eichner, 2023a).

During his interrogation, the intelligence officer also described the methods used to recruit local and foreign sources within Iran. He stated that the organization recruits prisoners convicted in Iran, as well as other criminals involved in smuggling, drug trafficking, and contract killings, offering them reduced sentences in exchange for cooperation. Another recruitment method involves targeting individuals at border crossings, where the ministry interrogates foreign nationals entering Iran for extended stays and offers them work as informants (Eichner, 2023a).

Given its mandate and powers, the Ministry of Intelligence has been significantly involved—more so than any other Iranian intelligence agency—in attacks against Iranian exiles and opposition leaders. For example, in December 2015, a Ministry of Intelligence operative killed Mohammad-Reza Kolahi Samadi, a Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) member suspected of orchestrating the 1981 bombing of the Islamic Republican Party headquarters. In 2018, the FBI

arrested a group of Iranian-American dual nationals linked to the ministry and accused them of surveilling Jewish centers and MEK activists. That same year, a Ministry of Intelligence officer operating under diplomatic cover was implicated in an attempted attack on an MEK rally in Paris. The ministry has also been linked to two assassinations of Iranian dissidents in the Netherlands. The Ministry of Intelligence is also involved in the kidnapping of Iranian opposition activists. In June 2022, Turkey's state news agency confirmed that the Iranian ministry had collaborated with the criminal organization of Naji Sharifi Zindashti to kidnap and assassinate Iranian dissidents on Turkish soil. According to reports, Zindashti's operatives had been targeting Iranian exiles since at least 2015 without interference. Several notorious murders and kidnappings of Iranian exiles have been attributed to Zindashti's network, including: The murder of Saeed Karimian and his Kuwaiti business partner in May 2017; the assassination of Masoud Molavi in November 2019; the kidnapping of Habib Farajollah Chaab (also known as Asiyud) in October 2020 (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2022; Golkar, 2021; Pourmohsen, 2024).

The Ministry of Intelligence is also directly involved in executing attacks against Western, Arab, Jewish, and Israeli targets. According to intelligence assessments, the Quds Force and the Ministry of Intelligence collaborated in carrying out the 1992 and 1994 attacks in Argentina; the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia; and the assassinations of Iranian Kurdish opposition leaders in the early 1990s (Banerjea, 2015). It has been alleged that Hezbollah operatives and the suicide bomber involved in the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires received assistance from Iranian intelligence and personnel stationed at the Iranian embassy in Argentina. This included intelligence gathering, encrypted communications, and the smuggling of explosives via diplomatic mail. Following the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, an international arrest warrant was issued against Iran's then-Minister of Intelligence, Ali Fallahian, for his role in the attack, along with several other Iranian intelligence officials operating

under cover. A warrant was also issued for Ahmad Vahidi, a senior IRGC officer who later became Iran's Minister of Defense (Melman, 2018).

Beyond the attacks in Argentina, the Ministry of Intelligence was also involved in an attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador to Azerbaijan in 2012. Azerbaijani security forces arrested a terror cell plotting to kill the Israeli ambassador and a local rabbi. The cell was operating under the direction of an Iranian national with ties to the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence (Dostri, 2022). Reports indicate that the assassination attempt was intended as retaliation for Israel's alleged involvement in assassinating Iranian nuclear scientists (Bardenstein & News Agencies, 2012).

The overlap in responsibilities between the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC Intelligence Organization has led to disputes and prestige battles between the two agencies. These conflicts concern both credit for successful operations and responsibility for failures. However, in recent years, the heads of both organizations have sought to downplay their differences. Over the past two years, they have publicly expressed mutual appreciation for each other's intelligence and operational successes. Nonetheless, the continued expansion of the IRGC Intelligence Organization's authority and responsibilities is likely to escalate this rivalry further (Zimmt, 2020).

Supreme Leader

Revolutionary Guards — President

Quds Force · Air Force · Ground Force · IRGC Intelligence Organization · Basij Militia · Naval Fleet — Ministry of Intelligence

IRGC Intelligence Organization:
- Unit 4000: external enemies
- Dt. 1500. Counter Espionage
- Dt. 800 Foreign Intelligence
- Technical Unit
- Documentation Center
- Procurement Dpt.
- Social Dpt.
- Operations Dpt.
- Political Dpt.
- Technology & Mapping Dpt.
- Information-Gathering Dpt.
- Security Dpt.

Ministry of Intelligence:
- Information Dpt.
- Dpt. 3 (Foreign Operations)
- Borders
- Technology
- Internal Problem-Solving
- Security
- Counter Espionage
- Nuclear Energy Unit
- Unit 853. Foreign Intelligence

Dpt. Officers:
- 400. Overseas Special Operations
- 190. Weapons & terror support
- 340. R&D, technology etc.
- 840. Criminal Organization Recruitment

Regional Dpts.:
- Ramazan Corps (Iraq)
- Levant Corps
- Ansar Corps (Afghanistan)
- Rasulallah Corps (Arabian Peninsula)
- Other Jurisdictions

Dt. - Directorate
Dpt. - Department

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).

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.

CHAPTER 7
IRANIAN HOSTAGE DIPLOMACY

What is Hostage Diplomacy?

Hostage diplomacy is a term used to describe the phenomenon of states arresting or abducting foreign citizens or dual nationals as a means of exerting influence over other countries, with the aim of achieving political, diplomatic, or economic goals (Alexander & Bou Serhal, 2024; Lau, 2022). When carried out by a state, hostage diplomacy involves the use of its judicial system to detain foreign nationals and leverage them as bargaining chips to apply pressure on other governments, advancing its foreign policy objectives. This form of coercion exploits the gray area between legitimate arrests and prosecutions on the one hand and illegal abductions on the other (Gilbert & Rivard Piche, 2021).

In its initial stages, state-sponsored hostage diplomacy may appear similar to legitimate arrests conducted under domestic law: a state detains a foreign citizen on suspicion of criminal activity. The charges are often vague, for example, accusations of espionage or the endangering of national security (Dignat, 2020). The detainee is arrested and formally charged, but the pretense of criminal prosecution quickly fades. Hostage diplomacy culminates when the targeted country negotiates for the release of the detainees in exchange for economic or political concessions, or in some cases, the release of the state's own nationals detained elsewhere. Through this process, the detainee transitions from being a prisoner to a bargaining chip. In this sense, it can be argued that although victims of hostage diplomacy are legally classified as detainees, they are, in reality, hostages. This duality complicates efforts to combat hostage diplomacy, as it blurs the distinction between legitimate law enforcement and extortion (Gilbert & Rivard Piche, 2021).

Hostage diplomacy is not a new phenomenon. In ancient China, Greece, and Rome, it was common practice to exchange hostages as a gesture of peace. These hostages were given or traded between states and rulers as a means of demonstrating trust and goodwill, as well as guaranteeing adherence to treaties or alliances. Over time, the use of hostages evolved, and in the modern era, certain states—primarily totalitarian regimes—have employed hostage-taking as a tool for advancing economic and political objectives. Many consider the Iran hostage crisis (November 1979 – January 1981) to be the most significant case of inter-state hostage-taking in modern history. During this crisis, 52 American citizens were held hostage inside the United States embassy in Tehran for 444 days. The order from Ayatollah Khomeini, the approval of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the cooperation of other Iranian government entities in maintaining control over the embassy and holding the hostages to "exert pressure on the United States government" to comply with their demands—including extraditing the Shah and returning his assets to Iran—institutionalized hostage-taking as an Iranian state practice (Lau, 2022).

Notable employers of hostage diplomacy include Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, Turkey, Russia, and China. As seen, these are mostly authoritarian states with the intent, capability, and willingness to manipulate their legal systems to extort their adversaries as part of an aggressive foreign policy strategy. However, even democratic countries have been accused of detaining foreign nationals to advance foreign policy interests, thereby engaging in hostage diplomacy themselves (Gilbert & Rivard Piche, 2021).

State-sponsored hostage diplomacy follows a similar logic to hostage-taking by terrorist organizations, and both share common characteristics. In both cases, there is a distinction between the direct victim and the target of the action—the entity to whom demands are directed and who has the power to comply or refuse. The threat of further harm to the victim is conditional and can be avoided if the perpetrators' demands are met. Hostage-takers

use their captives as leverage to improve their bargaining position, force concessions, and attract widespread attention. However, unlike terrorist hostage-takers, state actors may not always make their demands public or explicit; in many cases, these demands are only implied in public statements, whereas in private diplomatic channels, they are understood as extortion.

The effectiveness of hostage-taking as a coercive tool is based on two primary factors. First, hostage-taking creates a bilateral monopoly—a fabricated market with only one buyer and one seller—allowing the captor to significantly raise the "price" and leave the target state with only two options: to concede or accept the suffering of the victim. Second, hostage-taking cases generate significant media and public attention, which is especially relevant for democratic states, as their leaders depend on public support (Gilbert & Rivard Piche, 2021).

Regarding the typical victims of hostage diplomacy, evidence suggests that any foreign national is at risk of being taken hostage by a state. However, journalists, aid workers, academics, business professionals, and human rights activists are particularly vulnerable to this tactic. Additionally, dual nationals constitute a significant portion of hostage diplomacy victims. States that do not recognize dual citizenship can more easily exploit legal sovereignty as a pretext to deny consular access and services to dual nationals. Furthermore, individuals with ties to foreign governments or those involved in anti-government activities abroad—such as participating in protests or pro-democracy movements—are at heightened risk of false accusations related to espionage, national security threats, or even terrorism. This enables states to conduct closed-door trials, withhold evidence, and deny access to legal counsel or diplomatic visits (Nadjibulla & Foggett, 2023).

Nevertheless, several factors distinguish hostage diplomacy from other forms of hostage-taking. In most hostage situations, the captors are non-state entities such as terrorist or criminal organizations. By contrast, in hostage diplomacy, both the perpetrator and the target are states. The distinction between detainees and hostages is not merely rhetorical—it carries legal and

practical implications that theoretically separate these categories. Notably, the measures available to governments for securing the release of individuals held by another state differ fundamentally from those used to recover hostages held by non-state actors. The fact that states have a fixed address makes hostage recovery easier in some respects but more complex in others. For example, United States law explicitly prohibits ransom payments to entities designated as terrorist organizations by the State Department, yet there is no equivalent prohibition on offering concessions or making payments to other states. Additionally, governments can employ legal means, including extraditions, to retrieve detainees. However, unlike hostages held by non-state actors, detainees cannot be rescued through military operations (Gilbert & Rivard Piche, 2021).

Another distinction between hostage diplomacy and other forms of hostage-taking lies in public perception. There is a greater degree of legitimacy and acceptance of prisoner exchange deals involving state-held detainees compared to yielding to terrorist ransom demands. This is because such negotiations are viewed as part of diplomatic relations between states, akin to prisoner exchanges following wars, whereas agreements with terrorist organizations—who do not recognize international norms—are perceived differently.

Prisoner exchange negotiations may involve direct talks with the detaining state or the use of intermediaries. Intermediaries often play a crucial role in maintaining a degree of secrecy and establishing communication channels, particularly when official diplomatic relations are strained. Several factors contribute to the feasibility of a prisoner exchange. First, there must be a willingness to engage in dialogue from both the detaining state and the state seeking the release of its citizens, indicating a readiness to explore diplomatic solutions to the crisis. Aligned geopolitical interests can create favorable conditions for an exchange. The involvement of neutral mediators such as Switzerland, Qatar, or an international organization can expedite negotiations by providing a credible platform for dialogue and bridging gaps between the

parties. Third-party mediation can however also blur the lines of US policy, which asserts that no concessions should be granted in hostage situations (Alexander & Bou Serhal, 2024).

Iran's Hostage Diplomacy

As noted above, Iran stands out among nations that employ hostage diplomacy. This tactic aligns with Iran's broader strategy, which seeks to maintain plausible deniability regarding the terrorist nature of its actions. It allows Iran to present such operations as routine law enforcement measures, preserving a veneer of legitimacy. This aspect connects Iran's terrorism policies with its hostage diplomacy—both strategies maintain the facade of lawful conduct while violating international norms. Moreover, hostage diplomacy serves as a tool in Iran's wider warfare, enabling it to exert pressure and secure the release of Iranian operatives detained on suspicion of involvement in terrorism, as will be discussed below.

Over the years, Iran has detained numerous American, Australian, Canadian, and other European Union citizens to exert diplomatic and political pressure. It can be argued that the current environment is particularly opportunistic and permissive for the taking of Western hostages in Iran. This assertion is supported by the fact that the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union and several other countries advise their citizens to avoid travel to Iran due to the heightened risk of arbitrary detention. Furthermore, the risk is especially high for individuals with dual Iranian and Western citizenship (Nadjibulla & Foggett, 2023). Below, we will examine Iran's patterns of using hostage diplomacy, with an emphasis on recent developments.

Iran has employed hostage-taking as a policy tool since the early days of the Islamic Republic. As noted earlier, the American hostage crisis in Iran remains the most prominent case of state-led hostage-taking in modern history. Since then, Iran has used both detention and negotiation over the release of foreign and dual-national citizens to extract concessions from

Western governments, including monetary payments and the release of Iranians detained abroad. The Iranian regime also arrests such individuals and charges them with severe crimes to intimidate both foreigners and its own citizens. The frequent detentions of foreign nationals—especially from Europe and the United States—allow Iranian security agencies to ensure that even when some are released, Iran retains enough bargaining chips to trade for concessions at any given moment (Rome, 2022).

Since the American embassy hostage crisis, Iran's hostage diplomacy has evolved in two interconnected ways. First, while in 1979 all hostages were American and their detention primarily served domestic political goals— particularly consolidating Khomeini's power within Iran— more recently Iran has used foreign hostages to advance foreign policy objectives and to deter Iranian citizens from engaging with Western countries. Second, in recent years, Iran has masked its actions as law enforcement measures rather than outright hostage-taking. It leverages the foreign nationality of detainees to substantiate charges of espionage or threats to national security, subsequently putting them on trial and sentencing them to long prison terms or even the death penalty. Although the legitimacy conferred by these legal proceedings is often superficial, statements from the victims' home countries frequently reinforce Iran's narrative of Western interference in its domestic affairs. These arrests also complicate diplomatic responses, as states hesitate to interfere with another country's sovereign judicial system. Furthermore, the use of legal proceedings shifts attention to the charges against the detainees rather than Iran's conduct, causing divisions among detainees' families, some of whom fear collaborating with the families of those facing more severe allegations (Ferstman & Sharpe, 2022).

An examination of the profile of Iran's hostage diplomacy victims indicates that foreign and dual-national citizens engaged in journalism, research, business, and other fields perceived as bridging Iran and the West are particularly at risk. Academics are also highly vulnerable. In addition to

professional risk factors, certain nationalities face a higher likelihood of detention. Since 2010, citizens of Australia, Austria, Canada, China, Finland, France, Germany, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Russia, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States have been arbitrarily detained in Iran. However, among the 66 cases of foreign nationals detained in Iran between 2010 and 2022, 20 were American citizens or dual Iranian-American nationals, 11 were Iranian-British, one was solely British, and two were dual British-Australian nationals. Canadian and French citizens also appear disproportionately among detainees (Ferstman & Sharpe, 2022). Furthermore, as seen above, dual nationals constitute a significant proportion of victims, in part due to Iran's policy of not recognizing dual citizenship. This policy allows Iran to deny consular assistance to detainees (Nadjibulla & Foggett, 2023).

The testimony of an Australian citizen detained in Iran provides additional insight into the victims of this form of diplomacy. Kylie Moore-Gilbert, an Australian citizen, was arrested in Iran in 2018 after being invited to attend an academic conference in the country. She was accused of espionage and sentenced to ten years in prison, though she was released after serving two years and three months in two Iranian prisons in exchange for three members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who had been detained in Thailand on terrorism charges. According to her, during conversations with junior members of the Revolutionary Guard, she learned that hostages were ranked based on their "prestige." Complete foreigners were considered more valuable than dual nationals. Western European nationals were valued more than Eastern Europeans, who, in turn, were ranked above Japanese detainees. The Chinese government managed to secure the release of its citizens within months, whereas detainees from developing nations were likely to serve their full sentences. The most valuable hostages were Americans and Israelis, as they could be leveraged for the highest price (Moore-Gilbert, 2023).

Regarding Iran's modus operandi, a typical pattern emerges shortly after arrest, beginning with a period of incommunicado detention, often

under solitary confinement and without access to legal representation. Following initial detention, many detainees endure psychological and physical abuse, including coercion into making false confessions. The conditions of imprisonment are frequently cruel and inhumane. There are often significant delays before detainees learn the charges against them, and when the charges are disclosed, they are often extremely vague. Many cases involve state propaganda campaigns and violations of detainees' privacy, dignity, and reputation through government-controlled media, including the publication of fabricated evidence and forced confessions. The trials themselves are fraught with due process violations; for example, they may be conducted behind closed doors without allowing detainees access to legal counsel of their choice—or, in some cases, any legal representation at all. Some detainees do not even undergo a trial but are summarily convicted. The conditions and criteria for release also remain highly opaque (Dignat, 2020; Ferstman & Sharpe, 2022).

In this context, it is worth highlighting, for example, the differences between Iranian and Russian hostage diplomacy. As noted above, unlike Russia, Iran routinely detains individuals with dual citizenship. Furthermore, Iran tends to accuse hostages of espionage (similar to China), whereas Russia employs a much broader range of charges, including drug offenses, assault, and espionage. The agreements for resolving Iranian and Russian hostage diplomacy also differ significantly—in the Russian case, the United States has resolved crises through one-to-one prisoner exchange deals, whereas Iran demands much broader agreements, which include prisoner exchanges as well as financial payments and additional concessions (Gilbert, 2023).

A study examining Iran's use of hostages between January 2000 and April 2023 found that Iran's reasons for detaining individuals are circumstantial and context-dependent. However, several general trends can be identified. Over the two decades studied, hostage diplomacy shifted from an opportunistic and reactive tactic—wherein an individual arrested for various reasons, not necessarily intentionally, became a bargaining chip in negotiations—to a

strategic approach, wherein Iran actively pursues foreign nationals and dual citizens to extract concessions from their respective governments. It can be argued that between 2000 and 2014, Iran's use of hostage diplomacy was opportunistic. During this phase, Iran typically released detainees after securing domestic political gains and/or economic concessions, and foreign nationals and dual citizens were detained for relatively short periods. After 2014, this situation changed, with detainees being held for longer periods and often released only through prisoner exchange deals. This marked the turning point when Iran transitioned from using hostage diplomacy as an opportunistic tactic to employing it as a deliberate strategy. This shift resulted, in part, from the concessions Iran had successfully obtained during the opportunistic phase. Another factor contributing to this change was the evolution of US-Iran relations in 2015 and the negotiations that led to the nuclear agreement. Jason Rezaian, one of the detainees held by Iran between 2014 and 2016, recounts in his memoir that President Obama's National Security Advisor even apologized for the length of time it took to secure his release and admitted that he was a victim of the nuclear deal negotiations (Dimock et al., 2023).

Moreover, it is worth noting that hostage diplomacy often serves as a tool in internal power struggles within the Iranian regime. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which seeks to hinder Iranian diplomats' efforts to normalize relations with the West, isolate Iranian society from the outside world, and radicalize other political actors, uses hostages as leverage in its power struggles with other factions within Iran. This dynamic was particularly evident during Rouhani's presidency (Dignat, 2020).

As mentioned above, Iran employs hostage diplomacy to obtain a wide range of benefits. Beyond consolidating the regime's control over the Iranian population by instilling fear through arbitrary arrests of those perceived as threats to its stability, Iran also successfully extorts significant concessions from other countries in areas it deems important. The Algiers Accord, which

ended the American hostage crisis in 1981, exemplifies this pattern: the two nations agreed to establish a tribunal in The Hague to adjudicate the release of funds paid by the Shah for military equipment that was not delivered after the revolution. Among other provisions, the agreement stipulated that "the United States shall restore Iran's economic standing, as much as possible, to what it was prior to November 14, 1979" (Brodsky, 2023). Even the Iran-Contra Affair of the 1980s aligns with the pattern of American willingness to enter into prisoner exchange arrangements with Iran. As part of this affair, the United States pressured Iran to facilitate the release of American hostages held by Hezbollah. In return, the US supplied arms to the Islamic Republic—a step President Reagan later described as "an arms-for-hostages deal." In 1991, after Iran played a key role in securing the release of American hostages from Lebanon, the Bush administration agreed to pay $278 million to settle some of these claims. Although the US denied a connection between these two actions, President Bush told the Omani foreign minister that resolving these claims was "clearly related to the hostages" (Rome, 2022).

In 2016, coinciding with the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran released four American detainees, while the United States freed or dropped charges against seven Iranian prisoners. Among those released by Iran was Jason Rezaian, former head of The Washington Post's Tehran bureau, who had been arrested in 2014 along with his wife at their home in Iran. Rezaian was initially detained on espionage charges, with allegations that he was the CIA station chief in Tehran. According to him, the timing of his arrest was no coincidence, as he was reporting on the Iran-US nuclear negotiations, and he viewed his detention as an Iranian effort to extract concessions from the Obama administration. After spending more than a year and a half in Iranian prison, Rezaian was released just hours before the nuclear agreement's implementation (Alexander & Bou Serhal, 2024). In addition to the prisoner releases, the United States paid Iran $400 million in cash as part of a broader settlement related to claims involving military

equipment deals made under the Shah. The Obama administration denied that the payment constituted ransom (Rome, 2022).

In 2019, Switzerland mediated an agreement between the United States and Iran that led to the release of an American-Chinese scientist detained in Iran since 2016 on espionage charges, in exchange for the release of Iranian scientist Masoud Soleimani. The Chinese-American scientist, Xiyue Wang, had been convicted of espionage in 2017 and sentenced to ten years in prison. Soleimani, a stem cell researcher, was arrested at Chicago airport in 2018 for allegedly violating trade sanctions by attempting to transport biological material to Iran (News Agencies, 2019).

In 2022, the United Kingdom reached a settlement with Iran concerning $530 million used for the purchase of tanks, most of which were never delivered. Simultaneously, Iran released two British-Iranian citizens and an additional citizen, although the latter was barred from leaving the country (Rome, 2022; Brodsky, 2023).

Although these financial settlements were ostensibly conditioned on the release of funds, they did not lead to a change in Iran's policy; rather, it can be argued that they emboldened Iran, increasing both its audacity and the price it demands for hostage releases. This is evident in the 2023 agreement brokered by Qatar, which included the exchange of American detainees held in Iran for Iranians detained in the United States, alongside the unfreezing of $6 billion in Iranian oil revenues (a significant increase compared to previous agreements) that had been frozen by South Korea due to US sanctions on Iran. The negotiations for this deal lasted several months and represented a significant breakthrough despite ongoing disputes between the two countries over various issues. As part of the agreement, five American citizens with dual nationality were released from detention in Iran in exchange for the release of five Iranians. Two of the Iranian detainees returned to Iran, two remained in the United States at their request, and the fifth joined their family in an undisclosed country. Concurrently, the Biden administration imposed new

sanctions on Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and its former president for their involvement in detaining American citizens (Alexander & Bou Serhal, 2024; Brodsky, 2023; Hafezi & Mills, 2023).

Iranian hostage diplomacy is not limited to the United States and the United Kingdom. For instance, in May 2023, Iranian intelligence officer Asadollah Asadi, who had been convicted in February 2021 for plotting a terrorist attack at a gathering of Iranian exiles in Paris in 2018, was released as part of a deal between Belgium and Iran. In return, Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele was freed from Iranian prison. Vandecasteele, a Belgian humanitarian worker who had lived in Iran since 2015, was suddenly arrested in February 2022. In January 2023, he was sentenced to 40 years in prison and 74 lashes. His family claimed that he had been convicted in a show trial and was denied access to a lawyer during his detention. In addition to Vandecasteele, three other European citizens were reportedly released in the second phase of the deal—a Danish citizen whose name was not disclosed and two Austrian citizens of Iranian origin: Kamran Ghaderi, a businessman arrested in January 2016 and imprisoned in Iran for seven years, and Massoud Mossaheb, who had been incarcerated for nearly four years before being released in November 2022 for medical reasons, although he was prohibited from leaving Iran until the agreement was finalized. Oman, which likely mediated the negotiations, announced the prisoner exchange deal. Asadi's release is highly significant, as his conviction marked the first time a European court had convicted an Iranian official for acts of terrorism since the 1979 revolution. In this context, his release sends a clear message that Iran does not abandon its operatives, even when its terrorist plots fail (Ynet and Agencies, 2023; AFP, 2023).

Additionally, in September 2023, it was revealed that Swedish citizen Johan Floderus, an employee of a European Union service, had been imprisoned in Iran for over a year and a half. The European Union's foreign minister accused Iran of unlawfully detaining Floderus and emphasized that the EU had been working and would continue to work for his release in cooperation with his

family and the Swedish government. Floderus was arrested at the airport at the end of a vacation in Iran rather than during an official visit and is being held in Evin Prison. Iran only publicly disclosed his arrest in July 2022, three months after his detention, in what was perceived as an attempt to pressure Sweden into releasing former Iranian official Hamid Nouri from Swedish prison. Nouri had been convicted in Sweden of murder and violations of international law due to his involvement in the 1988 execution of thousands of political dissidents. In June 2024, Sweden announced that it had released Nouri in exchange for the release of two Swedes imprisoned in Iran: Floderus and Saeed Azizi, an Iranian-born Swedish citizen. Oman issued an official statement confirming that it had mediated the exchange (Bettini and News Agencies, 2024).

It is clear that Iran exploits hostage diplomacy to maximize its advantages. Iran detains foreign and dual-national citizens, accusing them of vague charges often related to national security, in order to extract economic and political concessions and, at times, to demand the release of Iranian prisoners accused of terrorism by the detainees' home countries. The dual nature of hostage diplomacy allows Iran to create the impression that these are legitimate law enforcement actions while maintaining plausible deniability—a strategy similar to its use of terrorism. Moreover, hostage diplomacy serves Iran as a tool for securing the release of Iranian terrorists, further preserving its global terrorist infrastructure. It is no coincidence that the head of Mossad, in a speech at a conference at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at Reichman University, highlighted the success of Iran's hostage policy, which yields both economic benefits—alleviating some of the sanctions imposed on it—and the release of Iranian terrorists. These factors contribute to Iran's overconfidence, further emboldening the regime to carry out terrorist attacks (Ben-Yishai, 2023).

CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This memorandum examines Iran's involvement in the landscape of international terrorism, focusing on trends that have characterized its activities in recent years. While there is growing international recognition of the threat posed by Iran in terms of its nuclear ambitions, its support for terrorist organizations in the Middle East, and its production and sale of drones, its continued engagement in international terrorism has been sidelined and does not receive the necessary attention. This is primarily because most attacks have been thwarted, preventing the bloodshed that typically attracts media and public attention. This memorandum lays out the factual basis for the argument that, in recent years, Iran has returned with increased intensity to the kind of international terrorist activity that largely defined its operations in the early years of the Islamic Republic in the 1980s and early 1990s. During this period, other states such as Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Sudan followed similar paths, but their reliance on terrorism declined over the years until they disappeared from the scene of international terrorism. Initially, it seemed that Iran had also reduced its direct engagement in international terrorism in an effort to evade its rogue state image and integrate into the international system as a legitimate state with which diplomatic negotiations could be conducted. However, recent years have seen Iran revert to its former practices, actively engaging in international terrorism.

This memorandum advances three key arguments:

The first claim: Iran is accelerating and expanding the scope of its activities and the resources it dedicates to advancing terrorist operations. On the one hand, this enables Iran to promote its interests and objectives, while on the other hand, maintaining plausible deniability regarding its responsibility for these actions. As observed, since 2010—and even more so since 2020—Iran

has significantly increased the number of operations it attempts to carry out, as well as the scale of resources it allocates to this effort and to the various entities involved in it, including the intelligence organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Quds Force, and the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence.

The second claim: The escalation of activity is global in scope, and Iran is willing to operate in all arenas. It conducts activities in numerous Western countries, including within the European Union, the United States, Canada, South America, Africa, and Asia. In some cases, it leverages support networks that it has established itself or that were created by its proxy organizations, such as Hezbollah; in others, it collaborates with local criminal organizations. It is evident that Iran does not respect the sovereignty of nations or international law, operating through illegal and illegitimate means to advance its interests.

The third argument focuses on Iran's increasing use of criminals and criminal organizations to carry out terrorist activities—another indication of its disregard for the established rules of the state-based international system. In recent years, Iran has not only relied on criminal entities for financing its operations and supporting its proxy organizations but has also engaged them as direct executors of terrorist attacks. This trend has been evident in attempted attacks in Germany, Sweden, and Turkey, as discussed in this memorandum.

Alongside these three arguments, Iran's use of hostage diplomacy as a combat-support tool was also examined. This strategy enables Iran to extract operatives, even in cases where they are apprehended and a direct link to Iran is proven, thereby avoiding accountability for its actions. This is achieved through the exploitation of innocent civilians from other countries, using them as bargaining chips to exert pressure on their respective governments.

The emerging picture from this research is of a rogue state that spares no means in spreading terror and international crime worldwide, yet does not pay the price for its actions. This Iranian conduct does not receive significant

attention, both due to the overwhelming scale of other threats posed by Iran—its nuclear ambitions and its support in transforming terrorist organizations into formidable terrorist armies—and due to the fact that most Iranian terrorist attempts have been thwarted.

So far, Iran has not been subjected to a severe and proportionate penalty for its ongoing involvement in international terrorism. Meanwhile, developments in the global arena—including the Russia-Ukraine war and the Swords of Iron war—have further emboldened Iran. This growing audacity is evident across several dimensions, including kinetic measures such as Iran's attack on Israel on the night of April 13–14, 2024. In parallel, Iran has strengthened its allies, increased military support for terrorist organizations, and supplied UAVs to Russia in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. Given several widely publicized disclosures, it is evident that Iran has also escalated its efforts to carry out attacks on Israeli soil and target senior Israeli officials. This growing audacity raises concerns that Iran's operational patterns may persist and even intensify.

Against this backdrop, we propose several key recommendations: First and foremost, a comprehensive account of Iran's involvement in international terrorism in recent years should be presented and disseminated globally. This would highlight Iran's increasing audacity as a rogue state that threatens the global order not only in the nuclear realm but also through "classical" terrorism. Additionally, attention should be drawn to Iran's cultivation of the military capabilities of its proxy organizations and its use of these groups to exacerbate regional instability in the Middle East. This has been particularly evident over the past year and a half of combat against Israel and in the threats posed to international maritime trade routes. It is possible that nations with specific interests—those that are not directly threatened or concerned by Iran's nuclear ambitions, military-economic support for regional actors, or war-mongering—may be more inclined to take notice when the threat of international terrorism directly endangers their citizens. This recognition could

encourage greater receptiveness and willingness to participate in concrete international cooperation to curb Iran's activities.

In this context, an effective international effort should be directed at the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), with the aim of designating it as a terrorist organization in multiple countries, thereby assisting the United States and Canada, which have already taken this step. In recent months, there has been extensive international discourse regarding the possibility that additional Western nations—particularly members of the European Union and the United Kingdom—may adopt this measure, given the IRGC's active role in orchestrating Iranian terrorism and its involvement in other controversial activities, such as providing military support to Russia in its war against Ukraine. While the primary impact of such a designation is symbolic—considering the extensive sanctions already imposed on the IRGC—its importance should not be underestimated. Moreover, this step has two significant practical consequences.

First, designating the IRGC as a terrorist organization would criminalize membership, support, and assistance to the group. This measure could reduce support for the IRGC within local communities, at least in overt forms, thereby complicating its operations. Second, as a direct result of this criminalization, law enforcement and judicial authorities would be granted expanded powers, enhancing their ability to preempt terrorist attacks at early stages of planning and organization. Given the extensive activities of the IRGC in relevant countries, increasing enforcement measures could have tangible effects in the fight against terrorism. We therefore recommend sharing relevant intelligence with these nations regarding attempted Iranian attacks, and particularly the IRGC's role in them, to help meet the legal requirements for such a designation and to garner additional public support.

Should the designation of the entire IRGC face opposition or difficulties, diplomatic efforts could focus on securing at least the inclusion of the Quds Force in these terrorist organization lists. This is justified by the Quds Force's

central role in orchestrating Iranian terrorism, as evidenced by unequivocal proof of its involvement.

Furthermore, given that the measures taken thus far by Israel and other nations have failed to deter Iran from employing terrorism, there may be grounds to consider kinetic responses—at least in cases where Iran successfully executes major terrorist attacks. Until now, international responses to Iran's terrorist activities have remained primarily within the legal and diplomatic spheres, alongside economic sanctions targeting individuals and entities involved in terrorism. However, in light of Israel's recent willingness to respond directly to Iranian provocations—demonstrated following the UAV attack in April 2024 and the missile attack in October—it may be worth considering kinetic responses to terrorist attacks initiated and executed by Iran. Naturally, such actions should be weighed carefully against potential Iranian retaliatory measures. It is also advisable to encourage other nations to adopt a more assertive stance against Iranian terrorism, given the failures of the prevailing policies.

It should be noted that recent regional developments—including the blows inflicted upon Iran's proxy network in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen; the death of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and the significant damage to Hezbollah, which has been a key pillar of Iran's proxy strategy and an integral part of its defense doctrine; and the considerable damage inflicted on Iran in the Israeli strike of October 26, 2024—have placed Iran in a difficult position. This may hinder its ability to respond forcefully both to the intensification of international sanctions and to kinetic attacks. Garnering international support for such measures could thereby become more feasible.

Furthermore, based on the projections outlined in this memorandum, the trend of increasing Iranian terrorist activity on the international level is unlikely to subside and may even intensify, given Iran's escalating confrontation with Western countries and Israel. Therefore, we recommend continued cooperation with intelligence agencies and international counterterrorism bodies. Given

the extensive reach of Iran's terrorist network and its collaborations with local organizations, a coordinated international effort is required to contain and thwart Iranian terrorist initiatives. Such cooperation would also strengthen the public diplomacy campaign highlighted in the previous section, as local security agencies could emphasize the significance of this issue to their respective governments.

Due to Iran's integration of criminal organizations into its international terrorist activities, we suggest expanding the circle of knowledge-sharing and coalition-building by involving law enforcement agencies in counterterrorism and enforcement efforts against Iran's terrorist-criminal operations through joint and coordinated action. This is particularly important as intelligence and law enforcement bodies often operate separately.

Additionally, given the significant involvement of seemingly benign local support networks—particularly local and international crime organizations—in Iran's global terrorism campaign, attention should be given to monitoring these entities. Their growing role within Iran's terrorist network raises concerns that they may assume an even more central role in the future.

Moreover, while Iran does not directly employ hostage diplomacy against Israel for obvious reasons, Israel should support international efforts to establish a systematic policy response to Iran's use of this tactic, as it serves as a tool that facilitates terrorism. Among other measures, we recommend advocating for the development of both diplomatic and economic punitive mechanisms that would be automatically triggered whenever Iran engages in hostage diplomacy.

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Over the past five years, Iran's activity in the arena of international terrorism has significantly intensified, spreading across vast geographic regions and incorporating criminal organizations in the execution of terrorist operations. Although most Iranian terrorism attempts have been thwarted, there is no guarantee that this success will persist in the future. It is therefore necessary to examine the characteristics of Iran's use of terrorism in order to improve the chances of countering it.

This memorandum examines Iran's policy regarding its use of terrorism in the international arena over the past five years, the trends that have characterized it, and its modes of operation—placing these elements within the broader historical context of Iran's employment of terrorism.

An analysis of Iran's terrorism policy reveals a troubling trend, illustrating that Iran remains committed to employing international terrorism and is even amplifying its efforts in this regard, demonstrating a willingness to risk friction with numerous states in order to pursue its policy. This trend requires close attention, both in its own right and because it signals Iran's growing audacity and confidence in violating international norms and the sovereignty of states—behaviors that may also manifest in other contexts.