

# For the UK Government, It Is Time to Take State-Sponsored Assassinations Seriously

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Articles & Testimony

**The Iranian and Russian regimes have used a wide mix of tactics and operatives to strike at dissidents and other targets in the West, and thwarting them will require more intensive efforts on multiple fronts.**

‘I have got increasing concern about the pace of increase relating to the Iranian threat,’ the Home Secretary told the UK Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee. She continued: ‘In particular in relation to the Iranian secret services’ attempts...to assassinate, lure and kidnap UK-based individuals who they perceive to be a threat to the stability of the Iranian regime.’

The admission was included in a [broader report \(https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Intelligence-and-Security-Committee-of-Parliament-Iran.pdf\)](https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Intelligence-and-Security-Committee-of-Parliament-Iran.pdf) on Iran’s security threat. Similar reports had been published in the past, one on [Russia \(https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCS207\\_CCS0221966010-001\\_Russia-Report-v02-Web\\_Accessible.pdf\)](https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCS207_CCS0221966010-001_Russia-Report-v02-Web_Accessible.pdf) in 2020 and one on [China \(https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ISC-China.pdf\)](https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ISC-China.pdf) in 2023. The latest Iran report, though, comes at a time of heightened concern regarding the threat posed by [hostile states \(https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63e4aef3ae07ad445eed03b5/t/67852e69ff4ff4079a9c3000/1736781420568/SOCACE-RP32-OldWineNewBottles\\_final.pdf\)](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63e4aef3ae07ad445eed03b5/t/67852e69ff4ff4079a9c3000/1736781420568/SOCACE-RP32-OldWineNewBottles_final.pdf) and the [new geopolitical environment \(https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/covert-wars-criminal-gangs-and-new-threat-environment\)](https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/covert-wars-criminal-gangs-and-new-threat-environment) they have created. At the same time, the House of Commons’ Defence Committee also published a report on [Defence in the Grey Zone \(https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/48694/documents/255330/default/\)](https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/48694/documents/255330/default/).

Reflecting on the Iran report, [several news stories \(https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jul/10/iran-threat-to-uk-on-a-par-with-russia-security-report-finds\)](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jul/10/iran-threat-to-uk-on-a-par-with-russia-security-report-finds) highlighted how Iran poses a threat to the UK comparable to that of Russia. This threat is multifaceted: espionage and cyber-attacks, but at present—and as the Home Secretary suggested—none seems more pressing than

assassination. In this context, Iran has clearly taken a page from Russia's covert warfare handbook. This can be seen in three main areas: the types of targets selected, the actors involved in the assassinations, and the methods used.

## Targets: Protecting the Regime

Russia's strategy generally focuses on maintaining regime stability, preserving the current status quo, and protecting its domestic image. Thus, Russian-sponsored assassinations mainly seek to eliminate those seen as grave threats to the governing regime. Most known 'marked' individuals are Russian Federation nationals and comprise political dissidents, opposition leaders, oligarchs, and journalists.

Iran is also likely to target individuals it perceives as a threat, primarily Iranian dissidents and those opposed to the regime. Iran has already conducted and attempted assassinations in Europe, such as the 2018 attempted bombing [in Paris](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/02/france-blames-iran-for-foiled-bomb-attack-near-paris) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/02/france-blames-iran-for-foiled-bomb-attack-near-paris>) against the Iranian opposition group Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK). The group had [reportedly](https://www.simonandschuster.co.uk/books/Target-Tehran/Yonah-Jeremy-Bob/9781668014578) (<https://www.simonandschuster.co.uk/books/Target-Tehran/Yonah-Jeremy-Bob/9781668014578>) been involved in Mossad's operations to assassinate Iranian scientists. In the UK, Iran has targeted individuals and media organizations such as Iran International.

## Perpetrators: From Spies to Gangs

In recent years, a combination of factors has increased reliance on non-traditional actors when conducting intelligence and covert operations. As [David Ignatius](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/interactive/2025/cia-ai-technology-spies/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/interactive/2025/cia-ai-technology-spies/>) recently noted, new technologies, as well as intelligence entrepreneurs, have contributed to making spying harder by increasing transparency. At the same time, diplomatic measures, such as [expulsions](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/14/may-expels-23-russian-diplomats-response-spy-poisoning) (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/14/may-expels-23-russian-diplomats-response-spy-poisoning>), and economic ones, like [sanctions](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68848438) (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68848438>), have meant that it is harder for foreign intelligence services to operate in Western countries. Here, Iran and Russia have been at the forefront of an increased reliance on both criminal groups and witting and unwitting individuals, recruited via blockchain technologies, and—at times—caught up in a spying game much beyond their expectations.

Russia relies on state agencies and non-state proxies. The state agencies include the 'cowboys' (<https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110854/witnesses/HHRG-116-FA14-Wstate-MartenK-20200707.pdf>) of the Russian military's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) and the KGB's successor, the Federal Security Service (FSB), which are known for their 'rough' (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/zelimkhan-khangoshvili-killing-germany-vadim-krasikov-convicted-russia-ordered-killing-judge/>) operational approach (<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/06/29/fsbs-magnificent-seven-new-links-between-berlin-and-istanbul-assassinations/>) to distant (<https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/wagner-group-command-structure/>) and 'near abroad' (<https://warsawinstitute.org/external-enemy-putin-gives-new-tasks-fsb/>) targets, respectively. At the same time, the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) is considered the more 'elegant' arm (<https://www.nsa.gov/Press-Room/Press-Releases-Statements/Press-Release-View/Article/3931959/nsa-issues-updated-guidance-on-russian-svr-cyber-operations/>) of Putin's regime. The non-state proxies consist of individuals and groups, often related to the [criminal underworld](https://ecfr.eu/publication/crimintern_how_the_kremlin_uses_russias_criminal_networks_in_europe/#a2) ([https://ecfr.eu/publication/crimintern\\_how\\_the\\_kremlin\\_uses\\_russias\\_criminal\\_networks\\_in\\_europe/#a2](https://ecfr.eu/publication/crimintern_how_the_kremlin_uses_russias_criminal_networks_in_europe/#a2)), that are [co-opted](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/how-the-biggest-fraud-in-german-history-unravelled) (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/how-the-biggest-fraud-in-german-history-unravelled>) into [espionage](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c627685p21eo) (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c627685p21eo>) or [kinetic operations](https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/12/03/identifying-the-berlin-bicycle-assassin-part-1-from-moscow-to-berlin/) (<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/12/03/identifying-the-berlin-bicycle-assassin-part-1-from-moscow-to-berlin/>). In this regard, the cases of [Jan Marsalek](https://www.ft.com/content/511ecf86-ab40-486c-8f76-b8ebda4cc669) (<https://www.ft.com/content/511ecf86-ab40-486c-8f76-b8ebda4cc669>) and the 'Berlin Bicycle Assassin' (<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/09/27/new-evidence-links-russian-state-to-berlin-assassination/>) are instructive.

Iran has also leveraged relationships with [criminal gangs](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/09/12/iran-criminal-gangs-target-dissidents/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/09/12/iran-criminal-gangs-target-dissidents/>) and dual-national lone offenders to carry out transnational attacks. Tehran reportedly pressured members of the criminal Foxtrot Network to carry out attacks against US and Israeli interests in [Sweden](https://se.usembassy.gov/security-alert-u-s-embassy-stockholm-june-23-2025/). (<https://se.usembassy.gov/security-alert-u-s-embassy-stockholm-june-23-2025/>) In Denmark, authorities arrested a dual Danish-Afghan national at the request of [German](https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/EN/2025/Pressemitteilung-vom-01-07-2025-) (<https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/EN/2025/Pressemitteilung-vom-01-07-2025->

[engl.html](#)) authorities who indicted the suspect for carrying out surveillance at Iran's behest of Jewish institutions and Jewish individuals in Germany.

In the wake of the recent war, Iran reportedly sent a message threatening to 'activate sleeper-cell' (<https://www.nbcnews.com/world/middle-east/live-blog/live-updates-iran-israel-trump-rcna214325/rcrd83150?canonicalCard=true>) terror inside the United States' should the US bomb Iran. The regime will likely seek to avenge the death of the many senior leaders killed and the damage done to its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Tehran is now even more concerned about domestic instability than the status of its nuclear program, with regime opponents at home having seen that Iranian security services are not ten feet tall. That means that Iranian transnational repression targeting dissidents abroad is likely to spike, continuing a trend we note [in our book](#) ([https://www.rienner.com/title/Killing\\_in\\_the\\_Name\\_of\\_the\\_State\\_State\\_Sponsored\\_Assassination\\_in\\_International\\_Politics](https://www.rienner.com/title/Killing_in_the_Name_of_the_State_State_Sponsored_Assassination_in_International_Politics)). But Tehran will almost certainly seek to carry out such operations with plausible deniability—especially using [criminal proxies](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-external-operations-europe-criminal-connection>)—to avoid further repercussions such as arrests, sanctions, or military strikes.

## Methods: An Area of Discrepancy?

For Russia, the preferred elimination method depends on the target's type, the available window of opportunity, and the target's geographical proximity. These dictate the elimination toolkit, which ranges from blunt force and firearms to the wide use of [chemical](#) ([https://www.amazon.com/Very-Expensive-Poison-Luke-Harding/dp/1783350946/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crid=3M3IT9TOQP281&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.aYiUyQH0\\_MJA4-bjWqv8fn\\_kW4Ufo3iutpNLHWEc7CSckVxZ6WnZFYz5J2T6sQ2IB5-5HloDKqxs3TnNBD0UsODpgv2kJ83Gj8bJoQ2jsFOITJabi8qO1zis-CmI3Yvyp8s4z7YTTLSEVpaIPISR0mLhcfWpl3fyvasHpGztOd5LnAZ\\_wwW8abFY-NKmzdZzLrCU1as4GaLLzZ-h3m\\_wslutOeuj1gtlhyR3XdmyROQ.RANZBPxTgVclCZ33r1ytrUmvg-AQfWXMpWT1Fyr1VGU&dib\\_tag=se&keywords=very+expensive+poison&qid=1753025145&s=digital-text&sprefix=very+expensive+poison%2Cdigital-text%2C162&sr=1-1-catcorr](https://www.amazon.com/Very-Expensive-Poison-Luke-Harding/dp/1783350946/ref=sr_1_1?crid=3M3IT9TOQP281&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.aYiUyQH0_MJA4-bjWqv8fn_kW4Ufo3iutpNLHWEc7CSckVxZ6WnZFYz5J2T6sQ2IB5-5HloDKqxs3TnNBD0UsODpgv2kJ83Gj8bJoQ2jsFOITJabi8qO1zis-CmI3Yvyp8s4z7YTTLSEVpaIPISR0mLhcfWpl3fyvasHpGztOd5LnAZ_wwW8abFY-NKmzdZzLrCU1as4GaLLzZ-h3m_wslutOeuj1gtlhyR3XdmyROQ.RANZBPxTgVclCZ33r1ytrUmvg-AQfWXMpWT1Fyr1VGU&dib_tag=se&keywords=very+expensive+poison&qid=1753025145&s=digital-text&sprefix=very+expensive+poison%2Cdigital-text%2C162&sr=1-1-catcorr)) and [biological](#) (<https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/uknews/putin-threat-of-biological-attack-on-uk-streets-novichok-poisonings-in-salisbury-were-wake-up-call/ar-AA1FYVfu>) weapons (CBW (<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/murder-british-civilian-need-action-against-russias-use-chemical-agents>)). However, some [methods](#) (<https://www.thetimes.com/travel/destinations/middle-east-travel/qatar/chechen-leader-killed-in-qatar-car-bomb-6l0wvg5f5ct?region=global>) are chosen opportunistically [without regard to how much disturbance](#) (<https://jamestown.org/program/the-assassination-of-zelimkhan-yandarbiyev-implications-for-the-war-on-terrorism/>) or unnecessary [attention](#) (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4275147.stm>) they cause. This unwanted operational 'noise' (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-the-uk/the-russian-fitness-instructors-who-wanted-to-see-salisbury-cathedral-but-ended-up-poisoning-sergei-skripal>) is often [propagandistically exploited](#) (<https://www.rt.com/shows/rt-interview/438408-rt-petrov-boshirov-full-interview/>) retrospectively to enhance the Kremlin's political posturing in various internal and external contexts.

Iran, for its part, [remains undeterred](#) (<https://ctc westpoint.edu/trends-in-iranian-external-assassination-surveillance-and-abduction-plots/>) from carrying out attacks even in countries with highly capable law enforcement and intelligence services, like the UK. As the Intelligence and Security Committee's report notes, Iran sees the targeting of regime opponents abroad as a matter of internal, domestic security—even when such plots are carried out abroad. These typically involve preoperational surveillance and the use of firearms or explosives, but have also featured knives and sedatives.

## Conclusion: Russian Lessons for the Iranian Threat?

The 2020 Russia report highlighted how the UK government initially underestimated the threat posed by Russia to individuals based in the UK. This was, at least in part, due to diplomatic, strategic, and financial interests. Only the attempt on Sergei and Yulia Skripal and—later—the invasion of Ukraine fully awakened the government to such a threat, but some areas still need attention. The UK government now has a broader set of tools to deal with the threat posed by Iran. In the first instance, and as recommended in the context of 'grey zone' threats, the UK government should build expertise surrounding assassinations; a process that is emerging in [academia](#)

([https://www.rienner.com/title/Killing\\_in\\_the\\_Name\\_of\\_the\\_State\\_State\\_Sponsored\\_Assassination\\_in\\_International\\_Politics](https://www.rienner.com/title/Killing_in_the_Name_of_the_State_State_Sponsored_Assassination_in_International_Politics))

but needs to be better connected to government and society.

Second, the UK government should adopt a stronger approach when it comes to increasing the costs for perpetrators for continuing to carry out acts of transnational repression on foreign soil. This includes both target hardening and making clear that much of the international community condemns these attacks via practices such as naming and shaming, diplomatic measures, and sanctions. Along with the UK and US, [Canada \(https://ares.internationalmapping.com/wi-iran-external-ops\\_2024-07-12/?id=612\)](https://ares.internationalmapping.com/wi-iran-external-ops_2024-07-12/?id=612), [Kenya \(https://ares.internationalmapping.com/wi-iran-external-ops\\_2024-07-12/?id=367\)](https://ares.internationalmapping.com/wi-iran-external-ops_2024-07-12/?id=367), [Albania \(https://ares.internationalmapping.com/wi-iran-external-ops\\_2024-07-12/?id=87\)](https://ares.internationalmapping.com/wi-iran-external-ops_2024-07-12/?id=87), and [Thailand \(https://ares.internationalmapping.com/wi-iran-external-ops\\_2024-07-12/?id=215\)](https://ares.internationalmapping.com/wi-iran-external-ops_2024-07-12/?id=215) have all publicly exposed Iranian operations on their soil. Finally, as both the Iran and the ‘grey zone’ reports suggest, the UK should take not only a whole of government but a whole of society approach to these threats. It should consider applying lessons learned from other NATO allies with varying levels of exposure and experience, such as Estonia, Finland, or the US, on managing ‘grey zone’ tactics used by revisionist powers.

*The article was originally published on the RUSI website (<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uk-government-it-time-to-take-state-sponsored-assassinations-seriously>).* ❖

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Jul 25, 2025



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