

Iran Intensifying Its Crackdown on Citizens Abroad

by [Mehdi Khalaji](#)

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Brief Analysis

The regime is once again targeting dissidents in Europe and arresting dual nationals, giving Washington and the EU common cause to sanction senior Iranian officials.

On October 30, Denmark recalled its ambassador and called for fresh EU sanctions against Iran after discovering that regime intelligence operatives had plotted an assassination on Danish soil. The reported target was an exiled leader of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA), the group Tehran accused of carrying out a terrorist attack in that eponymous region in September—conveniently ignoring the Islamic State’s claim of responsibility weeks earlier, and the fact that Iranian forces had launched missiles at IS bases in Syria in retaliation. Denmark’s decision followed similar developments in France, where an Iranian diplomat was expelled on October 26 after authorities uncovered a plot to attack a Paris gathering organized by another opposition group, Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK).

For years, many observers assumed that Iran had largely abandoned its agenda of killing dissidents abroad in order to build trust with the West and normalize relations with the international community. But these and other incidents show that the regime has been intently pursuing foreign assassination plots again for some time, in tandem with domestic maneuvers intended to ward off persistent political protests and intensified media pressure at home.

RESUMING ATTACKS AFTER THE GREEN MOVEMENT

In the early years of the Islamic Republic, regime operatives reportedly killed hundreds of Iranian dissidents in

various countries. In 1991, for example, they assassinated the shah's former prime minister, Shapour Bakhtiar, in a Paris suburb. A year later, several Iranian Kurdish opposition leaders were killed at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin, leading the German judiciary to accuse Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian of ordering the attack.

Such operations dwindled when reformist president Muhammad Khatami came to office in 1997. Yet the regime seemingly reverted to this policy in 2009, when the Green Movement launched mass protests against the rigged presidential election. On November 5 of that year, senior military official Gen. Masoud Jazayeri promised that Iran would “identify the dissidents, whether inside or outside the country, and crack down on them at the proper time,” explicitly noting the potential for operations on foreign soil: “If the Islamic Republic sees it as inevitable, it can go after the coup supporters even beyond the border.”

The years since have seen multiple high-profile assassinations abroad. For example, on April 29, 2017, GEM TV owner Saeed Karimian and his Kuwaiti business partner were shot dead in front of his office in Istanbul. Iran's most popular satellite network, GEM frequently aired entertainment programs promoting Western cultural values, leading a Tehran court to try him in absentia and sentence him to six years in prison for spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic.

More recently, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps [launched missiles](#) at the Iraqi headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iran (KDP-I) on September 8. Two days later, Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Supreme Leader's military advisor and former IRGC commander-in-chief, reiterated Jazayeri's 2009 threat about striking abroad: “If necessary, the IRGC will hunt and crack down on dissidents and enemies beyond borders and seas.”

DEFINING IRAN'S “ENEMIES”

The regime has kept its definition of “enemy” fluid depending on its domestic political situation. In January 2010, near the height of the Green Movement, the Intelligence Ministry reportedly released [a list of sixty foreign organizations](#) “involved in soft war” against Islamic Republic, including media networks, think tanks, universities, and affiliated entities. The ministry warned that relations with any of these organizations were “against the law,” prohibiting Iranian citizens from signing contracts or soliciting funds or other support from them.

Such a wide definition of “enemy” has given the regime legal ground to arrest dual nationals. In an August 28 interview, Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi told state television that “dozens of spies” working in the state bureaucracy had been arrested. He then emphasized that “we prevent dual nationals from assuming any state position.” Similarly, Reuters reported in November 2017 that the IRGC had arrested “at least 30 dual nationals during the past two years, mostly on spying charges, according to lawyers, diplomats and relatives.”

To carry out such crackdowns, the regime uses a wide network of intelligence organs. Beside the main Intelligence Ministry and the Qods Force, the IRGC special forces wing responsible for extraterritorial operations, the Supreme Leader directly supervises several agencies capable of taking action against dissidents, including intelligence bureaus within the IRGC, the police, the regular army, the judiciary, the office of the president, and the Interior Ministry. For instance, many Iranian dual nationals have been arrested by IRGC intelligence (e.g., British citizen Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, detained since 2016).

This proliferation of organizations sometimes leads to public interagency disputes. For instance, when Dorri Najaf Abadi, an Iranian-Canadian dual national who worked with the nuclear negotiating team, was arrested last year, IRGC intelligence claimed responsibility and accused him of espionage. Yet the Intelligence Ministry repeatedly called for his release, emphasizing that it did not recognize him as a spy. In the end, the IRGC overruled the ministry, as it usually does on such matters.

“NO HOPE IN EUROPE”

Some may read Iran’s renewed terrorist operations abroad as a hardliner tactic for undermining President Hassan Rouhani’s government and further demonstrating the nuclear deal’s ineffectiveness after Washington pulled out of the agreement earlier this year. Yet far from a sign of self-confidence, the regime’s plots in Europe seem more like a symptom of its despair about the EU’s ability to resist U.S. pressure and save the deal. For instance, an October 28 *Financial Times* story quoted diplomats who noted that “the EU has struggled to find a member state to host a new financial channel to shield trade with Iran from looming sanctions.”

Khamenei no doubt views such reports as proof of what he said in an October 17 speech: “Our eyes should focus mainly on the East. Looking at the West and Europe leaves us with nothing but a waste of time, headaches, and humiliation.” Similarly, during an August 29 meeting with the president and cabinet, he told officials to adjust their expectations about the EU: “To have relations with Europe and continue negotiations with it is okay, but even while doing this, we should harbor no hope about matters like the [nuclear deal] or economy.” He also told them to “watch things with suspicious eyes” when talking with Europe.

Such rhetoric has been accompanied by warnings to European governments, increasing the sense of desperation. On July 3, Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, who is known to be close to Khamenei, ominously stated, “If I shut my eyes for twenty-four hours, more than one million refugees would pass through Iran’s western borders to Europe.” An article published on the IRGC-affiliated Mersad News website called Fazli’s threat “more serious than blocking the Strait of Hormuz.”

NEW GROUND FOR U.S.-EU COOPERATION

Today, thousands of Iranians work abroad in academia, NGOs, Persian-language media, and other institutions. Iran’s hardline regime casts the bulk of these citizens as major security threats and has shown signs of expanding its efforts to crack down on them wherever they are—whether by conducting acts of terror on European soil, preventing dual nationals from entering Iran, or arresting those who hold European, Canadian, or American citizenship.

Accordingly, Western governments need to stand behind the Iranian people, especially those who live within their borders or hold dual citizenship. Tehran’s willingness to intimidate the diaspora through such blatant violations provides a common basis for U.S. and EU action, including intensified human rights sanctions on high-ranking Iranian political and military officials.

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