

Iran's Deadly Diplomats

By Matthew Levitt

With the July arrest of an Iranian diplomat in Germany for his role in an alleged plot to bomb a rally of Iranian dissidents in Paris, U.S. officials have warned allies to be vigilant of Iranian terrorist plotting elsewhere. Indeed, there is ample precedent for such concern. For decades, Tehran has been dispatching operatives to Europe to carry out assassinations and other acts of terrorism.

Though it had all the makings of an espionage thriller, the event was anything but fiction. An Iranian diplomat accredited to Tehran's embassy in Vienna, Austria, is arrested in Germany and charged with conspiracy to commit murder and activity as a foreign agent. Authorities suspect the diplomat, Assadollah Assadi, hired an Iranian couple living in Belgium to carry out a bomb plot targeting a rally of about 4,000¹ Iranian dissidents at the Villepinte Congress Center² near Paris and provided them with 500 grams of TATP explosives at a meeting in Luxembourg in late June 2018.³ The target was the annual meeting of the Paris-based National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which is the umbrella political organization including the Mujahedeen-Khalq, or MEK, a group once listed as a terrorist group by the United States and European Union. Among the VIPs attending the event on June 30 were former New York City mayor and Trump lawyer Rudolph Giuliani and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, among others.⁴ When that same day the couple was stopped in a leafy suburb of Brussels, Belgium, authorities say they found powerful explosives and a detonation device in their car and they were arrested "just in time."⁵ Three people were subsequently arrested in France, and the operation to arrest Assadi and three others at a highway rest stop was taken so seriously by German authorities that they shut down the highway for the period of time it took to make the arrest.⁶

According to German prosecutors, Assadi was no run-of-the-mill diplomat but rather an Iranian intelligence officer operating under diplomatic cover. In a statement, prosecutors tied Assadi to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), whose tasks

Dr. Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler fellow and director of the Reinhard program on counterterrorism and intelligence at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He is the author of Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God (Georgetown University Press, 2013).

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"primarily include the intensive observation and combatting of opposition groups inside and outside Iran."⁷

U.S. officials are pointing to this latest case as they seek to mobilize allies to counter Iran's support for terrorism around the world. Speaking on background with members of the press en route to Belgium from Saudi Arabia, one senior State Department official made Washington's concerns very clear:

"The most recent example is the plot that the Belgians foiled, and we had an Iranian diplomat out of the Austrian embassy as part of the plot to bomb a meeting of Iranian opposition leaders in Paris. And the United States is urging all nations to carefully examine diplomats in Iranian embassies to ensure their countries' own security. If Iran can plot bomb attacks in Paris, they can plot attacks anywhere in the world, and we urge all nations to be vigilant about Iran using embassies as diplomatic cover to plot terrorist attacks."⁸

In fact, this is just the latest example of how active Iranian intelligence operatives have been in Europe as of late. In June 2018, an investigation by Dutch intelligence led to the expulsion of two Iranian diplomats based at the Iranian embassy in Amsterdam from the Netherlands.⁹ This followed the assassination several months earlier of an Iranian Arab activist who was gunned down in the Dutch capital.¹⁰ In March 2018, Albanian authorities arrested two Iranian operatives on terrorism charges after being caught allegedly surveilling a location where Iranian New Year (Nowruz) celebrations were about to begin.¹¹ In January 2018, after weeks of surveillance, German authorities raided several homes tied to Iranian operatives who reportedly were collecting information on possible Israeli and Jewish targets in Germany, including the Israeli embassy and a Jewish kindergarten. Arrest warrants were issued for 10 Iranian agents, but none were apprehended.¹² And just a month before that, the German government issued an official protest to the Iranian ambassador following the conviction of an Iranian agent for spying in Germany. In that case, the agent scouted targets in 2016, including the head of the German-Israeli Association.¹³

In other cases, Iranian diplomats involved in terrorism or surveillance of possible targets for attack were quietly arrested and deported. In April 2013, for example, two Iranian intelligence officers posted to Bosnia and Herzegovina as diplomats were expelled from the country after being involved in espionage and "connections to terrorism," according to information prepared by the National Counterterrorism Center. And in 2012, four IRGC-Qods Force operatives were found trying to attack Israeli targets in Turkey, and another was arrested in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he was conducting surveillance of a local synagogue.¹⁴ According to a 1987 U.S. intelligence community assessment, several organizations within the Iranian government are involved in terrorism. That appears to remain the case today. The 1987 intelligence report offers some specific examples:

"Department 210 of the Foreign Ministry serves as a primary

operations center for coordination with Iranian intelligence officers abroad, and is often used to instruct intelligence officers about terrorist operations. The Revolutionary Guard, which is the principal agent of Iranian terrorism in Lebanon, uses its own resources, as well as diplomatic and intelligence organizations, to support, sponsor, and conduct terrorist actions.¹⁵

The Assadi arrest is, therefore, just the most recent alleged example of Iranian state-sponsored terrorism in which Tehran uses visiting government officials or accredited diplomats to plot terrorist attacks. Iranian diplomats were deeply involved in the 1992 and 1994 bombings of the Israeli embassy and AMIA Jewish community center, respectively, in Buenos Aires.¹⁶ But they have a long track record of just this kind of activity across Europe as well.

Looking Back at Iran's Dissident Hit List

Immediately following the founding of the Islamic Republic, the Iranian leadership embarked on an assassination campaign targeting individuals deemed to be working against the regime's interests. Between 1979 and 1994, the CIA reported that Iran "murdered Iranian defectors and dissidents in West Germany, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Turkey."¹⁷ Overall, more than 60 individuals were targeted in assassination attempts.¹⁸ In many cases, Hezbollah members functioned as the logistics experts or gunmen in these plots.

The first successful assassination of an Iranian dissident in Western Europe occurred in 1984. On February 7 that year, General Gholam Ali Oveissi and his brother were fatally shot on a Paris street by what French police described as "professional assassins." Police claimed there were "two or three men involved and that one or two of them had fired a 9-millimeter pistol at the victims who were walking on Rue de Passy."¹⁹ Oveissi, the former military governor of Tehran under the shah who was known as the Butcher of Tehran, distinguished himself by responding to protests with tanks. Just before his death, Oveissi claimed that he had assembled a small counterrevolutionary army to retake Iran. Hezbollah's IJO and another group, the Revolutionary Organization for Liberation and Reform, claimed responsibility for the killings. The day after the attack, the Iranian government described the event as a "revolutionary execution."²⁰

Oveissi's assassination ushered in a period of great danger for Iranian dissidents in Europe. On July 19, 1987, for example, Amir Parvis, a former Iranian cabinet member and the British chairman of the National Movement of the Iranian Resistance, suffered a broken leg, cuts, and burns when a car bomb exploded as he drove past the Royal Kensington Hotel in London. Several months later, on October 3, 1987, Ali Tavakoli and his son Nader, both Iranian monarchist exiles, were found shot in the head in their London apartment.²¹ Both attacks were claimed by a previously unknown group, the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, which according to a March 3, 1989, report by the *Times* of London, "is believe[d] to be closely linked to the Hezbollah extremists in south Beirut, but all its London-based members are Iranian."²²

On July 13, 1989, Dr. Abdolrahman Ghassemlou, secretary-general of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI); Abdollah Ghaeri-Azar, the PDKI's European representative; and Fazil Rassoul, an Iraqi Kurd serving as a mediator, were assassinated in a Vienna apartment while meeting with a delegation from the Iranian government. Although forced underground after the



Former Mayor of New York City Rudy Giuliani attends the annual gathering of Free Iran-Alternative 100 ASHRAF at the Villepinte exhibition North of Paris, France, June 30, 2018. (Siavosh Hosseini/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

1979 revolution, Ghassemlou and the PDKI were informed after the Iran-Iraq War that the Iranian government was open to conducting talks. On December 30 and 31, 1988, Ghassemlou had met with an Iranian delegation headed by Mohammad Jafari Sahraroudi, the head of the Kurdish Affairs Section of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence. The two met regularly until July 13 the following year, when a meeting was held that included Sahraroudi; governor of the Iranian province of Kurdistan Mostafa Ajoudi; an undercover Iranian agent, Amir Mansour Bozorgian; and the victims. At one point during the meeting, Rassoul and Ghassemlou proposed a break and suggested that the negotiations resume the next day. Soon after, gunshots were heard. In the shooting, the three Kurds were killed and Sahraroudi was injured. Investigators found a blue baseball cap in Ghassemlou's lap, the same call sign that was left at the scene of the murder of an Iranian pilot, Ahmad Moradi Talebi, in 1987 and the 1990 murder of resistance leader Kazem Rajavi.²³ Bozorgian was taken into custody; however, he was later released and fled the country, along with several other suspects.²⁴

Just one month after the Vienna assassination, on August 3, 1989, a Hezbollah operative by the name of Mustafa Mahmoud Mazeher died when an explosive device he was preparing detonated prematurely inside the Paddington Hotel in London. His target was Salman Rushdie, whose 1988 publication of *The Satanic Verses* prompted Ayatollah Khomeini to issue a *fatwa* condemning the writer, his editors, and his publishers to death, and to place a \$2.5 million bounty on his head. Mazeher, a Lebanese citizen born in the Guinean capital of Conakry, had joined a local Hezbollah cell in his teens. Though he was being watched by security agencies, he succeeded in obtaining a French passport in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, from an official later arrested by the French authorities in Toulouse. Mazeher apparently went to Lebanon and stayed in his parents' village before traveling to London through the Netherlands.²⁵

Later, speaking about Khomeini's *fatwa* against Rushdie, a Hezbollah commander would tell an interviewer that "one member of the Islamic Resistance, Mustafa Mazeher, had been martyred in Lon-

don.²⁶ According to the CIA, attacks on the book's Italian, Norwegian, and Japanese translators in July 1991 suggested "that Iran has shifted from attacking organizations affiliated with the novel—publishing houses and bookstores—to individuals involved in its publication, as called for in the original *fatwa*."²⁷ Today, a shrine dedicated to Mazeh still stands in Tehran's Behesht Zahra cemetery with an inscription reading, "The first martyr to die on a mission to kill Salman Rushdie."²⁸

Less than a year after the Vienna assassinations and the abortive attempt on Rushdie's life in London, Kazem Radjavi, former Iranian ambassador to the United Nations and brother of the leader of the Iranian opposition group MEK, was assassinated. On April 24, 1990, his car was forced off the road in Coppet, Switzerland, by two vehicles, after which two armed men exited one of the vehicles and opened fire. Again, a blue baseball cap was left at the scene, marking the third use of this call sign at the site of a suspected Iranian assassination.²⁹

According to the report of the Swiss investigating judge, evidence pointed to the direct involvement of one or more official Iranian services in the murder. All in all, there were 13 suspects—all of whom had traveled to Switzerland on official Iranian passports.³⁰ One report indicated that "all 13 came to Switzerland on brand-new government-service passports, many issued in Tehran on the same date. Most listed the same personal address, Karim-Khan 40, which turns out to be an intelligence ministry building. All 13 arrived on Iran Air flights, using tickets issued on the same date and numbered sequentially." International warrants for the 13 suspects' arrests were issued on June 15, 1990.³¹

No death, however, shook the Iranian expatriate community more than the assassination of Chapour Bakhtiar, former Iranian prime minister and secretary-general of the Iranian National Resistance Movement. On August 6, 1991, Bakhtiar and an aide were stabbed to death by Iranian operatives in Bakhtiar's Paris apartment.³² Previously, in July 1980, Bakhtiar had been targeted in another assassination attempt led by Anis Naccache, which killed a policeman and a female neighbor. One reason Hezbollah abducted French citizens in Lebanon was to secure the release of Naccache, who was imprisoned in France for the attempted killing.³³

In a 1991 interview, Naccache recalled, "I had no personal feelings against Bakhtiar ... It was purely political. He had been sentenced to death by the Iranian Revolutionary Tribunal. They sent five of us to execute him."³⁴ Hezbollah, for its part, pushed hard for Naccache's release and on July 28, 1990, finally got its wish. Naccache was released and deported to Tehran in a bid to improve relations with Tehran that would lead to the release of French hostages held in Lebanon.³⁵

Death at the Mykonos Restaurant

The most daring and public assassinations Hezbollah carried out at the behest of its Iranian masters occurred on September 17, 1992, when operatives gunned down Dr. Sadegh Sharafkandi, secretary-general of the PDKI—the biggest movement of Iranian Kurdish opposition to Tehran—and three of his colleagues at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin.³⁶ This operation also involved Iranian diplomats.

In its findings, a Berlin court ruled that the attack was carried out by a Hezbollah cell by order of the Iranian government. In delivering the opinion, presiding judge Frithjof Kubsch said the judges were particularly struck by Iranian leaders' assertions that they

could "silence an uncomfortable voice" any way they pleased. To strengthen his point, he cited a television interview given by Iran's intelligence minister, Ali Fallahiyan, one month before the Mykonos attack, in which Fallahiyan bragged that Iran could launch "decisive strikes" against its opponents abroad.³⁷ Furthermore, on August 30, 1992, Fallahiyan admitted in an interview with an Iranian television reporter that Iran monitored Iranian dissidents both at home and abroad: "We track them outside the country, too," he said. "We have them under surveillance ... Last year, we succeeded in striking fundamental blows to their top members."³⁸

Much of the information surrounding the Mykonos plot was relayed by an Iranian defector named Abolghasem Mesbahi, who claimed to be a founding member of the Iranian Security Service. According to him, the decision to carry out the attack was made by the Committee for Special Operations, which included President Rafsanjani, Minister of Intelligence Fallahiyan, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, representatives of the Security Apparatus, and, most significantly, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.³⁹

The "attack group," organized by Fallahiyan, arrived in Berlin from Iran on September 7, 1992. It was headed by Abdolrahman Banihashemi (also known as Abu Sharif, an operative for the Ministry of Intelligence and Security who trained in Lebanon), who also served as one of the attack's two gunmen and who has been implicated in the August 1987 assassination of a former Iranian F-14 pilot in Geneva.⁴⁰ The operation's logistics chief, Kazem Darabi, was a former Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah member who had been living in Germany since 1980 and belonged to an association of Iranian students in Europe. According to Argentine prosecutors, "UISA [Association of Islamic Students in Europe] and the associations that belonged to it worked closely with extremist Islamic groups, particularly Hezbollah and Iranian government bodies such as the embassy and consulate. UISA was the main organization from which Iran's intelligence service recruited collaborators for propaganda and intelligence activities in Iran."⁴¹

In a statement to German prosecutors, Ataollah Ayad, one of Darabi's recruits, made clear that Darabi was "the boss of Hezbollah in Berlin."⁴² Moreover, Darabi would also be linked to an attack at the 1991 Iran Cultural Festival in Dusseldorf. Before the festival, German intelligence reportedly intercepted a telephone call in which Darabi was instructed by someone at the Iranian cultural center in Cologne with ties to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence to enlist some "Arab friends" from Berlin and head to Dusseldorf. Armed with pistols, gas, guns, and mace, Darabi and his accomplices assaulted members of the Iranian opposition group MEK, who were exhibiting books and pictures at the festival. Several MEK members were seriously injured. Eyewitnesses later testified that Darabi appeared to be the leader of the assault.⁴³

Already concerned about Darabi's activities in their country, German officials attempted to deport Darabi in June 1992. However, the Iranian government intervened and asked Germany to allow Darabi to remain in the country.⁴⁴ The second gunman, Abbas Rhayel, and one of the co-conspirators, Youssef Amin, "were members of Hezbollah," according to Argentine prosecutors, adding they received training at an IRGC center near Rasht in Iran.⁴⁵ According to German prosecutors, when the "Hit Team" arrived in Berlin and command was transferred from Darabi to Banihashemi, two of the co-conspirators who were not members of Hezbollah "were shut out of the immediate involvement in the act."⁴⁶

The operational stage of the Mykonos attack began on the morn-

ing of September 16, 1992, when Rhayel and Farajollah Haider, another Hezbollah member of Lebanese origin, received an Uzi machine gun, a pistol, and two silencers. The source of these arms was never identified but was suspected to be linked to Iranian intelligence. German investigators later traced both the pistol and silencer to Iran. On the next morning, September 17, Rhayel and Haider purchased the bags they would use to conceal the weapons as they entered the Mykonos restaurant.⁴⁷

On the night of September 17, 1992, Banihashemi and Rhayel entered the restaurant at 10:50 PM, while Amin waited outside to block the door. Haider and an Iranian known only as Mohammad, who had previously been tasked with keeping the targets under surveillance, waited several blocks away with the getaway car. The car had been purchased several days earlier by Ali Dakhil Sabra, who had served with Amin and Rhayel in Lebanon and then come with them to Germany. When the targets emerged into view, Banihashemi shouted, “You sons of whores” in Persian and opened fire. Rhayel followed Banihashemi inside and shot both Sharfkandi and Homayoun Ardalan, the PDKI’s representative in Germany. Between the two assassins, 30 shots were fired. The assailants then fled on foot to the getaway vehicle.⁴⁸

The police investigation quickly revealed Iranian involvement in the attack. On September 22, 1992, the bag containing the weapons and silencers was discovered, and tests revealed significant similarities between these weapons and those used in the assassination of Iranian dissidents Akbar Mohammadi in Hamburg in 1987 and Bahman Javadi in Cyprus in 1989. The police also matched the serial number on the pistol used by Rhayel to a shipment delivered by a Spanish dealer to the Iranian military in 1972. Rhayel’s palm print was discovered on one of the pistol magazines, the blood of one of the victims was identified on the pistol itself, and Amin’s fingerprints were found on a plastic shopping bag inside the getaway vehicle.⁴⁹

According to German prosecutors, Abdolraham Banihashemi “left the city by airplane after the crime and went via Turkey to Iran. There, he was rewarded for his role in the attack with a Mercedes 230 and participation in profitable business transactions.”⁵⁰ The others were not so fortunate. Darabi and Rhayel were sentenced to life in prison in Germany in April 1997, while Amin and Mohammad Atris, a document forger who assisted the attackers, were given terms of 11 years and about five years, respectively.⁵¹ While Amin and Atris served out their shorter terms, in December 2007 Darabi and Rhayel were released from prison and returned to Iran. Germany’s *Der Spiegel* news magazine suggested they were released in exchange for a German tourist arrested in Iran in November 2005. Germany, it appears, was not the only country seeking collateral for Darabi and Rhayel’s release; Israel had hoped to bargain for an early release in return for information about Ron Arad, an Israeli aviator shot down over Lebanon in 1986.⁵²

The brazen assassination in public of four Iranian dissidents at Mykonos, in the opinion of Germany’s highest criminal court, signaled culpability for terrorism at the highest levels of the Islamic Republic. The court judgment rejected the premise that the attack was executed by “mavericks,” concluding that “the assassination [was] put into action much more through the powers in Iran.” By identifying President Rafsanjani and the Supreme Leader himself as the orchestrators of the assassination, the judgment found that “Iranian powers not only allow terrorist attacks abroad ... but that they themselves set in action such attacks.” When the Tehran regime

encountered political opposition, the court determined, its solution was simply to have the opponents “liquidated.”⁵³

Contending with Iranian Terrorism

And yet, the German court ruling in the Mykonos case did not translate into durable and tangible action against Iran or Hezbollah. Iran responded to the placement of a plaque memorializing the victims of the Mykonos attack by displaying one of its own near the German embassy in Tehran denouncing Germany for arming Saddam Hussein with chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War. Apparently concerned over the diplomatic ramifications, the German ambassador to Iran distanced his government from the original plaque’s assertion of Iranian responsibility for the Mykonos attack.⁵⁴ While many European nations withdrew their ambassadors from Iran following the ruling, this diplomatic freeze lasted only months. And along with the release of perpetrators Darabi and Rhayel, none of the Iranian leaders identified in the court judgment—Rafsanjani, Fallahian, Velayati, or Khamenei—were ever held to account for their roles in the attack.

Indeed, several of these officials—in particular, Velayati—were involved in a number of international terrorist plots. Argentinean officials have requested Velayati’s arrest and extradition multiple times as he has traveled the world as a senior Iranian official. The most recent request was made to Russia, where Putin hosted Velayati on July 12, 2018, just a day after Assadi, the arrested Iranian diplomat was formally charged in Germany. Similar requests for his arrest made to the governments of Singapore and Malaysia were also ignored.⁵⁵ As U.S. authorities have long assessed, without coordinated international action, Iran is unlikely to be deterred from carrying out such operations again in the future. In the wake of Iranian terrorist plots abroad in the late 1980s, the U.S. intelligence community concluded that “over the long term, Iran is likely to be deterred from terrorism only if evidence of its culpability results in strong, unified action by the international community, including a willingness to impose sanctions. This could include the breaking of relations, or the recall of ambassadors.” But to date, that has not been the case.⁵⁶

Today, law enforcement agencies around the world—and especially in Europe—are cooperating much more closely to deal with Iran and Hezbollah’s global terrorist and criminal activities. For example, the U.S.-led Law Enforcement Coordination Group (LECG) has met six times in various locations around the world to address Hezbollah’s terrorist and criminal activities worldwide. The latest meeting, held in Quito, Ecuador, was convened by the United States and Europol and held under the auspices of Ameripol.⁵⁷ The LECG will next meet in Europe in late 2018, where more than 30 governments—along with officials from Europol and Interpol—will convene to compare notes on Hezbollah activities in their far-flung jurisdictions and strategize on how to best cooperate to counter Hezbollah terrorist and criminal operations.

As a result of Iran’s direct involvement in this latest plot—and with the benefit of hindsight into Iran’s long history of such active operations in Europe—LECT officials are likely going to consider expanding their focus to include the full range of Iranian agents and proxies deployed by Tehran to carry out attacks abroad, including Iran’s diplomats and diplomatic facilities. There would be utility in that, not only because of Iran’s own attack plans but because of the support Iranian agents provide time and again to Hezbollah plots. Consider, for example, the series of 1985 Paris bombings or the hi-

jacking of TWA flight 847, both carried out by Hezbollah but with the logistical support of Iranian agents, according to the National Counterterrorism Center.⁵⁸

The international response to Iran's international terrorist activity should not be limited to law enforcement action alone. Regulatory action would also be helpful, and it is worth noting there have been calls for the European Union to designate not just Hezbollah's military wing as a terrorist group but to include the organization in its entirety, as well as expanded financial and diplomatic sanctions. European states should consider designating more Iranian institutions and personnel involved in Tehran's illicit conduct, but they should also consider working to isolate Iran diplomatically so long as Tehran continues to abuse diplomatic privilege and use its

representatives abroad to murder people on foreign soil.

To that end, in the wake of the Assadi affair, the State Department released timelines and maps depicting select incidents of Iranian-sponsored operational activities in Europe from 1979 to 2018, including both incidents involving Iran's proxy, Hezbollah, as well as those carried out by Iranian agents themselves.⁵⁹ Developing an appreciation for the extent of Iranian operations in Europe over the years is important, and not just as some kind of academic exercise. As authorities in Austria, Belgium, France, and Germany dig deeper into the Assadi affair, they are likely to determine fairly quickly, as investigators invariably did in previous Iranian plots, that these are not rogue actions, but the actions of a rogue regime. **CTC**

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