



A police cordon at RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire, where five men were arrested on suspicion of explosive and terrorism offences in late September. Neil Hall / EPA

How Iran carries out violence abroad – from diplomats and assassins to criminal networks

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Britain's prime minister, Andy Burnham, has said the recent suspected terror plot targeting RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire was "almost certainly" directed by Iran. The allegation has centred attention on how Iran projects power beyond its borders.

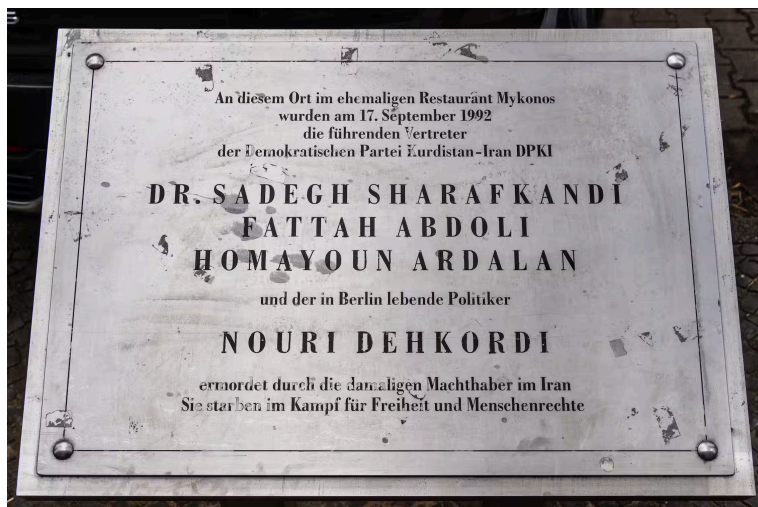
The case comes at a time of rising concern about Iranian-linked activities in the UK. In early October, two Iranians were charged in connection with an alleged plot targeting Jewish institutions in Manchester. According to authorities, the suspects were in contact with an individual believed to be in Iran.

While these cases remain under investigation, they fit into a much longer history. The Islamic Republic has been involved in a wide range of malign activities abroad since its establishment in 1979. These activities have principally targeted political opponents, dissidents and perceived enemies of the regime in Tehran.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Iranian opposition figures were assassinated or targeted in attacks worldwide. One of the most significant incidents was the 1992 assassination of four Iranian opposition figures at a Berlin restaurant.

A subsequent German court ruling concluded that senior Iranian political leaders, including the then-supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had ordered the killings. This triggered a major diplomatic crisis between Iran and several European states and altered how Tehran approached operations abroad.

In the following years, Iran became more reliant on surveillance, espionage and the infiltration of opposition groups, as well as disinformation and intimidation campaigns. But assassinations and terrorism did not vanish from the regime's toolbox.



A memorial plaque for the victims of the attack in the Mykonos Greek restaurant in Berlin, which occurred in September 1992. Mo Photography Berlin / Shutterstock

Many Iranian operations abroad have historically been conducted by intelligence officers operating directly on behalf of the state. Iran has also relied on allied proxy organisations, including the Lebanese armed group [Hezbollah](#). At the same time, Iranian embassies and diplomatic missions have repeatedly been accused of serving functions beyond traditional diplomacy.

Intelligence collection, surveillance of dissidents and support for covert operations have all been linked to Iranian diplomatic networks. Perhaps the most prominent example is the case of Iranian diplomat Assadollah Assadi. In 2021, Assadi was [convicted in Belgium](#) for his role in a planned bombing attack against an Iranian opposition gathering in France three years earlier.

The case [demonstrated](#) that diplomatic cover plays a significant role in Iran's foreign activities. It also highlighted the continued importance of state-directed operations in Tehran's security strategy.

Criminal intermediaries

As I have found in [my own research](#), another shift has taken place over the past two decades. Rather than relying solely on intelligence officers or diplomatic personnel, Iran has often turned to local criminal groups to carry out surveillance, intimidation or attacks abroad.

A leading example of this was the 2015 assassination of Iranian dissident Mohammad Reza Kolahi in the Netherlands. Naoufal Fassih, a key figure in the European drug trade, was later [convicted](#) by a Dutch court of hiring hitmen to carry out the murder. Dutch intelligence [said](#) there were "strong indications that Iran was involved".

Turkey-based Iranian drug trafficker Naji Ibrahim Sharifi Zindashti and his network were also implicated in the Istanbul assassination of media executive [Saeed Karimian](#) in 2017. A Tehran court had previously sentenced Karimian to six years in prison in absentia for allegedly spreading propaganda against Iran.

Zindashti's network was [found to have](#) orchestrated the 2019 killing of Iranian cybersecurity defector Masoud Vardanjani, too. Vardanjani previously worked in Iran's defence ministry and had become a vocal critic of the Iranian authorities before his death. He was also killed in Istanbul.

This approach to carrying out violence abroad has several advantages for Iran. First, criminals often have capabilities that foreign intelligence services lack. They understand local environments, have access to illicit markets and can move within criminal networks without attracting the same attention as foreign intelligence officers.

Second, the use of intermediaries provides plausible deniability. Even when investigators identify the immediate perpetrators of an operation, linking those people directly to Iranian state institutions can be difficult.

And third, criminal networks are often cheaper and more flexible than deploying trained intelligence officers from Iran itself. The result is a model that blurs the line between state activity, organised crime and political violence.



The US Air Force has pulled its bombers from RAF Fairford following an investigation into the alleged planned terror attack at the base. Tolga Akmen / EPA

What is striking about the Manchester and RAF Fairford cases is that, in both instances, Iran's authorities are alleged to have used individuals with Iranian backgrounds residing in the UK.

Such an approach, if proven, would suggest that Iranian intelligence services retain recruitment channels and the ability to direct individuals abroad despite heavy setbacks experienced during recent wars with Israel and the US.

These recent cases point to an Iranian intelligence apparatus that, although weakened, continues to adapt its recruitment methods while preserving its ability to operate abroad.

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