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Ardavan M. Khoshnood & Arvin Khoshnood

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ARDAVAN M. KHOSHNOOD AND
ARVIN KHOSHNOOD

The Islamic Republic of Iran's Use of Diplomats in Its Intelligence and Terrorist Operations against Dissidents: The Case of Assadollah Assadi

Abstract: The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has two main intelligence organizations: the Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) and the Intelligence Organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The two organizations are highly active on foreign soil with malign activities like assassinations. In 2018, the third secretary of the IRI embassy in Austria, Assadollah Assadi, was arrested and later convicted of involvement in terrorism. With the help of three of his assets, they had planned to bomb a gathering in Paris arranged by the Iranian opposition to the IRI. Assadi would later be identified as the principal intelligence officer of the MOI on the European continent. Analyzing the case of Assadi shows that the IRI has

Ardavan M. Khoshnood is an Associate Professor of emergency medicine at Lund University in Sweden. He holds degrees in criminology and political science from Malmö University and a degree in intelligence analysis from Lund University. The author can be contacted at ardavan.khoshnood@med.lu.se.

Arvin Khoshnood holds degrees in political science, human geography, and intelligence analysis from Lund University, Sweden. The author can be contacted at arvin.khoshnood@keg.lu.se.

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the will and resources to conduct significant terrorist operations and that the regime has a vast network of assets throughout Europe. Most significant in the failed Paris plot was that evidently the IRI Intelligence Community is likely compromised and that the regime has considerable problems in trusting its own intelligence officers.

Intelligence operatives working under diplomatic cover is not an unusual phenomenon. On the contrary, most countries, if not all, use their foreign missions and diplomatic postings as cover for their intelligence officers to conduct clandestine operations in or from their host countries.¹ One reason for using diplomatic cover is that the intelligence officer is, to a high degree, protected by diplomatic immunity should they be exposed. Usually, the worst-case scenario for the officer is to be declared *persona non grata* and thus expelled by the host country.² Another important reason is that diplomatic posts open doors to places to which regular people may not have access, like direct access to politicians and high-ranking officials.

Intelligence officers under diplomatic cover have several objectives. One of them is to gather intelligence on targeted objects through infiltrating different organizations and institutions in the host country, including governmental institutions, businesses, universities, and organizations related to dissidents and opponents of the regime, which the undercover intelligence officer represents. Another task is to plan and implement sabotage operations or terrorist attacks on a larger scale or through targeted assassinations.³ Hence, one of the principal tasks of the counterintelligence of the host country is to identify these intelligence officers and operatives.

It was an effective counterintelligence operation by several European countries that led to the arrest of Assadollah Assadi in 2018. Assadi, a third secretary diplomat at the embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in Austria, was arrested in Germany and sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment in Belgium in 2021, where, with three other Iranian operatives, he planned to bomb a political gathering in Paris arranged by opponents of the IRI. Assadi was the chief intelligence officer of the Islamic regime in Europe.

The case of Assadi provides an overview of this intelligence operation and the role of IRI diplomats in the planning and implementation of covert operations. Many of the assassinations and clandestine operations conducted by the IRI target Iranian dissidents and are conducted through its embassies and with the help of its diplomats.⁴ Before presenting the case of Assadi and discussing it, we offer a brief history of the IRI and the security implications it has generated for its opponents and for rival nations. We also briefly

describe the two main intelligence organizations of the IRI and some of their operations to provide a context for better understanding the case of Assadi and our analysis.

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

On 1 April 1979, the IRI was established by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Four months earlier, the late shah of Iran, ill with cancer, the details of which remain unclear, had left Iran amid countrywide protests.⁵ The triumph of the Islamic revolution and the creation of the IRI immediately had a significant detrimental impact on national, regional, and international security.

On a national level, the IRI addressed its own security through mass executions, the infamous occupation of the U.S. embassy in Teheran, and the hostage-taking of American diplomats and citizens.⁶ The executions contributed to continued armed opposition to the IRI, and the hostage-taking caused sanctions to be imposed on the country by the United States.⁷ Regional security was severely disturbed as Khomeini insisted on exporting the Islamic Revolution to other countries and supporting pro-IRI proxies and militias all around the region.⁸ With respect to international security, the IRI has trained, financed, and armed terrorist groups and has therefore been deemed by countries worldwide to be a state sponsor of terrorism and a threat to the national security of numerous countries outside the Middle East.⁹

Iranian dissidents in exile have been one of the main targets of IRI's extraterritorial operations, including assassinations.¹⁰ The IRI considers many Iranians in exile to be a threat to IRI's regime security and, eventually, its existence. The first Iranian to be assassinated at the hand of IRI operatives was Prince Shahriar Shafigh, nephew to the shah as well as a capable naval captain who had started to organize resistance against the IRI. He was gunned down on 7 December 1979, in Paris. The assassinations continued and culminated during the 1990s as Iranian dissidents worldwide, but specifically within Europe, were murdered.¹¹

Since then, the IRI has slightly changed its *modus operandi*. Its operations' focus has shifted from the assassination of Iranian dissidents to covert operations like espionage, character assassination, and kidnapping.¹² Nevertheless, terrorism has remained a vital option for the IRI, as seen in the case of the Iranian intelligence officer Assadollah Assadi.

The decisionmaking process pertaining to IRI's intelligence operations, including the assassination of individuals, larger terrorist attacks, as well as other covert operations of importance, such as espionage, is not entirely mapped. However, because it is the supreme leader of the country, Ali Khamenei, who has the last say in all vital matters, it is believed that he is at

the very least informed, if not making the ultimate decision himself.¹³ It is also believed that the Supreme National Security Council, which Khamenei and his office supervise, is directly involved in the decisionmaking.¹⁴ About this council, article 176 of the IRI constitution stipulates:

In order to safeguarding [*sic*] the national interests and preserving [*sic*] the Islamic Revolution, the territorial integrity and national sovereignty, a Supreme Council for National Security presided over by the President shall be constituted. [...] The decisions of the Supreme Council for National Security shall be effective after the confirmation by the Leader.¹⁵

Even though the decision to conduct foreign covert operations against Iranian dissidents is believed to go through the supreme leader and the Supreme National Security Council, the country's intelligence and security organizations plan for and conduct the operations.

IRI'S INTELLIGENCE

According to the Fars News Agency, linked to the *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami* (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC]), there are sixteen active intelligence and security organizations in Iran.¹⁶ While it is unclear which sixteen organizations built up the IRI Intelligence Community (IC), there is no doubt that the two main intelligence organizations of the country are the Ministry of Intelligence and the Intelligence Organization of the IRGC.

Vezerat-e Ettelâat-e Jomhori-e Eslami-e Iran (Ministry of Intelligence of the Islamic Republic of Iran [MOI]) was established in 1983 and, since the 1990s, has received essential assistance and training by the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service.¹⁷ The MOI is headed by the minister of intelligence, who, according to law, must be an Islamic clergyman competent to issue *fatwas*, religious decrees. The incumbent spymaster, taking office in 2021, is the hawkish Esmail Khatib, who oversees more than 15,000 employees.¹⁸ Even though it is formally the president who selects the minister of intelligence, the supreme leader has the last word in employing or dismissing the minister.¹⁹ While the structure and organization of the MOI remain unclear, its objectives are quite vivid—to prevent and counter conspiracies against the country's Islamic revolution and the IRI.²⁰

One of the most important objectives of the MOI is to conduct covert operations against Iranian dissidents, including assassinations.²¹ For this objective, MOI exploits both Iranian and foreign operatives sympathetic to the IRI's ideology or money.

The MOI has conducted several successful foreign covert operations in recent years. Their deep infiltration of the Iraqi political establishment and their intelligence and military since the fall of Saddam Hussein is one of the MOI's successes.²² Another example is their recent abduction of the Iranian dissident and German citizen Jamshid Sharmahd in July 2020 while he was traveling in the United Arab Emirates and then brought back to Iran in secret. Sharmahd, a supporter of the Iranian monarchy, is currently on trial in Iran, suspected of "spreading corruption on Earth"²³ and risking capital punishment.

Besides the MOI, the IRGC's intelligence organization (*Sazeman-e Ettelaat-e Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami* [IO-IRGC]) is also highly active in domestic as well as foreign intelligence operations. The IRGC was established in early May 1979 to protect the Islamic Revolution, and has eight branches: ground forces, aerospace forces, naval forces, Qods force, Basij,²⁴ intelligence organization, counterintelligence organization, and the security organization.

The IO-IRGC is highly effective and has, through the years, conducted several successful operations, one of them being the deception and, eventually, the kidnapping of Ruhollah Zam in 2019. Zam was a journalist who had left Iran for France, where he administrated a Telegram account opposing the IRI. It is believed that Zam was deceived by operatives of the IO-IRGC and manipulated to travel to Iraq for a meeting with a religious leader. When landing in Baghdad, he was kidnapped and brought to Iran, where he was prosecuted and later convicted of "corruption on earth." He was executed by hanging in December 2020.

The IO-IRGC is, since June 2022, headed by Brigadier General Mohammad Kazemi, who replaced the cleric Hossein Taeb.²⁵ Information on IO-IRGC is scarce. However, because of the responsibilities of the IRGC, it is safe to assume that the main objectives of the organization are counterespionage and counterterrorism. In order to achieve its objectives, the IO-IRGC is also active outside of Iran's borders, conducting different covert operations and acts of terrorism.

Intelligence operations are also conducted by the Qods Force of the IRGC (QF-IRGC). Established in 1990, the QF-IRGC aims to coordinate Iranian-supported militias and foreign operations, thus having a vital role in the foreign policy of the IRI.²⁶ It is also believed that the MOI uses QF-IRGC operatives to conduct operations for which the ministry is responsible or has initiated.²⁷

THE CASE OF ASSADOLLAH ASSADI

On 30 June 2018, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) was to hold its annual "Free Iran World Summit" in Paris.²⁸ The IRI had, in all secrecy, plotted to bomb this summit. Responsible for leading the operation

was Assadollah Assadi. Assadi was stationed at the IRI's embassy in Vienna as the third counselor. He is also believed to have been the head of operations of clandestine MOI activities in Europe and employed by the Directorate of Internal Security of the MOI, known as Directorate 312, which is on the European Union's list of terrorist organizations.²⁹ The director of the Belgian State Security Service, *Dienst voor de Veiligheid van de Staat* (VSSE), Jaak Raes, has stated about the operation that "[t]he attack plan was conceived in the name of Iran and under its leadership. It was not a personal initiative by Assadi."³⁰

On 1 July 2018, Assadi was arrested by the German police at a service station close to the town of Aschaffenburg.³¹ He was allegedly on vacation in Germany. German authorities stripped Assadi of his diplomatic status because he was not accredited in Germany, and in October of the same year, he was extradited to Belgium. On 4 February 2021, a Belgian court sentenced him to 20 years of imprisonment for, among other things, involvement in terrorism. The IRI vehemently objected and deemed his arrest, extradition to Belgium, and conviction a violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.³²

Assadi was not the only one convicted in this case. Three other Iranians, all residing in Belgium, two males (Amir Saadouni and Mehrdad Arefani) and one female (Nasimeh Naami), were also convicted, and all three were sentenced to imprisonment. Assadi was the handler of these three individuals, and it is believed that he had contact with the couple Amir Saadouni and Nasimeh Naami since at least 2015. The couple and Arefani posed as members of the Iranian opposition, the PMOI.³³

On 25 June 2018, the VSSE issued a statement to the Belgian Federal Police asserting that they had received intelligence from a foreign security agency about Amir Saadouni and Nasimeh Naami, residing in the Antwerp province, who might be involved in an act of violence on French soil.³⁴ The couple were put under surveillance, and three days later, 28 June, they had a meeting with Assadi in Luxembourg, where they received 500 grams of explosives, a detonator, a Universal Serial Bus stick with instructions on how the explosives work, as well as more than 20,000 Euros. It was later also revealed that the explosives were brought to Austria from Iran with a "diplomatic bag" that was covered by diplomatic immunity.³⁵

Two days after the Luxemburg meeting with Assadi, who used the alias "Danial," the couple left Antwerp for Paris. Belgian intelligence, who had the couple under surveillance, intercepted and stopped their car before they left Belgium. The couple was arrested, and the 500 grams of explosives were defused. It was later revealed that the couple had traveled to Iran numerous times and received tens of thousands of Euros since 2011.³⁶ Assadi, under

surveillance since at least the 28 June meeting with the couple, was arrested on 1 July. The fourth suspect, Mehrdad Arefani, was arrested by the French police in Paris. When arrested, he had a phone with only the number of “Danial,” that is Assadi, saved on it. Arefani is believed to have been responsible to guide the couple when arriving at the summit in Villepinte.

Evidence shows that Assadi, prior to the attack, had traveled multiple times to Tehran, and, in 2017, also had reconned the area of the foiled plot in Paris.³⁷ When Assadi was arrested, three notebooks were found in his car. The notebooks recorded more than 280 different places in eleven European countries where he had met with what is believed to be assets of the IRI (Figure 1).³⁸ The notebooks showed that Assadi frequently visited Shiite



Figure 1. Assadi visited eleven European countries where he is believed to have met assets of the Islamic Republic. Media outlets have reported these eleven countries to be Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland. Map by mapchart.net.

mosques and institutes in different European countries as well.³⁹ On 26 May 2023, Asadollah Asadi was released in exchange for the Belgian national, Olivier Vandecasteele, who was arrested in Iran in 2022, charged with, among other offenses, spying, and sentenced to 40 years in prison.⁴⁰

ANALYSIS

The case of Assadi illuminates the Islamic regime's exploitation of diplomatic posts as cover for their illegal and fatal intelligence operations. Besides this, the case of Assadi, together with the history of IRI intelligence, demonstrate three main aspects of IRI's covert operations: (1) that the use of terrorism is still a significant option for the IRI to use against what they deem as a "security threat," (2) that the regime has active assets in European countries and there is a connection between the IRI intelligence and Islamic institutes in Europe, and (3) that the IRI is rather reckless in its operations and may have issues with trusting its intelligence agents.

Terrorism via IRI Diplomatic Core

The involvement of a high-ranking Iranian intelligence officer, veiled as a diplomat, in an attempted terrorist attack is not surprising. On the contrary, it is consistent with the *modus operandi* of the IRI.⁴¹ Since its establishment in 1979, more than 160 Iranian opponents of the regime in exile have been murdered at the hands of the IRI.⁴² One example where the role of Iranian diplomats and the IRI embassy is vivid with respect to terrorism is the Mykonos assassinations in Germany in 1992. While Iranian opponents of the IRI had gathered at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin for a meeting, assassins opened fire, killing four. One of the terrorists arrested and later convicted, Kazem Darabi, was shown to have close ties to the diplomats of the Iranian embassy in Germany.⁴³ Another example is the 1996 assassination of Dr. Reza Mazlouman in Paris. He was a former deputy minister of Education during the reign of the late shah and was in exile a prominent opponent of the IRI. He was shot and killed in his apartment. The assassin was never arrested, but Ahmad Jeyhooni, a resident of Germany, was arrested for aiding the terrorist. It was revealed that Jeyhooni had intimate contacts with MOI operatives employed as diplomats at the IRI embassy in Bonn.⁴⁴ A third and more recent example is the ousting of two Iranian diplomats in 2018 from the Netherlands because of their role in killing two Iranian opponents of the IRI in Almere and The Hague, respectively.⁴⁵

The role of IRI embassies and diplomatic core in Iranian covert operations has been constant since 1979, as the examples above clearly show. The case of Assadi provides us with important information that the IRI has both the

will and the resources to conduct significant terrorist operations on foreign soil. The fact that the rate of assassinations and terror operations against Iranian dissidents has diminished since the 1990s is thus not because of a lack of will or resources, but rather because of well-thought-out risk assessments by the regime that also include considerations about international reactions. Conducting intelligence operations on foreign soil, including terrorism, may have severe consequences not only affecting diplomatic relations between countries but also risking heavy sanctions with significant damaging effects on the regime's economy.⁴⁶

The Assadi case also shows how simple it is for an intelligence agent with a diplomatic posting in Europe to cross borders freely and without difficulties. As revealed by his notebooks, he had visited eleven European countries. Because IRI embassies in at least Europe are highly active in supporting and facilitating terrorism as well as other illegal operations, European countries must reconsider their policy vis-à-vis the Islamic regime. In cases where closing Iranian embassies may not be feasible, diminishing embassy personnel to the minimum may be an effective way to counter Iranian intelligence and its malign activities. The fewer staff in the embassies of the Islamic regime, the easier it is for intelligence organizations to monitor and prevent the illegal activities of the embassy.

IRI Assets and Islamic Centers

The IRI has a vast extraterritorial espionage network. Reports from European intelligence and security organizations are consistent; the Islamic regime is a major intelligence threat.⁴⁷ Over the years, several individuals have been arrested and convicted of spying on behalf of the IRI. In the most recent espionage/terrorism case involving the IRI, an Iranian national with Norwegian citizenship was convicted in 2020 and sentenced to seven years of imprisonment in Denmark for spying on Iranians in exile and for his involvement in an attempted assassination. A year prior, in 2019, an Iraqi national residing in Sweden was convicted of spying for the MOI on an Iranian opposition organization and sentenced to more than two years of imprisonment. Two years prior, in 2017, a Pakistani national was convicted in Germany for spying on Jewish and Israeli targets on behalf of the Islamic regime.⁴⁸

Assadi's notebooks, as far as it is known, do not discuss the ethnicity of the assets he met in Europe, but it is not unlikely that they are individuals of both Iranian and non-Iranian origins. According to *Der Spiegel* and based on sources within German intelligence with whom they have spoken, IRI intelligence does not "only rely on their own countrymen" for their operations; they recruit Shiites from countries other than Iran as well.⁴⁹ Of course, it would be very interesting to know the origin of the assets used by

the IRI to understand their *modus operandi* better, but considering the case of Assadi, a more interesting fact is the number of assets the IRI has spread all over Europe. The notebooks clearly illuminate the human resources that the IRI possesses in Europe.

What is also significant in the case of Assadi is that it clearly shows that the IRI has close ties to Shiite mosques and Islamic cultural institutions. While the notebooks of Assadi explicitly mention the Islamic Center Hamburg, an Iranian Shiite association closely linked to the IRI, it is believed that the regime, via its intelligence organizations, also uses other Islamic centers and Shiia mosques all over Europe for its covert operations.⁵⁰ Another example of the exploitation of religious centers by the Islamic regime can be found in Norway. In November 2020, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation revealed that the Norwegian intelligence agency, *Politiets Sikkerhetstjeneste* (PST), had asked the Ministry of Justice to expel the lead clergy of the Imam Ali Center in Oslo because of matters related to national security.⁵¹

Hence, the intelligence organizations of European countries need to be aware that not only embassies, but also Islamic cultural centers, mosques, and similar types of institutions, are important supporting organizations for IRI intelligence organizations. These institutions help the IRI to spread regime disinformation and propaganda, gather intelligence, meet resources, and create a network for intelligence and terrorist operations. Therefore, effective surveillance against these institutions is of high importance. European countries must also be prepared to take more radical measures to suppress IRI influence in Europe, and closing these institutions may be an important action.

IRI Recklessness and the Trust Issue

While the IRI has strong and aggressive intelligence organizations, its counterintelligence and employed countermeasures during operations are weak, ineffective, and flawed. Domestically, the IRI has witnessed several counterintelligence fiascos. The 2018 Israeli raid on a highly protected warehouse in Tehran, where documents, videos, and images related to the Islamic regime's nuclear program were stolen and brought to Israel, was probably the most humiliating counterintelligence failure experienced by the IRI until now.⁵² Other notorious failures were the assassinations of al-Qaeda deputy Abdullah Ahmad Abdullah, who was hiding in Tehran, as well as the killing of the architect of the Iranian nuclear program, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, both in 2020.⁵³

The IRI has also had serious and sometimes fatal counterintelligence failures on foreign soil. The most known failure is the U.S. assassination of the high-ranked IRGC general Qasem Soleimani. Another example is the

case of Mohammad Davoudzadeh Loloei. An Iranian with Norwegian citizenship, he was arrested and later convicted of, among others, involvement in an assassination attempt in Denmark against Iranians in exile. It is believed that the Mossad had tipped off Scandinavian intelligence organizations about Loloei.⁵⁴ Also, in the case of Assadi, the VSSE had received intelligence from a friendly foreign intelligence organization. The IRI thus has significant problems with protecting its operatives and assets. The main question is, therefore, are these fiascos only counterintelligence failures or is IRI intelligence compromised? And how could a foreign intelligence organization have intelligence on the operations of the Islamic regime without having infiltrated the regime's intelligence? While the above questions, at least for now, remains unanswered, it is a fact that Assadi and the IRI have acted rather recklessly in the handling of the Paris bombing operation.

First, Assadi was not a simple undercover intelligence agent; he was the principal intelligence officer of the IRI in Europe. Even so, he personally handled the Paris bombing operation, thus increasing the risk of being compromised and exposing the regime's intelligence network on the continent. The Islamic regime may have accepted the risk because they may have felt that they did not have many options, but if so, the result has been disastrous for the regime. The Islamic regime is aware that their intelligence organizations may have been compromised, at least to some extent. The MOI and the IO-IRGC do not trust all their employees. Because of this, they entrust only individuals who are well known to them and well controlled by them. Therefore, Assadi was likely entrusted to handle the Paris operation. The regime's fear of trusting other intelligence employees may have persuaded them to accept the risks of exposing Assadi.

A second example of recklessness is that Assadi carried his notebooks with him on a private trip to Germany and risked exposing himself and the many European IRI assets. This exact scenario did happen; he was arrested, and the notebooks exposed a vast intelligence network. If this trip was "private" and he carried the notebooks with him, why did he not take advantage of his diplomatic status to be protected by its accompanying immunity? Or, was he misinformed and did believe that he had diplomatic immunity at all times?

Although the questions are many, the Islamic regime's intelligence organizations suffer from many weaknesses that result in reckless actions, including failing to have a secure organization. Corruption and nepotism within the IC could be two of the fundamental reasons for the weaknesses that exist within the Islamic regime's intelligence organizations. Therefore, Iranian intelligence operatives working undercover as diplomats have frequently been expelled from different countries for connection to

terrorism, direct involvement in terrorism, or covert operations like espionage.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

The case of Assadi offers insights into the relationship between IRI covert operations and the IRI diplomatic corps. This case study shows that the IRI has the will and resources to conduct terrorist operations if deemed necessary. The extensive presence of IRI assets in European countries is a serious threat to these states, not least to the Iranian opponents of the regime in Europe. A revised European policy toward Iranian intelligence officers and operations is thus an urgent priority. Increasing surveillance of regime embassies and Islamic institutions connected to the IRI is necessary. This would press the regime's intelligence apparatus and may contribute to their recklessness, being forced to take larger risks in conducting operations. This increased IRI risk-taking could help the European intelligence services to expose the IRI's covert operations. This development would, however, have consequences for the already strained relations between the IRI and European countries and may escalate into a full-grown conflict. As a response, the IRI would most likely expand their operations inside Iran and take citizens of European countries as hostages in order to have IRI intelligence personnel released through prisoner swap. Hostage diplomacy, which this method of the IRI is called, is one of regime's principal foreign policy tools to pressure the West. Nevertheless, the case of Assadi also shows that the regime's intelligence has one very important weakness: The regime has issues trusting its employees, which is a weakness that European intelligence services can use.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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