



Iran's Strategy of Terrorist Blackmail in a Historic Perspective

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Summary

This article argues that the Iranian regime successfully uses a terrorist blackmail strategy since the 1979 hostage saga of American diplomats at the US Tehran embassy, the bombings against the US Marines and French paratroopers of the Multinational Peace Force in Beirut in 1983, the kidnapping of dozens of Western academics, businessmen and diplomats in Lebanon in the 1980 - 90s and a long list of similar worldwide terrorist events during the years. Only rarely have the Iranian leaders been deterred, when their leaders felt that there was a direct threat to them, like by the Mykonos trial in Germany in 1997, or Iran's territory was in danger, as after 9/11 or the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003.

The author analyses the Western powers' policy during these crises, the waves of Iranian and its proxy Hezbollah attacks in the 1980s, 1990s and the 2000s and focuses on several case studies, such as France, Germany, Argentina, Thailand, India and Turkey. It also criticizes the policies of the involved governments and the lack of effective responses to Iran's "blackmail terrorist strategy" and "hostage diplomacy" in the past and until recently.

Keywords: Iran, Blackmail, Hostage, Strategy

The U.S. Embassy Prisoners in Tehran, 1979

On November 1, 1979, revolutionary Iran's new prime minister, foreign minister, and minister of defense met President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in Algiers. The Iranians demanded that the terminally ill Shah, brought to the United States the week before, be turned over to them for trial. Brzezinski refused.

Three days later, the U.S. embassy in Tehran was seized. Carter responded with attempts at conciliation, yet his letter to Khomeini, "from one believer to a man of God," seemed only to reinforce the supreme leader's conviction that "America cannot do a damn thing."¹

The hostage takers played on paranoid fears that the United States would unseat the new regime, and popular anger that the Shah and his family had escaped Iran with their great wealth intact. The hostages were held for 444 days, although their captors released five women, eight African Americans, and more than 30 non-U.S. citizens.²

In April 1980, Carter aborted Operation Eagle Claw, a failed Delta Force mission to free the hostages that left a transport plane, seven helicopters, and eight dead servicemen behind in the Iranian desert. Carter himself considered the hostage crisis to be the foremost of three issues leading to his failure to be re-elected.³

The 444 days of the Tehran hostage ordeal of 52 diplomats representing the most powerful state in the world can be considered as the first "military" victory of the modern Islamist wave.

The United States eventually negotiated the release of the hostages by promising not to intervene in Iranian affairs, rescinding \$11 billion in frozen assets, and freezing the Shah's family's property.⁴

Implementing the Accords required organizing eight billion dollars of Iranian assets overnight. President Carter had to intervene personally to transfer billions from American banks when the telex codes did not

¹ Nathan Thrall, "How the Reagan Administration Taught Iran the Wrong Lessons," *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2, June 2007, URL: <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2007/issue2/jv11no2a5.html>.

² Sherifa D. Zuhur, "Iran, Iraq, and the United States: The New Triangle's Impact. Sectarianism and the Nuclear Threat," *U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute*, November 2006, p. 38, URL: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA458204.pdf>. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA458204.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

work properly. Still, Iran held the hostages' plane on the ground, on purpose, until President Ronald Reagan was inaugurated at noon, January 20, 1981.⁵

Indeed, the leaders in Tehran most probably were worried that the new President will challenge them forcefully.

As a candidate in 1980 presidential elections, Reagan criticized President Carter's handling of the hostage crisis. He had told an audience on April 7, 1980, that U.S. captives "shouldn't have been there (in Iran) six days, let alone six months." Asked later if he could get the hostages out, Reagan said, "I don't know, but I certainly wouldn't stand by and do nothing." During a debate with Carter Reagan again spoke of the humiliation the nation suffered at the hands of Iran. He also said it was "high time that the civilized countries of the world made it plain that there is no room worldwide for terrorism".⁶

According to Seyed Hossein Mousavian, one of Iran's most senior diplomats at the time, the seizure of the U.S. embassy and American diplomats as hostages was the most devastating event in Iran's foreign relations with the West. "In the eyes of Iranian policy makers, it prevented a new U.S. coup in Iran and, in the eyes of American policy makers, was a violation of international law and a humiliation on the United States as a superpower. The impact of the hostage crisis was such that some scholars believe it caused the United States to give a green light to Iraq to invade Iran and provide support for Saddam Hussein's regime."⁷

US and French forces bombed in Lebanon

President Reagan's determination in fighting terrorism was challenged quite quickly during his first term.

American forces had entered war-torn Lebanon in August 1982 as part of a multinational peacekeeping force that included French, Italian, and British personnel. The peacekeepers intended to negotiate a cease-fire between Lebanon and Israel, which had invaded the country two months prior.

⁵ Mark Feldman's interview, "The Iran Hostage Crisis: Diplomatic Drama and Legal Innovation," *The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. Foreign Affairs Oral History Project*, July 12, 2022, URL: <https://adst.org/2022/07/the-iran-hostage-crisis-diplomatic-drama-and-legal-innovation/>.

⁶ Cliff Haas, "Reagan Says He Didn't Criticize Carter's Handling of Hostage Crisis," *AP*, June 19, 1985, URL: <https://apnews.com/article/406dab2bf1eba38d0b12391d3aa9a37c>

⁷ Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Mohammad Reza Chitsazian, "Iran's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: A Grand Strategy," *Middle East Policy*, Volume 27, Issue 3, Fall 2020, Pages 99-114.

A suicide car bombing on the U.S. embassy in Beirut, on April 18, 1983, killed 63 people, 17 Americans, among them eight members of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 32 Lebanese workers, and 14 other individuals. About 120 others were injured.

On October 12, 1983, Congress approved the extension of the Marine deployment for an additional eighteen months. On October 23, an Iranian named Ismalal Ascari detonated a truck in the center of the Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 241 soldiers, “the largest conventional blast ever seen by the FBI’s forensic explosive experts,” the largest loss of life the Corps had suffered in a single attack since Iwo Jima in 1945.

“The Marine bombing was the Pearl Harbor of the Middle East,” said Fred Hof, a former U.S. Army attaché in Beirut who investigated the bombing as part of the Long Commission.⁸

Minutes later, a second suicide bomber struck the nine-story Drakkar building, where the French contingent was stationed: 58 paratroopers were killed and 15 injured. It was the single worst French military loss since the end of the Algerian War.

The commanding officer of the Marine unit targeted by Hezbollah later wrote: “Unknown to us at the time, the National Security Agency had made a diplomatic communications intercept on 26 September in which the Iranian Intelligence Service provided explicit instructions to the Iranian ambassador in Damascus to attack the Marines at Beirut International Airport. The suicide attackers struck us 28 days later, with word of the intercept stuck in the intelligence pipeline.”⁹

Three developments had incited Iran to drastically escalate its actions in Lebanon: the congressionally approved extension of the Marine deployment; America’s inaction in the face of the attack on the embassy in April 1983; and the aid provided to Iraq by France.¹⁰

⁸ “The DOD Commission on Beirut International Airport (BIA) terrorist Act of 23 October 1983,” URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-1983-beirut-barracks-bombing-and-the-current-us-retreat-from-syria>

⁹ James Phillips, “The 1983 Marine Barracks Bombing: Connecting the Dots,” *COMMENTARY Defense*, The Heritage Foundation, October 23, 2009, URL: <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/the-1983-marine-barracks-bombing-connecting-the-dots>.

¹⁰ In the weeks before the French delivery to Iraq of planes capable of delivering the French Exocet anti-ship missile, Iranian officials made a series of escalating public threats. Iran closed both the French consulate and the Society for French Culture in Isfahan. Iran’s then-President, Ali Khamene’i, said that delivery of the aircraft would not go unanswered. Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, then speaker of the Iranian parliament, warned that if France went

The bombing on 23 October marked the beginning of the end for the Marine and MNF in Lebanon. The mission became contingent on defensive operations as opposed to patrolling and being visible to the locals.¹¹

In November 1983, in retaliation for the deadly October attack on its soldiers, France sent fighter jets to bomb Hezbollah's camp in Baalbek. The U.S. response to Hezbollah's attack was timider: some shelling from the battleship USS New Jersey at hostile positions beyond Beirut. It appears that then Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger scrapped a mission to hit Hezbollah's positions with more force.¹²

Five months following the second attack, the Lebanese government authority in West Beirut collapsed. In February 1984, U.S. officials announced the withdrawal of the U.S. troops, which was followed shortly thereafter by the pullout of Italian, British, and French troops.

On September 20, 1984, Hezbollah, with support and direction from Iran, carried out a second suicide car bombing targeting the U.S. embassy annex in East Beirut. The attack killed 24 people. Only two of the dead were American.

21 years later, in 2004, Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) unveiled a "monument" in a section dubbed "Martyrs of the Islamic World" in Tehran's Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery in "honor" of the terrorist attack against the Marine barracks in Beirut. a very vivid message that Iran's IRGC was behind the 1983 blast.¹³

The U.S. withdrawal enhanced prospects for jihadism generally. Hezbollah gained ever wider ground, launching attacks from Israel to Kuwait. It has since become the most powerful militia in the region.¹⁴

through with the delivery, it would be regarded as "Iran's enemy" and Iranians would "take revenge." Iran's prime minister, Mir-Hossein Moussavi, said that, if the arms were delivered, neither France nor the United States would have "a minute of rest." Over U.S. objections and complaints to France, Iraq received the planes in October.

¹¹ "The Beirut Bombing: Thirty Years Later," *Brief Histories*, Marine Corps University (MCU), Summer 2013, URL: <https://www.usmcm.edu/Research/Marine-Corps-History-Division/Brief-Histories/Beirut-Bombing-Thirty-Years-Later/>

¹² Olivier Guitta, "France and Hizbullah: The End of the Affair," *U.S.-Europe Analysis Series*, The Brookings Institution, November 2005, URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/guitta20051103.pdf>

¹³ Heshmat Alavi, "Secrets of the 1983 Beirut Bombings: The role of Iran's IRGC," *Al Arabia News*, URL: <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2017/10/30/Secrets-of-the-1983-Beirut-Bombings-The-role-of-Iran-s-IRGC>

¹⁴ Robin Wright, "The 1983 Beirut Barracks Bombing and the Current U.S. Retreat from Syria," *The New Yorker*, October 23, 2019, URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-1983-beirut-barracks-bombing-and-the-current-us-retreat-from-syria>

Bin Laden has spoken admiringly about the attack: “We have seen in the last decade,” he said in a 1998 interview, “the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier who is ready to wage Cold Wars and unprepared to fight long wars. This was proven in Beirut when the Marines fled after two explosions.”¹⁵ Similarly, in 2005, Nasrallah boasted: “Are you Lebanese afraid of the American naval fleets? These naval fleets have come in the past, and were defeated, and if they come again, they will be defeated again.”¹⁶

Scholars differ over whether the withdrawal from Lebanon was a shrewd political calculation designed to safeguard the president Ragan’s re-election chances, an impulsive reaction to a human tragedy, or a strategic course correction that foreshadowed Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger’s eponymous doctrine on the use of force. Alexandra Evans and Bradley Potter argue that the barracks bombing was not the determining factor in the U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon as many have presumed. Rather the bombing heightened divisions within the administration as policymakers integrated the attack into their pre-existing but competing theories of success (or failure) of the Lebanon mission.¹⁷

The bombing that left the Reagan administration's Lebanon ambitions in tatters continues to shape U.S. diplomatic, political, and counterinsurgency policies toward Lebanon and the Middle East, wrote Nicholas Blanford in 2008. They ushered in a new era of large-scale Al Qaeda attacks against the U.S. and its allies – the World Trade Center in 1993, the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996, the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 – that reached its apogee on September 11, 2001. “It was a turning point in asymmetrical warfare, especially in the Middle East,” according to Timur Goksel, a security analyst and former long-serving United Nations peacekeeper in South Lebanon. That was the beginning and we have been seeing it ever since.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Usama bin Ladin, “Interview with ABC News,” *ABC*, May 1998, URL: <http://www.pbs.243.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview.html>.

¹⁶ Hassan Nassrallah, “Speech Before a Pro-Syrian Rally in Beirut,” March 8, 2005 (Broadcast on *al-Manar TV*), URL: <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP87805>.

¹⁷ Alexandra T. Evans, A. Bradley Potter, “When Do Leaders Change Course? Theories of Success and the American Withdrawal from Beirut, 1983–1984,” *The Scholar, The Texas National Security Review*, Vol 2, Iss 2 February 2019, pp. 10–38, <https://tnsr.org/2019/02/when-do-leaders-change-course-theories-of-success-and-the-american-withdrawal-from-beirut-1983-1984/>

¹⁸ Nicholas Blanford, “The lasting impact of 1983 Beirut attack,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 24, 2008, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2008/1024/p07s01-wome.html>

For many, 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks added credibility to Secretary of State George Shultz's notion that perceptions of America's resolve had more consequence than what Caspar Weinberger (at the time the Secretary of Defense and opponent of any retaliation against the perpetrators) dismissed as a concern with demonstrating "manhood." After 9/11, even Weinberger stated that America's displays of weakness had invited attack.¹⁹

The Saga of the Westerners Kidnapped in Lebanon

The first American hostage, American University of Beirut President David Dodge, was kidnapped in July 1982. CIA Station Chief William Buckley was the fourth person to be kidnapped by militant Islamic extremists in Lebanon. Eventually, 30 Westerners would be kidnapped during the 10-year-long Lebanese hostage-taking crisis (1982-1992). Americans who were kidnapped included journalist Terry Anderson, American University of Beirut librarian Peter Kilburn, and Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian minister. While some of the prisoners lived through captivity some, including Buckley, died in captivity, or were killed by their kidnapers.²⁰

Several of the abducted, including William Buckley, were held by the IRGC in eastern Lebanon's Shaykh Abdallah Barracks. Algeria informed the United States that Hezbollah's chief of operations, Imad Mughniyah had kidnapped Buckley and others. To its discredit, the United States later sold arms to Iran in exchange for the release of some of those hostages.²¹

For President Reagan, the return of the hostages from Iran soon after his inauguration in January 1981 was one of the happiest moments of his administration. Unfortunately, American captives held abroad also provided some of the darkest moments of his presidency. Throughout 1984 and 1985, seven Americans were taken hostage in Beirut, and to secure their release Reagan approved the controversial policy of trading arms for hostages, in the Iran-Contra Affair in 1985-1986 in which Israel was also deeply involved, and a variety of other inducements: intelligence, money, medical supplies, promises to help free terrorists held in Israel and in Kuwait, and promises of a closer relationship with Iran in exchange for the

¹⁹ "Caspar Weinberger Interview," *PBS Frontline*, September 2001, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/interviews/weinberger.html>.

²⁰ Terrorist attacks on Americans (1979 – 1988): *FRONTLINE timeline*, URL: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/etc/cron.html>

²¹ Nathan Thrall, "How the Reagan Administration Taught Iran the Wrong Lessons," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (December 2007)

hostages. These inducements violated the U.S. arms embargo on Iran as well as the administration's repeated pronouncements against making concessions to terrorists.²²

The historical parallel that Reagan had in mind was the Iranian Hostage Crisis, and the administration offered these inducements to avoid a replay of the 444-day ordeal that helped destroy Carter's presidency. Reagan refused to accept that he could be as helpless or ineffective as he had derided Carter for being. Many of Reagan's advisers argued that a policy of giving in to the terrorists would be an international and domestic disaster.²³

Despite Iran's goodwill in facilitating the release of American and Western hostages in Lebanon, Washington intensified its pressure on Tehran, wrote ambassador Mousavian.²⁴ Mousavian forgets to mention that the Iranian ruthless aggressiveness was at the root of these events.

By contrast, when three Soviet diplomats were kidnapped in Lebanon, Moscow refused to deal. Instead, they captured a Hezbollah leader and began shipping his body parts home until the diplomats were released.²⁵

The French experience: 1985-1991

The French and American experiences in Lebanon have been quite similar in many ways.

Despite the disengagement from Lebanon, Hezbollah, acting as a contractor funded and supported by Syria and Iran, began targeting France again in 1985. Between 1985 and 1987, Hezbollah kidnapped sixteen French citizens, mostly journalists and diplomats. Sheikh Fadlallah, "spiritual" leader of Hezbollah, told at the time about the French hostages held in Lebanon: "France is standing in front of a locked vault. There are three keys to open it. The smallest is the Lebanese one. So even if I was holding your

²² Christopher Hemmer, "Historical Analogies and the Definition of Interests: The Iranian Hostage Crisis and Ronald Reagan's Policy Toward the Hostages in Lebanon," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1999, URL: <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezprimo1.runi.ac.il/doi/pdf/10.1111/0162-895X.00145>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Mohammad Reza Chitsazian, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: A Grand Strategy*.

²⁵ Jack Anderson and Dale Van Atta, "No Stomach for Terror," *The Washington Post*, August 13, 1989, URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/08/13/no-stomach-for-terror/3ea6ba1d-097b-4b57-b63d-97dcd38d1e9e/>

countrymen, I could not free them by myself. My little key is not enough. The Syrian key is larger. But it is not enough too. You need to get the third key, that of Iran.”²⁶

So, to free their citizens, both France and the U.S. had to deal with Iran—and both decided that negotiation was the only option. Ayatollah Khomeini was angry at France, particularly because of the asylum granted to prominent figures from the Shah’s regime, including former Prime Minister Chapur Bakhtiar, and because of France’s support for Iraq, then engaged in a bloody war against Iran.

Iran’s revenge did not come long after. It decided to actively use Hezbollah to attack French interests: first in Kuwait against its embassy on 12 December 1983, then in successive attacks against French soldiers in Lebanon, which killed 10. And on 31 December, Islamic Jihad kept its promise by simultaneously bombing the Marseille train station and the high-speed Paris-Marseille train. These attacks killed four.²⁷

But Iran did not stop there: between March 1985 and January 1987, 16 French citizens — mostly journalists and diplomats — were kidnapped by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Some hostages remained in captivity for as long as three years; one was executed. Between December 1985 and September 1986, Iran, via Hezbollah, orchestrated a massive terror campaign in the streets of France that killed 13 and injured hundreds. The explosives used during this wave of bombings were the same as those used in the December 1983 French Embassy bombing in Kuwait City. The French Directorate of Territorial Surveillance (DST), commenting in its final report on the attacks, noted: “Nothing could have been decided without the blessing of either Iranian Parliament President Rafsanjani or Ayatollah Montazeri.”²⁸

The main culprit of the terrorist network arrested in 1986, the Tunisian Fouad Ali Saleh, was very close to many of Hezbollah’s top leaders, including Hussein Mazbuh, the main bombmaker for the organization.²⁹ Information derived from wiretaps on Saleh lead French investigators to learn that Wahid Gordji, the unofficial number two Iranian diplomat in Paris ,was coordinating the bombing campaign in France He took refuge in the Iranian embassy and a months-long standoff ensued as French police surround the building, and Iranian police encircle the French Embassy in Tehran in retaliation. In July, Iran and France severed diplomatic relations and Hezbollah took several French citizens hostage in Lebanon. In November

²⁶ Olivier Guitta, *France and Hizbullah: The End of the Affair*

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Didier Bigo, « Les attentats de 1986 en France : un cas de violence transnationale et ses implications (Partie 1), » *Cultures et Conflits*, no. 4, 1991, URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/conflits/129?lang=en>

Gordji was briefly interviewed by French authorities, then fled to Iran. The hostages in Lebanon were released soon afterward. Iran claimed that France expedited the repayment of Iranian loans, paid millions of dollars to the Lebanese kidnapers, and agreed to suppress the activity of French-based opponents of the Islamic Republic. French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac denied that there was any deal. In June 1988 full diplomatic relations were restored between France and Iran.³⁰

The only Iranian obligation in the deal was to stop all terrorist activities in France.

However, on October 24, 1990, Cyrus Elahi, a member of the monarchist opposition, is assassinated at his home in Paris. On April 18, 1991, former Iranian Prime Minister Bakhtiar's chief assistant in the National Movement of Iranian Resistance, Abdolrahman Boroumand, is stabbed to death in the lobby of his Paris apartment building. On August 6, 1991, Chapour Bakhtiar himself, a refugee in France, was assassinated by three men. Aides to Bakhtiar said that the French government, looking to improve its relationship with Iran, had been pressuring him to stop his political activity and had recently reduced his security detail.³¹

Fast forward to 2018. On June 30, 2018, Amir Sadouni and his wife, Nasimeh Noami, two Belgians of Iranian origin, were arrested by the Belgian police and charged with an attempt to bomb a major meeting of the Iranian opposition movement Mojahedine-Khalq in Villepinte, north of Paris, to denounce the European tour of the Iranian president Rouhani. The operation could have killed hundreds among the 25,000 activists present, and also important personalities. The explosive was given to them by Assadollah Assadi, a diplomat at the Iranian embassy in Vienna, Austria.³²

Assadi, who was arrested in Germany, was given a 20-year jail term by the court in Antwerp in Belgium in February 2021. It was the first time an Iranian official had faced such charges in the EU since the 1979 revolution.

But in a twist in the story, the Belgian Parliament voted in July 2022 to ratify a fiercely criticized treaty allowing prisoner exchanges with Iran, potentially opening the way for Assadi to return home. Belgian

³⁰ Dan Geist, "A Darker Horizon': The Assassination of Shapour Bakhtiar," *FRONTLINE Tehran Bureau*, August 6, 2011, URL: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/08/a-darker-horizon-the-assassination-of-shapour-bakhtiar.html>

³¹ Dan Geist, *A Darker Horizon*.

³² Ely Karmon, "The Return of Iranian Terrorism to Europe," *ICT website*, November 2018, URL: <https://www.runi.ac.il/media/tznhd4jz/elykarmon11-18.pdf>

Prime Minister argued it is the only route possible to free a Belgian already held in Iran, a jailed aid worker, Olivier Vandecasteele.³³

Belgium's prisoner swap deal will only encourage Iranian terrorism as Brussels is paving the way for more Europeans to be taken hostage.

The Iranian 1990s Terrorism in Europe and Beyond

Berlin – the Mikonos affair: On September 17, 1992, the secretary-general of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, Sadegh Sharafkandi, and three of his associates were assassinated in Berlin's Mykonos restaurant.³⁴

Iranian powerful mortars: In March 1996, an Iranian ship named Iran-Kolahdouz was inspected by police in Antwerp, Belgium. A shipment of powerful mortars was found in it. The container was meant to continue overland to Munich. As a result, the German government decided to remove restrictions on the investigation into the Mykonos assassinations. Officials said that they may have been intended for use by terrorists against Israeli or opposition targets in Western Europe.³⁵

In his book, Seyed Hossein Mousavian, the head of Western European Affairs at the Foreign Ministry and former ambassador to Germany, gave an interesting testimony of his government's policy during these tense events. In May 1990, he proposed a dialogue on an array of issues with Iran's European counterparts as a step toward resolving tensions with the West. He voiced "Tehran's readiness to do its utmost to facilitate the release of European hostages in Lebanon, while also proposing to establish an Iran—Europe dialogue to discuss the critical issues of both parties as a way to revive relations." The European counterparts responded positively to his initiative on an Iran-Europe dialogue. Based on this agreement with the EEC foreign ministers, "critical dialogue" would take place at a biannual gathering of Iranian and European officials at the level of deputy ministers of foreign affairs in various European capitals. These meetings continued until the end of President Rafsanjani's tenure in 1997.³⁶

³³ "Belgium ratifies controversial prisoner swap treaty with Iran," *France24 TV*, July 21, 2022, URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/diplomacy/20220721-belgium-ratifies-controversial-prisoner-swap-treaty-with-iran>

³⁴ Maria Abdi, "Iran's Intelligence Ministry has a History of Terrorism in Europe," *IRANWIRE*, February 9, 2021, URL: <https://iranwire.com/en/features/68887/>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Seyed Hossein Mousavian, Shahir Shahidsaless, "Iran and the United States: an insider's view on the failed past and the road to peace," London : Bloomsbury, [2015], p. 140-1. Seyed Hossein Mousavian is a Middle East Security and Nuclear Policy Specialist at the Program on Science and Global Security at Princeton University's Woodrow

According to Mousavian, two major terrorist attacks significantly impacted relations between Iran and the West: the assassination of the Shah's last prime minister, Shapour Bakhtiar, in Paris in August 1991 and the Mykonos terrorist attacks in Berlin. Mousavian met in Tehran with the Minister of Intelligence Ali Fallahian, who assured him that Iran had not been involved and that he would send his deputy, Saeed Emami, to fully cooperate with the German authorities. Emami's position at the meeting had been that Iran was not involved in the killings. that a third party had been involved and assured Iran would cooperate in finding the culprits.³⁷ For the next four years (1992-6), Mousavian followed up on this issue in his meetings with German officials but despite his efforts, relations between Iran and Germany began to deteriorate, though they were strong enough for Bonn to obstruct the issuing of a subpoena by the judiciary to bring Iranian Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian to court.³⁸

The finding of the mortar in March 1996 on the Iranian vessel Kolehdoz, suddenly aggravated the already tense situation: Germany would subsequently claim that Iran had attempted to smuggle arms into NATO territory. The German government decided to lift its restrictions on the investigation of the Mykonos assassinations and subsequently issued a subpoena on the Iranian Minister of Intelligence. The timing of the Kolehdoz affair seemed to be perfect in terms of worsening the already troubled relations between Iran and Germany following the Mykonos murders.³⁹

Former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani refers to the same incident in his memoir. He claims he was surprised when he found out: "These people sent missiles to Europe to hit the Monafeghin [MKO] without my knowledge." Rafsanjani added that after learning of the incident he punished Emami as an "administrative offender" and removed him from the post of deputy security minister.⁴⁰

The Mikonos trial. Following the Mykonos assassinations court verdict in April 1997, in which the Iranian government was judged to have "inspired, supported, and supervised" the terrorist act, Iran-German

Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He is a former diplomat who served as Iran's Ambassador to Germany (1990-1997), Head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council (1997-2005), Spokesman for Iran in its nuclear negotiations with the international community (2003-2005), Foreign Policy Advisor to the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (2005-2007), among others.

³⁷ Ibid. Saeed Emami, according to Mohammad Niazi, Head of the Judicial Organization of the Armed Forces, "was one of the main and central elements" of a rogue cell within the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security (MOIS) who a few years later was arrested on charges of disappearance and murder of several intellectual dissidents.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Maria Abdi, *Iran's Intelligence Ministry has a History of Terrorism in Europe*.

relations spiraled downward, and the years of concerted effort to strengthen relations were reversed. Both countries recalled their ambassadors, ministerial-level cooperation halted, the expulsion of diplomats by both sides begun, the leading German firm Euler Hermes suspended insurance credit, and the "critical dialogue" was suspended. The other European countries followed suit. Relations with Europe deteriorated, leaving Iran feeling detached from the developed world. This was not what the government of Iran had sought.⁴¹

Two months later, Khatami won the Presidential election. His platform of liberalization and reform immediately raised debate and consideration by European countries about restoring their relations with Iran. Iran leaders decided to respond positively before differences deepened but Ayatollah Khamenei had one condition: "the German ambassador should be the last one to return to Iran;" the Europeans rejected it outright. Six months of deliberation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Europeans ensued before an acceptable solution was found: the German and French ambassadors would be the last ambassadors to return and both would come to Tehran aboard the same plane!! With this arrangement, Iran's condition was fulfilled.⁴²

According to Mousavian, the most salient factors driving Iran's strategy in the region are influence and balance. Iran, like the United States, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, strengthens its relations where governments are considered allies, such as Syria, and institutionalizes its influence through politicians, parties and resistance groups in countries with which it has social and cultural affinities, such as Iraq and Lebanon.⁴³

Shahram Chubin explains that Iran used terrorism in the service of its political goals rather extensively through Rafsanjani's tenure as president but notes a change from 1997 under Khatami.⁴⁴ President Khatami fought to strengthen the Presidency since 1997, differing with Khamene'i about Iran's ability to survive in isolation. However, his reform challenge was undone by hardliners.⁴⁵

The Khobar Tower bombing in Saudi Arabia

⁴¹ Seyed Hossein Mousavian, Shahir Shahidsaless, *Iran and the United States*.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Mohammad Reza Chitsazian, *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: A Grand Strategy*.

⁴⁴ Shahram Chubin, *Whither Iran? Reform, Domestic Politics and National Security*, London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2002, pp. 92-93.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

On June 25, 1996, Iran again attacked America, at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, exploding a huge truck bomb that devastated Khobar Towers and murdered 19 U.S. airmen and wounded more than 400 in their dormitory. The evidence showed that while the attack was staged by Saudi Hezbollah members, the entire operation was planned, funded, and coordinated by the IRGC and the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security (MOIS), acting on orders from the highest levels of the regime in Tehran. It became essential that FBI agents be permitted to interview several of the participating Hezbollah terrorists who were detained in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁶

Unfortunately, according to the Director of the FBI Louis J. Freeh, the White House was unable or unwilling to help the FBI gain access to these critical witnesses. The only direction from the Clinton administration regarding Iran was to order the FBI to stop photographing and fingerprinting official Iranian delegations entering the U.S. because it was adversely impacting U.S. "relationship" with Tehran. After months of inaction, Freeh finally turned to President Bush, who personally asked the Saudis to let the FBI do one-on-one interviews of the detained Khobar bombers. This was the investigative breakthrough for which the FBI had been waiting for several years. On June 21, 2001, a grand jury indicted 13 Hezbollah terrorists for the Khobar attack and identified Iran as the sponsor.⁴⁷

At that time, the Clinton administration hoped to open a dialogue with reformist president Khatami, which would be impossible after accusing Iranians of supporting terrorist action. A secret letter, delivered directly to Khatami by Sultan Qaboos of Oman, stated that the United States had evidence of direct Iranian involvement in the act, and demanded that those involved be held responsible for their actions.⁴⁸ Khatami refused to begin an investigation and Iranian officials stated that al-Qaeda was responsible for the attack.⁴⁹

In July 2001, Saudi Arabia announced that eleven of the people indicted in the U.S. were in custody in Saudi prisons, and were to be tried in Saudi court, as the country refused to extradite any of them to the

⁴⁶ Louis J. Freeh, "Remember Khobar Towers," *WSJ*, June 23, 2006, URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB115102702568788331>

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Martin Indyk, *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East*. Simon & Schuster, pp. 224–227, January 2009.

⁴⁹ Iran and the West (part 2): The Pariah State, *BBC (Television production)*, 14 February 2009.

United States to stand trial.⁵⁰ The government has not made public the outcome of the trial or the whereabouts of the prisoners.

After the 1997 German Supreme Court decision to indict Iranian leaders, and even more so after the 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks and the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran and Hezbollah kept a low profile in their international terrorist adventures, especially in the West.

Argentina and Latin America

Since 9/11, under US pressure, local governments in the Tri-border area (Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina) and other countries, like Chile and Colombia, have monitored and discovered part of the wide Hezbollah network active since the late 1980s in the continent.⁵¹ However, despite the arrest of important militants in Paraguay, Brazil and Chile, mainly for economic crimes or narcotics trafficking, this large Hezbollah network continued to be active on the continent.

Assad Ahmad Barakat, a Lebanese businessman emigrant to Paraguay in Ciudad del Este, and the ringleader of Hezbollah's financial network in the tri-border area, was arrested in the summer of 2002 for funneling large sums of money to the organisation. His arrest led to the discovery of a wide infrastructure of Hezbollah militants in the area, and in Chile, part of which have been expelled and others continued to be active. Two clans in the area have been investigated for running combined gun and drug trafficking networks used for the same purpose. Barakat fled to Brazil, was extradited back to Paraguay, and put on trial and condemned to eight years in prison for money laundering but not terrorism.⁵²

This large network has been directly involved in the preparations and the execution of the March 17, 1992, suicide bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, the first Islamist terrorist attack in the Western Hemisphere. A car, driven by a suicide bomber and loaded with explosives, smashed into the front of the Embassy, and killed 29 people and injured a further 242. On 18 July 1994, the Argentine Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA - Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina) building was bombed, leaving 85 dead and 300 injured. This attack was the deadliest terrorist toll ever in Argentina's history and resulted in the largest Jewish death toll from terrorism outside Israel since the Second World War. These attacks have marked

⁵⁰ "Saudis Say They, Not U.S., Will Try 11 in '96 Bombing," *The New York Times*. 2 July 2011.

⁵¹ Fabio Castillo, 'The Hizballah Contacts in Colombia', part three of the investigative series 'Tracking the Tentacles of the Middle East in South America', *El Espectador* (Bogotá), 9/XII/2001.

⁵² Ely Karmon, "Fight on All Fronts? Hizballah, the War on Terror, and the War in Iraq," *Policy Focus*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, nr 46, December 2003, p. 24, URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3540>

deeply the Iranian/Hezbollah threat to Israel and Jews since the inception of the Khomeinist Islamist regime in Iran.⁵³

The AMIA case has gone through many ups and downs, involving prosecution changes, witness tampering charges and several arrests that ended in release. On 25 October 2006, twelve years after the AMIA tragedy, Alberto Nisman, Argentina's Attorney general, and District attorney Marcelo Martínez Burgos presented the findings of the team which investigated the terrorist attack that destroyed the AMIA building. The detailed report unequivocally showed that the decision to blow up the building was taken by the "highest instances of the Iranian government," and that the Iranians had asked Hezbollah to carry out the attack.⁵⁴

The report did not ignore the fact that the attack was carried out for reasons connected to the conflict in the Middle East (including the abduction of the Amal leader Mustafa Dirani in Lebanon and the Israeli bombing of the Hezbollah training camp in the Beqa'a Valley). However, based on the evidence collected, it concluded that the fundamental reason was the Argentine "government's unilateral decision to terminate the nuclear materials and technology supply agreements that had been concluded some years previously between Argentina and Iran".⁵⁵

Although many experts have considered the AMIA bombing a revenge for the massacre of Muslim worshipers at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron by Israeli religious extremist Baruch Goldstein on 25 February 1994, or the Israeli bombing of a Hezbollah training camp in Lebanon on June 2, 1994, this author assesses that the main goal of the attack was to derail the relatively fresh peace process between Israel and the Palestinians after the Oslo Accords signed with the PLO in September 1993. It should be remembered that it took more than a year to prepare the AMIA attack and that the failed bombing attack against the Israeli embassy in Bangkok on March 11, 1994, took also more than a year to cook.

Hezbollah Operative members (under the name Islamic Jihad apparatus) were sent to countries where many Shiites are living: Triple Frontier (Paraguay, Brazil, Argentina), Chile, Colombia, Venezuela, to

⁵³ Ely Karmon, "Iran and its Proxy Hezbollah: Strategic Penetration in Latin America," *Elcano Royal Institute Working Paper*, 18/2009, URL: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/work-document/iran-and-its-proxy-hezbollah-strategic-penetration-in-latin-america-wp/>

⁵⁴ Office of criminal investigations, *AMIA Case Report; Request for Arrests*, 2006, URL: http://albertonisman.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/2006-Nisman-indict-AMIA-full-ENG_.pdf

⁵⁵ Ibid.

function as “sleeping cells”. During their stay, they learned the language, became involved in society, gained experience in opening legitimate businesses, and managed to establish a strong enough commercial coverage to be able to move from country to country and within them.⁵⁶

The Islamic Jihad apparatus gained great experience in that period, and a large part of the operatives that acted in Latin America in the 1990s continued to carry out missions for the unit even in recent years. Furthermore, several of the operatives that perpetrated the attacks in Buenos Aires have placed their children at the disposal of the Islamic Jihad. This "second generation" acted in Latin America (from the south to Panama and Colombia, in addition to Bolivia, Peru, Brazil, Venezuela and Costa Rica), using a birth passport in Latin American countries, perfect Spanish language and commercial coverage.

The AMIA attack, where 83 people died, was celebrated and marked as a success in the highest spheres of Iran and Hezbollah, allowing the "promotion" of some of its participants who today lead the Iranian regime and the Hezbollah attack units. Talal Hamia for instance, who in the 1980s worked alongside the arch-terrorist Imad Mughniyeh, and was responsible for the organization of the two bombing attacks in Buenos Aires became, continues to serve to this day as commander of Hezbollah’s Unit 910, the apparatus behind all terrorist attacks abroad, in coordination with the al-Quds force of the IRGC.⁵⁷

The Iranian intelligence delegation in Buenos Aires, based in the Iranian embassy, was aware of the final preparations and the materialization of the attack days before July 18. In the operational sphere, the activities in Argentina on the Iranian side were conducted by two higher levels of the Iranian Intelligence Ministry and the Pasdaran Quds Force: Sheikh Mohsen Rabbani and Ahmad Reza Asgari (or Mohsen Ranjamaran).⁵⁸

The attacks in Buenos Aires are part of a broader context in which the Iranian regime ordered Hezbollah to carry out a campaign of attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets around the globe in the early part of

⁵⁶ Román Lejtman, “Exclusivo: el informe final del Mossad sobre el ataque terrorista de Irán y Hezbollah a la Embajada de Israel (Exclusive: Mossad’s Final Report on Iran and Hezbollah Terror Attack on Israeli Embassy),” *infobae*, August 9, 2022, URL: <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2022/07/28/exclusivo-el-informe-final-del-mossad-sobre-el-ataque-terrorista-de-iran-y-hezbollah-a-la-embajada-de-israel/>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Román Lejtman, “Exclusive: the final Mossad report on the terrorist attack that Iran and Hezbollah carried out against the AMIA” (Exclusive: the final Mossad report on the terrorist attack that Iran and Hezbollah carried out against the AMIA), *infobae*, July 29, 2022, URL: <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2022/07/30/exclusivo-el-informe-final-del-mossad-sobre-el-ataque-terrorista-que-iran-y-hezbollah-ejecutaron-contra-la-amia/>

the 1990s. Thus, the failed attempt to attack the Israeli embassy in Thailand in March 1994 stands out in the same pattern.

The 1992 Israeli embassy bombing in Buenos Aires has not prevented the dismantling of the Hezbollah infrastructure in the Triple Border by the local authorities area nor the 1994 AMIA building bombing, by the same members of the network.

Moreover, the Argentinian Government of President Christina Kirschner and Iran agreed in 2013 on a MOU to jointly set up a commission to investigate the 1994 AMIA. Argentina's Congress endorsed the agreement, but it was never ratified by lawmakers in Tehran and therefore did not enter into effect.

Prosecutor Alberto Nisman initiated the investigation of the MOU approved by then President de Kirchner and was hours away from presenting his evidence of a cover-up to the Argentinian Congress in January 2015, when he was found dead in his home of a gunshot to the head. Kirchner said he committed suicide, but a 2017 report by the Argentine National Gendarmerie, said he had been murdered. Nisman's death remains an unresolved legal matter in Argentina. Judge Claudio Bonadio had taken up Nisman's investigation but died in February 2020.⁵⁹

In October 2021, judges have cleared former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and a host of other officials of charges in the case relating to an alleged cover-up of Iran's possible involvement in the 1994 AMIA bombing. "The Memorandum of Understanding with Iran, regardless of whether it is considered a political success or failure, did not constitute a crime or an act of cover-up," the judges concluded. The DAIA, representative of the Argentine Jewish community, decided to appeal the ruling of the Federal Oral Court 8 that dismissed Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and other defendants in the case for covering up the Memorandum with Iran.⁶⁰

9/11: The Occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq by U.S. and NATO 2001-2004

In July 2002, in the framework of his research on Hezbollah as Visiting Fellow at the Washington Institute, this author interviewed at the State Department in Washington the heads of the Lebanon and Syria desks

⁵⁹ Michael Lipin and Carolina Valladares, "Argentine Judge Who Accused Officials of Covering Up Iran Role in 1994 Attack Dies," VOA, February 9, 2020, URL: https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east_voa-news-iran_argentine-judge-who-accused-officials-covering-iran-role-1994-attack-dies/6183939.html

⁶⁰ "Judges dismiss Iran MoU cover-up case against CFK, other officials," *Buenos Aires Times*, October 8, 2021, URL: <https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/argentina/judges-dismiss-iran-mou-cover-up-case-against-cfk-other-officials.phtml>

and the CIA liaison officer to the State Department. When asked about how the Bush administration sees Iran and Syria in the framework of the “War on Terror”, on the background of their passed history of terrorism against the U.S., the three officials claimed that the two countries were very helpful with relevant intelligence in fighting al-Qaeda. The CIA appreciation of this cooperation seemed a bit strange and naïve.

In fact, after the American occupation of Iraq in March 2003, Syrian intelligence agencies were deeply involved in the Assad regime’s efforts facilitating and providing cover for the terrorist pipeline that ran through Syria into Iraq and helped build up al Qaeda in Iraq, which later became ISIS. For example, the foreign terrorist fighter network run by Badran Turki al-Hishan al-Mazidih, aka Abu Ghadiyah and his Syria-based network was exposed and designated by the Treasury Department in February 2008, noting, “Syria has become a transit station for al-Qaeda foreign terrorists on their way to Iraq.”⁶¹

After the eruption of the al-Aqsa intifada in 2000 in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel proved that in January 2002, Iran had shipped some 50 tons of weapons on the ship KarineA to the Palestinian Authority for the expansion of terror attacks during the Second Intifada. This incident further discredited PA Chairman Yasser Arafat and showed that Iran had never abandoned its intrusive support of terrorist activity despite its quieter profile on other fronts.⁶²

Overall, since March 2003, Tehran was deterred during the first year of the occupation of Iraq by American and NATO forces fearing that Iran would be the next target of President Bush’s war against the “axis of evil.” Iran even stopped the military aspect of its nuclear project and negotiated with Europe the end of sanctions related to it.

Iranian President Muhammad Khatami in 2003 told a crowd in Beirut that Hezbollah should act cautiously, and experts have argued that the U.S. victory in Iraq and domestic strife in Iran will compel Iranian leaders to seek better relations with Washington.⁶³

⁶¹ Matthew Levitt, “The Role of the Islamic State in the Assad Regime’s Strategy for Regime Survival: How and Why the Assad Regime Supported the Islamic State,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4698>

⁶² Sherifa D. Zuhur, *Iran, Iraq, and the United States: The New Triangle’s Impact*, p. 41.

⁶³ Daniel Byman, “Should Hezbollah Be Next?” *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 82 • Number 6, November / December 2003.

The difficulties of the American forces in fighting al-Qaeda and other jihadist forces in Iraq, and at the same time the strengthening of the Shia grip on the Baghdad government, in great measure under Iranian influence and subversion, changed the tide.

In a Friday sermon on April 9, 2004, in fact a strategic analysis of the situation, Expediency Council head Hashemi Rafsanjani said: "The present situation in Iraq represents a threat as well as an opportunity... It is a threat because the wounded American beast can take enraged actions, but it is also an opportunity to teach this beast a lesson, so it won't attack another country."⁶⁴

"At the top US objectives of the war was to weaken Syria and Lebanese Hizballah and to encircle Iran and weaken and destroy Iran's Islamic revolution. America intervened and all of America's stated, or unstated objectives, were either not achieved or they distanced themselves from them. In fact, we have not become much stronger, but it is the Americans who have become vulnerable, America has become a hollow drum and the question is, what can it do?"

The 2011-12 World Terrorist Campaign

The 2011/12 terrorist campaign started after the February 2008 assassination in Damascus of senior Hezbollah military and arch-terrorist leader Imad Mughniyeh, who had been linked to major attacks on American, Israeli, and Arab targets around the world. Accusing Israel of the assassination, Hezbollah and Iran vowed to extract a painful revenge.⁶⁵

Attempts to strike back at Israel were not long in coming. In May of that year, authorities in Azerbaijan uncovered a plan to blow up the Israeli embassy in Baku with a suicide truck. Two Lebanese citizens and four Azeris were sentenced to 15 years in prison for planning the attack, which would also have endangered the Japanese Embassy, located in the same Baku building. Members of the Iranian

⁶⁴ Nimrod Raphaeli, "Iran's Stirrings in Iraq," *MEMRI Iraq, Iran: Inquiry & Analysis Series*, No. 173, May 4, 2004, citing *Al-Siyassah (Kuwait)*, April 10, 2004. See full speech "Rafsanjani Sees Iraq Situation as Opportunity to Teach America a Lesson," *Tehran Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran Radio 1 in Persian* 0810 GMT 09 Apr 04, FBIS Document Number: FBIS-NES-2004-0409.

⁶⁵ Ely Karmon, "Analysis Iran and Hezbollah's Terror Escalation Against Israel," *Haaretz*, July 22, 2012, URL: <https://www.haaretz.com/2012-07-22/ty-article/analysis-iran-stepping-up-terror-against-us/0000017f-e86a-df2c-a1ff-fe7b40c60000>

Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRCG) who helped organize the plot escaped to Iran. Plans to bomb the Israeli embassy and Jewish targets in Baku began in 2007, long before Mughniyeh's assassination.

However, the wave of attacks appears to have intensified as numerous foiled and failed attacks against Israeli targets involving Iranian, Lebanese, and local citizens have taken place since January 2012. In January a package suspected of containing explosives was spotted on a bus carrying Israeli ski tourists from Turkey to Bulgaria. Three men were detained in January in Baku after planning to attack two Israelis employed by the Chabad Jewish school. They were given smuggled arms and equipment by Iranian agents. A plot to assassinate Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak during a mid-February visit was foiled by Singapore authorities in cooperation with the Mossad. Singaporean security agencies arrested three members of a Hezbollah-Iranian terror cell. On February 13, 2012, local police defused a device in a car belonging to an Israeli embassy staff worker in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. In mid-June, Kenyan authorities arrested two Iranians suspected of planning attacks on Israeli and Western targets.

Cypriot authorities on July 7, 2012 arrested Hossam Yaakoub, a 24-year-old Lebanese with a Swedish passport who admitted he was a Hezbollah operative, had photographs of Israeli targets in his possession, including information on tour buses carrying Israeli tourists and Israeli flights to and from the island.⁶⁶

Unfortunately, Iran and Hezbollah finally staged on 18 July 2012 a “successful” bombing attack against a tourist bus at the Burgas airport, in Bulgaria, which killed five Israeli tourists and a Bulgarian citizen, and wounded some 30 Israelis.⁶⁷

The Cyprus case is important on several grounds. On March 28, 2013, the court sentenced Yaakoub to four years in prison. His conviction, in tandem with the Bulgarian government's declaration that Hezbollah was behind the July 2012 Burgas bus bombing, increased the pressure on the European Union and led to the Council of the European Union's decision on July 22, 2013, to designate Hezbollah's "military wing" as a terrorist organization. Yaacoub, a member of Hezbollah since 2007, had been on “previous missions with Hezbollah,” in Turkey as well as in Netherlands and France.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Nicholas Kulish, “Trial Offers Rare Look at Work of Hezbollah in Europe,” *NYT*, February 20, 2013, URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/21/world/europe/in-cyprus-trial-man-says-hezbollah-scouted-israeli-targets-in-europe.html>

However, it seems that the Europe authorities did not really challenge the terrorist threat as materialized in 2012. In Cyprus itself a new plot was thwarted, where Hussein Bassam Abdallah, a dual Lebanese Canadian citizen, stockpiled 8.2 tons of ammonium nitrate, a popular chemical explosive. He pled guilty to all eight charges against him, including participation in a terrorist group, Hezbollah.

This latest plot reveals that the EU's warnings to Hezbollah not to operate on European soil have not dissuaded the group.

The 2017-2018 Wave of Iranian Terrorism in Europe

In the years 2017-2018, Iran again provoked a wave of terrorist attacks, most of them frustrated, against elements of the Iranian opposition in Europe.⁶⁹

In January 2018, after weeks of surveillance, German authorities raided several homes tied to Iranian operatives who were reportedly gathering information on potential Israeli and Jewish targets in Germany. Arrest warrants were issued for 10 Iranian agents, but none were detained.

In March 2018, Albanian authorities arrested two Iranian agents on terrorism charges after they were caught guarding a location where the Iranian New Year (Nowruz) celebrations were about to begin.

In June 2018, an investigation by Dutch intelligence led to the expulsion of two Iranian diplomats after the murder several months earlier of an Iranian Arab activist shot dead in the Dutch capital.

In late September 2018, three dangerous people involved in a "serious crime" and travelling in a Swedish-registered car were hunted by Danish police. A Norwegian citizen of Iranian origin was arrested in Sweden on 21 October in connection with the alleged plan. Norway had since extradited to Denmark the man who was seen taking pictures of the Danish home of a leader of The Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA), an Arab nationalist insurgent group that advocates for a separate Arab state in Khuzestan Province of Iran. Denmark has recalled its ambassador from Tehran and is consulting other EU countries about imposing new sanctions against Iran.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Ely Karmon, "The Return of Iranian Terrorism to Europe," *ICT Website*, November 2018, URL: <https://www.runi.ac.il/media/tznhd4jz/elykarmon11-18.pdf>

⁷⁰ Ibid.

The most serious European incident, the plot to bomb the annual meeting of the Paris-based National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) on June 30, 2018, was described above.

Paris blamed Saeid Hashemi Moghadam, an Iranian deputy minister of intelligence in charge of operations, for the foiled attack against the rally of the Mujahedin of the Iranian people in Villepinte.

Officials and analysts expressed concern the foiled attacks in Europe mark an escalation in Iran's willingness to undertake violent covert operations in the West, after years of relative restraint. "They feel the constraints on them have been removed," argued Bruce Riedel, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and former official at the Central Intelligence Agency.⁷¹

After stressing that the latest Iranian terror plots demonstrate a pattern that goes well beyond the two incidents in France and Denmark, Giulio Terzi, former Foreign Minister of Italy, asked Western leaders to recognize the futility of attempting to bribe Iran's leaders into compliance with international standards. A policy of "maximum pressure" is much more likely to compel reasonable behavior, he argues.⁷² Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen and intelligence chief Finn Borch Andersen called for European Union sanctions after they discovered the plot to kill Danish residents associated with the ASMLA.⁷³

Finally, the European Union in January 2019 designated the intelligence unit and two of its staff as terrorists, and froze their assets, as the Netherlands accused Iran of two killings on its soil and joined France and Denmark in alleging Tehran plotted other attacks in Europe. The move marks the first time the EU has enacted sanctions on Iran since lifting a host of curbs on it following its 2015 nuclear pact with world powers.⁷⁴

Sanctions on the intelligence ministry, which is under the control of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, are unlikely to change what the European Union says are Iran's destabilizing activities in Europe and the Middle East. But imposing economic sanctions on Iran, once the EU's top oil supplier, remains highly sensitive for the bloc. The EU has been straining to uphold the 2015 nuclear accord between Iran

⁷¹ Matthew Dalton, "Bags of Cash and a Bomb Plot: Inside a Covert Iranian Operation in Europe," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 31, 2018.

⁷² Giulio Terzi, "Another Foiled Terror Plot Underscores The Need For Maximum Pressure On Iran," *The Federalist*, November 12, 2018. Giulio Terzi was the Foreign Minister of Italy from 2011 until 2013. He is also a former Italian Ambassador to the United States and former Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations.

⁷³ "Denmark accuses Iran of activist murder plot," *BBC News*, October 30, 2018.

⁷⁴ Jacob Gronholt-Pedersen, Robin Emmott, Anthony Deutsch, "In shift, EU sanctions Iran over planned Europe attacks," *Reuters*, January 8, 2019, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-idUSKCN1P20UA>

and world powers that U.S. President Donald Trump pulled out of in May. It has been less willing to consider sanctions, instead seeking talks with Tehran.⁷⁵

We present below three case studies of Iranian/Hezbollah attacks in Thailand, India and Turkey, to show how the blackmail attacks were used against small, medium states and even a global power like India.

Thailand: A Preferred Target of Iran and Hezbollah

On March 11, 1994, what could have been one of the biggest catastrophes in Thailand's history was averted due to a minor traffic accident between a motorcycle taxi and a six-wheeler. The truck driver panicked and fled, leaving the abandoned truck about 250 meters from the Israeli embassy. The vehicle was seized and almost a week later it was found to be carrying enough explosives to devastate several city blocks.⁷⁶

National Police Chief General immediately ordered increased security at embassies, including those of Israel and the United States, international schools and other locations where foreigners congregate such as a synagogue. The General also asked the media to refrain from naming certain Middle Eastern countries as sponsoring the planned attack because it could damage relations between Thailand and friendly countries.

Thai police arrested Iranian national Hossein Shahriarifar in the southern Thai city of Hat Yai on suspicion of making the bomb and driving the truck. He was sentenced to death, but the Supreme Court reversed the verdict. Under heavy Iranian pressure, Shahriarifar was released from prison in 1998, leaving many to question whether justice had been served.⁷⁷

It would not be discovered until five years later, after the arrest of Pandu Yudhawinata, a man of Indonesian descent, that the March 1994 failed bombing was a Hezbollah attack, almost a year in the making. Pandu's involvement with Hezbollah can be traced back to as early as 1981, when he was expelled from university for his Islamic activism in Indonesia and fled to Iran where he received military, ideological and language training. Pandu was recruited by and worked for Iranian intelligence in Malaysia, was transferred to Hezbollah and began working for "a special attack unit of Hezbollah in south-east Asia"

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Maxmilian Wechsler, "A Massive Truck Bomb in Central Bangkok Was Defused After Lucky Accident," *BigChilli Famous crime stories from the past*, January 17, 2017, URL:

⁷⁷ Ibid.

which devised a "Five Contingency Plans": a maritime bombing plot targeting U.S. Navy and Israeli merchant ships docking in Singapore or sailing through the Malacca Straits; sending three Indonesian members to Australia for an attack - never acted upon - on American and Jewish targets during the 2000 Sydney Olympics..⁷⁸

On January 12, 2012, Thai authorities arrested Hussein Atris, a Swedish citizen of Lebanese descent linked to Hezbollah. Atris led Thai police to four tons of explosive precursor in Samut Sakhon province in a commercial building rented since January 2010. He was sentenced to two years and eight months in prison. He was released in September 2014.⁷⁹

Several weeks later, an Iranian team of seven terrorists planning to attack Israeli targets in Bangkok was uncovered after Iranian Saeid Moradi was seriously wounded in a "work accident." Mohammad Hazaei, whom Thai authorities suspect headed the Iranian operational group, was captured. Other suspects fled and Thai police later arrested an operative, Madani Seyed Mehrded, who entered Thailand back in July 2011. Three Iranians were jailed for the bomb plot.⁸⁰

Thailand has freed the three Iranians following the release of British-Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert by Iran, a lecturer in Islamic studies who was held on fake spying charges. According to Thai authorities, the three Iranians were not exchanged with anyone. The Australian government has been silent on the circumstances surrounding the deal, and some observers have said it could encourage Iran's "hostage diplomacy".⁸¹

In April 2014, Thai officials arrested two Hezbollah operatives, French Lebanese dual citizen Daoud Farhat and Filipino-Lebanese national Yosef Ayad, for plotting an attack targeting Israeli tourists in Bangkok. The director general of the Thai Foreign Ministry's information department declared the two are being held

⁷⁸ Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah recruited operatives with dual citizenship to carry out the bombing in Burgas, Bulgaria," *Policy Analysis*, The Washington Institute, December 13, 2013, URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/long-reach-hezbollah-makes-it-threat-close-home>

⁷⁹ Ely Karmon, *Analysis Iran and Hezbollah's Terror Escalation Against Israel*.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ "Kylie Moore-Gilbert: Thailand frees Iranians 'in swap with academic," *BBC*, November 26, 2020, URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55086337>

on violating terms of their tourist visas, but they have not been charged with any more serious offenses time.⁸²

India

On February 13, 2012, an Israeli diplomatic vehicle was bombed in Delhi, seriously wounding the wife of the Israeli defense attaché and three other people, when a motorcycle rider attached a magnetic explosive device to her car and sped away.

This writer was in New Delhi the day of the attack as a participant at the main Indian conference on defense issues and was asked to comment on the event on a local TV station. The show presented the attack as an Iranian operation, based on information about previous attacks in Azerbaijan and Bangkok in January and a foiled one in Georgia, the same day as the New Delhi attack, with the same modus operandi: a magnetic explosive device attached to an Israeli diplomatic car.⁸³

Two Indian pundits – a former senior diplomat, and a renowned professor, interviewed on the same program – categorically rejected this evaluation and did not accept the idea that a friendly state and strategic ally such as Iran would decide to hurt Indian sovereignty by such a brazen attack on its soil.⁸⁴

Three weeks later the New Delhi Police arrested Indian journalist Syed Mohammed Ahmad Kazmi for allegedly facilitating the February 13 bombing of the Israeli Embassy car. Kazmi, a Shi'ite, was employed by the Iranian news agency IRNA and Iranian radio. Kazmi was finally granted bail by the Supreme Court of India in October 2012 but restrained from going abroad. As of today, he continues to host a show on his YouTube channel, Media Star World.

The Indian police have identified three Iranians implicated in the New Delhi bombing as Houshan Afshari Irani, Seyed Ali Mahdiansadr and Mohammadreza Abolghasemi. The police said that Kazmi was paid \$5,500 and provided assistance to Irani. An Indian court issued arrest warrants for the three Iranians in connection with the attack. Irani, who had visited Delhi twice and left for Malaysia shortly after the Delhi

⁸² Steve Herman, "Thailand Reacts to Plots Targeting Israelis," *VoA*, April 22, 2014, URL: <https://www.voanews.com/a/thailand-reacts-to-plots-targeting-israelis/1898402.html>

⁸³ Ely Karmon, "Iranian rationale behind the New Delhi terrorist attack," *The Jerusalem Post*, February 2, 2021, URL: <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/iranian-rationale-behind-the-new-delhi-terrorist-attack-657518>

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

attack, was in contact with Masoud Sedaghatzadeh, one of the Iranian suspects in the January 2012 Bangkok bomb plot. The Delhi police had concluded that the attack was the work of the IRGC.⁸⁵

Iran denied it would do such a thing in India especially when New Delhi is making strenuous efforts, despite disapproval by the U.S. and some European countries, to develop new methods to pay for Iranian oil. “It is not in the character of Iranian policy to do this. If it is so, why select India? Iran could have selected some other country.” The attacks in India occurred when it had just replaced China as Iran's largest crude oil importer.⁸⁶

It seems that all diplomatic efforts, as well as the visit of the Indian Police to Tehran to obtain from the Iranian government information about the suspected perpetrators of the February 13 attack, have not achieved any positive results until today.

A bomb attack on January 29, 2021, outside the Israeli embassy in New Delhi by a “very low intensity improvised device,” damaged cars but caused no injuries or damage to the diplomatic compound. A handwritten note, in English, found at the blast site, was addressed to Israel Ambassador Ron Malka and warned Israel of revenge for the killing in 2020 of “Iranian martyrs,” Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. The operation was probably staged by a local, dispensable group of supporters with minimal knowledge of its real goals. This also permits deniability in case the local perpetrators will be caught.⁸⁷

While fingers point to Iranian involvement, the Indian security services again will find it difficult to pierce through the fog of plausible deniability.

It should be of note that in 2003 India and Iran signed an agreement to set up a joint working group on terrorism and security, described as an “Axis” in the making, the main purpose of which was to share intelligence on al-Qaeda activities in Afghanistan. The February 2012 minor attack in one of the rising global powers was more of an Iranian signal with the potential to reverberate internationally as it was probably connected to the 29th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between India and

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Israel. Based on experience [2012], it is possible that the Iranian leaders thought they could rely on a lax investigation, under political constraints, by the Indian authorities.⁸⁸

Turkey

The case of Turkey is a very interesting one, as it involves two regional powers, one with a Sunni Islamist regime and the other a Shia radical regime, competing for influence or even hegemony in the Middle East, and beyond. The Cold War's end, the USSR's disintegration, the birth of new republics mostly inhabited by peoples of Turkish origin, the Gulf War's result and the Bosnian crisis created at the beginning of the 1990s a new international environment which put Turkey in a key position, sometimes in direct competition with Iran for regional strategic influence and economic assets.

Iran's support for and incitement of Islamic terrorism in Turkey in the early 1990s can be understood as part of its drive to export the Islamic revolution to a key Muslim country, a symbol of secularism and a strategic adversary. Tehran's aggressive policy was probably encouraged by Islam's growing influence in Turkish society. Iran especially encouraged Turkish President Ozal's policy in the 1980s of embracing Islam and expanding Turkey's relations with its Muslim neighbors.⁸⁹ Good relations did not, however, prevent deep Iranian involvement in Islamic terrorism inside Turkey's borders, which at times was proved in court or leaked by security authorities to the media.

Islamic terrorist organizations active in Turkey during the 1990s strived to establish an Islamic shari 'a-based state on the Iranian example, profited from deeper social and political trends in Turkish society and, at the same time, strengthened those trends by their violence. These groups enjoyed wide Iranian support and often acted on behalf of Iranian local and regional, political and strategic interests.⁹⁰

The Turkish Islamic Movement, one of the main radical groups, like all other radical organizations, received a serious blow during the September 1980 military coup in Turkey. But, as the regime encouraged the general Islamic trend as a solution to political polarization, and as both Marxists and nationalists lost their influence, Islamic activists were afforded ample space to strengthen their position. The 'Hezbollah

⁸⁸ Ely Karmon, "India's Counterterrorism Cooperation with Israel," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 16, Issue 2, April 2022, URL: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2022/issue-2/karmon.pdf>

⁸⁹ This interesting analysis of Iran's relations with Turkey appeared in the *Tehran Salam*, December 19, 1996, on the occasion of Rafsanjani's visit to Turkey.

⁹⁰ Ely Karmon, "Islamic Terrorist Activities in Turkey in the 1990s," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 10:4, 101-121, December 21, 2007.

Muslims' appeared for the first time publicly in 1984 and, as the original Hezbollah, proclaimed support for the Iranian revolution and the defense not of nations or sects, but of "Allah's way." The Sunni origin of the radical Turkish Islamic groups did not prevent their close cooperation with the Iranian Shi'a regime. It is known that various Sunni extremist organizations have viewed the Iranian revolution and its leader Khomeini as a catalyst and a model for their own revolutionary endeavor.⁹¹

The year 1992 represented the turning point in radical Islamic terrorist activity, as the objectives attacked during this year included Iranian opposition as well as Jews and Israelis. Ugur Mumcu, one of Turkey's top investigative reporters, was killed on January 24, 1993, by a car bomb. On January 24, 1993 a car bomb attempt was made on the life of a well-known Turkish businessman and community leader of Jewish origin, Jak Kamhi, by a group of four terrorists who used automatic weapons and even a rocket launcher. He escaped uninjured. The same month the tortured body of an exiled Iranian dissident - Abbas Gholizadeh, a former officer and the Shah's bodyguard, kidnapped several weeks before, was discovered by the police.⁹²

This series of terrorist events provoked a sharp reaction from Turkish public opinion: huge street demonstrations in favor of the secular regime, a strong press campaign and swift action by security authorities against both the perpetrators and their sponsors. For the first time the Islamic Movement and Iran were directly implicated in acts of terror against the state. The arrests and interrogations of many Turkish members of these organizations unveiled the story behind the killings of Turkish secular intellectuals and anti-Khomeini Iranian exiles in the years 1990-1992.⁹³

For the first time, a Turkish minister declared that members of radical Islamic organizations trained in Iranian security installations, traveled with Iranian real and forged documents, and attacked Turkish citizens and Iranian opposition militants with Iranian-supplied arms. Turkey's approach toward Iran, however, was very cautious. The minister absolved the Iranian state of these actions, but concluded that, "the perpetrators had connections in Iran."⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ *Cumhuriyet* and other newspapers, February 5-6, 1993.

Iran's foreign minister issued a subtle denial excluding the possibility that any anti-Turkish activity conducted on Iran's territory could escape the state's control. While denying that Iran was behind anti-Turkey movements, he accused Turkey of supporting terrorist groups opposed to the Tehran regime and suggested discussing any "mutual allegations" through a common security committee.⁹⁵

But the arrest and trial of dozens of Islamic terrorists did not dissuade more extremists from continuing to attack Turkish intellectuals fighting for the secular state and values. In July 1993 these extremists set on fire a hotel where a cultural festival was taking place, and 37 intellectuals were burned to death. Aziz Nesin, one of Turkey's leading literary figures, was the main individual target of the fundamentalists. He was accused of intending to publish Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*.⁹⁶

The fight of the security authorities against the radicals continued during 1994, when 659 members of "Turkish Hezbollah" were caught, some of them responsible for murders of activists in exiled Iranian opposition groups. In January, four members of the Islamic Movement in Istanbul were arrested for their part in the killing of a Mojahedin-e Khalq activist, the Shah's bodyguard and a member of the Kurdish opposition, KDPI. In October, a six-man Hezbollah team was arrested while preparing to assassinate, on orders from Iranian intelligence, a woman of Armenian descent guilty of employing "only" Muslim women in her brothel! They were also involved in the assassination of Iranian dissidents.

Below a long but not comprehensive list of Iranian terrorist attacks and incidents in Turkey.

Iranian dissidents have sought refuge in Turkey since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, as it is one of just 41 countries that Iranians can travel to without a visa. But with a long history of assassinations, abductions and extraditions, Turkey has been far from a safe haven for them. The assassinations and abductions of Iranian political activists that began in Turkey in the 1980s continue to this day.⁹⁷

Abolhassan Mojtahedzadeh, a member of the opposition group Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), is one of few Iranian dissidents to survive a regime kidnapping attempt in Turkey. In November 1988, Iranian agents

⁹⁵ Gungor Mengi's column in reaction to Velayati's interview on February 15, 1993, *Sabah*, February 16, 1993.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Yaghoub Fazeli, "With history of killings, abductions Turkey is no safe haven for Iranian dissidents," *AL Arabiya English*, June 20, 2020, URL: <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/06/26/With-history-of-killings-abductions-Turkey-is-no-safe-haven-for-Iranian-dissidents>

kidnapped Mojtabezadeh in Istanbul and attempted to take him to Iran by land in a convoy of three vehicles with diplomatic licenses. Mojtabezadeh was rescued after Turkish police stopped and searched the vehicles. Mojtabezadeh said that he was interrogated and tortured by members of the Iranian embassy in Turkey including then-ambassador Manouchehr Mottaki who later served as foreign minister from 2005 to 2010. In August 1992, another MEK member was kidnapped and gruesomely murdered in Istanbul.⁹⁸ July 15, 1990: Ali Kashefpour, a member of the DPIK central committee residing in Turkey, is kidnapped, severely tortured, and killed. The case remains unsolved.⁹⁹

In February 1996 two Iranian members of the MEK, were allegedly assassinated by Iran, including Zahra Rajab, who was shot to death in her apartment in Istanbul.¹⁰⁰

More recently, on April 2017, Saeed Karimian, founder and chief executive of the Persian-language network Gem TV, was killed alongside Kuwaiti businessman Mohammad Metab al-Shalahi in Istanbul. A year before he was killed, a Tehran court tried Karimian in absentia and sentenced him to six years in jail for spreading “propaganda against the state” and “acting against national security.”¹⁰¹

Two intelligence officers at Iran’s consulate in Turkey instigated the killing of Masoud Molavi Vardanjani, shot dead on an Istanbul Street on November 14, 2019. A police report into the killing said Vardanjani had an “unusual profile”: he worked in cyber security at Iran’s defense ministry and had become a vocal critic of the Iranian authorities.¹⁰²

In October 2021 an ex-Iranian military official was the target of a plot to kidnap him and bring him back to Iran. Turkish authorities detained two alleged Iranian agents and six Turkish citizens in connection with the plan.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Dan Geist, “A Darker Horizon: The Assassination of Shapour Bakhtiar,” *FRONTLINE Tehran Bureau*, August 6, 2011, URL: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/08/a-darker-horizon-the-assassination-of-shapour-bakhtiar.html>

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Hanna and Garrett Nada, “Timeline: Iran's Assassinations and Plots,” *The Iran Primer*, The United States Institute of Peace, August 17, 2022, URL: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/sep/16/timeline-iran-assassinations-and-plot>

¹⁰¹ Yaghoub Fazeli, *With history of killings, abductions Turkey is no safe haven for Iranian dissidents*.

¹⁰² Andrew Hanna and Garrett Nada, *Timeline: Iran's Assassinations and Plots*.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Turkish - Iranian cooperation against Kurdish militants and organizations. It should be noted however, that there were periods of cooperation between Iran and Turkey, mainly in the fight against Kurdish organizations and separatist aspirations. In the 1990s Iran supported the battle of the PKK against the Turkish state, still governed under the Kemalist military secular umbrella, by giving safe haven, logistical and financial support to the main Kurdish organization. But the Ayatollahs in Tehran found common interest with Erdogan in repressing the Kurdish aspirations in Turkey, Iran itself, but also in Iraq and northern Syria.

Over the last few years, Iranians and Kurdish Iranians have gone missing, with some showing up dead; the fate of others is yet unknown. Turkey deported 33 Iranian Kurdish activists to Iran in December 2019, and their fate remains unknown. Iranian state-affiliated outlets accused the deported activists of collaborating with the opposition group Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, which Tehran considers a terrorist and separatist group.¹⁰⁴

Even Balochi separatists are seen as common enemies. In 2020, the Turkish intelligence services in Ankara arrested Iranian Baloch activist Abdollah Bozorgzadeh. Activists are fearful Turkey would extradite Bozorgzadeh to Iran where his life would be in danger. Turkey and Iran have cooperated extensively in recent years on security matters.¹⁰⁵

Israeli and Jewish targets. In 2009 intelligence agencies warned against terror attacks planned by Hezbollah against Israeli and American targets in Turkey in retaliation for the assassination of Hezbollah terror mastermind Imad Mugniyah in February 2008: Israeli tourists, Israeli vessels, and airplanes, as well as synagogues¹⁰⁶.

In May 2011, a foiled Hizballah–Qods Force assassination attempt targeted the Israeli consul-general to Istanbul, Moshe Kimhi, as retribution for the assassination of Mohammadi, an Iranian nuclear physicist.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Yaghoub Fazeli, *With history of killings, abductions Turkey is no safe haven for Iranian dissidents*.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Daniel Edelson, "Report: Hezbollah plans attacks on Israeli targets in Turkey," *Ynetnews.com*, September 10, 2009, URL: <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3792483,00.html>

¹⁰⁷ Matthew Levitt, Hizballah and the Qods Force in Iran's Shadow War with the West, *Policy Focus 123*, January 2013, URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3129>

In March 2012, Israeli intelligence tipped off Turkish authorities about a Qods Force plot to be carried out by at least four individuals who crossed the border from Iran armed with weapons and materials.¹⁰⁸

On March 21, 2016, President Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey would use all its military and intelligence might to battle “one of the biggest and bloodiest terrorist waves in its history”, after a suicide bomber killed three Israelis in Istanbul. Interior Minister Efkan Ala on Sunday identified the Istanbul bomber as a Mehmet Ozturk, born in 1992 and from the southern province of Gaziantep near the Syrian border. Five people had been detained in connection with the blast.¹⁰⁹

According to Israeli officials, Turkey has become exceptionally cooperative on security matters “in a very uncharacteristic way.” Most recently, Turkish intelligence thwarted an Iranian assassination attempt of an Israeli businessman, Yair Geller.¹¹⁰ Geller, the 75-year-old owner of CNC Advance Technologies, was targeted in retaliation for the killing of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in 2020, an act that Tehran considered to be an Israeli operation. A nine-person network of hit men tracked Geller for a long time. MIT informed its Israeli counterpart, Mossad, about the gang’s plan before it turned operational, and the two sides worked together to move the businessman to a safe house. Once Geller was safe, MIT moved in on the hit men and arrested all but one of them. Most are Turkish nationals, but the head of the group is Iranian Saleh Moshtagh Bigohouz. The timing of the operation to protect Geller was significant as it came amid the discussions between Turkey and Israel to normalize diplomatic relations, adding that Iran might have been motivated to disrupt such talks.¹¹¹

In June 2022 Israeli security officials had tipped off their Turkish counterparts on an Iranian plot to kidnap or kill Israeli tourists in Turkey. Israel urged its citizens to leave or avoid the Turkish capital, Istanbul. The Israeli National Security Council raised the threat level for Istanbul to four, the highest possible. Some of the Israelis who were targeted were evacuated due to an imminent threat. On June 23, Turkish authorities arrested eight people, including five Iranian agents who posed as businessmen, students, and tourists.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Humeyra Pamuk, Nick Tattersall, “Erdogan says Turkey battling 'terrorist wave' after Istanbul bombing,” *Reuters*, March 21, 2016, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-idUSKCNOWN0Y5>

¹¹⁰ Mustafa Gurbuz, “Turkey’s Evolving Policy toward Iran,” *Arab Center Washington DC*, February 16, 2022, URL: <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/turkeys-evolving-policy-toward-iran/>

¹¹¹ “Turkey, Israel foil Iran-led assassination attempt on businessman in Istanbul,” *Arab News*, February 11, 2022, URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2022966/middle-east>

¹¹² Andrew Hanna and Garrett Nada, *Timeline: Iran's Assassinations and Plots*.

Interestingly, three weeks later, on July 19, Turkish president Erdogan attended in Tehran the 7th trilateral summit meeting in Astana format to meet Iranian and Russian presidents. The recent developments in Syria, fight against terror groups, particularly YPG/PKK and Daesh/ISIS, which pose a threat to regional security, were on the agenda of the summit.¹¹³ Nothing transpired if Erdogan protested to President Raisi about the Iranian terrorism in Turkey.

According to Mustafa Gurbuz, in the long-term perspective, Turkey-Iran relations have long been shaped by geopolitical drivers, which made both players neither friends nor foes—but, rather, rivals. Turkey’s “bitter competition” with Iran in the mid-1990s became a “benign competition” with Erdoğan’s rise a decade later. It was not surprising to detect chemistry between Erdoğan’s AKP and the Iranian regime, as nascent political Islamism in Turkey was significantly shaped by cultural repertoires and was inspired by the 1979 revolution. The trajectory of the Syrian civil war, however, revealed the limits of Turkey-Iran cooperation. Souring relations were most evident in the Turkish government’s accusations against Iran of trying “to create two Shia states in Syria and Iraq” and calling on the international community to “stop” Tehran’s “dangerous” activities. Iran’s response was equally harsh, warning that Turkish soldiers in Syria and Iraq could become targets unless they were withdrawn. With an increasingly isolated Turkey confronting the hopeless trajectory of US-Turkey relations, such shifting sands provided a political opportunity and face-saving exit for Erdoğan. The Turkish government has already begun to exploit the opportunity by breaking the ice with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel and seek to reorient Turkey against Iran’s regional ambitions. If successful, their efforts may swing the pendulum again toward aggressive competition between Turkey and Iran, especially in Syria and Iraq.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

The Iranian strategy in the use of blackmail terrorism has been shaped by the lack of stamina and decisiveness of the leaders of the United States, the Western democratic global power, and France, the global actor representing the historic liberal values of the Occident, during the long crisis of numerous hostages in 1979 in Tehran, and later in Lebanon, and clearly the lack of tangible reaction to the bombings in Beirut and the streets of Paris.

¹¹³ Handan Kazanci , “Turkish president due in Tehran to meet Iranian, Russian counterparts,” *Anadolu Agency*, July 17, 2022, URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-president-due-in-tehran-to-meet-iranian-russian-counterparts/2639013>

¹¹⁴ Mustafa Gurbuz, *Turkey’s Evolving Policy toward Iran*

How could other lesser actors in the international arena, like Germany or Argentina, Thailand, Nigeria, Cyprus or even India, challenge this terrorist machine developed, improved and expanded over the years, supported by regional proxies like Hezbollah or local ones like the Shia militias in Iraq, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas or the Houthis of Yemen?

The Iranian/Hezbollah attacks took place often in “soft countries” in Asia, Latin America and Africa, countries where the intelligence and law enforcement agencies are not sufficiently trained to challenge this kind of threat and where the Iranian/Hezbollah activities are low priority for the local security agencies.

Iran has taken in consideration, based on past experience, that the governments of the targeted countries by its terrorist campaigns will react leniently and Tehran will pay only a minimal political price. Indeed, despite the involvement of seven Iranian citizens in the terrorist attempts in Bangkok there was no diplomatic reaction by the Thai government against Iran. Indian authorities declined to implicate Iran in the February 13, 2012, attack and rushed to buy more Iranian oil.

Iran’s fingerprints are obvious and clumsy and imply that Tehran is not worried to be exposed killing innocent citizens of these countries, harming their tourist industry, and provoking a global terrorist environment.

Neither has succeeded the recent Israeli attempt to convince the European Union to place Hezbollah on the terror blacklist. The arrest of Hezbollah terrorist operatives in so many countries did not convince the EU that Hezbollah is a terrorist organization, because of lack of consensus and “because Hezbollah also has an active political arm in the Lebanese government.” Neither has this decision been influenced by the renewed indictment by the UN Special Tribunal of four Hezbollah members over the killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

“Iran seems to regard political assassination as its national right, even on foreign soil. Any country that enforces its laws against murder is seen interfering in the sovereign affairs of Iran,” said one high-ranking French justice official. “One reason all these assassinations have continued is because the Iran

government has had to pay no price,” said Shaul Bakhash, a historian and Iranian expert at George Mason University.¹¹⁵

Iran has detained a number of foreign nationals and Iranian dual citizens in recent years, many of them on fake spying charges. Human rights groups have accused Tehran of using the cases as leverage to try to gain concessions from other countries. They include British-Iranian charity worker Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who was jailed on spying charges in 2016. She has always maintained her innocence. Anoosheh Ashoori, a retired civil engineer from London, was jailed for 10 years in July 2019 after being convicted of spying for Israel's Mossad intelligence agency.¹¹⁶

Most recently, Iranian security forces have arrested nine people from Germany, Poland, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and other countries for their alleged role in the popular protests against the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody in Iran. The nine unidentified persons were detained “during the riots or while plotting in the background,” the Iranian intelligence ministry said in a statement to the media.

We are facing a new wave of “hostage diplomacy” in order to suppress any international support to the popular pacific uprising against the Ayatollah’s brutal regime.

The European leaders directly involved in the support to their beleaguered citizens, the UN and the international community, the human rights NGOs, personalities of all walks of life should act strongly against this policy and isolate even more the Iranian disgraceful theocratic regime.

¹¹⁵ William C. Rempel, “Tale of Deadly Iranian Network Woven in Paris: Terrorism: An assassination trial’s threads lead as far as California, uncovering a wealth of spy data along the way,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1994, URL: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-11-03-mn-58301-story.html>

¹¹⁶ Ibid.