



Iran

## Iran's covert war on opponents abroad

Experts say Tehran is likely to eventually seek retaliation against senior figures over the US-Israeli war

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In mid-April, as a shaky ceasefire was taking hold in the US-Israeli war on Iran, Tehran's embassy in London posted a recruitment campaign message on Telegram.

It invited Iranians living in the UK to click a link to join what it called a "sacrifice for the homeland" campaign, urging "all proud sons and daughters of Iran" to "demonstrate unity".

"Let us all stand together, ready to sacrifice our lives, for it is better than surrendering our country to the enemy," the message said.

Tehran claims millions of ordinary people have registered for the Iranian national campaign, which was launched in March to rally support for the republic during the US-Israeli war, and which the Iranian embassy later said was a "purely symbolic and non-operational initiative". But the British government took a dim view.

It summoned the Iranian ambassador and told him that “these actions and comments were completely unacceptable, and that the embassy must cease any form of communications that could be interpreted as encouraging violence in the UK or internationally”.

The exchange was just one sign of a deep concern among western governments about the actions of Iranian operatives on their soil — a concern that has deepened as the war focused attention on Tehran’s covert capabilities abroad and their potential use in retaliation for attacks on Iran.

Western intelligence agencies have long accused Iran of orchestrating intimidation campaigns, beatings, kidnappings and even assassinations of opponents abroad, from Iranian dissidents to non-Iranians it views as a threat. It has also allegedly attacked Israeli-linked targets and Jewish communities.

Two men are due to go on trial in May over an attack on Pouria Zeraati, a presenter with Iran International, an overseas channel that Tehran considers an opposition outlet, who was stabbed in a Wimbledon street in December 2024.

Since the war began in February, a series of European countries have provisionally blamed Iran for orchestrating a wave of arson and other attacks, including at least five assaults in the UK in a week. The Iranian embassy in London did not respond to a request for comment, but has previously said that Tehran “rejects any allegations related to the unlawful actions of certain individuals in the United Kingdom”.



Iranian TV journalist Pouria Zeraati in hospital following the attack outside his home in London © @pouriazeraati/X

As those attacks mount, European security officials say they are worried Tehran might later retaliate for the killing of senior Iranian leaders, including Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, by targeting a western leader or military asset.

“They’d love to be able to take out a US capital asset, such as a base, a warship, a leadership figure. Something of an equal weight to the death of the Supreme Leader,” said John Raine, a former senior UK national security official who is now a senior adviser at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

“From their doctrine they have invested heavily in asymmetric capabilities and overseas capabilities. But they will keep it in reserve,” said Raine. For Iranian leaders, he said, “revenge is as much a religious obligation as an emotional response”.

But it would take place on a separate timeline from the war in the Middle East, he said: “It will be a dish eaten cold.”

Late last year Sir Ken McCallum, head of the UK's domestic security service MI5, identified a “wave of Iranian transnational aggression” including foiled assassination plots in Australia, Spain and the Netherlands. He said in October that MI5 had tracked more than 20 potentially lethal Iran-backed plots in 2025 alone.

“Iran’s autocratic regime is . . . frantically trying to silence its opponents around the world, including in the UK,” he said.

Last May, UK police arrested eight men, including seven Iranian nationals, in two investigations of alleged threats to national security. The cases are due for trial in October.



Last May, UK police arrested eight men, including seven Iranian nationals, in two investigations of alleged threats to national security © Ryan Jenkinson/Getty Images

However, experts said the decapitation of Iran’s security establishment — including the killings in March of National Security Council chief Ali Larijani and intelligence minister Esmail Khatib — has limited its capacity for immediate reprisals, though its security forces continue to operate, with evidence of a functioning chain of command.

And despite its reputation for ruthlessness, the Islamic republic has struggled to carry out complex, high-impact operations on western soil.

It has relied heavily on what one analyst called “the gig economy” — criminal gangs, hired operatives and proxy networks hired online.

A former European security official said: “The structure is layered: someone in Iran talks to an intermediary — say in Romania or Chechnya — and that person then handles operatives in the target country. It creates distance and plausible deniability.”

Most apparent Tehran-linked assassination plots have targeted Iranian nationals. One, against radio presenter and activist Masih Alinejad in New York in 2022, involved a handler in Iran who contacted someone in Chechnya, who then managed operatives on the ground, said Roger Macmillan, an expert on counterterrorism and security. The shooter, found with a Chinese-made assault rifle in his car, was arrested before he could attack.

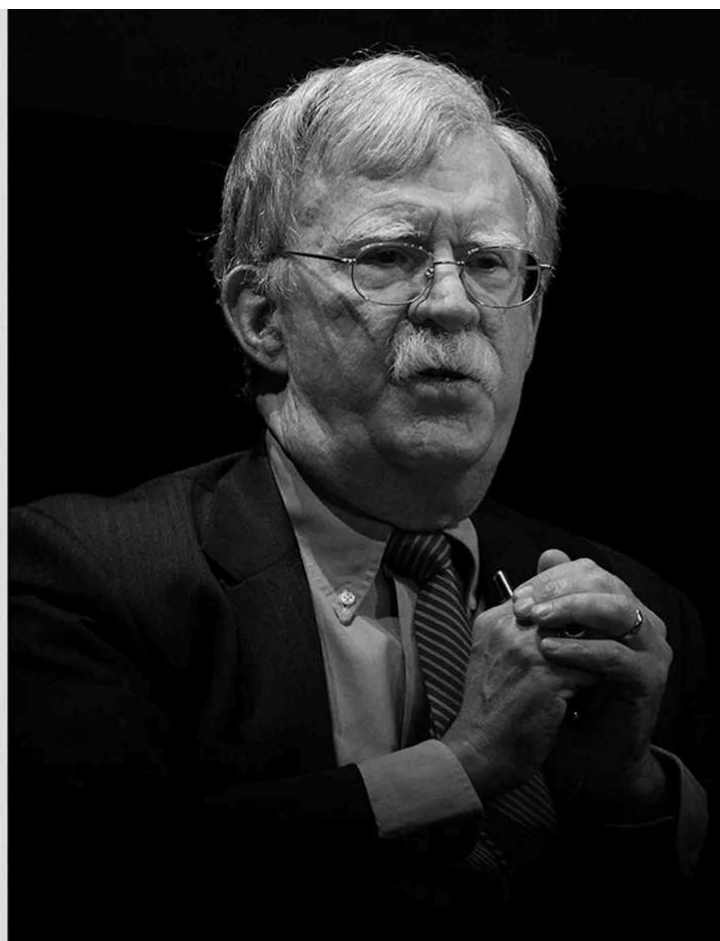


Iranian-American journalist and activist Masih Alinejad was the target of a Tehran-linked assassination plot © Stephanie LeCocq/EPA/Shutterstock

There have also been plots against senior western leaders, however. In 2024 Washington accused Shahram Poursafi, an alleged member of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, of trying to arrange the assassination of John Bolton, Donald Trump's former national security adviser, in retribution for the killing in a US drone strike of Qassem Soleimani, the head of the IRGC's Quds Force, in 2020.

US officials, who have offered a reward of up to \$20mn for information leading to his arrest, said Poursafi spent months in 2021 and 2022 trying to hire "criminal elements" in the US to kill Bolton, allegedly offering \$300,000 for the job.

Poursafi told one contact, who turned out to be an FBI informant, that he had "a second assassination job" after Bolton was dead, according to US authorities. Donald Trump later said US intelligence had briefed him on an alleged Iranian plot against him at around this time.



Washington accused Shahram Poursafi, left, an alleged member of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, of trying to arrange the assassination of John Bolton, right, Trump's former national security adviser © FBI/Getty Images

As a result of Iranian threats, the US government in 2024 provided security details for former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Trump's then-special envoy for Iran, Brian Hook, according to news reports.

"They want to establish deterrence with their adversaries," said one former senior UK intelligence official. "They will definitely want to try for a senior political figure [following Khamenei's assassination]. They'll want to have an eye for an eye."

The case against Poursafi, however, highlights another risk faced by Iranian networks abroad: even before the war they were heavily penetrated by western intelligence and security agencies, said several former western security officials.

A European security official said Iranian special operations were divided into two distinct units. A division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps known by Israel's Mossad intelligence agency as "Unit 400" conducts operations against Iranian targets only.

The Quds Force Special Operations Division, which Mossad calls Unit 840, became fully operational in 2012 and conducts kidnappings and assassination operations abroad against foreign nationals, the European security official said.

Special Operations Division officers have attempted assassinations and kidnappings against Israeli diplomats or intelligence officers in locations including Cyprus, Ethiopia, Kenya, the United Arab Emirates and Colombia, while Israeli businesspeople were also targeted in Ghana, Tanzania and Senegal, said the European security official.

"There's the Iranian dissident target set, which gets one type of team sent after it, and there's a totally separate team that goes after non-Iranians," said Jonathan Hackett, former US Marine Corps special operations veteran and counterterrorism expert.

He said the deaths during the war of several key figures in Iran's security and foreign intelligence services have made any large-scale operation in the near term unlikely.

"The real challenge [the Iranians have] created for themselves is where one individual will monopolise that file, and when he's dead, he can't pass on his clout to the successor."

He added: “We saw that after the killing of Qassem Soleimani. When his successor took over, there was no overlap in influence networks, and that caused a significant decrease in Quds Force activities overseas immediately.”

Some operatives working for Tehran overseas have been trained by Iranians, though they are not necessarily Iranian themselves. A former UK official said: “These tend to be people who are ideologically sympathetic to the Islamic republic.”

The former official said that for these operatives, “this is ideological . . . You are not just an enemy of the state; you are an enemy of the ideology. And there is no moral hesitation, on their side, about killing such people.”

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