

CASE STUDIES

Iran



People in Berlin demand the release of Amirhossein Moradi, Mohammad Rajabi, and Saeed Tamjidi, who took part in street demonstrations and now face possible execution in Iran. Image credit: Sean Gallup/Getty Images.

The Iranian regime’s expansive definition of who constitutes a threat to the Islamic Republic contributes to the breadth and intensity of its transnational repression campaign. The authorities frequently label the targeted dissidents and journalists as terrorists, using the term as a blanket justification for violence and disregard for due process. The campaign incorporates the full spectrum of transnational repression tactics, including assassinations, renditions, detentions, unlawful deportations, Interpol abuse, digital intimidation, spyware, coercion by proxy, and mobility controls. These tools have been deployed against Iranians in at least nine countries in Europe, the Middle East, and North America.²³⁹

The Iranian campaign is distinguished by the total commitment it receives from the state, the level of violence

that it employs, and its sophisticated application of diverse methods against a similarly diverse set of targets. The result is intense intimidation of the Iranian diaspora, from which even those who avoid physical consequences ultimately suffer. As an Iranian activist told Freedom House, “They drain you emotionally, financially, in every way.”²⁴⁰

Assassinations and renditions

Since the revolution in 1979, the Iranian regime has frequently conducted deadly attacks on exiles.²⁴¹ Many opponents of the new political system sought safety abroad, and the diaspora continued to grow as others fled the devastating war with Iraq in the 1980s and worsening repression over the past two decades. The regime’s transnational repression is entangled

with its parallel campaigns of bombings and assassinations aimed at Jewish, Israeli, and US targets around the world; Israeli and US forces have also assassinated Iranian officials and agents, both inside and outside Iran.²⁴² Iranian leaders frequently portray its attacks on exiles as part of the same struggle against the United States and Israel, which they accuse of supporting terrorists.²⁴³

After a lull in exile **assassinations** in the 2000s, Tehran has resumed the tactic in Europe and Turkey in recent years. Since 2014, the regime has been linked to five assassinations or assassination attempts in three countries, and plots were thwarted in at least two others. In December 2015, Mohammad Reza Kolahi Samadi, a refugee living in the Netherlands since 1981, was assassinated outside his home in Almere. The Iranian authorities accused him of being responsible for a 1981 bombing in Iran that was carried out by the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an outlawed militant group. In November 2017, Ahmad Molla Nissi was shot and killed in The Hague, the Netherlands. He had formerly been a leader of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA), another militant group opposed to the Iranian regime.²⁴⁴ In November 2019, Masoud Molavi, a former Iranian intelligence officer who had gone into exile and begun distributing information about the regime from abroad, was gunned down on the streets of Istanbul. Turkish officials ascribed his killing to the Iranian authorities, an assessment shared by the United States.²⁴⁵ An Iranian media owner, Saeed Karimian, was also killed in Istanbul in May 2017, although Iranian state involvement is less clear in that case.²⁴⁶

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Belgian authorities disrupted a bomb plot against a gathering in France of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), a group associated with the MEK, in July 2018.²⁴⁷ An Iranian diplomat was among those arrested and is currently standing trial in Belgium for personally transporting the bomb.²⁴⁸ In September 2018, Danish intelligence officials said they had disrupted an assassination attempt organized by the Iranian regime against the head of the ASMLA in Denmark.²⁴⁹ Albanian

authorities announced in October 2019 that they had foiled multiple attacks against an MEK compound in that country.²⁵⁰

Another recent tactic is **renditions**, in which Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) leads operations to kidnap exiles from other countries and forcibly repatriate them. In October 2019, Ruhollah Zam, a refugee in France who ran a popular website and a channel on the social media platform Telegram, traveled to Iraq for unknown reasons and was promptly taken to Iran. The IRGC said the kidnapping was "a complicated intelligence operation," although Iraqi officials denied that the IRGC had independently taken Zam from Iraqi soil.²⁵¹ Zam was tried for offenses against the state, convicted, and eventually executed in December 2020.²⁵² In November 2019, Rasoul Danialzadeh, a businessman with connections to the family of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, was brought from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in an intelligence operation to face corruption charges in Iran.²⁵³ In August 2020, the IRGC kidnapped California-based activist Jamshid Sharmahd from the UAE while he was traveling to India. He has been accused of responsibility for a 2008 terrorist attack in Iran. Sharmahd had previously been the target of an assassination plot in California.²⁵⁴ And in October 2020, the IRGC claimed credit for kidnapping a Swedish citizen of Iranian origin—Habib Asyud, another leader of the ASMLA—as he was transiting Turkey.²⁵⁵ In all of these cases, the targets were afforded no due process or opportunity to challenge their removal.

Coerced or voluntary recruitment of Iranians abroad is a key component of the regime's transnational repression campaign. Authorities in Sweden charged a man with spying on ethnic Arab refugees from Iran in November 2019.²⁵⁶ In an August 2020 interview with the *Guardian*, a US-based Iranian software engineer described being imprisoned for a week on a trip to visit family in Iran, during which he was pressured to act as an agent for the regime. He agreed in order to be released, but then publicized his ordeal and refused to cooperate.²⁵⁷

Despite its relative international isolation, the Iranian state is still able in some cases to use a combination of bilateral pressure and co-optation of other countries' institutions to achieve **detentions and deportations**. The rendition of Habib Asyud from Turkey in October 2020 would have required cooperation from Turkish authorities. In December 2019, two participants in the nationwide protests of that year, Mohammad Rajabi and Saeed Tamjidi, fled to Turkey and applied for asylum but were summarily returned to Iran

by Turkish authorities. They now face the death penalty.²⁵⁸ The regime has also continued to use Interpol to harass exiles, even though the clear lack of judicial independence in the country should limit the credibility of its notices. Mehdi Khosravi, a political refugee in the United Kingdom, was arrested in Italy in 2016 and held for a week based on an Iranian “red notice” with Interpol; he had previously traveled elsewhere in the European Union without difficulty.²⁵⁹

“Everyday” tactics: Threats, spyware, coercion by proxy, and mobility controls

The Iranian state’s transnational repression reaches far beyond those who have been kidnapped, killed, or detained, exerting other forms of pressure on anyone involved in opposition politics or independent journalism. The regime is notable for the broad spectrum of tactics that it employs, which collectively amount to a constant barrage of **harassment, intimidation, and surveillance**.

Masih Alinejad, an Iranian journalist in New York, was threatened with kidnapping following the rendition of Jamshid Sharmahd, the US-based activist.²⁶⁰ In January 2020, Reporters without Borders (RSF) counted 200 Iranian journalists living overseas who had been threatened, including 50 who had received death threats.²⁶¹ In February 2020, four UN special rapporteurs issued a statement about the targeting of Iranian journalists abroad, highlighting a written death threat against journalist Rana Rahimpour.²⁶² The pressure sometimes involves smear campaigns that take on surreal dimensions, such as the creation of fake news websites that mirror real ones and falsify statements by journalists in order to discredit them.²⁶³

The regime frequently pairs these threats with **coercion by proxy**, in which family members within Iran are threatened or detained in order to silence exiles. The journalist

“It grows a distance between you.”

–Iranian exile speaking about being forced to conceal their work from their family

Masih Alinejad’s sister was forced to disown her on state television; her brother was arrested and sentenced to eight years in prison.²⁶⁴ Other journalists in RSF’s research described elderly family members being called in for questioning. The authorities often refuse to allow relatives of exiles to travel abroad, creating an implicit threat by guaranteeing state access to exiles’ loved ones. Dissidents also have their passports confiscated and their ability to travel curtailed.²⁶⁵

For some Iranians abroad, the only solution is to keep their family at arm’s length and to obscure their political activities. One Iranian activist described being forced to conceal his work from his family, saying, “It grows a distance between you.”²⁶⁶

Iranian authorities also run highly sophisticated **spyware** campaigns. According to a paper on the topic from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), “offensive cyber operations have become a core tool of Iranian statecraft,” and attacks on civil society “often foreshadow” attacks on other, harder targets.²⁶⁷ Iranians abroad receive complex spear-phishing attempts, with one example imitating an email from US Citizenship and Immigration Services, and another setting up a fake event for human rights activists in Spain in order to trick them into downloading malicious software.²⁶⁸ An Iranian exile journalist told researcher Marcus Michaelsen, “There is no day when I open my email and I don’t have a phishing email.”²⁶⁹