



Iranian terrorist activity in Africa: the Swedish connection

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On February 4, 2021 it was reported that Ethiopia has arrested 15 people over a plot to attack the United Arab Emirates' embassy in Addis Ababa. Some of the 15 suspects arrested had been spotted near the UAE embassy. Ethiopia's state news agency EPA reported, citing the state's intelligence service, that the group was working at the direction of foreigners. The group was linked to Iran after their ringleader, Swedish resident Ahmed Ismail, was arrested in Sweden.

Israel says that only three of the 15 arrested may be "real Iranian operatives", while the rest are members of an Ethiopian network. An unspecified amount of arms, explosives and documents were seized during the operation. The group took the mission from a foreign terrorist group and was preparing to inflict significant damage on properties and human lives. The Ethiopian authorities had been monitoring the activities of these groups since November 2020 in collaboration with several foreign intelligence services in Europe, Asia, and Africa.¹

A second group of suspects was planning to attack the UAE's diplomatic mission in neighboring Sudan. Ethiopia's National Intelligence Security Service was working with its Sudanese counterparts on that aspect of the plot, which was confirmed by a Sudanese official.

Recent intelligence released by Israel and the United States, originally reported by *The New York Times*, claims that Iran was behind the recent plot to attack the UAE's embassy in Ethiopia to avenge the killings of Qassem Soleimani and Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. In addition, the report suggested that Iran had also activated "sleeper cells" in Addis Ababa in late 2020 to gain more intelligence on American and Israeli embassies. Rear Admiral Heidi K. Berg, the director of intelligence at the Pentagon's Africa Command, confirmed that Sweden and Ethiopia had "collaborated on the disruption to the plot". Sofia Hellqvist, spokeswoman for the Swedish police authority, did not answer questions about the arrest but instead referred to the authorities in Ethiopia.²

Iran, however, has denied the *NYT* report.

A high-ranking US defense official linked the arrests in Addis Ababa and the failed Iranian plan to assassinate in September 2020 the US Ambassador to South Africa, Lana Marks.³

Attia Essawi has widely reported in the Egyptian *Ahram Online* other Iranian attempts of its kind, in Egypt's southern backyard. For instance, according to US Foreign Policy magazine, senior Somali government officials reported that Tehran's interests in the Horn of Africa included establishing

¹ Reuters Staff, "Ethiopia says it foiled attack on UAE embassy in Addis Ababa," *Reuters*, February 4, 2021.

² Statecraft Staff, "Intelligence Reports Reveal Iranian Ploy to Attack UAE Embassy in Ethiopia," *Statecraft, World News Monitor*: 16 February, 2021, <https://www.statecraft.co.in/article/intelligence-reports-reveal-iranian-ploy-to-attack-uae-embassy-in-ethiopia>

³ Nahal Toosi and Natasha Bertrand, "Officials: Iran weighing plot to kill U.S. ambassador to South Africa," *Politico*, September 13, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/13/iran-south-africa-ambassador-assassination-plot-413831>

secret relations with the militant Al-Shabaab (Youth) al-Qaeda affiliated group. This relationship extended to targets outside Somalia, such as using extremist groups to transfer weapons to the Houthi rebels in Yemen and to groups in other countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan, Mozambique, and the Central African Republic.⁴

In June 2019, the British Daily Telegraph quoted Western officials as saying that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard had formed networks of sleeper cells to attack American and European targets such as embassies, foreign military bases and foreign employees in Africa under the supervision of the 400th Unit of the Al-Quds Force. In April 2019, one such network was exposed in Chad and the Central African Republic, whose members had received training in camps run by Iran. Four years before, a network of two Iranians and others who had plotted bombings in Nairobi, Kenya, was also exposed.⁵

Israeli officials said that the Iranian apparatus responsible for the failed attack on the Iranian opposition conference in France in June 2018 and for another conspiracy during the same year in Denmark was also responsible for orchestrating the failed operation in the Ethiopian capital.⁶

It should be noted that on February 4, 2021, an Iranian diplomat accused of planning to bomb a meeting of an exiled opposition group was sentenced in Belgium to 20 years in prison in the first trial of an Iranian official for suspected terrorism in Europe since Iran's 1979 revolution. Assadolah Assadi, third counsellor at Iran's embassy in Vienna, was found guilty of attempted terrorism after a foiled plot to bomb a rally of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) near Paris in June 2018. He was arrested in Germany before being transferred to Belgium for trial.⁷ French officials have said he was running the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence's network in Europe.⁸

The Iranian European intelligence network was also targeting in Denmark 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. In late September 2018, Danish authorities closed bridges into Copenhagen and suspended train operations in connection with this terrorist case. Three dangerous people involved in a "serious crime" and travelling in a Swedish-

⁴ Attia Essawi , "Iran awakens African sleeper cells," *ahramonline*, February 26, 2021, at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1203/404730/AlAhram-Weekly/World/Iran-awakens-African-sleeper-cells.aspx>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Clement Rossignol, Robin Emmott, "In first for Europe, Iran envoy sentenced to 20-year prison term over bomb plot," *Reuters*, February 4, 2021.

⁸ On the European activity of this Iranian network , see Ely Karmon, "The Return of Iranian Terrorism to Europe," *ICT website*, November 21, 2018, at https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2287/Return_of_%20Iranian_Terrorism_to_Europe#gsc.tab=0, and "Europe could pay high price for ignoring the Iranian/Hezbollah threat," *Jerusalem Post*, July 18, 2019.

registered car were hunted by Danish police. At the end of the saga, a Norwegian citizen of Iranian origin was arrested in Sweden on 21 October in connection with the alleged plan and extradited to Denmark.⁹

Farzin Nadimi, an expert on Iranian military affairs at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said that Iran “may wish to send a message to the new American administration that if it does not succeed in reaching a speedy agreement with the Iranian government on the Iranian nuclear program, this is what they will face.”

More recently, on January 29, 2021, Iran send another message of this kind, by the bombing of a “very low-intensity improvised device” outside the Israeli Embassy building in New Delhi, India.¹⁰

Swedish citizens involved in Iranian and Hezbollah plots

Many could be surprised that Sweden was the platform for organizing such a sophisticated terrorist operation.

The Swedish authorities, and media, are quite mum on this affair and on the citizenship and background of Ahmed Ismail, the ringleader of the Ethiopian network. The Police didn't report anything at all on this affair, but the lead prosecutor has said that the investigation will not be finished before summer. Three persons were apprehended, actually two persons remain in custody, both indicted for terrorism crimes, while the third was released due to lack of evidence.¹¹

Ahmed Ismail is a citizen of Eritrea, but a legal resident of Sweden. Eritrea doesn't recognize dual citizenship (or rather, they view everyone with an Eritrean passport as only Eritrean) but Sweden does, so he could be a Swedish citizen as well. All the information behind the arrests are from outside Sweden, i.e. provided by non-Swedish intelligence agencies.

Terrorist experts have been aware of the participation of Swedish citizens in planned Iranian/Hezbollah attacks since the 1990s.

In the 1990's there was a tense and busy time in Sweden, with considerable Iranian/Hezbollah activity. Members of the Kurdish community became the main victims of Iran/IRGC/Hezbollah, which murdered several people.¹²

⁹ Ely Karmon, *The Return of Iranian Terrorism to Europe*.

¹⁰ Ely Karmon, “Iranian rationale behind the New Delhi terrorist attack,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 2, 2021, at <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/iranian-rationale-behind-the-new-delhi-terrorist-attack-657518>

¹¹ Interview on February 24, 2021 with Magnus Norell, Senior Policy Advisor at the European Foundation for Democracy in Brussels.

¹² Interview with Magnus Norell.

Karim Mohammedzadeh, a Kurdish dissident, was assassinated in 1990 in his apartment in the town of Nynäshamn, south of Stockholm.¹³ Efat Ghazi, a Kurdish refugee from Iran, not politically active, was killed by a letter bomb in Västerås, Sweden, in 1990. Her husband, Emir Ghazi, was a former member of the politburo of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (PDK-I) and later leader of the Independence Party of Kurdistan.¹⁴ Kamran Hedayati, an Iranian Kurdish dissident, was seriously wounded after opening a letter bomb in his apartment in Stockholm, in January 1994. He lost his hands and sight in the attack and died from his wounds two years later.¹⁵ These murders remain officially unsolved. However, the Iranian government is widely believed to have ordered the assassinations as it had many similarities with other assassinations and assassination attempts on Iranian Kurdish dissidents around the world at the time.

In June 1995 Swedish Security Police (SAPO) Director General, Anders Eriksson, said that over the past year SAPO had foiled plans for several terrorist attacks in which Hezbollah was involved. The Israeli Embassy in Stockholm was under rigorous surveillance. In summer 1994, a car containing explosives was found in Malmö. Police believed it was part of a planned attack on Israeli interests. The leader of the Shia Muslim congregation in Malmö was deported to Lebanon under the terms of the Terrorist Act. In May 1995, two Hezbollah supporters who had been living in Trollhattan were also expelled.¹⁶

Hussein Atris was born in the Shiite town Nabatiya, in South Lebanon, in 1964. His family is well connected to the Hezbollah and his brother, Muhammad Atris, a Germany resident, was involved in the past in the Iranian assassination of four Kurdish opposition figures in 1992 in Germany. Atris married a Swedish woman in 1996 which made him eligible for a Swedish passport, which he allegedly exploited for the benefit of Hezbollah's international operations. Atris previously owned a hair salon in Gothenburg, before returning with his family to Lebanon more than 10 years ago. However, he revisited Sweden to obtain a passport and in 2010 and 2011 made many trips from Europe and the Middle East to Thailand.¹⁷

Hussein Atris was detained at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport on January 12, 2012 before leaving Thailand, on suspicion of planning to blow up Israeli targets in the country. He has led police to the

¹³ Skeppholm, Teresa. "I nationens intresse". Uppdrag granskning (in Swedish). Sveriges Television. Archived from the original on 2006-05-27.

¹⁴ Fälth, Gun (7 September 1990). "Kvinna sprängd till döds". Dagens Nyheter (in Swedish).

¹⁵ Baksi, Kurdo (19 April 1994). "BLIND EFTER BREVBOMB" (in Swedish). Expressen. Retrieved 7 January 2020.

¹⁶ Edward F. Mickolus and Susan L. Simmons, *"Terrorism, 1992-1995: A Chronology of Events and a Selectively Annotated Bibliography (Bibliographies and Indexes in Military Studies)*, Greenwood Press, 1997, p. 828.

¹⁷ "Terror suspect still at large may be Hezbollah operative," *The Nation Thailand*, January 15, 2012, at <https://www.nationthailand.com/national/30173769>

discovery of 4,380kg of urea fertilizer and 10 gallons of liquid ammonia nitrate in Samut Sakhon province, 36km south of Bangkok. Atris had rented the premises since January 2010 and claimed that the explosive precursor had been stored there a long time. Thai court has sentenced him to two years and eight months in jail for possessing a large amount of fertilizer that could be used to make explosives.¹⁸

Hosssam Taleb Yaacoub, a dual Swedish-Lebanese citizen, was arrested in his Limassol hotel room in Cyprus on July 7, 2012, just a few hours after returning from a surveillance operation at Larnaca airport. It happened just days before the bombing of a bus with Israeli tourists at Burgas airport in Bulgaria. He confessed to be an active member of Hezbollah since his recruitment by a Lebanese called Reda, in 2007.”¹⁹

Hosssam Yaacoub was trained by at least three Hezbollah experts during several months, at a Hezbollah military camp in Lebanon. In 2009, he was sent on a mission to Cyprus “to create a cover story for people to get to know [him], to keep coming with a justifiable purpose and without giving rise to suspicions.” On his return from his 2009 trip to Cyprus Yaacoub was assigned to his next mission to Lyon, France, to receive a bag from one person and deliver it to someone else. Shortly thereafter, he was sent to Amsterdam, where he retrieved a cell phone, two SIM cards, and an unknown object wrapped in newspapers, and he brought them back to Lebanon. Then, in December 2011 and again in January 2012, Yaacoub went back to Cyprus “to create a cover story” as a merchant interested in importing to Lebanon juices from a specific local company in Cyprus. He was also tasked with collecting information about renting a warehouse in Cyprus.

For all of his European travels Yaacoub used his Swedish passport, which he had renewed for this purpose. Once his basic training was complete, Yaacoub became a salaried operative, earning \$600 a month. His December 2011 visit to Cyprus involved separate missions, including to spot Israeli restaurants in Limassol, where Jews eat “kosher.” On March 21, 2013, a Cypriot criminal court convicted Yaacoub of helping to plan attacks against Israeli tourists on the island. After serving two years and five months of his criminal sentence, Yaacoub was granted early release from prison and escorted to Sweden. He is believed to have subsequently returned to Lebanon.

Hassan Khalil Hizran, 55 years old, a Swedish national, has been charged in Israel on suspicion of having spied on Israeli military facilities. He was arrested in Tel Aviv on July 21, 2015 on suspicion of

¹⁸ Online Reporters, AFP, “US sanctions Hezbollah terrorist released from Thailand,” *Bangkok Post*, April 29, 2015, at <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/545451/us-sanctions-hezbollah-terrorist-released-from-thailand>

¹⁹ Matthew Levitt, “Hizb Allah Resurrected: The Party of God’s Return to Tradecraft,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 6, Issue 4, April 2013, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/CTCSentinel-Vol6Iss41.pdf>

having collected information about Israeli military facilities that the militant group planned to target.²⁰

Under plea bargain, prosecution dropped more serious charges of terrorism and direct contact with Hezbollah but found him guilty of passing information to a foreign agent terror group. Hizran returned to Lebanon in 2011 and 2013 for meetings with Hezbollah operatives. He was ordered to gather information about army bases and about Ben Gurion Airport security. His son, said his father had traveled to Israel several times before.²¹

Criminal activity

The 2019 Report of The National Risk Assessment of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in Sweden mentions a major investigation in 2017 involving a Lebanese citizen who offered money laundering services to organised crime. Part of the profit from this enterprise was used to finance the military branch of Hezbollah.²²

Activity against the Iranian community in Sweden

Swedish society is very vulnerable to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Shia militias whose members are in Sweden and have been granted asylum in violation of the Aliens Act, wrote Nima Rostami, a lawyer expert in Migration Law. In principle, the Swedish Migration Agency does not carry out background checks on foreigners who apply to Sweden, and society is therefore extremely vulnerable.²³

These groups are linked to the Iran-backed Imam Ali Mosque in Järfälla. According to Iranian authorities, the imam of the mosque was sent by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The center is controlled and thus subordinates to the Iranian state. The Iranian embassy in Sweden participates in logistics to this mosque and the Quds force is highly involved in financing Shia followers - individuals and groups - in Sweden.

²⁰ "Swede accused of spying for Hezbollah in Israel," *The Local*, August 9, 2015, at <https://www.thelocal.se/20150809/swede-accused-of-spying-for-hezbollah-in-israel>

²¹ Raoul Wootliff, "Israel gives Lebanese-Swede 18 months for Hezbollah spying," *The Times of Israel*, November 29, 2015.

²² "National Risk Assessment of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in Sweden: 2019, A Report By: The Swedish Companies Registration Office, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, the Swedish Economic Crime Authority, at <https://www.government.se/4aed70/contentassets/70c9762f411144dbbaf1020b1a5425b3/swedish-national-risk-assessment-2019-english-20191205-.pdf>

²³ Nima Rostami, "Open the eyes of the Iranian threat to Sweden," *Expressen*, January 4, 2020, at <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/oppna-ogonen-for-det-iranska-hotet-mot-sverige/#:~:text=Det%20svenska%20samh%C3%A4ller%20%C3%A4r%20mycket,advokaten%20och%20iraniern%20Ni ma%20Rostami>.

These activities are well known and documented. All Swedish governments have been aware of the Quds Force's crimes against humanity. Despite this, they continue to have a good relationship with Iran and have been passive towards the IRGC, argues Rostami. As the Iranian diaspora is not pro-regime, the Iranian regime has, via Quds and the security service, coordinated targeted strategies for recruiting Shia Muslim migrants worldwide, including in Sweden. The aim is to spread Shia Islam through various pressures and eventually become an increasingly strong power factor.²⁴

On December 20, 2019, Raghdan al-Hraishawi, a Swedish-Iraqi citizen was convicted by the Stockholm District Court of espionage against exiled Iranians. The man is said to have spied on opposition Iranians in Sweden for almost four years, with the aim of passing the information on to Iran, according to the indictment. The espionage was directed at the group of Ahwazis, ethnic Arab Iranians, and the man is said to have photographed and filmed Ahwazi conference participants in Sweden, the Netherlands and Belgium under the guise of working for an online newspaper. According to the prosecutor, the espionage may have affected several hundred people.²⁵

A new Israeli study, by Michael Barak, a senior researcher at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) in Israel, indicates that pro-Iranian terrorist activity based in Lebanon is expanding across the globe, including the appointment of individuals to high-profile positions in order to push anti-Israel policy in numerous countries and even conceal Hezbollah activity in Europe and the United States.²⁶

The organization known as the "Arab and Muslim Union for Supporting the Resistance" is used as a pro-Iranian international platform that seeks to advance the goals of the resistance axis against the US, Israel and their allies. The group is headed by Lebanese national Yehia Ghaddar. Some of the organization's branches abroad carried out propaganda activities in praise of Hezbollah and its activities against Israel.²⁷

The organizations has an active website in Sweden and is leaded by Prof. Khaled Al-Saadi.²⁸ Al Saadi is also head of the Association of the Palestinian diaspora in Sweden, Tajammu Aidun, which has a

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Sweden. A man is convicted of refugee espionage," *Expressen*, December 20, 2019.

²⁶ Dean Shmuel Elmas, "Report: Iran quietly increasing its reach worldwide," *Israel Hayom*, February 25, 2021, at <https://www.israelhayom.com/2021/02/25/report-iran-silently-spreading-its-tentacles-across-the-globe/>

²⁷ See the full article: Michael Barak, "Al-Tajammu as a pro-Iranian International platform to leverage the axis of resistance" (in Hebrew), *ICT website*, February 2021, <https://www.ict.org.il/images/%D7%90%D7%9C-%D7%AA%D7%92%D7%9E%D7%A2%20HEB.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3LAdN83viyclJsGlqr0XCCAD3I-1HNsziUFlamhybC4I3CCO7xdeJf7sM>

²⁸ http://www.tajammo3.org/category/%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF?filter_by=popular7

Facebook page, The Youth Organization (Shatat Al Falastini).²⁹ Another active member of this “Union” is Musab Salaymeh, an economist by profession.

Al-Saadi participated a month ago at an online conference in memory of the assassination of General Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Quds Force in Iraq, organized by the entities supporting the resistance against Israel.³⁰ The branch in Sweden praised in September 2019 Sheikh Nasrallah and his organization for their activities against Israel and their “success in renewing deterrence against Israel.”

In March 2018, EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini, responding to an open letter from European parliament members calling for a full ban of Hezbollah, after a series of foiled Iranian terrorist attacks in France and Denmark, said it would be up to the European Council and EU members to make that designation. The European Union differentiates between Hezbollah’s political and military wings, with the latter designated as a terrorist group.

Swedish MEP Lars Adaktusson, one of the authors of the letter, was scathing in his reaction to Mogherini’s response. “EU High Representative Mogherini speaks in the same sentence of ‘constructive dialogue with all political parties,’ which presumably includes Hezbollah, and ‘strengthening Lebanese institutions.’ This is an oxymoron,” he said. “Hezbollah is itself the source of instability and, by looking the other way, the EU is failing its allies in the region and imperiling the lives of European citizens at home.” Adaktusson, a representative of Sweden’s Christian Democrats, earlier described the open letter, which was signed by 60 MEPs, as a “first step” towards having Hezbollah in its entirety designated a terrorist group. Adaktusson said MEPs would go on stressing the danger posed by Hezbollah. “We will continue to sound the alarm on Hezbollah’s nefarious activities. Europe simply can’t afford to wait for another attack like the one Hezbollah carried out in 2012 on vacationers in Burgas, Bulgaria,” he said.³¹

A year later, despite the decision by UK and Germany to ban Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, nothing has happened on the Swedish side.³²

Conclusion

It seems the Swedish law enforcement and intelligence agencies do not consider the Iranian/Hezbollah a serious threat.

²⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/alshatatalfalastini/>

³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oe6wDv5pWd4>

³¹ Mahmud el-Shafey, “EU failing allies by not banning Hezbollah in its entirety, MEP says,” *Arab Weekly*, March 29, 2018, at <https://theiarabweekly.com/eu-failing-allies-not-banning-hezbollah-its-entirety-mep-says>

³² “Ban Hezbollah’s activities in Sweden,” *JellyPages.com*, 22 May 2020, <https://www.jellypages.com/business/Ban-Hezbollahs-activities-in-Sweden-h100328.html>

Sweden's National Center for Terrorist Threat Assessment (NCT) is a permanent working group with personnel from the Security Police, the Swedish Armed Forces Radio Institute (FRA) and the Military Intelligence and Security Service (Must). Its task is to make strategic assessments of the terrorist threat against Sweden and Swedish interests in the short and long term.

The reading of its annual reports for the years 2016 to 2020 didn't find any mention of Iranian or Hezbollah activity, despite the terrorist plots involving them since 2012, and more so since the wave of Iranian terrorist activity in Europe in 2018.³³

Possibly, a more transparent and public report on the threat represented by these two dangerous actors could deter them and limit their use of Swedish citizens or territory for terrorist operations.

³³ National Center for Terrorist Threat Assessment, at <https://www.sakerhetspolisen.se/kontraterrorism/nationellt-centrum-for-terrorhotbedomning.html>

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