# Iran accelerates use of organised crime gangs to target dissidents abroad



Recent reports highlight an alarming rise in Iran's tactics for targeting dissidents abroad, wherein the regime increasingly relies on criminal gangs for illicit activities, including assassination and kidnapping. According to intelligence assessments from the US and Israel, these actions have intensified markedly since 2022, with several high-profile targets, including ex-White House officials, falling under scrutiny. In an unsettling incident, UK police recently arrested a group of Iranian nationals suspected of plotting a terrorist attack, allegedly aimed at the Israeli embassy in London.

Court documents obtained by BBC Eye Investigations reveal a systematic pattern of hiring criminal elements, particularly drawing attention to the operations of Naji Sharifi Zindashti, a notorious Iranian crime figure implicated in various international drug smuggling activities. Zindashti’s connections to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are under suspicion, adding a complex layer to his criminal profile that includes his alleged involvement in the 2017 assassination of Saeed Karimian. Karimian, whose broadcasts were considered a threat to Iranian ideologies, was murdered in Turkey shortly after being sentenced to prison in absentia by an Iranian court.

Zindashti has faced legal repercussions in Turkey linked to these murders, yet his swift escape back to Iran raises questions about possible collusion with Iranian intelligence. Cengiz Erdinc, a Turkish investigative journalist, remarked on the recurring pattern of overlap between organised crime and the Iranian intelligence apparatus, suggesting that Zindashti's criminal enterprise might serve as a cover for state-sponsored hit jobs. The extent of his operations came into sharper focus following the murder of Massoud Molavi, another critic of the Iranian regime, who was killed under suspicious circumstances in Istanbul.

The Iranian regime's strategies for silencing dissenters have evolved, with high-profile cases revealing the involvement of international gangs. Notably, the Thieves-in-Law, a criminal organisation originating from the Soviet Union, has been implicated in several plots, indicating a shift toward more organised and globally coordinated efforts to eliminate threats to the regime. Recent court rulings in the United States have brought to light an Iranian-backed plot aimed at US-Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad. This case, resulting in the conviction of two men with documented connections to Iranian operatives, underscores the operational alliance between the IRGC and criminal organisations.

Alinejad, a vocal critic of the Iranian government and spokesperson for women's rights, has faced numerous threats due to her activism. In March 2025, federal prosecutions linked to a plot against her culminated in convictions for Rafat Amirov and Polad Omarov, both of whom participated in a scheme orchestrated by the IRGC to assassinate her in New York. The investigation revealed extensive coordination involving digital evidence, including communications between the defendants and Iranian agents, highlighting the extent of Iran’s reach in its efforts to stifle dissent.

As Alinejad continues her advocacy from the US, her calls for the international community to combat Iran's transnational repression gain traction. There have been calls for increased protection for dissidents and actions against the networks that support them. Notably, charges have been brought against Brigadier General Ruhollah Bazghandi, a figure within the IRGC linked to Alinejad's assassination plot, illustrating the US commitment to confronting Iran’s extraterritorial threats.

The emergence of similar operations in Europe further highlights a disturbing trend. The so-called "Sunflowers Case" in Spain, involving the attempted assassination of Alejo Vidal-Quadras, a prominent critic of Iranian policies, sheds light on the broader implications of Iran's use of criminal networks to achieve political ends. Investigations revealed connections between the perpetrator and Iranian influence, reinforcing concerns over Iran's willingness to engage in violent retribution against its opponents beyond its borders.

Amidst these developments, Western intelligence agencies are on high alert, working to unravel the complex web of relationships linking criminal enterprises with state-sponsored activities. With reports indicating over 20 credible threats against individuals in the UK linked to these Iranian operations, the international community faces the pressing challenge of ensuring the safety of dissidents while holding Iran accountable for its clandestine activities.

In summary, the worrying pattern of Iran leveraging organised crime for extraterritorial operations underscores the regime's relentless pursuit to silence dissent and maintain its grip on power. Efforts to dismantle these networks are essential not only for safeguarding individuals targeted by these operations but also for upholding broader principles of justice and accountability on an international scale.

### Reference Map

1. Core article
2. Iran-backed plot against Masih Alinejad
3. Charges against senior Iranian military official for plotting to kill Alinejad
4. Court convictions in the assassination plot against Alinejad
5. The Sunflowers Case involving assassination attempts in Europe
6. Overview of threats and implications for dissidents in the UK and beyond.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c308p0rjq9zo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/two-convicted-us-iran-backed-plot-kill-journalist-2025-03-21/> - In March 2025, a Manhattan federal jury convicted Rafat Amirov and Polad Omarov for their roles in an Iran-backed assassination plot targeting Masih Alinejad, a U.S.-Iranian journalist critical of Tehran's regime. The two men, linked to a Russian organized crime group, faced charges including murder-for-hire. The Justice Department's crackdown on transnational repression revealed that Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps had paid them $500,000 for the targeted killing. The plot unraveled when Khalid Mehdiyev, connected to the case, was arrested with an AK-47 near Alinejad’s home, leading to his cooperation with prosecutors. Amirov and Omarov may face life imprisonment during their sentencing on September 17. ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/two-convicted-us-iran-backed-plot-kill-journalist-2025-03-21/?utm_source=openai))
3. <https://apnews.com/article/1c12a0add2181238568109754f5ed6bd> - In November 2024, federal prosecutors in New York charged senior Iranian military official Brig. Gen. Ruhollah Bazghandi and three others with plotting to kill Iranian American activist and author Masih Alinejad. Bazghandi, a former chief of the Revolutionary Guard's counterintelligence department, and the three men are in Iran and remain at large. Alinejad expressed her gratitude towards U.S. authorities for safeguarding her, reminiscing her distress but expressing joy and relief upon hearing the charges. The U.S. aims to halt Iran's repression efforts targeting dissidents abroad. Alinejad, exiled in NYC, continues advocating for Iranian freedoms, despite facing threats. ([apnews.com](https://apnews.com/article/1c12a0add2181238568109754f5ed6bd?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://time.com/7270415/iran-assassins-new-york-trial-conviction-guilty-verdict-masih-alinejad/> - In April 2025, a U.S. federal jury convicted two Eastern European gangsters, Rafat Amirov and Polad Omarov, for their roles in a failed 2022 Iranian plot to assassinate prominent Iranian dissident and journalist Masih Alinejad in Brooklyn. The plot, orchestrated by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), involved surveillance and a planned shooting by a hired hitman, Khalid Mehdiyev, who was arrested with an assault rifle outside Alinejad's home. This trial marked the first full exposition in a U.S. court of Iran’s targeted assassination efforts abroad. Digital forensic evidence—including phone data, search histories, and WhatsApp messages—demonstrated coordination among Iranian intelligence operatives and the defendants. Brig. Gen. Ruhollah Bazghandi was linked to the plot through extensive online searches related to Alinejad and U.S. sanctions. Mehdiyev testified against the others, bolstering the prosecution’s case despite defense efforts to question his credibility and motives. Alinejad, who has long been a target of Iranian threats due to her activism and criticism of the regime, testified passionately about the impact of Iran's campaigns against her. The case underscored Iran’s ongoing attempts to silence dissidents abroad and highlighted U.S. efforts to thwart such operations. ([time.com](https://time.com/7270415/iran-assassins-new-york-trial-conviction-guilty-verdict-masih-alinejad/?utm_source=openai))
5. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2024/07/14/the-sunflowers-case-the-petty-criminal-the-attempted-assassination-and-the-shadow-cast-by-iran_6684192_7.html> - In July 2024, 'Le Monde' reported on the 'Sunflowers Case,' involving Mehrez Ayari, a petty criminal who allegedly attempted to assassinate Spanish politician Alejo Vidal-Quadras in Madrid on November 9, 2023. Ayari shot Vidal-Quadras, a prominent critic of Iran and ally of the Iranian opposition, potentially under orders linked to the Iranian regime. Passers-by helped save Vidal-Quadras, and Ayari fled on a scooter, which was later found burned. Spanish investigators connected Ayari to the crime through CCTV footage. Ayari, already a suspect in a 2022 murder in France, was arrested in the Netherlands in June 2024. The investigation revealed Ayari’s possible connections to the Moroccan mafia and potential involvement in a larger network performing hits for political reasons, suspected to be sponsored by Iran. Vidal-Quadras had accused the Iranian regime of the assassination attempt, highlighting Iran's history of using criminal groups for extraterritorial operations. ([lemonde.fr](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2024/07/14/the-sunflowers-case-the-petty-criminal-the-attempted-assassination-and-the-shadow-cast-by-iran_6684192_7.html?utm_source=openai))
6. <https://www.reuters.com/legal/two-men-face-us-trial-over-iran-backed-plot-kill-dissident-2025-03-10/> - In March 2025, Reuters reported that two men, Rafat Amirov and Polad Omarov, faced a U.S. trial for an alleged Tehran-backed attempt to kill Iranian American journalist Masih Alinejad, who has been critical of Iran's treatment of women. Prosecutors allege that Iran's Revolutionary Guard hired the two men, who purportedly belong to a Russian organized crime group, to carry out the murder in New York. Both men have pleaded not guilty. Alinejad, who has previously been targeted by Iranian intelligence officers, will testify. This trial is part of a broader U.S. initiative to combat transnational repression. Another co-conspirator, Khalid Mehdiyev, was arrested with an AK-47 outside Alinejad's home in 2022. A Revolutionary Guard brigadier general, Ruhollah Bazghandi, who allegedly orchestrated the plot, remains at large. The trial could offer insights into the alleged collaboration between Iran's government and criminal organizations. ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/legal/two-men-face-us-trial-over-iran-backed-plot-kill-dissident-2025-03-10/?utm_source=openai))
7. <https://apnews.com/article/d17a4b4bad3205c705f4e61f5a288785> - In March 2025, the trial proceedings began in New York for Rafat Amirov and Polad Omarov, accused of plotting to assassinate Masih Alinejad, an Iran-born journalist and U.S. citizen known for exposing Iranian human rights abuses. Prosecutor Jacob Gutwillig claimed that Iran hired the two men as part of a decade-long effort to silence Alinejad for her activism, which includes encouraging Iranian women to resist the mandate of wearing hijabs. Key testimony comes from Khalid Mehdiyev, who was arrested with an AK-47 and has cooperated with the government. Defense attorneys argue the evidence is circumstantial and characterize their clients as scammers but not killers. Alinejad, who fled Iran after the 2009 election and became a U.S. citizen in 2019, will testify about her opposition to the Iranian regime. ([apnews.com](https://apnews.com/article/d17a4b4bad3205c705f4e61f5a288785?utm_source=openai))