



Iran's Lawfare in Europe Normalizes Its Geopolitical Strategy

by Irina Tsukerman

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,637, July 12, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Iran has shifted away from political assassinations of Ahwazi Arab and Kurdish opposition figures in Europe. It is now trying to normalize its ethnocentric, Khomeinist revolutionary agenda abroad by using lawfare and playing politics. This new approach is a more “diplomatic” and “acceptable” means of asserting hard and soft power, and poses a danger to the prospects for effective US sanctions enforcement.

In the months following the killing of Qassem Soleimani in January, Iran has employed a combination of lawfare, aggressive diplomacy, and non-violent active measures in Europe to normalize both its geopolitical agenda and its unsavory activities abroad. This new strategy is proving effective.

By casting itself as victim rather than perpetrator, Iran is bridging the gap between European countries' commitment to human rights, the rule of law, and due process and their interest in continuing to do business with the Islamic Republic—even at the risk of circumventing US sanctions.

The evolution of this new approach is best illustrated by the cases of four Ahwazi dissident activists. The four represented the European human rights and political organization ASMLA, and were focused on defending the Ahwazi Arab population living in Iran, a culturally distinct community populating oil-rich lands annexed by the Shah in 1925. The activists' object was to expose the oppression of this population by the revolutionary regime.

In February, three of these activists—Habib Jabor, Nasser Jabor, and Yaqoub Hor Altostari—were arrested in Denmark, [charged with spying](#) on behalf of Saudi Arabia (including engaging in industrial espionage), and placed in isolation, which made it

impossible for them to communicate with anyone except court-appointed local counsel. The fourth activist, Eissa Savari, was arrested on charges of having facilitated a large-scale terrorist attack in Iran in September 2018. The attack was committed by several resistance groups, including what the regime described as “Ahwazi separatists.” The strike killed over 50 IRGC personnel during an official parade.

Iran has repeatedly described Ahwazi human rights groups and resistance to official policies as “terrorism” and “separatism,” even during the course of peaceful demonstrations. It has likewise equated any demand for autonomy or even basic cultural and human rights with separatism that threatens the country’s territorial integrity.

Tehran developed this rhetorical strategy to create divisions between the Ahwazis and mainstream Persian opposition groups, as well as the rest of the population. The same talking points are routinely used to silence and discredit Ahwazi voices in the Western press, despite a disturbing record of horrific accounts of [abuses and torture](#) against cultural rights activists, poets, and students of the Arabic language.

Tehran also denies the existence of an Arab identity within its borders, to the point that some Arabic-speaking countries are not even aware that there are at least 3-4 million and possibly as many as 6-7 million Arabs in Iran. The 2019 US State Department human rights report [details](#) various systematic forms of abuse and repression to which these people are subjected by the Iranian regime.

After months of internal investigation, none of which could be shared with the public, Denmark expanded the charges against the defendants to include the accusation of soliciting [financial support](#) for terrorism. The government had confiscated the defendants’ devices and allegedly found [WhatsApp and other social media chats](#) with individuals allegedly engaging in discussion about how much money would be required to carry out attacks. Similar charges have been levied against Eissa Savari in the Netherlands.

The convoluted chain of events around these arrests should be seen in its proper context.

Both Denmark and the Netherlands have engaged in lucrative business dealings with Iran and were strong supporters of the JCPOA and opponents of the US withdrawal from the agreement. Both states have built pharmaceutical factories and plants in Iran; in Denmark’s case, an insulin factory agreement was concluded one day before the arrests of the Ahwazi activists.

Both Denmark and the Netherlands pride themselves on their human rights records, yet they make it exceptionally difficult for refugees and other immigrants to obtain

citizenship. This means that three of the four Ahwazis face possible deportation to Iran in the event of their conviction.

Furthermore, during the summer immediately preceding the IRGC parade attack in Iran, these very same people were dealing with [security concerns](#) of their own. The three Denmark activists were [targeted](#) by a [Norwegian-Iranian assassin](#) who has since been [charged](#) with their attempted murders. Eissa Savari, meanwhile, was being [spied on by an Iranian agent](#) from Sweden.

The planned terrorist attack against the Ahwazis was thwarted by the [Mossad](#). US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [acknowledged](#) the targeting of the Ahwazis and [expressed concern](#) about Iran's terrorism in Europe. (Regime apologists at the Voice of America Persian outlet, which is supposed to reflect US positions to the Persian community, [omitted](#) Pompeo's comments about Ahwazi Arabs from the translation of his speech, demonstrating the mechanism by which the Ahwazi issue is excised from public discussion).

This was not Iran's first attempt to assassinate dissidents; [nor will it be the last](#). The regime targeted opposition groups [all over Europe](#) in 2018 and succeeded in assassinating another Ahwazi activist in the Netherlands in 2017 thanks to the assistance of Moroccan fugitive [Ridouan Taghi](#) and his criminal gangs. Taghi was subsequently arrested in Dubai and now shares the same maximum security facility as Eissa Savari in the Netherlands.

The four Ahwazi activists, as well as others, were also targeted in Poland. One was detained thanks to Iran's abuse of Interpol's "red notice" procedure, but was released—and the Polish judge testified in his ruling to Iran's record of persecuting Ahwazi opposition at home and abroad.

So what changed? Why did Iran switch gears and decide to go through legal and political channels to bring down its adversaries rather than hunting them down?

Several developments explain the shift. First, Iran found itself under pressure from its business partners in Europe, who viewed the regime's hits and attempted hits on dissidents as part of a [proxy war](#) between Iran and Saudi Arabia (despite the Ahwazis' distinct national identity) and wanted none of that on their soil. European countries [threatened Iran](#) with sanctions over the assassinations and attacks (though Iran's record of political violence against minority activists [goes back decades](#)). [Iranian diplomats](#) who were connected to planned attacks in Europe lost their positions or were expelled, which brought [unwelcome scrutiny](#) to Iran's [other operations in Europe](#) and elsewhere.

All this attention to Iran's violence against dissidents endangered the "normalization" of its business relationships. Iranian intelligence was caught plotting the assassination

of a [pro-Israel official in Germany](#), a country that had gone out of its way to protect its business interests in Iran and which had boasted of the major financial institutions willing to invest in the Islamic Republic despite American disapproval.

Second, Iran's key criminal associates were caught. Taghi's capture was a serious blow to Iran's criminal enterprises. His Danish associate was likewise [captured](#) in Dubai recently. This gang was in charge of Iran's networks in Europe. Following its dissolution, Iran will need time to identify new leaders and resurrect its allies in organized crime.

More importantly, Iran realized that putting pressure on European governments would make the Islamic Republic appear clean and yield the desired results while shifting scrutiny onto its adversary, Saudi Arabia. For that reason, Iran leaned heavily on Denmark to arrest the ASMLA activists right after the IRGC attacks. Due to its own involvement in a failed assassination attempt, however, it was forced to wait until enough time had passed that that incident had been forgotten.

Iran knows that the European states prefer Iran to Saudi Arabia. This is due to Iran's image of cooperation in the war on drugs in Afghanistan and the cooperation between Iran, Iraqi militias, and Western forces against ISIS—which is seen in Europe as a Wahhabi organization associated with Saudi Arabia and its extremist Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood past.

Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's reforms not only did not put a dent in that perception, but fueled Iran's desire to undermine the Saudis politically. It wished to do this while simultaneously shutting down the increasingly vocal and visible Ahwazi opposition movement in Europe, which, only a month prior to these events, had succeeded in organizing a big EU Parliament conference in Brussels in conjunction with well-known leaders such as Manel Msalmi.

Iran's systematic pursuit of its enemies through [discreditation and character assassination campaigns](#) manifested itself in its efforts to paint the reformer Crown Prince as a hypocrite and supporter of terror. This is why the Danish government didn't even wait for the verdicts before [summoning](#) the Saudi ambassador immediately following the announcement of the expanded terror charges.

Where is the vaunted Danish and Dutch concern about human rights? Allowing an aggressive Islamic Republic to take control of their justice systems and even their political relationships with Saudi Arabia to suit Iranian business interests seems at odds with Europe's purported commitment to respecting human rights.

But it does make sense if Europeans view Saudis and Ahwazis as one and the same—just “Arabs” with no individual distinctions, values, or aspirations—and that no reforms in the Saudi kingdom will ever suffice to make the country an equal in

the eyes of Europe. Business with Iran is apparently sufficiently tempting to offset whatever minor concerns might arise over Iran's persecution of dissidents on their soil—dissidents who are now facing highly suspect legal processes in Europe.

The European domestic media are all too happy to regurgitate [Iranian propaganda talking points](#) without delving into how and why Iran has so much sway over their countries' political and law enforcement priorities.

Iran is successfully integrating itself into the business sphere of the Western allies and normalizing the export of its ethnocentric, Khomeinist revolutionary agenda and methods abroad. With time, US pressure on sanctions enforcement will be less and less effective. Iran will exercise more control as it essentially buys out European countries that otherwise would be working with the US.

Irina Tsukerman is a human rights and national security attorney based in New York. She has written extensively on geopolitics and US foreign policy for a variety of American, Israeli, and other international publications.