



# License to kill: How Europe lets Iran and Russia get away with murder



For rogue states, solving a problem by removing it often proves irresistible.

By **Matthew Karnitschnig**

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*Illustration by Joan Wong for POLITICO*

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**B**ERLIN — On a balmy September evening last year, an Azeri man carrying a Russian passport crossed the border from northern Cyprus into southern Cyprus. He traveled light: a pistol, a handful of bullets and a silencer.

It was going to be the perfect hit job.

Then, just as the man was about to step into a rental car and carry out his mission — which prosecutors say was to gun down five Jewish businessmen, including an Israeli billionaire — the police surrounded him.

The failed attack was just one of at least a dozen in Europe in recent years, some successful, others not, that have involved what security officials call “soft” targets, involving murder,

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hired guns. The most significant connection, intelligence officials say, is that the attacks were commissioned by the same contractor: the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In Cyprus, authorities believe Iran, which blames Israel for a series of assassinations of nuclear specialists working on the Iranian nuclear program, was trying to signal that it could strike back where Israel least expects it.

“This is a regime that bases its rule on intimidation and violence and espouses violence as a legitimate measure,” David Barnea, the head of Israel’s Mossad intelligence agency, said in rare public remarks in September, describing what he said was a recent uptick in violent plots. “It is not spontaneous. It is planned, systematic, state terrorism — strategic terrorism.”

He left out one important detail: It’s working.

That success has come in large part because Europe — the staging ground for most Iranian operations in recent years — has been afraid to make Tehran pay. Since 2015, Iran has carried out about a dozen operations in Europe, killing at least three people and abducting several others, security officials say.

“The Europeans have not just been soft on the Islamic Republic, they’ve been cooperating with them, working with them, legitimizing the killers,” Masih Alinejad, the Iranian-American author and women’s rights activist said, highlighting the continuing willingness of European heads of state to meet with Iran’s leaders.

Alinejad, one of the most outspoken critics of the regime, understands better than most just how far Iran’s leadership is willing to go after narrowly escaping both a kidnapping and assassination attempt.

“If the Islamic Republic doesn’t receive any punishment, is there any reason for them to stop taking hostages or kidnapping or killing?” she said, and then answered: “No.”

## Method of first resort

**A**ssassination has been the sharpest instrument in the policy toolbox ever since Brutus and his co-conspirators stabbed Julius Caesar repeatedly. Over the millennia, it’s also proved risky, often triggering disastrous unintended consequences (see the Roman Empire after Caesar’s killing or Europe after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo). ✕

And yet, for both rogue states like Iran, Russia and North Korea, and democracies such as the United States and Israel — the attraction of solving a problem by removing it often proves irresistible.

Even so, there's a fundamental difference between the two spheres: In the West, assassination remains a last resort (think Osama bin Laden); in authoritarian states, it's the first (who can forget the 2017 assassination by nerve agent of Kim Jong-nam, the playboy half-brother of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, upon his arrival in Kuala Lumpur?). For rogue states, even if the murder plots are thwarted, the regimes still win by instilling fear in their enemies' hearts and minds.

That helps explain the recent frequency. Over the course of a few months last year, Iran undertook a flurry of attacks from Latin America to Africa. In Colombia, police arrested two men in Bogotá on suspicion they were plotting to assassinate a group of Americans and a former Israeli intelligence officer for \$100,000; a similar scene played out in Africa, as authorities in Tanzania, Ghana and Senegal arrested five men on suspicion they were planning attacks on Israeli targets, including tourists on safari; in February of this year, Turkish police disrupted an intricate Iranian plot to kill a 75-year-old Turkish-Israeli who owns a local aerospace company; and in November, authorities in Georgia said they foiled a plan hatched by Iran's Quds Force to murder a 62-year-old Israeli-Georgian businessman in Tbilisi.

Whether such operations succeed or not, the countries behind them can be sure of one thing: They won't be made to pay for trying. Over the years, the Russian and Iranian regimes have eliminated countless dissidents, traitors and assorted other enemies (real and perceived) on the streets of Paris, Berlin and even Washington, often in broad daylight. Others have been quietly abducted and sent home, where they faced sham trials and were then hanged for treason.

While there's no shortage of criticism in the West in the wake of these crimes, there are rarely real consequences. That's especially true in Europe, where leaders have looked the other way in the face of a variety of abuses in the hopes of reviving a deal to rein in Tehran's nuclear weapons program and renewing business ties.

Unlike the U.S. and Israel, which have taken a hard line on Iran ever since the mullahs came to power in 1979, Europe has been more open to the regime. Many EU officials make no secret of their *ennui* with America's hard-line stance *vis-à-vis* Iran.

“Iran wants to wipe out Israel, nothing new about that,” the EU foreign policy chief Josep

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with it.”

## History of assassinations

**T**here’s also nothing new about Iran’s love of assassination.

Indeed, many scholars trace the word “assassin” to Hasan-i Sabbah, a 12th-century Persian missionary who founded the “Order of Assassins,” a brutal force known for quietly eliminating adversaries.

Hasan’s spirit lived on in the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the hardline cleric who led Iran’s Islamic revolution and took power in 1979. One of his first victims as supreme leader was Shahriar Shafiq, a former captain in the Iranian navy and the nephew of the country’s exiled shah. He was shot twice in the head in December 1979 by a masked gunman outside his mother’s home on Rue Pergolèse in Paris’ fashionable 16th *arrondissement*.

In the years that followed, Iranian death squads took out members and supporters of the shah and other opponents across Europe, from France to Sweden, Germany, Switzerland and Austria. In most instances, the culprits were never caught. Not that the authorities really needed to look.

In 1989, for example, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, a leader of Iran’s Kurdish minority who supported autonomy for his people, was gunned down along with two associates by Iranian assassins in an apartment in Vienna.

The gunmen took refuge in the Iranian embassy. They were allowed to leave Austria after Iran’s ambassador to Vienna hinted to the government that Austrians in his country might be in danger if the killers were arrested. One of the men alleged to have participated in the Vienna operation would later become one of his country’s most prominent figures: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran’s president from 2005 until 2013.

Not even the bad publicity surrounding that case tempered the regime’s killing spree. In the years that followed, the body count only increased. Some of the murders were intentionally gruesome in order to send a clear message.

Fereydoun Farrokhzad, for example, a dissident Iranian popstar who found exile in Germany, was

His slaying was just one of dozens in what came to be known as Iran’s “chain murders,” a decade-long killing spree in which the government targeted artists and dissidents at home and abroad. Public outcry over the murder of a trio of prominent writers in 1998, including a husband and wife, forced the regime hard-liners behind the killings to retreat. But only for a time.



▲ Illustration by Joan Wong for POLITICO

Then, as now, the dictatorship’s rationale for such killings has been to protect itself.

“The highest priority of the Iranian regime is internal stability,” a Western intelligence source said. “The regime views its opponents inside and outside Iran as a significant threat to this stability.”

Much of that paranoia is rooted in the Islamic Republic’s own history. Before returning to Iran in 1979, Khomeini spent nearly 15 years in exile, including in Paris, an experience that etched the power of exile into the Islamic Republic’s mythology. In other words, if Khomeini managed to lead a revolution from abroad the regime’s enemies could too

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## Bargaining chips

Given Europe's proximity to Iran, the presence of many Iranian exiles there and the often-magnanimous view of some EU governments toward Tehran, Europe is a natural staging ground for the Islamic Republic's terror.

The regime's intelligence service, known as MOIS, has built operational networks across the Continent trained to abduct and murder through a variety of means, Western intelligence officials say.

As anti-regime protests have erupted in Iran with increasing regularity since 2009, the pace of foreign operations aimed at eliminating those the regime accuses of stoking the unrest has increased.

While several of the smaller-scale assassinations — such as the 2015 hit in the Netherlands on Iranian exile Mohammad-Reza Kolahi — have succeeded, Tehran's more ambitious operations have gone awry.

The most prominent example involved a 2018 plot to blow up the annual Paris meeting of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, an alliance of exile groups seeking to oust the regime. Among those attending the gathering, which attracted tens of thousands, was Rudy Giuliani, the former New York mayor and then-U.S. President Donald Trump's lawyer.

Following a tip from American intelligence, European authorities foiled the plot, arresting six, including a Vienna-based Iranian diplomat who delivered a detonation device and bombmaking equipment to an Iranian couple tasked with carrying out an attack on the rally. Authorities observed the handover at a Pizza Hut in Luxembourg and subsequently arrested the diplomat, Assadollah Assadi, on the German *autobahn* as he sped back to Vienna, where he enjoyed diplomatic immunity.

Assadi was convicted on terror charges in Belgium last year and sentenced to 20 years in prison. He may not even serve two.

The diplomat's conviction marked the first time an Iranian operative had been held accountable for his actions by a European court since the Islamic revolution. But Belgium's courage didn't last long.

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In February, Iran arrested Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele on trumped-up espionage charges and placed him into solitary confinement at the infamous Evin prison in Tehran. Vandecasteele headed the Iran office of the Norwegian Refugee Council, an aid group.

Following reports that Vandecasteele's health was deteriorating and tearful public pleas from his family, the Belgian government — ignoring warnings from Washington and other governments that it was inviting further kidnappings — relented and laid the groundwork for an exchange to trade Assadi for Vandecasteele. The swap could happen any day.

“Right now, French, Swedish, German, U.K., U.S., Belgian citizens, all innocents, are in Iranian prisons,” said Alinejad, the Iranian women's rights campaigner.

“They are being used like bargaining chips,” she said. “It works.”

## Amateur hour

**E**ven so, the messiness surrounding the Assadi case might explain why most of Iran's recent operations have been carried out by small-time criminals who usually have no idea who they're working for. The crew in last year's Cyprus attack, for example, included several Pakistani delivery boys. While that gives Iran plausible deniability if the perpetrators get caught, it also increases the likelihood that the operations will fail.

“It's very amateur, but an amateur can be difficult to trace,” one intelligence official said. “They're also dispensable. They get caught, no one cares.”

Iranian intelligence has had more success in luring dissidents away from Europe to friendly third countries where they are arrested and then sent back to Iran. That's what happened to Ruhollah Zam, a journalist critical of the regime who had been living in Paris. The circumstances surrounding his abduction remain murky, but what is known is that someone convinced him to travel to Iraq in 2019, where he was arrested and extradited to Iran. He was convicted for agitating against the regime and hanged in December of 2020.

One could be forgiven for thinking that negotiations between Iran and world powers over renewing its dormant nuclear accord (which offered Tehran sanctions relief in return for supervision of its nuclear program) would have tamed its covert killing program. In fact, the opposite occurred.

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In July of 2021, U.S. authorities exposed a plot by Iranian operatives to kidnap Alinejad from her home in Brooklyn as part of an elaborate plan that involved taking her by speedboat to a tanker in New York Harbor before spiriting her off to Venezuela, an Iranian ally, and then on to the Islamic Republic.

A year later, police disrupted what the FBI believed was an attempt to assassinate Alinejad, arresting a man with an assault rifle and more than 60 rounds of ammunition who had knocked on her door.

American authorities also say Tehran planned to avenge the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, the head of its feared paramilitary Quds Force who was the target of a U.S. drone strike in 2020, by seeking to kill former National Security Adviser John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, the former Secretary of State, among other officials.

Through it all, neither the U.S. nor Europe gave up hope for a nuclear deal.

“From the point of view of the Iranians, this is proof that it is possible to separate and maintain a civilized discourse on the nuclear agreement with a deceptive Western appearance, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to plan terrorist acts against senior American officials and citizens,” Barnea, the Mossad chief said. “This artificial separation will continue for as long as the world allows it to.”

## Kremlin’s killings

Some hope the growing outrage in Western societies over Iran’s crackdown on peaceful protestors could be the spark that convinces Europe to get tough on Iran. But Europe’s handling of its other favorite rogue actor — Russia — suggests otherwise.

Long before Russia’s annexation of Crimea, much less its all-out war against Ukraine, Moscow, similar to Iran, undertook an aggressive campaign against its enemies abroad and made little effort to hide it.

Russian police investigators stand near the body of killed Russian opposition leader and former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov | Sasha Mordovets/Getty Images

The most prominent victim was Alexander Litvinenko. A former KGB officer like Vladimir Putin, Litvinenko had defected to the U.K., where he joined other exiles opposed to Putin. In 2006, he was poisoned in London by Russian intelligence with polonium-210, a radioactive isotope that investigators concluded was mixed into his tea. The daring operation signaled Moscow's return to the Soviet-era practice of artful assassination.

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Litvinenko died a painful death within weeks, but not before he blamed Putin for killing him, calling the Russian president “barbaric.”

“You may succeed in silencing me, but that silence comes at a price,” Litvinenko said from his deathbed.

In the end, however, the only one who really paid a price was Litvinenko. Putin continued as before and despite deep tensions in the U.K.’s relationship with Russia over the assassination, it did nothing to halt the transformation of the British capital into what has come to be known as “Londongrad,” a playground and second home for Russia’s Kremlin-backed oligarchs, who critics say use the British financial and legal systems to hide and launder their money.

Litvinenko’s killing was remarkable both for its brutality and audacity. If Putin was willing to take out an enemy on British soil with a radioactive element, what else was he capable of?

It didn’t take long to find out. In the months and years that followed, the bodies started to pile up. Critical journalists, political opponents and irksome oligarchs in the prime of life began dropping like flies.

Europe didn’t blink.

Angela Merkel, then German chancellor, visited Putin in his vacation residence in Sochi just weeks after the murders of Litvinenko and investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya and said ... nothing.

Even after there was no denying Putin’s campaign to eradicate anyone who challenged him, European leaders kept coming in the hope of deepening economic ties.

Neither the assassination of prominent Putin critic Boris Nemtsov just steps away from the Kremlin in 2015, nor the poisoning of a KGB defector and his daughter in the U.K. in 2018 and of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in 2020 with nerve agents disabused European leaders of the notion that Putin was someone they could do business with and, more importantly, control.

## ‘Anything can happen’

■ Just how comfortable Russia felt about using Europe as a killing field became clear in the

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Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a Chechen with Georgian nationality, and shot him twice in the head with a 9mm pistol. The murder took place in a park located just a few hundred meters from Germany's interior ministry and several witnesses saw the killer flee. He was nabbed within minutes as he was changing his clothes and trying to dispose of his weapon and bike in a nearby canal.

It later emerged that Khangoshvili, a Chechen fighter who had sought asylum in Germany, was on a Russian kill list. Russian authorities considered him a terrorist and accused him of participating in a 2010 attack on the Moscow subway that killed nearly 40 people.

In December of 2019, Putin denied involvement in Khangoshvili's killing. Sort of. Sitting next to French President Emmanuel Macron, Merkel and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy following a round of talks aimed at resolving the conflict in Ukraine, the Russian referred to him as a "very barbaric man with blood on his hands."

"I don't know what happened to him," Putin said. "Those are opaque criminal structures where anything can happen."

Early on October 19 of last year, Berlin police discovered a dead man on the sidewalk outside the Russian embassy. He was identified as Kirill Zhalo, a junior diplomat at the embassy. He was also the son of General Major Alexey Zhalo, the deputy head of a covert division in Russia's FSB security service in Moscow that ordered Khangoshvili's killing. Western intelligence officials believe that Kirill Zhalo, who arrived in Berlin just weeks before the hit on the Chechen, was involved in the operation and was held responsible for its exposure.

The Russian embassy called his death "a tragic accident," suggesting he had committed suicide by jumping out of a window. Russia refused to allow German authorities to perform an autopsy (such permission is required under diplomatic protocols) and sent his body back to Moscow.

Less than two months later, the Russian hitman who killed Khangoshvili, was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. Russia recently tried to negotiate his release, floating the possibility of exchanging American basketball player Brittney Griner and another U.S. citizen they have in custody. Washington rejected the idea.

The war in Ukraine offers profound lessons about the inherent risks of coddling dictators.

Though Germany with its thirst for Russian gas is often criticized in that regard, it was far

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years in the face of his crimes convinced him that he would face few consequences in the West for his invasion of Ukraine. That's turned out to be wrong; but who could blame the Russian leader for thinking it?

Iran presents Europe with an opportunity to learn from that history and confront Tehran before it's too late. But there are few signs it's prepared to really get tough. EU officials say they are "considering" following Washington's lead and designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a vast military organization that also controls much of the Iran's economy, as a terror organization. Last week, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock spearheaded an effort at the United Nations to launch a formal investigation into Iran's brutal crackdown against the ongoing protests in the country.

Yet even as the regime in Tehran snuffs out enemies and races to fulfil its goal of building both nuclear weapons and missiles that can reach any point on the Continent, some EU leaders appear blind to the wider context as they pursue the elusive renewal of the nuclear accord.

"It is still there," Borrell said recently of the deal he has taken a leading role in trying to resurrect. "It has nothing to do with other issues, which certainly concern us."

In other words, let the killing continue.

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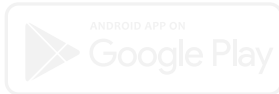
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