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The EU's Iran Dilemma

By Antonino Occhiuto

On 8 January 2019, the European Union (EU) approved fresh sanctions on a unit of the Ministry of Intelligence of the Islamic Republic of Iran and two of its individuals members, the Deputy Minister, Saeid Hashemi Moghadam, and Director General of Intelligence, Assadollah Asadi, over assassination plots within the EU. The EU accuses the Tehran agency of carrying out plots and attacks in several European countries. The move puts individuals and intelligence unit on the EU terror list, thus freezing their financial assets. The EU has concluded that IRGC operatives have been responsible for hostile acts within its territory since 2015. This comes despite EU-Iran joint efforts to enhance bilateral relations and save the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), despite the decision of the United States (US) to abandon the deal.

IN THE NETHERLANDS...

On the very day sanctions were agreed on, the Foreign Minister of the Netherlands, Stef Blok, declared that his country's secret service had "strong indications" that Iran was involved in the assassination of Dutch nationals, firstly in Amsterdam in 2015 and then in The Hague in 2017. The Netherlands had in fact previously expelled two Iranian embassy workers in connection with the murders, as Dutch authorities already had reason to suspect the active involvement of the Islamic Republic in the assassinations. According to the Netherlands' police, Ali Motamed, who was killed in shooting outside his home near Amsterdam in December 2015, had adopted a pseudonym to hide his real identity, which was Mohammad Reza Kolahi. Kolahi stood accused by Iran of carrying out a major bombing in Tehran in 1981, which killed dozens of Iranian regime officials, including one of Ayatollah Khomeini's top aids. Prior to his death, Kolahi had — for decades in fact — been among the Islamic Republic's most wanted men. Two years later, another Dutch citizen of Iranian descent, Ahmad Mola Nissi,

was murdered in The Hague. Nissi was a leader in the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA), a separatist group which hopes to break away from the Islamic Republic and form an Arab state in western Iran. The group is considered a terrorist organisation by Tehran and has been repeatedly targeted by Iran's intelligence.

...FRANCE

Despite being one of the staunchest supporters of the JCPOA, Paris has also denounced the activities of Iranian intelligence in France. As recently as June 2018 the French government accused the Islamic Republic of Iran Intelligence Ministry of organising a plot to bomb a rally of Iranian opposition groups in Paris. France believes Tehran wanted to target Iranian opposition supporters, gathered in Paris for a meeting of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) which is an umbrella organisation of Iranian dissident groups, co-founded by the People's Mujahidin Organisation of Iran (MEK), the National Democratic Front (NDF) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI). These groups share strong opposition to the Islamic Republic. Notably, US politicians such as Newt Gingrich, a former House speaker, and Rudy Giuliani, President Donald Trump's lawyer, were part of the gathering. France responded by raiding the headquarters of the organisation Zahra Centre France led by Yahia Gouasmi, a French-Algerian who is known for his links to Iran, was arrested during the same police operation. France was also the first EU country to freeze the assets of Saeid Hashemi Moghadam and Assadollah Asadi, the two men sanctioned by the EU this month.

AND DENMARK

The October events in Denmark represent the most recent example of activities by Iran's intelligence officials on EU soil, as Copenhagen directly accused Tehran of plotting to assassinate the Denmark-based European branch leader of the ASMLA group. The investigation led to the detention of a Norwegian citizen of Iranian origin, arrested in Sweden and extradited to Denmark, who had taken pictures of ASMLA leaders' homes. The links to the Islamic Republic are corroborated by the fact that six days before Denmark accused Iran of plotting attacks inside its territory, Tehran's intelligence had strengthened its focus against the ASMLA group. ASMLA claimed responsibility for targeting a military parade, on 22 September 2018, killing 25 military personnel and civilians in the city of Ahvaz. Following the attack on the parade, Iran condemned Denmark, the Netherlands and Britain for harbouring ASMLA members.

Iran has warned several times that it could withdraw from the nuclear deal if EU countries do not protect guarantee its full implementation. The Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) will continue to monitor EU's efforts to keep the JCPOA alive. Such efforts have been evidenced by the recent adoption of measures such as the EU blocking statute and the Special Purpose Vehicle (SVP), aimed at reducing the impact of US sanctions on Iran. Imposing fresh sanctions on a unit of the Iranian intelligence agency is unlikely to significantly undermine EU-Iran joint efforts to save the deal. However, Tehran's covert activities in Europe and the consequent EU response signal that, beyond the mutually beneficial economic and commercial relations, political relations between the EU and Iran continue to face significant obstacles and, perhaps, even incompatible strategies.

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