INTRODUCING
THE IRANIAN EXTERNAL OPERATIONS INTERACTIVE MAP AND TIMELINE

MATTHEW LEVITT
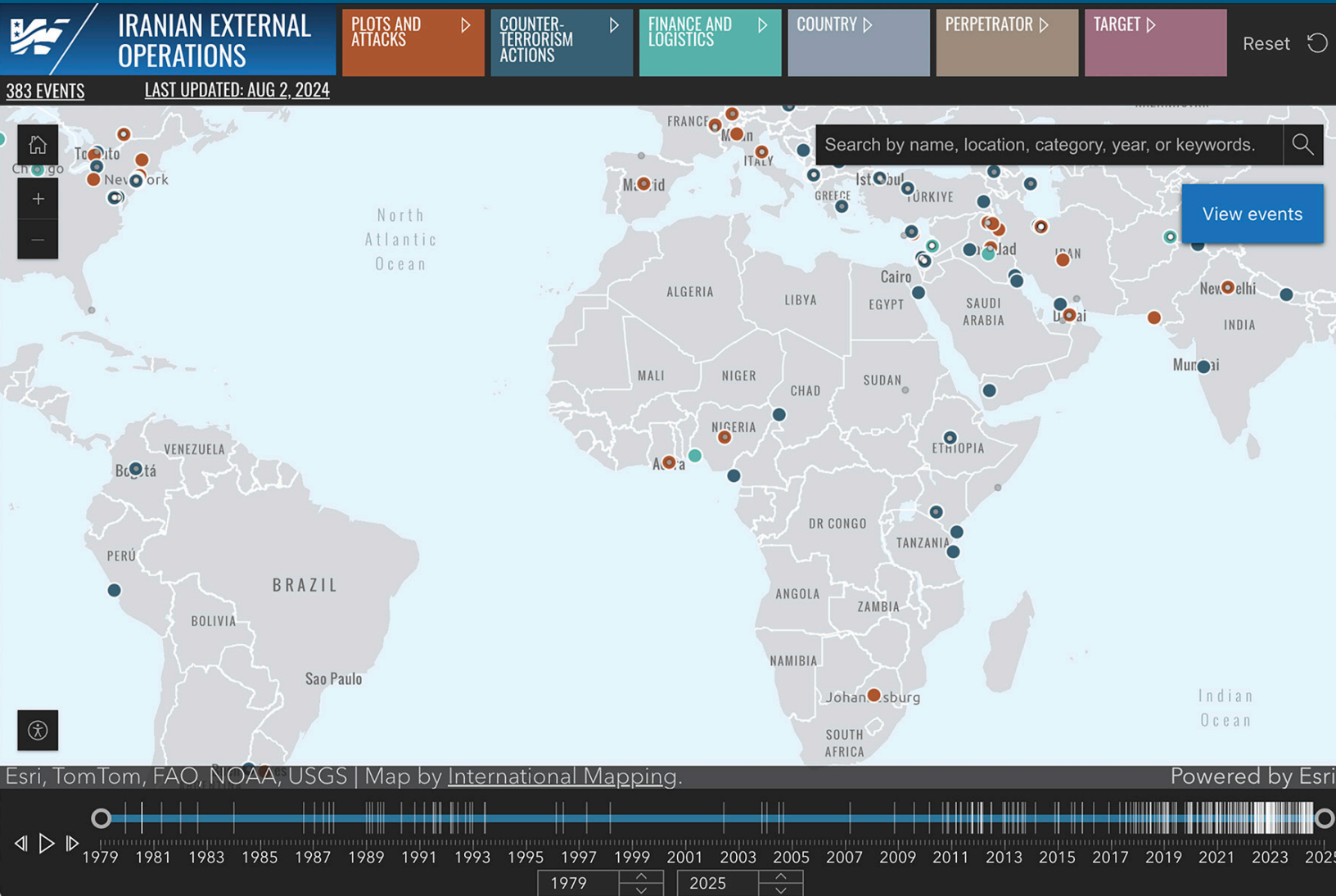
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IRANIAN EXTERNAL OPERATIONS

PLOTS AND ATTACKS ▷ COUNTER-TERRORISM ACTIONS ▷ FINANCE AND LOGISTICS ▷ COUNTRY ▷ PERPETRATOR ▷ TARGET ▷ Reset ↻

383 EVENTS   LAST UPDATED: AUG 2, 2024

Search by name, location, category, year, or keywords.

View events

Esri, TomTom, FAO, NOAA, USGS | Map by International Mapping.   Powered by Esri

1979 1981 1983 1985 1987 1989 1991 1993 1995 1997 1999 2001 2003 2005 2007 2009 2011 2013 2015 2017 2019 2021 2023 2025

1979   2025

Over the past forty-five years, agents and proxies of the Islamic Republic of Iran have targeted Iranian dissidents and journalists, diplomats from countries opposed to Iranian policies, as well as Israelis and Jews in assassination plots, attempted abductions, intimidation campaigns, and surveillance operations. Iran has carried out these operations around the world, in countries with both strong and weak law enforcement, intelligence, and border control agencies. And it has done so consistently, including in circumstances when taking such actions could undermine Iranian diplomatic efforts,

such as negotiations over the country's nuclear program. In recent years, Iranian reliance on these external operations as tools of intimidation, revenge, and deterrence has spiked, leading governments from the United States,[1] Britain,[2] and Sweden,[3] among others, to decry the regime's aggressive plots on foreign soil.

Iran has pursued such plots since the earliest days after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. One of the first such cases on U.S. soil occurred in July 1980, when Iranian agents recruited David Belfield, aka Dawud Salahuddin, an American convert to Shia Islam, to assassinate former Iranian diplomat Ali Akbar Tabatabai in Bethesda, Maryland.[4] Later, in a 1997 briefing, Ambassador Philip Wilcox, the U.S. State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism, stated that "since 1990, we estimate—and indeed, we have solid information—that Iran is responsible for over 50 murders of political dissidents and others overseas."[5]

The current map tool shines a bright spotlight on activities Iran goes to great lengths to obfuscate, using cutouts such as proxy groups and criminals to complement its own stable of operatives and diplomats to engage in murder, abduction, intimidation, and surveillance around the world. The map is not a comprehensive compilation of Iranian external operations, however, since many of these remain classified. For example, the map does not include the more than fifty murder plots between 1990 and 1997 referenced by Ambassador Wilcox. But it does represent the first open-source repository of Iranian external operations of its kind, and officials who cover these matters and have access to classified sources—from the United States to Europe to the Middle East—have confirmed that the findings here parallel their own.[6]

This is an interactive project to which entries will be added on an ongoing basis, both to keep up with current events and to backfill past entries as information and source material become public.

ORIGIN STORY

In July 2018, an Iranian diplomat partnered with three Iranian operatives in a plot to bomb the annual convention, near Paris, of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, the political wing of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) opposition group. The plot was thwarted, and all four conspirators were arrested, tried, and sentenced for their roles in an attack that could have killed many people, including several senior current and former U.S. officials who attended.[7] The plotters, who engaged in operational activities in at least five European countries, were undeterred from carrying out a potentially spectacular strike in Western Europe.[8]

In the wake of this plot, U.S. officials sought to mobilize partners to counter Iran's support for terrorism around the world. A senior State Department official—after noting the role of an Austria-based Iranian diplomat in the Paris bomb plot—summarized Washington's concerns in a press briefing:

> [The] United States is urging all nations to carefully examine diplomats in Iranian embassies to ensure their countries' own security. If Iran can plot bomb attacks in Paris, they can plot attacks anywhere in the world, and we urge all nations to be vigilant about Iran using embassies as diplomatic cover to plot terrorist attacks.[9]

The Paris plot was a turning point for many U.S. and European officials, in part because it was not a standalone event. The previous month, in June 2018, the Dutch government expelled two Iranian diplomats following an intelligence investigation into an attack on an Iranian Arab activist in Amsterdam.[10] And in March 2018, Albanian authorities charged two Iranian operatives with terrorism following a German raid two months earlier on several residences tied to suspected Iranian agents.[11] Within weeks of the thwarted Paris plot, an article by this author in *CTC Sentinel*, "Iran's Deadly Diplomats," documented Iran's long history of carrying out such attacks and the roles played by Iranian diplomats, intelligence operatives

under diplomatic cover, and the Iranian Foreign Ministry.[12] At the time, before the Paris plotters were tried and convicted, the article concluded that "as authorities in Austria, Belgium, France, and Germany dig deeper into the Assadi affair [a reference to Vienna-based Iranian diplomat/ operative Assadollah Assadi], they are likely to determine fairly quickly, as investigators invariably did in previous Iranian plots, that these are not rogue actions, but the actions of a rogue regime."[13]

Shortly thereafter, several U.S. and European governments reached out asking for more information on the history of Iranian external operations. Eager for informed analysis, they had been frustrated by the lack of unclassified data about past Iranian plots. Policymakers were looking for ways to deter Iran from continuing to carry out such plots, while intelligence and law enforcement agencies sought trend analysis to understand where, when, and why Iran conducts such operations along with details on operatives and targets.

What followed was a five-year research project that resulted in a unique, unclassified data set encompassing Iran's external operations. Entries were based on available open-source data, but also relied on consultation with government experts in cases of insufficient clarity or sourcing. Many cases have yet to be included for lack of sufficient sourcing.

The first research product based on the data set, "Trends in Iranian External Assassination, Surveillance, and Abduction Plots," was published in *CTC Sentinel* in February 2022.[14] Additional articles followed,[15] as well as requests from journalists to leverage the data set for stories on Iranian external operations.[16] Now, even as more analytical pieces remain to be published, the public is welcome to dig in to this open-access resource as well.

THE MAP

Before exploring the analytical potential of the Iranian External Operations Map and Timeline, one must note its primary limitation—that of a publicly

available, open-source information repository documenting the covert activities of a state actor (Iran) as well as a designated terrorist organization (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). This collection of court records, interviews, video documentation, and other unclassified primary material about Iran's external operations is one of the largest of its kind, but it is by definition incomplete; therefore, users should be careful not to draw conclusions from the map or timeline as to what operations Iran did or did not carry out at a particular time or in a given place. Several of the older entries, particularly those that took place in Europe in the years immediately following the Islamic Revolution, may list only a victim or target's name and the location of an assassination or kidnapping plot, but that does not make them any less significant than more current operations with a wealth of publicly available unclassified details.

Limitations aside, this project represents a major contribution to the understanding of Iran's external plots against those it considers enemies—political dissidents, journalists, Israelis, Jews, former Iranian officials, Americans, and others. Its analytic potential lies not only in its collection of much of the publicly documented information available on Iranian assassinations, kidnappings, surveillance, and intimidation operations, but also in its constant evolution as more sources are added, plots uncovered, and entries updated. The information contained in this interactive resource allows users to understand the geographic and temporal range of Iranian external operations, in addition to the types of perpetrators conducting these plots and the victims they most frequently target.

Consider a few key themes:

- **Two major spikes in Iranian external operational activity.** Patterns in the data reveal two events that led to a significant increase in external operations: the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the January 2020 targeted killing of IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani. In the decade following the rise of the Islamic Republic, the data reveals at least fourteen unique Iranian external operations, largely targeting former shah-era officials who fled Iran for Europe. The Iranian external operations data set also documents at least 116 unique operations since

Soleimani's killing, meaning that more than half of the documented operations have taken place in the past four years.

- **Reliance on hired criminals and locals to conduct surveillance and execute plots.** Iran frequently turns to criminal groups, including the Hells Angels biker gang—as well as hit men, drug traffickers, and even private investigators—to conduct surveillance operations, organize kidnappings, and commit assassinations.

- **Use of diplomats to provide official cover for illicit activities.** Since the mid-1980s, Iran has been using government officials and diplomats posted in embassies abroad to provide diplomatic immunity to those carrying out external operations. Take the cases of Kazem Rajavi, who was assassinated in 1990, leading to the attempted arrest of no fewer than thirteen Iranians with diplomatic passports;[17] Assadollah Assadi, the diplomat/explosives smuggler who was arrested in 2018;[18] or Masoud Vardanjani, who was assassinated in 2019.[19]

- **Targeting of those who speak out against the Iranian regime.** Iranian external operations largely target individuals and groups seen as enemies or critics of the Islamic Republic, including activists like Masih Alinejad, media outlets like Iran International, and dissident political organizations like MEK.

Besides highlighting broad trends over the past four decades, the map provides insight into little-known Iranian links to criminal plots across the globe, including an IRGC effort to build up a small rebel group in the Central African Republic, a German-Afghan national's Iranian espionage activities while working as a translator for the German army in Afghanistan, and a plot by two alleged Afghan nationals to assassinate three Swedish Jews, among them a dual U.S. citizen.

This tool also reveals new details in more well-known cases, including links between known Iranian drug trafficker and Ministry of Intelligence operative Naji Ibrahim Sharifi Zindashti and at least half a dozen assassination plots spanning the globe; the involvement of a senior commander

in the IRGC's Syria-based Unit 840 in a 2022 plot to assassinate former U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo and former national security advisor John Bolton; and connections between three late-2022 attacks on Jewish targets in Germany and an Iran-based Hells Angels member wanted in connection with the reported murder of a fellow rock band member in Tehran in April 2024.

Creating this tool required attention by many people to a range of details, from the design of the user interface and interactive feature set to even more granular decisions about coding and the relationships between entries and known actors. Here is how some of these details were addressed:

1. Spellings. The Iranian External Operations Map typically adopts the spelling of individuals and entities used in government documents. Yet agencies occasionally vary their transliterations of Arabic or Persian names, and in these situations the text adheres to the spelling used in the source document (e.g., a criminal indictment or Treasury Department designation). The map's search feature takes into account all known documented spellings of an individual or organization's name. For example, if an individual's first name is spelled "Mohammed," "Mohamed," and "Muhammed" across three different sources, all three spelling variations will link to the same entry concerning that individual.

2. Document repository and attached primary sources. Wherever possible, the entries include primary sources, such as criminal complaints, indictments, declassified CIA reports, trial testimony, Rewards for Justice announcements, Treasury Department designations, government reports and press releases, and links to NGO reports. Some entries include documents (e.g., indictments from foreign countries) that have been translated from their original languages; these documents are intended for reference only and users are encouraged to examine an entry's original sources, which are always included alongside the translated copy when available.

Additionally, where relevant, key documents such as an indictment or Treasury Department designation are used as the header image for an entry to highlight a main source. Entries with

multiple associated documents will have a blue arrow indicating that users can click through attached PDFs, as well as a "View document" button that will enlarge an attached PDF or photograph. For entries where photographs clearly illustrate the contents, photos will be included as the header, and PDFs—if applicable—can be viewed in a "Documents" dropdown box at the bottom of the entry. Additional sources, including news articles and other secondary materials, are available in the dropdown box labeled "Sources."

View image/document
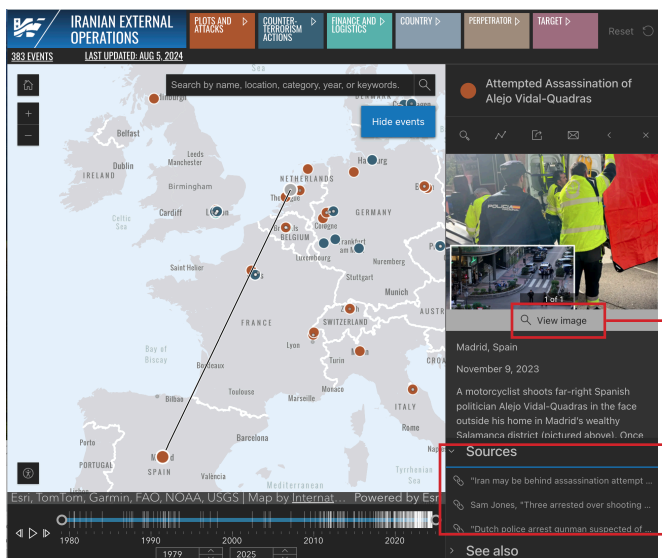
Sources

3. Dates for incidents. Because this tool functions as both a map and an interactive timeline, each event is associated with a date and a set of geographic coordinates. When a specific date is unavailable, entries provide the greatest specificity possible: e.g., November 2022, Fall 2022, or simply 2022 if no further identifying information can be found. In instances where sources provide no clues to the date of illicit activity, the date of the source will be used and noted in the entry description.

When the only information available is the year, that entry will appear on the timeline at the earliest possible date (e.g., January 1, 2022, for a listing of 2022), even as the date in the text box will reflect solely known information (2022). Users can filter

for events during a specific period by adjusting the sliding timeline on the bottom of the page, and can view events during a specific year by clicking on that year. Filtering entries by time period will open up a sidebar listing all entries relevant to a user's filtered search.

4. Dates for judicial actions. Wherever possible, entries will reference an individual's first contact with law enforcement. Ideally, judicial actions will be categorized as arrests, but in instances where the date of an individual's initial arrest is unknown, an entry will be tagged as an indictment. Details concerning an individual's trial, sentencing, or deportation are included in this same entry, which is periodically updated as new information becomes publicly available.

In cases where an individual's extradition occurs shortly after their arrest, that information is included in a single entry detailing both the arrest and subsequent extradition to a third country. For example, Rafat Amirov was arrested in a third country, extradited to the United States on January 26, 2023, and then charged in a New York court the following day in connection with a 2022 plot to assassinate Masih Alinejad; all of this information is included in one entry tagged as both "arrest" and "indictment." But Polad Omarov, charged on the same day as Amirov, was not extradited to the United States from the Czech Republic until February 2024; this new information warranted a separate entry due to the length of time between Omarov's indictment and arrest. When multiple entries are associated with a single plot, they will be listed in a dropdown box labeled "See also" at the bottom of a given entry and sorted by appropriate noun tags (e.g., individuals, organizations, businesses).

5. Cross-coding of entries and colored dots on the map. The map's category filters, shown in six colored boxes atop the screen, allow users to filter by type of external operations plot, counterterrorism action, or operational finance and logistics action, as well as by specific country, perpetrator, and target. Selecting one or multiple filters will limit the dots that appear on the map itself, as well as the events listed in the collapsible sidebar. Users may notice that selecting the "Assassination"

subcategory under "Plots and Attacks" still leaves many blue and turquoise dots on the map; this is not an error but instead reflects the cross-coding of entries under multiple categories to enhance searchability. For example, the entry "Manssor Arbabsiar Transfers Money to Fund Saudi Ambassador's Assassination" is coded primarily as a case of "Finance" under "Finance and Logistics" (turquoise), but is listed secondarily as an "Assassination" under "Plots and Attacks" (orange) due to Arbabsiar's role in funding an attempted hit on the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir.

6. Searching by country and other filters. The mapping tool includes several additional filters to reflect the target and perpetrator set involved in Iranian external operations globally and to give users a fuller picture of how the Iranian regime preys upon its perceived enemies using a diverse operational toolkit. The "Country" filter allows users to search for plots taking place in a specific country and filter out entries that do not meet the search criteria. Users may notice, however, that when selecting "United Kingdom," events still appear in multiple countries, including Albania, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates; remaining dots represent cases linked to Britain by association (explained below in point 9). Users should note that

the "Country" filter does not allow users to search by region or autonomous administration—e.g., Kurdistan, Scotland, northeast Syria, the Middle East.

7. Combining of filters. This interactive tool is particularly powerful when filters are combined to produce targeted search queries. For example, users can manipulate the timeline to display all events taking place since the beginning of 2020, then select the "Assassination" and "Kidnapping" filters under the "Plots and Attacks" main category, and afterward narrow results by activating the "Iranian dissidents" filter under "Target."

8. Approach to geolocation. Each event is geolocated as precisely as possible given the available information, and pinned to a country's capital when more specific geographical information is unknown. While capital cities serve as both stand-ins and actual locations for various entries, the most specific confirmed information is denoted in the entry text (e.g., London, United Kingdom v. United Kingdom). Additionally, the geolocation is typically determined by the activity rather than the site of a report or designation's publication. For example, "Treasury Department Designates Mohammed Reza Ansari" is geolocated to Damascus, Syria, where Ansari is accused of heading an IRGC Qods Force unit, and linked to Washington DC,
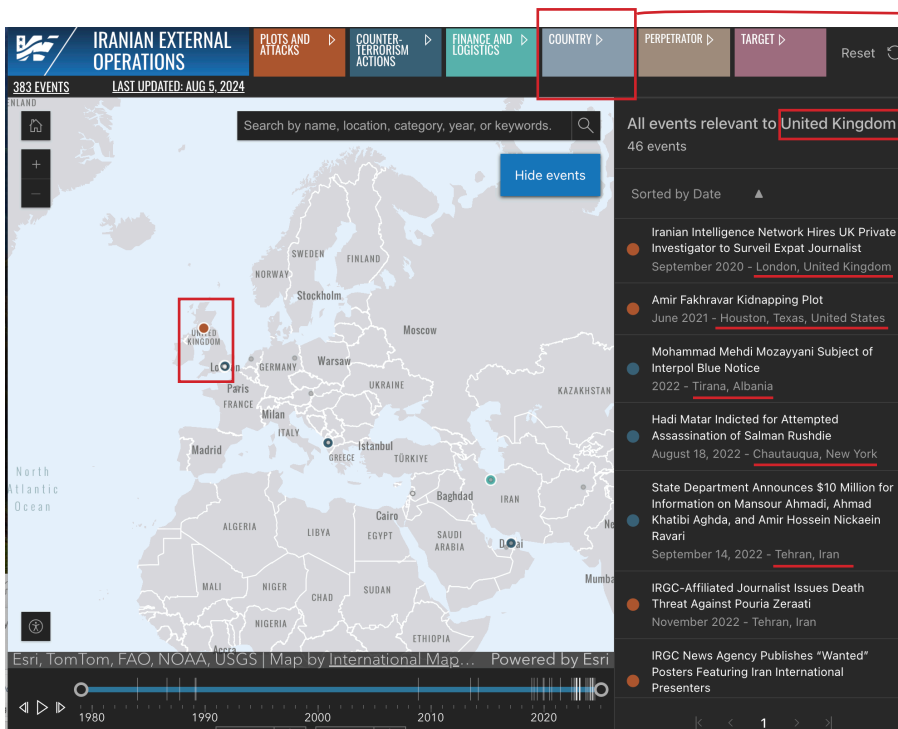

Search/filter by country

where he allegedly helped orchestrate assassination plots targeting John Bolton and Mike Pompeo.

A note on Iran: While this map includes only *external* operations (i.e., those taking place outside Iran), a number of entries are geolocated to Tehran or other locations inside Iran. This is the case when an individual within Iran helps orchestrate a plot in another country (see, e.g., "IRGC Hires Fugitive Biker Gang Leader to Organize Attacks on Synagogues in Germany"), as well as when individuals travel to or are recruited in Iran (see "Majid Ghorbani Travels to Iran"), when Iran releases statements pertaining to kidnapping or assassination plots (see "Iran Executes Swedish-Iranian National Habib Chaab"), and when counterterrorism operations take place on Iranian soil (see "Gunmen Kill IRGC-QF Officer Hassan Sayyad Khodaei in Tehran").

9. Linked and associated locations. While all entries are pinned to one "primary" location, some cases are more complex and involve linked or associated locations. Locations are connected linearly in the presence of known travel routes or financial flows, while spider lines demonstrate a radial connection. These features allow users to understand the geographic breadth of Iran's external operations and visualize the interconnectedness among many of these plots. "Linked" locations are those with direct geographical ties to an entry; spider lines show the direction of travel (see "Majid Ghorbani

Travels to Iran") or a direct link to a plot in a secondary location (see "Damion Patrick John Ryan Indicted for Plotting to Assassinate Two Maryland Residents"). When used to indicate travel, spider lines are often configured linearly, moving from one location to another rather than radiating outward from a central location. In cases of more complicated travel patterns, multiple lines are used to indicate direction of travel (see "Dawud Salahuddin Flees to Iran").

"Associated" map locations are portrayed as gray dots superimposed on colored dots, but are not physically connected to an entry with spider lines—these represent a looser connection to a secondary location. For example, the 1989 assassination attempt against Salman Rushdie took place in London, with Cote d'Ivoire, Lebanon, and the Netherlands listed as "associated" locations to illustrate Mustafa Mahmoud Mazeh's travel route from West Africa to Britain. Associated locations may also be used to highlight operatives' or victims' nationalities or passport countries (see "Ali Mansouri Arrested for Espionage"), locations of operatives' handlers (see "Thaer Shafut Indicted for Developing Iranian Espionage Network in West Bank"), or suspected links to separate plots (see "Mohammad Mehdi Mozayyani Investigated for Plotting Assassinations Against Iranian Dissidents in Britain"). Users should note that entries may have both linked and associated locations, including multiple instances of each.
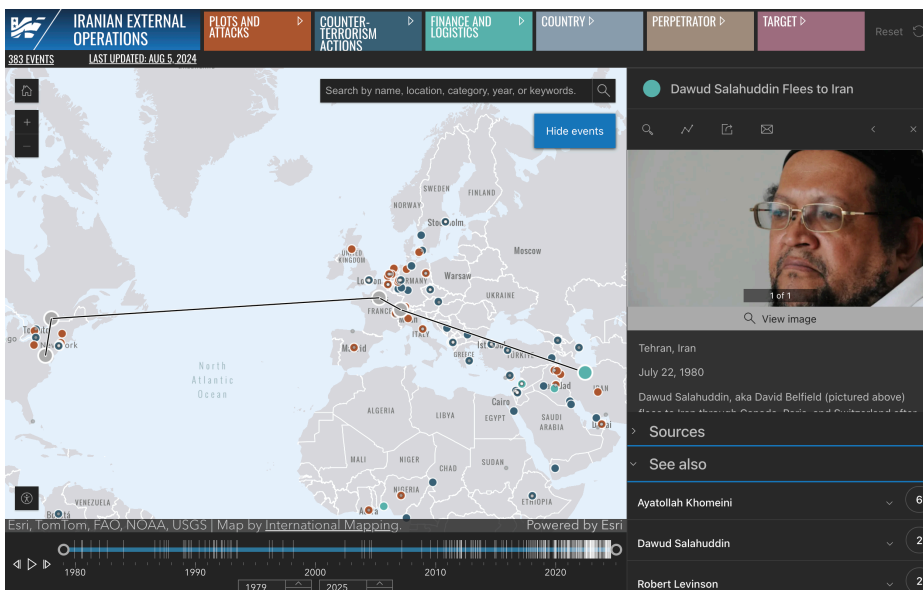
Linked/associated locations

10. Decoupling dots from activity volume. A dot is not necessarily indicative of the volume of activity at one given set of coordinates. For example, the map currently has twenty-nine entries whose primary, linked, or associated location is tagged as "Jerusalem, Israel"—those twenty-nine entries are represented with a single dot. To view all the entries associated with one particular location, users can click on a city dot to activate a pop-up window that displays the titles of all entries associated with a location.

11. Recent developments. This resource is continuously updated as news stories break, reports are declassified, and insights into historical plots emerge. The upper left-hand corner of the map provides a running tally of entries included in the map. Clicking "Last updated" will call up a list of updated events sorted in reverse chronological order.
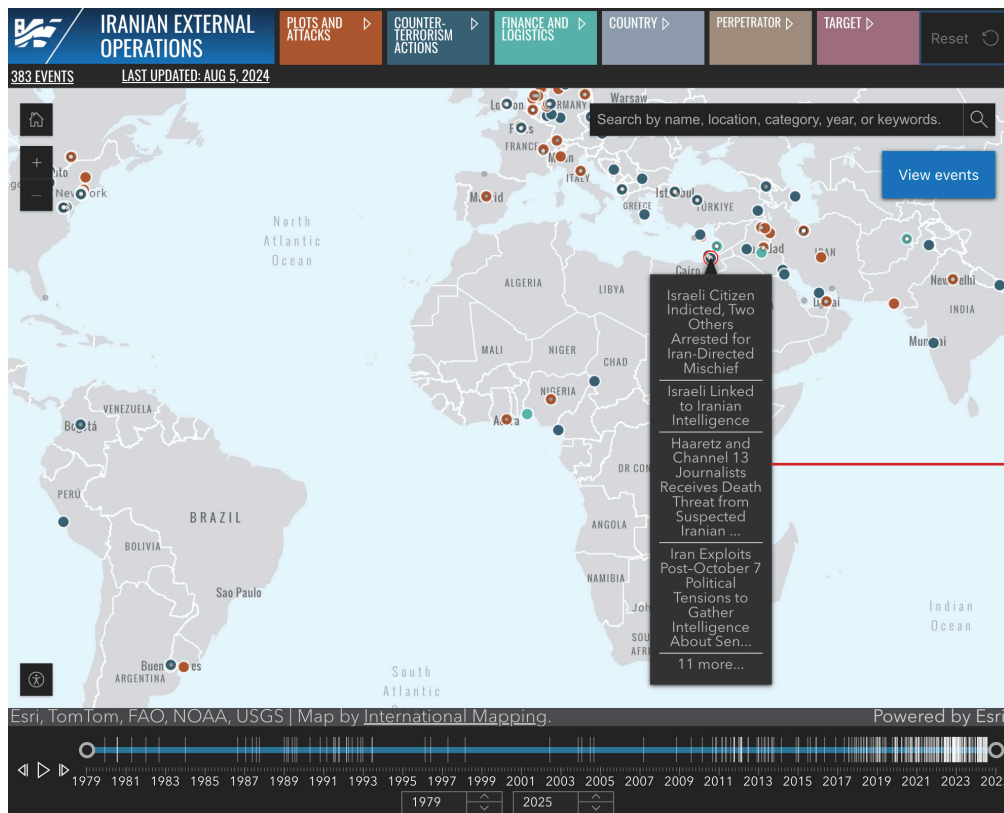
Pop-up window of entries associated with a location

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

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