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ALBANIA AND THE IRANIAN TERROR THREAT

Abstract: *The national security of countries and the security of the international system are the cornerstones for the stability and prosperity of the international system. Terrorism in general and state-supported terrorism in particular pose a major threat to the security and stability of the international system. In the course of almost 40 years Iran is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism and has a long and bloody history of terror attacks. Since 2017 the Iranian regime's terrorist activities appear to be on the rise on European soil. The Iranian regime appears committed to a strategy of targeting Iranian decedents and Western and Israeli interests, even in Europe. Albania, a close US ally has found itself on the frontline of the clash between the West and Iran and Albania has been at the center of terrorist activities organized by Iran, due to hosting the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK).*

Keywords: *Albania, Iran, embassy, Al Quds, IRGC, MOIS, MEK.*

1. Introduction

On January 15, 2020, Albania has ordered two Iranian diplomats to leave the country within 72 hours, saying that they pose “a serious threat” to Albania. The two diplomats are Mohammed Peimanemati, an adviser to the Iranian embassy in Tirana, and Sayed Ahmad Hosseini Alast, Iran's cultural attaché in Albania (Leen Alfaisal, 2020).

Albanian Foreign Minister, Gent Cakaj, said that two Iranian diplomats had been expelled for conducting activity that is “not compatible with their status.” Cakaj said both has been declared “persona non grata for conducting activities not related to their status and to the principles of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. They had been requested to leave Albania immediately,

Cakaj added (Leen Alfaisal, 2020). Since the 1990s, Iran opened an embassy in Tirana, but Albania does not have an embassy in Iran.

According to local reporting, the Iranian diplomats were linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the ministry of intelligence. Over the past 18 months both entities have been implicated in terror and assassination plots in Europe, targeting exiled opponents of the regime in Tehran. Albania expelled two Iranian diplomats in December 2018 over an alleged terrorist plot.

Following the escalation of tensions between the US and Iran after the recent killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, the Supreme leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, in a speech, in January 8, 2020, considered Albania a problematic European country that is giving shelter to the enemies of Iran. "There is a small, devilish country in Europe where Americans are cooperating with Iranian traitors, plotting against the Islamic Republic. Their plan was clear, with the protests they held in Iran, since some of those traitors came to Iran to protest. Enemy agents started implementing a plan to sabotage and destroy our government and our Constitution", Ali-Khamenei declared.¹

Albanian President Ilir Meta shot back at comments made by Ali Khamenei. He said that Albania is not a devilish country, but a democratic country that has suffered from an unprecedented devilish dictatorship and has come to value human rights as sacred (Gjergj Erebara, 2020).

"The missiles fired by Iran on two Iraqi military bases that house US military and coalition personnel are a provocative move with dangerous consequences for the region and its stability. Iran must respect international agreements, international laws and their obligations in the interest of peace," Meta wrote on Twitter, speaking of the reciprocation attacks Iran launched in response to the US move that killed one of its main generals (Gjergj Erebara, 2020).

Speaking to reporters in Vienna, Prime Minister Edi Rama said the presence in Albania of over 3,000 mujahideen (MEK), also known as the opposition of the Iranian regime does not specifically expose its country in these moments of fierce conflict between Iran and the United States of America. "This is a topic and an issue that is not new to us in relation to Iran. We have taken an action that honors Albania in line with the Albanian tradition, in the wake of a non-negotiable strategic alliance with the United States, to welcome or open the doors to a group of people whose life is at risk. And as it is written in the agreement

1 Iranian leader, Al-Khamenei, addressed to Albania as a 'small, diabolic country in Europe' Top channel tv, from January 8, 2020. Retrieved January 15, 2020. <https://top-channel.tv/english/iranian-leader-al-khamenei-addressed-to-albania-as-a-small-diabolic-country-in-europe/>

that we have made that they are in Albania as a result of a humanitarian, not political, operation,” explained Rama (Gjergj Erebara, 2020).

The Albanian Foreign Ministry has urged Albanian citizens to avoid travels to Iran and Iraq after Ali Khamenei’s threatening speech, which considers Albania as a ‘diabolic country that supports their enemies.’²

In the course of almost 40 years Iran is the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism. The main focus of attention of the Iranian regime are Iranian dissidents in Europe, Israeli and Jewish targets, American targets and European targets.

Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Supreme Leader’s military advisor and former IRGC commander-in-chief warned that: “If necessary, the IRGC will hunt and crackdown on dissidents and enemies beyond borders and seas”.

To carry out such terror operations, Iran uses a wide network of the IRGC’s - al - Quds Force, the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) and proxies like Hezbollah. Iran has an organized terrorist network established in Europe.

The Iranian regime has kept its definition of “enemy” fluid depending on its domestic and international political situation. The regime in Tehran is providing about 1 billion dollars every year to terrorist organizations across the world. The main beneficiaries are: Hezbollah, Hamas and other Palestinian terror groups, the Houthis in Yemen and Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. Iran isn’t content to merely fund proxies like Hezbollah and the regime itself engages in terrorist plotting around the world.

2. The embassy of Iran in Tirana

The Iranian infiltration in Albania followed the pattern that Iran used in other countries of setting up “charities” and “cultural organizations” that serve as front organizations for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS).

An Iranian Embassy also opened in Tirana, Albania’s capital, in February 1999. After the decision of the government of Albania in May 2013, to welcome around 3000 Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK) members, the embassy of Iran suddenly became one of the most staffed in Europe and Tehran dramatically increased its intelligence presence and operations in Albania.

² Albanian Foreign Ministry urges Albanian citizens to avoid travels to Iran and Iraq, top channel tv, from January 8, 2020. Retrieved January 15, 2020. <http://top-channel.tv/english/albanian-foreign-ministry-urges-albanian-citizens-to-avoid-travels-to-iran-and-iraq/>

In 2016, Tehran decided to assign Gholam Hossein Mohammadnia as its ambassador in Tirana. Prior to this assignment, Mohammadnia was a vice-minister of Intelligence, in charge of International affairs (Claude Moniquet, 2019).

The MOIS bureau in the embassy – which counted 25 officers - was headed by Fereidoun Zandi-Aliabadi, a senior intelligence officer from 2014 to 2017. Since 2017 a new chief was in charge of the MOIS bureau of the embassy: Mostafa Roodaki, the former chief of Iranian intelligence in the Vienna's embassy (Claude Moniquet, 2019).

3. The Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK)

Since 2014, some 3,000 members of the People's Mujahideen Organization of Iran (PMOI), also known by its Farsi name Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK), have settled in Albania after they were attacked in Iraq and now live in a camp near Durres, the country's main port.

Albanian Interior Minister Sandër Lleshaj said: "We don't consider the PMOI/MEK as a threat to Albania's security. This is the position of the Albanian government, police and security officials. Our viewpoint about the PMOI/MEK is without any bias or prejudice. They are friends that have been welcomed to reside in Albania and this has nothing to do with their political activities" (Claude Moniquet, 2019).

The Iranian MEK represent an opposition movement in exile, which wants to bring down the Islamic Republic of Iran. Led by Maryam Rajavi, the Iranian dissidents in exile cast themselves as an alternative to the Iranian regime. Rajavi told Reuters in July 2019 she stood for democracy, separation of the state and religion, private investments and a non-nuclear Iran (Benet Koleka, 2019).

The MEK was created in the 1960s by Marxist-Islamist urban guerrillas. MEK carried out bombings against the Iranian shah's government in the 1970s and later participated in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. But the group soon turned on Iran's clerical regime and violently opposed it from Iraqi territory during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. Its armed resistance from exile included bombings and attacks that killed civilians.

After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by the U.S.-led coalition, the MEK in Iraq was disarmed and thousands of its members isolated at Camp Ashraf, near the Iranian border in eastern Iraq, as "protected persons" under the Geneva Conventions.

The United States designated MEK as a terrorist organization in 1997 but removed its terrorist label from MEK in 2012, crediting the group's public renunciation of violence, the lack of any confirmed militant attacks by the group in more than a decade, and its cooperation in the closure of its paramilitary base in Iraq, from where its members relocated to Albania (Armand Mero, Michael Lipin, 2019).

4. Albania expelled two Iranian diplomats in December 2018

Albania had expelled Iran's ambassador Gholam Hossein Mohammadnia and the first secretary of the Embassy Mostafa Rudaki, in December, 2018 for "damaging its national security". On December 19, 2018, Albanian Foreign Ministry spokesman told the Associated Press that the two diplomats were expelled for "violating their diplomatic status."

The Iranian ambassador Mohammadnia and the first secretary Mostafa Rudaki were asked to leave Albania after the Albanian government discovered the role of the Iranian diplomats in a foiled terror attack against the Iranian dissidents (MEK) in the country.

In an interview on the same day, Albanian Interior Minister Sandër Lleshaj said: "The Iranian regime is recognized as the leading state sponsor of terrorism in the world... The People's Mujahideen Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) have been threatened in other countries. This is a method used by the Iranian regime's security agents under the cover of diplomats (Claude Moniquet, 2019).

5. The Iranian response

Tehran denounced as "unacceptable" Albania's move to expel two Iranian diplomats, saying the Balkan country fell prey to a scenario fabricated by the U.S. and the Israeli regime. Responding to the move, Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassem said in a statement that the move has been implemented under pressure from the U.S. government and the Zionist regime's security service and in collaboration with some anti-Iran terrorist groups. Albania, he said, which has always had good relations with Iran, has become a victim of the evil plots by those making up scenarios against Iran.³

³ Tehran: Albania falls prey to U.S.-Israeli plot against Iran, Tehran Times, from December 22, 2018. Retrieved January 10, 2020. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/430925/Tehran-Albania-falls-prey-to-U-S-Israeli-plot-against-Iran>

In an interview with the state-run IRNA news agency, Gholam-Hossein Mohammadnia, the Iranian regime's former ambassador to Albania claimed that the expulsion of the Iranian regime's ambassador and another diplomat from Albania was a scenario planned by the United States and Israel to "damage relations between Iran and Europe" (Sadegh Pashm-Foroush, 2019).

He added that American "hawks" supporting the MEK were "concerned about the future of this organization" due to the "growing relations" between the Iranian regime and Albania. "The most important objective of those plotting this scenario to confront Iran, be it in Albania or other countries, and to challenge any measures aimed at maintaining the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)," he said (Sadegh Pashm-Foroush, 2019).

6. The US response

The U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton was quick to publicly support Albania's decision. "We stand with PM [Edi] Rama and the Albanian people as they stand up to Iran's reckless behavior in Europe and across the globe," he tweeted. U.S. State Secretary Mike Pompeo described the diplomats as "two Iranian agents who plotted terrorist attacks in Albania".⁴

7. The Iranian terror plot in Albania

Two Iranian MOIS agents were arrested by the intelligence services and the counterterrorism unit of the Albanian police. The arrest occurred on March 22, 2018, outside the Bektashi World Center just before the start of the Iranian Year (Nowruz) celebration.

The suspects were taking photos at the moment of their arrest. They told the anti-terrorism police that they were journalists and they had come there upon the invitation of the Bektashi World Center.⁵ The two Iranians were detained for further investigation by Albanian anti-terrorism agencies and later expelled.⁶

On October 24, 2019, Albanian police said they had thwarted a planned terror attack by an Al Quds terrorist cell against opponents of the Tehran regime in Albania. The terrorists planned to attack high-level MEK members attending

4 Ibid.

5 Two Iranians arrested in Albania over terrorism-related charges, The Baghdad Post, from March 25, 2018. Retrieved January 16, 2020. <https://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/story/25279/2-Iranians-arrested-in-Albania-over-terrorism-related-charges>

6 Ibid.

Persian New Year festivities in March 2018, in Tirana but were prevented from doing so by Albanian police action (Benet Koleka, 2019).

The police published photos of three Iranians and one Turkish national allegedly involved in the terrorist cell.⁷

The alleged cell leader's family name is Peyman, an Iran-based operative of the Quds Force. Peyman had sent another Iranian cell member, Alireza Nagha-Shazadeh, identified as a former MEK member with an Austrian passport, to Albania several times to gather information for a planned attack on the MEK group.⁸

The Albanian police named the third Iranian suspect as Abdolkhalegh Malek-Zadeh, who he said was based in Turkey and had been working for the past two years with a Turkish man named Abduselam Turgut to plan terrorist attacks at the behest of Peyman and the Quds Force. Albanian authorities jailed Turgut in 2011 on charges related to the alleged trafficking of about one ton of heroin. He fled Albania using a false passport after a court released him to house arrest. The police also accused both Malek-Zadeh and Turgut of having links to organized crime in Turkey. Police declined to confirm whether international arrest warrants had been issued (Armand Mero, Michael Lipin, 2019). Iranian state news agency IRNA quoted a foreign ministry spokesman as denying the allegations.

8. Conclusion

In the course of almost 40 years Iran is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism and has a long and bloody history of terror attacks. Since 2017 the Iranian regime's terrorist activities appear to be on the rise on European soil. Thanks to good intelligence the Iranian latest terrorist plots have not resulted in heavy casualties, but these plots are just the tip of the iceberg. The latest Iranian terror plots in Europe are a warning and a wake-up call to governments in Europe to reexamine the appeasement policies toward the Iranian regime.

Iran and Hezbollah are the main potential threats to the U.S and its allies, Israel and EU interests. To carry out terror operations, Iran uses a wide network of the IRGC's - al - Quds Force, the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) and proxies like Hezbollah.

⁷ Albanian police say they foiled Iranian terror plot, The Times of Israel, from October 23, 2019. Retrieved January 17, 2020. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/albanian-police-say-they-foiled-iranian-terror-plot-in-country/>

⁸ Ibid.

Iran's effort to exert influence over the Western Balkan and its governments poses a grave security threat. Iran is using "Soft Power" to maintain and even extend its influence in the Balkans, through economic, 'cultural' and 'religious' ties. Iran is supporting centers for religion studies and NGOs in the Balkans to promote the Iranian radical religious doctrine. The European countries must be aware to the potential threat from Shia jihadists and the radicalization of European Muslim youths by the Shia revolutionary doctrine.

The Iranian regime appears committed to a strategy of targeting Iranian decedents and Western and Israeli interests, even in Europe. Albania, a close US ally has found itself on the frontline of the clash between the West and Iran and Albania has been at the center of terrorist activities organized by Iran, due to hosting the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK).

Albania took in the MEK as a humanitarian gesture at the request of the United States, because the now demilitarized group was stuck in Iraq in dire conditions. Albania was the only country to accept the MEK members, part of a 2013 agreement made with the United States. The move jeopardized Albania's relations with Iran and it created tension with Tehran, aggravating the already minimal relations between the two countries. Albania and other countries in the Balkans are potential targets of Iranian terror plots as part of the Iranian declaration to revenge the death of Al Quds commander Qassem Soleimani.

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PRETNJE ALBANSKOG I IRANSKOG TERORIZMA

Rezime

Nacionalna sigurnost zemalja i sigurnost međunarodnog sistema su kamen temeljac za stabilnost i prosperitet međunarodnog sistema.

Terorizam uopšte i terorizam koji podržava država posebno predstavljaju veliku prijetnju sigurnosti i stabilnosti međunarodnog sistema. Tokom skoro 40 godina Iran je vodeći državni sponzor terorizma i ima dugu i krvavu istoriju terorističkih napada. Od 2017. godine, terorističke aktivnosti iranskog režima su u porastu na tlu Evrope. Čini se da je iranski režim privržen strategiji ciljanja iranskih potomaka i zapadnih i izraelskih interesa, čak i u Evropi.

Albanija, bliski saveznik SAD-a, našla se na prvoj liniji sukoba između Zapada i Irana, a Albanija je bila u središtu terorističkih aktivnosti koje je organizovao Iran, zbog domaćina mudžahida-e-Khalka (MEK).

Ključne reči: Albanija, Iran, ambasada, Al Kaida, IRGC, MOIS, MEK.