

Iran Accused of Assassinations in Europe: What Happened and Why?



Activists of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) hold placards reading 'Deliver the Iranian diplomat - terrorist to Belgium' during a demonstration calling for the extradition of a secret service officer to Belgium in front of the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin on July 11, 2018. Photo AFP

On 2 October 2018, France **accused Iran** of plotting a terrorist attack on its soil. The alleged attempt was to bomb a People's Mujahideen of Iran (MEK) rally in Paris – an organization comprised of Iranian opposition with a four-decade-long history of armed struggle and attacks within Iran. **An Iranian-Belgian couple** carrying an explosive device and materials was arrested in Belgium, followed by arrests of a number of Iranians in France and Germany – including an Iranian diplomat. A plot of “such extreme seriousness on French territory could not be let go without a response,” France’s ministers of foreign affairs, interior and finance **said** in a joint statement. France froze assets belonging to Iran’s intelligence services and two Iranian nationals as a punitive measure. **Iran** has long been critical of France’s hosting of the MEK, which is blacklisted as a terrorist group in Iran and some western

countries. The accusation was at odds with the new course in the Iran-European Union (EU) relationship after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA; also known as “the [Iran deal](#)”) and is expected to negatively affect the relationship. Many EU states condemned the plot and the [US said](#) that it proved the fact that Iran is the most dangerous state sponsor of terrorism.

A month later, on 31 October 2018, Denmark accused Tehran of plotting an assassination against an opposition leader on its soil. Denmark’s intelligence service [said](#) the agency believed that Iran “was planning an attack in Denmark” against three activists – members of the separatist Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of al-Ahwaz (ASMLA). According to Danish intelligence, a man took pictures of the residence of an ASMLA leader in the city of Ringsted, southwest of Copenhagen. In October, the man was arrested in the Swedish city of Gothenburg and extradited to Denmark. [ASMLA](#) is a secessionist group; it was formed in 2005 as an armed movement and has carried out attacks and bombings in Iran ever since. Iran considers the group a terrorist one because of its armed attacks inside the country. The Danish accusation came after a spokesman of the group [claimed responsibility](#) for the [Ahvaz Parade attack](#) on September 22, 2018 – a claim [refuted by IS](#).

Iran rejected both accusations, claiming they are but an effort to frame Iran as a means of ratcheting up US pressure on the country. Additionally, Tehran had its own set of arguments regarding the incidents. On the Paris plot, Iran [accused the MEK](#) of framing the former. Iran brought up three main issues to support its case with regard to the incident. First and most importantly, Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated that some of the plotters arrested were known and operational members of the MEK and that Iranian security officials were [ready to provide](#) the required documents and evidence to clarify the pre-planned scenario by the MEK.

Secondly, according to this information, the plotted bombing was to be carried out during a time in which Iran’s President [Hassan Rouhani](#) was on a European tour, during which he visited Sweden and Austria. According to the Iranians, it did not make any sense to carry out such a plot, which would have deviated attention from the visit to an anti-Iran media coverage. Iran’s Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) reflected this in [a tweet saying](#), “how convenient: just as we embark on a presidential visit to Europe, an alleged Iranian operation and its “plotters” arrested. Iran unequivocally condemns all violence & terror anywhere and is ready to work with all those concerned to uncover what is a sinister false-flag ploy.”

The third point that was brought up by some Iranian analysts is that the MEK has been holding its annual rallies in Paris for years without any Iranian attempt against it and that there was nothing new to force Iran to change this course. In fact, if anything, the current phase of Iran-EU relations and US pressure on both should be compelling enough for Iran to refrain from such activities, even more so than before.

On the second plot in Denmark, in addition to repeating the same narrative on the first case, Iranian officials accused [Israel](#) of a plan to frame Iran, with MFA [Mohammad Javad Zarif](#) tweeting that “Mossad’s perverse & stubborn planting of false flags (more on this later) only strengthens our resolve to engage constructively with the world.” The accusation came a result of the fact that the Israeli spy agency Mossad [informed](#) Denmark’s intelligence in the case. Zarif’s accusation resonated very well within Iran, as Iranians believe that a number of Middle Eastern countries, including Israel and [Saudi Arabia](#), have been trying to complicate Iran-EU relations in order to pressure the latter to comply with US president [Trump’s anti-Iran policy](#) of “maximum pressure.”

Though they do bolster its case, however, none of Iran’s arguments outright discredit the accusations made by France and Denmark. According to both the French and Danish security agencies, backed by a number of other states, parties within Iran are indeed responsible for the plots. This reading is reflective of the analysis that Iran’s internal power struggle might be where leads on the reported

plots are most likely to materialize. Specifically, that there are factions working against the Rouhani administration, trying to weaken it inside the country by complicating Iran's relations with the EU – harming the very few foreign policy achievements of the Rouhani administration after the US [withdrawal](#) from the JCPOA. This reading is more in line with the fact that the Rouhani administration cannot be pursuing a confrontation with the EU at this stage and that, if Iran is involved, it is likely someone else's call inside Iran.

Though the reasoning based on the internal divide and anti-Rouhani campaign inside Iran seems more illustrative of the real incentive behind the plots, there are, however, other facts that stand in the way. The first and most important is that two government ministries were linked to the plots by France and Denmark. In the French case, [an Iranian diplomat](#) working in Iran's embassy in Vienna was arrested in Germany on account of his links to the Iranian-Belgian couple. In other words, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or at least some within it, appear to have links to the plot. Additionally, [France froze](#) the assets of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence on account of its master-minding the plot. In the Danish case, the plot was also linked to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. In other words, according to the accusations, two ministries of the Rouhani administration are responsible for the plots.

And this is exactly why it is a hard sell within Iran and why the third-party-framing is resonating there. No one, including Rouhani's critics, believe that his administration, with its pro-West foreign policy, would get involved in such plots. Still there is another possibility which was brought up in Iran: the role of rogue elements. While this could theoretically be the case, the fact that the two incidents happened in a row suggest that either the Rouhani administration is complacent, or that it did not act against those rogue elements after the first incident to uncover the second before it happened. Both explanations are far-fetched. But what is certain is that the Rouhani administration is caught between two main scenarios: the first involving external (Israel and MEK) plans to frame Iran and the second, which has internal rogue elements working against Rouhani's foreign policy. Both scenarios need to be backed up by more evidence and should be re-evaluated with every new piece of available information.