

Countering the Shadows: Tackling the escalating Iranian terrorist threat in the UK and EU

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The European Union (EU) is having sleepless nights over the increasing threat of in-country terror attacks, instigated by groups such as ISIS, Jihadists, and the controversial Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp in Iran.



The threat

The terror group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) dates back to 2004 and was formed from the Sunni terror organisation 'al Qaeda in Iraq' (AQI). A US airstrike in 2006 killed then Jordanian leader Abu Musab Zarqawi. His replacement, Egyptian Abu Ayyub al-Masri, renamed the group the 'Islamic State in Iraq' (ISI). Following al-Masri's US-Iraq-led assassination in 2010, Abu Bak al Bagdadi took control (2013) and expanded operations in Syria, finally changing their name to ISIS. From this point, the group gained notoriety for its horrific practices including televised executions and beheadings. Even though ISIS has lost significant amounts of territory following military campaigns, it has continued to control and radicalise beyond its borders making it a Western concern.

Jihadism is rooted in political Islam and is a neologism meaning 'a militant Islamic movement that threatens the West'. **Jihadists** believe that jihad (A holy war to make God's Law supreme) is the only way the world will change its ways. The origins of these acts can be found in the Qur'an and the actions of the Prophet Muhammad. The movement gained prominence in the 1970s and one of the first publicised attacks in the name of Jihad was the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, in 1981, by the group 'al-jihad' led by Muhammed Abd al-Salam Faraj.

Formed in 1979 by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to protect the government, the **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp** (IRGC) has gone onto become one of the most significant paramilitary organisations in the Middle East. Operating independently of the regular Iranian military, it has tremendous influence in many sectors like banking, shipping, and even mafia-style protection racketeering in the form of corporate dividends. It has also been involved in state-sanctioned terror activities, though it strongly denies this. The US designated the IRGC a Foreign Terrorist Organisation in April 2015 during Obama's term.

Due to potential impacts to security, this rising terror threat has been at the forefront of recent EU discussions. ISIS and Jihadist organisations pose a clear and significant threat to the EU. However, there are complicated considerations that must be observed with regard to the nature of the IRGC. For example, the EU is aware that it must acknowledge Iran's support for Russia in the Ukraine, as well as the IRGC's questionable activities, yet it is reluctant to officially recognise it as a terrorist organisation for fear of a backlash from Tehran's hardliners.

Reports of terror incidents are on the rise and in-state recruitment radicalisation is a mounting problem. Abundant online propaganda and networks of recruiters are preying on the vulnerable and encouraging them to conduct acts of violence. It is therefore necessary to assess the implications of escalating attacks and the geopolitical agendas of the organisations instigating them, along with the effects they have on the EU and UK's security landscape.

The current landscape of terrorism in the UK and EU

Since 2018, the UK has experienced nine declared terror attacks (killing six and injuring twenty) and thirty-nine foiled or failed attacks. Additionally, twenty-four UK nationals have been killed in eleven attacks overseas. This represents almost eight attacks a year up to 2023. Sixty-seven per cent of these attacks are said to be the result of Islamist terrorism.

Some key facts reported in the 'Europol European Union Terrorism Situation And Trend Report 2023' also provides grim reading. The report states that in 2022, sixteen attacks occurred on EU soil and an additional twelve either failed or were prevented.

Four sadly died in these incidents – two, as a result of Jihadist attacks and the remainder from other terrorist groups. Three hundred and eighty were arrested by Member States for terror crimes. These arrests were the result of investigations into Jihadist terrorism in France, Spain, Germany and Belgium with all these countries being incident hot spots on the EU terror map. Radicalised anarchist actors continue to cause havoc for the authorities and all EU member states consider Jihadist terrorism to be the most concerning, despite the fact that statistics indicate decreased activity from 2020 and 2021.

The rising threat of Iran’s IRGC to the UK

At present, the IRGC is of particular concern for UK security personnel and policymakers. Being such a powerful force in Iran and a prominent organisation in the Middle East, it is known for its dealings in proxy warfare and associations with extremist groups. Such activities have not been restricted to within the state, with the UK having experienced substantial increases in IRGC-related threats.

This escalation is due to the IRGC’s desire to increase its influence beyond the Middle East and into the EU. The UK is viewed not only as one of the great Western powers, but also as a known ally of the US. Together they have been looking to undermine Iran’s pursuit of a nuclear power programme. Geopolitical issues surrounding regional conflicts and human rights have also given rise to recent tensions. It is believed that the IRGC has been performing black ops within UK’s borders by way of cyberattacks, espionage and social media propaganda used to radicalise and recruit to further its cause.

The role of UK public perception and policymaking

Analysing the UK’s public perception of terror threats and the effect it has on policymaking, a study on EU citizen perceptions and EU counterterrorism co-operation suggested the perceptions of terror threats on citizens has had significant effect on the geopolitical landscape and, in turn, political policymaking decisions.

Since the Cold War, threats from other nations have grown considerably. Since the 9/11 attacks, the UK and the US have developed some of the strictest and most robust security measures designed (it is said) to reassure their citizens. The hearts and minds of both government and citizens make policymaking a tough call. People who feel threatened will gladly compromise civil freedoms for security. However, this can lead to oppressive restrictions and intolerance towards laws and minorities. An unruly public could be hazardous to government, and this itself will threaten the very freedoms the measures look to protect. The UK National Security bill – and similar legislation – aims to find ways to combat terrorism and in most cases involves freedom for the government to gather all kinds of intelligence and to share that data with other agencies. Such encroachment on civil liberties will sadly exacerbate stressed public sentiment and wellbeing.

Addressing the growing threat

To protect itself from the rising threat from the IRGC, the UK has been conducting extensive monitoring operations on known operatives and associates. Crucial to this success has been the proliferation in information sharing and co-operation with international allies, mainly within the EU and the US. Great efforts are being made to increase counterterrorism measures with increases to personnel and resources, in particular to border security, and cyber defence combatting the in-country radicalisation caused by online propaganda.

In addition, the UK has been striving to find peaceful resolutions to the fundamental causes of the tensions with Iran, Jihadists and ISIS while at the same time remaining vigilant and steadfast.

Summary

Threats from ISIS, Jihadists and IRGC are causing the EU and the UK serious concern. Problem area hotspots are France, Spain, Germany and Belgium – all practically on the UK's doorstep – with the main threat to date being from Jihadists. Now with the IRGC being such a prominent paramilitary force in the Middle East and with its ambitions to gain greater influence in the EU to destabilise the West, the UK is also being subjected to increased threats and, as a result, has heightened security measures.

Enhanced policy changes required to protect UK citizens could very well invade data privacy rights and severely affect the quality of life through enforced restrictions, potentially leading to a frightened and frustrated public.

The future for UK–Iranian diplomatic relations is fraught with complications and needs to be handled diplomatically to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. In order to escape diplomatic fallout and the consequences that brings, efforts to bolster border security and quash the abundant radicalising online propaganda are the only diplomatically available actions at this time.

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