

Opinion – Iran’s Increasing Use of Azerbaijanis for Covert Operations

Written by Rufat Ahmadzada

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The authorities in Cyprus arrested a British national of Azerbaijani descent on 21 June on suspicion of spying and terror related activities. This is the latest example of the Iranian regime’s use of Azerbaijani community members abroad for IRGC-Quds force extraterritorial operations. According to Cypriot media reports, the suspect is thought to have been spying on a British RAF military base in nearby Akrotiri. It is also claimed that the arrested individual was about to carry out an act of terrorism. On the same day, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar revealed that an Iranian terror plot had been thwarted in Cyprus, thanks to the close cooperation of the local authorities with Israeli security services, and accused the Iranian regime of trying to target Israeli nationals in Cyprus. It is not clear whether the case is related to the arrest of the British national of Azerbaijani descent, however, as The Telegraph claims it was a separate incident.

Just two days later, on 23 June, an Azerbaijani man with Polish citizenship was arrested on the Greek island of Crete on suspicion of espionage. It is reported that the suspect had taken thousands of photos of military installations and warships on the island, which hosts the United States’ Souda Bay naval base. These two cases reveal the IRGC-Quds force’s increasing use of foreign nationals of Azerbaijani descent in its clandestine operations abroad. This would appear to be a deliberate policy by Tehran with the dual aims of conducting extraterritorial operations and tarnishing the reputation of Azerbaijani people around the world.

Moreover, Iranian intelligence services have been actively involved in recruiting members of the Azerbaijani community in countries like Georgia and Russia over the years. It is noteworthy that Iran has increased its soft power among the Georgian Azerbaijani community in particular with the tacit approval of successive Georgian governments, while it has done the same among the Azerbaijani community in Russia. One of the most prominent cases revealing both Iran’s close cooperation with organized crime and its use of gangsters of Azerbaijani descent was the plot to kill American Iranian dissident and journalist Masih Alinejad.

In July 2022, Khalid Mehdiyev, 27, a self-proclaimed member of the Russian mob, was on a mission to assassinate the prominent Iranian-American journalist Masih Alinejad. He told a New York court in March this year that he had been hired for 30,000 US dollars by Rafat Amirov and Polad Omarov. They in turn had been tasked by IRGC operatives to carry out the killing for 500,000 US dollars. Polad Omarov was arrested in the Czech Republic in 2023 and was extradited to the United States to face charges in the Alinejad case in February 2024. Rafat Amirov was also arrested and extradited to the USA to stand trial. Khalid Mehdiyev said at the hearing that Rafat Amirov had told him the Iranian regime was behind the plot.

Khalid Mehdiyev arrived in the United States in November 2017 and claimed political asylum, arguing that he would be tortured in Azerbaijan, where he was in fact wanted for his criminal activities. A member of the Azerbaijani judo team who dropped out for a life of crime, Khalid Mehdiyev was the perfect hitman for Iran’s Quds force to carry out the assassination attempt on Masih Alinejad. The US Justice Department officially accused Georgian national Polad Omarov and Iranian national Rafat Amirov (both ethnic Azerbaijanis) of involvement in the plot to assassinate Masih Alinejad on behalf of Iran. Mehdiyev, Omarov and Amirov were all members of the crime syndicate of infamous Georgian Azerbaijani mobster Nadir Salifov, known in criminal circles as Lotu Guli. Polad Omarov was recruited by

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Nadir Salifov in 2014.

Salifov was considered a top crime boss in Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey, and was killed by his bodyguard in Turkey in 2020. An ethnic Azerbaijani born in Georgia and a Georgian citizen, Salifov recruited mainly Georgian-born Azerbaijanis to his syndicate. Before being assigned the job of murdering Masih Alinejad, Khalid Mehdiyev had been involved in extorting money from an ethnic Azerbaijani grocery store owner in Brooklyn. Polad Omarov’s co-defendant Rafat Amirov was residing in Iran and is shown as an Iranian citizen in the US official indictments, but also holds Azerbaijani and Russian citizenship.

In January 2025, Azerbaijan’s State Security Service announced the arrest of two individuals who planned to kill a prominent figure in Azerbaijan’s Jewish community. Later, The Washington Post revealed that a Georgian citizen and drug trafficker named Agil Aslanov had been hired by Iran’s Quds force to organise and carry out the killing of Rabbi Shneur Segal for 200,000 US dollars. The foiled plot was also intended to target a Jewish education centre in Baku, according to media reports. Agil Aslanov, whose name implies that he is from Georgia’s ethnic Azerbaijani community, is another example of the Quds force’s use of Georgian citizens with an Azerbaijani background in terror plots abroad. It is evident that Iran’s soft power in Georgia’s ethnic Azerbaijani regions as well as its ties with Georgian Azerbaijani criminal elements pose an increasing security risk to Azerbaijan.

Successive Georgian governments allowed the rise of Iranian soft power among the local Azerbaijani community with the aim of balancing the influence of the Republic of Azerbaijan and keeping the local community inactive in domestic governance. The Azerbaijani community constitutes the second largest ethnic group in Georgia, numbering more than 250,000 people or 6.5% of the country’s population. The Iranian regime uses its humanitarian charities and businesses to spread its ideology among the Georgian Azerbaijani community and thereby weaken Azerbaijan’s influence. The Iran-linked Ahlibeyt Cultural-Educational Society located in Marneuli, an ethnically Azerbaijani dominated town in eastern Georgia, receives finance and support from Iran via the Iranian embassy. The Ahlibeyt.ge website published in the Azerbaijani language promotes the Iranian regime’s ideological and political interests as well as narratives advancing Iran’s soft power over the Georgian Azerbaijani community.

In 2021, a Russian citizen of Azerbaijani descent, Orkhan Asadov, was arrested in Cyprus accused of trying to carry out a terrorist attack against Israelis living on the island. Orkhan Asadov is thought to have been paid 40,000 USD to carry out the terror attack by Iran’s IRGC Quds force. What makes Asadov’s case different from the actions of Lotu Guli’s criminal syndicate and the Georgian drug trafficker’s case is the religious ideological link to the Islamic Republic. As part of the crackdown on Iranian sleeper cells in 2022, Azerbaijan’s State Security Service (DTX) exposed an Iran-linked armed network whose members had been recruited and trained in Syria under Iranian supervision. Azerbaijan’s intelligence service named Orkhan Asadov as the key individual in recruiting members of the group. Yunis Safarov, a Russian citizen of Azerbaijani descent who tried to kill the former mayor of the Azerbaijani city of Ganja in 2018, had also been recruited by Iran in Russia. Safarov had lived in Qom in Iran for eight months in 2016 before travelling to Syria and joining Iran-backed Shia militias in targeting Syrian opposition members.

Iran’s Quds force operatives continue to operate freely in Russia with the tacit approval of the Russian state, particularly in recruiting ethnic Talish community members to work against Azerbaijan and in carrying out missions such as Asadov’s. The Moscow Islamic Centre, funded and created by Iran in 2012, was led by an Iranian citizen, Hojjat al Islam Saber Akbari Jiddi between 2013 and 2023. There are reports that Akbari Jiddi was the representative of Iran’s Supreme Leader in Russia. Another important Iran-funded organisation is the Huseyniyya, led by Qom-educated Russian citizen and ethnic Talish Famil Jafarov. He is considered to be a close associate of Hojjat al Islam Saber Akbari Jiddi and is known for his activism in defence of the Iran-backed radical Islamists arrested in Azerbaijan. Russia is known to harbour Talish separatists who work closely with Iran against Azerbaijan. The Russian authorities prefer to see Iran working among the Azerbaijani community rather than the Republic of Azerbaijan, as pro-Iranian people will be hostile towards the Republic. This aligns with Moscow’s foreign policy, which often coincides with Iranian interests.

Overall, it is evident that the Iranian regime has been actively using foreign nationals of Azerbaijani descent to

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conduct espionage and terror attacks. The IRGC Quds force works with two distinct groups to carry out its operations: crime syndicates and the religiously indoctrinated, ideologically committed individuals mostly among the Azerbaijani community in Georgia and Russia. This in turn shows that Tehran conducts soft power policies to target and recruit members of Azerbaijani communities. This needs to be addressed by Baku. In particular, Azerbaijan should get tough on Georgia to curb Iranian activities in the ethnic Azerbaijani regions of Georgia, as these activities pose a security threat to Azerbaijan.

About the author:

Rufat Ahmadzada is a PhD candidate in Politics and graduate of City, University of London. His research covers Azerbaijan, Iran and the South Caucasus region.