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Iran's Killing Machine: Political Assassinations by the Islamic Regime

Ardavan Khoshnood



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 185

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Cover image: Graves of Iranian opposition leaders Fattah Abdoli, Sadegh Sharafkandi, and Homayoun Ardalan, three victims of the Mykonos Restaurant assassinations, in the Père Lachaise Cemetery (Paris), image via Wikipedia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It was recently revealed that the Iranian regime was planning to assassinate the US ambassador to South Africa. Tehran denied any such plans, but a brief look at the Islamic regime's history shows that Iran not only has the will but also the means to conduct assassinations on foreign soil.

Assassinations and terrorism have been the regime's modus operandi both at home and abroad ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. Four institutions in Iran are instrumental to the decision-making, organizing, and execution of subversive operations, especially those conducted on foreign soil: the Office of the Supreme Leader, the Supreme Council of National Security, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the Ministry of Intelligence.

It is above all with the assistance of its diplomatic corps that Iran puts its subversive plans into action. Terrorist attacks and assassinations have been conducted around the world by Iranian operatives or proxies in close conjunction with Iranian diplomats and Iranian embassies. Many of the targets have been Israeli and Saudi diplomats.

The recent allegation that the Iranian regime is targeting the US ambassador to South Africa is credible, as such an operation is entirely consistent with Iranian tactics. As Iranian operatives and intelligence officers are highly active in South Africa, it is no surprise that the US embassy in Pretoria has been targeted.

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In the wake of the slaying of Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani, there has been significant pressure on the Iranian regime to retaliate. It is of foremost importance to the regime that its supporters—the physical base of the state—be satisfied. As the regime is not able to target notable American generals and statesmen, it will instead target US ambassadors, diplomats, and embassies. At the same time, the regime will continue its attacks on countries it deems to be enemies of the Islamic revolution: namely, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

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Not long ago, [Politico](#) published an exclusive item stating that the Islamic Republic of Iran was plotting to assassinate US ambassador to South Africa Lana Marks. According to US intelligence, an Iranian threat against Marks is known to have existed since the spring of 2020. The South African intelligence organization, the State Security Agency (SSA), [stated](#) said that it has no knowledge of any assassination plans.

In typical fashion, Tehran vehemently denied the existence of such plans. Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh added that the claim of an Iranian assassination attempt was part of “the Trump administration’s counter-intelligence campaign against Iran.”

It is impossible to know whether the American intelligence reports are correct or on what they are based. But a review of the history and style of the Islamic Republic of Iran can provide some indication of whether the Iranian regime is either willing or able to attack foreign diplomats abroad. This is of particular interest with respect to South Africa, where the Iranian regime and its operatives are highly [active](#).

The regime’s first international assassination was conducted very soon after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in April 1979. On December 7 of the same year, Prince Shahriar Shafiqh, a captain of the Imperial Iranian Navy and the Shah’s nephew, was [gunned down](#) in Paris by Iranian assassins. Seven months later, on July 22, 1980, Ali Akbar Tabatabaei, a supporter of the Shah, was shot and killed at his home in the US state of Maryland. The assassin, David Theodore Belfield, was an African American who had converted to Islam and changed his name to [Dawud Salahuddin](#). After the assassination he fled to Iran, where he resides to this day.

So many assassinations were conducted by Tehran over the decade between 1988 and 1998 that they have been given a title, the [Chain Murders](#). The killings began during the presidency of Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and continued during the presidency of Muhammad Khatami. Interestingly, both these presidents are deemed to be the fathers of the reformist movement in Iran.

During the Chain Murders, dozens of Iranians were assassinated both inside the country and abroad. Of those assassinated in Iran, individuals like [Ebrahim Zalzadeh](#), [Dariush Forouhar](#) and his spouse [Parvaneh Eskandari Forouhar](#), and [Hamid Hajizadeh](#) and his nine-year old son, [Karoun](#), can be mentioned. They were all deemed to be a liability for the Islamic Republic and were therefore killed. Those assassinated abroad include the Shah's last PM, [Shapour Bakhtiar](#), and his secretary [Soroush Katibeh](#), as well as [Abdollah Boroumand](#). All three were viciously stabbed to death in France.

The most infamous killings by Iran on foreign soil, also part of the Chain Murders, were the so-called [Mykonos Restaurant assassinations](#), which occurred in Berlin, Germany on September 17, 1992. While several opponents of the Islamic regime were gathered at the restaurant for a meeting, assassins attacked the restaurant with firearms and killed four of the attendees: [Muhammad Sadegh Sharafkandi](#), [Fattah Abdoli](#), [Homayoun Ardalan](#), and [Nurollah Dehkordi](#).

The German authorities were able to arrest, indict, and convict several individuals connected to the killings and [concluded](#), "The political leaders of Iran gave the order for the murders, for the sole purpose of staying in power. Those who issued the orders and pulled the strings were Iranian state functionaries."

Ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, [more than 160 Iranians](#) in exile have been assassinated by regime operatives all over the world.

IRAN'S MACHINE OF TERROR

The regime considers four institutions essential for its security. These institutions are instrumental in deciding upon, organizing, and conducting assassinations and terrorist attacks, especially on foreign soil. They are the Office of the Supreme Leader, the Supreme Council of National Security (SCNS), the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the Ministry of Intelligence (MOI).

At the top of the hierarchy is the Supreme Leader and the Office of the Supreme Leader. The Office was established during the rule of Ruhollah Khomeini but was significantly developed by the incumbent Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. Thousands of people work at the Office, which supervises all government ministries (in addition to other duties). The Office has its own intelligence and counter-intelligence organizations. All decisions of importance to the regime, not least concerning [regime security](#), must be discussed with the [Supreme Leader](#) and have his blessing. It is thus apparent that all decisions regarding assassinations and terrorist attacks must be discussed with the Supreme Leader before being set in motion.

Both before and after the Supreme Leader has made a decision on a matter, it is discussed at the most important regime institution after the Office: the SCNS, which was established in 1989. One of its three main responsibilities, according to the [constitution](#), is to “utilize the material and non-material resources of the country to confront internal and external threats.”

The SCNS consists of 12 permanent members: the heads of three branches of the state, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, the Commander of the Military, the Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Minister of Intelligence, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Interior, and the government official responsible for planning and budgeting affairs, as well as two representatives appointed by the Supreme Leader. The SCNS is presided over by the President of the Islamic Republic but is managed by a secretary who is directly appointed by the Supreme Leader. According to the [constitution](#), “The decisions of the Supreme Council of National Security shall be effective after the Leader’s approval.”

All matters related to [the security and foreign policy of the regime](#) are discussed in this state body. It is thus highly unlikely for any act of assassination or terrorist attack to take place overseas without its having been discussed and approved by the SCNS.

While the Supreme Leader and the SCNS have foremost responsibility for decision-making and giving the green light, [the IRGC and the MOI](#) are responsible for planning and conducting the assassinations or the terrorist attacks.

The number of MOI departments and their respective responsibilities are unknown, though it is known that at least one department at the MOI is responsible for [conducting assassinations](#). These are often accomplished in conjunction with the IRGC. The IRGC was established after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and is responsible for the protection of the Islamic regime. The most important and well-known section of the IRGC is its external branch, the [Quds Force \(QF\)](#), which is responsible for spreading the revolution and the ideology of the regime abroad.

The QF has, since its establishment in the 1990s, been involved in hundreds of assassinations and terrorist attacks throughout the world. Exactly how the operational responsibilities are divided between the QF and the MOI is not known. It is, however, clear that the two organizations collaborate closely on the conducting of subversive operations on foreign soil, including assassinations. As the QF is a military organization, it can be inferred that the MOI is more active in gathering and analyzing intelligence while the actual assassination is conducted by QF operatives.

The majority of QF operatives are Iranian nationals, but the QF often uses proxies in its operations. These proxies exist all over the Middle East: the [Lebanese Hezbollah](#), the Iraqi [Popular Mobilization Forces](#) (Hashd Shaabi), [Hezbollah Hejaz](#) in Saudi Arabia, [Ansar Allah](#) (the Houthis) in Yemen, and the [Ashtar Brigades](#) in Bahrain, to name just a few. It is thus natural for the Iranian regime to use non-Iranians in its foreign operations. One example was the Iranian attack on the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) in Buenos Aires. One

of the operatives was [Imad Mughniyeh](#), a Lebanese national and a main leader of Hezbollah.

Tehran makes use of foreign, non-Iranian operatives not only for terrorist operations, but also to conduct espionage. In 2019, for instance, the Swedish Security Police, Säkerhetspolisen, arrested an Iraqi national on suspicion of conducting espionage against Iranian opponents of the Islamic regime. In December 2019, the suspect was [convicted](#) of espionage and given a prison term of 2.5 years.

USING DIPLOMATS

Over the years, Iran has made extensive use of its diplomatic arm with regard to subversive activities like espionage, assassinations, and terrorist plots. The first known assassination in which regime diplomats were involved was the murder of Ali Akbar Tabatabaei in the summer of 1980. As noted above, Tabatabaei was assassinated by an African American Muslim convert, Dawud Salahuddin. Salahuddin had extensive contacts among Iranian revolutionaries prior to the downfall of the Shah, but it was during his employment as a security guard at the Iranian Interest Section of the Algerian Embassy that he was [recruited](#) as an assassin. The details of his recruitment are still unclear, but it is highly likely that diplomats at the Interest Section had a role in the recruitment.

As Iranian subversive operations in the region as well as in Europe increased during the 1990s, so did illegal activities by Iranian embassies throughout the world. In 1992, two Iranian employees at the Iranian embassy in [London](#) were expelled for planning a plot to assassinate Salman Rushdie. The same year, the Mykonos assassinations took place in Berlin. One of the individuals convicted of the attack was Kazem Darabi, who had close contact with employees of the Iranian embassy in [Germany](#).

Two years later, in 1994, the heinous AMIA attack was conducted, which killed close to 100 people. In 2004, Alberto Nisman was appointed Special Prosecutor in charge of the AMIA bombing investigation. He stated in a [report](#) that the Third Secretary of the Iranian embassy in Argentina, Ahmad Reza Asghari, was directly involved in the decision

to attack AMIA. Nisman concluded that the AMIA attack “was carried out by the Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah at the behest of the highest authorities in the Iranian government, and with local assistance from Iranian diplomats who were accredited in Argentina.”

In 1996, Dr. Reza Mazlouman, who later changed his name to Kourosch Aryamanesh, was assassinated in his home in Paris. He was a professor of criminology prior to the Islamic Revolution and Deputy Minister of Education during the reign of the Shah. In exile, he became a prominent opponent of both Islam and the Islamic Republic. One Ahmad Jeyhooni, a resident of Germany, was convicted by the French court for aiding the assassins. German intelligence revealed that Jeyhooni had contacts among operatives of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence who were employed at the Iranian embassy in [Bonn](#). Jeyhooni also had contacts with other diplomats at the [embassy](#), including the Cultural and Consular Affairs Attaché and the Secretary of Consular Affairs.

Though the above examples are old, they show a pattern that illustrates how the Islamic regime goes about conducting assassinations. It is a pattern the regime has repeated in recent times. In 2012, nationals from Kenya, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Great Britain were to be targeted in planned bombings in Nairobi. The culprits, Ahmad Abolfathi Muhammad and Sayed Mansour Mousavi, [members of the QF](#), were initially convicted and sentenced to life in prison. The High Court reduced their sentences to 15 years, and the [Court of Appeal](#) ultimately set the men free. The interesting element of the case is that the former Iranian ambassador to Kenya, Hadi Farajvand, was under investigation for trying to illegally secure the release of the two men by bribing individuals from the Kenyan Interior Ministry. It would later be shown that the individuals were not from the Interior Ministry and had [defrauded](#) the ambassador for an unknown amount of money. Four years after this plot, in 2016, two other Iranian nationals in Kenya were deported after being arrested in an Iranian diplomatic car outside the [Israeli embassy](#) while allegedly conspiring on a plot.

In 2013, two Iranian diplomats in Bosnia and Herzegovina were declared *persona non grata* after being accused of membership in the MOI and having links to terrorism. They were both [expelled](#) from the country.

The most high-profile terrorist plot to be connected to an Iranian embassy in recent years was in 2018, when [Assadollah Assadi](#), a member of the MOI and the Third Secretary of the Iranian embassy in Austria, was arrested in Germany and extradited to Belgium on charges of having provided an Iranian couple with explosives with which to bomb an Iranian exile gathering in Paris. Assadi's trial started in Belgium on [November 27, 2021](#).

Also in 2018, the Dutch government ousted two Iranian diplomats from the Netherlands. Though the [Dutch intelligence service](#) did not provide any information on the reasons for the deportations, it is safe to state that the two diplomats were involved at a high level in operations that were deemed by the Dutch government to be a threat to national security. This is particularly likely in light of two assassinations of Iranian opponents of the Islamic regime that took place in 2015 and 2017 in the Netherlands. Incumbent Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Stefan Blok [stated](#) with regard to these killings that there are "strong indications that Iran was involved in the assassinations of two Dutch nationals of Iranian origin."

The latest Iranian scandal took place in Denmark. In June 2020, an Iranian man with Norwegian citizenship was convicted and sentenced to [seven years' imprisonment](#) after being arrested for espionage and complicity to commit murder. The central crime was committed against an Iranian opposition figure in Denmark. The offender had close connections to the Iranian embassy in [Oslo](#), and there is a strong probability that he received his orders from that embassy.

In short: Iranian embassies, diplomats, and employees are highly active in their target countries in the areas of espionage, the plotting of assassinations and terror attacks, and the conducting of those attacks.

TARGETING DIPLOMATS

Iranian subversive operations have been focused on the Iranian opposition in exile, several Arab states in the Persian Gulf, Israel, several Western countries like the US and Great Britain, and the respective interests of those states. The Islamic regime of Iran has repeatedly targeted the diplomats and embassies of these countries.

In 2008, the Azerbaijani government stated that an attack on the Israeli embassy in Baku had been thwarted with the arrest of Hezbollah operatives trained by the IRGC. Azerbaijani officials revealed that Iran was planning to attack employees of the US and Israeli embassies (among others) in [Baku](#). Four years later, in 2012, the then Israeli ambassador to Azerbaijan, [Michael Lotem](#), was targeted by Azerbaijani nationals who had been recruited by an Azerbaijani criminal with links to Iran.

Israel's embassies as well as its ambassadors and diplomats are high priority targets for the Islamic regime in Tehran. In 2012, it engineered several other attacks against Israeli diplomats. On February 13 of that year, bombs were placed on cars belonging to personnel at the Israeli embassies in New Delhi and Tbilisi. In New Delhi, the bomb exploded, injuring the spouse of an Israeli defense envoy. The bomb in Tbilisi was detected and defused. Israel blamed Iran, which of course denied it. The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Ramin Mehmanparast, [stated](#) that "Israel has bombed its embassies in New Delhi and Tbilisi to tarnish Iran's friendly ties with the host countries."

The next day, on February 14, an assassination plot against Itzhak Shoham, the then Israeli ambassador to Thailand, together with other Israeli diplomats, was foiled. One of the Iranian nationals involved in the assassination attempt, Said Moradi, lost his legs as a bomb he tried to hurl at Thai police exploded prematurely. A second Iranian was arrested at the airport. Altogether, three Iranian nationals were arrested as having been involved in this foiled plot. Once again, the Iranian regime denied any role in the attacks, and the spokesman of the Iranian Foreign Ministry again [stated](#) that "The Islamic Republic of Iran believes that elements of the Zionist regime are responsible for this crime and is prepared to help and cooperate with the Thai government to shed all lights on these events."

Barely a month after the foiled Thailand attack, in March 2012, Turkish officials stated that [four members of the QF](#) had been arrested for preparing attacks against Israeli diplomats in the country.

In late November 2020, the three men involved in the plot in the February 14 attack in Thailand—Said Moradi, Masoud Sedaghatzadeh, and Mohammad Khazaei—were part of a [prisoner swap](#). They were sent back to Iran, in exchange for which the Islamic regime released Australian Islamic scholar Kylie Moore-Gilbert, who had been convicted in September 2018 by an Iranian court and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment for espionage while she was in Iran attending a conference.

In January 2015, a mock bomb was found near the Israeli embassy in [Montevideo](#). With the help of CCTV footage, Uruguayan investigators connected an Iranian diplomat to the fake bomb. A few months later, the diplomat—a senior member of staff at the Iranian embassy—was expelled from the country.

One of the most well-known Iranian attempts to assassinate a diplomat occurred in 2011. In September of that year, an Iranian national, Mansour Arbabsiar, was arrested by US intelligence on charges of planning to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the US, Adel Jubeir. Just four months prior to the arrest, Iranian operatives had [assassinated](#) a Saudi diplomat in Pakistan.

Arbabsiar had close ties to the QF and received his orders from Gholam Shakuri, a QF official residing in Tehran. Arbabsiar had been instructed to contact Mexican drug cartel members to conduct the assassination. A Los Zetas member was indeed contacted, but he turned out to be an undercover informant for the US Drug Enforcement Agency. The plan was thus uncovered and foiled. Arbabsiar was [convicted](#) and sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment.

TARGETING LANA MARKS

On September 13, 2020, [Politico](#) disclosed that Iran was planning to target the US ambassador to South Africa, Lana Marks. Iranian authorities denied any plans to assassinate Marks, and commander of the IRGC Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami stated in an [interview](#) that Iran had no reason to target her. He added that only those directly or indirectly involved in the slaying of Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani would be targeted.

Salami's claims should be interpreted with caution, and with consideration of the way regime officials usually communicate. There is no doubt that Iran will use every means at its disposal to attack Israeli, Saudi, and American interests all over the world, including their embassies and diplomats, whether or not they were directly or indirectly involved in Soleimani's killing.

It is clear from the above examples that Iran not only uses its own embassies and diplomats to conduct terror operations and assassinations, but also targets the embassies and diplomats of other countries. There is no doubt that Iran has both the will and the means to target diplomats all over the world.

But why would Iran target Lana Marks specifically? The answer to this question may be simpler than many believe. Marks is 1) female; 2) Jewish; 3) a close friend of President Trump; and 4) a resident of South Africa.

The Islamic regime was well aware that Soleimani could have been killed on any of his many missions in the Middle East. Soleimani was often present on the field during conflicts abroad, and could easily have been killed during a shootout. The regime did not, however, believe that the US would ever target Soleimani directly. Tehran believes that by killing Soleimani, an important Iranian official, the US crossed a red line and rendered all unwritten rules and considerations obsolete.

By targeting a female, Tehran wants to show that everyone is now a legitimate target. The fact that she is also Jewish and a close friend of Trump's makes her an even more appealing target. The fourth factor, though, that she resides in South Africa, is probably the most important reason why she was chosen as a target by the Iranians.

In 2015, Aljazeera and the *Guardian* published leaked intelligence documents from several different intelligence organizations. A great many of the documents were from the State Security Agency (SSA), the South African intelligence organization. The documents discuss the Islamic Republic of Iran and its operatives in South Africa and reveal a strong presence of Iranian intelligence operatives in that country.

According to one of the [documents](#), dated June 9, 2009, South Africa is “an important target in Iran’s current struggles in the world political system.” The document further discusses how Iranian intelligence officers infiltrate South Africa disguised as journalists and businessmen. Another document shows how Iran has been using South Africa as a base from which to organize terrorist attacks against other countries on the African continent. One of the attacks, which South African intelligence helped to [thwart](#), was an Iranian attempt to attack Western nationals in [Kenya](#).

In a 12-page [document](#) entitled “Iranian Intelligence Activities in Africa,” the SSA discusses in detail Iranian foreign objectives, the role of Iranian cultural ministries and agencies in Africa, and the modus operandi of the MOI and the IRGC. The document concludes that “Africa has been selected to become the primary zone of conflict with the West in an attempt to advance Iranian foreign policy and intelligence objectives.” It is thus no surprise that the Iranian regime would target the US ambassador to South Africa.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Iran’s assassination strategy is designed for one purpose: to keep the regime secure. For most of the regime’s existence, individuals were targeted for elimination because the regime believed they posed a direct or indirect threat to its survival.

But ever since the early 2010s, Iran has actively sought to assassinate people who are not a threat to the regime. The plot to assassinate Israeli diplomats all over the world, the assassination attempt of the Saudi ambassador to Washington, and not least the plot to assassinate Lana Marks are all examples of this. One reason is revenge for what the regime calls a “Zionist conspiracy” to overthrow the IRI. Another is the regime’s need to keep its base of supporters satisfied with respect to the many assassinations that have targeted the IRI both inside and outside Iran.

During the second decade of the millennium, Iran experienced assassinations of several of its nuclear scientists and prominent figures. In 2010, two scientists—Masoud Alimohammadi and Majid Shahriari—were assassinated in Tehran. The same year, Fereydoon

Abbasi, a nuclear physicist and former head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, was targeted. He was severely wounded, but [survived](#) the assassination attempt. The following year, a third scientist, Darioush Rezaeinejad, was [killed](#). Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, another scientist, was [assassinated](#) in 2012. As mentioned, Qassem Soleimani was killed in 2019. On August 7, 2020, Al-Masri, the al-Qaeda second-in-line, was [gunned down](#) outside of his house in Tehran, allegedly by Mossad.

While the US is directly responsible for the killing of Soleimani, no one has claimed responsibility for the killings of the Iranian nuclear scientists or Al-Masri. It is widely believed, however, that the Israeli intelligence organization, Mossad, was behind the assassinations. The most recent assassination conducted in Iran, believed to have been organized by Mossad, was on November 27, 2020, when the architect of the Iranian nuclear program, Hossein Fakhrizadeh, was killed in Absard, 70 km outside Tehran.

All the above-mentioned assassinations, especially the killings of Soleimani and Fakhrizadeh, put a large burden on the IRI, which is under heavy pressure to respond.

In a declassified CIA [report](#) from 1987, it was stated that “Terrorism is an important instrument of Iranian foreign policy, used both to promote national interests and to export the regime’s revolutionary ideals.” Though 34 years have passed since this report was issued, the CIA’s conclusion is still accurate and succinctly describes the modus operandi of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran will continue to use subversive measures like terrorism, espionage, and assassinations to safeguard the regime and bring forth its objectives and ideology. After the killings of Soleimani and Fakhrizadeh, Iran is under great pressure to avenge their deaths. It is of critical importance to understand this when discussing *the physical base of the state* as put forward by [Barry Buzan](#) in his national security theory.

The focus of that theory is the state and three concepts closely related to it: the idea of the state, the institutional expression of the state, and the

physical base of the state. According to the theory, any harm to one or more of these concepts will jeopardize the country's national security.

The physical base of the state is defined as the inhabitants of a country. For the Islamic regime in Iran, its physical base is primarily its supporters. In addition, the regime views all Muslims, specifically all Shiites, to be part of its physical base. This is clearly seen in Iran's use of proxies all over the Middle East and Africa.

If it is to keep its physical base satisfied, Iran will have to act upon the deaths of Soleimani and Fakhrizadeh. Because of the [weaknesses](#) in Iranian intelligence and the amateur skill level of most of its operatives, the likelihood that Iran will be able to target important generals and statesmen of Israel and the US is very low. In keeping with the regime's modus operandi since its birth, it is more likely that Iran will continue to target US and Israeli interests in the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa. It will attack diplomats and embassies, and will use its proxies to fire more missiles into Israel. This is no longer a matter of vengeance. It is a matter of saving face in front of the regime's physical base and the world.

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