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The terror threat of Iran and Hezbollah in Europe

Shaul Shay

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Research Institute for European and American Studies

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Abstract

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 has 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.

To carry out such terror operations, Iran uses a wide network of the IRGC's - al - Qods Force, the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) and proxies like Hezbollah. Iran has an organized terrorist network established in Europe and the people who were arrested in connection with the terror plots lived and worked in Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Norway and Denmark.

Despite the many terrorist attacks carried out by Hezbollah around the world and on European soil, so far most of the EU countries have not put Hezbollah on its list of terrorist organizations.

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.

Iran and Hezbollah are the main potential threats to the U.S, Israel and EU interests. This is something not yet realized by Western governments. The European Union and its member states must understand the need to prevent the Iranian threat to their security and interests and take the necessary tough measures against the Iranian regime and Hezbollah.

The Iranian terror threat

In the course of almost 40 years Iran is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. The Iranian terror activity worldwide is based on an organizational and operational infrastructure that includes four components: ¹

- Iranian embassies and consulates (which enjoy diplomatic immunity).
- Iranian institutions, organizations, NGOs and companies (the Iranian national carrier, shipping companies, banks etc.).

- Institutions, organizations and companies belonging to Iranians or Muslim residents living all over the world, which are prepared to assist Iran or its emissaries.
- Terror by proxy through sponsored organizations such as the Hezbollah.

The main targets of the Iranian regime are 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."

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

Iran is one of the leading countries to use terror to promote its objectives in the international arena but Iran's terrorist-related activities across Europe have largely managed to fly under the radar. In last year Iran was actively involved in several plots to carry out terror attacks in Europe:

- ***In December 2017***, the German government protested to the Iranian ambassador following the conviction of an Iranian agent for spying. The Iranian agent was convicted in Berlin of espionage and sentenced to more than four years in prison. His targets included Reinhold Robbe, who headed the German-Israeli Association.³
- ***In January 2018***, the German authorities were conducting searches across the country in connection with 10 suspected Iranian agents. The searches by police Special Forces were carried out in Berlin, Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia. The suspected agents had been gathering information on the Israeli embassy in Berlin, as well as on targets related to the local Jewish community, including kindergartens. The agents were monitored by German intelligence services for two months before the raids were conducted. The arrest warrants for the suspects listed them as members of the al-Quds force, which is part of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and is considered a terrorist organization by the United States.⁴
- ***In June 2018***, an investigation by Dutch intelligence led to the expulsion of two Iranian diplomats based at the Iranian embassy in Amsterdam. This followed the assassination several months earlier of an Iranian Arab activist who was gunned down in the Dutch capital.⁵
- ***On June 30, 2018***, Belgian Security officials have announced that a Belgian couple with Iranian origin has been arrested with explosives in their car. They planned to bomb the grand gathering of the Iranian democratic opposition in Villepinte outside Paris.
- ***On June 30, 2018***, the Iranian diplomat, Assadollah Assadi, from the Iranian Embassy in Vienna, who, according to Belgian security sources, handed over the explosives to the couple to launch the attack, was arrested in Germany. European counterintelligence services have long considered the Iranian embassy in underground operations.
- ***In October 2018***, the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET) arrested Mohammad Davoudzadeh Lului, an officer serving Iran's Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) for planning to carry out an assassination in Denmark. The reported target was an exiled leader of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA),

the group Tehran accused of carrying out a terrorist attack in Iran. Davoudzadeh was arrested at the Göteborg airport in Sweden at the request of the Danish government, when he returned from Iran and was extradited to Denmark.⁶ On October 30, 2018, Denmark recalled its ambassador and called for fresh EU sanctions against Iran. One month after foiling an assassination attempt, ASMLA held its annual conference in Copenhagen, entitled, “Ahwaz against Iranian Terrorism,” to shed light on menaces caused by Tehran’s terrorism, both at the international and regional levels.⁷

- **On November 1, 2018**, Norway summoned the Iranian ambassador in Oslo to protest a suspected assassination plot against an ASMLA leader in Denmark that allegedly involved a Norwegian citizen of Iranian origin.⁸

- Denmark’s decision followed similar developments in France. The French government officially and publicly blamed Iran’s intelligence service for a failed attack on the June 2018 gathering of an Iranian opposition group outside Paris attended by thousands, including high-profile Americans like Rudolph Giuliani and Newt Gingrich. France said it had seized assets linked to Iran’s intelligence services and two Iranian nationals including one posted to the Iranian embassy in Vienna.⁹

Thanks to good intelligence the Iranian latest terrorist plotting in Europe has not resulted in heavy casualties, but these plots were just the tip of the iceberg and Iran has a long and bloody history of conducting and supporting terrorism in Europe.

To carry out such operations, Iran uses a wide network of the **IRGC’s - al - Qods Force, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and proxies**. The al-Quds Force had tried to recruit non-Iranian Shiites, primarily those with European citizenship to establish a terror cell to carry out attacks throughout the continent.¹⁰ Iran sponsors terror through an elaborate network of allies and proxies and the most important one is Lebanese Hezbollah.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah is one of the most capable and worrisome terrorist organizations in the world, which intends to continue expanding its reach. Hezbollah was formed by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards in 1982 and remained an Iranian proxy. The group embraces the principles of Iran’s Islamist ideology and sees armed struggle not only as justified, but as a sacred imperative and has implemented this vision.

Iran gives Hezbollah hundreds of millions of dollars a year.¹¹ On June 24, 2016, Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah delivered a speech dealing with Hezbollah’s challenges. One of the issues discussed at length was the pressure exerted by the United States on the Lebanese banks system to prevent them from collaborating with Hezbollah.¹² Nasrallah claimed, the measures taken would not affect the organization because its entire budget came directly from Iran and not through Lebanese banks.¹³

Hezbollah now has more than 100,000 rockets in Lebanon, a massive and destabilizing buildup. Indifferent to the people it purports to defend; Hezbollah hides its missiles in densely populated areas, using innocent civilians as human shields.¹⁴ Since 2012, Hezbollah acts also as a proxy for Iran in Syria, where it has its largest deployment outside of Lebanon (about 5000 fighters).

Hezbollah likes to make a false distinction between its terrorist wing and the “political wing.”

Hezbollah is not an NGO and it is not just another political party in Lebanon. Hezbollah is a terrorist group with a bloody record of perpetrating violence and destruction in Lebanon and Syria, throughout the Middle East, and around the world.¹⁵

The United States, Canada, the Netherlands, Israel and the Arab League, classify Hezbollah a terrorist organization. Germany and the European Union merely designate Hezbollah's so-called military wing a terrorist entity.¹⁶

Hezbollah's terror history started with the 1983 bombing of U.S. embassy and U.S. Marine and French barracks in Beirut, abduction of American and European citizens in Lebanon and high jacking airplanes.

In recent years, Hezbollah operatives have been caught preparing attacks as far afield as Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Egypt, Peru, and Thailand. Hezbollah weapons caches have been discovered in the Gulf, in Europe, in Asia, and in Africa.

In 2012, Hezbollah bombed a bus in Burgas, Bulgaria, killing five Israeli tourists and one Bulgarian citizen. Nine months after the Burgas attack, a Cyprus court convicted Hossam Taleb Yaacoub, a dual Swedish-Lebanese citizen, of planning another terror attack against Israeli tourists on behalf of Hezbollah. In 2015, another plot was thwarted in Cyprus. Hussein Bassam Abdallah, a dual Lebanese-Canadian citizen, stockpiled 8.2 tons of ammonium nitrate explosive. He pled guilty to all eight charges against him, including participation in a terrorist group.

Hezbollah is designated also as an international criminal organization, and not only as a terrorist organization. On October 15, 2018, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions declared Hezbollah and four other criminal cartels as the leading transnational criminal groups. The declaration states that these groups are threatening the security and prosperity of the United States and its allies. This was in order to grant top priority to the war against them, and to allocate adequate resources to activities that would disrupt and dismantle these groups.¹⁷

Hezbollah's External Security Organization Business Affairs Component (BAC), was founded by Hezbollah Senior Leader Imad Mughniyah, before his death in 2008. The BAC is now run by senior Hezbollah official Abdallah Safieddine and other operatives such as Adham Tabaja. Safieddine, is a cousin of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, served as the group's representative to Tehran. Members of the Hezbollah BAC have established business relationships with South American drug cartels, responsible for supplying large quantities of cocaine to the European and United States drug markets. The Hezbollah BAC continues to launder significant drug proceeds as part of a trade based money laundering scheme.¹⁸

Hezbollah is operating in Europe a criminal money-laundering ring that uses an ancient banking practice. Hawala works on the basis of trust and extensive use of family or regional affiliations and middle men called the hawaldars or the hawala dealers who immediately receive and release money in another destination. The Hawala is an alternative or parallel remittance system, which works outside the circle of banks and formal financial systems. Its speed, reliability and relative cover from the traces of security services have made it an attractive proposition for terrorist groups and militias alike.¹⁹

Financial pressures on Iran from the U.S. sanctions is likely to make Hezbollah ramp up its international funding activities. These financial pressures are likely to make Hezbollah leverage its significant global network and put more effort into its international funding activities, which range from extortion to smuggling, spanning from South America to and via Europe.²⁰

In 2015, Hezbollah weapons procurer Ali Fayyad was detained in Czech Republic pending

extradition to the U.S. In February 2015, he was released from Czech custody after five Czech citizens went missing in Lebanon. The five were released when Prague announced it would not honor the extradition request and deported Fayyad to Lebanon. Hezbollah is believed to have been behind their kidnapping.²¹ The U.S. embassy in Prague has criticized a decision by the Czech Republic's justice minister not to extradite a Lebanese man to the United States to face weapons smuggling charges.²²

Operation “Cedar” in January 2016 - International law enforcement operation targeting Hezbollah's business affairs component activities in Europe, that included the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Customs and Border Protection, the Treasury Department, Europol, Eurojust, and authorities in France, Germany, Italy, and Belgium. The investigation spanned seven countries and led to the arrest of several members of Hezbollah's so-called Business Affairs Component (BAC) on charges of drug trafficking, money laundering, and procuring weapons for Hezbollah. As a result of this transnational investigation, authorities arrested “top leaders” of the BAC's “European cell.”²³

Newly released European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2018 wrote: “**In 2017**, member states carried out several investigations into financing of terrorism. One major investigation focused on a large network of Lebanese nationals offering money laundering services to organized crime groups in the EU and using a share of the profits to finance terrorism-related activities of the Lebanese Hezbollah's military wing.” The report added, “The cooperation of these money-launderers and Hezbollah's military wing was a clear example of a nexus between organized crime and terrorism.”²⁴

In November 2018, French prosecutors put fifteen members of Hezbollah's criminal organization on trial in Paris. Two of the accused men lived in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia and an additional two men charged lived near the city-state of Bremen in northern Germany. The members of the crime ring are charged with laundering Colombian narcotics money via a complex finance evasion scheme with the aid of the Lebanese Diaspora.²⁵ An export trader in the city of Münster in North Rhine-Westphalia is believed to be one of the main alleged Hezbollah agents who oversaw the illegal narcotics operation that trafficked in cocaine for a Colombian drug cartel and used the profits to purchase weapons for Hezbollah.²⁶ The Paris prosecutor suspects that the Lebanese network bought with cash just within a year jewelry and watches in value from roughly 10 million euros in jewelry stores in North Rhine-Westphalia and other German states. The criminal enterprise is believed to have laundered as much as 1 million Euro per week during the high point of its operation.

Iran - Hezbollah and the Balkans

The Iranian regime is advancing its presence and resources considerably in Europe, especially in the Balkans. The Iranian efforts including Bosnia -Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania, three countries with Muslim population.

Iran is using “Soft Power” to maintain and even extend its influence in the Balkans, through economic, ‘cultural’ and ‘religious’ ties. During the past three decades, Iran has launched consulates, “charities” and “cultural organizations” that serve as front organizations for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Intelligence and security (MOIS). This is something not yet realized by the authorities of countries in the Balkans, which have opened their doors to those organizations. Iran's effort to exert influence over the Balkan

Peninsula and its governments poses a grave security threat.

In 2017, American security agencies saw expanding activities of Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other countries in the Western Balkans.

Iran and Bosnia - Herzegovina

During the Bosnian war of the 1990s, as the leading advocate for Islamic support of the Muslims in Bosnia, Iran gathered volunteers from Islamic terror organizations including Al Qaeda, and helped with their training and dispatch to Bosnia. Iranian aid for Bosnia began as early as 1992 (in the aftermath of the Bosnian Muslim leader, Izetbegović's visit to Teheran), and culminated during 1994-1995.²⁷

The Iranian intelligence played a key role in the allocation of the aid offered by the Iranian government to Muslims in Bosnia during the war against the Serbians and in the establishment of the Iranian terror infrastructure in the Balkans. Some of the Iranian intelligence agents acted under the guise of employees of Iranian charities such as the Iranian Red Crescent and others operated under diplomatic protection.²⁸

The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Ministry was also involved in the support efforts for the Muslims in Bosnia and dispatched the **Seventh Revolutionary Guards Brigade**, which included 2000 soldiers and was incorporated in the Bosnian Muslim Army.

The Revolutionary Guards Seventh Brigade, which was stationed in Zenica, played an active role in the fighting and trained Bosnian soldiers. In addition, some 400 Iranian intelligence agents from the (VEVAK) and the Revolutionary Guards served in Bosnia.²⁹

Iran and Croatia established diplomatic relations on April 18, 1992 and Croatia appointed a Muslim Croatian named Osman Muftić its first ambassador to Iran. According to the Serbs, Croatia's consent to the transfer of fighters and weaponry to the Muslims in Bosnia via its territory was granted silent approval by the United States and the Western countries, despite the US embargo imposed on arms.³⁰ During the years 1994-1995 the Iranians transported at least 60 weapon shipments to the Muslims in Bosnia.³¹

In the early nineties, Zagreb, Croatia served as the focal point for Iranian intelligence activity, which dealt in directing intelligence gathering in the Balkans and in coordinating activities between the Iranian intelligence and Islamic terror organizations.

In March 1996, the UN spokesman in Bosnia accused Iran of violating the Dayton Accords, citing its continued training of the Muslim Army in Bosnia-Herzegovina and claiming that Iran constituted a terrorist threat against the International Force in Bosnia.

Evidence regarding the continued Iranian involvement in the training of the Bosnian forces and intelligence agencies was found during a raid conducted by the International Forces (IFOR) on a training camp in Fojnica.

A number of Iranians were granted citizenship by Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992-1995 civil war. The Mujahidin fighters were either recognized as legal citizens following marriage to local women or were granted citizenship for their contribution to the Bosnian Muslim nation during the war. These included officials from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, military, and intelligence.³²

Bosnian passports have provided Iranians with the ability to enter and exit a country bordering the European Union that has since applied for EU membership and has enjoyed an Association Agreement with it since 2008. Since 2010, Bosnian citizens with a biometric passport also enjoy visa-free travel within the EU's Schengen Area.³³

During the past three decades, Iran has launched consulates, cultural centers and charities in the Balkans for espionage and other covert activities. The presence of Iranian intelligence agents in Bosnia in Herzegovina has sharply increased since the beginning of 2012, along with the activities of Iranian officials and diplomats.

In April 2013, two Iranian intelligence officers posted to Bosnia and Herzegovina as diplomats were expelled from the country after being involved in espionage and "connections to terrorism". The accused diplomats, Hamzeh Dolabi Ahmad and Jadidi Sohrab, Second and Third Secretary of Embassy respectively, were actually the head of the Iranian intelligence Station chief in Bosnia and one of his agents.

Iran and Kosovo

After the end of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Iranian embassies in Croatia and Sarajevo (Bosnia) served as logistic and operational bases for Muslim aid in the Balkans.

In May 1998, Iran established a center for Muslim aid in Kosovo headed by Ayatollah Janati, who was one of the first Iranian "patrons" of the Muslims in Bosnia. In the summer of 1998, following increased Serb pressure imposed upon the Muslim population in Kosovo, Iran called for cooperation with the West in order to save the Muslims from the Serbs.

An editorial published in the Teheran Times dated June 16, 1998¹ called on NATO and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) to take immediate action against Milosheвич and the Serb forces.³⁴

In June 2015, Kosovo police have raided five NGOs tied to Iran on suspicions of money laundering and financing terrorism, as a part of a strategy to counter religious extremism. The NGOs raided in Pristina were Nisa, Bregu i Diellit, and Ibni Sina, while those ones raided in Prizren were Kurani and Ehli Bejti.

The Kosovo Special Prosecution indicted, in July 2016, an Iranian citizen, Hasan Azari Bejani, on four criminal charges including money laundering and financing terrorism. According to the indictment, throughout 2014 and 2015, the suspect received several deposits in the account of the NGO "Kur'ani" (Quran), without asking for permission from the Kosovo Financial Intelligence Unit, as required by law.³⁵

The prosecution also alleged that the suspect did not maintain proper accounting to explain discrepancies. According to prosecutors, from 2005 to 2015, the NGO declared 580,000 euros in donations, but the suspect withdrew more than 870,000 euros from various banks. The prosecution also seized 30,000 euros from "Kur'ani", and suspended the activity of four other NGOs related to the case: "Ibn Sina", "Bregu i Diellit", "Nisa" dhe "Ehli Bejt".³⁶

Ties between Iran and Kosovo have not been warm since latter's split from Serbia in 2008 because Iran does not recognize Kosovo as an independent state and the relations between the two countries have tensed after the authorities in Kosovo accused an Iranian citizen of funding terrorist acts and money laundering through the NGOs.³⁷

Iran and Albania

Albania has been another Balkan country Iran has targeted. As in Bosnia, the attempted Iranian infiltration of Albania followed the pattern of setting up “charities” and “cultural organizations” that serve as front organizations for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Intelligence. An Iranian Embassy also opened in Tirana, Albania’s capital, in February 1999.

Despite such efforts, however, Iran draws little sympathy in either elite circles or amongst the general population. Albania’s government and Parliament allowed in 2016, a large number of members of Iran’s democratic opposition group, MEK,³⁸ to settle in Albania. The MEK has relocated in 2016, its headquarters from Iraq to Tirana.

That same year a senior MOIS deputy, Gholamhossein Mohammadnia, became the Iranian ambassador to Albania and the Iranian embassy has since planned several operations against MEK members.³⁹

Albanian authorities arrested ,in March 2018,two Iranian agents on terrorism charges after being caught allegedly surveilling a location where Iranian New Year (Nowruz) celebrations were about to begin. The Iranian agents planned to set off a car bomb.⁴⁰

Iran and Bulgaria

In 2012, an IRGC-Qods Force operative was arrested in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he was conducting surveillance of a local synagogue. ⁴¹ Bulgarian authorities reportedly caught a Qods Force operative scoping out a synagogue in the country’s capital.”

On July 18, 2012, an explosion outside Burgas airport’s terminal building tore through a tourist bus. Five Israelis, the vehicle’s Bulgarian driver, and the terrorist alleged to have planted the device, Franco-Lebanese national Mohamad Hassan El-Husseini, were killed. It remains unclear whether Hussein intended to die in the blast or if the device went off by accident.⁴²

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused Hezbollah of carrying out the attack with the backing of Iran. An Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman rejected Netanyahu’s accusation that the bombing was carried out by Hezbollah as a proxy for Iran as “baseless.”

Two men allegedly linked to the Hezbollah terrorist organization went on trial on January 18, 2018 in absentia in Bulgaria over a deadly bomb attack on Israeli tourists in Burgas in July of 2012. Bulgarian authorities identified the attackers as two Lebanese men with links to the Lebanese Hezbollah terrorist group, named as Australian passport holder Meliad Farah and Canadian citizen Hassan El Hajj Hassan.⁴³

Bulgarian authorities believe the suspects fled to Lebanon after the attack and even filed an extradition request to the Lebanese government but their exact whereabouts remain unknown. It has also been reported that Hezbollah wired almost 75,000 euros to the two suspects wanted in the attack.⁴⁴

Summary

As the tension between Iran and the U.S and its allies in Middle East are on the rise and the sensitive domestic situation in Iran, the foiled attacks in Europe mark an escalation in Iran's willingness to undertake violent covert operations, after years of relative restraint.

The Iranian regime appears committed to a strategy of targeting Iranian decedents and Western and Israeli interests, not only in places where countermeasures may be comparatively underdeveloped but even in Europe.

As it appears from the various Iranian and Hezbollah terrorist plots on European soil since 2012, their apparatuses use a wide range of militants of Iranian, Lebanese origin or others, as well as asylum seekers, for intelligence missions or as terrorist infrastructure.

There are hundreds of Iranian al - Qods Force, MOIS and Hezbollah members within EU borders, many of whom could be activated should Iran or Hezbollah decide to operate against EU, U.S or Israeli targets on European soil.

Iran's effort to exert influence over the Balkan Peninsula 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.

Despite the many terrorist attacks carried out by Hezbollah around the world and on European soil and the 2012 Burgas bombing , the EU member states designated in 2013, Hezbollah's so-called military wing a terrorist entity—not the organization itself.⁴⁵ U.S President Donald Trump, former U.S president Barack Obama and ex-secretary of state Hillary Clinton have urged the EU to proscribe all of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.⁴⁶ Making distinction between Hezbollah's military, political and social activities is a fiction and the EU must change its mind and include Hezbollah in its list of terrorist organizations.

Iran and Hezbollah are the main potential threats to the U.S, Israel and EU's interests. This is something not yet realized by most of Western societies. The European Union and its member states must understand the need to prevent the Iranian threat to their security and interests and take the necessary tough measures against the Iranian regime and Hezbollah.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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