



**Iran**

## Iranian activists across Europe are targets of threats and harassment

**Fifteen activists including in France, Germany and Spain believe Iranian regime behind campaign of repression**

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Iran and its agents appear to be orchestrating a Europe-wide campaign of harassment, surveillance, kidnap plots and death threats targeting political activists who are protesting against the regime.

The Guardian has spoken to 15 Iranian campaigners who have been targeted in similar acts of repression across the UK, France, Germany, Spain, [Switzerland](#) and Sweden.

In most of the cases, the activists have been warned by western police or security agencies that [Iran](#) is behind credible threats to their life in retribution for their activism on European soil.

The attacks include hacking, cyber-attacks and online harassment that can include thousands of death threats sent over a week, and real-world threats.

Two activists in different countries have had their car tyres slashed in the last year, which they suspect was done by Iranian agents. Several report having been followed home from meetings by suspicious men.

An Iranian government spokesperson denied all accusations of wrongdoing.

The death in custody last year of Mahsa Amini, after her arrest for allegedly contravening the mandatory hijab law, sparked an unprecedented wave of mass protests across Iran that threatened to topple the Islamic Republic.

Inside Iran, the response to the protests has been brutal, with more than 500 people killed on the streets during marches and about 20,000 said to have been detained. More than 100 protesters have been reportedly sentenced to death or charged with capital offences, with seven executions so far.

Iran has simultaneously sought to quell dissent far outside its borders.

Among those targeted are Maryam Banihashemi, the face of the Iranian women's movement in Switzerland, where she has lived since 2016. She has grown used to receiving death threats on social media after publicly calling for regime change in Iran. She believes she has been followed home after attending political events, twice in Zurich and again after a meeting with a Swiss MP in parliament in Berne.



📷 Maryam Banihashemi: 'After this year, even Europe is not safe for me.' Photograph: handout

In June this year, Banihashemi was informed that her life may be in danger. The message, delivered to her by a person she knows works for Iran's Revolutionary Guards, was chilling: "They intend to assassinate you there."

Swiss police have since advised Banihashemi to change her name and address and to hire private bodyguards, which she says she cannot afford. She said: "When I first moved here, I was happy. After years of repression for being a female CEO in Iran, I finally felt free in Switzerland. After this year, even Europe is not safe for me."

Another recipient of a death threat was Farzane, an Iranian based in [Spain](#) who asked not to use her last name. In February, she received a threat via a Telegram account purporting to speak for the Iranian regime.

Spanish police have been unable to identify the sender, who wrote: “We are going to look for you in Madrid and we are going to kill you. Just like the rest of your friends were arrested and executed in Iran, you too will be punished.”

Farzane reported being followed home from political meetings in Madrid after dark by someone she believes to be an Iranian agent. Spanish police inspected her house and opened an investigation but she says they closed it two months later.

She continues organising protests but lives in a state of constant anxiety. She said: “I am paying taxes to the Spanish government, I expect to be protected. They know the situation, they don’t care.”

Elsewhere, security agencies or police are providing some advice or a measure of protection to those who are being targeted. But doing so involves a significant commitment of resources.

Matt Jukes, the head of counter-terrorism policing at London’s Metropolitan police, said earlier this year that the force’s workload investigating threats from foreign states, many of them emanating from Iran, had quadrupled over the last two years.

He revealed that the UK had foiled 15 plots by Iran to either kidnap or kill UK-based individuals that Iran regards as enemies of the regime.

Shadi Amin, an Iranian LGBTQ+ activist in [Germany](#), was warned by the security services there that she was under threat from Iranian hackers and agents. The police came to her house to check the locks and bolts on the door, and spent weeks inspecting her digital devices, which she was later advised not to use due to the threat from Iran’s hackers.

Last month, Germany’s domestic intelligence agency issued a public warning about “concrete spying attempts” by an Iran-linked hacker group, Charming Kitten.



📷 Shadi Amin: 'I cannot have friends over or give anybody my address.' Photograph: handout

Despite efforts to protect her, Amin still feels unsafe. “I cannot trust anybody - the situation for me is the same as the 1980s in Iran. I cannot have friends over or give anybody my address. The German government is not in a position to give us the safety that we expected,” she said.

Another LGBTQ+ activist in Germany, Mina Khani, was provided with bodyguards by the state and warned by the German security services that her personal details were being circulated on Iranian hacker forums.

Suspected Iranian hackers have targeted activists in [France](#) with phishing attacks and in the UK with attempts to hijack their Google accounts. One sophisticated phishing campaign, detected by an NGO supporting Iranian activists, Miaan Group, targeted journalists and activists outside Iran who used Gmail, trying to trick them with fake Google Drive links.

### **‘Now I constantly watch my back’**

When Alireza Akhondi, a Swedish MP of Iranian descent who has been a vocal critic of the Revolutionary Guards, travelled to Brussels earlier this year, Swedish security services advised him to wear a bulletproof vest. Police issued him with a personal alarm for emergencies.

He said that when he first started receiving death threats over the phone, he did not take them seriously. Warnings from security agencies changed his stance. “Now I constantly watch my back, I take a different route home every day, I check under my car before getting in. I am constantly on the watch,” Akhondi said.

In France, police have issued travel warnings to women organising protests against Iran’s regime, warning there is a risk they could be kidnapped by a country that has a long history of hostage-taking. They were specifically warned not to travel to Turkey or the UAE.

“They explained to me that Iran’s target is people having a media impact, especially on public opinion,” said Mona Jaffarian, who has led protests in France.

Where Iran has been unable to silence reformers overseas, the regime has targeted their family members in Iran.

Fariba Borhanzeahi, a Baluchi activist living in London, testified against Iran’s government in the European parliament in April. Two months later, while attending a women’s leadership workshop for Iranian activists in London, she discovered that her son, a British resident, had been arrested on espionage charges while visiting Iran and accused of collaborating with British intelligence.

Her son was released on bail in August but has had his UK residence permit confiscated and cannot travel back to London.

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“When I heard the news of my son’s arrest, I felt like I was dying,” Borhanzeahi said. “But I refuse to remain silent while my people’s rights are taken by a dictatorial government.”



Mahmoud Maleki, a spokesperson for the Iranian embassy in London, said the accusations were unsubstantiated and lacking in evidence, and questioned the motives of those making them. He added: “We can categorically reject all those claims like harassment, surveillance, kidnap plots and death threats, as well as hacking, cyber-attacks and online harassment.”

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