

What Is Driving State-Sponsored Attacks On Citizens Abroad?



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12-14-2024 ~ Kidnappings and killings of citizens by their own governments abroad are becoming increasingly common. The normalization of this trend will erode the sovereignty of all nations, as well as the safety of their citizens.

In July 2020, Iranian dissident Jamshid Sharmahd was visiting Dubai when he was suddenly abducted. Mobile phone data later [traced his movements to Oman's](#) port city of Sohar, before the signal went silent. Days later, he reappeared in Iran, accused of leading a terrorist group and orchestrating attacks in Iran, charges his family denies. After years in detention, he was [executed in October 2024](#).

Iran's actions are part of a longstanding pattern. Since the 1979 Revolution, its government has targeted dissidents overseas. Notable cases include [the 1991 stabbing death](#) of the Shah's last prime minister in Paris and the [1992 assassination of four Iranian-Kurdish dissidents](#) at a Berlin restaurant. These operations appear to have escalated again, with an Iranian journalist kidnapped in Iraq [in 2019](#), an opposition leader kidnapped in Turkey [in 2020](#), and a thwarted attempt to kidnap an Iranian journalist in the U.S. [that year as well](#).

Functioning governments exercise a monopoly on violence and detention within their borders, including lawful imprisonment and capital punishment. In conflict zones, these powers sometimes extend into contested areas, blurring legal distinctions. However, Iran's extraterritorial operations mark a trend of smaller

nations increasingly adopting tactics reserved for major powers, bypassing international protocols to punish citizens overseas.

Covert operations targeting your own citizens in other countries require substantial resources and intelligence to track individuals, orchestrate a hit, and avoid detection. The modern era of such operations was shaped in part by the surge of political assassinations by militant and terrorist groups [in the early 1970s](#). Governments responded with their own covert actions, both domestically and internationally, broadening their targets to include political activists and opposition figures.

Globalization, interconnected diaspora networks, and advances in surveillance technologies have further enabled these activities. As diplomatic repercussions wane and global enforcement diminishes—particularly from the U.S., which has faced its own criticism for extraordinary rendition and drone strikes on U.S. citizens abroad—states act with growing impunity and plausible deniability. Civilians unaffiliated with political disputes are occasionally caught in the crossfire, diminishing the sanctity of national sovereignty further.

Few countries are as brazen as Iran has been for decades, but other countries are also demonstrating their reach. In neighboring Pakistan, national forces recently apprehended a Pakistani citizen in Myanmar [in October 2024](#). Turkey, however, has [escalated its extraterritorial operations](#) the most in recent years in response to [the 2016 coup attempt](#). Turkish authorities claim to have abducted over 80 individuals from 18 countries [between 2016 and 2018 alone](#). One incident in 2018 saw six Turkish nationals [kidnapped in Kosovo](#) and sent back to Turkey, prompting a diplomatic rift between the two nations.

Turkey's assertiveness in targeting its citizens abroad has not stopped other governments from using it as a stage for their own actions. In [2018](#), Saudi Arabia orchestrated the killing of U.S.-Saudi citizen journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside its consulate in Istanbul. The killing drew global outrage and strong condemnation from the Turkish government. However, Washington's reluctance to impose significant consequences on Saudi Arabia emboldened other states.

Algeria abducted a dissident in neighboring Tunisia [in 2021](#), continuing a practice that has become common in parts of Africa. South Sudan, for instance, kidnapped two of its citizens from Kenya [in 2017](#). In another high-profile case, three

Rwandan diplomats [were expelled from South Africa](#) in 2014 after being implicated in the murder of a former Rwandan intelligence chief and attacks on two other Rwandan exiles.

In Eastern Europe, assassinations of government officials became a grim reality amid the political and social upheaval of [the 1990s](#). Governments often responded in kind, targeting individuals beyond their borders. Russia's approach has been particularly notable for its persistence and evolving methods.

Dozens of Chechen separatist supporters and others with links to organized crime have been killed in other countries, with operations often executed by Chechens to obscure Moscow's direct involvement. These include killings in Turkey [in 2011](#) and Germany [in 2019](#).

Russia's political killings in the UK have also drawn international attention. [In 2006](#), former FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko was fatally poisoned with a radioactive substance in London. [In 2018](#), another former Russian intelligence agent, Sergei Skripal, survived a poisoning attempt, though a local civilian was killed. These high-profile attacks conveyed to other Russians seeking to flee the country that even in the intelligence capital of Europe, no one is beyond Russia's reach.

Further afield, Russian authorities are believed to have been involved in the [2018 killings](#) of three Russian journalists in the Central African Republic, investigating Russian private military companies. And since the start of the Ukraine War, Russian authorities are suspected to be behind [numerous deaths](#) of prominent Russian citizens in other countries, as well as of at least one defector in Spain [in 2023](#).

Russia's actions have set a precedent for other post-Soviet states. Uzbekistan has a history of targeting dissidents overseas, starting with the [2006 kidnapping of Uzbek human rights activist](#) Muzafar Avazov from Kyrgyzstan. [Accusations have since included](#) a 2012 attempted assassination of an Uzbek citizen in Sweden and suspected involvement in the 2014 murder of an Uzbek Islamic cleric in Turkey.

[In 2021](#), Belarus forced a Ryanair flight traveling through its airspace to land in Minsk so authorities could board the plane and detain a journalist. Although technically in Belarusian airspace, it violated international norms regarding the sanctity of civil aviation.

China has also adopted sophisticated measures to suppress dissent in other countries. Its growing power allows it to enforce cooperation with some governments to repatriate wanted Chinese nationals, including the increasing use of “[overseas police stations](#)” to intimidate expatriates into compliance—a practice unmatched in its scope, though other nations have [employed similar tactics](#) to convince citizens to return home. But China’s history of abductions, in one of the largest expat populations in the world, spans decades.

A pro-democracy activist was seized in Vietnam [in 2002](#), for example, while a former Chinese diplomat who had sought asylum in Australia was allegedly drugged and transported via ship back to China [in 2005](#). Its actions have become more visible in recent years, particularly in Southeast Asia. [In 2015](#), a book publisher was kidnapped from his apartment in Thailand, followed by a pro-democracy activist in Thailand the next year.

Thailand itself has been implicated in targeting dissidents abroad. [In 2019](#), the killing of government critic Ko Tee in Laos raised suspicions of Thai involvement, as did the targeting of other critics, including an activist in Cambodia [in 2020](#).

North Korea demonstrated its willingness to use foreign agents to silence critics when Kim Jong Nam, the estranged half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, was assassinated in Malaysia [in 2017](#). A Vietnamese and Indonesian citizen were accused of acting on Pyongyang’s behalf. Later that year, Vietnam faced backlash after its agents were accused of [kidnapping a Vietnamese oil company executive](#) in Berlin and forcibly returning him to Vietnam, sparking a diplomatic conflict with Germany.

India has also stepped up its efforts against individuals it accuses of supporting the Khalistan independence movement, which seeks an independent Sikh state within India. [In 2023](#), tensions flared between India and Canada when evidence surfaced linking India to the assassination of a Sikh separatist leader in British Columbia, as well as a foiled plot to kill another leader in New York. The incidents triggered a major diplomatic row, while additional reports revealed India was intensifying its surveillance of diaspora communities in the UK and Australia.

India’s actions in particular pose a risk to normalizing this behavior further. Countries like China, Russia, and Iran already engage in extraterritorial operations, but India’s status as a growing partner to the West raises the stakes.

If a nation with close ties to Western democracies can act with relative impunity, what might other states feel emboldened to do? India's actions will potentially pressure Western states to crack down on Khalistan independence advocates to maintain diplomatic balance, and these concessions could inspire others to act in a similar manner to get the same results.

The increasing willingness of countries like India to test these boundaries has been preceded by decades of U.S. intelligence agencies kidnapping and assassinating U.S. citizens abroad. But after 9/11, the U.S. intensified and officialized such practices under the banner of "[extraordinary rendition](#)," detaining hundreds of foreign nationals and U.S. citizens accused of terrorism, many of which were later sent to third countries and often tortured.

The increasing use of drone technology has transformed government operations abroad, including the targeting of their own citizens. In 2011, U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni American cleric linked to Islamic extremism, was killed in Yemen by a U.S. drone strike. Despite his ties to extremist groups, his killing raised serious concerns about the erosion of due process, though the strike encountered limited domestic pushback.

The operation reflected a broader policy shift by the U.S. in the 21st century, justified under the premise that military action is permissible in areas where states are "unwilling or unable" to address terrorism. [By 2013](#), the Obama administration publicly acknowledged that four U.S. citizens had been killed by similar drone strikes overseas.

Advancements in technology are making it steadily more difficult for individual citizens to evade governments seeking to track them abroad. States are showing a growing boldness in crossing borders, encouraged by Washington's targeting of its own citizens and its leniency toward allies engaging in similar actions.

Concerns are also linked to the increasing involvement of dual citizens in these situations. Many countries refuse to recognize dual citizenship, complicating their treatment under international law and further straining diplomatic norms. This escalation of targeting one's own citizens in other countries risks evolving into broader attacks on foreign nationals. [In November 2024](#), Israeli citizen Zvi Kogan was assassinated in the United Arab Emirates, reportedly by three Uzbek nationals. While the motives remain unclear, the incident follows a year of

heightened tensions between Iran and Israel, as well as years of Israeli operations [targeting Iranian citizens within Iran](#) and elsewhere.

[Rising sabotage and covert operations](#) in the West and Russia since the Ukraine war have shown the ease with which foreign powers infiltrate other nations. Alongside the increasing trend of governments targeting their own citizens abroad, the possibility of citizens being attacked by external actors within their own countries is becoming alarmingly real.

A world where sovereignty is routinely undermined—where states deny asylum, target their citizens, and strike foreign nationals—threatens to further erode trust, security, and the rule of law in an already fragile global order. Perhaps if these practices can occur anywhere, confirming that no state is immune to the consequences of unchecked impunity, then even powerful nations may find themselves incentivized to curtail them.

By John P. Ruehl

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