

EXPERT PAPER

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The Iran War, the Phantom HAYI, and the Hybrid Terror Threat in Europe

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Introduction

The military escalation between the U.S., Israel, and Iran since late February 2026 affects the European security architecture not only indirectly but also as a direct accelerator of previously identified trends in the realm of Islamist terrorism.¹ Beyond the immediate global economic consequences surrounding the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the conflict also functions as an accelerating catalyst for a transnational conflict-terrorism nexus, in which external war dynamics—in the form of radicalization, anti-Semitic mobilization, proxy activation, and opportunistic low-level violence—seep into European cities.²

In conjunction with new hybrid groups such as *Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamiya* (HAYI)³ and the systematic use of so-called “disposable agents,” the threat landscape is increasingly shifting into a gray area between terrorism, state influence, organized crime, and digitally induced lone-wolf violence.⁴

This integrated expert paper combines the original methodological approach of the EICTP Trend Report⁵ with an in-depth security policy analysis of the Iran War with regard to its impact on the terrorist threat landscape in Europe. This is based on recent findings regarding the mysterious new terrorist organization HAYI, the use of “disposable agents” for terrorist purposes, and the facets of Iranian hybrid warfare in Europe. At the center of this analysis are therefore five intertwined observations:

1. the intensification of the conflict-terrorism nexus in the wake of the Iran War;
2. the operational dominance of low-level attacks as the preferred modus operandi of Iran-linked actors;
3. the emergence of new, diffuse actor structures such as HAYI as a hybrid front actor and brand label;
4. anti-Semitism as an ideological bridge;
5. the security policy relevance of Shiite Islamist networks and “disposable agent concepts” in the European context.

The analysis follows a three-step structure: First, the strategic context of the war with Iran is outlined as a vector or multiplier of terrorist threats. This is followed by a presentation of the relevant landscape of actors, operational patterns, and gray-zone tactics (HAYI, “disposable agents,” crime-terror nexus) in light of current security policy developments in Europe. Conclusive findings, implications, and recommendations for action for European security agencies, policymakers, and extremism prevention efforts in the broader sense are intended to round out the study.

1. Strategic Context: The War with Iran as a Threat Multiplier

1.1 Conflict-Terror Nexus and External Escalation

While the *Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2026*⁶ indicates that the global number of attacks declined slightly in 2025, European countries recorded a significant increase in terrorist incidents. This applies above all to the marked rise in terrorist plots in Europe that were thwarted in advance. Conflicts are considered a key driver of future violence, as they create a fertile ground for the mobilization, legitimization, and operationalization of extremist actors.⁷ The *EICTP Trend Report on Terrorism (ETRT)* had already described the phenomenon of the conflict-terror nexus as a dominant structural pattern (particularly at the motivational level): Wars in Europe’s neighborhood or in the broader MENA region—whether in Gaza or now in Iran—continue to serve as narrative and operational catalysts for terrorism in Europe.⁸

The war with Iran, which has been escalating since late February 2026, reinforces this dynamic in several ways. First, it serves as a melting pot for various **victim** and factional narratives⁹ (anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, anti-Western resistance), which simultaneously coalesce into anti-Semitic mobilization and anti-American resentment. Second, it shifts the focus from predominantly Sunni-jihadist resonances to Shiite-coded, state-affiliated, and at the same time highly disputable violent milieus.¹⁰ Third, it offers pro-Iranian (proxy) actors an opportunity to view Europe as an extended conflict zone where symbolic proxy targets can be attacked without risking an immediate military counter-reaction.¹¹ Fourth, this dynamic is embedded in a broader geopolitical constellation in which the so-called “*Axis of Resistance*” is increasingly converging with the strategic interests of Russia and China.¹² Iran acts as the hub of a transnational network of state and non-state actors

(including Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and the Houthi movement) that operate both militarily and, currently on a massive scale, in the information domain.¹³ Some of these actors have established infrastructures for plausible *deniability*, which significantly lowers the threshold for Iran’s indirect operations in Europe.

Russia reinforces this dynamic, particularly within the framework of its hybrid warfare against the West. A functional convergence of interests arises where destabilizing effects in Europe—such as through terrorist incidents, acts of sabotage, or, at the level of consequences, through societal polarization—create strategic relief in the context of the war in Ukraine.¹⁴ Evidence of loose coordination networks, for example in the areas of disinformation, influence operations, or logistical support, suggests that terrorist or terror-related activities can be understood as part of an expanded toolkit of hybrid conflict management modeled on the Russian approach, in line with the much-cited Gerasimov Doctrine.¹⁵

China, by contrast, plays a more indirect, structural, and above all quiet role in this revisionist triangle of actors.¹⁶ Beijing supports Iran primarily politically and economically, thereby contributing to the regime’s resilience and the maintenance of its regional projection capabilities. At the same time, China pursues an interest in weakening Western cohesion without itself being openly involved in conflict-related violent constellations.¹⁷ In this sense, China acts less as an operational actor in the context of terrorism and more as a systemic “enabler” of a multipolar, conflict-ridden geopolitical order in which anti-Western networks can gradually expand their scope of action.

Taken as a whole, this creates a multi-layered conflict ecosystem in which terrorism, state influence, and geopolitical rivalry are increasingly intertwined around the Iranian regime and its sphere of influence. In this framework, Europe is not merely an observer but—particularly in the context of the war in Iran—becomes a secondary theater of operations where the effects of this convergence can manifest in the form of heightened risks of attacks, espionage activities, and attempts to drive societal destabilization.

1.2 Disruptive “*threat multiplier*” and 3-D logic (*diffusion, delegation, denial*)

In a recent “Intel Brief” for the Soufan Center, the war with Iran was described as a disruptive “*threat multiplier*” for Europe’s current terrorism landscape.¹⁸ Instead of clearly attributable plans for large-scale attacks, a pattern of small-scale, partly independent attacks is emerging that cumulatively produce a significant psychological and political effect. These attacks—such as arson attacks on synagogues, IEDs at Jewish institutions, drone incidents, or attacks on U.S.-linked targets—follow a “3-D” logic: *diffusion* (spreading across multiple countries and target types), *delegation* (outsourcing to proxies, criminals, and lone actors), and *denial* (systematically making attribution difficult).¹⁹

In this model, European cities become venues where Iran demonstrates its strategic reach without crossing conventional thresholds of war due to the lack of traceability. Attacks on Israeli targets, Jewish communities, and U.S. companies, as well as threats against diplomatic missions or tourist hotspots, primarily serve psychological functions: they signal a capacity for retaliation, create uncertainty, and, not least, test the resilience of open societies.²⁰

2. Prevalence of low-level attacks and juvenile perpetrators

2.1 Low-threshold violence as a hallmark of modern threat scenarios

Both the EICTP trend report * * 2025 and the GTI 2026 identify low-level terrorism—that is, logistically simple, rapidly executable attacks—as the dominant pattern in Western terrorist threat scenarios.²¹ These include knife attacks, arson, vehicle attacks, improvised explosive devices, and attacks with simple firearms, often carried out by individuals or very small cells with only rudimentary communication and planning.²² Precisely because of their spontaneity and lack of early warning indicators, these forms of operation are difficult to prevent and pose significant challenges to traditional **early warning** and disruption strategies.²³

The EICTP Trend Report describes this development as the continuing dominance of low-threshold attacks as a trend; at the same time, it emphasizes that precisely these seemingly mundane forms of operation are particularly difficult to prevent due to their spontaneity, low communication density, and few warning signs. The GTI adds (based on data from the Europol TESAT Report and other relevant official sources) that in Europe and North America, as early as 2025, 42 percent of all terrorism-related investigations involved adolescents or minors, and that the duration of radicalization among this vulnerable group can shrink from months to just a few weeks.²⁴ The war in Iran reinforces this fundamental tactical trend.

Incidents in Europe attributed to Iran or linked to Iranian networks, in particular, strikingly often follow a low-level pattern: arson attacks on synagogues or Jewish aid organizations, improvised explosive devices, knife attacks, threats against tourist destinations or sites of political significance, as well as attacks that appear amateurish but are psychologically highly charged, with limited kinetic impact.²⁵ This finding is central to security policy because it relativizes the traditional prioritization of large-scale, complexly planned mass attacks without categorically ruling them out. The current threat lies rather in the accumulation of many small, symbolically charged violent incidents that insidiously undermine the sense of security among Jewish communities, the public perception of the state's ability to maintain control, and social cohesion. The logic behind this is rational, at least from the attackers' perspective. A simple arson attack on emergency vehicles near a synagogue, an

improvised explosive device at a Jewish institution, or an anti-Semitic knife attack in an urban setting generates enormous media and psychological resonance relative to its material costs. Terrorism launched in this manner is thus effective less through the number of victims than through symbolic choreography and the sustained generation of fear.

2.2 From Terrorist Plot to Diffuse Ecosystem of Violence

One of the most important findings of current terrorism research is that terrorism in Europe is increasingly moving away from hierarchical organizational models and instead unfolding as a fluid, narrative, digitally supported ecosystem. As early as 2008, Marc Sageman wrote about “leaderless jihad,” sparking an intense academic debate at the time; since then, the concept of the terrorist franchise system has even found its way into public discourse.²⁶

The GTI assumes a transformation into “*decentralized franchise networks*”; the EICTP report describes a shift toward loosely connected circles of supporters, influencers, recruiters, and perpetrators, within which ideology, motivation, and operational guidance may vary in intensity.²⁷

The Iran-related threat vector adds another dimension to this pattern: the interplay of state operational logic, tactically semi-autonomous proxy groups, criminal service providers, and self-mobilized actors. The line between a controlled, i.e., “projected” operation, opportunistic copycat acts, and independent stochastic violence by self-radicalized individuals is thereby deliberately blurred.

This is what it is all about—for this is precisely where the core of hybrid terror strategies lies. The violence is intended to be effective, yet not clearly attributable to a single perpetrator or even a state actor. Naturally, it is visible, but only to a limited extent provably coordinated; politically intimidating, without forcing an open military escalation path against a state or its operational headquarters. In this form, terrorism asymptotically approaches the broad field of sub-conventional influence operations, as has been discussed thus far primarily in connection with Russian sabotage, criminal recruitment, and gray-zone destabilization.²⁸

The following incidents are illustrative of this: the IED attack near the U.S. Embassy in Oslo, a foiled plot to attack a Bank of America branch in Paris, attacks on synagogues in Belgium and the Netherlands, and the arson attack in the London area on vehicles belonging to a Jewish ambulance service. Added to this is the knife attack in Golders Green on two Orthodox Jews in late April 2026, which British authorities treated as a terrorist incident, while at the same time, according to The Guardian, investigators initially saw no reliable evidence of direct Iranian involvement.²⁹

It is precisely this ambiguity that is not a marginal analytical issue, but rather part of the strategy. A claim of responsibility can be opportunistic without being irrelevant; an act may not have been directly ordered by the state and yet take place within a propagandistic, operational, or inspirational echo chamber prepared by pro-Iranian networks. For security agencies, this means that attribution must henceforth be conceived more as a matter of gradual probability than as a binary attribution.

2.3 “Teenage Terrorism” and Links to “Disposable Agents ”

In this context, the GTI 2026 is not merely a statistical outlier, but points to a profound shift in the structure of perpetrators and threats within Western societies. The fact that 42 percent of all terrorism-related investigations in Europe and North America in 2025 involved minors or adolescents reflects an accelerated generational shift: The threshold from exposure to extremist messages and narratives to actual willingness to commit violence is continuously lowering, while the time span between initial contact, ideological assimilation, and operational mobilization is increasingly shortening. The EICTP Trend Report describes this phenomenon as “Teenage Terrorism” or as a manifestation of youth-dominated micro-terror structures, in which traditional cadre training, deep ideological cohesion, and organizational embedding are replaced by digital resonance spaces, affective dynamization, and short-term peer validation.³⁰

Characteristic of this development is not only the comparatively young age of the actors, but also the logic of their informal, loose integration.³¹ Today, radicalization often no longer proceeds linearly, but rather in a fragmented, situational, and platform-mediated manner. Young people navigate hybrid online ecosystems where extremist material, gamification elements, ironic codes,

the aesthetics of violence, and political symbolism merge.³² This gives rise to highly volatile micro-environments in which identity formation, provocation, and proximity to action reinforce one another. Ideological coherence is often secondary; what matters are offers of belonging, self-enhancement, the production of relevance, and the emotionally charged experience of being part of a larger antagonistic conflict.³³ It is precisely this combination that makes young people an attractive target group for extremist actors: they are accessible online, socially malleable, and in many cases not yet firmly embedded in stabilizing institutional ties.

Pro-Iranian networks exploit these dispositions in a particular way. Unlike traditional terrorist organizations with highly ideologized recruitment models, they operate increasingly opportunistically and transactionally. Minors and young adults are approached via messaging services, social media platforms, or gaming-related communication spaces, recruited with relatively small sums of money to carry out arson, intimidation, or attempted attacks, and rendered expendable immediately after fulfilling their role in the operation. The perpetrator thus does not appear as a member of an organizationally established cadre, but as an interchangeable subject in an asymmetrical system of assignments: quickly recruitable, easily manipulated, tactically useful, and politically deniable. It is precisely this combination of precariousness, responsiveness, and low entry barriers that explains why pro-Iranian violent circles can be so effectively linked with youth and marginalized resources.

Furthermore, this form of recruitment fits into a broader geopolitical context. In the shadow of escalating conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, anti-Israeli, anti-Semitic, and anti-Western sentiments coalesce into a semantic reservoir that extends far beyond the immediate conflict zone. This opens up an expanded field of operation for pro-Iranian actors, in which Europe can be understood not as a peripheral zone but as a symbolically charged resonant space. Attacks do not necessarily have to cause significant material damage; often, the mere generation of fear, media hype, and social polarization is sufficient. Young perpetrators are particularly effective in this context because they subvert the profile of the planning, strategically embedded terrorist, thereby complicating both investigation and attribution.

The core of the security policy problem thus lies in the intersection of youth, digitalization, and geopolitical instrumentalization. The EICTP Trend Report notes that the new generation of extremist actors is characterized less by dogmatic depth than by digital dynamics, emotional short-circuit logic, and transversal ideological fragments. The GTI 2026 confirms this trend with regard to Western investigative data and makes it clear that terrorism is increasingly shifting from a classic organizational phenomenon to a fluid, algorithmically accelerated, and socially fragmented milieu of violence. For prevention, this means that not only radicalization content but also recruitment ecosystems, digital contact initiation, adolescent psychiatric vulnerabilities, and transnational command structures must be considered within a common analytical and intervention framework.

3. HAYI as a New Hybrid Formation

3.1 Origins and Operational Profile

Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamiya (HAYI) first appeared in European sources in March 2026 and has since claimed responsibility for at least 17 attacks and planned attacks in Belgium, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, Greece, and Germany.³⁴ Among other incidents, the following have been documented:

- Arson attacks on synagogues and Jewish schools in Liège, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and the London area;
- an explosion near a synagogue in Liège and an attempted attack in Nijkerk;
- an IED incident near the U.S. Embassy in Oslo;
- a foiled bomb attack on a Bank of America branch in Paris, in which minors were allegedly recruited via social media for a small fee.

According to MI5 Director Ken McCallum, the British domestic intelligence service uncovered more than twenty potentially lethal, Iran-backed attack plots within a single year.³⁵ In terms of preferred *modus operandi*, the attack pattern is predominantly *low-tech*; the actions typically take place at night or in the early morning hours and target almost exclusively symbolically charged but relatively soft targets with ties to Israel or the U.S.³⁶ The number of victims has remained low so far—from the perspective of the perpetrators or the organizations behind them, the added value lies in media visibility, the political symbolic value, and the normalization of anti-Semitic violence in European cities.

3.2 Front organization, marketing, and the “*astroturfed terror brand*”

Recent analyses emphasize that there was no verifiable activity by a group named HAYI prior to 2026; the abrupt visibility, the professional “marketing,” and the serial nature of the claim-of-responsibility letters suggest a front organization or a deliberately created brand label rather than an organically grown underground structure.³⁷ European security agencies that have spoken with international media suspect a cover operation by Iranian intelligence services designed to conceal

their own or externally orchestrated operations and create the impression of an emerging, autonomously acting movement.

HAYI thus fulfills several functions:

- An operational framework for attacks allegedly initiated by pro-Iranian networks;
- A propaganda hub that absorbs anti-Semitic acts of violence—including opportunistic and only loosely connected scenarios—*after the fact* and integrates them into a coherent narrative;
- A psychological multiplier that, by its very existence as a phantom, reinforces the perception of a new, elusive threat.

These characteristics qualify HAYI as an “*astroturfed terror brand*” (Lucas Webber)—an artificially created, digitally amplified terror brand that relies less on stable leadership structures than on narrative manipulation, flexible claim-of-responsibility capabilities, and absolute clandestinity.³⁸ For Canadian terrorism researcher Lucas Webber, the group consequently appears less like a “*European grassroots cell that emerged out of nowhere, but rather like a controlled terror brand that suddenly appeared in online ecosystems, hooked into an existing Iran-oriented network, and is experimenting with low-cost operations with high visibility in Europe.*”³⁹

3.3 Digital and Symbolic Hybridity

The visual and narrative design of HAYI propaganda material combines numerous hybrid features: logos and symbols are modeled after well-known insignia of Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias, but vary these through weapon iconography and color schemes.⁴⁰ HAYI communiqués sometimes use AI-assisted translation and text generation, which results in inconsistencies, stylistic breaks, and specific errors. Audio tracks in claim-of-responsibility videos, in turn, draw on *nasheeds* and compositions associated with Shiite resistance propaganda, including music referencing Khorramshahr or the Tehran Symphony Orchestra.⁴¹

This combination of real-world attacks, hybrid aesthetics, AI elements, and integration into existing pro-Iranian online ecosystems makes HAYI an ideal-typical hybrid formation that blends a state-

backed proxy structure, a digital disinformation campaign, and a terrorist brand exploited for opportunistic purposes.⁴²

4. Disposable Agents, the Crime-Terror Nexus, and the Gray Zone

4.1 Empirical evidence for “disposable agents ”

Since the spring of 2026, international media and security agencies—including those in German-speaking countries—have increasingly warned of the use of so-called Iranian “disposable agents”—that is, actors who are recruited on an ad hoc basis for clearly defined operational tasks such as sabotage, espionage, or low-level attack attempts.⁴³ A characteristic feature of this model is the deliberately minimal involvement of the recruited individuals: they receive limited financial incentives, operate without in-depth ideological indoctrination, and are systematically discarded upon completion of the respective mission. A lasting bond or long-term integration into intelligence structures is explicitly not intended.⁴⁴

Specific case reports indicate that the focus is particularly on petty criminals, socially marginalized individuals, or opportunistic actors who are approached via digital communication platforms—such as Telegram—or loose personal networks.⁴⁵ The tasks assigned to them range from obtaining and passing on contact information, to scouting out potential targets, to carrying out simple arson attacks or acts of vandalism. It is striking that these “disposable agents” are generally unaware of either the identity of their handlers or the strategic context of their activities. This fragmentation of information, in the style of the old Soviet KGB, clearly serves to shield operations while simultaneously minimizing the risk of intelligence-based traceability.⁴⁶

In its logic, this approach bears clear parallels to known patterns of Russian hybrid operations. There, too, in recent years, there has been repeated recourse to the recruitment of petty criminals, politically radicalized individuals, or members of extremist circles to carry out acts of sabotage, espionage, or corresponding preparatory operations.⁴⁷ The use of such “*disposable assets*” allows state actors to achieve operational effects with manageable risk without having to directly endanger their own personnel.⁴⁸

Taken together, it therefore seems more than plausible that Iran is adapting this methodology and applying it to the European context. Particularly in countries where Tehran lacks a robust intelligence infrastructure or faces increased regulatory pressure, this model offers a comparatively low-risk means of projecting operational capability.⁴⁹ At the same time, the deliberate use of uninformed, loosely affiliated actors significantly increases the degree of plausible deniability. In the event of exposure, direct state responsibility is more difficult to prove, while the actual control structures remain in the background.⁵⁰

From a security policy perspective, this development is significant in that it further blurs the classic dividing line between state-directed operations and crime-related activities. Terrorism in Europe offers an ideal laboratory for experimentation. The externalization of operational risks to socially precarious environments that accompanies this insidious tactic not only complicates criminal prosecution but also places new demands on prevention, situational analysis, and interagency cooperation. In particular, the combination of digital initiation, low barriers to entry, and high interchangeability of the actors involved is likely to further facilitate this form of hybrid threat in the coming years. Thus, this dynamic should be viewed as a key new aspect of the trends toward decentralization and the crime-terror nexus.

4.2 Conceptual Classification: Crime-Terror Nexus and the “Gig Economy of Violence”

The EICTP Trend Report has highlighted the crime-terrorism nexus and the “Onlife” radicalization process as key drivers of current terrorism dynamics.⁵¹ In the Iranian context, this convergence is further exacerbated: “Disposable agents” often operate in gray areas between petty crime, youth culture, online-based anomie, and ideological vulnerability. Terrorist violence is thus translated into the logic of a criminal “gig economy”—cheap, fast, interchangeable, and only loosely tied to clear organizational identities.⁵²

For security agencies, this means that traditional milieu analyses (mosque associations, scene hangouts, known leadership structures) are no longer sufficient. Relevant recruitment spaces are shifting to digital platforms, petty crime milieus, marginalized youth cultures, and diasporic gray zones where ideology, the pursuit of status, and financial incentives intertwine.

4.3 Grey-zone warfare and “implausible deniability”

The gray zone perspective developed in the discourse on hybridity can be further explored in relation to pro-Iranian violence projection through the analysis by Cormac and Aldrich (2018) on covert actions and “implausible deniability.”⁵³ The authors argue that classical notions of plausible deniability are empirically untenable and that *covert action* increasingly operates in the realm of “open secrets”—operations in which sponsorship is widely suspected but not officially acknowledged.

This logic becomes clear in the Iranian context: Many incidents related to HAYI or the mullah regime can be clearly attributed to the broad spectrum of pro-Iranian networks, yet direct lines of evidence—such as clear chains of command or financial trails—remain deliberately fragmented.⁵⁴ *Covert action* thus becomes an instrument of strategic ambiguity—even in the context of terrorism: It communicates resolve, tests reaction thresholds, and uses the lack of clarity regarding attribution as a shield against harsh countermeasures. A tactically clever principle. With regard to HAYI, one could almost cynically remark: Confessions of a phantom.

5. Anti-Semitism as a bridging narrative and target catalyst

Hardly any trend in the ETRT is as clearly defined as that of growing antisemitism as the common denominator of heterogeneous forms of extremism.⁵⁵ The report explicitly refers to a massive rise in antisemitism, which acts as a unifying element between Islamism, right-wing and left-wing extremism, and is increasingly taking on the role of an ideological bridge that partially dissolves traditional ideological boundaries.⁵⁶ Anti-Semitic narratives no longer operate exclusively within specific milieus but demonstrate a remarkable ability to connect across ideological divides. Military escalation in the context of the war with Iran acts as a significant accelerator in this framework. It provides anti-Semitic circles with a highly emotional interpretive framework in which Israel-related enemy stereotypes, anti-Western victim narratives, anti-imperialist narratives, and religiously coded hostility toward Jews merge into a condensed, mobilizing narrative. These narratives are characterized by a high degree of adaptability and can be flexibly embedded in various ideological contexts—ranging from jihadist discourse spaces to activist, conspiracy-ideological, and anti-institutional circles. In this context, the ETRT emphasizes that anti-Zionism, in particular, is increasingly establishing itself in the context of Gaza and Israel as a socially accessible form of expression for a modernized anti-Semitism.⁵⁷ This semantic shift makes it possible to feed anti-Semitic positions into broader social discourses while circumventing normative barriers. This creates a space of resonance that not only facilitates Islamist mobilization but also structurally reinforces it.⁵⁸ With the Iran war, this dynamic undergoes further radicalization, as the conflict is increasingly interpreted as a transnational conflict between opposing camps, in which Jewish institutions and individuals in Europe are constructed as symbolic proxy targets. The attacks and attempted attacks observed in Europe against synagogues, Jewish educational institutions, emergency services, and visibly Orthodox Jews are clearly not to be understood as mere byproducts of foreign policy escalations. Rather, they are an expression of an ideological continuum in which antisemitism functions both as a motivating factor for action and as a strategic binding agent—linking physical perpetrators of violence, digital multipliers, and various extremist milieus. The increasing intertwining of online radicalization, emotion-driven mobilization, and a low threshold for violence further reinforces this development.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the dual functional role of antisemitic violence in this context is noteworthy: on the one hand, it is directed immediately against Jewish target

groups and aims to intimidate, traumatize, and create a sense of permanent threat. On the other hand, it unfolds a symbolic effect in the public sphere: As a demonstrative act, it is intended to make the supposed global reach of the conflict visible and to underscore the claim to bring geopolitical conflicts into the everyday life of European societies. According to Peter Waldmann, terrorism is traditionally employed not only as a means but also as a violence-oriented form of communication—as a deliberately sent signal within a transnational, ideologically charged spectrum of conflict.⁶⁰

6. Shiite political Islam as a blind spot in security policy?

The European debate on terrorism over the past two decades has been heavily shaped by a focus on Sunni Salafist jihadism. In contrast, Shiite Islamism—despite the long-known activities of Hezbollah, Iranian intelligence services, and in particular the Revolutionary Guards (also known as the IRGC-Quds Force)—remained underrepresented both in public perception and, to some extent, in the operational priorities of Western security agencies.

However, the dynamics in the context of the current Iran conflict make it clear that this focus has become too narrow analytically. The security policy challenge currently manifests itself less in the form of a broad-based Shiite mass mobilization along the lines of the jihadist mobilization surge beginning in 2014, and more in the consolidation of a multi-layered, pro-Iranian network of influence and support.⁶¹ This encompasses diaspora hardliner structures, transnational proxy actors, digital spaces for agitation, and delegated perpetrator resources.⁶²

Key actors within this framework include, in particular, the IRGC Quds Force as the operational arm of Iranian foreign and security policy, as well as Hezbollah as an established enabler and logistical hub.⁶³ This is embedded in a broader, functionally divided proxy ecosystem that includes, among others, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthi movement.⁶⁴

A defining feature of this threat constellation is its pronounced asymmetry: While Sunni jihadist actors have relied for years on open mobilization, mass ideological dissemination, and the publicization of spectacular attacks, pro-Iranian networks operate in a far more covert manner, with greater tactical discipline and by leveraging plausible deniability.⁶⁵ The close intertwining of intelligence, diaspora, criminal, and ideological elements not only complicates attribution but also undermines established analytical and legal categories.

Against this backdrop, it seems conceptually more productive to speak not of “Shiite terrorism” as a static category, but rather of a security-relevant concentration of Shiite-Islamist potential for influence and violence in Europe. These manifest themselves across a broad spectrum of activities, ranging from propaganda, intimidation, and recruitment to contract violence, espionage, and sabotage, all the way to selective, symbolically charged attacks.

The resulting challenge for European security architectures lies less in countering a massively mobilized terrorist milieu, as in the case of ISIS’s “virtual caliphate,” and more in adequately identifying, assessing, and containing hybrid, state-affiliated, and transnationally networked forms of threat.

7. Implications for the European security architecture

7.1 Integrated hybrid situational awareness instead of sectoral silos

The Iran-related gray-zone threat undermines traditional institutional responsibilities across counterterrorism, counterintelligence, organized crime, and the defense against foreign influence operations. What is needed are integrated hybrid situational assessments and joint task forces that analyze pro-Iranian networks, HAYI activities, “disposable agent recruitment,” and digital **propaganda** ecosystems in a consolidated manner.

7.2 Prioritizing the Protection of Jewish Institutions

Given the clearly anti-Semitic focus of Iran-related and HAYI-associated operations, the protection of Jewish institutions and those with U.S. ties must be understood as a core component of the European security strategy. This encompasses not only physical security measures (structural protection, access controls, police presence) but also the integration of hybrid scenarios (arson attacks, IEDs, drones, coordinated “swarming”) into risk analyses and operational planning.

7.3 Attribution as a Probability Model

In hybrid terrorist situations, comprehensive legal attribution is often only achievable late in the process or not at all; however, political responsiveness must not be hindered by this obstacle. A multi-stage probability model based on foresight analysis is therefore recommended, one that synthesizes and simultaneously integrates chains of evidence from digital forensic data, financial flows, communication patterns, propaganda correlations, and known proxy profiles.

These assessments should in turn lead to a **sanctions** and deterrence regime that also addresses sub-conventional operations that can be denied at any time—for example, through targeted sanctions against IRGC structures, proxy officials, support associations, and relevant front NGOs.

7.4 Early intervention for teenage **disposable** attackers

The combination of teenage attacker profiles, “disposable agents,” and digitally facilitated contract terrorism requires closer integration of preventive measures, youth services, schools, social work, and, when necessary, law enforcement and strict correctional measures. What is needed are profile-oriented early intervention approaches that identify and address early signs of abnormal online behavior, anti-Semitic activism, high-risk clique structures, and petty criminal tendencies.

In doing so, an analytical distinction must be made between ideologically motivated, committed perpetrators (terrorists in the strict sense) and primarily financially motivated (criminals) “disposable agents” in order to target both prevention and criminal prosecution more effectively.

8. Concluding Remarks

The war with Iran did not create the European terrorist threat anew, but it has profoundly transformed it in terms of its nature, structure, and dynamics. What we are currently observing is not merely an intensification of existing threats, but a reconfiguration of the threat ecosystem itself: External war dynamics are directly interfering with intra-European security architectures, anti-Semitic mobilization acts as an ideological catalyst, young low-level attackers lower the operational entry threshold, while criminal outsourcing and pro-Iranian proxy logic enable new forms of unpredictable, sometimes anonymous violence. These developments converge into a hybrid threat landscape characterized by low predictability, high adaptability, and strategic ambiguity.

At the center of this transformation stands the phantom HAYI, a prototypical hybrid formation that exemplifies the shift from classically hierarchical terrorist organizations toward fluid, network-like arrangements of violence. HAYI operates clandestinely and not primarily as a clearly definable organization, but as a functional label that bundles real attacks, inspired lone-wolf acts, digital radicalization impulses, and opportunistic acts of violence under a common symbolic umbrella. This “brand logic” not only generates mobilization effects but also serves to deliberately obscure attribution, accountability, and strategic control. The line between a directed operation, a loosely inspired act, and crime-related violence is increasingly blurring—a gray-zone situation that structurally challenges state response mechanisms.

Of particular relevance here is the growing significance of proxy and surrogate structures in the European context. Pro-Iranian networks specifically exploit existing criminal milieus, diaspora structures, and ideologically compatible narratives to externalize operational risks while simultaneously maximizing impact. Violence is increasingly “outsourced,” fragmented, and decentralized, without losing its strategic embeddedness. On the contrary: it is precisely the combination of low operational complexity and high symbolic impact that makes this form of violence so resonant and difficult to predict.

Consequently, the central challenge for Europe is to avoid falling into a logic of pure reactivity. Traditional, highly event-driven security approaches fall short when threats are no longer understood primarily as singular events but as persistent conditions.

What is needed instead are proactive, integrated, and resilient responses that systematically interlink security, prevention, communication, and social policies. This encompasses not only the early detection of hybrid threat signatures but also the targeted strengthening of societal resilience against disinformation, polarization, and anti-Semitic radicalization. The European Commission's "ProtectEU" counterterrorism agenda, published this year, has incorporated this approach—at least in theory—and anticipated it as a future model for success.⁶⁶

Success in counterterrorism will in the future be measurable less by the prevention of spectacular large-scale attacks and more by the ability to contain a state of permanent, low-level, and at the same time always deniable orchestrated terrorist pressure—a task comparable to mucking out the Augean stables. The goal is to contain an underlying extremist noise, the *"background threat level,"* characterized by its ubiquity and vagueness. At the same time, the visible and credible protection of Jewish life in Europe is becoming a central barometer of the state's capacity for action and normative steadfastness in the fight against Islamism.

Ultimately, much more is at stake for European societies than mere operational security: it is about defending open societies against advancing polarization and a creeping erosion of cohesion through fear, strategically deployed disinformation, and regularly recurring anti-Semitic violence. A new normality of insecurity looms, one that is less spectacular but all the more destabilizing in the long run. There will most likely not be another 9/11; rather, we will have to contend with the "banality of evil" in the form of permanent, low-threshold exposure to an omnipresent, subconventional threat. HAYI and Co. are merely the harbingers.

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