

Fears Grow That Iran May Be Using Proxy Groups Beyond Mideast

The charges against Mohammad al-Saadi in the United States have raised concerns that Iran could be working with its proxies to stage attacks outside the region.

Listen · 6:25 min

- [Share full article](#)



The funeral of a commander from the Kataib Hezbollah paramilitary group in Baghdad in 2024. The group is backed by Iran, and its fighters have killed American soldiers and kidnapped people in the past. Credit...Hadi Mizban/Associated Press

By [Aaron Boxerman](#) [Neil MacFarquhar](#) and Falih Hassan

May 16, 2026

See more of our coverage in your search results. **Add The New York Times on Google**

A criminal complaint against an Iraqi man that was unsealed in a U.S. court on Friday, accusing him of plotting attacks in the United States, has raised fears that Iran is increasingly wielding its proxy forces to target Western interests far beyond the Middle East.

Iran's powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps have tried to kill their opponents on American soil even before the war with the United States, according to U.S. officials. Their targets have ranged from [President Trump](#) to Masih Alinejad, an Iranian critic of the regime living in exile in New York.

The [accusations against the Iraqi man](#), Mohammad al-Saadi, describe him as a high-ranking figure in Kataib Hezbollah, an Iraqi militia backed by Iran. The complaint has led to a heightened level of concern following a series of attacks in Europe that prosecutors said Mr. al-Saadi was involved in.

"They've expanded their scope into actual Western countries now beyond just the war zone," said Aaron Y. Zelin, an expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, referring to Kataib Hezbollah.

ADVERTISEMENT
SKIP ADVERTISEMENT

"It is significant because it would suggest that more vectors of Iran's broader 'Axis of Resistance' are involved in attacking in the West," he added.

According to the complaint, Mr. al-Saadi was involved in planning at least 20 attacks in Europe and Canada since the U.S.-Israeli campaign against Iran began in late February, and was plotting attacks on U.S. soil, including against Jewish institutions.

Mr. al-Saadi was detained in Turkey recently and handed over to U.S. authorities, Mr. al-Saadi's lawyer said in federal court in Manhattan on Friday. Mr. al-Saadi appeared in court on Friday, but did not enter a plea.

Sabereen News, an Iraqi outlet affiliated with Iranian-backed militias, said in a post on social media that Mr. al-Saadi had been traveling through Turkey to Moscow when he was detained by Turkish security forces. The outlet shared what it said was a video of Mr. al-Saadi reassuring his family after his detention.

Much remains unclear about the case, which has yet to make its way through the courts. Kataib Hezbollah has not commented publicly on Mr. al-Saadi's arrest or the allegations that the group had supported attacks in Western countries.

Mr. al-Saadi has not commented publicly on his alleged involvement with Kataib Hezbollah, although his lawyer said in court on Friday that "he is a political prisoner and prisoner of war."

Three people in Iraq who said they knew Mr. al-Saadi, including a senior Iraqi official, said that while he had ties to Iraqi militias and Iranian officials, they were not aware of his alleged membership in Kataib Hezbollah. They spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the case.

Image



A criminal complaint unsealed on Friday accused Mohammad al-Saadi, right, of planning at least 18 attacks. Prosecutors provided a photo they said showed him with Qassim Suleimani, a senior Iranian commander who was killed in 2020. Credit...Department of Justice, via Associated Press

In the complaint, federal investigators supplied transcripts of phone calls in which they said Mr. al-Saadi had sought to plan attacks — including against “a Jewish temple” — and recruit operatives. They also attached photos they said showed Mr. al-Saadi with senior Iranian officials, such as Qassim Suleimani, a senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander who was killed by the United States in 2020.

The attacks included the firebombing of a synagogue in Belgium and another on the Bank of America building in Paris, the complaint said.

Many of the attacks had originally been claimed by a hitherto unknown group, which called itself Harakat Ashab Al-Yamin al-Islamiya. Federal investigators, however, said on Friday that they had determined that it was essentially a front for Kataib Hezbollah.

The complaint says that Mr. al-Saadi planned to kill “Americans and Jews” in Los Angeles and Arizona and that he had started planning an attack on a synagogue in New York City.

Since the war between the United States, Israel and Iran began in late February, [Kataib Hezbollah](#) has been involved in firing on the U.S. Embassy in Iraq as well as at oil installations in the Arab Gulf states. But its role appeared to be limited to the region.

With Iranian backing, the militia has grown into a hard-line and powerful force that holds significant sway in Iraq. Its fighters have killed American soldiers, [kidnapped](#) an

American journalist and an Israeli academic, and fought to prop up the dictatorial government of the deposed Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

Iran began setting up its network of proxy militia forces across the Middle East — the so-called Axis of Resistance — in the late 1980s.

Hezbollah in Lebanon was long the most powerful member of the network, and the group has been accused of carrying out attacks abroad, most notoriously when an Argentine court concluded that the organization had carried out a deadly assault on a Jewish community center in 1994 in Buenos Aires that killed more than 80 people. Both Hezbollah and Iran denied involvement.

Although the groups have their own leadership, they work in close coordination with the Guards, and are unlikely to carry out any overseas operation that might blow back on Iran without a green light from Tehran, experts said.

The United States, Israel and Iran are currently observing a fragile cease-fire in the war. Efforts by mediators, most prominently Pakistan, to reach a conclusive deal to end the war have stalled, with the two sides unable to agree on constraints to Iran's nuclear program.

Iran continues to blockade the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, a critical waterway for global oil, driving up prices worldwide. U.S. vessels have enforced their own blockade of Iranian ports.

Mr. Trump has insisted that the United States and Israel have devastated Iran's military. But U.S. intelligence assessments suggest that Iran retains considerable [fighting power](#) should the countries return to open war.

Aaron Boxerman is a Times reporter covering Israel and Gaza. He is based in Jerusalem.

Neil MacFarquhar has been a Times reporter since 1995, writing about a range of topics from war to politics to the arts, both internationally and in the United States.

A version of this article appears in print on May 17, 2026, Section A, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: Evidence Mounts That Iran Is Planning More Attacks in Western Countries. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)
See more on: [Hezbollah](#), [Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps \(Quds Force\)](#)

•