

Radicalization in the Service of the Revolution: Iran, Hezbollah, and the Shi'ite population in Europe

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European Eye on Radicalization



Background

Recently, following Islamist terrorist attacks in France and Austria, the discourse in Europe has increasingly turned to what can be done to monitor and curb those inciting such attacks by laying down the ideological basis for them.¹ Naturally, since these attacks have come from the Islamic State (ISIS), most of the focus has been on those Sunni religious centers and mosques that have, directly or indirectly, assisted the terrorists.

However, the discussion currently taking place across the European Continent misses a key facet of the Islamist challenge by focusing exclusively on its Sunni component, and ignoring the institutions created by the Iranian revolutionary government across Europe, which allows them deep purchase within Shi'ite Muslim populations on the Continent, as well as inroads with disaffected Sunnis and even European non-Muslims drawn to the language and posture of anti-Western radicalism.

It is important to note that the criminal activities of the Iranian theocracy and its Hezbollah branch throughout Europe are not new. Some of this is ordinary criminality, from trafficking in contraband like weapons and drugs.² Others are acts of terrorism, whether assassinations of dissidents or bombings, such as that in Burgas, Bulgaria, in 2012.³ Intelligence experts maintain that Hezbollah operatives are located in dozens of European states, including Belgium, Bosnia, Britain, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and Ukraine.⁴

The Iranian radicalization infrastructure in Europe has been built assiduously over many decades. The revolutionary clergy who rule Iran

¹ Lorenzo Vidino, 'Austria, Not France, Is the Model for Europe's Crackdown on Islamists', *Foreign Policy*, 11 November 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/11/austria-not-france-is-the-model-for-europes-crackdown-on-islamists/>

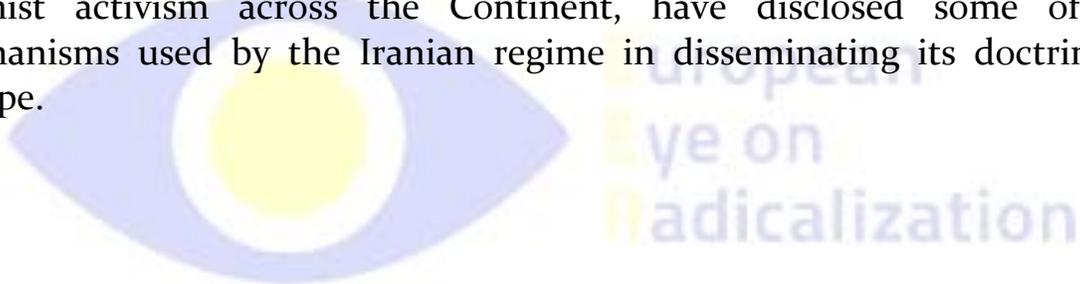
² Josh Meyer, 'The secret backstory of how Obama let Hezbollah off the hook', *Politico*, 17 December 2017, <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2017/obama-hezbollah-drug-trafficking-investigation/>

³ Paul Peachey, 'Revealed: \$100m hunt for Hezbollah funds after Bulgarian bus bombing', *The National*, 15 December 2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/revealed-100m-hunt-for-hezbollah-funds-after-bulgarian-bus-bombing-1.129370>

⁴ Matthew Levitt, 'Islamic Extremism in Europe: Beyond al-Qaeda— Hamas and Hezbollah in Europe', *The Washington Institute*, 27 April 2005, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/islamic-extremism-in-europe-beyond-al-qaedahamas-and-hezbollah-in-europe>

intend to convert Shi'ite populations in Europe to their version of Shi'ism, known as Khomeinism, after the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The purpose of converting Shi'ite populations in Europe to Khomeinism is that they can then be used as assets in at least three ways. Iran-loyal Shi'ite populations in Europe can be used to apply political pressure on European governments by abusing the available democratic processes. Such populations can be used to raise support, both funds and recruits, for Hezbollah and other organs of the Iranian revolution. And finally, pro-Iran Shi'ite populations can be used as logistical infrastructure for criminal and terrorist activities by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and other parts of the Iranian state structure.

In recent years, a number of actions from state governments, in Germany, France, and elsewhere, and the leaking of some of this intelligence material, plus in-depth independent research on social media and other aspects of Islamist activism across the Continent, have disclosed some of the mechanisms used by the Iranian regime in disseminating its doctrine in Europe.



Mechanism in the Service of the Revolution

An analysis of Iran's activities in Europe shows several centers of gravity directing their ideological warfare across the Continent:

Foreign Relations Department (FRD)

Alongside its clandestine foreign operatives, Hezbollah also maintains a more public international presence through its FRD, which has representatives at institutions around the world.

The FRD functions overtly in Lebanon and in a semipublic fashion abroad. Some FRD personnel are Lebanese members sent abroad, while others are Hezbollah supporters who already live in the countries in question. Most have close ties to senior Hezbollah officials, and many have significant military training.

In terms of overt “diplomatic” activities, FRD personnel serve several functions abroad. They build “community centers” to encourage local Shi’ite support for Hezbollah and serve as a base for the group’s activities. They raise funds, spot potential recruits, and serve as liaisons, maintaining communication between local supporters and Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon, as well as between Hezbollah operatives in various countries.⁵ The FRD also has special representatives that synchronize community activity in these countries.

Al-Mustafa University

One of the most important and influential institutions for Khomeinist indoctrination is Al-Mustafa University. Al-Mustafa was founded in 2007 by Iran’s current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who directs its activities and is the school’s highest authority.

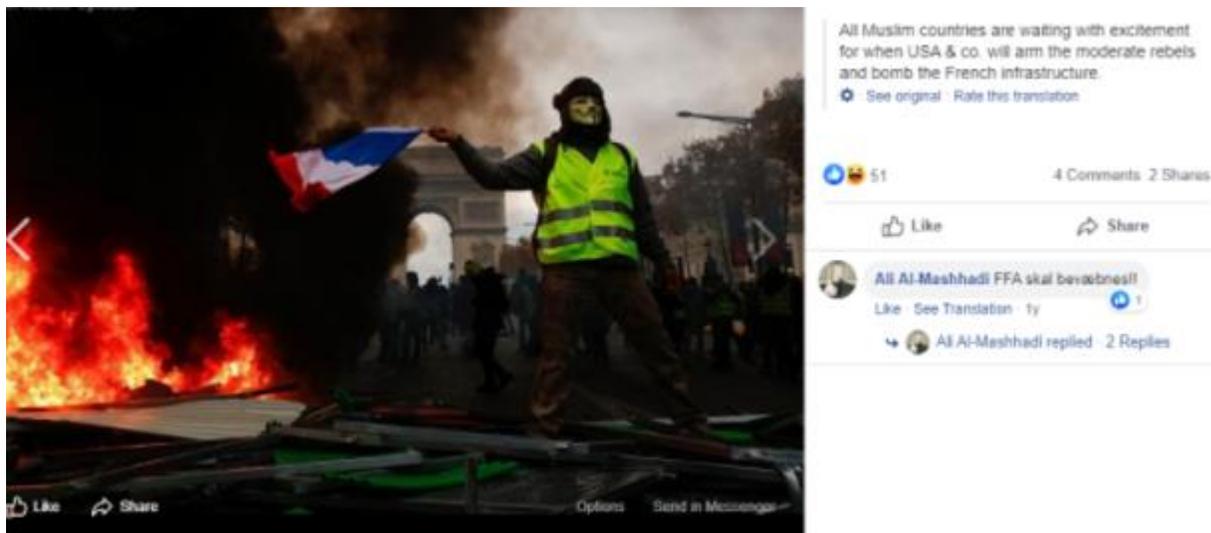
In 2016, Iran allocated \$74 million to Al-Mustafa, which receives even more funding from the Office of the Supreme Leader and from his vast business empire and “charitable” networks. Al-Mustafa trains clerics from around the world to spread Khomeinism to their home countries.

⁵ Matthew Levitt, ‘Hezbollah's “Diplomats” Go Operational’, *The Washington Institute*, 2 December 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-diplomats-go-operational>

Al-Mustafa operates several branches in Europe, most notably in the Islamic College of London. Graduates of Al-Mustafa, such as Italian cleric Abbas DiPalma, have gone on to form Iranian cultural centers in their home countries, notably the Imam Mahdi Center in Rome.

Significant numbers of Shi'ite clerics in Europe gained their education in Al-Mustafa University, and these Khomeinist-indoctrinated clerics are then in charge of sending Shi'ite youth from Europe to study in Iran or its university centers across Europe.⁶

A picture in social media account of European Al-Mustafa graduate cleric



Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly (ABWA)

ABWA is an internationally active Iranian “non-governmental organization” (NGO), functioning as an umbrella structure for a network of Iranian-backed religious, cultural, and educational institutions tasked with disseminating Khomeinism around the world.

The ABWA is functionally the link between the Iranian Shi'a clerical establishment and foreign Shi'a clerics, and also links Shi'a communities around the world to each other. The ABWA plays an administrative role, facilitating relationships with local branches and affiliated religious and cultural organizations around the globe. Many of the localized organizations

⁶ 'How Iran exports its Ideology: Al-Mustafa International University', *United Against Nuclear Iran*, <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/ideological-expansion/al-mustafa-international-university>

profiled this report, such as the Islamic Centre of Hamburg and World Ahl al-Bayt Islamic Mission in Britain, operate under the aegis of the ABWA and receive material and planning support from the parent organization.

ABWA helps arrange pro-Iranian seminars and conferences; sponsors religious activists and Shi'a preachers to speak at events; and undertakes charitable endeavors at the local branches worldwide. Many of the Ahl al-Bayt-affiliated organizations also play leading roles in staging annual Quds Day celebrations in their respective localities.⁷

Many Ahl al-Bayt centers in Europe are strongly connected to Hezbollah's FRD unit and Al-Mustafa University.

Revolutionary Clergy and Religious Centers

All over Europe, there are Shi'ite centers and clerics that are ostensibly independent, but which in fact have strong connections to FRD and Al-Mustafa University, taking direction from Iran on their messaging and preaching, attacking the Iranian regime's enemies rhetorically and, most dangerously, acting as hubs for IRGC/Hezbollah activity. This activity does not just include raising money and inciting against Israel and America; as is now known, it includes storing weapons.⁸

One of the prominent Shi'ite Cleric Al-Ghadir in Association al-Ghadir support of Hezbollah martyrs



⁷ 'How Iran exports its Ideology: Ahlul Bayt World Assembly', *United Against Nuclear Iran*, <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/ideological-expansion/ahlul-bayt-world-assembly>

⁸ Ben Riley-Smith, 'Iran-linked terrorists caught stockpiling explosives in north-west London', *Telegraph*, 9 June 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/06/09/iran-linked-terrorists-caught-stockpiling-explosives-north-west/>

An analysis of the social media profiles used by these various bodies clearly indicates the strong connection between them, a holistic structure, acting to realize Iran's goals. The meetings of FRD personnel with clerics and the presence of those FRD personnel in the relevant centers provides a connective tissue within an ecosystem that enables radical activity in Europe.



Iran's Radicalization Infrastructure in Europe

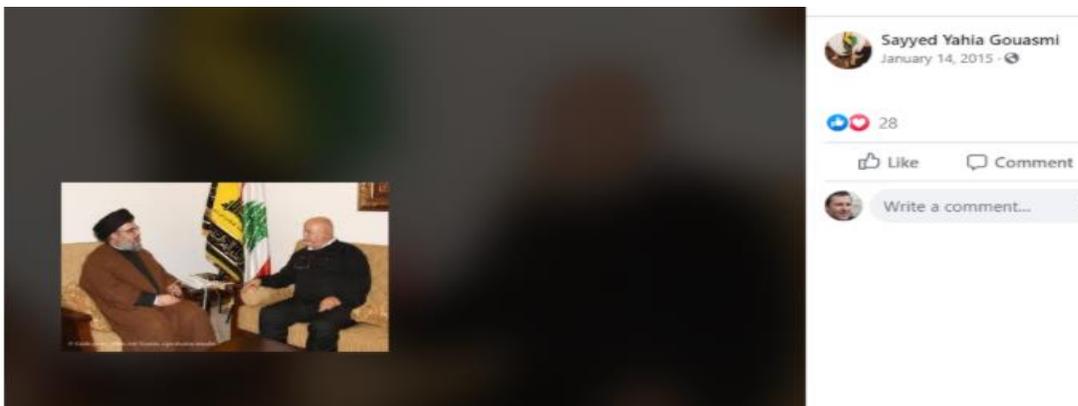
France: Al-Zahra Center

The Zahra Centre was founded in 2005 by Yahia Gouasmi and its officially stated goal was to “spread Islam’s words through the vision of the Prophet and his family”. Gouasmi was also one of the founders of the “Anti-Zionist Party”, led by the infamous antisemitic comedian Dieudonné M’Bala and the alt-Right activist Alain Soral.

The Zahra Centre is close to Iran on many levels: ideologically, logistically, and even financially. In 2018, the police entered the Centre Zahra and arrested some of his leaders. The Zahra Centre was subsequently dissolved by the government. The reasons were: legitimization of jihad, hatred speech and support for Hamas and Hezbollah terrorists.

After the 2015 attack against *Charlie Hebdo*, Gouasmi condemned “the Zionist responsibility in this attack” and has also declared that ISIS was a “Nazi, socialist and Zionist project”. In recent videos, Gouasmi has criticized French President Emmanuel Macron and his government for allegedly harassing the Muslim minority. Gouasmi did not express any kind of solidarity with the victims of the recent Islamist terrorist attacks in France.⁹

A meeting between Gousami and Hezbollah General-Secretary Hassan Nasrallah

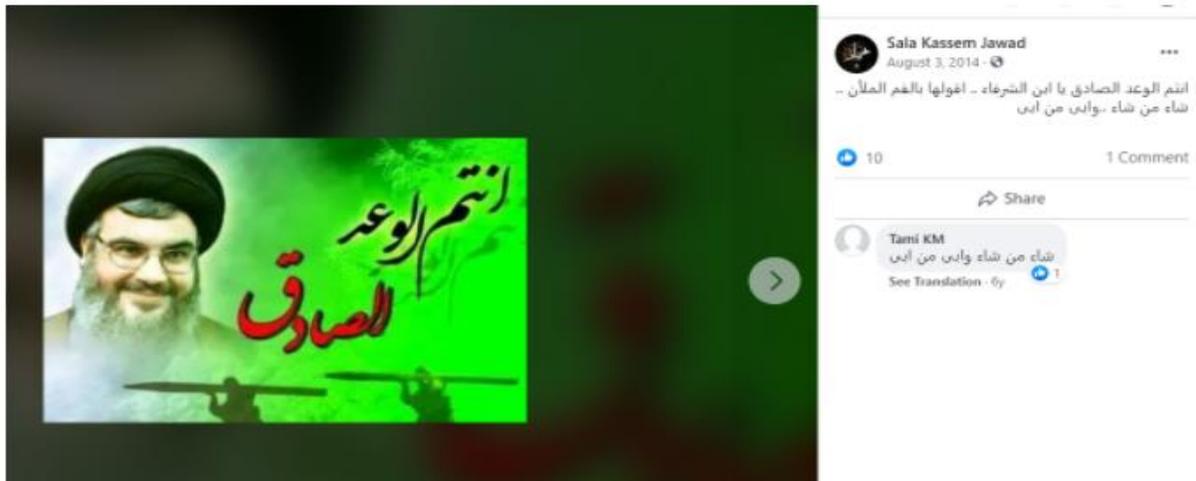


⁹ Allan Kaval, ‘Le Centre Zahra: entre influence iranienne et mouvance conspirationniste française’, *Le Monde*, 2 October 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2018/10/02/le-centre-zahra-entre-influence-iranienne-et-mouvance-conspirationniste-francaise_5363517_3224.html

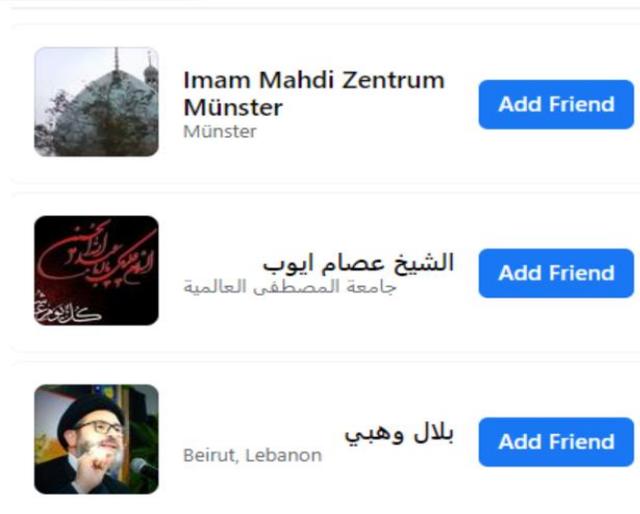
Germany: Imam al-Mahdi Center, Munster

A German intelligence report documented that “for more than 20 years, the Islamic Center (Imam al-Mahdi Zentrum) in Münster has been a platform and meeting place for Hezbollah supporters in North Rhine-Westphalia and western Germany. Other focal points: Essen/Bottrop, Dortmund and Bad Oeynhausen.”¹⁰

A prominent figure in Munster Imam Mahdi Center—Admiration to Nasrallah



The connection between German religious center, FRD and AL Mustafa University



¹⁰ Benjamin Weinthal, 'German Hezbollah mosque: We're proud of terrorism', *The Jerusalem Post*, 30 August 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/german-hezbollah-mosque-declares-it-is-proud-of-terrorism-and-pro-khamenei-599998>

There were many examples of radicalization efforts *within the center*, like the one on 25 December 2018: a video of a ceremony at the Imam Mahdi Zentrum Shi'ite mosque in Münster was uploaded to the mosque's Facebook page. A man recited a poem with the lyrics:

"[Oh Mahdi,] our hearts [and] our swords are with you. ... [The fate of] our children, our women, and the men of the Lord [is] laid upon your threshold. ... The soil of Yemen has been watered with their blood in the confrontation with the Zionists and the takfiris. ... In Syria and Iraq, we have written in blood that victory is coming. ... [We strive] for martyrdom on the day of glory ... Death in your cause is the gate to Heaven. ... We have pledged our allegiance to the Jurisprudent Ruler [Khamenei]. We are soldiers willing to sacrifice our lives for Nasrallah. We belong to the party of [Khomeini] ... We have been accused of being terrorists—we are proud of terrorism ... We are the Shi'ites [and] we will only die free".¹¹

Ivory Coast: Al-Ghadir Center

Though Lebanese cultural associations in Côte d'Ivoire largely deny any association with Hezbollah, the largest such group—the Al-Ghadir association—is widely believed to serve as Hezbollah's representative in the country. In August 2009, then-leader of Al-Ghadir, Imam Abd al-Menhem Kobeissi,¹² was deported from Côte d'Ivoire after he was sanctioned by the U.S. government for raising money for Hezbollah.¹³ Recent Social Media Analysis provides a strong indication that there is a connection between Hezbollah-aligned religious centers in Germany, France, and Belgium—and Al-Ghadir Center.

¹¹ 'Poem Recited in a Münster, Germany Shiite Mosque: We Have Pledged Allegiance to Khamenei; We Are Accused of Terrorism and Are Proud of It', *Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI)*, 25 December 2018, <https://www.memri.org/tv/ceremony-imam-mahdi-center-munster-germany-shiite-khamenei-nasrallah-jihad-martyrdom>

¹² 'Abd al-Menhem Qubaysi', *Counter Extremism Project*, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/abd-al-menhem-qubaysi>

¹³ 'Côte d'Ivoire: Extremism & Counter-Extremism', *Counter Extremism Project*, <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/cote-d-ivoire>

A meeting Between Ghaleb alKojok—the Imam of al-Ghadir center and Sheick Motada al-Khalik from Imam El-Khoei center in Paris



Bilal Mohsen Wehbe

Bilal Mohsen Wehbe is the U.S.-designated chief representative of Hezbollah in South America, a role he allegedly undertook at the request of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. Wehbe relays information and instructions between Hezbollah's leadership in Lebanon and Hezbollah operatives in South America.

Additionally, Wehbe has acted as fundraiser for Hezbollah and conveyed funds from Brazil to the terrorist group in Lebanon. He has overseen Hezbollah's counterintelligence activities in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. As of late 2017, he continues to operate freely in Brazil, where he remains a prominent Islamic cultural leader. On 9 December 2010, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Wehbe as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.¹⁴

It is clear that Shi'ite religious centers in Europe are connected to Wehbe and thus to his Khomeinist instruction.

¹⁴ 'Bilal Mohsen Wehbe', *Counter Extremism Project*, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/bilal-mohsen-wehbe>

Conclusion

Hezbollah, though based in Lebanon, is not only a problem for the Lebanese people; it is not even really a product of the Lebanese, even if it is staffed by them. Hezbollah began even before the Islamist revolution in Iran, of which it is an integral, organic component.¹⁵ Whether it is terrorist cells in Cyprus, terrorist attacks in Bulgaria, or narco-trafficking in Germany and France, Hezbollah is acting as the tip of Iran's spear and this is a problem for all of Europe.

Iran, often working through Hezbollah/IRGC, is trying to radicalize Shi'ites across Europe, to create ideological loyalists, in order to build an infrastructure that gathers money to fund activities, enables terrorist acts, and recruits future terrorists.

The sanctions placed on Iran by U.S. President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign have created enough strain that Hezbollah's budget has been scaled back, and to meet the shortfall Hezbollah has turned inter alia to extracting resources from Shi'ite communities around the world, including Europe. Thus ostensibly "innocent" and "humanitarian" fundraising campaigns are led in Iran-aligned religious centers, for example to aid the victims of the war in Syria or Yemen, and these funds are then channeled to Iran's terrorist apparatus.

If Europe challenged Iran's radicalization infrastructure across the Continent, it would not only be helping itself; it would, given Hezbollah's growing dependence on overseas activities, give a boost to those in Lebanon struggling to overthrow Hezbollah's dominance of the state and in general to remove sectarian, corrupt elements.

This will not be easy. Hezbollah's overseas networks are complex—by design. Hezbollah's networks are intended to be resilient to the exposure and/or destruction of part of the network. The European Union therefore has to act in a calculated, unified manner to undermine Hezbollah's infrastructure. A good place to start is by designating the whole organization as a terrorist organization, rather than pretending there is a "military wing"

¹⁵ Kyle Orton, 'The Middle East After Qassem Sulaymani', *European Eye on Radicalization*, 6 January 2020, <https://eeradicalization.com/the-middle-east-after-qassem-sulaymani/>

and a “political wing” that are separate, which Hezbollah itself says is untrue.¹⁶ There is also a need for increased focus on the ideological challenge from the brand of Islamism, Khomeinism, promoted by the Iranian regime.

The spread of radicalism among Shi’ite populations in Europe is a threat to social cohesion and thereby the durability of the whole democratic fabric of the Continent. The Iranian indoctrination infrastructure also throws up a series of security challenges for the EU, from terrorism to espionage. Severing the links between Iranian institutions and Shi’ite centres in Europe, and beginning deradicalization processes for those already affected, is vital for the stability of the Continent.



¹⁶ Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story from Within*, 2005, Saqi Books.