

# Turkey says Iranian intelligence was behind elaborate plot to kidnap opponent in Istanbul

By **Kareem Fahim** and **Erin Cunningham**

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ISTANBUL — When exiled Iranian opposition figure Habib Chaab traveled from his home in Sweden to Turkey in October, he did not tell his friends, one of them said.

“None of us would have accepted him going,” said the friend, Fouad al-Kabi. Turkey had become known as a “backyard” for Iranian intelligence agents, he said, and Chaab, a leader of a militant separatist group, was wanted by Tehran.

Soon after he arrived in Istanbul, Chaab disappeared.

Two days later, Iran’s state media reported he had been arrested and said he had confessed to his involvement in a deadly attack on a military parade two years ago in Iran. It provided no detail about how he had been taken into custody.

But Turkey’s intelligence agency quickly started unraveling the mystery, a Turkish official said. Revealing details for the first time, the official described an elaborate scheme in which Chaab was lured to Turkey by a woman, drugged and kidnapped when he went to meet her, and then smuggled across the border into Iran — all orchestrated by a notorious drug trafficker at the behest of Iranian intelligence.

In recent days, Turkey has arrested several people in connection with Chaab’s abduction, according to the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss an ongoing investigation.

The allegations contain echoes of the fatal plot by Saudi Arabia against journalist Jamal Khashoggi, whose disappearance in Istanbul two years ago was one of a string of foreign intelligence operations staged in Turkey, an international travel hub and a magnet for regional dissidents.

The alleged abduction also has striking similarities with another recent operation carried out by Iran: the kidnapping of Ruhollah Zam, an Iranian dissident journalist who lived in exile in France but disappeared after he was lured to Iraq last year. Zam, who operated a popular social media channel, was executed Saturday in Iran after being convicted on charges of inciting violence during anti-government protests in 2017. Amnesty International condemned the execution as “a deadly blow to freedom of expression in Iran.”

Chaab’s disappearance was the third high-profile operation in Turkey in as many years blamed on Iran’s government, and the latest incident threatens to strain the relationship between the two countries — regional rivals that also cooperate on trade, energy and other matters.

In 2017, an Iranian media mogul who had been sentenced to prison in absentia in Iran was killed in a drive-by shooting in Istanbul said to have been carried out by an associate of the drug trafficker, Naji Sharifi Zindashti.

Last year, Masoud Molavi Vardanjani, a former Iranian defense official who had become critical of his government, was also fatally shot in Istanbul, in a killing that Turkish officials said was instigated by intelligence officers working out of the Iranian Consulate there, according to Reuters.

Chaab led the Swedish branch of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz, or ASMLA, a decades-old separatist group advocating for the independence of Iran’s ethnic Arab minority, most of whom live in the oil-rich southwest of the country but have long complained of discrimination and neglect. The group’s political leaders operate from exile in Europe, while a military arm stages attacks inside Iran

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A Turkish investigation found that Chaab traveled from Sweden to Istanbul on Oct. 9, to meet a woman they referred to as Saberin S. She arrived in the city the day before Chaab did, after traveling from Iran on a forged Iranian passport.

The day Chaab arrived, several members of the kidnap team purchased plastic ties at a hardware store in Istanbul. Chaab landed that evening and went to meet Saberin at a gas station in the Istanbul district of Beylikduzu, where she was waiting in a van.

Once inside, Chaab was drugged and his hands and feet bound. He was driven to the eastern Turkish province of Van, handed over to a human trafficker and smuggled across the border the next day, the summary said. Saberin also returned to Iran.

Turkish intelligence officers and police have detained 11 men, all Turkish citizens, who have been arraigned on charges that include “using weapons . . . to deprive an individual of their liberty through deceit,” the official said. Zindashti, the drug smuggler, was still at large and believed to be in Iran, he added.

Zindashti did not immediately respond to emailed questions about the allegations. He has previously denied accusations of murder and drug trafficking, including on his Twitter account. A spokesman for Iran’s mission to the United Nations did not reply to questions about Tehran’s alleged role in the plot.

Zindashti’s exploits in Turkey are the stuff of crime lore. He served prison time for a heroin trafficking conviction more than a decade ago, reportedly worked as a government informant, and lost his daughter in a fatal shooting in 2014 carried out by gunmen who may have been from a rival gang. When Zindashti was arrested at his house in Istanbul two years ago on murder charges, the authorities also detained two police officers who had apparently been the drug lord’s guests.

Zindashti was imprisoned in April 2018, but served only six months. His early release set off a scandal in Turkey, after allegations that an adviser to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had intervened in the case. The adviser, Burhan Kuzu, who died earlier this year after contracting the coronavirus, denied the charges.

It was not clear when Zindashti would have started working with Iran’s government. He hailed from Oroumieh, in western Iran, was imprisoned as a young man on narcotics-related charges and later escaped Tehran’s notorious Evin prison, fleeing the country when he was 20, according to Timur Soykan, the author of “Battle of the Barons,” a recently released book in Turkish about a war between drug kingpins, including Zindashti. It was only after the killings of the two Iranian dissidents in Istanbul that Zindashti’s possible connection to Iran’s government came to the fore and was discussed in Turkish media, he said.

Bahtiyar Firat, a relative of Zindashti, was arrested in October shortly after he tried to travel to Iran, according to the Turkish official and Firat’s wife, Esra, who told Turkey’s Bianet website her husband was going to Iran to visit relatives and see a dentist. Firat has told Turkish authorities that Zindashti met with Iranian officials several times before Chaab’s disappearance, the official said.

Iranian officials allege that ASMLA’s leaders have received funding from Tehran’s Persian Gulf rivals, including Saudi Arabia, to destabilize Iran. While the southwest region of Iran is home to more than 80 percent of the country’s oil reserves, poverty is rife and long-standing grievances with the state have also helped seed unrest.

ASMLA-linked militants have been blamed for attacks in Iran, including on banks, oil pipelines and government offices. In 2018, Iran accused the group of planning a deadly assault by gunmen on a military parade in the southwestern city of Ahvaz.

ASMLA lacks widespread support among ethnic Arabs in Iran, experts say. But Tehran clearly still sees a threat. In 2017, a gunman who Dutch officials say was linked to the Iranian government shot and killed an ASMLA leader, Ahmad Mola Nissi, near his home in The Hague.

Chaab had lived in exile for 14 years, according to his friend Kabi, who is a spokesman for the Ahwazi Democratic Popular Front, which is related to ASMLA. Kabi said Chaab’s confessions were “forced” and that the crime Iran accused him of — the military parade attack — was claimed by the Islamic State militant group at the time.

Chaab’s colleagues said they had already suspected that the woman identified as Saberin had played a role in his abduction. Kabi said he knew her by a different name and that she and Chaab, who was separated from his wife, were “secretly married” four years ago.

In addition, Chaab was deeply in debt, and the woman had loaned him about 100,000 euros in the past, Kabi said. After Chaab disappeared, Kabi and other friends learned that the woman had

offered another loan. The initial plan was for the two of them to meet in Qatar.

“How she convinced him to go to Turkey, we don’t know,” he said.

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