A-Z of Secrecy

A is for (State-sponsored) Assassination

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State-sponsored assassination refers to the killing or attempted killing of a prominent individual by agencies of a state or actors operating on their behalf. While assassinations also occur in times of war, much of the attention associated with SSA focuses on peacetime assassination. Here, an individual may be targeted either within the territory of the sponsoring state or outside it. There are several interesting dimensions to this controversial practice.

The first – clear in the definition itself – can be understood as the modality of the assassination. This refers to the actors involved. Throughout recent history, the intelligence agencies of various countries – the U.S. CIA, the Israeli Mossad, and the Russian FSB - have carried out assassinations directly, using employees of the agencies themselves. At other times, these agencies have hired contractors for a single operation or have kept contractors on their books for multiple operations. For example, the recent hiring by Iran of criminals and members of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (Lucas 2024). Or the CIA's use of agent QJWIN/1, who was involved in both the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and in the ZR/RIFLE plots against Fidel Castro (Trenta 2024). More indirectly, assassination has featured as an explicit or implicit component of broader covert operations, such as regime change. Here, governments have often nurtured, shaped, or manipulated the grievances of local actors. They have provided various types of support to these actors, from financial support to weapons and training, and ultimately, 'turning a blind eye' while local actors kill a target (Trenta 2024).

The second important dimension of state-sponsored assassinations relates to the methods used. A CIA 1954 manual entitled *A Study in Assassination* listed a plethora of methods that the US government could consider using. The list included killing a man 'with bare hands,' drugs, edge weapons, blunt weapons, firearms, explosives, and contrived accidents (CIA 1953). Historically, poisons (chemical and bacteriological substances) have also played a prominent role in assassinations and attempted assassinations. Radiological materials – such as polonium – have also featured in the assassination of prominent individuals such as Alexander Litvinenko (Harding 2016). Several governments, from the US and the Soviet Union to Pinochet's Chile, developed chemical and bacteriological programs, at least in part, for use in assassination (Shlomo 2009; Dewey 2022, 2024).

A third dimension has to do with the rationale behind assassination. These have varied depending on the sponsoring state's foreign and domestic policy priorities and interests. During the Cold War, the US government used assassination against a plethora of foreign leaders and officials as a means to direct policies towards US interests. At times, assassination functioned as a preventive mechanism: the aim was to undermine the policies of a specific leader or official and/or to prevent their government from aligning with the Soviet Union. Similarly, assassination functioned as a component of covert regime change (O'Rourke 2018). More recently, assassination has featured prominently in counter-terrorism operations, although the US government denies that its activities amount to assassination. For Israel, assassination has served an assortment of purposes, from terror in the early years of the state to deterrence, and retaliation, as in the case of Operation Wrath of God after the 1972 Munich Olympics terror attacks or in the campaigns against the leadership of Hamas and Hezbollah after the October 7th attacks. Beyond political leadership, assassination has also often targeted scientists and/or individuals involved in the development of weapons and weapons programmes (Bergman 2019). More often,

though, assassination – like chemical and biological weapons programmes (Koblentz 2013) - constitutes a weapon deployed within a state to protect the regime itself and its ruling elite. This has been true of governments like Saudi Arabia and Rwanda, especially when the individuals targeted have engaged more explicitly in political activities (Rugman 2020; Wrong 2021). Suppressing dissent at home and abroad and strengthening the regime's stability was and remains a hallmark of Imperial Russian, Soviet, and Post-Soviet state-sponsored assassination campaigns. What distinguishes post-Soviet state-sponsored assassination campaigns from similar state-backed programs is their specific feature of being primarily retaliatory in nature, designed with the goal of a targets' terminal elimination (Avramov et al. 2025). The rationale behind assassinations also connects with debates surrounding the signalling function of assassination. Here, one view posits that assassinations are a means of strategic political communication (Gioe at al. 2019) intended to signal resolve and deterrence (Hanni and Grossman 2020). Another accentuates the functionality of assassinations as a strictly punitive measure.

In international society, state-sponsored assassinations violate long-standing international and domestic norms (Ward 2005). Moreover, assassinations are seldom lawful under international law, regardless of whether they take place in times of peace or war, are conducted by the military, the intelligence community, another state actor, or a proxy, and happen on the territory of the sponsoring state, abroad, or in international spaces (Duroy 2023). The legal framework applying to state-sponsored assassinations is straightforward: these assassinations are unlawful unless they comply with all potentially applicable legal frameworks, usually international human rights law, international humanitarian law (*jus in bello*), and the law applicable to the use of force (*jus ad bellum*) (Melzer 2008; Callamard 2020). As a result, very few assassinations will be deemed lawful. To avoid the costs of being perceived as norm-violators, many states deploy extensive resources to frame their use of assassination as complying with their interpretation of a (permissive) legal norm or falling outside the scope of another (constraining) one. For instance, assassinations taking place on foreign soil are often framed as a lawful use of states' right to self-defence under Article 51 UN Charter, even if states' interpretations of what Article 51 permits are sometimes highly controversial.

Finally, state-sponsored assassinations often centre issues of secrecy, disclosure, and acknowledgment. They can be understood along three main continuums: overt to covert, exposed to unexposed, and acknowledged to unacknowledged. At one extreme, assassinations are carried out covertly, the sponsoring state never acknowledges them, and they remain unexposed; that is, other actors did not discover or have no interest in publicising the assassination. At the other extreme, assassinations are carried out openly. The sponsoring state is keen to acknowledge its role in the operation and – at times – to provide a public legitimation, and the assassination is exposed and/or publicised by third parties. Assassinations occur more often in the murky territory between these two extremes. They are carried out covertly but leave traces. The sponsoring state might not openly acknowledge the assassination, but those traces, and the state's behaviour, create a situation of ambiguity, of (im)plausible deniability (Cormac and Aldrich 2018). Finally, third parties might have an interest in publicly exposing assassinations sponsored by friends (such as Canada's and the US government's exposure of India's assassinations and assassination plots in 2023) (Cecco and Hellis-Petersen 2023) and enemies (such as the international reaction to the Skripal assassination attempt), or they might not expose the perpetrating state explicitly. Still, they might point to culprits loosely affiliated with the state.

State-sponsored assassinations represent an increasingly frequent feature of international politics. SSA however undermine norms, weaken trust, and endanger personal and national security. As such, they touch upon major debates in International Relations and intelligence studies, and they certainly require further research and exploration.

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