

# The Iran Question and British Strategy

Sir John Jenkins KCMG LVO, Air Marshal Edward Stringer (Ret'd) CB CBE, Harry Halem and Jay Mens

Foreword by Rt Hon Lord Campbell of Pittenweem CH CBE KC,  
Rt Hon Sir Michael Fallon KCB, Alicia Kearns MP,  
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## Foreword

*Rt Hon Lord Campbell of Pittenweem CH CBE KC, former Leader of the Liberal Democrats*  
*Rt Hon Sir Michael Fallon KCB, former Secretary of State for Defence*  
*Alicia Kearns MP, Chair of the Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee*  
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*Rt Hon Lord Robertson of Port Ellen KT, GCMG, former Nato Secretary-General and former Secretary of State for Defence*  
*Lord Sedwill GCMG, former National Security Adviser and Cabinet Secretary*

In an era of growing polarisation, it is fascinating to witness a multi party consensus on Iran policy. Iran's increasingly appalling human rights record, accelerating nuclear programme, sponsorship of proxies throughout the Middle East, extensive assistance to Russia in its brutal war on Ukraine, and sponsorship of terrorism and kidnapping makes it an obvious threat to international stability.

Iran poses a threat to British citizens on British soil. MI5 Director Ken McCallum identified no fewer than ten credible Iranian plots on British soil in 2022, while Met counterterrorism policing lead Matt Jukes identified another five plots in early 2023. Undoubtedly, Iran is becoming more brazen in its prosecution of international disruption.

In such a critical geopolitical environment, we are proud to endorse this paper on British strategy towards Iran. It is truly the first of its kind: no British think-tank has written such a comprehensive analysis of the Iran threat, and provided detailed recommendations that cut across policy areas with such specificity and nuance.

The policy the paper articulates will make the UK a critical power in an increasingly fractious Eurasian political environment. Russia's acute military threat is the most obvious current challenge to British interests and values. Meanwhile, the UK is executing its Indo-Pacific Tilt to engage in and stabilise a region central to global prosperity and security, a policy reinforced in the Integrated Review Refresh.

The UK's unique combination of cultural, economic, diplomatic, and military-intelligence tools allow it to play a major regional role absent significant additional financial cost, while also undergirding the other elements of its foreign policy. Executing the Tilt entails an emphasis on the Middle East. The region is the vital commercial hub connecting Europe and Asia, an energy powerhouse, and home to hundreds of thousands of British citizens. The Middle East is therefore central to Eurasian competition. This is in-line with the government's overall vision, as articulated in the Integrated Review Refresh: Middle Eastern security and prosperity is a vital British interest, to be achieved through the careful application of British diplomatic, strategic, and economic capabilities. Sustaining the Tilt, and

shepherding into existence the Atlantic-Pacific partnerships the UK seeks to spearhead, requires a coherent Middle East policy.

Iran is the Middle East's largest, most aggressive power, with an obvious commitment to revising the global order, and with a growing alliance with Russia. Indeed, the paper's foremost contribution is to widen British Iran policy: focus on the nuclear issue is correct, but it must be contextualised alongside Iran's proxy network and support for Russia. Consequently, an effective Iran policy must address the threat's totality, including the nuclear issue as one among many problems.

As Iran accelerates its nuclear enrichment, the risk increases that Russia assists Iran in nuclear breakout, facilitate advanced military technological transfers, and support Iranian intelligence activities in the UK and the EU. An Iran-Russia axis is as much a European problem, therefore, as a Middle Eastern one.

Now more than ever, as we witness the growing alignment between Iran and Russia, it is imperative for the Government to seriously consider the insights and recommendations put forth in this paper. It is our sincere hope that the insights and proposals put forth in this paper will inform and guide the United Kingdom's policy decisions toward Iran, enabling us to confront the complex challenges ahead and secure a safer and more prosperous future for our nation and the Middle East as a whole.



# Executive Summary

**The Middle East matters to British interests.** In addition to being the commercial nexus point between Europe and Asia, and the world's preeminent energy hub, the Middle East is important in terms of European geopolitics, the British economy, national security and migration flows. The region is also home to hundreds of thousands of British citizens.

**The UK must see the Middle East in context.** The military threat of Russia and the long-term systemic challenge of China require Britain, if it is serious about being a global actor, shaping rather than accepting its strategic environment, to take a Eurasian approach to the Middle East, situating it within a broader context of systemic competition for influence and resources. The Middle East is the backstop of the Indo-Pacific region, giving it long-term importance during any great power rivalry.

**The UK's diplomatic and military toolkit allow it to make a difference in the Middle East.** For historic and strategic regions, the UK has deep and longstanding relationships with almost every country in the Middle East. This fact, alongside its UN Security Council membership and military capacity, give it the ability to have an outsized influence on the course of Middle East affairs.

**Any Middle East policy requires an Iran policy.** Iran is the region's largest and most geographically secure power, with a revanchist commitment to reshaping the regional and ultimately global order in its own interests. It is a geopolitical hinge between the Middle East, the Trans-Caucasus, and Central and South Asia. It exerts significant influence over Muslim and specifically Shia communities globally. Supported by a wide range of militarised proxies and sympathetic regimes from the Levant through West Africa to South and Central America, its reach is unparalleled by that of any country in the region. It is constructing a land bridge connecting Iran to the Mediterranean (for the first time since late antiquity), and has footholds in Yemen and the Palestinian Territories, giving it leverage over the Middle East's main naval chokepoints and Britain's key partners and friends. Every regional actor views the western response to Iran as the defining feature of each country's Middle East policy.

**Iran's ultimate ambitions extend beyond the Middle East, and beyond the immediate future.** Iran is fundamentally committed to creating a new Middle Eastern *status quo* where it is the region's dominant power. From this position, it can defend and export the Islamic Revolution, expand effective control of territory, maximise revenues through legitimate and illegitimate channels and deal – regionally at least – with Turkey, Russia

and China as equals in a long-term contest for Eurasian mastery.

**In the 2010s, Iran shifted from a defensive strategic posture to an expansionist one.** Its ambitions grew from solidifying its position in neighbouring states to building a corridor through the Levant to the Eastern Mediterranean, along with a flanking manoeuvre around the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen into the Red Sea. This expansion gave Iran access to, and the potential to control, the Suez-Indian Ocean maritime chokepoint (in addition to the Straits of Hormuz), generating a long-term threat to regional stability, global energy markets and trade between Europe and Asia.

**The Iran threat is not simply the nuclear issue, but a combination of Iranian military capabilities, proxy groups, intelligence and influence tools in the UK and elsewhere, and the nuclear programme.** The most obvious failure of Western policy, and particularly British and European policy, has been to compartmentalise the nuclear issue diplomatically and then treat this as the central policy issue in relations with Iran. Nuclear developments, while an important part of the package, must be situated within a more comprehensive understanding of the wider threat posed by Iran. Iran policy, meanwhile, must begin with the strategic threat that Iran poses, not the single, symptomatic element that is its nuclear programme.

**Iranian expansion across the Middle East will continue unless there is a Western – and indeed a regional Arab – policy change.** Iran has links with proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, as well as enduring if sometime oscillating relationships with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas. The longer Iranian regional expansion is left unchecked, the more Iran will cement its hegemony over significant parts of the Levant, Iraq and the southern Arabian Peninsula, intensify its efforts to undermine and eventually destroy Israel and expand its presence beyond the Middle East.

**Iran will soon expand its support to Russia's war in Ukraine. Having already transferred drones to Russia, Iran is likely soon to begin transfers of advanced ballistic missiles to the Kremlin. In October, under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), sanctions on Iran's ballistic missile exports will lapse, making such transfers legal under international law.** Iran has also accelerated its programme of nuclear enrichment, reaching the cusp of weapons-grade uranium and developing centrifuge and other related technologies at existing and new sites. Iranian nuclear advancement and military assistance to Russia – like Iran an increasingly hostile revanchist power with shared interests in Syria – increase the odds that President Putin, with the right incentives, will see advantage in assisting Iran with nuclear breakout, transferring advanced military technology, and supporting Iranian intelligence activity in Europe and the UK.

**The Iran-China Relationship, demonstrated by the recent Chinese-brokered normalisation deal with Saudi Arabia, is also set to transform the Middle East and undermine British and wider western interests.** The normalisation agreement is only the most recent step in a broader Chinese Middle East policy to which Iran is central, and through which China

hopes to secure long-term access to regional energy resources, captive markets for its products and significant control over both land-based and maritime trade routes, naval bases. In doing so, Beijing doubtless hopes to reduce the dependence of the UK's traditional regional partners on western security and other guarantees. Iranian-Chinese trade has skyrocketed since the Ukraine War began, as China takes advantage of illicit Iranian and transshipped Russian oil. China has also expanded its economic footprint in Iran and its strategic footprint in East Africa. The UK's Indo-Pacific Tilt, as described in the Integrated Review, was a sound strategic framework: an Iran policy is a necessary complement to this.

**Iran has thorough sub-threshold capabilities, including operatives within the UK and links to transnational organised crime.** Iran simultaneously claims the legal rights of a traditional polity and contravenes international law, allowing it to act in concert with organised criminal entities, conduct assassinations and kidnappings abroad, and participate in the international drug trade. In the last 15 months, MI5 Director Ken McCallum and Counterterrorism Policing lead Matt Jukes have identified 12 to 15 cases of Iranian plots within the UK against British citizens or Iranian dissidents. These statements are in line with those of the Director of the FBI, Christopher Wray, pointing to more intense Iranian intelligence activity in the past two years.

**Iran is a theocracy ruled by a clerical elite that lays claim to the leadership of the Islamic world, and is theologically opposed to the West.** Iran's 1979 constitution claims a mandate over the entire Islamic world and demands an interventionist foreign policy on behalf of the "world's oppressed". Its founding was premised on a narrative of British and American duplicitousness. A systematically anti-British, anti-American and anti-western foreign policy is the logical corollary.

**The short-term chances for political reform inside of Iran are minimal.** Iran's "deep state," comprising the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and hardline clerics, is now in complete control of Iran's domestic and foreign policy. Since 2019, Iran's 'reform movement' has been neutered.

**Iranian domestic instability increases the likelihood of conflict.** The looming death of Iran's 83-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei will likely lead to a succession directed by the most aggressive elements of the Iranian state. This incentivises both Iranian nuclear breakout and makes an Israeli strike on Iran more likely.

**Now is the time for a new Iran policy.** In addition to Iran's highly-publicized human rights violations, Iran's alignment with Russia and deepening economic alignment with China are part of a larger project to reshape the present regional and international orders. Iran's nuclear program is more advanced than ever, raising the likelihood of an escalation that threatens British interests—and citizens—in coming years. Iran's domestic politics incentivise a more aggressive foreign policy. Moreover, whatever the outcome of the Ukraine War, the Russian military will require at least two to three years, and perhaps as long as a decade, to reconstitute

itself. Combined with Eastern European NATO's major defence expansion, this decreases the immediate threat that the UK will face from Russia in Europe, freeing up resources for a more concerted strategic focus on the Middle East.

**Absent decisive action, the UK risks accepting both a nuclearised Middle East and persistent Iranian strategic expansion.** An Iranian nuclear arsenal will trigger regional proliferation and increase sub-threshold rivalry in the Middle East that raises the likelihood of direct confrontation. Iran thrives off ungoverned spaces generated by major military conflicts. As we have repeatedly seen, its Arab neighbours do not have the military capacity to resist or roll back Iranian gains. This means Iranian expansion is likely to continue unabated unless there is a collective and systematic western response to it. Moreover, without an Iran policy, the UK risks facing a major regional conflict, that will put at risk the British economy and hundreds of thousands of British citizens, without the capacity for a serious and effective response.

**British strategy must go beyond preserving the status quo. Indeed this no longer exists. Two decades of Iranian expansion and regional turmoil (including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) have produced a new and evolving balance of power that currently favours Iran.** British policy objectives should include maintaining freedom of access to and movement through the Middle East's maritime chokepoints, in coordination with allies the defence of British partners and friends including Israel and the Gulf States, and the limitation of Iranian strategic disruption beyond the Middle East. Establishing a favourable balance of forces requires diplomatic, economic, intelligence, ideological, and military steps to undermine Iranian expansion, pressure the Iranian regime, and credibly threaten an overwhelming response to Iranian escalation and reprisals against Iranian attacks in the UK.

### Listed Recommendations

Diplomatic steps to isolate Iran and support a stable Middle Eastern coalition:

- **In consultation with the US, the EU, France, and Germany, trigger the JCPOA's Snap-Back Process** to isolate Iran, ensure international support for an anti-Iranian coalition, and force the issue over Iran amongst the JCPOA's signatories;
- **Pursue security and intelligence partnerships with the key powers surrounding Iran.** This should include Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, and Israel.
- **Work with Turkey and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus alongside the UK's European partners** to undermine the developing Russia-Iran Caspian Sea trade corridor – absent a greatly expanded regional footprint, the corridor will develop unimpeded;
- **Conclude a GCC-wide FTA and expedite arms sales** to push back against Iranian pressure against the Arabian Peninsula;
- **Expand the 2021 UK-Israel Strategic Partnership through an**

**innovation-focused Free-Trade Agreement** to solidify the UK-Israel relationship for a period of long-term competition with Iran and ensure participation in major regional military exercises alongside the U.S. and Israel.

*Soft Power, Social Cohesion, Intelligence, and Human Rights:* to disrupt Iranian networks in the UK, leverage British cultural assets, and expose Iranian criminal acts and domestic brutality;

- **Stand up a hybrid public diplomacy and intelligence capacity, either as an interagency group or a small separate team**, to integrate intelligence analysis and an understanding of Iranian messaging with British public diplomacy strategies to identify and counter Iranian subversive messaging in a more timely and effective way;
- **Revive soft power tools, particularly BBC Persian’s Radio Service**, through proper financing and staffing to connect directly with the Iranian people; reorient other relevant regional services like BBC Azeri, Arabic, Pashto; and stand up a BBC Balochi Radio Service;
- **Create language scholarship programmes through FCDO that prioritise critical Middle Eastern languages**, including Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hebrew, Azeri, Balochi, Pashto, and Dari to revive British linguistic talent so critical for the security services, intelligence, and public diplomacy;
- **Use intelligence assets within Iran to identify human rights violations** and amplify those violations globally to win the narrative battle against Iran by reporting Iranian human rights violations to major news outlets and opposition media.
- **Expel Iranian diplomats in the UK suspect of having intelligence links**, and greatly increase the stringency of diplomatic visas issued to Iranian consular personnel to undermine Iranian intelligence in the UK by depriving Iran of official cover agents.

*Financial Intelligence* to enhance sanctions prosecution and ensure better UK enforcement:

- **Stand up an executive sanctions enforcement capacity** to ensure the UK actually regulates potentially illicit cash within its financial system, patterned off the United States Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).
- **Break down bureaucratic barriers for Financial Intelligence** by empowering the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI), expanding its staff to around 200 from 70 employees, and reorganising the NCA’s Financial Intelligence (FININT) capabilities to provide this newly-empowered OFSI with an actually responsible analytical capability.

Counterterrorism steps to integrate intelligence, law enforcement, and military capabilities:

- **Revive the whole-of-government counterterrorism approach developed originally to counter AQ and IS** to ensure proper bureaucratic coordination between different parts of the British government to limit Iranian actions, potentially even empowering and modifying the office of the Head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO) to make it more adaptable, efficient, and responsive during a period of strategic competition with Iran.
- **Increase police and Security Service focus on both open and covert Iranian regime activities** to prevent assassinations and kidnappings in the UK, including by tasking the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre and National Crime Agency's intelligence capabilities, along with MI5 and MI6 to hire more Persian analysts and better fuse MI5, MI6, and NCA capabilities.

Legal and Regulatory Modifications to make the British state more capable of acting in the grey zone:

- **Use the National Security Bill as a vehicle to replicate proscription** to empower British law enforcement and break the war-peace binary without triggering the potentially adverse effects on British terrorism law that might arise from the designation of Iran as a state terrorist organisation;
- **Employ Regulation to limit IRI illicit finance** by tasking the FCA and other regulatory bodies with more aggressive enforcement and auditing, particularly against companies and charities with potential ties to Iran.
- **Disrupt Iran's dark tanker fleet** by enforcing and if necessary strengthening the requirements for British companies and British-flagged ships to verify oil and gas transactions.

Military and Intelligence activity in the Middle East that appreciably – through strategically sound deployments – influences the regional balance of forces and bolsters deterrence:

- **Bolster strategic communications efforts to link the Middle East to other regions**, using the Indo-Pacific Tilt as a heuristic, and highlighting the Middle East's strategic relevance to European and Indo-Pacific security;
- **Improve the UK's ability to attack the Iranian international network** by reinforcing the mechanisms the UK created to respond to non-state actors and adapting them to the Iran threat;
- **Expand the capabilities necessary for the UK to deploy to the Middle East as a crucial coalition member**, including improving British heavy airlift surface combatant units in the long-term,



thereby demonstrating British commitment and reinforcing long-term deterrence;

- **Conduct limited redeployments towards the Middle East to maximise operational returns and improve short-term deterrence**, including by retasking British drones to the region and relying on new autonomous technologies;
- **Review evacuation plans for British citizens** in light of the Afghanistan and Sudan evacuations, and with the recognition of the sheer scale a Gulf evacuation attempt would demand.

## Introduction: The Middle East and the UK

The 2021 *Integrated Review* recognised the reality of a fragmented international system, “characterised by intensifying competition between states over interests, norms and values”.<sup>1</sup> Russia’s 24 February 2022 escalation of its war against Ukraine has demonstrated this trend in real time, as the UK and its allies confront the largest European ground war since 1945.<sup>2</sup> In this context, British strategic debate increasingly points to a binary choice between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic.<sup>3</sup> In reality, however, the present competitive age is another contest for Eurasia, the world’s largest geographical region that includes the majority of the world’s population, resources, and GDP.<sup>4</sup>

FIGURE 1: MAP OF EURASIA



Figure 1: A Map of the World Under the Strategic Heartland-Rimland thesis, accessed via: <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/279/27964799050/html/>

1. *Global Britain in a Competitive Age* (March 2021), 11.
2. Edward Stringer, “Ukraine Reinforces the Case for the Integrated Review”, *Policy Exchange*, 21 March 2022, accessed via: <https://policyexchange.org.uk/blogs/ukraine-reinforces-the-case-for-the-integrated-review/>.
3. See David Lammy’s Chatham House Speech, 24 January 2023, accessed via: <https://labour.org.uk/press/david-lammy-speech-to-chatham-house/>.
4. Eurasia runs from the French Atlantic coastline to the South and East China Seas, from the most remote reaches of Siberia to southern India.
5. *State of the Maritime Nation 2019* (Maritime UK), 5.

Maritime trade facilitates 95% of all British trade.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore of crucial importance to ensure that major Eurasian chokepoints remain open, connection regions between these chokepoints unimpeded, and the links from chokepoints to resources farther within Eurasia are uninterrupted. **British policy cannot therefore focus on one region. The UK must have a policy for every Eurasian region, or risk being at the mercy of strategic trends over which it has no control.**

The Integrated Review articulated an Indo-Pacific approach which balanced the acute military threat of Russia, and a long-term focus on Asia. Its result was the Indo-Pacific Tilt.<sup>6</sup> However, the Integrated Review paid insufficient attention to the crucial link between Europe and Asia, the Middle East. Nine-tenths of global trade are still carried by ship, making the Middle East, with its expansive Indo-Pacific and Mediterranean littorals a far more viable trade route than Central Asia. The Middle East contains three globally significant maritime chokepoints – the Suez Canal, Babel-Mandeb, and Strait of Hormuz – which generate the region’s massive commercial hubs like Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah, Oman’s Port Salah, Qatar’s Port Hamad, the UAE’s Port Khalifa, and Israel’s Haifa Port.<sup>7</sup> Threats to Middle Eastern trade drove British Middle East policy until the 1970s.<sup>8</sup>

## FIGURE 2: MAP OF THE MIDDLE EAST

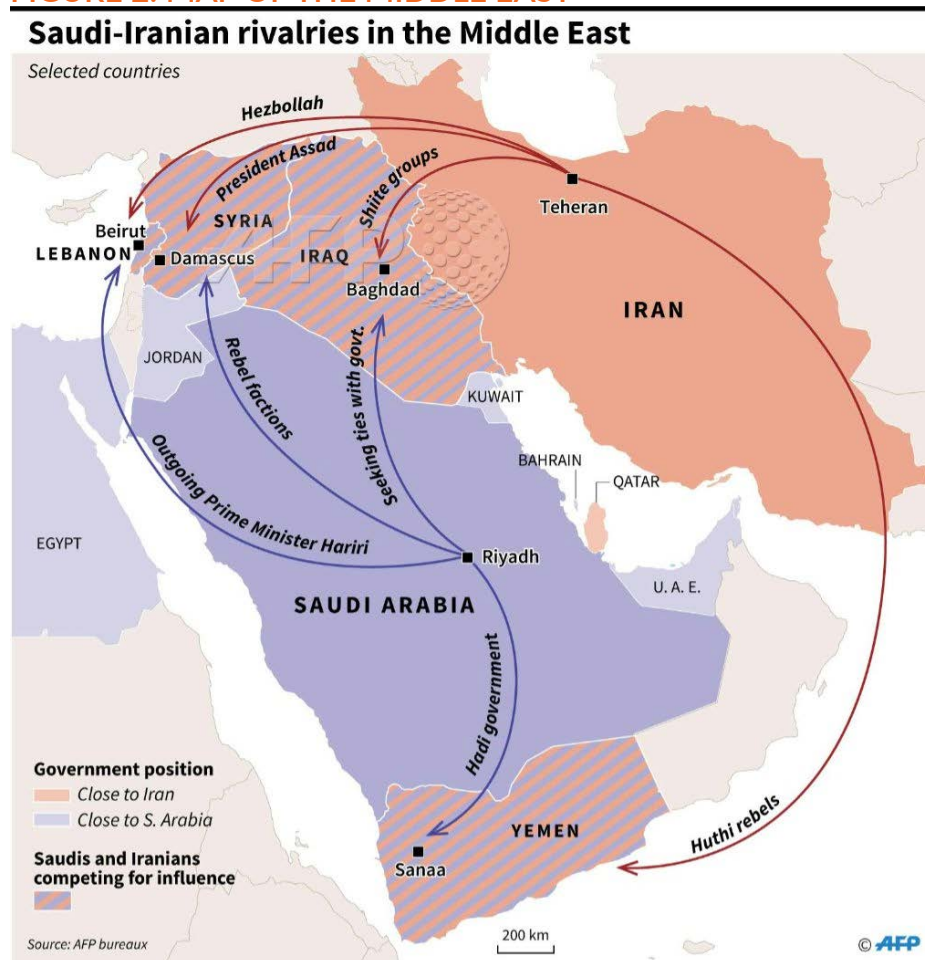


Figure 2: A strategic map of the Middle East, accessed via: <https://twitter.com/afp/status/943496223968907267?lang=en-GB>

Energy security intensifies the region’s importance. OPEC’s Middle Eastern members control nearly 60% of the world’s proven crude oil reserves.<sup>9</sup> Europe, the UK, and the UK’s Asian allies still rely overwhelmingly on these energy reserves, as do British adversaries.

6. *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, 66.
7. “Middle East Container Ports Are the Most Efficient in the World”, *World Bank*, 25 May 2022, accessed via: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/05/25/middle-east-container-ports-are-the-most-efficient-in-the-world>.
8. Magnus PS Persson, “Recent Literature on British Policy in the Middle East, 1945-67”, *Contemporary European History*, 14:2 (May 2005), 271-276.
9. Data from *OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2022*, accessed via: [https://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/en/data\\_graphs/330.htm](https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.htm).

FIGURE 3: OPEC SHARE OF WORLD CRUDE

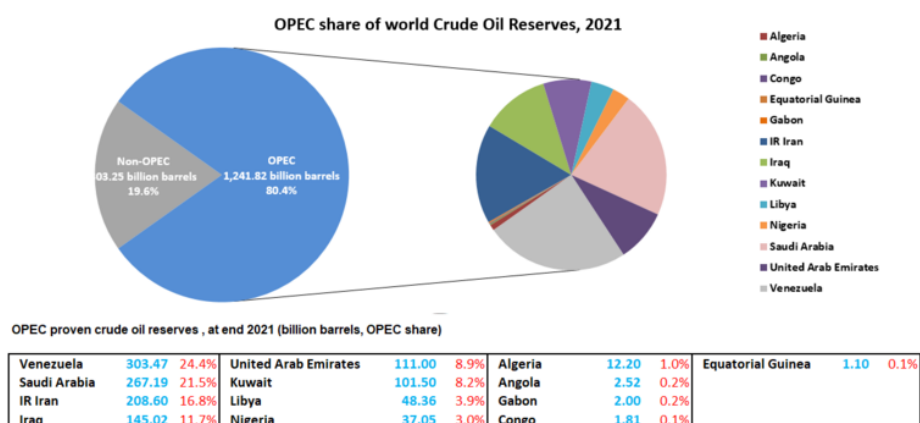


Figure 3: OPEC Share of world crude oil reserves, accessed via: [https://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/en/data\\_graphs/330.htm](https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.htm)

### Iranian Ideology-Mythology and the UK

As the diplomatic joke goes, Iran is the last country to still consider the UK a great power.

The UK reduced its Middle Eastern presence in 1971. But ideologically, Iran places the UK, along with the U.S. and Israel, at the heart of its historical mythology. In this scheme, the United States is the ‘Great Satan’ and Israel the ‘Little Satan’ that must be defeated to consummate Iranian power. The UK, in turn, is the ‘Middle Satan’, Iran’s alleged great humiliator. British *de facto* partitions of Iran in 1907 and 1941 played a significant role in Iranian revolutionary thought. When nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh nationalised the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) in 1953, the UK played a leading role in deposing him. This historical mythology makes Iranian antagonism towards the UK part of the Islamic Republic’s political DNA.

## 1953 IRAN

The Iranian regime's grievance narrative places the UK at its centre. Under this telling, the UK and U.S. deposed the democratically-elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, to ensure British access to Iranian oil in an act of singular perfidy. The truth is rather different

In 1951, the Persian *majlis* nationalised the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), legally a British possession, prompting Mohammed Reza Shah to appoint Mossadegh, an aristocratic elder statesman, arch-nationalist, and thorough Anglophobe, as prime minister.<sup>10</sup> Mossadegh, appointed as prime minister in Iran's factional, elitist political system, was a long-term fixture of Iranian politics, who had previously retired in 1947.

Mossadegh was intransigent throughout US-brokered negotiations, seeking a maximalist arrangement that would provide Iran with all oil revenues from the seized AIOC fields while ensuring Western technical assistance for their operation, and rejecting multiple U.S.-offered compromises. Meanwhile, by 1953, the Iranian economy had collapsed due to an oil embargo and a lack of Western technical assistance.

Iranian domestic politics became increasingly unstable, and the country vulnerable to Soviet influence. The Korean War still raged at the time and, just seven years earlier, the Soviets sought to bite off northwestern Iran through two puppet states, indicating the Kremlin's designs on the region.<sup>11</sup> Mossadegh's actions throughout 1952-1953 convinced every centre of Iranian power – the *bazari* merchants, the aristocratic old politicians, the military, and the clergy with their connections to the countryside – that Mossadegh was a long-term threat to Iran's prosperity. The military and political figures put out feelers to the U.S. and UK embassies throughout Mossadegh's premiership, but only in March-June 1953 did the U.S. and UK acquiesce to Iranian-led resistance.

As economic difficulties intensified and Mossadegh's popularity amongst the Iranian elite and people decreased, he sought to consolidate power. On 3-10 August, Mossadegh held a referendum on the dissolution of parliament, conducted without secret ballots, and on 16 August dissolved parliament. During a confused four-day period, the Iranian military executed a *coup* with the UK and US' *backing*, but nevertheless as the primary actors in the drama.

The simplistic narrative, that American fear of communism and British perfidy drove a democrat from power in 1953, is simply untrue. Cold War geopolitics and energy questions did intersect with *Iranian domestic issues* to generate the 1953 *coup*, but it was those domestic factors – and Mossadegh's fundamental unpopularity – that led to his removal.

## The Physical Threat

Hundreds of thousands of British citizens live in the Middle East. In the UAE alone reside over 120,000 British expatriates.<sup>12</sup> British business connections in the UAE are robust, with 6,000 British-registered companies located in the UAE. 20,000-plus Brits live in Saudi Arabia, while around 5,000 live in Kuwait.<sup>13</sup> Around 500-600 Brits move to Israel each year, while 150,000-plus Brits travel to Israel for various reasons annually.<sup>14</sup> In the event of a serious security contingency in the Middle East, a considerable number of British citizens would be on the front line. Iran frequently employs kidnapping to extract leverage from international targets. In recent years, Iran has arbitrarily detained dozens

12. Alice Haine, "British expatriates move to UAE in search of new lifestyle after Covid-19 and Brexit", *The National News*, 18 September 2021, accessed via: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/mon-ey/2021/09/18/british-expatriates-flock-to-the-uae-for-new-life-away-from-covid-and-brexit/>.
13. See "Brits Abroad", BBC, accessed via: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/in\\_depth/brits\\_abroad/html/mid\\_east.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/in_depth/brits_abroad/html/mid_east.stm): "See also Kubi Kalloo, Understanding and engaging with UK expats in the UAE", *Visit Britain*, research conducted March-April 2021, accessed via: [https://www.visitbritain.org/sites/default/files/vb-corporate/uk\\_expats\\_in\\_the\\_uae\\_research.pdf](https://www.visitbritain.org/sites/default/files/vb-corporate/uk_expats_in_the_uae_research.pdf).
14. Jenni Frazer, "See-saw demography: Israelis in the UK vs. British aliyah", *Times of Israel*, 24 November 2015, accessed via: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/see-saw-demography-israelis-in-the-uk-vs-british-aliyah/>.
10. Gregory Brew, "The Collapse Narrative: The United States, Mohammed Mossadegh, and the Coup Decision of 1953", *Texas National Security Review*, 2:4 (August 2019), 39-44. See also Ray Takeyh, "The Coup Against Democracy That Wasn't", *Commentary* (December 2021), accessed via: <https://www.commentary.org/articles/ray-takeyh/iran-1953-coup-america/>.
11. Louise Fawcett, "Revisiting the Iranian Crisis of 1946: How Much More Do We Know?" *Iranian Studies*, 47:3 (May 2014), 379-399.

of British nationals, including the high-profile case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and more recently, executed British-Iranian dual national Alireza Akbari.<sup>15</sup> Iran has also kidnapped British nationals in the UAE<sup>16</sup> and has used kidnappings against its geopolitical rivals, attempting to abduct and murder Israeli tourists in Turkey.<sup>17</sup>

More broadly, a regional conflict would be severely disruptive to the British economy. The Middle East accounts for 5% of British exports and 2% of its imports.<sup>18</sup> Since February 2022, the UK imported more oil individually from Saudi Arabia and the UAE than from Russia, and imported well over double the oil volume from the Middle East than from Russia.<sup>19</sup> A regional contingency would thus amount to a substantial supply contraction and would cause oil prices to skyrocket. Moreover, 12% of global trade transits the Suez Canal. The UK imports the majority of spices, various oils, meats, and wine from Asia, all of which must transit the Suez Canal. Moreover, the EU, the UK's largest trading partner, imports around a quarter to a third of its goods from Asia, the majority of which must also transit the Suez Canal.<sup>20</sup> Any disruption to the Suez-Indian Ocean maritime route, therefore, would cause broader dislocation to Europe, with knock-on effects in the UK.

Given the destabilising potential of a Middle Eastern conflict and the direct threat that conflict poses to British interest, it is incumbent upon British policymakers to articulate a Middle East strategy that deters and manages regional escalation. Iran is the primary, and fundamentally only, instigator of a major potential conflict, meaning that any Middle East policy must begin with Iran.

### Iranian Objectives

Iran's long-term goal is to become the Middle East's dominant power, thereby preserving the Islamic Revolution indefinitely, exporting it to the rest of the Muslim world, and gaining the leverage to deal directly with other great powers, particularly Russia and China.

Iran's theocratic political model of Islamic Republicanism is not limited to Iran. Rather, the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian regime's term for the 1979 overthrow of the Shah, was meant to begin a broader revolution in the Islamic world. Nor is Iranian ambition limited to Shia-majority areas. Iran considers itself the Islamic world's natural leader, and seeks to export the Islamic Revolution first to areas with major Shia populations like Iraq, Lebanon, and parts of Syria, and then to the Islamic world more broadly.

By uniting the Islamic world under the Iranian banner, Tehran hopes to preserve the Islamic revolutionary regime indefinitely. Insulated by a buffer of friendly Islamic states, and directly or indirectly controlling the majority of the world's oil reserves, Iran would be immune to long-term economic pressure. This Iran, likely armed with nuclear weapons, could expand conventional and advanced military capabilities to expand its influence in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean.

A united Islamic world under Iranian leadership, meanwhile, would be a *bona fide* great power, the first Islamic great power since the

15. Philip Loft, "Dual nationals imprisoned in Iran", *House of Commons Library* (Research Briefing 8147, 17 January 2023), 4.

16. "UAE arrests Iranians suspected of kidnapping Briton in Dubai", *Reuters*, 9 January 2014, accessed via: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-iran-emirates-idUK-BREA080RQ20140109>.

17. "Iranian kidnapping of Israeli tourists said thwarted in Turkey last month", *Times of Israel*, 12 June 2022, accessed via: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-said-to-have-helped-foil-planned-iranian-attack-on-israeli-targets-in-turkey/>.

18. See ONS Data as of 16 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/internationaltrade>.

19. Hannah Donnarumma, "Trends in UK imports and exports of fuels", ONS, 29 June 2022, accessed via: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/balanceofpayments/articles/trendsimportsandexportsoffuels/2022-06-29>.

20. Jeremy Domballe, "Maritime trade and its risks: EU's imports from Asia and the Middle East", *S&P Global*, 2 July 2020, accessed via: <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/mi/research-analysis/maritime-trade-and-risks-eu-imports-from-asia-and-middle-east.html>.



Ottoman Empire, and the first Middle Eastern actor capable of projecting power beyond the region since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. An emboldened, empowered Iran would be able to negotiate with Russia and China, the other Eurasian authoritarians, on reasonably equal terms. It would also be able to extend its influence throughout Eurasia and even gain allies in the Americas, likely first turning to Venezuela and Cuba, and then to other Latin American states hostile to the Anglo-Euro-American international system.

In short, then, Iran's long-term strategic objective is *great-power status*.

The COVID-19 Pandemic, Russian invasion of Ukraine, and growing Chinese threat to Indo-Pacific security and stability all indicate a renewed era of systemic great power competition, which the Integrated Review's first draft and refresh clearly recognise.<sup>21</sup> The emergence of a third authoritarian great power in Eurasia would acutely undermine British economic and strategic security, threaten British allies, and create a balance of forces hostile to British values and the liberal international system those values support.

Moreover, Iran's concerted campaign to gain great power status has destroyed the Middle Eastern status quo. The Prime Minister has already signalled a departure from status quo thinking in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>22</sup> Absent a Middle East status quo, the UK's objective should be to *cultivate a regional balance of forces that preserves Britain's interests in regional commerce, the respect for national borders, and the defence of its allies*.

Every aspect of the Iran threat – its non-violent subversion within the UK, its intelligence activity and assassinations beyond the Middle East, its kidnappings and pressure on dissidents, its illicit cashflow through its links with organised criminal groups, and its nuclear and conventional military expansion – all stem from Iran's principal objective of great-power status, and are all meant to establish a new balance of forces.

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21. *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, 17.

22. "PM speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet: 28 November 2022", 28 November 2022, accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-to-the-lord-mayors-banquet-28-november-2022>.

## The Structure of the Iran Threat

The Iran threat has crystallised given Tehran's active support for Russia in Ukraine and repeated violations of human rights during the 2022-2023 Mahsa Amini protests. The threat from Iran itself is not new – it evolved throughout the 2010s as Iranian power and ambition increased. However, Iran's increasingly robust relationship with Russia, and now China, have made it a particularly acute threat to Middle Eastern peace and, of equal importance, given Iran a legitimately global reach. Indeed, the recent Chinese-brokered normalisation between Iran and Saudi Arabia demonstrates the degree to which the regional balance of forces has shifted in Iran's favour.

### Human Rights, Terrorism and Organised Crime, and Social Cohesion

Iran's internal repression dovetails with its support for terrorism, intelligence network in the UK, Europe, and Middle East, and active meddling in British society and politics. British Iran policy must therefore consider Iran's human rights violations and connect them to its support for terrorism and organised crime, and its intelligence activity. **For Iran, there is no distinction between the domestic and the international, meaning Iranian activity abroad is a coherent aspect of Iranian strategy more generally.**

The killing of Mahsa Amini has sparked a protest wave in Iran reminiscent of the 2009-2010 Iranian Green Movement.<sup>23</sup> The regime turned to its security services to crack down upon the protestors. Since the protests began on 16 September 2022, several hundred Iranians, including British-Iranian dual nationals, have been executed, and an estimated 20,000 Iranians have been imprisoned.<sup>24</sup> The U.S. Department of State's 2022 Iran Human Rights Report identified 500 Iranians killed by the regime's security services, including 69 children.<sup>25</sup> The Iranian security services actively target suspected resistance organisations including teachers' associations and other groups, impinging upon freedom of association and disrupting civil society.<sup>26</sup> Iran frequently employed torture, deprivation, and sexual violence to force confessions from jailed dissidents.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the Iranian state is noticeably more violent against ethnic minority dissidents than others.<sup>28</sup>

Below is an excerpt from the 2021 report describing the torture of two Balochi-Iranians, Hassan Dehvari and Elias Qalandarzehi, arrested on spurious political charges:

In the (Ministry of) Intelligence (detention center), we were subjected to physical and psychological torture including being threatened with rape, tying us to the "miracle bed" (a bed used for flogging prisoners), all types of instruments, like whips, cable wires, a metal helmet that would be wired with electric shocks to our heads, attempting to pull out hand and toe nails, turning on an electric drill and threatening to drill our arms

23. Nicole Winchester, "Protests in Iran: Death of Mahsa Amini", *House of Lords Library* (21 October 2022), accessed via: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/protests-in-iran-death-of-mahsa-amini/>.

24. *Iran Protests 2022 -Detailed Report of 82 Days of Nationwide Protests in Iran* (Human Rights Activists News Agency, December 2022), 57ff.

25. *Iran 2022 Human Rights Report* (U.S. Department of State, 20 March 2023), 40.

26. *Ibid.*, 40-43.

27. *Ibid.*, 9.

28. *Ibid.*, 59.

and legs, bringing my wife and a video camera and [telling] me that either I accept the charge or they would rape her and film it in front of me.<sup>29</sup>

Both Dehviri and Qalandarzehi were tortured for months before their executions in early 2021.

## FIGURE 6: EXECUTIONS IN IRAN

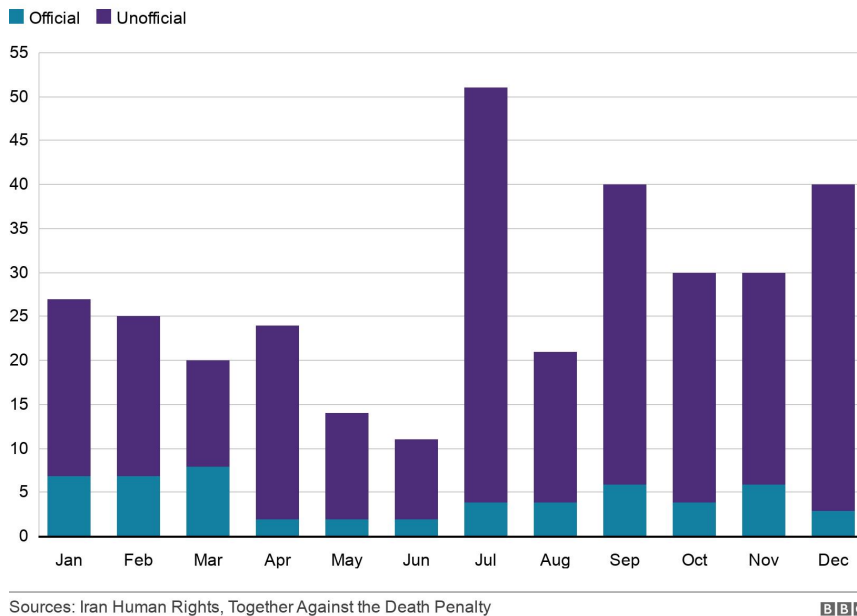


Figure 6: Iranian execution data in 2021, accessed via: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-61256213>

Iran's 1979 Constitution and legal code permit punishments including stoning, executions, and amputations, limits free expression and political participation, and explicitly enshrines a second-class role for women.<sup>30</sup> Iran further has one of the highest execution rates in the world – since 2010, it has been second only to China in its application of the death penalty.<sup>31</sup> These violations are possible only because of its robust security apparatus. At its heart is the IRGC, a hybrid internal security, external action, and warfighting service that prosecutes Iran's foreign interventions. IRGC officers receives the bulk of preferential state positions, while the organisation receives priority for funding and general influence over the Iranian state.<sup>32</sup>

The IRGC includes several regional commands, each of which trains and equips IRGC divisions and brigades.<sup>33</sup> Below this is the Provincial Guard, a province-level devolvement of the IRGC that operates in 32 independent cells, corresponding to Iran's first-order organisational system.<sup>34</sup> The Provincial Guard is responsible for the Basij paramilitaries, a five million strong force of reservists that provide invaluable additional public security manpower. The Basij system also cross-pollenates with the police – since 2007, the majority of new Iranian police recruits are also Basij members, increasing the IRGC's control of the security system.<sup>35</sup>

29. *Ibid.*

30. See the Preamble to Iran's 1979 Constitution, accessed via: [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran\\_1989.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf); See also the translations of Books 1 and 2 of the Iranian Penal Code, accessed via: <https://iranhrdc.org/english-translation-of-books-i-ii-of-the-new-islamic-penal-code/>.

31. *Amnesty International Global Report: Death Sentences and Executions 2021* (Amnesty International, 2022), 10.

32. Saeid Golkar, "Iran's Coercive Apparatus: Capacity and Desire", *Washington Institute*, 5 January 2018, accessed via: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-coercive-apparatus-capacity-and-desire>.

33. Marie Donovan, Nicholas Carl, and Frederick W. Kagan, *Iran's Reserve of Last Resort: Uncovering the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Ground Forces Order Of Battle* (AEI Critical Threats Project, January 2020), 5-7.

34. Saeid Golkar, "Taking Back the Neighborhood: The IRGC Provincial Guard's Mission to Re-Islamize Iran", *Washington Institute* (June 2020), 6.

35. Golkar, "Iran's Coercive Apparatus".

36. "Shahriar Shafiq", *Abdorrahan Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran*, accessed via: <https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story-7088/shahriar-shafiq>.

37. Felicity Barringer and Donald P. Baker, "Anti-Khomeini Iranian Slain at Bethesda Home", *Washington Post*, 23 July 1980, accessed via: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/07/23/anti-khomeini-iranian-slain-at-bethesda-home/1980-07-23/>.

38. John Vinocur, "Exiled Iranian General Is Killed With Brother By Gunmen In Paris", *The New York Times*, 8 February 1984, accessed via: <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/08/world/exiled-iranian-general-is-killed-with-brother-by-gunmen-in-paris.html>.

39. "Hamid Reza Chitgar", *Abdorrahan Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran*, accessed via: <https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story-4371/hamid-reza-chitgar>.

40. "Abdol Rahman Qasemlu Ghassemloo", *Abdorrahan Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran*, accessed via: <https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/30421/abdol-rahman-qasemlu-ghassemloo>.

41. "3 Iranian Kurdish Nationalists Killed", *Deseret News*, 15 July 1989, accessed via: <https://www.deseret.com/1989/7/15/18815470/3-iranian-kurdish-nationalists-killed>.

42. "No Safe Haven: Iran's Global Assassination Campaign", *Iran Human Rights Documentation Center*, 3 February 2011, accessed via: <https://iranhrdc.org/no-safe-haven-irans-global-assassination-campaign/>.

43. "Assassination of Professor Kazem Rajavi on political grounds", *UN Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities* (42nd sess. : 1990 : Geneva), accessed via: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/102253?ln=en>.

44. Muhammad Sahimi, "The Chain Murders: Killing Dissidents and Intellectuals, 1988-1998", *PBS Frontline*, 5 January 2011, accessed via: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/01/the-chain-murders-killing-dissidents-and-intellectuals-1988-1998.html>.

45. Faramarz Davar, "Diplomat Assassins: Who Does Iran Kill Abroad and Why?" *Iran Wire*, 18 November 2021, accessed via: <https://iranwire.com/en/features/67508/>.

46. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/lifeinfocus/shapour-bakhtiar-exiled-assassinated-prime-minister-iran-pahlavi-era-a8474656.html>

47. Homa Katouzian, "A Life in Focus: Shapour Bakhtiar, the last prime minister of Iran's Pahlavi era", *The Independent*, 11 August 2018, accessed via: <https://www.rferl.org/a/farrokhzad-murder-persons-of-interest/31566368.html>.

48. "Dr Sharafkandi", *PDKI*, accessed via: <https://pdki.org/english/dr-sharafkandi/>.

49. "Fattah Abdoli", *Abdorrahan Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran*, accessed via: <https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/33127/fattah-abdoli>.

50. "Homayoun Ardalan", *Abdorrahan Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran*, accessed via: <https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/33126/homayoun-ardalan>.

51. Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *Germany/Iran: Details of the assassination of four Kurdish politicians in 1992 at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin*, 16 November 1999, ZZZ33188.E, accessed via: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ad824c.html>.

52. "Report on the Islamic Republic's Terrorism abroad", accessed via: <https://princesssharafpahlavi.org/en/8-articles/27-report-on-the-islamic-republic-s-terrorism-abroad>.

53. Daniel Boffey and Martin Chulov, "Death of an electrician: how luck run out for dissident who fled Iran in 1981", *The Guardian*, 14 January 2019, accessed via: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/14/a-dutch-electrician-raises-issues-of-trust-in-iran>.

54. "Gem TV: Iranian CEO Saeed Karimian shot dead in Istanbul", *BBC*, 30 April 2017, accessed via: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39761451>.

55. Anthony Deutsch and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Ahmad Mola Nissi: Arab nationalist from Iran shot dead in Netherlands", *The Independent*, 9 November 2017, accessed via: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ahmad-mola-nissi-dead-shot-netherlands-iran-arab-nationalist-a8046646.html>.

Table 1: Iranian Assassination Attempts

Year	Location	Target	Reason
1979 <sup>36</sup>	Paris, France	Shahriar Shafiq	Shah's Nephew
1980 <sup>37</sup>	Bethesda, Maryland	Ali Akbar Tabatabaei	Iranian dissident
1984 <sup>38</sup>	Paris, France	Gholam Ali Oveisi	High-ranking Imperial military officer
1987 <sup>39</sup>	Vienna, Austria	Hamid Reza Chitgar	Iranian Communist
1989 <sup>40</sup>	Vienna, Austria	Abdul Rahman Ghassemloo	Iranian Kurdish Political Figure
1989 <sup>41</sup>	Vienna, Austria	Abdullah Ghaderi Azar	Iranian Kurdish Political Figure
1990 <sup>42</sup>	Nynäshamn, Sweden	Karim Mohammedzadeh	Kurdish Dissident
1990 <sup>43</sup>	Coppet, Switzerland	Kazem Rajavi	NCRI Representative, former Iranian UN Ambassador
1990 <sup>44</sup>	Konya, Turkey	Elî Kaşîfpûr	KDPI Figure
1990 <sup>45</sup>	Västerås, Sweden	Efat Ghazi	KDPI Figure
1991 <sup>46</sup>	Suresnes, France	Shapour Bakhtiar	Former Iranian Prime Minister
1992 <sup>47</sup>	Bonn, Germany	Fereydoun Farrokhzad	Iranian Dissident
1992 <sup>48</sup>	Berlin, Germany	Sadegh Sharafkandi	KDPI Leader
1992 <sup>49</sup>	Berlin, Germany	Fattah Abdoli	KDPI Figure
1992 <sup>50</sup>	Berlin, Germany	Homayoun Ardalan	KDPI Figure
1992 <sup>51</sup>	Berlin, Germany	Nouri Dehkordi	KDPI Figure
1996 <sup>52</sup>	Stockholm, Sweden	Kamran Hedayati	Kurdish Dissident
2015 <sup>53</sup>	Almere, Netherlands	Mohammad-Reza Kolahi Samadi	MEK Member
2017 <sup>54</sup>	Istanbul, Turkey	Saeed Karimian	Television Executive
2017 <sup>55</sup>	The Hague, Netherlands	Ahmad Mola Nissi	Dissident

Iran's intelligence services and the IRGC Quds Force have a global presence. Iran's intelligence activity connects Iran with terrorist groups and organised criminal syndicates. Iranian intelligence has two objectives. First, Iran intimidates, kidnaps, and assassinates Iranian dissidents.<sup>56</sup> The IRGC has conducted operations on British and American soil, within the EU, and throughout the Middle East. MI5 Director-General Ken McCallum, in his 2022 threat assessment, notably identified Iran as behind at least ten plots against British citizens and UK-based dissidents.<sup>57</sup> In 2011, the U.S. FBI foiled an Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador and attack the Saudi and Israeli embassies.<sup>58</sup> Iranian intelligence also has an extensive European presence. According to Germany's Federal Intelligence Service, the BND, 160 active Iranian agents have been with German connections, primarily engaged in operations against Jewish groups.<sup>59</sup> Iranian agents are also active in the Netherlands. AIVD, the Netherlands' intelligence agency, identified Iranian participation in two assassinations of regime dissidents in the 2010s.<sup>60</sup>

In 2022, the IRGC likely organised the Salman Rushdie Assassination Attempt, during which Hadi Matar, with known sympathies towards the IRGC and Hezbollah.<sup>61</sup> The world-renowned British-American novelist has had a price on his head since Khomeini issued a *fatwa* calling for his execution in 1989.<sup>62</sup> Iranian intelligence is extraordinarily persistent. This January, FBI Director Christopher Wray announced that U.S. law enforcement had stopped a second plot against an Iranian dissident journalist in the New York City area.<sup>63</sup> Although the target's name is unconfirmed, it is almost certainly Mahsa Alinejad, an Iranian-born journalist whose high-profile criticisms of the regime have drawn the Iranian state's ire, and who Iranian intelligence previously sought to assassinate in 2021.<sup>64</sup>

Iranian intelligence also targets dissident Iranian media outlets. Iran International, founded in 2017, has become the premier opposition news network in the Persian speaking world.<sup>65</sup> In February 2023, Iran International announced that it will transfer operations from London to Washington, DC given pervasive IRGC security threats against its staff.<sup>66</sup> Iranian intelligence, then, not only targets dissidents in general, but also is tasked with breaking up dissident information networks that can threaten the Iranian regime.

Beyond its intimidation of and attacks on dissidents and regime opponents, Iran uses its international intelligence presence to facilitate its links to the global black market.<sup>67</sup> The IRGC and *bonyad* system – which is in turn IRGC controlled – interfaces between the Afghan drug trade and international markets. Iranian agents, either directly or through Hezbollah, then work with Latin American drug cartels and Euro-American gangs.<sup>68</sup> Venezuela is Iran's primary conduit to Latin America. Hugo Chavez and his successor Nicolas Maduro progressively turned to the drug trade to ensure state finances.<sup>69</sup> Iran, through a variety of shell companies, works through Venezuela to ensure Latin American drug access.<sup>70</sup> It also has connections with Mexican cartels, most notably Los Zetas.<sup>71</sup> Iranian groups also have European links, most notably to Anglo-Irish organised crime through the

56. "Timeline: Iran's assassinations and plots to kill dissidents living abroad", *Al-Arabiya English*, 16 July 2021, accessed via: <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2021/07/16/Timeline-Iran-s-assassinations-and-plots-to-kill-dissidents-living-abroad>.
57. Ken McCallum, "Annual Threat Update", MI5, 16 November 2022, accessed via: <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/director-general-ken-mccallum-gives-annual-threat-update>.
58. "Two Men Charged in Alleged Plot to Assassinate Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States", U.S. Department of Justice, 11 October 2011, accessed via: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-men-charged-alleged-plot-assassinate-saudi-arabian-ambassador-united-states>.
59. Frederik Schindler, "Iran betreibt „umfangreiche Ausspähungsaktivitäten“ in Deutschland", *Welt am Sonntag*, 11 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article243710081/Iran-betreibt-umfangreiche-Ausspähungsaktivitäten-in-Deutschland.html>.
60. "Iran likely involved in assassinations in the Netherlands", AIVD, 8 January 2019, accessed via: <https://english.aivd.nl/latest/news/2019/01/08/iran-likely-involved-in-assassinations-in-the-netherlands>.
61. James Phillips, "Was Iran Behind Attempt to Kill Salman Rushdie in America?" *Heritage*, 18 August 2022, accessed via: <https://www.heritage.org/terrorism/commentary/was-iran-behind-attempt-kill-salman-rushdie-america>.
62. "Part 1: Khomeini's Fatwa on Rushdie", *The Wilson Center*, 16 August 2022, accessed via: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-1-khomeinis-fatwa-rushdie>.
63. Christopher Wray, "Director Christopher Wray's Remarks at Press Conference Announcing Charges and New Arrest in Connection with Assassination Plot Directed from Iran" FBI, 27 January 2023, accessed via: <https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/director-christopher-wrays-remarks-at-press-conference-announcing-charges-and-new-arrest-in-connection-with-assassination-plot-directed-from-iran>.
64. "Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces Kidnapping Conspiracy Charges Against An Iranian Intelligence Officer And Members Of An Iranian Intelligence Network", *Department of Justice*, 13 July 2021, accessed via: <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/manhattan-us-attorney-announces-kidnapping-conspiracy-charges-against-iranian>.
65. Reformist-inclined Iranian media even engage with Iran International, which now may be the most viewed media outlet in Iran. See <https://www.sharhdaily.com/%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B4-%DA%F%D9%88%D8%8C%D8%B4-231/852640-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B8C-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87-%D9%BE%D8%B4-%D8%B1%D9%88>.
66. George Wright, "Iran International: Channel leaves UK after regime threats", *BBC*, 18 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-64690387>.
67. *Under the Shadow: Illicit Economies in Iran* (The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, October 2020), 3-8.
68. Aurora Ortega, "Hezbollah in Colombia: Past and Present Modus Operandi and the Need for Greater Scrutiny", *Washington Institute*, 28 March 2022, accessed via: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-colombia-past-and-present-modus-operandi-and-need-greater-scrutiny>. See also Ali Hajizade, "How the Iranian regime allows drug trafficking for foreign currency liquidity", *Al-Arabiya English*, last updated 20 May 2020, accessed via: <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2018/08/16/How-the-Iranian-regime-allows-drug-trafficking-for-foreign-currency-liquidity->
69. Roger F. Noriega, Kirsten D. Madison, et al., *Kingpins and Corruption: Targeting Transnational Organized Crime in the Americas* (American Enterprise Institute, July 2017), 18-31.
70. "Advisory on the Iranian Regime's Illicit and Malign Activities and Attempts to Exploit the Financial System", U.S. Treasury Financial Crimes Enforcement Network Advisory (FIN-2018-A006, 11 OCTOBER 2018).
71. Jo Tuckman, "Iran's alleged Mexican hitman was US drugs informant", *The Guardian*, 12 October 2011, accessed via: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/12/iran-mexico-drug-informant-hitman>.



Kinahan Gang, which has laundered money for Hezbollah, and the New IRA, whose relationship with Hezbollah was facilitated by the Iranian embassy in Ireland.<sup>72</sup>

Iran employs its illicit financial connections and links to criminal organisations to evade sanctions and export illegal oil.<sup>73</sup> Iran has perfected its Dark Tanker methods over the past decade, using incorrectly-registered ships with their transponders turned off and shipping oil through Kuwait to evade detection.<sup>74</sup> Iranian oil exports probably grew by 35% in 2022 despite Western sanctions.<sup>75</sup>

Finally, Iran poses a direct threat to British social cohesion. Iran has a network of active agents and friendly plants within the UK that it has used, and will employ in the future, to infiltrate British society. Iranian influence networks overlap with, but are distinct from, its intelligence activities in the UK. Iran works through religious and social organisations. Iranian influence operations seldom target Shia causes, given that only five percent of British Muslims are Shia.<sup>76</sup> Instead, Iran creates pan-Islamic organisations for its own ends, like the Maida Vale Islamic Centre of England, which has Iran's Supreme Leader serve as one of its trustees.<sup>77</sup>

British Sunni Muslim organisations generally ignore Iranian domestic brutality and its viciousness in Syria and Iraq, instead focusing on anti-Western and anti-Israel causes. This affords Iran significant operational space, as it can generate support for its causes without marking itself as Shia in a British context. Iranian networks have staged rallies in support of Iran's Iraqi proxies, including Kataib Hezbollah, which has killed British soldiers in the Middle East during the Iraq War.<sup>78</sup>

Iran's Islamic organisations in the UK have also influenced British electoral politics, most recently courting former Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon in 2019.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Iranian influence on the SNP runs deep. In 2015, former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond led a formal trade delegation to Iran.<sup>80</sup> A number of SNP officials are linked to Iranian agents, including East Kilbride Councillor Ali Salamati – moreover, the Iranian-linked charity Ahl al-Bayt has received significant donations from the Scottish government.<sup>81</sup> Iranian social media and cyber capabilities amplify Iranian manipulation. Iran has sought to use astroturfed social media accounts in the past to support Scottish separatism, doing so during the previous Scottish Independence Referendum and during other Scottish elections.<sup>82</sup> If the SNP execute a Catalan-style illegal referendum, their effort will receive Iranian support. Nicola Sturgeon's exit as SNP Leader and Scottish First Minister may increase the possibility of pro-Iranian penetration. As of this writing, Humza Yousaf, currently second in polling for SNP Leader, has historical connections to Islamist-sympathetic groups.<sup>83</sup> Although he has no direct connections to Iran, a Yousaf win would ease the task of Iranian social media operatives seeking to encourage broader Muslim support for Scottish separatism.

72. John Mooney, "New IRA forges links with Hezbollah", 13 September 2020, accessed via: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/new-ira-forges-links-with-hezbollah-gq68x8w5w>.
73. Srinivas Mazumdar and Nik Martin, "How Iran is boosting oil exports despite US sanctions", *DW*, 1 February 2023: <https://www.dw.com/en/how-iran-is-boosting-oil-exports-despite-us-sanctions/a-64562167>.
74. Michael Lipin, "Tanker Trackers: After Iraqi Oil Blending Scheme, Iran Found Better way to Evade US Sanctions", *Voice of America*, 18 August 2022, accessed via: <https://www.voanews.com/a/tanker-trackers-iran-ditched-iraqi-oil-blending-scheme-for-better-way-to-evade-us-sanctions/6707265.html>; "Treasury Sanctions Oil Shipping Network Supporting IRGC-QF and Hizballah", *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 3 November 2022, accessed via: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1076>.
75. Michael Lipin, "Q&A: Iran Likely Grew Oil Exports by 35% in 2022, Data Company Says", *Voice of America*, 18 January 2023, accessed via: <https://www.voanews.com/a/q-a-iran-likely-grew-oil-exports-by-35-in-2022-data-company-says-/6924648.html>.
76. "Estimated Percentage Range of Shia By Country", *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life: Mapping the Global Muslim Population*, accessed via: <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2009/10/Shiarange.pdf>. At most, 15% of British Muslims are Shia. Mosque data is even more heavily skewed towards Sunnism: there are far fewer Shia Islamic centres and Mosques than Sunni locations.
77. Camilla Turner, "Home Office accused of failing to close Iran's 'London office'", *The Telegraph*, 11 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2023/02/11/home-office-accused-failing-close-irans-london-stronghold/>.
78. See "London Rally in Support of the Militant Group Hashd al-Shabi", *Policy Exchange*, 28 November 2020, accessed via: <https://policyexchange.org.uk/blogs/london-rally-in-support-of-the-militant-group-hashd-al-shabi/>.
79. Struan Stevenson, "How Nicola Sturgeon narrowly avoided handing propaganda coup to brutal Iran", *The Scotsman*, 21 November 2019, accessed via: <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/how-nicola-sturgeon-narrowly-avoided-handing-propaganda-coup-brutal-iran-struan-stevenson-1401756>.
80. Jamie Brotherton, "SNP delegation to Iran highlights Scotland's potential to create foreign policy initiatives", *The Herald*, 23 December 2015, accessed via: <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/14168707.snp-delegation-iran-highlights-scotland-potentialcreate-foreign-policy-initiatives/>.
81. Jake Wallace Simons, "Sturgeon's link to anti-gay Iran cleric", *The Jewish Chronicle*, 10 March 2021, accessed via: <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/sturgeon-s-link-to-anti-gay-iran-cleric-1.512738>.
82. Jack Aitthison, "Scottish independence debate targeted by Iran-based fake social media accounts", *The Herald Scotland*, 22 January 2022, accessed via: <https://www.heraldsotland.com/politics/19867365.scottish-independence-debate-targeted-iran-based-fake-social-media-accounts/>.
83. Alongside his cousin Osama Saeed, Yousaf ran the Scottish Islamic Foundation in the 2000s. The SIF was subsequently identified as a potential Islamist affiliate, and Saeed was ultimately dropped as an SNP candidate. See Angus Macleod, "SNP urged to drop 'sectarian and divisive' Muslim candidate", *The Times*, 23 April 2009, accessed via: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/snp-urged-to-drop-sectarian-and-divisive-muslim-candidate-gq8f6z62xjf>.



## The Evolving Threat: Iranian Strategic Expansion in the 2010s

In the 2010s, Iran shifted from a defensive strategic posture to an expansionist one. Its ambitions grew from solidifying its position in neighbouring states to building a corridor through the Levant and to the Eastern Mediterranean, along with a flanking manoeuvre around the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen. This expansion gave Iran access to, and the potential control, the Suez-Indian ocean maritime chokepoint, generating a long-term threat to regional stability. Notably, U.S. intelligence assessed that, to quote former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper: “Iran’s Supreme Leader continues to view the United States as a major threat. We assess that his views will not change despite the implementation of the JCPOA deal”.<sup>84</sup> The Iran deal, therefore, made little difference to Tehran’s strategic calculations.

Iran intervened in Syria as the anti-Assad protests transitioned to a full-blown civil war. The Syrian Arab Army suffered from poor training and morale, alongside a spate of defections.<sup>85</sup> Assad quickly lost ground to the FSA and other rebel groups. Iran’s intervention in Syria was alone insufficient to deliver victory to Assad – it took Russia’s subsequent, open intervention to tip the scales in 2015-2018. However, Lebanese Hezbollah became a crucial ground force for the Assad regime, giving the SAA time to reconsolidate. IRGC Quds Force officers, including Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, also directed multiple offensives that broke rebel momentum, staving off Assad’s collapse in 2012-2013. Moreover, while Russia provided aircraft, ammunition, and other materiel to the SAA, Iranian intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance sustained Syrian combat capacity.

Russia’s 2015 intervention, the tide turned decisively in Assad’s favour. Concurrently, Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), reducing sanctions pressure and opening up Iranian cashflow.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, the Iraqi military’s near-collapse in 2014 against IS’ initial offensives, while placing additional strain upon the IRGC, did ultimately allow Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq to gain a far greater political position in the Iraqi security services.<sup>87</sup> New cashflow enabled another proxy intervention, in Yemen, in support of the Houthis Movement.<sup>88</sup> This has provided Iran with a foothold at the Suez-Indian Ocean route’s southern exit.

Compared to 20 years ago, the erosion of Western power in the Middle East has created a regional strategic situation strongly favours Iran. Iran has a continuous supply route to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria, along with political leverage, if not political control, over both states. Iran thus brackets the Suez-Indian Ocean route, through which a third of global container shipping volumes transit, and is within striking distance of Gulf State oil refineries.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, it has settled its ideological dispute with the Palestinian terrorist movement, becoming Hamas’ primary benefactor, and sustaining Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Iran thereby brackets Israel and Jordan.<sup>90</sup>

84. James R Clapper, “Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing – IC’s Worldwide Threat Assessment: Opening Statement”, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington DC (9 February 2016), 5.
85. Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria* (AEI Critical Threats Project & the Institute for the Study of War, May 2013), 9-10.
86. Lindsey Graham and Morgan D Ortogus, “Biden’s \$90 Billion Bailout to Tehran”, *Foreign Policy*, 28 April 2021, accessed via: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/28/iran-deal-biden-bailout/>. See also Emma Borden, “The United States, Iran, and \$1.7 billion: Sorting out the details”, *Brookings*, 3 October 2016, accessed via: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/10/03/the-united-states-iran-and-1-7-billion-sorting-out-the-details/>.
87. Hamdi Maliki, “The Future of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 September 2017, accessed via: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/73186>.
88. Seth G. Jones, Jared Thompson, Danielle Ngo, Brian McSorley, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., “The Iranian and Houthi War against Saudi Arabia”, *CSIS Briefs* (December 2021), 4-7.
89. Joe Myers, “The Suez Canal in numbers”, *WEF*, 25 March 2021, accessed via: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/03/the-suez-canal-in-numbers/>.
90. “Treasury Targets Facilitators Moving Millions to HAMAS in Gaza”, *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 29 August 2019, accessed via: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm761>. *Iran Military Power Report* (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019), 62-63.

### Iran and Russia

Iranian regional expansion intensified its relationship with Russia, the acute military threat the UK faces. Iran’s partnership with Russia stems from the 1990s – despite Russian pledges to the contrary, the Kremlin assisted Iran with its nascent ballistic missile programme from 1995 onwards.<sup>91</sup> However, this partnership intensified in the 2010s during the Arab Spring. Russia sold Iran advanced military material, notably the S-300 air defence system,<sup>92</sup> and Iran offered Russia basing rights.<sup>93</sup> Iran’s Caspian maritime link with Russia increases avenues for Russo-Iranian trade, and Iran is a long-time Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) aspirant.<sup>94</sup>

FIGURE 4: RUSSIA-IRAN TRADE



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Sources: Statista, TradeMap



Figure 4: Russia-Iran Trade since 2005, accessed via: <https://www.gzeromedia.com/the-graphic-truth-russia-iran-trade-rebounds>

Iran has capitalised upon the Ukraine War to gain strategic leverage over Russia and undermine the latitude the Kremlin has in the Middle East. As it stands, Iran is Russia’s most public ally in Ukraine – compared to Belarus, which since 2020 has been increasingly drawn into Russia’s orbit, Iran’s choice to support Russia openly with military equipment is far more consequential.<sup>95</sup> Iran has provided Russia with both economic and military support. Economically, Iran has the world’s most robust

91. Fred Wehling, "Russian Nuclear and Missile Exports to Iran", *The Nonproliferation Review*, 6:2 (Winter 1999), 134-136.  
 92. April Brady, "Russia Completes S-300 Delivery to Iran", *Arms Control Today*, December 2016, accessed via: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-11/news-briefs/russia-completes-s-300-delivery-iran>.  
 93. Dmitry Trenin, "Russia and Iran: Historic Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership", *Carnegie Moscow*, 18 August 2016, accessed via: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2016/08/18/russia-and-iran-historic-mistrust-and-contemporary-partnership-pub-64365>.  
 94. The CSTO is Russia’s *de facto* answer to NATO, meant to provide Russia with strategic control in the Caucasus and Central Asia.  
 95. Claire Mills, "Belarus: One year on from the disputed Presidential election", *House of Commons Library* (Report Number 9344, 5 October 2021), 14-18; see also Nigel Walker and Tim Robinson, "Belarus: 2020 presidential election", *House of Commons Library* (Briefing Paper CBP 8979, 8 September 2020), 8.

sanctions-evasion networks, cultivated over decades. Of particular interest is Iran's ability to export petrochemicals through its dark tanker fleet and various shell organisations. This ability sustained Russian revenues, and there is considerable evidence of Iranian assistance.<sup>96</sup> Iran and Russia have signalled their intention to expand the trans-Caspian route, formalising their new trade relationship. Russia will finance a major extension that improves the link between Bandar Anzali, Iran's major Caspian Sea port, to Rasht, which is linked directly to the North-South Transport Corridor that runs from Moscow to Mumbai.<sup>97</sup> Russia has also invested in its major Caspian ports and expanded the navigable canals between the Azov Sea and the Volga, increasing trade potential.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, Iran's state-owned shipping company under U.S. sanctions and formerly under EU and UN sanctions, increased its Caspian Sea activity in 2022.<sup>99</sup> All this points to a greatly increased Iran-Russia economic relationship.

Militarily, Iran's diverse drone and loitering munition fleet has become integral to Russian strategy. Russia uses Iranian loitering munitions to bombard Ukrainian infrastructure and civilians, while Iran's small and medium size UAS are crucial for Russian battlespace awareness.<sup>100</sup> Iran has deployed technical advisors, likely from the IRGC Quds Force, to train Russian operators in Crimea.<sup>101</sup> Iran has also provided Russia with 300,000 artillery shells and one million ammunition rounds since November 2022, ferrying supplies directly to Russia over the Caspian.<sup>102</sup>

Absent Iranian military and economic support, Russia's war effort in Ukraine may have collapsed. Russia burned through its precision-guided munitions stockpiles by mid-2022, and faced a missile shortage even as it began its strategic strike campaign.<sup>103</sup> After its major strike waves in December 2022, Russia struggled to sustain its bombardment of Ukrainian infrastructure. Iran's loitering munitions have relatively small warheads.<sup>104</sup> But they are cheap, easy to construct, and can be launched from a modified civilian trailer bed.<sup>105</sup> Even absent ballistic missile transfers to Russia, then, Iran has played a crucial role in the Russian war effort, as critical as Belarus.<sup>106</sup>

Iran's support for Russia in Ukraine demonstrates the degree to which its hostility towards the West is fundamental and difficult to reverse. Iran's support for Russia does provide benefits. But Iran could well have allowed Russia to persist without transferring it significant quantities of military equipment, and instead providing it with only economic and commercial support. The fact that Iran has engaged actively in the Ukraine War indicates the degree to which Tehran has bet on a systemic transformation throughout Eurasia, including in Europe. An impulse so deeply ingrained in Iranian strategy will not be dislodged by a negotiated agreement over Iran's nuclear programme.

96. Matthew Karnitschnig, "Iran teaches Russia its tricks on beating oil sanctions", *Politico*, 9 November 2022, accessed via: <https://www.politico.eu/article/iran-russia-cooperation-dodging-oil-sanctions/>.
97. Nikos Papatolios, "Russia to develop transport hub in Iran, rail investments on the agenda", *RailFreight*, 11 October 2022. accessed via: <https://www.railfreight.com/corridors/2022/10/11/russia-to-develop-transport-hub-in-iran-rail-investments-on-the-agenda/>.
98. Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "BREAKING: Putin's Speech To The Russian General Assembly – The 2023 Trade & Commerce Content", *Russia Briefing*, 21 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/breaking-putin-s-speech-to-the-russian-general-assembly-the-2023-trade-commerce-content.html/>; see also "Russia Invests in Volga-Don Canal as Trade With Iran Booms", *The Maritime Executive*, 21 December 2022, accessed via: <https://maritime-executive.com/article/russia-invests-in-volga-don-canal-as-trade-with-iran-booms>.
99. See the following from the *Financial Tribune*, an Iranian-domiciled paper, "IRISL Cargo Shipment Hit Record High of 27m Tons in Fiscal 2021-22", 8 July 2022, accessed via: <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/irisl-cargo-shipment-hit-record-high-of-27m-tons-in-fiscal-2021-22/>; see also "Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL)", *Iran Watch*, last updated 26 June 2020, accessed via: <https://www.iranwatch.org/iranian-entities/islamic-republic-iran-shipping-lines-irisl>.
100. "Iranian UAVs in Ukraine: A Visual Comparison", *U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency*, 14 February 2023, accessed via: <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23613688/dia-iranian-uavs-in-ukraine-a-visual-comparison.pdf>.
101. Julian Borger, "Iranian advisers killed aiding Russians in Crimea, says Kyiv", *The Guardian*, 24 November 2022, accessed via: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/24/iranian-military-advisers-killed-aiding-moscow-in-crimea-kyiv>.
102. Dion Nissenbaum and Benoit Faucon, "Iran Ships Ammunition to Russia by Caspian Sea to Aid Invasion of Ukraine", *Wall Street Journal*, 24 April 2023, accessed via: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-ships-ammunition-to-russia-by-caspian-sea-to-aid-invasion-of-ukraine-e74e8585>.
103. John Hardee, "Estimating Russia's Kh-101 Production Capacity", *Long War Journal*, 16 December 2022, accessed via: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/12/estimating-russias-kh-101-production-capacity.php>.
104. Uzi Rubin, "Russia's Iranian-Made UAVs: A Technical Profile", *RUSI*, 13 January 2023, accessed via: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-iranian-made-uavs-technical-profile/>.
105. *Ibid.*
106. Pavel Slunkin, "Putin's last ally: Why the Belarusian army cannot help Russia in Ukraine", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 27 October 2022, accessed via: <https://ecfr.eu/article/putins-last-ally-why-the-belarusian-army-cannot-help-russia-in-ukraine/>.

### Iran and China

Iran’s relationship with China is less public but equally relevant. Sino-Iranian relations have been vital for Tehran. Chinese consumer electronics, automobiles, and other manufactured goods have reduced Western sanctions pressure.<sup>107</sup> Iran is also a long-standing petrochemical exporter to China, not as critical as the Gulf States, but still relevant for Chinese energy security. As Sino-American tensions increase, Iran can spoil the theorised American “far blockade” that cuts off Chinese oil and gas imports from U.S. positions in the Middle East, strangling the Chinese economy during an Indo-Pacific War. There is no guarantee that Iran would be a co-belligerent; but Iran’s strategic importance to China is only likely to increase as friction with the U.S. grows.<sup>108</sup> The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA made the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Sino-Russian political organisation, a lifeline for the Iranian economy.<sup>109</sup> Tehran obviously views the SCO as a safety valve against Western sanctions – in June 2022, Iran proposed a single SCO currency, which would allow a Russia-China-Iran grouping to evade Western sanctions.<sup>110</sup>

FIGURE 5: CHINA-IRAN TRADE



Figure 5: China-Iran Bilateral Trade, accessed via: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/despise-sanctions-china-is-still-doing-some-business-with-iran/>

Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi’s recent visit to China increases the odds of open collaboration between Tehran and Beijing.<sup>111</sup> Raisi did not seem to achieve a full-on diplomatic breakthrough, despite travelling to China with multiple key ministers and Iran’s lead nuclear negotiator, although China recommitted itself to the JCPOA in another sign that it will flout any reimposed sanctions.<sup>112</sup> Rhetorically, moreover, Iran has increasingly turned to the sort of non-alignment, anti-hegemonic, anti-Western rhetoric so common in Chinese speeches.<sup>113</sup>

The Indo-Pacific tilt emphasises the need for both ‘broad’ and ‘integrated’

107. “China-Iran Profile”, OEC, last updated December 2022, accessed via: <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/irn>.

108. Kathrin Hille and Najmeh Bozorgmehr, “Xi Jinping vows to boost Iran trade and help revive nuclear deal”, *Financial Times*, 14 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.ft.com/content/568edcd3-f189-4c62-8b2a-c5878c524ada>.

109. Umud Shokri, “Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 16 November 2022, accessed via: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88427>.

110. “Deputy FM: Iran proposes single SCO currency”, *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 2 June 2022, accessed via: <https://en.irna.ir/news/84775351/Deputy-FM-Iran-proposes-single-SCO-currency>.

111. Tuvia Gering, “Full throttle in neutral: China’s new security architecture for the Middle East”, *Atlantic Council*, 15 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/full-throttle-in-neutral-chinas-new-security-architecture-for-the-middle-east/>.

112. “Xi and Raisi call for full implementation of JCPOA”, *Tehran Times*, 17 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/482023/Xi-and-Raisi-call-for-full-implementation-of-JCPOA>.

113. Laura Zhou, “China pulls off balancing act in Middle East ties – but for how long?” *South China Morning Post*, 20 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3210855/china-pulls-balancing-act-middle-east-ties-how-long>.

presence in the region.<sup>114</sup> Self-admittedly, traditional hard power need not be the core of the UK's regional strategy, despite the political relevance of a major military deployment like CS21.<sup>115</sup> Actualising the Indo-Pacific tilt, and more generally, safeguarding the UK's interests across the entire Eurasian landmass, entails an integrated strategy that carefully employs specific strategic elements where relevant.

The Sino-Russian connection demonstrates the degree to which the Iran question must be understood through the framework of the Indo-Pacific tilt. The more Iran and China expand their economic, technological, and strategic interactions, the more China will be relevant in the Middle East, and Iran in the Western Indian Ocean. Moreover, China has already signalled a desire to expand its Middle Eastern presence through its Djibouti naval base – the PLA's first overseas military installation – its participation in various anti-piracy missions in the Western Indian Ocean, and its concerted economic expansion in East Africa.<sup>116</sup> Actualising the Indo-Pacific tilt, then, and properly executing an integrated foreign policy, requires a distinct British focus on the Middle East, and particularly on Iran.

### The Trilateral Relationship

Russia-China-Iranian cooperation is far from the level of an alliance. However, the strategic logic for this cooperation has only intensified over time, and with the JCPOA's fragmentation, is only likely to grow. Physical disruption to this cooperation may be possible, and in the long-term, Russia-Iranian cooperation may be impossible to sustain given historical trends. Nevertheless, Russia-Iran and Russia-China-Iran relations are governed by forces largely independent of actions the UK and its allies take. The reality, then, is that the UK must assume the three authoritarian powers are cooperating, albeit not formally allied, under a New Non-Aligned Movement.<sup>117</sup>

### Normalisation and the Balance of Forces

The 10 March normalisation announcement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, brokered by China, demonstrates the degree to which the regional situation has unravelled, the extent of Tehran's ambitions, and the likelihood of increasing Iranian assertiveness absent a British policy shift.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are long-term regional rivals, having been at odds since the 1979 Revolution, when Saudi Arabia supported Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran.<sup>118</sup> Iran has sponsored terrorist attacks throughout the Arabian Peninsula, including in Saudi Arabia itself, and has bombarded Saudi energy infrastructure through its proxies in Yemen and Iraq.<sup>119</sup> In the former context, Iranian support for the Houthis has created a long-term strategic problem that Saudi Arabia has not solved militarily or diplomatically.<sup>120</sup> In response, Saudi Arabia has supported protests within Iran.

The Chinese-brokered normalisation between Tehran and Riyadh ends seven years of diplomatic hostility. Even in the short-term, the agreement

114. *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, 66.

115. *A Very British Tilt: Towards a new UK strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region* (Policy Exchange, 2020), 9-11.

116. "China's Engagement in Djibouti", *Congressional Research Services*, 4 September 2019; Padraig R Carmody and James T Murphy, "Chinese neoglobalization in East Africa: logistics, couplings and impacts", *Space and Polity*, 26:1 (2022), 20-43; R Vignesh, "China's Growing Security Presence in the IOR and its implications for India", *Parliament Library* (Lok Sabha Secretariat: New Delhi, July 2022), 8-12.

117. Madiha Afzal, Bruce Riedel, and Natan Sachs, "The United States, China, and the 'New Non-Aligned Countries'", *Brookings* (Policy Brief, February 2023), 4-6.

118. Barry Rubin, "The Gulf States and the Iran-Iraq War". In Efraim Karsh (ed), *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications* (Palgrave Mac-Millan, 1989), 121-132.

119. "Attacks on Saudi Oil Facilities: Effects and Responses", *Congressional Research Service* (1 October 2019).

120. "Political Transition in Yemen", *Congressional Research Service* (25 April 2022).



is unlikely to eliminate tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There are simply too many friction points, and too much ingrained hostility, to foster a comprehensive agreement. Moreover, although the ceasefire in Yemen has held for a year, it is entirely unclear whether Iran offered any legitimate concessions to Saudi Arabia bar a pledge to refrain from infrastructure attacks – in previous negotiation rounds, brokered by Oman and Iraq, Iranian intransigence over the Yemen question continuously frustrated an agreement.<sup>121</sup> There is evidence, meanwhile, that the Saudi foreign policy establishment understands the temporary reality of any agreement with Iran.<sup>122</sup>

Nevertheless, the normalisation has three implications.

First, Iran will be emboldened, viewing itself as a major power that has driven forward an alternative global system. Iranian leaders are already convinced that the Western-led Anglo-American international system is in terminal decline, as Russia wages war in Ukraine and China menaces the Indo-Pacific peace. This explains Iran's support for Russia in Ukraine as an adventurist intervention on the long-term winning side. Iran's leaders are wrong in their assessment, but Tehran's participation in a landmark diplomatic agreement that involves China, a *bona fide* great power, and that brings Iran's incorrigible sectarian rival to the table, will confirm Iranian analytical and ideological biases. Iran's ambition and aggression will therefore only grow.

Second, years of American inaction and Western commitment to the JCPOA have undermined Gulf State trust in Western security partnerships. If the regional balance of forces were not increasingly tilted towards Iran, Saudi Arabia would have felt no need to engage in negotiations with its long-term rival. Doubling down on the diplomatic approach that has characterised the West's Iran policy for the past 30 years, and particularly the past 10, will simply alienate Riyadh even further. Saudi Arabia has no confidence that Iran can be deterred, not only from nuclear breakout, but simply from attacks on Saudi critical infrastructure. Hence by hedging through an agreement with China, Saudi Arabia may be able to "buy off" Iran, or at least buy time for more negotiations.

Third, the Indo-Pacific is now intimately linked to the Middle East. China's diplomatic ambitions evidently extend beyond Asia. Beijing's "Peace Proposal" in Ukraine, alongside its brokered Middle East deal, demonstrate its commitment to shaping Eurasian conflicts outside its geopolitical backyard. This reinforces the case for a Middle East aspect to any British Indo-Pacific policy, since China obviously understands the two regions as connected.

The normalisation agreement will not settle Iranian-Saudi disputes. Renewed competition in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq is probable in the coming 24 months. But by hedging its bets, Riyadh has signalled to Tel Aviv, Washington, and the West more generally that its Middle East policy is insufficiently robust, and Saudi Arabia will look elsewhere to secure its interests, even if temporarily.

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121. "Iran Says Oman 'Epicenter' Of Regional Talks", *Iran International*, 28 December 2022, accessed via: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212286042>.

122. "The Saudi-Iran Agreement and the Resumption of Diplomatic Ties", *Rasanah International Institute for Iranian Studies* (16 March 2023), 16-17.



# A Clear and Present Danger – The Immediate Threat from Iran to British Interests

Iran clearly poses a threat to the UK in the long-term. However, a unique combination of circumstances creates not just a long-term, persistent strategic threat from Iran, but a short-term, highly acute threat from it that is likely to intensify in the coming 36 months. Four reasons contribute to this. **Absent an Iran policy developed in the coming months, the UK risks being caught flat-footed in a major regional crisis.**

## The Iranian Nuclear Programme:

Iran is now a nuclear weapons threshold state. There are two aspects to its nuclear development, the actual warheads and its ballistic missile capabilities. Both are highly advanced. As it stands, Iran has the uranium stockpiles and centrifuge capacity to create a dozen-warhead nuclear arsenal within six months, or as little as four weeks depending upon enrichment.<sup>123</sup> Iran has enriched a supply of uranium to 84%, just six percent from the weapons-grade threshold of 90%-plus.<sup>124</sup> Iran has also created a potent ballistic missile arsenal, including missiles capable of hitting targets as far as Romania and Greece. Iran's more advanced ballistic missiles are all nuclear-capable, and a growing number are solid-fuelled, reducing their deployment time.<sup>125</sup> Moreover, Iran has a space programme, providing it with valuable Intercontinental Ballistic Missile development experience.

Estimates on breakout time vary, but Iran has enough enriched uranium and centrifuges to sprint to a dozen nuclear cores.<sup>126</sup> Iran's warhead development remains unclear but, without assistance, Iran could likely operationalise its arsenal in under six months.<sup>127</sup> Thus, it can stand up a small but operational nuclear force in around a year from the decision to produce weapons, assuming Iran does not receive technical assistance from Russia or another nuclear power.

An Iranian nuclear weapon is unacceptable to Israel.<sup>128</sup> Iran's ambitions for regional domination point to a long-term confrontation with Israel and, per Iran's rhetoric and founding *idées maitresses*, Israel's destruction and the subjugation of the Gulf States. Hence, if Israel identifies an Iranian nuclear weapons sprint, it will act. Moreover, Iran's nuclear programme is too mature for anything but a series of physical strikes to delay its nuclear breakout. Iran has the technical expertise and experience to withstand grey-zone against its nuclear development. Any serious attempt to stop

123. Kersten Knipp, "Is Iran ready to build its own nuclear bomb?" *DW*, 14 September 2022, accessed via: <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-how-close-is-it-to-building-its-own-nuclear-bomb/a-63108224>.

124. "Iran calls allegation it has enriched uranium to 84% a 'conspiracy,'" *France24*, last updated 24 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230224-iran-directly-acknowledges-accusation-it-enriched-uranium-to-84>.

125. Farzin Nadimi, "Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology", *Washington Institute*, 11 February 2022, accessed via: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology>.

126. Amnah Ibraheem and William Alberque, "Iran approaches the nuclear threshold", *IJSS*, 10 November 2022, accessed via: <https://www.ijss.org/blogs/analysis/2022/11/iran-approaches-the-nuclear-threshold>.

127. With assistance, of course, is key: there are various technical obstacles that could disrupt this process.

128. Tobias Bork, "The Gulf States and the Iran Nuclear Deal: Between a Rock and a Hard Place", *RUSI*, 29 November 2021, accessed via: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/gulf-states-and-iran-nuclear-deal-between-rock-and-hard-place>.

Iranian nuclear development will require strikes across Iranian territory. A strike, however, is exceptionally difficult absent support: Iran's nuclear sites are 1,500 kilometres from Israel, necessitating a complex refuelling operation. This guarantees a significant Iranian retaliation against an Israeli strike.

Iran would retaliate severely against a strike on its nuclear programme. At minimum, it will use its own missiles, or those it has transferred to Hezbollah and Hamas, to bombard Israel for weeks, raising the odds of an escalation spiral that could go global. It could also activate Hezbollah and begin another Lebanon War, forcing Israel to invade, while also stirring up trouble in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>129</sup> British and American bases and assets would also likely come under attack from proxies. The most vulnerable UK bases are HMS Jufair in Bahrain and the joint-U.S.-UK al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar. Although historically, HMS Jufair had only a few hundred permanently deployed personnel, the expansion of its jetty to allow larger warships to dock at the base has increased its activity over the past two years. Its personnel reached 1,000 in 2022, making it a high-value target for Iranian bombardment.<sup>130</sup> Al-Udeid, moreover, is an enormous air base. The UK contribution to the counter-IS campaign was headquartered there, also raising its value as a potential target.<sup>131</sup>

Iran could also conduct large-scale deniable attacks against Saudi and Emirati oil production, which would derail global energy markets. Most aggressively, Iran could employ its proxies to attack shipping in the Suez-Indian Ocean maritime link. Even a limited disruption would cause enormous supply chain disruption, and a spike in global inflation.

Finally, Iran's intelligence and terrorist-criminal network abroad can be activated to conduct attacks within the UK and Europe and kidnap British citizens. Iran has employed this strategy in the past in Lebanon, and sought to do so in Turkey to Israeli citizens in 2022.<sup>132</sup> Any number of incidents, from kidnappings and cyberattacks to bomb threats, actual terrorist activity, and mass protests, can be expected. Iran will leverage its connections within the British and European Muslim community to stoke social British divisions as well.

### The JCPOA and the Ukraine War:

Russo-Iranian cooperation was significant before 24 February 2022. However, it has greatly intensified in light of the Ukraine War. The strategic differences between Moscow and Tehran, apparent since 2019, have largely been resolved, now that Iran is Russia's greatest ally, and bar Belarus, only public ally in Ukraine.<sup>133</sup>

Iran's support for Russia in Ukraine provides Iran with three potential benefits.

First, Iran may gain access to more advanced conventional technology like the Su-35, Russia's most advanced fighter aircraft, which Iran is set to receive in March 2023.<sup>134</sup> Iran has already been transferred S-300s, while Iranian and Russian forces, particularly naval units, have exercised together more frequently.<sup>135</sup> Iran has chosen an asymmetric military

129. Jonathan Schanzer, Tony Badran, and David Daoud, *The Third Lebanon War: The Coming Clash Between Hezbollah and Israel in the Shadow of the Iran Nuclear Deal* (Washington, DC: Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, July 2016), 21-26; See also Giora Eiland, "The Third Lebanon War: Target Lebanon", *Strategic Assessment*, 11:2 (November 2008), 10-14.

130. "Quay development as big-ship jetty opens for Royal Navy ships in Bahrain", *Royal Navy*, 23 June 2020, accessed via: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2020/june/23/200623-new-jetty-in-bahrain>.

131. *The Military Balance 2022* (IISS, 2022), 161-162.

132. "Iranian kidnapping of Israeli tourists said thwarted in Turkey last month", *Times of Israel*, 12 June 2022, accessed via: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-said-to-have-helped-foil-planned-iranian-attack-on-israeli-targets-in-turkey/>.

133. Robbie Gramer and Amy Mackinnon, "Iran and Russia Are Closer Than Ever Before", *Foreign Policy*, 5 January 2023, accessed via: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/05/iran-russia-drones-ukraine-war-military-cooperation/>.

134. Vali Kaleji, "Iran's Purchase of Russian Fighter Jets Underlines Shifting Regional Geopolitics", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 20:26 (13 February 2023), accessed via: <https://jamestown.org/program/irans-purchase-of-russian-fighter-jets-underlines-shifting-regional-geopolitics/>.

135. Patrick Sykes, "Russia, Iran, China to Hold Joint Navy Drills in Indian Ocean", *Bloomberg*, 22 September 2022, accessed via: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-22/russia-iran-china-to-hold-joint-navy-drills-in-indian-ocean>.

approach primarily because of sanctions pressure. Direct access to Russian technology will not transform Iran's military overnight but will accelerate modernisation.

Second, Russia may support an Iranian nuclear breakout. As advanced as Iran's nuclear programme has become, there are still crucial technical hurdles that remain. Foremost among them is the detonator mechanism needed to create a viable nuclear device.<sup>136</sup> Additionally, as advanced as Iran's ballistic missiles have become, it will still take some time for Iran to learn how to mate a nuclear warhead onto its weapons and deliver it. Finally, Iran has never conducted a nuclear test – nuclear breakout absent testing is historically unheard of, meaning Iran may require additional support to leapfrog this key phase. Active Russian assistance to Iran's nuclear programme is unlikely, but Russia could be tempted to accelerate Iranian breakout, if only to spread the U.S. thin. Russian assistance would cut Iranian breakout time to only a few weeks.

Third, Russia may assist Iranian operations in Europe and the U.S. This is the least public, and most dangerous, step that Russia could take. The Russian intelligence services have been under stress since the Ukraine War began. As European states expelled Russian diplomats, Russian intelligence lost critical official cover channels to maintain spy networks.<sup>137</sup> Russian agents operating under unofficial cover have been caught since, including in the Netherlands<sup>138</sup>, Sweden<sup>139</sup>, and Norway.<sup>140</sup> In this respect, the EU follows the UK's lead – since 2018, the UK has expelled 23 Russian spies under official cover and denied diplomatic visas to 100 Russian embassy staff likely to be intelligence officers, per Ken McCallum's 2022 Threat Assessment.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, Russia retains an extensive clandestine network in Europe that it has cultivated over decades, and that conducted the 2018 Skripal Poisoning in the UK and the 2014 Czech Ammunition Depot sabotage incidents.<sup>142</sup> Iranian intelligence is particularly capable of targeting Iranian dissidents abroad. But the very fact that Ken McCallum and now Matt Jukes, the Metropolitan Police's Counterterrorism lead, have spoken so candidly of the Iranian threat, and identified 15 Iranian plots foiled in the UK since January 2022, demonstrates that UK counterterrorism and counterintelligence efforts are putting pressure on Iranian operatives.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, the overwhelming majority of known Iranian actions are directed towards intimidating, kidnapping, or killing opponents of the Iranian regime, rather than traditional intelligence collection or military sabotage. If the Russian SVR, GRU, and to the extent relevant FSB offered Iranian intelligence with support for external operations, Iranian intelligence would gain significant capabilities.

These three benefits necessitate rapid, decisive action. The JCPOA stands in the way of action by spoiling any sort of active coordination against Iranian influence.

136. Valerie Lincy and Gary Milhollin, "Iran's Nuclear Timetable: The Weapon Potential", *Iran Watch*, 18 December 2022, accessed via: <https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/articles-reports/irans-nuclear-timetable-weapon-potential>.

137. Zachary Basu, "U.S. and Europe crack down on Russian spies", *Axios*, 7 April 2022, accessed via: <https://www.axios.com/2022/04/07/russian-spy-crackdown>.

138. "AIVD disrupts activities of Russian intelligence officer targeting the International Criminal Court", *AIVD*, 16 June 2022, accessed via: <https://english.aivd.nl/latest/news/2022/06/16/aivd-disrupts-activities-of-russian-intelligence-officer-targeting-the-international-criminal-court>.

139. Charlie Duxbury, "Out of the shadows: Europe exposes its Russian spies", *Politico*, 21 December 2022, accessed via: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-spies-europe-exposes-out-of-the-shadows-sweden/>.

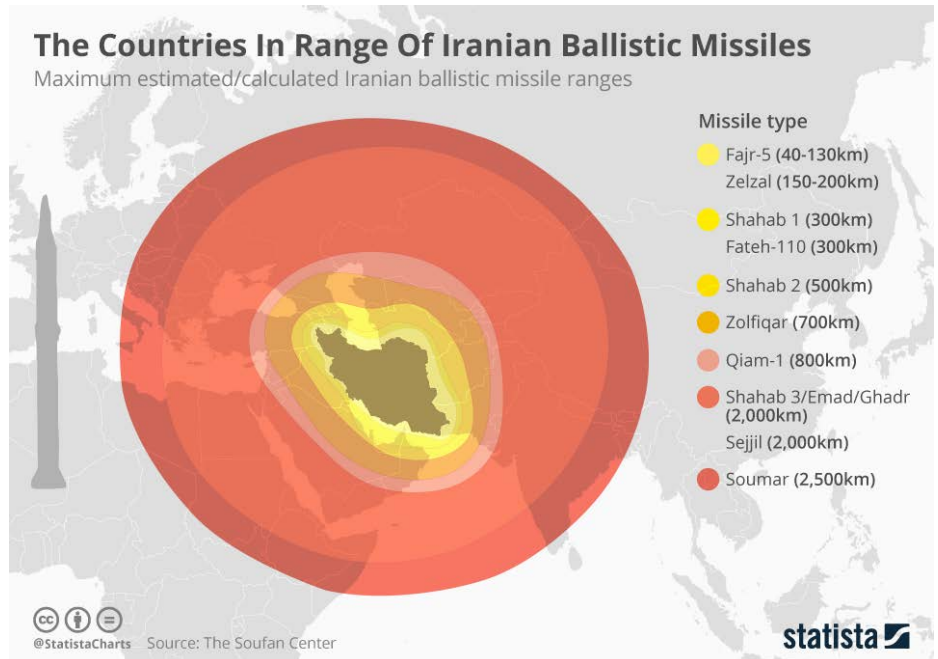
140. *National Threat Assessment 2023* (Norwegian Politiets sikkerhetstjeneste), 13 February 2023, 10-12.

141. McCallum, *Annual Threat Update 2022*, accessed via: <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/director-general-ken-mccallum-gives-annual-threat-update>.

142. *Annual Report for 2020* (Czech Republic Security Information Service, 23 November 2021), 9.

143. Matt Jukes, "Officers continue to work in response to potential threats projected from Iran", *Metropolitan Police*, 18 February 2023, accessed via: <https://news.met.police.uk/news/officers-continue-to-work-in-response-to-potential-threats-projected-from-iran-462271>.

**FIGURE 7: IRANIAN MISSILE RANGES**



*Figure 7: Iranian missile ranges, accessed via: <https://www.statista.com/chart/18019/maximum-estimated-calculated-iranian-ballistic-missile-ranges/>*

At this point, the JCPOA is politically dead. The U.S. will not rejoin the agreement – Iran’s support for Russia in Ukraine and flagrant human rights violations have poisoned negotiations, while Iran will not budge on key American demands. However, given the U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA without triggering the snap-back mechanism, it remains in legal effect. The snap-back mechanism allows any of the JCPOA’s parties to file a complaint that Iran is in breach of the deal. Once a snap-back complaint has been filed, it takes unanimous UN Security Council consent to prevent the reapplication of the entire UN sanctions regime, thereby formally killing the JCPOA. As only one UN Security Council permanent member can veto a snap-back pause, once triggered, the deal is legally dead.

The JCPOA was never meant to deny Iran a nuclear weapon. It rather limited Iranian nuclear breakout by 15 years.<sup>144</sup> The 2015 agreement’s goal was to buy the U.S. and its diplomatic partners, including the UK, another decade to conclude a broader diplomatic settlement with Iran that included the entire Middle East. By the mid-2020s, careful diplomacy would have hypothetically obviated the risks of an Iranian nuclear weapon. Because of this now-obsolete premise, the JCPOA includes the phased elimination of the UN sanctions regime on Iran.

144. Michael Doran and Tony Badran, “The Re-alignment”, *Tablet*, 11 May 2021, accessed via: <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/realignment-iran-biden-obama-michael-doran-tony-badran>.

### THE JCPOA AND SNAP-BACK PROCESS

The JCPOA provided Iran with phased sanctions relief in return for its nuclear good behaviour. Iran agreed to limits on its enrichment levels, centrifuge sophistication and number, along with IAEA inspections to verify Iranian good behaviour. The JCPOA's other participants – the U.S., UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany, termed the P5+1 – agreed to a long-term sanctions reduction programme. The JCPOA front-loaded economic sanctions relaxation: the U.S., EU, and UN all removed embargoes on Iranian oil, lifted SWIFT designations on Iranian transactions, and allowed Iran to access its U.S. Dollar reserves. After five to eight years, remaining arms sanctions would be removed as well, allowing ballistic missile exports and imports. After ten years, the JCPOA would phase out all UN regulations on the Iranian nuclear programme. And after 15 years, in 2030, IAEA inspections would cease.

The only way to halt the JCPOA is through the snap-back process.<sup>145</sup> Snap-back is established in UNSC 2231 10-15, the UN Resolution that endorsed the JCPOA. Any P5+1 member can lodge a complaint that Iran is in violation of the agreement. After this complaint passes through the JCPOA's Joint Commission, which takes at most 35 days, it is transmitted to the UN. Within 10 days, either a UNSC state or the UNSC President at the time must bring forward a resolution to continue the JCPOA. The UNSC then has another 30 days to vote on this resolution. Because of the UNSC's veto system, all of the P5 states must agree to continue the JCPOA. Hence it takes just one objection from the U.S., UK, or France to ensure the JCPOA dies. Killing the deal would automatically reimpose all UN sanctions on Iran, including those that have already sun-setted, making illegal Iran's import and export of advanced military technology and re-implementing UN sanctions on the IRGC and Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines.

The U.S. attempted to trigger snap-back in September 2020. However, the UNSC, and the P5+1's five other members, deemed that the U.S. lacked standing, having withdrawn from the JCPOA in 2018. Russia and China will not trigger snap-back. Only the UK, France, and Germany have both the standing and the desire to trigger snap-back.

The moment now nears where substantive military-technological restrictions will be eliminated, not just economic ones. In October 2023, UN sanctions that bar Iranian ballistic missile exports and regulate ballistic missile technology imports will expire.<sup>146</sup> This will allow Iran to export ballistic missiles to Russia for use in Ukraine, and in return, enable Russian support for Iran's nuclear programme, ballistic missile developments, and conventional military forces. In July 2024, restrictions on advanced Iranian centrifuges will be relaxed. Ten years after the JCPOA was adopted, on 18 October 2025 – under three years away – the JCPOA's snap-back mechanism will expire.

146. "Explainer: Timing of Key Sunsets in Nuclear Deal", *USIP*, 11 January 2023, accessed via: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jan/11/explainer-timing-key-sunsets-nuclear-deal>.

145. See UN Resolution 2231 and the attached text of the JCPOA, accessed via: [https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/unsc\\_resolution2231-2015.pdf](https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/unsc_resolution2231-2015.pdf)

**TABLE 2: JCPOA SUNSET DATES**

Date	Regulation to be Removed <sup>147</sup>
October 2020	UN Embargo on Iranian conventional weapons exports and imports
October 2020	UN visa ban on Iranian citizens involved in nuclear, ballistic missile, and defence industry research
October 2023	UN limits on Iranian ballistic missile research and development
October 2023	UN ban on Iranian missile and drone imports and exports for systems with a 300 kilometre plus range
October 2023	U.S. sanctions on individuals linked to Iran’s nuclear programme
October 2023	EU sanctions on Iran’s nuclear programme
July 2024	Sanctions on Iran’s advanced IR6 and IR8 centrifuge testing and production
October 2025/January 2026	JCPOA “Snap-Back” process, which when triggered can reimpose sanctions
January 2026	The majority of sanctions on Iranian centrifuge import, production, and development, along with JCPOA oversight of Iran’s nuclear imports
January 2031	3.67% enrichment cap on Iranian uranium, uranium stockpile limits, nuclear facility construction, and aspects of IAEA monitoring
January 2036	All IAEA monitoring of Iranian centrifuges
January 2041	All IAEA monitoring of the Iranian nuclear programme

Most important of these checkpoints is the October 2023 ballistic missile restriction removal. Iran would at that point have no incentive to limit arms exports to Russia. The snap-back question is political, not legal – U.S. sanctions are far more potent than the UN sanctions regime would be, and Russia will not abide by renewed restrictions. It would therefore force Russia and China to expose their disregard for international law, isolating Beijing and Moscow.

If the ballistic missile sanctions elapse, Iran will likely export missiles to Russia in August/September 2023, shortly before sanctions elapse, and precisely when Russia prepares a renewed strategic strike campaign in Ukraine. Increased Iranian leverage over Russia will raise the odds of Russian technical assistance to Iran, shrinking breakout time, and equally relevant, give Russia an incentive to support Iran directly during a regional conflict. Ukraine receives the tools to defeat Russia by the autumn, the Ukraine War risks expanding not to Europe, but to the Middle East.

The more Iran can gain leverage over Russia through missile exports, meanwhile, the more probable it becomes that Russia passively or actively assists Iran’s nuclear programme, transfers advanced technology, actively supports Iranian military efforts in the Middle East, or extends intelligence support to Iranian actions in Europe, the UK, and the U.S. **The coming six to twelve months are the last viable window to prevent Russian involvement in the Iran issue and to limit Iran’s odds of gaining advanced technology. It also makes the next 24 months a period of**

147. “Explainer: Timing of Key Sunsets in Nuclear Deal”, USIP, 11 January 2023, accessed via: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jan/11/explainer-timing-key-sunsets-nuclear-deal>.



**maximum danger, given the odds of a subsequent strike.**

### Iranian Domestic Instability:

Iranian domestic instability also amplifies the odds of nuclear breakout. Specifically, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's probable death in the coming 36 months will trigger a succession crisis that empowers hard-line elements within Iran and encourages the Iranian opposition, creating interlocking domestic incentives for nuclear breakout.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is 83, and in poor health. He has disappeared from public activities multiple times in the past years, and in 2014 underwent surgery for prostate cancer.<sup>148</sup> Khamenei has been a fixture of Iranian political life since his election as Supreme Leader in 1989. Moreover, from 1981 to 1989, Khamenei served as Iran's president, placing him at the heart of Iranian political life for the entirety of Iran's existence. He is, in short, the second-most consequential political figure in modern Iranian history, behind only Khomeini. Iran has not navigated a succession crisis since 1989.

Khamenei's governance model has empowered the IRGC, relying particularly on Iran-Iraq War veterans to create a security state, manage Iran's black market economy, and prosecute international interventions. Khamenei's successor will lack his standing and charisma. Hence whomever the Assembly of Experts selects will be faced with a choice: defer to IRGC power, thereby reinforcing Iran's deep state, or challenge the IRGC, and risk being deposed and transitioning the country to a more traditional dictatorship.<sup>149</sup> Either way, the IRGC is the regime's element most likely to be empowered once Khamenei dies. These hard-liners are the most committed to Iranian nuclear weapons development. Khamenei's succession is most likely the start of an Iranian breakout attempt. Iran's security state, moreover, is enormous – if the Basij paramilitary's 600,000 reservists are included in calculations, Iran has around 18 security personnel per 1,000 citizens, ranking between 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> globally.<sup>150</sup>

Meanwhile, Khamenei's status in Iranian politics means his death will trigger another protest wave – the current Supreme Leader embodies Iran's unique political model, while the most intense Iranian protests typically demand his removal.<sup>151</sup> Iran's security state will act rapidly to suppress dissent. But any regime is weakest during a transfer of power. Iran's credibility deficit, combined with Khamenei's demise, could prompt protests that shake the regime, or may embolden elements of the IRGC otherwise too afraid to act. Even absent organised resistance, the natural paranoia of IRGC hardliners, combined with Iran's historical mythology that elevates the role of Western meddling in Iranian politics, will cultivate a perception of vulnerability.<sup>152</sup> This further raises the odds of a sprint to nuclear weapons to obtain for Iran the ultimate insurance against a Western-backed coup.

Finally, considering Iran's relative instability post-Khamenei, Israeli policymakers may identify a brief window of opportunity for an effective strike before Iran's machinery of government resettles. The most reasonable

148. Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran's Top Leader Undergoes Prostate Surgery", *New York Times*, 9 September 2014, accessed via: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/09/world/middleeast/irans-ayatollah-khamenei-has-prostate-surgery.html>.

149. Saeid Golkar, "Iran after Khamenei: Prospects for Political Change", *Middle East Policy*, 26:1 (Spring 2019), 85-86.

150. Data from IISS *The Military Balance 2022*, compared with latest population estimates and crossed with the same data for other countries.

151. Ray Takeyh, "Iran's Protesters Want Khamenei Gone. Who Is Iran's Supreme Leader?" *CFR*, 20 October 2022, accessed via: <https://www.cfr.org/article/irans-protesters-want-khamenei-gone-who-irans-supreme-leader>.

152. Saeid Golkar and Mehdi Khalaji, "The Islamic Republic's Will to Survive: Likely Nuclear Resistance, Unlikely Social Revolt", *Washington Institute*, 12 June 2013, accessed via: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-republics-will-survive-likely-nuclear-resistance-unlikely-social-revolt>.

political moment to strike Iran would be during a succession crisis that undermines the Iranian policy apparatus' capacity for rapid reaction. The IRGC's elements that Khamenei's death will empower recognise this, and may preemptively break out or escalate against Israel, the Gulf States, and the U.S. and UK, triggering a military response.

### Eroded Deterrence in Israel and the Gulf:

The Saudi-Iran normalisation agreement and Israeli domestic political instability have eroded regional deterrence, increasing the odds that Iran will act in the next 24 months.

Saudi Arabia has removed itself from the balance of forces between Iran and its regional adversaries for the next two years. An Israeli strike on the Iranian nuclear programme is operationally complex, far more complex than 1981's Operation OPERA strike on the Iraqi reactor and 2007's Operation ORCHARD strike on the Syrian reactor. Israeli attack aircraft must fly over 3,000 kilometres round-trip.

Even the longest-range Israeli combat aircraft, equipped with long-range missiles, must refuel at least once, or land in a friendly airfield before conducting the strike or returning to base. The normalisation agreement rules out both Saudi participation in a strike, which would bring another 200-plus aircraft into combat, and implies that Saudi Arabia would not provide Israel with airspace access to strike Iran. This would force Israeli strike aircraft to transit Syrian and Iraqi airspace. Iran has expanded its air defences in Syria over the past four months, complicating an already extraordinarily difficult military task.<sup>153</sup> Israeli tankers would need to loiter for hours to support strikers conducting the attack, all the while exposed to Iranian air defences and combat aircraft. Normalisation therefore limits Israeli military options.

Israeli domestic politics also influences the international situation. Israel remains in the midst of a five-year political crisis. In its most recent iteration, the Netanyahu government has sought to overhaul the Israeli judiciary, prompting political backlash throughout Israeli society.<sup>154</sup> Resistance has become so severe that members of elite IDF units threatened to skip reserve duty.<sup>155</sup> As of this writing, the government has paused its legislative package. But the reality of deep-seated societal disagreement over the character of the state, along with foreign diplomatic interventions in Israeli domestic politics, imply an isolated, divided Israel that cannot respond decisively to external security threats.<sup>156</sup>

Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Secretary-General, has predicted that Israel will collapse before its 80<sup>th</sup> year.<sup>157</sup> As leader of Iran's premier proxy organisation, his statements indicate the direction of thought within the Iranian regime. Since March, Iranian proxies have intensified their rocket attacks against Israel.<sup>158</sup> Iran has also intensified its recruitment efforts in the West Bank, while terrorist attacks have become more frequent since March 2023.<sup>159</sup> All this indicates the erosion of deterrence between Israel and Iran, and the likelihood of regional escalation in the near future. An isolated, divided Israel encourages violence in the Middle East.

153. Zachary Coles, Annika Ganzeveld, et. al., "Iran Update: 12 April 2023", *Critical Threats Project*, 12 April 2023, accessed via: <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/iran-update-april-12-2023>.

154. Patrick Kingsley and Isabel Kershner, "The Israeli Government's Plan to Overhaul the Judiciary: What to Know", *The New York Times*, 29 March 2023, accessed via: <https://www.nytimes.com/article/israel-judiciary-crisis-explainer.html>.

155. Tom Bateman, "Israel's elite fighter pilots escalate judicial reform protest", *BBC*, 6 March 2023, accessed via: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64866873>.

156. See James Cleverly's statement on 27 March 2023, accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-state-ment-on-pause-to-judicial-reform-in-israel>; see also the U.S. Department of State's 27 March 2023 press briefing, accessed via: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-march-27-2023/>.

157. Orna Mizrahi, Nasrallah's "Civil War" Speech: An Effort to Strengthen Domestic Legitimacy and Deterrence against Israel", *INSS*, 20 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.inss.org.il/social-media/nasrallahs-civil-war-speech-an-effort-to-strengthen-domestic-legitimacy-and-deterrence-against-israel/>.

158. Lucy Williamson and David Gritten, "Israel strikes Lebanon and Gaza after major rocket attack", *BBC*, 8 April 2023, accessed via: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-65210045>.

159. Joe Truzman, "Analysis: Iran Leverages Armed Groups Against Israel", *Long War Journal*, 10 April 2023, accessed via: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2023/04/analysis-iran-leverages-armed-groups-against-israel.php>; "Israeli police say two wounded after suspected terror attack in East Jerusalem", *France24*, 18 April 2023, accessed via: <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230418-israeli-police-say-two-wounded-after-suspected-terror-attack-in-east-jerusalem>; "Terrorist Attacks in Tel Aviv and the West Bank", *U.S. Embassy in Israel*, 7 April 2023, accessed via: <https://il.usembassy.gov/terrorist-attacks-in-tel-aviv-and-the-west-bank/>.

### The Current Opportunity for an Iran Policy:

An Iran policy unveiled in the immediate future would capitalise on a shift in the British domestic political environment. Parliamentary debate demonstrates the degree to which Iran has entered the national political conversation. Parliamentarians are openly considering proscription against the IRGC, an unprecedented legal step, and an unthinkable one just six months ago.<sup>160</sup> Iran policy debate has spilled over into general and specific parliamentary business. Most demonstratively of the legislative mood, Security Minister Rt Hon Tom Tugendhat MP's statement on 20 February 2023 addressed Iran's threat to UK-based journalists, and prompted an overwhelming reaction towards a forward-leaning Iran policy.<sup>161</sup> Rapid Governmental action would there capitalise upon extant, obvious support for a coherent Iran policy.

The national political mood has shifted as well. The British public remains fully engaged with the Ukraine War a year on and, despite predictions of war fatigue, entirely committed to the UK's continued forward-leaning role.<sup>162</sup> Public reaction to the Iran protests is undoubtedly linked to the UK's sympathy for Ukraine, considering Iran's direct support for Russia and equivalent barbarism towards its own people. Indeed, the British public has been exposed more explicitly to Iran's crimes over the past months than at any other point, facilitating a long-term shift in public sentiment. The most recent Trafalgar Square rally in solidarity with Iranian protestors attracted thousands in a scene reminiscent of the rallies during the Ukraine War's early days.<sup>163</sup> This indicates public appetite for action against Iran that should be leveraged for coherent policy.

There is also a bureaucratic opportunity for a coherent Iran policy. The Integrated Review refresh maintains the UK's Indo-Pacific Tilt. It recognised Russia as an acute military threat, which the Ukraine War confirmed, while also identifying China as a systemic competitor and articulating the need for long-term Indo-Pacific engagement. However, there is still no systematic framework for Middle East policy, nor an explicit link between Middle East policy and the UK's policy in other Eurasian regions. Given the obvious threat from Iran, and the degree to which the Iran question is linked to the Eurasian balance, it is reasonable to capitalise upon the Integrated Review refresh to articulate a coherent Middle East policy.

Additionally, the Iran threat is not unique to the UK. The U.S., France, and Germany face a similar strategic situation.<sup>164</sup> Each allied capital watches the others, as previous Iran debates have demonstrated – when the U.S. previously sought to trigger snap-back sanctions after exiting the JCPOA, the Iran Deal's three European powers all stood together, unwilling to break ranks and trigger sanctions. Fortright British action will have an effect in allied capitals, catalysing European and American action.

Meanwhile, there is a military opportunity for increased British Middle Eastern focus. The Ukraine War's outcome remains unclear. But whatever the conflict's end-state, Russia's military must be rebuilt.<sup>165</sup> The Russian Armed Forces, along with the National Guard, have taken horrendous

160. See Hansard, 12 January 2023, accessed via: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-01-12/debates/8B0B0A39-4FF0-4EFF-960D-8D3A51F0ED79/Iran>.

161. Tom Tugendhat, "Statement on the security threat to UK-based journalists", *Home Office*, 20 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-on-security-threat-to-uk-based-journalists>.

162. Gideon Skinner, "Britons more likely to back actions in support of Ukraine than many other countries surveyed", *Ipsos*, 23 January 2023, accessed via: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ukraine-war-one-year-on>; see also Skinner, Keiran Pedley, and Laura King, "Public continues to support Britain's role in Ukraine conflict", *Ipsos*, 31 October 2022, accessed via: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/public-continues-support-britains-role-ukraine-conflict>.

163. Emily Atkinson, "Thousands gather for Iran solidarity rally in Trafalgar Square", *The Independent*, 8 January 2023, accessed via: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/iran-rally-traffic-square-b2258199.html>.

164. Michael Duclos, "After snapback sanctions on Iran: A European perspective", *Atlantic Council*, 23 September 2020, accessed via: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/after-snapback-sanctions-on-iran-a-european-perspective/>.

165. Pavel Luzin, "Doomed to Failure – Russia's Efforts to Restore its Military Muscle", *CEPA*, 15 November 2022, accessed via: <https://cepa.org/article/doomed-to-failure-russias-efforts-to-restore-its-military-muscle/>.

casualties. Per U.S. and UK reporting, total Russian losses have surpassed 200,000, with around 50,000 at least killed.<sup>166</sup> Russian equipment losses have also been high, perhaps as high as half of the Russian tank fleet.<sup>167</sup> Moreover, corruption hollowed out the Russian military's nominal front-line strength, while the Western sanctions regime, despite its gaps, has pressured Russia's defence industry. It will take at least two to four years, and perhaps even a decade or more, for Russia to rebuild itself as a credible conventional military power.<sup>168</sup> All the while, European defence production will increase, and Eastern Europe's NATO members – particularly Poland – will field greatly expanded land forces.<sup>169</sup>

For at least the next 24 months, then, and more likely until the late 2020s, the UK will not face a major conventional threat from Russia in Europe. The Russian Aerospace Forces and Navy may remain an issue. But Finnish and probable Swedish NATO accession, along with the Atlantic Alliance's broader defence buildup, should mitigate the threat conventional Russian air and naval forces can pose to the UK.<sup>170</sup> This creates a brief window of opportunity for the UK to apply its military power in the Middle East without significantly weakening its defence in the Euro-Atlantic.

Worryingly, however, there are increasing signs that British allies, without some sort of push, will not act prior to another round of regional escalation.

IAEA Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi travelled to Iran on 3-4 March 2023, producing a joint statement between the IAEA and Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation (AEOI).<sup>171</sup> The Joint Statement lacks substance: it commits Iran "on a voluntary basis" to allowing "the IAEA to implement further appropriate verification and monitoring activities".<sup>172</sup> Grossi claimed that Iran would allow various inspections once again, including the reinstallation of video cameras throughout Iranian facilities and a 50% increase in inspections at Fordow, the plant where the IAEA recently discovered 84% enriched uranium, just short of weapons-grade.<sup>173</sup> However in his 6 March 2023 introductory statement to the IAEA's Board of Governors Meeting, Grossi did not mention a single tangible commitment from Iran, instead referencing Iranian assurances "to allow the Agency to proceed with further monitoring and verification measures indispensable to the Agency fulfilling its mission", but that specific measures will be determined "in technical follow-up discussions with Iran".<sup>174</sup>

Grossi's specific phrasing is relevant because it self-evidently is designed as a pretext for resuming JCPOA negotiations. As Grossi puts it, "Achieving this will be very important because it would allow the Agency to begin to establish a new baseline necessary in the event of a resumption of Iran's implementation of its nuclear-related commitments under the JCPOA".<sup>175</sup> Just before Grossi's Iran visit, U.S. Special Envoy for Iran, and the Obama administration's lead negotiator in 2015, Robert Malley stated that the U.S. would await Grossi's visit and subsequent report to determine its course of action.<sup>176</sup> Grossi's statement, combined with the IAEA-AEOI Joint Statement, are therefore intended to provide the U.S. a political pretext for re-engaging in nuclear negotiations and continuing a

166. "12 February Update", UK Ministry of Defence, accessed via: <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1624707961019924481?lang=en>.

167. Stephen Filder, "Russia Likely Lost More Than Half of Its Tanks in Ukraine, Estimates Show", *Wall Street Journal*, 15 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-likely-lost-more-than-half-of-its-tanks-in-ukraine-estimates-show-c23dabc2>.

168. "Russia can rebuild military in 2-4 years: Estonia", *France24*, 19 October 2022, accessed via: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20221018-russia-can-rebuild-military-in-2-4-years-estonia>.

169. Loveday Morris, "Poland is on a quest to have Europe's strongest military – with U.S. arms", *Washington Post*, 22 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/22/poland-us-weapons-ukraine-russia/>.

170. Niclas Rolander, "Finland Says It's Ready to Join NATO Even Without Sweden", *Bloomberg*, 22 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-02-22/finland-says-it-s-ready-to-join-nato-even-without-sweden>.

171. "Joint Statement by the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)", IAEA, 4 March 2023, accessed via: <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/joint-statement-by-the-atomic-energy-organization-of-iran-aeoi-and-the-international-atomic-energy-agency-iaea>.

172. *Ibid.*

173. Adam Pourahmadi, "Near bomb-grade level uranium found in Iranian nuclear plant, says IAEA report", *CNN*, 1 March 2023, accessed via: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/01/middleeast/iran-uranium-enrichment-iaea-intl/index.html>.

174. "IAEA Director General's Introductory Statement to the Board of Governors", IAEA, 6 March 2023, accessed via: <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/statements/iaea-director-generals-introductory-statement-to-the-board-of-governors-6-march-2023>.

175. *Ibid.*

176. "US And Europe Await Outcome Of IAEA Chief's Visit To Iran", *Iran International*, 3 March 2023, accessed via: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202303035477>.

wait-and-see approach with Iran's nuclear programme.

Hence there is concurrently a domestic British opportunity for a shift on Iran policy and, equally critical, the potential for bureaucratic inertia in allied capitals that prevents a policy shift absent the UK serving as the catalyst.

### The Long-Term Costs of Inaction

Absent a Middle East policy in the coming months, the British government will miss the best opportunity since the mid-2000s to craft a strategic approach. An incoherent British Middle East policy will not only leave the UK unprepared for regional escalation in the short-term. Regardless of whether there is an Israeli-Iranian confrontation, and regardless of whether or not Israel can damage Iran's nuclear programme, this initial conflict simply presages a broader escalatory cycle.

The Middle Eastern strategic situation has deteriorated steadily over the past 20 years. At this point, there is no longer a Middle East status quo for the UK or its allies to preserve. A status quo requires a situation in which there is an identifiable, coherent set of political and economic structures in a specific region.<sup>177</sup> There may be challengers to the status quo, as for example 19<sup>th</sup> century Prussia was, without destroying it completely. Until the late 1860s, the European system functioned reasonably well, even as Berlin sought to modify it. But since the early 2000s, the Middle East has been defined by repeated conflagrations, first the Iraqi Insurgency, then the 2006 Lebanon War, then the Syrian Civil War and Iraqi Civil War, and finally the Yemeni Civil War. The parts of the Middle East actively under armed contestation – Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, and Yemen – comprise 1.2 million square kilometres of territory, and a population of nearly 110 million. It is impossible to identify a status quo when a territory twice the size of Ukraine, and with a population nearly three times as large, is wracked by internationalised civil wars and proxy conflict.

Moreover, despite the escalating regional cataclysm, the UK and its allies have pursued a functionally identical foreign policy for not only the past 20 years, but the past 40. Barring two periods of departure, the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars and the U.S. 2018-2020 'maximum pressure' strategy towards Iran, the UK and West have first and foremost sought to avoid a major conventional war, particularly with the region's most populous state, Iran. Foreign action was restricted to limited military deployments, counterinsurgency and counterterrorism activity, and sanctions regimes of varying efficacy. The strategic inertia of the late Cold War sputtered out by the early 2010s, explaining the Middle East's descent into violence. But at this point, inaction indicates that it is British policy to allow the region's powers to settle the issue of the strategic balance amongst themselves. Considering Iranian military expansion and near-nuclearisation, this is synonymous with strategic neglect.

Hence the greatest long-term risk of inaction is, effectively, ceding the Middle East to an expansionist Iran that, with probable nuclear capabilities,

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177. See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 10-12ff.



has become a full-fledged member of the authoritarian revisionist coalition alongside Russia and China. Israeli strikes against Iranian supply lines in Syria have reduced Iran's ability to sustain Hezbollah. Between 2017 and 2019, two separate interviews with high-ranking Israeli officers revealed that Israel significantly expanded its interdiction campaign, hitting well over 1,000 targets.<sup>178</sup>

However, this has not been nearly enough to halt, let alone roll back, Iranian expansion. Iranian-supported Houthis have maintained their control over the western Yemeni coastline, Iranian-backed Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad have become more aggressive, Iran's most robust proxy Hezbollah has increased its leverage in Lebanese politics, and Iranian-backed militias retain their power in Iraq. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, on his early March trip to Iraq, met with multiple Iranian-backed figures, including Qais al-Khazali, the leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, a U.S.-designated terrorist organisation that during the Iraqi insurgency conducted several thousand attacks against Coalition forces.<sup>179</sup>

Absent a renewed economic pressure campaign paired with a comprehensive strategy, Iran's regional proxies will only further entrench their positions in Middle Eastern hot-spots. Moreover, as international organisations like the UN accept Iranian proxies as legitimate political interlocutors, it will become increasingly difficult to dislodge Iranian influence. Combined with the obvious erosion of Israeli deterrence against Iran and Iranian activities in the West Bank, the probability of a renewed Lebanon War and/or conflict in the West Bank will only rise in the coming months.

The issue will only intensify if Iran acquires a nuclear arsenal. Under a nuclear umbrella, Iran could claim a seat at the strategic table alongside Russia and China as a major authoritarian power with a permanent presence beyond its borders. The more Iran is allowed to solidify its regional presence prior to nuclearisation, the more probable it is that Iran becomes a legitimately Eurasian power after nuclearisation. The result, a third revisionist Eurasian power, placed at the crucial economic and strategic link between Europe and Asia, will be extraordinarily difficult to manage in an intensifying period of broader strategic rivalry, with deleterious effects on the UK's long-term strategic position.

Iranian nuclear capabilities, meanwhile, would trigger broader regional proliferation. This carries a severe escalatory risk, given the propensity of all regional powers for proxy warfare, the deep-seated rivalry between Iran, Israel, and the Gulf Arabs, and Turkey's regional ambitions. Moreover, the reality of nuclear weapons is such that, during an arms race, no Middle Eastern power is wealthy and technologically competent enough to maintain a large, survivable, effectively controlled nuclear arsenal capable of fielding second-strike forces. This creates the distinct possibility of nuclear first-use during any regional war.<sup>180</sup> Proliferation would also raise the prospect of nuclear terrorism, given the sheer number of non-state armed groups in the Middle East. Second, an Iranian nuclear arsenal, combined with an effective ICBM programme, would threaten Europe

178. Compare the comments of Gadi Eisenkot, then Israeli Chief of General Staff, in 2019 with the comments of Amir Eshel, then commander of the Israeli Air Force, in 2017. Bret Stephens, "The Man Who Humbled Qassim Suleimani", *New York Times*, 11 January 2019, accessed via: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/11/opinion/gadi-eisenkot-israel-iran-syria.html>; Amos Harel, "Israel Struck Syrian and Hezbollah Arms Convoys Nearly 100 Times in Five Years, Top General Says", *Haaretz*, 17 August 2017, accessed via: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2017-08-17/ty-article/israel-struck-syrian-hezbollah-convoys-nearly-100-times-in-5-years/0000017f-e301-d568-ad7f-f36b60660000>.

179. "Guterres stresses UN commitment to Iraq during first visit in 6 years", *UN News*, 1 March 2023, accessed via: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/03/1134012>. The official report carefully omits the Secretary-General's dinner and photograph. See Mina Aldroubi, "UN chief criticised for posing with Iraqi militia leaders", *The National*, 2 March 2023, accessed via: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2023/03/02/un-chief-criticised-for-posing-with-iraqi-militia-leaders/>.

180. Albert Wohlstetter, "Nuclear Sharing: NATO and the N+1 Country", *Foreign Affairs* (1 April 1961), accessed via: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1961-04-01/nuclear-sharing-nato-and-n1-country>.



and the UK directly, giving Iran a tool to pressure the UK and its allies in any crisis. Third, Iranian nuclear capabilities would embolden Iranian expansion, particularly during the gap between its acquisition of nuclear weapons and regional proliferation. This expansion will not be limited to the Middle East's traditional borders. Azerbaijan is a probable target for long-term Iranian pressure and, if under a nuclear umbrella, military action – particularly if Iran can coordinate with Russia and Armenia to pressure Azerbaijan from multiple angles. Fourth, Tehran's weapons developments and relationship with Russia increase the odds that it will undermine the future sanctions needed to restrain Russian power in the long-term. The effectiveness of the entire global sanctions regime is at stake if Iranian capabilities are allowed to expand further, as demonstrated by Iran using its sanctions-evasion mechanisms to sustain and support Russia. Additionally, a nuclear Iran will be a full member of the authoritarian revisionist bloc. Far wealthier and with a better strategic location than North Korea, a nuclear Iran would be an active participant in Eurasian competition that undermines British and allied interests throughout the world's most strategically consequential landmass.

Iran's grey-zone proxies will also intensify their activity. Iran's "Axis of Resistance", running from Iraq and Syria to Lebanon, Yemen, and the Palestinian Territories, will be activated to disrupt all major Middle Eastern geographic chokepoints. This proxy force affords Iran significant advantages during grey zone competition. Tehran has used its partners to pressure or even outright attack Western forces and allies in the past, in each case actively aiding proxy combat operations, as it did in 2006 in Lebanon, and throughout the Syrian, Yemeni, and Iraqi Civil Wars. Proxies would combine with improved Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles, loitering munitions, and traditional missile capabilities to allow Iran to strike Gulf State oil production, as it did in 2019, all while under a nuclear umbrella.

Additionally, although there is obvious public, legislative, and bureaucratic appetite for an Iran policy, inaction risks allowing that appetite to be satisfied with only the most limited actions. Proscribing the IRGC is, if properly conducted, a crucial aspect of an Iran policy. But just as the nuclear question is not the totality of the Iran issue, IRGC intimidation and assassination actions are also not exclusively and fundamentally the total of the Iran issue. Absent forthright political leadership, it is probable that the UK, after adopting some expanded proscription legislation, simply leaves the Iran issue alone. Once the regional escalatory cycle begins, and Iran becomes markedly more aggressive, the British public and legislators will look back at this window in early 2023 and question why the Government refused to act decisively, instead leaving British citizens and interests vulnerable to Iranian predation.

## Policy Recommendations

A British Middle East policy, and by extension and Iran policy, must flow from British national interests. At bottom, the UK requires Middle Eastern stability to prevent the disruption of this critical Eurasian region. This implies the denial of hegemony to any particular Middle Eastern action, and the support for a Middle Eastern balance of power that is durable over time. From this is the UK's Iran policy – the UK seeks to *deter Iranian regional escalation, contain Iranian power, and pressure Iran to reduce its power and potency abroad.*

A British Middle East and Iran policy, however, encounters three difficulties: capacity limits, a bureaucracy poorly designed to respond to illicit finance, and a legal framework that struggles to break the peace-war binary that Iran, as a grey-zone state, so thoroughly exploits.

None of these interests entail actions that preserve the status quo because, once again, the status quo has been eroded through decades of UK and allied inaction and crisis avoidance. The only way to achieve the UK's Middle East strategic objective is to generate a new balance of forces, one that is unmistakably slanted against Iran. This includes undermining Iranian proxy activities, limiting Iranian cash-flow and by extension reducing its financial means to project power, pressuring the Iranian state internally, and most critically, creating a military situation in which Iran is strongly disincentivised from escalating any conflict through proxy or direct means.

What is needed, then, is a *course correction*, not a policy that preserves a defunct status quo.

This reality generates four interests that a British Middle East policy should fulfil.

*First, the UK seeks Middle Eastern stability – it therefore should deter Iranian regional escalation to prevent serious disruption to international commerce.* The Middle East sits at the heart of Eurasian commerce and is crucial to global energy markets. Moreover, considering Iran's growing links to Russia – and Russia's growing dependence upon Iran – a regional conflict may rapidly transform into a European-Mediterranean one with direct implications for NATO. Iranian regional escalation must be deterred to prevent an explosive Middle Eastern conflict and forestall a broader crisis.

*Second, the UK seeks to uphold international law – it therefore should limit Iran's growing weapons programmes to prevent increased proliferation.* Iran's nuclear, missile, drone, and loitering munition technologies are proven in their maturity. Iran is also willing to export technology to other conflict zones, including to Europe, as it provides Russia with a host of munitions for its strategic strike campaign. In the short-term, this will undermine any post-Ukraine

sanctions regime on Russia that seeks to limit Russian rearmament. And in the long-term, all sorts of hostile, aggressive regimes will turn to Iran to evade economic and military pressure. Iran will be a larger, more consequential, more threatening North Korea that also has direct connections to major powers and a degree of strategic leverage over Russia. This is a severely adverse outcome for British interests.

Third, the UK should seek to contain Iranian power – this entails preventing the expansion of Iranian influence, combating the spread Khomeinist ideology, and disrupting its links with Russia. Iran seeks to expand its influence and *de facto* territory through its campaign of state capture in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, its links with organised crime and terrorist organisations globally, its network of intelligence officers and individuals sympathetic to its ideology, and its strategic partnership with Russia that provides Iran with access to advanced military technology. It is in the UK’s interest to pressure all elements of this expansion. Iran must be made once again a regional actor, not a Eurasian one, to secure British interests.

Fourth, the UK seeks to pressure the Iranian state – this requires sanctions on Iranian illicit finance, relationships with regional actors, and the JCPOA’s snap-back capability. The UK and its allies can oppose Iranian expansion, limit its active presence beyond the Middle East, and deter regional escalation. But the fundamental issue is Iran’s growth in relative power. The UK must undermine the core aspects of Iranian power to reduce the resources Tehran can employ to prosecute its aggressive intelligence, fund its nuclear and strategic weapons programme, and sustain its proxies, instead forcing the Iranian regime to redirect resources to preserve itself against domestic pressures and defend its regional proxies and global intelligence network against its adversaries. In brief, the more Iran can be pressured at home and abroad, the less likely it becomes that Iran engages in international disruption. This demands targeting Iranian cashflow, disrupting Iran’s relationships with proxies, pressuring the regime internally, and most crucially, triggering snap-back to catalyse a coalition of like-minded states to contain Iran.

The difficulty, however, is that British capabilities and institutions are not properly designed to achieve policy ends. There are three particular shortfalls.

First, British military capabilities are insufficient to take on a major Middle Eastern role without extremely careful planning. British ground forces were already hollowed out prior to transfers to Ukraine, the fiscal environment speaks against a major defence spending injection, and even with a major defence spending increase, additional funding would not immediately impact operational capabilities.<sup>181</sup> The Royal Navy and RAF do retain some capabilities, but as will be discussed below, their deployments must be extremely well coordinated with intelligence analysis and allies to ensure they actually influence the balance of forces, and thereby bolster deterrence.

Second, the UK currently lacks the financial intelligence and sanctions prosecution mechanisms to sustain pressure on Iran. The UK Treasury does not have an Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) precisely akin to the U.S. Treasury’s OFAC, an executive capacity that enables the aggressive prosecution of sanctions.

181. See Section 4.8 “Defence” in Ruth Kelly, Iain Mansfield, and Connor MacDonald, *Balancing the Books: Charting a Credible Path to Fiscal Responsibility* (Policy Exchange, 26 October 2022), 50-52.

It also does not recruit and maintain a pool of Financial Intelligence (FININT) specialists from its finance industry that it can employ to track and target illicit cash flows. This makes it extremely difficult for the UK to leverage potential sanctions because it cannot properly apply the tools at its disposal.

Third, the UK legal system contains a peace-war binary unfit for hybrid operations that must be overhauled to counter a grey-zone state like Iran. The British state encountered this issue first when combating Irish terrorist groups, beginning with the 1939 Prevention of Violence Act.<sup>182</sup> However, every group the British state countered was a recognisable non-state terrorist organisation,<sup>183</sup> even if the terrorist groups of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century received state support.<sup>184</sup> Their non-state status enabled a legalistic approach to counterterrorism.<sup>185</sup> By contrast, Iran manipulates the grey zone<sup>186</sup> to intentionally blur the lines between peace and war to gain a competitive advantage by avoiding formal escalatory triggers that would prompt a major conventional response.<sup>187</sup> The British state's tools are therefore not crafted to respond to the threat Iran poses because it has not done the intellectual work needed to understand competition in the grey zone.

British Middle Eastern priorities – maintaining a stable Middle East, upholding international law, limiting Iranian expansion, and reducing Iranian power – requires six lines of effort that cut across government:

- Diplomacy to isolate Iran and support a stable Middle Eastern coalition;
- *Soft Power, Social Cohesion, Intelligence, and Human Rights*: to disrupt Iranian networks in the UK, leverage British cultural cache, expand British regional linguistic expertise, and expose Iranian criminal acts and domestic brutality;
- *Financial Intelligence* to enhance sanctions prosecution and ensure better UK enforcement;
- Counterterrorism steps to integrate intelligence, law enforcement, and military capabilities;
- *Legal and Regulatory Modifications* to make the British state more capable of acting in the grey zone;
- *Military and Intelligence activity in the Middle East* that appreciably – through strategically sound deployments – influences the regional balance of forces and bolsters deterrence.

In each case, the UK has a series of extant capabilities that it must leverage more effectively through reasonably limited strategic changes. A legitimate cross-government response, then, can leverage British strengths in a manner well within the means of the British state.

### Diplomacy:

The UK has a world-leading diplomatic network, with embassies in all but three Middle Eastern states – Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan – and a 14,000-plus strong diplomatic service.<sup>188</sup> British diplomatic efforts since

182. See *Hansard*, HC Deb 24 July 1939, vol 350, cc1047-1061. This legal framework evolved into the acts relating to Northern Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s, and ultimately, into the Terrorism Acts that began with Terrorism Act (2000).

183. Michael von Tangen Page and MLR Smith, "War by Other Means: The Problem of Political Control in Irish Republican Strategy", *Armed Forces & Society*, 27:1 (Fall 2000), 82-90.

184. "State Sponsors of Acts of International Terrorism—Legislative Parameters: In Brief", *Congressional Research Service* (R43835, updated 4 May 2021), 1-3.

185. Indeed, the central difficulty in counterterrorism strategy is understanding whether the threat from terrorism is a specific version of crime, or instead a strategic threat in its own right. See Joan Fitzpatrick, "Speaking Law to Power: The War Against Terrorism and Human Rights", *European Journal of International Law*, 14:2 (2003), 244-246. See also Gabriel Schoenfeld, "Legalism in Wartime", *National Affairs*, 7 (Spring 2011), accessed via: <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/legalism-in-wartime>.

186. Conrad Beckett, "Getting to grips with grey zone conflict", *UK Strategic Command*, 26 April 2021, accessed via: <https://stratcommand.blog.gov.uk/2021/04/26/getting-to-grips-with-grey-zone-conflict/>.

187. John Raine, "War or peace? Understanding the grey zone", *IISS*, 3 April 2019, accessed via: <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2019/04/understanding-the-grey-zone>.

188. Total staff is around 17,000, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-development-office/about>.

mid-2021 have demonstrated the relevance of diplomacy in international crises despite the UK's limited military power, restricted finances, and domestic political turmoil. Successive British governments have leveraged the UK's position at the heart of NATO, and its standing as a crucial Euro-Atlantic power, to drive Allied policy in Ukraine. Carefully-calibrated British diplomatic efforts, then, can have an outsized strategic effect.

The UK can leverage its Middle Eastern-related diplomatic tools in five ways: (1) Trigger the JCPOA's Snap-Back Process; (2) Reorient British policy to pursue a diplomatic-strategic encirclement of the Iranian regime; (3) Pursue a partnership with Azerbaijan in the Caucasus alongside the UK's European partners; (4) Conclude a GCC-wide FTA and expedite arms sales; (5) Expand the 2021 UK-Israel Strategic Partnership through an innovation-focused Free-Trade Agreement.

### Snap-Back:

The UK should initiate the JCPOA's snap-back process, formally killing the Iran Deal. Snap-back does raise the odds of an accelerated Iranian breakout, but the benefits of snap-back – a formal anti-Iran coalition, limits on smuggling, an actual sanctions regime that prevents arms transfers – grossly outweigh any escalatory risks. Moreover, the UK can use the snap-back process to demonstrate the full scope of the Iran threat: Iran is a systemic proliferator and hegemonic aspirant, not simply a “rogue actor” with an advanced nuclear programme.

The JCPOA imposed specific limits on Iranian uranium enrichment levels and stockpiles. Iranian enrichment was capped at 3.67%, and Iran's stockpiles limited to 300 kilograms.<sup>189</sup> Iran's uranium enrichment to 84% is a flagrant violation of the JCPOA.<sup>190</sup> Moreover, Iran previously enriched uranium to 60%, another violation of the JCPOA.<sup>191</sup> Hence there is solid ground for initiating the snap-back mechanism to kill the JCPOA.

Under UNSC 2231, the UN Resolution relevant to the JCPOA, UN sanctions on Iran's nuclear programme will progressively “sunset” over time. As discussed above, in October 2023, ballistic missile restrictions will be removed, followed by additional limitations in 2024-2025. The JCPOA proceeds automatically unless a signatory triggers the snap-back mechanism, delineated in UNSC 2231 10-15. Any P5+1 state can file a complaint that Iran is in breach of the JCPOA.<sup>192</sup> Once this occurs, a 30-day period begins, when the UN Security Council considers a resolution that would preserve the Iran Deal. Because of the UN Security Council's veto system, all P5 states must acquiesce to the deal's continuation. That is, once the snap-back process starts, it is impossible to stop. Snap-back would reimpose all UN sanctions on Iran, including on its technological imports, weapons sales, and global financial access, while also providing a legal framework for extensive inspections of Iranian shipping.

Two factors would blunt snap-back's material effects. First, Russia, and likely China, would not comply with the reimposed UN sanctions. Second,

189. JCPOA, Section A, Clause 5-8 in particular. See UNSC S/RES/2231 (2015), 11-12ff. This cap will remain in effect until January 2026.

190. Parsia Hafezi and Francois Murphy, “Iran starts enriching uranium to 60% purity at Fordow plant”, *Reuters*, 22 November 2022, accessed via: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-enrich-uranium-60-purity-fordow-nuclear-site-tv-2022-11-22/>.

191. Jonathan Tirone, “Iran's Uranium Enrichment Hits a New High, Testing Diplomacy”, *Bloomberg*, 19 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-02-19/iran-nuclear-inspectors-detect-uranium-enriched-to-84-purity?sref=oja9DljU>.

192. Henry Rome, Louis Dugit-Gros, “Snapback Sanctions on Iran: More Bark Than Bite?” *Washington Institute*, 25 October 2022, accessed via: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/snapback-sanctions-iran-more-bark-bite>.

U.S. sanctions since 2018 have done much of snap-back's work for it, meaning the pressure Iran faces would not be strategically transformative. Snap-back, in short, is not alone enough to make an Iran policy, prevent Iranian nuclear breakout, or limit Iranian power.

Nevertheless, snap-back would have three exceptionally valuable consequences.

First, snap-back would compel the other P5+1 members, including the US, to confront the Iran question directly, creating a potential diplomatic coalition against the IRI.<sup>193</sup> Once snap-back begins, the Iran issue becomes unavoidable, since all sanctions will be reimposed. Russia and China will oppose snap-back. France, Germany, and the U.S., meanwhile, will accept sanctions reimposition. Iran is clearly in breach of the JCPOA, the Iran threat is far greater than it was in 2010-2015 when the JCPOA was negotiated, and there is growing public and policy appetite for more robust action on Iran in each national context. With UN sanctions as a baseline, snap-back can therefore prompt a debate over, and coalition on, Iran policy, where the U.S., UK, and EU all harmonise strategies.

Second, snap-back connects all aspects of the Iran threat, rather than focusing on the nuclear question, by targeting Iran's conventional proliferation. The JCPOA's greatest failure was its complete compartmentalisation of the nuclear issue.<sup>194</sup> The Iran threat became the nuclear question, and the solution became normalisation in return for compliance. This strategic approach was imprudent in the 2010s. It is particularly foolish today, when Iran sustains Russia's war effort in Ukraine, has cultivated a far larger proxy system, and has a far more robust terrorist and influence network. Snap-back would shift the debate from solely Iran's nuclear programme to the totality of the Iran threat.

Third, snap-back would enable other sanctions, particularly for the EU. Within the EU, there is undoubtedly appetite for more comprehensive restrictions on Iran that include financial limitations, individual sanctions, and other legal measures that restrict Iranian intelligence activity and influence operations.<sup>195</sup> Snap-back would enable these sanctions by providing the EU, UK, and other powers with a ready-made UN sanctions regime with which national and bloc-wide policy could be aligned. It would also facilitate an aggressively-prosecuted arms embargo, under which all Iranian shipping could be searched for contraband, reinforcing the economic and strategic pressure sanctions impose on Iran, and thereby weakening the regime's ability to project power.

Snap-back is a particularly prudent policy for the UK. The U.S. sought to trigger snap-back in 2020, but the JCPOA's other signatories – and UN Security Council as a whole – deemed that Washington lacked standing due to its 2018 withdrawal from the Iran Deal. The UK, Germany, and France are realistically the only states that have an interest in snap-back. If the UK moves first, it can position itself to influence future European Iran policy, giving it a decided advantage in relations with the EU.

The UK can also forestall German and French recalcitrance similar to that seen in Ukraine. Germany's only major foreign policy shift of

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193. John Caves, John Krzyzaniak, Valerie Lincy, "Trigger Warning: The Consequences of Snapping Back Sanctions on Iran", *Iran Watch*, 31 January 2023, accessed via: <https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/policy-briefs/trigger-warning-consequences-snapping-back-sanctions-iran>.

194. Magnus Norell, "A really bad deal: the Iran nuclear deal and its implications", *European View*, 14 (2015), 287-289.

195. Jacopo Barigazzi, "Documents show EU's planned new Iran sanctions list", *Politico*, 12 January 2023, accessed via: <https://www.politico.eu/article/documents-show-eus-planned-new-iran-sanctions-list/>.



the past 30 years, the post-24 February 2022 *Zeitenwende*, occurred only after an overwhelming structural shift in European politics removed the diplomatic device Berlin used, the Minsk-II Agreement, to justify its Russia policy. France has been more aggressive since summer 2022, but used Minsk-II in a similar fashion until 24 February 2022. Germany and France have avoided explicit policy statements on Iran despite the increasing odds of Iranian nuclearisation, obvious non-compliance with the JCPOA, and Iran's support for Russia in Ukraine. The only formal statements thus far have been relatively mild joint declarations alongside the UK.<sup>196</sup> Removing the vehicle that Germany and France can use to avoid explicit action can once again force the issue. Moreover, the structure of snap-back incentivises French and German policy shifts because preventing snap-back would require both European powers to forge a consensus with Russia and China, an extremely unlikely move given the Ukraine War. Assertive British diplomatic steps, then, can have an outsized strategic impact.

To be relevant, snap-back must be triggered soon. Iranian ballistic missile exports to Russia increase in likelihood the closer UN restrictions' elapse becomes – hence exports are probable from August 2023 onwards. Given snap-back takes 30 days to complete, it should be triggered no later than 1 July.

### The Logic of Strategic Encirclement:

The below recommendations *vis-a-vis* the Caucasus, Levant, and Arabian Peninsula are all articulated with the objective of *strategic encirclement* in mind. The Iran question is a geographic one: because Iran is in the eastern part of the Middle East, because it touches both the Caspian Sea and the Indian Ocean, and because its proxies give it direct access to the Levantine Basin, Iran has a unique ability to expand its influence well beyond its borders.<sup>197</sup>

British diplomacy must have a geostrategic eye if its Iran policy is to succeed. Each aspect of Iranian access to the Middle East's maritime chokepoints must be jeopardised. This entails a more robust relationship with friendly powers in the Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan to gain leverage in the Caspian Sea; an expanded partnership with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to bolster British access to the Western Indian Ocean; and a solidified partnership with Israel to prevent Iranian disruption in the Eastern Mediterranean. The military and intelligence aspects of this recommendation will be articulated separately, but the logic of this strategy, military and diplomatic, remains geostrategic regardless.

### The Caucasus in British Diplomacy:

Iran's support for Russia rests upon its freedom of action in the Caucasus and Caspian Sea. Russia has expanded its inland waterway network to link the Azov Sea and central Russia to the Caspian through a series of annually navigable canals and expanded its port of Astrakhan, on the southern Volga and expanded its traffic to other Caspian ports.<sup>198</sup> Iran, meanwhile, is investing in its railway network to link its Caspian ports to Chabahar, Iran's Chinese-affiliated southern port.<sup>199</sup> Moreover, Russia's tacit Central Asian

196. "Iran - Joint statement by France, Germany and the United Kingdom", 10 September 2022, accessed via: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iran/news/article/iran-joint-statement-by-france-germany-and-the-united-kingdom-10-sept-22>; "Statement by France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States on the IAEA's Latest Report on Iran's Nuclear Program", 3 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.state.gov/statement-by-france-germany-the-united-kingdom-and-the-united-states-on-the-iaeas-latest-report-on-irans-nuclear-program/>.

197. Compare this to, for example, Saddam's Iraq, which was not only a smaller power, but had – even with a conquered Kuwait – only a small coastline that remained within the Hormuz chokepoint.

198. "Handling of general cargo in Makhachkala seaport surged by 38% to 450 thousand tonnes YTD", *Port News*, 24 January 2023, accessed via: <https://en.portnews.ru/news/341895/>.

199. Jonathan Tirone and Golnar Motevalli, "Russia and Iran Are Building a Trade Route That Defies Sanctions", *Bloomberg*, 21 December 2022, accessed via: <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2022-russia-iran-trade-corridor/#xj4y7vzkg>.

partners, most notably Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, are also expanding their port capacity to turn the Caspian into an alternative trade route.<sup>200</sup> As this expands, Russia and Iran together will be better able to evade Western sanctions and transfer each other advanced military technologies.

The only state that can legitimately disrupt Caspian Sea trade with Western-aligned interests is Azerbaijan. Acutely aware of its exposed position between Russia and Iran, and with substantial Azeri ethnic minorities in both states, Azerbaijan has sought allies since the USSR's collapse. Turkey plays that role traditionally, providing a counterbalance against Russian-aligned Armenia.

The UK already has a robust commercial relationship with Azerbaijan. Even absent a free-trade agreement, UK-Azerbaijan trade reached £1.2 billion last year (February 2022-February 2023).<sup>201</sup> The UK is also the largest foreign investor in Azerbaijan, with 450 companies already having a presence in Azerbaijan.<sup>202</sup>

Long-term cooperation with Azerbaijan would provide two benefits. On the one hand, it would give the UK access to the Caspian Sea, locked in Eurasia's heartland, thereby allowing it to monitor and potentially disrupt Iranian-Russian illicit trade. On the other, a link with Azerbaijan would allow the UK to gain some leverage over Turkey – the more crucial the UK becomes to Turkey's highest-profile strategic partner, the more capable it becomes of influencing Turkish policy towards Ukraine, Europe, and NATO.

In the short-term the UK should expand its diplomatic footprint in Azerbaijan with an emphasis on its military attaches. British Embassy Baku should be treated as a Caspian Sea hub, serving as the primary regional node for diplomatic activity with a greatly increased staff. This will facilitate a far greater regional intelligence footprint, necessary to identify Iranian-Russian trade and disrupt it. Most critically, the UK should expand its military footprint at the Baku Embassy. As it stands, the MOD and FCDO assign one military attache for the Caucasus Region – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – locating this officer in Tbilisi.<sup>203</sup> The UK should immediately assign a military attache to Azerbaijan, and provide this officer with a substantive staff. The UK should also make its Baku defence attache the regional lead, with authority over the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Iran. As it stands, the UK defence attache in Kyiv has led the British regional diplomatic-military mission throughout Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Splitting this assignment would provide greater focus on the Caucasus-Caspian region, and by extension, on Iran. The UK could consider loosening the application of its embargo on Azerbaijan's defence industry. The UK already trains the Azerbaijan Armed Forces, Azerbaijan is a NATO Partnership for Peace member, and the U.S. has provided some military supplies to Azerbaijan.<sup>204</sup> But the U.S.-European embargo<sup>205</sup> on arms sales to Azerbaijan forces Baku to turn to Moscow and Ankara almost exclusively for military equipment.<sup>206</sup> Relaxing restrictions for at least small arms might enable greater Azerbaijan-UK military-to-military coordination, useful for curbing Iranian influence.

200. "New \$28.9 million container hub for Kazakhstan's Aktau Port", *Port Technology International*, 19 October 2022, accessed via: <https://www.porttechnology.org/news/new-28-9-million-container-hub-for-kazakhstans-aktau-port/>.

201. "Trade and Investment Factsheet: Azerbaijan", *Department for International Trade*, 17 February 2023, accessed via: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1136058/azerbaijan-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2023-02-17.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1136058/azerbaijan-trade-and-investment-factsheet-2023-02-17.pdf).

202. "Doing business in Azerbaijan: Azerbaijan trade and export guide", *Department for International Trade*, 13 October 2022, accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/exporting-to-azerbaijan/exporting-to-azerbaijan>.

203. MOD does not publicly list its attaches, but see the following for a list of attaches that includes Georgia only: <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2010-11-08a.10.0>. Moreover, UK defence attaches to Georgia are typically credentialed as the UK defence attache to Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

204. "Relations with Azerbaijan", NATO, last updated 25 August 2021, accessed via: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49111.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49111.htm).

205. UK sanctions relating to Armenia and Azerbaijan", *FCDO*, last updated 10 January 2023, accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-sanctions-on-armenia-and-azerbaijan>.

206. Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Jordan Smith, "Arms transfers to conflict zones: The case of Nagorno-Karabakh", *SIPRI*, 30 April 2021, accessed via: <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2021/arms-transfers-conflict-zones-case-nagorno-karabakh>.

In the long-term, the UK should actively support the Middle Corridor project, providing a link between Azerbaijan and Europe. The Middle Corridor began in 2009 as a Turkish initiative to link the Black Sea to China through the Caspian and Central Asia.<sup>207</sup> It has now evolved into a unique energy-diplomatic system that is focused on Central Asian and Caucasian resources. The Middle Corridor has already proven invaluable during the Ukraine War – Turkey, Azerbaijan, and the EU used this network to meet Bulgarian energy needs as Sofia approached an energy crisis in September. The UK should take note and support the Middle Corridor as a Caucasus wedge between Russia and Iran. This involves prompting British energy companies to invest in Azerbaijan. BP in particular is already a lucrative player: its presence in Azerbaijan should be encouraged.<sup>208</sup> An energy-focused trade agreement would be a start – the UK could lower customs duties on Azerbaijani-exported natural gas, for example, as the first step towards a comprehensive, energy-focused free-trade agreement. Absent British and European action, meanwhile, the Middle Corridor project will progress, but under the guise of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>209</sup> Indeed, British involvement in the Middle Corridor can help the EU recognise that the route need not extend entirely to China, and that rather Azerbaijan’s Caspian Sea oil access is a strategic prize in itself.

Other diplomatic initiatives should be explored, including British mediation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict alongside the EU.<sup>210</sup> The UK’s objective should be the removal of Russian peacekeepers removed from the Lachin Corridor to reduce Russian leverage in the Caucasus.<sup>211</sup>

### The Gulf in British Diplomacy:

If the Caucasus is the crucial link between Iran and Russia economically, the Arabian Peninsula and its surroundings are the geographical bulwark against Iranian expansion into North Africa and, equally crucial, the bar from Iranian control of the Suez-Indian Ocean maritime route. The UK must view the Gulf States as critical partners in any strategy against Iran.

The UK can take two direct diplomatic steps to intensify its cooperation with the Gulf.

First, the UK should accelerate its proposed Free-Trade Agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council. The latest round of GCC-UK FTA talks concluded in December. Another round is anticipated in 2023, this time in Riyadh. Even absent a GCC-UK FTA, UK-Gulf trade is set to expand by £800 billion in the next 15 years.<sup>212</sup> And a GCC-UK has obvious economic benefits independent of the geopolitical situation in the Middle East. The UK should fast-track a GCC FTA in the next three months, prioritising this agreement over other trade policy negotiations, ideally to conclude it around when snap-back is triggered. This would demonstrate the UK’s long-term commitment to a stable Middle East.

Second, the UK should also expedite the sale of military equipment to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, emphasising unmanned aerial systems. Both Gulf States understand the threat that Iran poses and have taken steps to contain it, most notably through involvements in Yemen.<sup>213</sup> The UK already has a robust military-industrial

207. Tuba Eldem, “Russia’s War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity”, *SWP Berlin*, Comment 64 (October 2022), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/russias-war-on-ukraine-and-the-rise-of-the-middle-corridor-as-a-third-vector-of-eurasian-connectivity>.

208. “BP in Azerbaijan”, accessed via: [https://www.bp.com/en\\_az/azerbaijan/home/who-we-are/bp-in-azerbaijan.html](https://www.bp.com/en_az/azerbaijan/home/who-we-are/bp-in-azerbaijan.html).

209. Turkish descriptions of the Middle Corridor have begun to tilt towards China. See “Türkiye’s Multilateral Transportation Policy”, *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, accessed via: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-s-multilateral-transportation-policy.en.mfa>.

210. “Averting a New War between Armenia and Azerbaijan”, *International Crisis Group* (Europe Report 266, 30 January 2023), 9-12.

211. Maurizio Geri, “Russia’s new meddling in the Caucasus”, *Politico*, 30 January 2023, accessed via: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-meddling-caucasus-armenia-lachin-corridor/>.

212. “UK-GCC Trade Negotiations”, *Deloitte*, <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/tax/articles/uk-gcc-trade-negotiations.html>; see also Alex Whiteman, “Saudi-UK business to grow ‘significantly’ under GCC trade deal, says lord mayor of London”, *Arab News*, last updated 30 September 2022, accessed via: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2172851/world>.

213. Ibrahim Jalal, “Continuity and change in British foreign policy toward Yemen”, *Middle East Institute*, 1 September 2020, accessed via: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/continuity-and-change-british-foreign-policy-toward-yemen>.

relationship with Saudi Arabia and the UAE – British military companies are crucial to sustaining the Saudi Air Force in particular.<sup>214</sup> Generally speaking, the Middle East is the largest market for British arms.<sup>215</sup> After a lengthy legal dispute, the 2019 restrictions on British exports to the UAE and Saudi Arabia over the Yemen conflict were lifted.<sup>216</sup> However restrictions remain upon British, and American, unmanned aerial system exports to the region. UAS in particular are relevant because of the way in which China has built market share.

The U.S. and UK were historically unwilling to provide Saudi Arabia or the UAE top-line UAS like the Predator or Reaper because of aspects of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the regulatory framework for drone and missile sales by which the G7 abides.<sup>217</sup> In response the UAE and Saudi Arabia have turned to Chinese firms, namely China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) and Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group (CAIG), both of which are state-owned enterprises.<sup>218</sup> It may be worth advocating for an unmanned aerial vehicle carve-out in the MTCR, given the MTCR was conceived in the 1990s when the West was obsessed with nuclear terrorism.<sup>219</sup> This would not be unprecedented, given the U.S. has already reinterpreted the MTCR to allow it to export drones.<sup>220</sup>

### The UK-Israel Relationship:

Israel is the central actor in any anti-Iranian coalition. The IDF will be at the sharp end of any anti-Iranian action, and has prosecuted its “War Between the Wars” for a decade, degrading Iranian operational capacity in Syria.<sup>221</sup> Strengthening the UK’s relationship with Israel would therefore bolster the one actor willing and capable of responding to Iranian aggression rapidly.

Of equal importance, a more robust UK-Israel relationship would provide the UK limited but valuable leverage over Israeli actions and invaluable early warning of escalation. This is crucial considering the likely UK domestic reaction to an Iran-Israel contingency. Iran would leverage its connections to Islamic organisations that historically discount Iranian violence in Iraq and Syria, and instead focus on Israel’s actions in the West Bank and Gaza. The result in the UK would be mass protests and intense social disruption, an eventuality for which the UK government can prepare only if it has early warning that a robust relationship with Israel would provide.

The UK should emphasise concluding the UK-Israel innovation-focused FTA, which will build off current advanced cyber and other technological cooperation. Particularly relevant would be cooperation in life-sciences, biotechnology, cyber techniques, and other emerging technologies. University-to-University cooperation should also be eased to enable higher educational and research collaboration between British and Israeli institutions.

This FTA can be used as an incentive for the GCC – complementary UK-Israel and UK-GCC FTA’s would make the UK the central node in a

214. Louisa Brooke-Holland and Ben Smith, “UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia: Q&A”, *House of Commons Library* (Briefing Paper 08425, 9 January 2021), 6-7.

215. Esme Kirk-Wade, “UK Arms Exports: Statistics”, *House of Commons Library*, 16 January 2023, 8.

216. Robert Clark, “The power of arms – Global Britain’s move to the Middle East”, *UK Defence Journal*, 10 December 2021, accessed via: <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/the-power-of-arms-global-britains-move-to-the-middle-east/>.

217. Leonard S. Spector, “The Missile Technology Control Regime and Shifting Proliferation Challenges”, *Arms Control Today*, 48:3 (April 2018), 14-20.

218. “United Arab Emirates” (RUSI: Armed Drones in the Middle East Project), accessed via: <https://drones.rusi.org/countries/unit-ed-arab-emirates/>; see also “Saudi Arabia” (RUSI: Armed Drones in the Middle East Project), <https://drones.rusi.org/countries/saudi-arabia/>.

219. “MTCR Guidelines”, accessed via: <https://mtcr.info/mtcr-guidelines/>.

220. Daryl G. Kimball, “U.S. Reinterprets MTCR Rules”, *Arms Control Association* (September 2020), accessed via: <https://www.arms-control.org/act/2020-09/news/us-reinterprets-mtcr-rules>.

221. Eran Ortal, “The Fly on the Elephant’s Back: The Campaign between Wars in Israel’s Security Doctrine”, *Strategic Assessment*, 24:2 (April 2021), 108-115.

budding Middle Eastern trade system.<sup>222</sup> The UK should also reorient its diplomatic statements towards Israel, highlighting the shared threat from Iran that both actors face.

Additionally, the UK should prioritise regional military exercises with Israel. The UK has exercised with Israel in the past, most recently during a joint Search-and-Rescue exercise alongside the Cyprus National Guard.<sup>223</sup> The UK should join multilateral Eastern Mediterranean exercises alongside Israel, in particular the Greek-based INIOCHOS exercises that typically include Israel, Greece, Italy, and Cyprus.<sup>224</sup> Larger-scale commitments would be ideal. However, the UK need not expend significant resources on these exercises. Instead, it could task the nine RAF fighters deployed to RAF Akrotiri to engage in these exercises without significant strain upon operational tempo. The long-term goal should be British participation in major U.S.-Israeli exercises akin to the January 2023 JUNIPER OAK exercise.<sup>225</sup>

### Soft Power, Social Cohesion, Intelligence, and Human Rights:

The threat Iran poses to British social cohesion demands a political response. Absent a coherent policy that prevents Iranian meddling in British social structures, the UK will remain vulnerable to long-term Iranian manipulation. Moreover, domestic efforts intersect with questions of soft power and values, since the UK cannot respond to Iranian influence in the UK if it cedes the informational space to Iran. Five steps should be taken.

First, the UK should identify and disrupt IRGC propaganda and soft power within the UK. This involves standing up at minimum a new interagency team that integrates intelligence analysts from MI5, MI6, and the NCA, and perhaps even a small new agency, intentionally kept small to no more than several dozen analysts to ensure its bureaucratic agility. This agency, notionally named the UK Information Office, would combine traditional intelligence-gathering techniques with open-source methods that rely heavily upon translated documents from Iranian news media and, using intelligence contacts, Iranian-affiliated groups within the UK.<sup>226</sup> Integrating traditional intelligence techniques with public diplomacy has two benefits. First, it allows the UK's public diplomatic efforts to target more directly current trends in Iranian propaganda, thereby disrupting it more effectively. Second, it allows the UK's security services to identify Iranian propaganda far more efficiently, because the ideological and rhetorical tags and callouts that define Iranian propaganda will be more readily apparent after systematic analysis. Moreover, there are immediate steps the UK can take to regulate Iranian broadcasters and prevent their activity within the UK's Shia community. Most effective would be to use Ofcom's regulatory power to scrutinise Shia TV Box, a streaming outlet owned by Hidayat TV, itself an outlet the U.S. FBI has scrutinised and limited its presence in America.<sup>227</sup> Related networks have carried antisemitic propaganda in the past.<sup>228</sup> Ofcom should be directed to more aggressively identify and regulate broadcasters with known links to the Iranian regime. There is

222. "UK-Gulf Cooperation Council trade negotiations update: December 2022", *Department for International Trade*, 20 December 2022, accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-gulf-cooperation-council-trade-negotiations-update-december-2022>.

223. "Israeli Air Force conducts joint training with UK and Cyprus", *Air Force Technology*, 4 April 2022, accessed via: <https://www.airforce-technology.com/news/israeli-air-force-conducts-joint-training-with-uk-and-cyprus/>.

224. "«INIOCHOS» Exercise", *Hellenic Air Force*, accessed via: <https://www.haf.gr/en/structure/htaif/air-tactics-center/iniohos/>.

225. David Vergun, "Largest U.S.-Israeli Exercise in History Concludes", *U.S. Department of Defense*, 26 January 2023, accessed via: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3279772/largest-us-israeli-exercise-in-history-concludes/>.

226. Essentially, this replicates the functions of the U.S. Information Agency, a hybrid intelligence and public diplomacy organisation stood up during the Cold War to fine-tune the American response to Soviet propaganda and subversion. See Christian Whiton, *Smart Powr: Between Diplomacy and War* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2013), 166-169.

227. See the Hidayat TV domain name in the U.S., accessed via: <https://hadjity.com/>.

228. "20th Hour – Money Power, Islam and a Just Order", *Ofcom* (Issue 455, 25 July 2022), accessed via: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0013/242023/20th-Hour-Money-Power-Islam-and-a-Just-Order-Ahlebit-TV.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0013/242023/20th-Hour-Money-Power-Islam-and-a-Just-Order-Ahlebit-TV.pdf).



obvious precedent for such actions: in July 2022, Ofcom also found RT UK in breach of its impartiality standards and revoked its licence.<sup>229</sup>

Second, the UK should revive soft power tools, particularly BBC Persian but also other relevant regional networks, to counter Iranian narratives. The UK cannot cede the informational space to Iran. The Iranian regime is extraordinarily adept at information control, but Iran's urban population is relatively well educated, while Iranian expatriates retain links to the IRI. BBC Persian has broadcasted since 1940, maintaining a continuous presence in Iran whenever possible and accessing Iranians throughout the 1953 Coup and 1979 Revolution.<sup>230</sup> In 2009, BBC Persian received a major funding boost with the establishment of BBC Persian Television, with a £15 million annual budget.<sup>231</sup> This funding boost supercharged BBC Persian's reach. But as the Iranian government has cracked down upon foreign media, BBC Persian's television broadcasts and online content have become less relevant than its radio service.<sup>232</sup> BBC Persian has the credibility to become a major news source amongst the Iranian opposition and in the Iranian expatriate community if its coverage is properly targeted and it receives sufficient funding.<sup>233</sup> From 2014 to 2022, the BBC World Service received £254 million of annual funding from BBC licence fees, along with small additional grants from the FCDO.<sup>234</sup> However, a licence fee freeze has forced the BBC World Service to make significant cuts.<sup>235</sup> BBC Persian retains its online webpage and television service, but BBC Persian Radio has been axed. It is due to end its broadcasts on 26 March 2023, providing a brief window of opportunity for action.<sup>236</sup> It should be revived with a block grant from the FCDO in line with its previous funding model. This funding should be ring-fenced within the UK's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) Budget.<sup>237</sup>

Similarly, the BBC should expand its coverage to other linguistic minorities in Iran. BBC Azeri service should receive a similar funding package to BBC Persian considering the massive Azeri minority in Iran. BBC Arabic's radio service should also be revived. Moreover, the BBC should attempt to stand up a new BBC Balochi Service to target Iran's Balochi population. Additionally, the BBC's other critical regional services, Arabic and Turkish, should have at minimum pages dedicated to Iran, if not dedicated radio coverage specifically on Iranian issues.

Third, the UK should create a number of language programmes to expand its pool of regional specialists and talented linguists. The UK has extraordinarily high quality language education programmes. 13 British universities are in the top 100 ranked universities globally for language training, with two in the top ten.<sup>238</sup> However, the time has passed when the UK could leverage its natural linguistic talents to bolster the security services and its soft power network. In 2000, around six percent of UK undergraduates studied languages in general, compared to only three percent of UK undergraduates today.<sup>239</sup> UK secondary schools still teach European languages, particularly French and German, at high rates, but per the most recent figures, only six percent of British secondary schools teach Arabic.<sup>240</sup> Farsi learning at pre-university levels is not recorded. Hence although there is not specific

229. "Ofcom finds RT in breach of due impartiality rules", *Ofcom*, 18 July 2022, accessed via: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2022/ofcom-finds-rt-in-breach-of-due-impartiality-rules>.

230. Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh, "The BBC Persian Service 1941-1979", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 28:4 (October 2008), 517-525.

231. "Bridging the Persian Gulf", 14 January 2009, accessed via: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bridging-the-persian-gulf-rr-zgt9g3hf5>.

232. Kusra Naji, "BBC Persian radio is a lifeline to millions and must be saved", *The Times*, 13 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bbc-persian-radio-is-a-lifeline-to-millions-and-must-be-saved-glphnf56j>.

233. Zoe Tidman, "BBC to cut hundreds of jobs across World Service with radio stations to close", *The Independent*, 29 September 2022, accessed via: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/bbc-job-cuts-world-service-b2177962.html>.

234. *BBC World Service Performance Review, 2016-2020*, 4.

235. Heather Evennett, "BBC World Service: Soft power and funding challenges", *House of Lords Library*, 24 November 2022, accessed via: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/bbc-world-service-soft-power-and-funding-challenges/>.

236. Hansard HL Deb Vol 827, col 519-520GC, 23 February 2023.

237. Hansard HL Deb Vol 825, col 1893-1897, 1 December 2022.

238. "QS World Rankings by Subject 2021: Modern Languages", accessed via: <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2021/modern-languages>.

239. Data from HESA, *Students in Higher Education, 2000/01*, accessed via: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/publications/students-2000-01> and HESA, *HE Student Enrolments by Subject of Study, 2019/20 to 2021/2*, accessed via: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-46>. The data does not differentiate between different sorts of language study, but the downward proportional trend is obvious.

240. "Arabic Language and Culture Programme", *British Council*, accessed via: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/school-resources/languages/arabic-language-culture-programme>.



data differentiating language degrees, it can be assumed that a rather small proportion of languages graduates in the UK learn either Arabic or Farsi, let alone other relevant regional languages like Turkish and Hebrew. This leaves the UK at a distinct disadvantage, as the pool of talent for intelligence analysis, economic development, and soft power promotion is limited.

The UK should remedy this issue by creating a variety of language training scholarships and partnerships for British undergraduates. The U.S. system should serve as a model. Three routes are possible. First, the UK can directly fund long-term university study abroad programmes. The U.S. Boren Scholarships support language undergraduates and postgraduates with awards up to \$25,000 (£20,800) for various study-abroad programmes in countries deemed critical to U.S. interests.<sup>241</sup> These are funded by the National Security Education Program, which is included in the Defense Department's budget.<sup>242</sup> Second, the UK can fund summer language programmes. The Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) supports undergraduates and graduate students in intensive language-learning summer programmes, offering training in 14 languages, including Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, and Azeri.<sup>243</sup> CLS receives funding through the State Department. Moreover, there is also the Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships (FLAS) programme, which serves a similar role to the Boren Scholarships and CLS, but is run through the Department of Education.<sup>244</sup> Third, the UK can offer direct financial credit to British students that achieve above a certain mark in languages designated as critical to the British national interest. This would go beyond the current piecemeal funding model, under which different private organisations and at times UK academic research organisations offer limited funding and Erasmus Mundus Mobility Scholarships are open to all students who study in Europe.

In the British context, centralising and ring-fencing this funding within the FCDO's ODA budget might be the most prudent step – FCDO could then work with universities to facilitate language-study programmes and provide direct financial support to students engaging in specific relevant languages. This forward-leaning approach would, over the course of a decade, cultivate a crop of high-quality British linguists capable of amplifying British soft power.

Fourth, the UK should pursue an intelligence-led human rights policy that exposes Iran's flagrant disregard for human dignity both within Iran and internationally. The British people have finally understood the IRI's barbarity in light of its public executions. But these sorts of crimes occur in the IRI every single day – women are beaten, citizens are arrested for political purposes, and hundreds are executed each year. British intelligence should prioritise identifying these acts and informing international media of them to demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that the IRI is an unredeemable violator of human rights. This reinforces the case for a BBC Persian service broadcasting in radio to ensure that UK intelligence can tacitly leak incidents to the British and Iranian public.

There is an obvious parallel to Western actions during the Cold War,

241. "Boren", *BorenAwards*, accessed via: <https://www.borenawards.org/>.

242. "National Security Education Program", accessed via: <https://dlneq.org/NSEP>.

243. "CLS", accessed via: <https://clscholarship.org/>.

244. "Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships Program", *U.S. Department of Education*, accessed via: <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/iegpsflasf/index.html>.

when Allied intelligence agencies would identify and publicise Soviet dissidents.<sup>245</sup> In Solidarity's case, for example, the U.S. spent only \$5 million (£4.16 million), primarily in publicity campaigns, which triggered an outsized Soviet response out of reflexive paranoia.<sup>246</sup>

A similar reaction is possible in Iran, as the IRGC and Iranian security state more broadly see every dissident and mild act of resistance as the result of a complex intelligence operation. Simply publicising and supporting Iranian dissidents and acts of resistance within Iran, then, can have an outsized effect on the Iranian regime. Specific organisations for support could be media-focused trade unions, like the now-defunct Association of Iranian Journalists, the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, and Iranian steel workers.<sup>247</sup>

Fifth, the UK should increase the stringency of its standards for Iranian diplomatic visas, just as it has done for Russian diplomatic staff since 2018. Iran's intelligence network heavily leverages the Iranian diaspora to cultivate assets and emphasises dissident targeting missions. However, like all intelligence agencies, Iranian intelligence uses official cover diplomatic contacts to conduct operations.<sup>248</sup> It is no coincidence that Iran's increased diplomatic presence in Vienna during the P5+1 negotiations coincided with a sharp uptick in Iranian operations in Europe.<sup>249</sup> Most notably, Asadollah Assadi, an Iranian diplomat posted to the Vienna embassy, was convicted in 2021 over his organisation of a plot to bomb a dissident rally in Paris – targets included former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, former FBI director Louis Freeh, and five British Members of Parliament.<sup>250</sup>

There must be some Iranian diplomatic representation in the UK to provide consular services for Iranian nationals in Britain. Moreover, while UK citizens remain in Iranian jails, the UK should maintain its own diplomatic presence in Iran to ensure it can, to the best of its ability, advocate for the rights of British detainees. However, there is no need to allow any more than the bare minimum of Iranian staff to be stationed at the Iranian embassy. The UK should therefore intensely screen any individuals Iran claims will work at its diplomatic representation in London. The UK has applied a similar policy to Russia, expelling Russian diplomats and denying visas to suspected intelligence assets, creating an obvious precedent.<sup>251</sup>

### Financial Intelligence and Sanctions:

The UK is an international financial hub. Nearly every major bank in the world has a major London branch, while international insurance markets also depend upon the London-based Lloyd's. However, the UK lacks the robust, agile sanctions enforcement mechanisms of the U.S. despite having the potential for these mechanisms given its financial markets and talents.

The lack of British sanctions coordination blunts the economic pressure the UK could apply on Iran. Just over one year of American sanctions during 2018-2019 cost Iran \$200 billion, according to then-president Hassan Rouhani.<sup>252</sup> These aggressive, targeted sanctions both undermined the Iranian economy, triggering a recession, and squeezed the IRGC's offensive

245. Mark Hurst, "Crossing the curtain: British activists and the echoes of soviet dissent in contemporary Russian human rights activism", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2022), 3-7ff.

246. See Seth G Jones, *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (London: WW Norton, 2018).

247. "Iran bus drivers stage strike to protest low salaries", *Arab News*, 16 May 2022, accessed via: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2083311/middle-east>. See also "Oil, Steel Industry Workers Join Strikes In Iran", *Iran International*, 8 November 2022, accessed via: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202211082635>.

248. "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Iran", U.S. Department of State, Bureau on Counterterrorism, accessed via: <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/iran/>.

249. "Mapping the IRGC's Global Activity, 1979–present", *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, accessed via: <https://institute.global/policy/irgc-global-tracker>.

250. Steven Erlanger, "Iranian Diplomat Is Convicted in Plot to Bomb Opposition Rally in France", *New York Times*, 4 February 2021, accessed via: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/world/europe/iranian-diplomat-convicted-bomb-plot.html>; Hansard HC Deb vol. 716 cols. 694-695, 21 June 2022.

251. "Russia", *Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament* (HC 632, 21 July 2020), 2.

252. Amy Teibel, "Iran's Rouhani Says U.S. Sanctions Cost Country \$200 Billion", *Bloomberg*, 31 December 2019, accessed via: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-31/iran-s-rouhani-says-u-s-sanctions-cost-country-200-billion>.

capacity.<sup>253</sup> Iranian cash is undoubtedly present in the British financial system despite sanctions pressure. Between 2007 and 2011, Standard Chartered – the British headquartered bank and Systemically Important Financial Institution – laundered \$240 million (approximately £200 million) for Iranian actors.<sup>254</sup> In 2018, the NCA arrested Iranian money-laundering kingpin Seyed Sajjad Shahidian in London in cooperation with the FBI.<sup>255</sup> The UK’s globally relevant financial institutions are an excellent tool to pressure Iran, and must be actualised more effectively. Moreover, since Iran has used the UK to move money in the past, greater pressure within the UK would further stress Iranian cashflow.

HM Treasury should establish a legitimately integrated executive enforcement arm that resembles the US’ Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). The UK does have an agency that is meant to resemble OFAC, the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI), stood up in 2015 in a manner that explicitly mirrored OFAC. However, there are several key differences.

OFSI, as an arm of HM Treasury, does not have an intelligence relationship with an in-house agency. By contrast, OFAC is part of the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (TFI), which has its own intelligence element, the Office of Intelligence and Analysis, with its own international presence. By contrast, HM Treasury must rely on intelligence from the National Crime Agency’s Financial Intelligence Unit (UKFIU) and, when applicable, intelligence gained from other departments, including FCDO.<sup>256</sup> The NCA has some international presence and is reasonably resourced. However, there is no dedicated FININT international network that feeds into UK sanctions enforcement, unlike the OFAC-OTFI relationship. Moreover, sanctions identification and enforcement is bifurcated – although OFSI prosecutes sanctions, it does so only upon the direction of “sponsoring departments”, typically the FCDO and the Home Office.<sup>257</sup> Hence sanctions are one of many “tools in the toolkit” for counterterrorism, not a strategic capacity in their own right that should be guided by a coherent strategy for implementation.

Moreover, OFSI is perceived as ineffective because it lacks clear enforcement powers. OFAC has the authority to prosecute aggressively the U.S. sanctions regime. The Executive sets general guidelines and targets, but OFAC, working with OTFI, has a reputation as a remarkably agile agency that doggedly tracks down sanctions targets and is adaptable to new circumstances.<sup>258</sup>

OFSI has gained some powers in the past nine months, namely the ability to publicise recent financial transactions in violation of sanctions and a reduced burden of proof for issuing fines.

Nevertheless, OFSI requires far greater resourcing and staff. As it stands, only 70 staff work for OFSI.<sup>259</sup> On average, fewer than ten staff can assist British companies in navigating sanctions regulations. This is despite a sevenfold increase in Russia-related sanctions over the past year. HM Treasury needs to expand OFSI, leveraging the talent of the UK’s financial and legal sector to build an organisation with legitimate enforcement

253. Simon Kerr, Andrew England, and Najmeh Bozorgmer, “Iran’s economy slumps as US sanctions pile on the pain”, *Financial Times*, 29 April 2019, accessed via: <https://www.ft.com/content/ac599cf4-6a72-11e9-80c7-60ee53e6681d>; Andrew Hanna, “Sanctions 5: Trump’s ‘Maximum Pressure’ Targets”, *USIP*, 3 March 2021, accessed via: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/mar/03/sanctions-5-trumps-maximum-pressure-targets>.

254. “Standard Chartered Bank Admits to Illegally Processing Transactions in Violation of Iranian Sanctions and Agrees to Pay More Than \$1 Billion”, *US Department of Justice*, 9 April 2019, accessed via: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/standard-chartered-bank-admits-illegally-processing-transactions-violation-iranian-sanctions>.

255. “Iranian who ran payment platform for cyber criminals arrested in UK”, *National Crime Agency*, 17 October 2020, accessed via: <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/iranian-who-ran-payment-platform-for-cyber-criminals-arrested-in-uk>.

256. This is not a new issue. See Koos Couvée, “FATF Criticizes ‘Deliberate’ Limitation of UK Financial Intelligence Unit”, *MoneyLaundering.Com*, 30 October 2018, accessed via: <https://www.moneylaundering.com/news/fatf-criticizes-deliberate-limitation-of-uk-financial-intelligence-unit/>.

257. Jonathan Hall, *Report of the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation on the Operation of the Counter Terrorism (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018* (December 2022), 1.15.

258. Ethan Kessler, “Working Paper: How Economic Sanctions are Used in U.S. Foreign Policy”, *Chicago Council on Global Affairs* (March 2022), 6-10.

259. Kalyeena Makortoff, “UK office in charge of Russia sanctions has just 70 staff, says director”, *The Guardian*, 22 June 2022, accessed via: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jun/22/uk-office-charge-russia-sanctions-just-70-staff-director>.

capacity. HM Treasury should plan to hire at least 100 more staff permanently tasked to OFSI, ideally reaching 200 staff in the next 18 months. Moreover, the NCA and OFSI should establish a liaison programme in which around a dozen UKFIU officers are attached to OFSI directly to give OFSI a more robust internal intelligence capacity.

### Counterterrorism:

The UK has a whole-of-government approach to counterterrorism that it has fine-tuned over the past 20 years of operations against al-Qaeda, IS, and other extremist groups.<sup>260</sup>

The infrastructure for these actions already exists. It is clear that MI5, MI6, and their foreign counterparts are already live to the threat of Iranian subversion. It explains Ken McCallum's November 2022 statement on the Iran threat and, more recently, Metropolitan Police Counterterrorism lead Matt Jukes' statement that 15 Iranian plots have been foiled in the past year.<sup>261</sup>

The UK currently lacks a whole-of-government approach to counterterrorism questions, which makes responding to Iran's networks extraordinarily difficult, as the threat from the IRI cuts across terrorism, illicit finance, and counternarcotics/organised crime issues. The UK has some experience with a whole-of-government approach to a hybrid threat. During the counter-IS campaign, the UK fused capabilities from FCDO, the then-independent DFID, MOD, the Security and Secret Intelligence Service, and the Home Office more generally to respond to the threat the jihadist group posed.

Iran's threat to the UK is far more comprehensive than that of IS, given Iran's resources, global reach, and willingness to manipulate the British and European Muslim community for its own ends. Indeed, any regional escalation will involve a significant domestic element. Major protests are probable as Iran mobilises its British affiliates, while violence against British Jews – including terrorist attacks on Synagogues, Jewish organisations, and the Israeli embassy – are also possible.

To respond, the UK needs to integrate once again all elements of national power in a series of contact groups on Iran. The point here is not that the NCA will deter Iran. Rather, forewarning of regional escalation can allow the UK to prepare for domestic blowback and far more rapidly identify and mitigate Iranian-derived threats to British citizens and actions on British soil in the event of escalation. Additional police and security attention must be paid, in particular, to dissident Iranian media. Iran International, the notable Iranian opposition network, will relocate from London because of terrorist threats.<sup>262</sup> A special Iran task force should be created to address specifically the threat the IRGC poses to similar dissident networks. The language programmes recommended for the FCDO and BBC to expand their regional coverage should also have a dual purpose to expand the pool of talent Persian linguists that focus on Iran.

Moreover, the UK should reassess its intelligence machinery within government to optimise its operations against the Iran threat. The UK does

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260. Georgina Sinclair, "Confronting terrorism: British Experiences past and present", *Crime, History and Societies*, 18:2 (2014), 117-122.

261. Mark Townsend and Geneva Abdul, "Met police and MI5 foil 15 plots by Iran against British or UK-based 'enemies'", *The Guardian*, 18 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/feb/18/met-police-mi5-foil-15-iranian-plots-against-british-or-uk-based-enemies>.

262. Alix Culbertson, "Iran's most senior diplomat summoned to Foreign Office again after assassination threats to UK journalists", *Sky*, 20 February 2023, accessed via: <https://news.sky.com/story/irans-most-senior-diplomat-summoned-to-foreign-office-again-after-assassination-threats-to-uk-journalists-12816000>.

have a professional head of intelligence, the Head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation, who is dual-hatted as the chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee.<sup>263</sup> This system, however, is far less robust than that in the U.S., which benefits from the centralised control of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, a Cabinet-level position that has executive authority over the entire U.S. Intelligence Community. Empowering the head of the JIO in this respect, and perhaps even elevating the JIO's head to the level of the UK National Security Advisor – and thereby linking intelligence far more directly to the Cabinet Office – would allow for better cross-agency coordination and ensure long-term threat reduction against an Iran challenge that combines elements of a foreign intelligence actor and a terrorist group.<sup>264</sup>

### Legal Modifications:

#### THE GREY ZONE

Modern international law rests upon a binary between peace and war, legality and illegality, and state and non-state actors. In each case, there is a clear demarcation between one type of international agent or state of interaction and another. Al-Qaeda is not a state, organised *criminal groups* are *criminal groups*, and the West, despite its assistance to Ukraine, is not directly at war with Russia.

The grey zone is the space that exists between different legal states. It has two implications *vis-a-vis* Iran.

First, Iranian strategy typically remains within the military-strategic grey zone, the space between active warfare and low-level competition. Military power is relevant in the grey zone, particularly through proxies, intelligence operations, and special forces activity. But Iran remains within the grey zone, avoiding a direct military confrontation with the Gulf States, Israel, Jordan, the U.S., and the UK despite its active strategic pressure. Iranian objectives are military in nature – they replicate the results of a standard military operation – even if they are not achieved by traditional military means.

Second, the Iranian state is a grey zone entity. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a state that claims the rights and privileges as any other state, including sovereign borders and participation at international organisations. But the Islamic Republic of Iran is also a transnational expansionist entity with revolutionary objectives, intending to export the 1979 Islamic Revolution throughout the Middle East and, in time, the world. It also links with a variety of criminal enterprises to maintain cashflow under sanctions pressure in a manner far more formalised than that of any other state. Hence Iran is a grey zone entity that operates strategically within the grey zone.

The British legal system rests upon a peace-war binary that severely restricts the way in which the UK can respond to the IRI threat. Breaking the peace-war binary requires an intellectual shift that also began in the counter-IS campaign. Military circles began to accept this in the mid-2010s, when the post-Iraq and Afghanistan generation joined public discourse. Shifting away from this binary is fundamental if the UK is to respond to Iranian actions. Legally speaking, there are three steps to be taken to allow the UK to act in a grey-zone situation.

263. "Joint Intelligence Organisation", Gov.UK, accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/joint-intelligence-organisation>.

264. "Office of the Director of National Intelligence", DNI.Gov, accessed via: <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/what-we-do>.



First, the UK should identify a proper proscription vehicle to undermine the IRGC's operational space in the UK. The UK should use the National Security Bill to extend proscription-esque limitations to the IRGC and other IRI-linked organisations without employing the Terrorism Act (2000).

The ongoing Proscription debate demonstrates the degree to which there is legislative appetite for more aggressive action on the Iran question. However, the Terrorism Act (2000) is the wrong vehicle for this legislation. The Terrorism Act's proscription powers would be extraordinarily useful when applied to Iranian-linked organisations. They would allow the UK, for example, to use police powers against suspected Iranian affiliates without actual proof of an active pro-Iranian plot, investigate and suspend operations at Iranian-linked front companies, and do the same for Iranian-affiliated organisations posing as civic groups or religious institutions.

However, the Terrorism Act is written to apply to non-state groups. This has a sound legal logic. Non-state actors do not receive the institutional protections of states for understandable reasons. Even if they resemble states, as IS did during 2014-2017, extending to non-state groups similar rights to state would be extraordinarily problematic for international law.<sup>265</sup> States can commit terrorist acts – Russia's civilian strike campaign in Ukraine, along with its brutality against Ukrainian citizens in occupied areas, certainly constitutes terrorism. Yet using the same legal vehicle that empowers the UK government to respond to non-state terrorist activity to counter state action risks unduly reducing the distinction between state and non-state actors, with thorny long-term legal consequences for the UK's terrorism enforcement. The solution is to place a proscription-style set of capabilities within some other legislative vehicle, most easily the National Security Bill, and use that to empower the UK government to limit Iranian activity. This would provide the same benefits as proscription while avoiding the potential legal issues that proscribing the IRGC as a terrorist organisation.

Second, the UK should view regulation as a strategic instrument. It should have its major regulatory authorities more aggressively enforce basic regulations to ensure sanctions compliance and limit Iranian financial access. Much of Iranian cashflow is illegal but below the threshold of actively-prosecuted crime. The NCA and MI5 lack the resourcing to prosecute all Iranian illicit finance. However, British regulatory bodies can modify their practices to increase the cost to British organisations that work with Iranian affiliates. For example, the Financial Reporting Council (FRC) could begin to investigate much more aggressively suspected accountancy violations.<sup>266</sup> This would require not new powers, but an actual mandate to prosecute various breaches of good conduct. Similarly, the Charities Commission could be tasked with equivalent objectives in the Charitable Trust domain, auditing those charities that are most likely to have links to the Iranian regime or IRGC. This has begun, albeit extremely slowly, with the Charity Commission's investigation of the Maida Vale Islamic Centre of England.<sup>267</sup> Companies House would also be a particularly fruitful line of pressure. Since February 2022, Parliament introduced new legislation that

265. See Johnathan Hall, *Hidden Implications: Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Terrorism Proscription* (Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, 11 January 2023), accessed via: <https://terrorismlegislation-reviewer.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/IRGC-Note-Jan-23-1.pdf>.

266. Siddharth Venkataramakrishnan and Stephen Morris, "Barclays probed by UK regulator over anti-money laundering systems", *Financial Times*, 10 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.ft.com/content/0a1eb38d-7409-42ba-8098-720ce9eef4d5>.

267. "Regulator launches inquiry into Islamic Centre of England", *Charity Commission*, 22 November 2022, accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/regulator-launches-inquiry-into-islamic-centre-of-england>.



requires foreign companies to reveal ownership and financing when they purchase UK property.<sup>268</sup> However, despite these new regulations, some 18,000 foreign companies have ignored registration requirements, with no legal consequences.<sup>269</sup> By actually resourcing and directing regulatory bodies like the FRC, Charities Commission, and Companies House to fulfil their remit and prosecute and fine those entities that violate UK law, the freedom of action for Iranian and other illicit financial action would be sharply curtailed.

Third, the UK should disrupt the Iranian dark tanker fleet by increasing the regulatory pressure on British corporate engagement with potential illicit buyers and transporters of Iranian oil. Under U.S. sanctions pressure, Iran has created a “dark tanker” fleet, a fleet of petrochemical-carrying ships that are typically older, owned through various shell companies, and often travel with their Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders off to prevent tracking as they carry sanctions oil and gas.<sup>270</sup> Russia and Venezuela, along with Iran, maintain the global dark tanker fleet, the ships of which are often in disrepair.<sup>271</sup> The dark tanker fleet includes a significant number of ships that are simply unregistered and uninsured. But one method of sanctions avoidance is to transfer illicit oil from a dark ship to another ship and then transport the product to port.<sup>272</sup> The UK can crack down on Iranian – and Russian – dark tankers in two ways. First, it can improve tracking and verification of any vessels that pass through British waters, given the English Channel remains a major conduit for Russian, and by extension Iranian, dark tankers. Second, it can task the UK Maritime Agency to more aggressively review merchant flag applications. Dark tankers typically operate under flags of convenience, and the UK’s overseas territories can often provide as flags of convenience. Hence a more aggressive regulatory effort on the British side can go a long way to disrupting illicit commerce.

### Military and Intelligence Activity:

The British military lacks the capabilities to act completely independently in the Middle East. However, it does have notable strengths that it can leverage to bolster allied deterrence and ensure long-term strategic capacity. This can increase the confidence of the Gulf States in British and Western military action in the Middle East.

At bottom, the British military has been an expeditionary organisation since 1991. It has built a balanced force that can deploy alongside the U.S. anywhere in the world. No NATO ally could participate in major exercises in the Mediterranean<sup>273</sup>, contribute to NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence mission in Eastern Europe<sup>274</sup>, sustain a joint Carrier Strike Group deployment to the Indo-Pacific that reached South Korea and Japan<sup>275</sup>, maintain continuous at sea nuclear deterrence, and be the second-largest military donor to Ukraine by quantified cost.<sup>276</sup> The Royal Navy and RAF are thoroughly interoperable with their American and NATO counterparts. British officers constantly serve on joint staffs, and British aircraft are quite literally interchangeable with American aircraft on combat missions.<sup>277</sup> Moreover, the UK’s FIVE EYES participation affords it with truly global

268. See *Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022*, accessed via: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/10/contents>; see also “Register of Overseas Entities”, Gov.UK, 13 January 2023, accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/register-of-overseas-entities>.

269. Nassos Stylianou, Will Dahlgreen and Alison Benjamin, “UK property register: What three luxury homes reveal about who owns UK real estate”, BBC, 7 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-64536926>.

270. Jan Stockbruegger, “Russia’s using ‘dark’ tankers to evade Western oil sanctions”, *Washington Post*, 8 December 2022, accessed via: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/12/08/russia-oil-sanctions-tankers-safety/>.

271. Greg Miller, “Welcome to the dark side: The rise of tanker shipping’s ‘shadow fleet’”, *FreightWaves*, 9 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.freightwaves.com/news/welcome-to-the-dark-side-the-rise-of-tanker-shippings-shadow-fleet>.

272. Daniel Boffey, “‘Dark activities’ of Russian-linked oil tankers have doubled, analysis shows”, *The Guardian*, 6 December 2022, accessed via: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/06/dark-activities-of-russian-linked-oil-tankers-has-doubled-analysis-shows>.

273. Alie Peter Neil Galeon, “UK Forces Hold ‘Largest’ Joint Amphibious Exercise in Cyprus”, *The Defense Post*, 14 October 2022, accessed via: <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/10/14/uk-amphibious-exercise-cyprus/>.

274. “British Contingent with NATO EFP Battlegroup Estonia Showcases Advanced Artillery Capabilities”, NATO, 1 December 2022, accessed via: <https://mncne.nato.int/newsroom/news/2022/british-contingent-with-nato-efp-battlegroup-estonia-showcases-advanced-artillery-capability-during-exercise-abu-walk>.

275. Nick Childs, “UK Carrier Strike capability: where next?” *IJSS*, 7 January 2022, accessed via: <https://www.ijss.org/blogs/military-balance/2022/01/uk-carrier-strike-capability-where-next>.

276. Clare Mills, “Military assistance to Ukraine since the Russian invasion”, *House of Commons Library* (Research Briefing 9477, 21 February 2023, 7-15).

277. “Indispensable allies: US, NATO and UK Defence relations”, *House of Commons Defence Committee* (19 June 2018).

intelligence access, a strategic capacity to which it contributes through its world-class intelligence service and diplomatic network.

Additionally, the Ukraine War has reduced Russia's immediate threat to Europe and the UK, while Eastern Europe's military buildup and the expansion of Scandinavian NATO blunts the short-term threat to the North Atlantic and GIUK Gap. There is a brief window of opportunity, then, during which the British Armed Forces need be less concerned with European and homeland defence. The UK government should actualise this window, while also leveraging the British military's expeditionary capabilities before future force structure modifications erode them.

Moreover, given the deterioration of the Middle East's status quo, British military and intelligence activity must be directed towards reestablishing deterrence: the UK should raise the cost of Iranian regional actions while also, alongside its regional and international allies, rebuilding a legitimate deterrence against Iranian escalation.

What is needed, then, is less a transformation of capabilities, but their reorientation towards a new mission – countering the threat from Iran and deterring Iranian regional escalation. The five recommendations listed below are meant to improve short and long-term deterrence and allow the UK to operate as part of a coalition, with recognition of the capability limits the British military currently faces.

First, MOD and FCDO should articulate the UK's Middle East Policy in the context of the Indo-Pacific Tilt, demonstrating the long-term need to invest in Western Indian Ocean basing. The Indo-Pacific Tilt should remain the backstop of UK strategy. It is the first recognition of an actual Eurasian-wide strategic framework that a British government has articulated since the early Cold War.<sup>278</sup> Rhetorically, the Indo-Pacific does not include the Middle East. But the Middle East is the geographic anchor for the Indo-Pacific trade system because Indo-Pacific-to-European trade passes through the Middle East's littorals, either overland via a major port or by sea through the Suez-Indian Ocean route. Moreover, Middle Eastern bases will be crucial for sustainment during any major Indo-Pacific deployment. The U.S. understands this, and hence has maintained a robust Middle East base network despite its shifting emphasis towards the Pacific's island chains.<sup>279</sup> The role the Middle East can play in an Indo-Pacific Tilt as the backstop for any long-term Indo-Pacific strategy should be properly articulated.

Second, treat 'Attack the Network' as a declared capacity: a pan-Executive team pulling all national levers in a coordinated manner to defeat a threat across its breadth and depth. The UK should emulate British approaches to the counter-IS campaign and other successful network-centric counterterrorism operations. There is recent evidence that active pressure on Iran disrupts Iranian decision-making and establishes a degree of deterrence. Most recently, the US – and to a degree the UK – imposed direct costs on Iranian action between 2018 and 2020. The US' "Maximum Pressure" campaign, culminating in the killing of IRGC Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani and Kataib Hezbollah leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, legitimately disrupted Iranian strategy. The Iranian national security establishment was so afraid of a

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278. "1960 Defence White Paper", accessed via: <http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/small/cab-129-100-c-14.pdf>

279. Gabriel Collins, "A Maritime Oil Blockade Against China—Tactically Tempting but Strategically Flawed," *Naval War College Review*, 71:2 (Spring 2018), 50-59; see also Philip Loft, John Curtis, and Matthew Ward, "China and the US in the Middle East: Iran and the Arab Gulf", *House of Commons* (Research Briefing, 26 August 2022), 20-25.

follow-on attack that it mistook Ukrainian Airlines Flight 752 for a hostile aircraft.<sup>280</sup> Moreover, Iran's response in Operation MARTYR SOLEIMANI was extraordinarily limited, undeniably because of the US carrier strike group deployed off Iran's coast.<sup>281</sup>

Yet these events, again, were the culmination of a broader set of actions that included, on the US' part, an anti-network campaign that disrupted Iranian finances and freedom of movement. Deterrence stemmed from a combination of day-to-day actions and the threat of decisive force if Iran were to escalate. The public kinetic moves like the Soleimani strike were only a small aspect of a much broader campaign. This campaign included a comprehensive suite of sanctions that went beyond just financial intelligence, including also the ability to identify Iranian cooperation abroad. They also involved a major British regional deployment to Oman, which when placed alongside the UK's public cooperation with Saudi Arabia in 2018, implied potential military coordination against Iran if Tehran were to escalate.

Deterring Iran today requires both types of responses, the day-to-day activities that harm Iran's international network and the potential to deliver decisive force if Iran escalates against British allies. The UK has experience with both sorts of activities, but particularly with the first type. During the counter-IS campaign, MoD stood up a relatively secretive unit of financial specialists, recruited from the City of London, and tasked with tracing and identifying IS financial flows.<sup>282</sup> The unit still exists, but it should be made a permanent force with divisions that counter multiple adversaries, including Iran. This would link directly with the above recommendations to ensure more robust regulatory enforcement on Iranian-related issues to tighten the sanctions regime more broadly. The UK can take the lead in particular on screening and identifying Iranian technological partnerships. UK academic institutions have unwittingly helped Iran develop the loitering munitions it now exports to Russia, while Iran buys a number of loitering munition components abroad.<sup>283</sup> Meanwhile, Western technology appears in downed Iranian loitering munitions, indicating Iranian sanctions evasion goes beyond financial activities.<sup>284</sup> By imposing specific production requirements on certain products like various microchips, engine parts, and sorts of propellant and explosives, the UK can trace products through the sanctions evasion chain and limit off Iranian access to Western technology. Moreover, new regulations are not meant to limit or modify the actual products in question. Rather, they are meant to tag exports that could wind up in Iranian hands to make their retrospective identification easier.

280. "The Downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752: Factual Analysis", *Global Affairs Canada* (Forensic Examination and Assessment Team, 24 June 2021), 35-37.

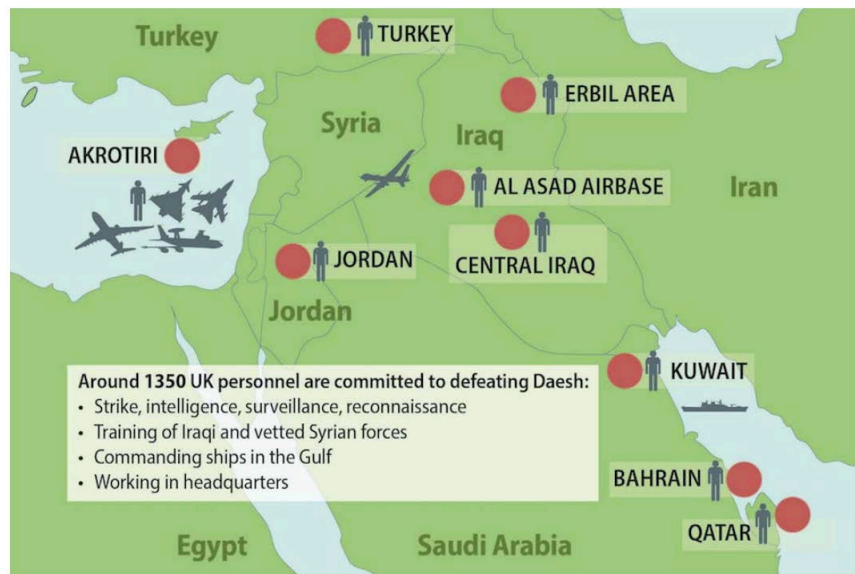
281. Jim Garamone, "Trump: No Casualties in Iranian Missile Attack, U.S. Won't Allow Nuclear Iran", *U.S. Department of Defense*, 8 January 2020, accessed via: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2052632/trump-no-casualties-in-iranian-missile-attack-us-wont-allow-nuclear-iran/>; see also "USNI News Fleet and Marine Tracker: Jan. 6, 2020", *USNI*, last updated 16 January 2020, accessed via: <https://news.usni.org/2020/01/06/usni-news-fleet-and-marine-tracker-jan-6-2020>.

282. Helen Warrell, "Secretive MoD 'banking' unit helps UK wage economic warfare", *FT*, 22 October 2021, accessed via: <https://www.ft.com/content/af703b19-7e1e-47b0-83fc-4d58d5b4da10>.

283. Gabriella Swerling and Louisa Clarence-Smith, "The 11 UK universities accused of helping to develop Iran's 'suicide drones'", *The Telegraph*, 8 June 2023, accessed via: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/06/08/drones-cambridge-iran-raf-ukraine-suicide-universities/>.

284. "Explainer: American Parts in Iranian Drones", *USIP*, 1 March 2023, accessed via: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/mar/01/explainer-american-parts-iranian-drones>.

FIGURE 8: MAP OF BRITISH MIDDLE EASTERN BASES



Map of UK contribution to the fight against Daesh/ISIS, [Ministry of Defence](#), 27 September 2019

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8794/CBP-8794.pdf> (screen shot from p2 of HoC briefer)

Third, the UK military should expand the capabilities that are necessary to support a multinational expeditionary operation to deter Iranian escalation in the long-term, thereby reinforcing deterrence. Budgetary, programmatic, and strategic choices have created a British military less capable than it was in 2018, the last time it deployed significant assets to the Gulf. The British Army has divested itself of many of the capabilities it deployed in 2018, cutting deep into land force equipment stocks, partly to transfer crucial weapons to Ukraine.<sup>285</sup> Strategically speaking, this was the correct choice. However, of equal relevance is the RAF and Royal Navy’s persistent downsizing over the past five years, a result of long-term budgetary and bureaucratic issues.

The RAF will retire its C-130J fleet in mid-2023 without making up the loss of 14 strategic transport aircraft over two years by adding an equivalent capability to the A400 fleet – and without providing UK Special Forces with an immediate bridge deployment capability. The RAF has explored the possibility of adding six more A400 transports, but there is as of yet no funding for them.<sup>286</sup> This reduces the British military’s ability to surge regionally. During a surge, the military would need to rely on slower, more exposed sealift assets to move materiel into theatre. If British bases in the Gulf were used, these assets could be exposed to Iranian harassment in the Bab-el-Mandeb.

Similarly, the Royal Navy has cut a frigate from the fleet, retiring the HMS Montrose in April 2023.<sup>287</sup> The Type-23 frigates have been kept in service well past life expectancy as the Type-26 programme experienced cost overruns and bureaucratic developmental delays. The Royal Navy’s response, after years of waiting and a life-extension upgrade to the Type-23s, is to keep phasing out the Type-23s considering their severe fatigue

285. Claire Mills, “Military assistance to Ukraine since the Russian invasion”, *House of Commons* (23 May 2023), accessed via: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9477/>.

286. Defence Committee: Oral evidence: Work of the Chief of the Air Staff, HC 1108 (1 February 2023), Q140, accessed via: <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/12649/html/>.

287. “Navy bids farewell to ‘a fine ship’ as stalwart frigate HMS Montrose is retired”, *Royal navy*, 17 April 2023, accessed via: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2023/april/17/20230417-montrose-decommissioned>.

and the cost of additional hull recertification programmes.<sup>288</sup> Indeed, phasing out the *Montrose* was a watershed moment, since the Navy had yet to retire a ship that had undergone a life-cycle extension. The issue is, with the slow pace of the Type-26 programme, the reduction of the Type-26 purchase from 13 to eight ships, and the still-unclear state of the Type-31 programme, the UK will for the coming half-decade at least lack a robust surface combatant screen for major force deployments. Considering the relevance of air and missile defence in the Middle East and the variety of missions the British military must meet, the Royal Navy in particular will struggle without a capability modification.

The implication is that the UK must invest in the specific baseline capabilities it needs to remain a credible contributor to a major international force. The objective of British policy should be to return to the deployability of 2018, when the UK deployed significant, if relatively light, forces to Oman under SAIF SAREEA. The precise numbers of equipment, particularly in the ground forces, are beside the point. What is relevant, rather, is the UK has the heavy lift capabilities and naval escort screen to facilitate a deployment. Iran would notice these investments – for example the procurement of more transport aircraft or better funding to refit and crew the remaining Type-26 fleet – since they demonstrate a long-term commitment to British regional presence and deployability.

Fourth, the UK should make a handful of specific changes to its military posture that, in the short-term, could maximise its ability to operate as part of a regional coalition without adding significant financial strain. This demands careful consideration of currently deployable assets, maximisation of capabilities that do not fit other operational requirements, and the employment of more advanced systems that reduce costs. RAF Akrotiri should be the initial hub for UK deployments since it is the only UK-exclusive regional base. This also makes it a potential Iranian target, since if Iran were to escalate directly against the UK, it could attack Akrotiri rather than al-Udeid, home to British and American forces. Hence in general when possible, and particularly during periods of crisis, the UK should deploy missile defence capabilities to RAF Akrotiri, particularly through a Type-45 destroyer, which is in line with historical British deployments.<sup>289</sup>

Meanwhile, several specific capabilities can be used to improve the UK's presence and capability in the Gulf. The UK's legacy UAS programmes are increasingly unfit for British tactical and operational needs. However, they can be applied to Middle Eastern ISR. The UK's Reaper, and incoming Protector, UAS are both high-cost, high-value assets that are not survivable in a contested battlefield. Yet both, and in particular the incoming Protector, can operate advanced long-range maritime sensors. The RAF is set to purchase 16 Protectors to replace its 10 Reapers.<sup>290</sup> These Protectors, particularly equipped with maritime-specific sensors, can provide ISR support to British and allied forces in the Gulf, monitoring Iranian maritime movements at a standoff range. This would help the UK screen any air or naval forces it deploys to the Gulf, reducing the vulnerability the capacity limits of the RAF and Royal Navy discussed above would impose.

288. Defence Committee: *Oral evidence: National Shipbuilding Strategy Refresh*, HC 1108 (31 January 2023), Q61, Q83, Q84, accessed via: <https://committees.parliament.uk/oral-evidence/12651/html/>.

289. "Navy destroyer completes epic 2022 mission", Royal Navy, 28 November 2022, accessed via: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2022/november/28/221128-navy-destroyer-completes-epic-2022-mission>; "Destroyer Duncan departs on six-month Mediterranean mission", Royal Navy, 9 June 2023, accessed via: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2023/june/19/20230619-destroyer-duncan-departs-on-six-month-mediterranean-mission>.

290. "£195m contract signed for 13 additional RAF Protectors", Royal Air Force, 22 July 2021, accessed via: <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/195m-contract-signed-for-13-additional-raf-protectors/>.



Moreover, considering the loiter time of Protector UAS, the UK could deploy only two to four UAS and generate effective impact. Similarly, the UK's P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, while in high demand, could be used to supplement the Protectors as an aerial screening element. Finally, the UK's permanent Middle Eastern naval presence under Operation KIPION, primarily a mine countermeasures mission, would be improved with the deployment of unmanned surface vessels. The Royal Navy is already using KIPION as a testing ground for USVs, given the deployment of the autonomous minehunter RNMB *Harrier* earlier this year.<sup>291</sup> Accelerating these efforts would improve the defensive screen around any British and allied force deployment while also reducing British operational costs.

**Recommendations two through four are not transformational, high-cost proposals, but rather ways to maximise the forces the UK already has.** The UK can demonstrate credible short-term presence and long-term commitment, thereby demonstrating its leadership of a deterrence effort and indicating the stakes of any escalation on Iran's part. Moreover, greater public and private commitment would give the UK greater bargaining power with its regional partners, potentially triggering financial commitments to sustain British presence.

Fifth, the FCDO – in concert with MoD – should begin a review of its Middle East evacuation procedures in light of the chaos surrounding recent evacuations. The unexpected collapse of Afghanistan in August 2021 triggered a major evacuation effort under Operation PITTING, one that was reasonably successful in evacuating British citizens, but that was nevertheless extraordinarily difficult and encountered bureaucratic issues. For example, vetting evacuees was not a properly delineated task, meaning FCDO and MoD often missed Afghans who had worked with the British military in Afghanistan, and who were therefore eligible for evacuation and were at serious risk of reprisal if left in-country.<sup>292</sup> In April-May 2023, meanwhile, British evacuation efforts were similarly chaotic when civil war escalated in Sudan. The UK ultimately evacuated nearly 2,500 individuals over eight days. Again, bureaucratic issues and initial coordination problems with Germany and France delayed evacuation efforts – while British nationals were largely removed successfully, the whole affair remained tense.<sup>293</sup> An evacuation from the Gulf during regional escalation would be far messier, and require the UK to account for an order of magnitude more British nationals, along with a number of dependents, diplomatic staff, and other relevant individuals. Reviewing evacuation procedures today can insulate the UK from a dangerous situation in the near future, where it must extract tens of thousands of citizens on the fly.

291. "British Navy announces arrival of autonomous mine hunter in Gulf", *Naval Technology*, 14 February 2023, accessed via: <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/british-autonomous-mine-hunter-gulf/>.

292. *Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (House of Commons Defence Committee, 1 February 2023), 44-50.

293. "UK completes largest and longest Western evacuation from Sudan", FCDO, 4 May 2023, accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-completes-largest-and-longest-western-evacuation-from-sudan>.



## Conclusion: The Future of Iran

Considering the nature of the Iran question and the unstable Middle Eastern balance, the UK's immediate policy priorities should be to deter Iranian aggression in concert with regional and international allies. Iranian expansionism and ambition must be contained. However, the UK must also have a broader vision of the Middle East, and of its future relationship with Iran, to which British policy points in the long-term.

Any Iranian domestic developments will be unpredictable considering the robust state of the security services, the opacity of Iranian politics, and the lack of identifiable opposition leadership within Iranian civil society. Undoubtedly, the UK should offer moral – and in some cases tangible – support to individuals and groups that wish to see a freer, fairer, more just Iran. Potential targets for support include the above-discussed Iranian trade union movement, ethnolinguistic minorities within Iran including the Kurdish and Azeri population, women's movements, and where possible, political figures and parties that legitimately embrace pluralist and liberal ideals, as difficult as identifying these individuals may be in Iran's insular political system.

The UK should identify and speak to aspects of the Iranian state's structure that particularly cause Iran's strategic orientation to be disruptive and hostile to British interests and values. The 1979 Constitution that elevates the role of Islamic clerics is a particular target, along with the legal codes that allow the religious police extraordinary latitude against women in Iran – the UK could encourage referenda on both specific brutal items in the Iranian penal code and the 1979 Constitutional wholesale. Nevertheless, Iranian political developments will stem from the Iranian people, not external actors. This is in line with all modern Iranian history, beginning with the Constitutional Revolution.

A clear aspect of British policy, then, should be to prepare for an Iran whose domestic political trajectory would allow it to be reintegrated into the international community. After all, Iran was the first state in the region to develop a modern constitution, one that balanced the Iranian state's historical character with its aspirations to modernisation. Iran has a unique modern political tradition beyond the current Islamic Republic that, if activated properly, can be leveraged as a force for stability and moderation.

Nevertheless, the UK's objective should be, over time, to create an environment in which the Iranian state is *weak enough to be susceptible to domestic pressure*. This requires forcing Iran to redirect resources to simply maintain its presence in the Levant, Yemen, and farther abroad. It also requires

putting Iran on the back foot ideologically by exposing the Iranian regime's crimes to the Iranian people.

Most critically, however, it requires *detering Iranian regional escalation*, regardless of whether Iran obtains nuclear capabilities. A major regional conflict will result in economic disruption to the UK and likely the death of British soldiers and civilians in the region. But it will also result in extensive damage to Iran and its neighbours as the confrontation escalates. General infrastructure, energy infrastructure, and commercial sites throughout the region will be damaged, if not destroyed. Economic damage and social disruption will prime Iran, if not the entire Middle East, for another sustained period of political instability that will complicate, if not prevent, any long-term regional diplomatic efforts.

Hence the imperative of deterrence matters not just for the coming months and years, but for the coming decades. Successful British policy will, alongside the UK's allies, *deter* Iranian escalation indefinitely, allowing for the Iran question to be settled on more favourable terms in the future.

## APPENDIX: THE IRAN AL-QAEDA RELATIONSHIP

Al-Qaeda and Iran are often portrayed as antithetical. The Sunni Jihadist group is bent upon global revolution and sees both non-Muslims and Shia as its enemies. Indeed, Shia are *takfir*, apostates who have renounced Islam, and are therefore in some ways more hated than non-Muslims. Iran, by contrast, is the Islamic world's leading Shia power, the protector of Shia Muslims internationally, and has an intellectually sophisticated theocratic model premised upon Shia jurisprudence.

Despite the ideological divisions between the two groups, however, al-Qaeda and Iran have at minimum a tactically beneficial relationship. Iran has engaged in relationships with non-Shia groups in the past. Palestinian terrorist group Hamas is a Sunni Islamist organisation. Iran has also developed links with the Taliban, despite Iran's sponsorship of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in the 1990s, although Iran's partnership with the Taliban is qualified and tense at times.

Iran's relationship with al-Qaeda runs back to the 1990s, when Iran allowed al-Qaeda to operate training camps on Iranian territory and in Lebanon's Hezbollah-controlled Beqaa Valley. After the 11 September attacks, Iran allowed al-Qaeda members to transit its territory to fight in Afghanistan.

Iran continued to grant al-Qaeda territorial access throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, only revising this policy when its tactical interests in Syria conflicted with al-Qaeda's objectives.

Although the Syrian Civil War disrupted Iran's relationship with al-Qaeda, it has resumed its partnership with the jihadist organisation. Then-Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in a 2021 speech identified Iran's resumed cooperation with al-Qaeda.

Since this point, the evidence has only increased of Iran-al-Qaeda links. In August 2020, Israeli intelligence assassinated Abu Muhammad al-Masri, al-Qaeda's second in command and the orchestrator of the 1998 East Africa Embassy Bombings, in Tehran.

Per American intelligence, al-Masri had lived in Iran since at least 2015, residing in Tehran's affluent Pasdaran district. Moreover, al-Qaeda's *de facto* leader, the Egyptian-born bomb-maker Saif al-Adel – who was behind the 2003 Riyadh Bombings and involved in the kidnapping and murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl – now resides in Iran, according to a UN report confirmed by U.S. intelligence.

Given al-Qaeda's new freedom of action after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and the end of the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars, an expanded relationship with Iran should be exceptionally strategically concerning to the UK.



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