

March 2026

WORLDS APART: BRITISH MUSLIM ATTITUDES ON THE IRAN CONFLICT

A Policy Exchange Research Note

Dr Rakib Ehsan



About the Author

Dr Rakib Ehsan is a British researcher, writer, and commentator of Bangladeshi Muslim heritage who is a Senior Fellow at Policy Exchange. A prominent national authority on matters of immigration, integration, and identity, his work has received support across the political spectrum. Rakib has authored several Policy Exchange reports, including 'The Case for a 2026 Emergency Census in England' (2025), 'A Portrait of Modern Britain: Ethnicity and Religion' (2024), and 'Small-Boats Emergency: Fixing the UK's Broken Asylum System' (2023).



Policy Exchange is the UK's leading think tank. We are an independent, non-partisan educational charity whose mission is to develop and promote new policy ideas that will deliver better public services, a stronger society and a more dynamic economy.

Policy Exchange is committed to an evidence-based approach to policy development and retains copyright and full editorial control over all its written research. We work in partnership with academics and other experts and commission major studies involving thorough empirical research of alternative policy outcomes. We believe that the policy experience of other countries offers important lessons for government in the UK. We also believe that government has much to learn from business and the voluntary sector.

Registered charity no: 1096300.

Trustees

Karan Bilimoria, Alexander Downer, Andrew Feldman, David Harding, Patricia Hodgson, Greta Jones, Andrew Law, Charlotte Metcalf, David Ord, Daniel Posen, Andrew Roberts, William Salomon, Salma Shah, Simon Wolfson, Nigel Wright.

Executive summary and commentary

The surprise US-Israel airstrikes on the Islamic Republic of Iran, which commenced on 28 February 2026, targeted multiple cities across the country – killing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other high-ranking Iranian officials, with the primary aim of regime change. In response, Iran has targeted drone and missile strikes against Israel, American military bases, and what could be perceived as US-allied countries in the Middle East region (such as the United Arab Emirates). Fighting has resumed in southern Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah (an Iran-backed Shi'ite Muslim political party and militant organisation). During the conflict, a Royal Air Force (RAF) base in Cyprus (Akrotiri) was targeted by a drone. While the UK has not participated in any direct attacks on Iran, the airbase in Cyprus has reportedly been used by American U-2 spy planes.¹

Amid the ongoing Iran conflict, British Polling Council (BPC) member JL Partners polled a nationally representative UK sample of 2,223 adults, and an additional sample of 1,031 Muslims in the UK.² Respondents were asked about their views on the military strikes in Iran, the role of UK foreign policy, and their attitudes towards prominent countries in current-day international geopolitics. The fieldwork dates for the survey were 2 – 13 March 2026, with respondents being recruited using an online panel.

The survey reveals that the country generally does not want the UK to become actively and directly involved in the Iran conflict. Nearly half of the British people oppose the UK joining the US-Israel military strikes on Iran, with only 18% supporting it. The most popular position is neutrality (29%), followed by 'diplomatic-only' support for such action (22%). The conflict risks becoming a major cost-of-living issue, with almost 80% believing that energy and petrol prices will rise. Nearly half of the British public are 'very concerned' over the impact that the Iran conflict will have on the cost of living.

¹ Parker, J. (2026), 'War fuels debate in Cyprus over UK military bases', *BBC News*, 8 March. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx2r1xldl1ko>, last accessed: 12 March 2026.

² The nationally representative sample was quota'd and weighted on gender, age, region, education, ethnicity, level of political attention, and 2024 general election vote. The British Muslim sample was quota'd and weighted on gender, age, region, education, and ethnicity. Margin of error +/- 2.1pp on nationally representative headline figures and +/- 3.1pp on British Muslim headline figures.

What the polling also shows is that the conflict is being viewed quite differently by British Muslims when compared with the wider public. While 14% of the general population believed that Iran was not a significant threat before the US-Israel airstrikes, this rises to 45% for British Muslims. Compared to the general population, British Muslims are more likely to cite gaining control of oil supplies as a motive behind the military action against Iran (40% / 15%) and far more likely to consider the strikes as 'definitively wrong' (50% / 17%). There is a profound divergence in how events and developments are being interpreted.

Beyond the Iran conflict, British Muslims also have a broadly different view of the world order and the international system. While 8% of people in the UK view Iran favourably, this rises to nearly two in five people – 39% - among British Muslims. British Muslims have much warmer attitudes towards Iran than towards the United States and Israel, as well as Saudi Arabia. It is worth noting that the US is far from popular with the wider population, with only 23% having a favourable view of the country (and 40% having an unfavourable view). America's standing in the UK is far from solid as it stands. British Muslims are younger, on average, than the UK general population. While younger generations are traditionally linked to stronger forms of disillusionment with Western geopolitics, hostility towards the US and Israel - as well as support for Iran - is significantly greater among UK Muslims of all ages than the youngest group of the wider public in the analysis (18–24-year-olds).

Looking further afield, British Muslims are dramatically less hostile towards both China and Russia when compared with the general public. While 8% of the wider population have a favourable view of Russia, this rises to 29% for British Muslims. Fifteen per cent of the general population have a favourable view of China, rising to 38% for British Muslims. In both cases, the net favourability rating ('favourable' minus 'unfavourable') of British Muslims to Russia and China is positive, whereas for the general population it is strongly negative. This exposes a certain British Muslim scepticism of Western geopolitics, holding relatively favourable views towards countries which could be perceived as having hostile anti-West regimes.

The Iran conflict has reached new terrain in the sense that there is considerable public interest in it. Most of the British public is following events closely, with nearly two-thirds of respondents reporting this – which is very high for a foreign policy issue given the fact that the UK has not been directly involved in the strikes

on Iran. British Muslims are even more engaged, with 81% saying they are following the Iran conflict closely. Compared to the general population, British Muslims are more likely to digest information and material on the conflict from channels such as Qatar-headquartered Al Jazeera, social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, and podcasts/YouTube commentators.

British Muslim attitudes towards the Iran conflict and wider international system

In recent times, British Muslim attitudes towards foreign policy issues have been thrust into the spotlight following the October 7 Hamas-led terrorist attacks on the State of Israel and the subsequent military response by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in Gaza. The response of the 'establishment' parties to Israel-Gaza has fundamentally altered the British Muslim political landscape, with a considerable proportion leaving their traditional party – Labour – in favour of left-wing alternatives such as the Green Party, as demonstrated in the recent parliamentary by-election in the Greater Manchester constituency of Gorton and Denton.³ At the local level, independent Muslim candidates have found much electoral success at the expense of Labour by blending domestic concerns over underperforming public services, a lack of economic opportunities, and a shortage of decent affordable housing, with foreign-policy positions on Palestine (as well as Kashmir).

Fresh polling on the Iran conflict provides further indication that British Muslims, many of whom hold the concept of the *Ummah* – a global Islamic community which transcends national, ethno-racial, and geographical boundaries – very dearly, are in a different space when it comes to foreign-policy preferences and their orientations towards an ever-evolving international system. British Muslim sentiments towards Iran differ considerably to the wider public. Around two in five British Muslims – 39% – hold a favourable view of Iran, dropping to 8% for the wider public. When looking at net favourability ratings ('favourable' minus 'unfavourable') towards Iran, the British Muslim figure is +22 – despite the regime's

³ Curtice, J. (2026), 'Sir John Curtice: Greens' win means future of British politics is more uncertain than ever', *BBC News*, 27 February. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwygpdjq9jjo>, last accessed: 12 March 2026.

heavily militarised crackdown on the recent nationwide demonstrations which resulted in unprecedented massacres. For the general population, it plummets to -42 (a difference of 64 points). While neither the US nor Israel is popular with the British public (net negative favourability ratings of -16 and -22 respectively), British Muslims are notably more hostile towards the two countries behind the military strikes on Iran (corresponding ratings of -41 and -52 respectively). While the wider public is split on whether the assassination of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was justified, British Muslims are overwhelmingly of the view that it was unjustified.

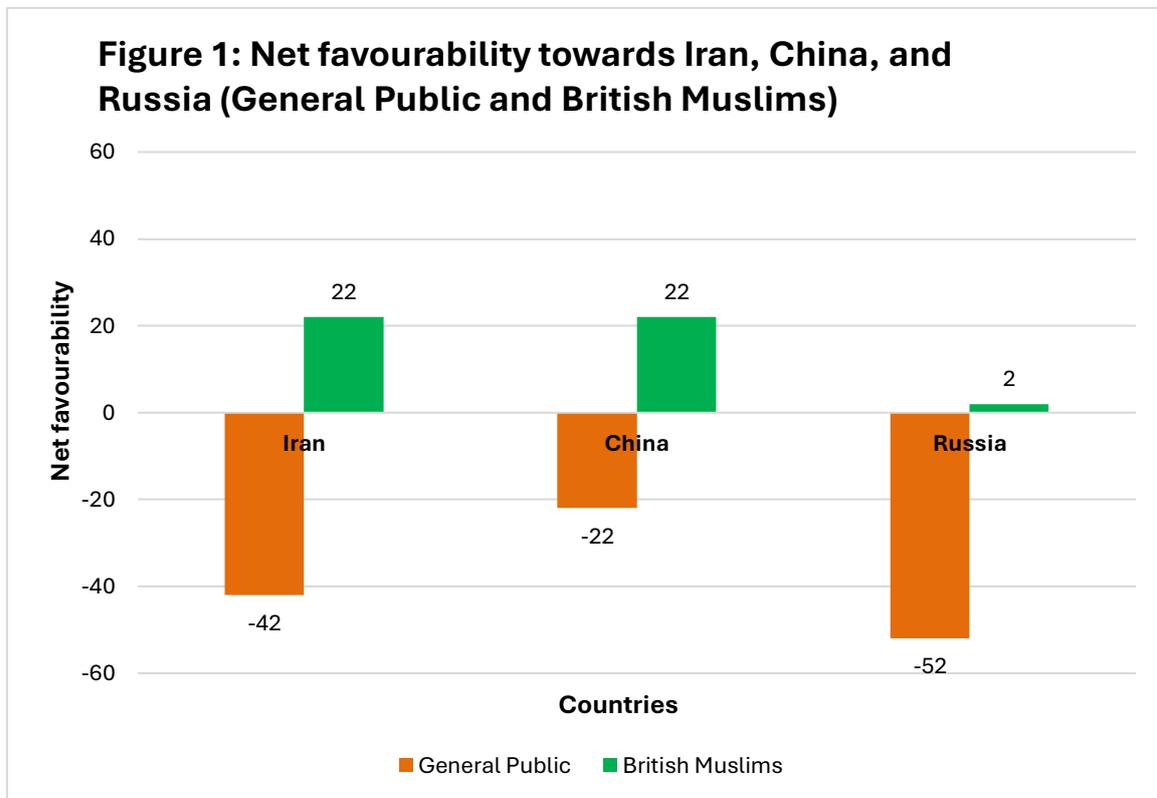
Table 1: “Do you have a favourable view of the following?” (Net favourability)

	General Public	British Muslims
UK	+33	+25
USA	-16	-41
Israel	-22	-52
Iran	-42	+22
Saudi Arabia	-9	+11
Russia	-52	+2
China	-22	+22

The level of support being shown to the Islamic Republic of Iran among British Muslims is especially interesting when denominational realities are considered. While the regime in Iran can be described as a Shi’ite military-theocratic dictatorship, the overwhelming majority of British Muslims are Sunni. According to a March 2024 report published by the Institute for the Impact of Faith in Life (IIFL), 84% of British Muslims are Sunni (a mixture of non-denominational, Deobandi, Barelvi, Salafi, and other denominations).⁴ The proportion of Shia Muslims as part of the wider British Muslim population is in the region of seven to eight per cent (with the remainder in the survey belonging to a non-Sunni, non-Shia sect or preferring not to report being part of a specific denomination). Indeed, British Muslims appear to have warmer views towards Iran than Saudi Arabia – which is further illustration of geopolitical considerations trumping any sense of denominational tribalism (especially British Muslim disillusionment over Saudi

⁴ Ehsan, R. and Scott, J. (2024), ‘The social contribution of British Muslims’, *Institute for the Impact of Faith in Life (IIFL)*, 5 March. Available at: <https://iifl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/The-social-contribution-of-British-Muslims.pdf>, last accessed: 12 March 2026.

Arabia's previous willingness to entertain the normalisation of relations with Israel).



Beyond the conflict, British Muslims are generally less hostile towards countries which seek to re-orient the balance of power and influence away from the western world in the international system – such as China and Russia. The net favourability rating for China among the wider public is -22 – rising to +22 for British Muslims. While the net favourability rating for Russia among the general population is deep into negative territory at -52, it creeps into positive territory for British Muslims at +2. This could be driven by aggressive forms of anti-Americanism among British Muslims – a desire for US international hegemony to be something of the past. There are other plausible factors which may be at play. The most common country of origin among British Muslims is Pakistan, which has traditionally enjoyed close ties with China, with the two countries defining their relationship as an ‘all-weather strategic cooperative partnership’. Meanwhile, Islam holds a high status in Russia. Recognised by law and political leaders as one of Russia’s ‘traditional religions’, Islam is part of Russian historical heritage and subsidised by the government. It is possible that a mixture of geopolitical, religious, and cultural considerations is shaping such perceptions.

British Muslim media consumption of the Iran conflict

British public interest in the Iran conflict is very high for a foreign-policy matter, with 62% people following it closely - rising to 81% for British Muslims. Crucially, and possibly interlinked, British Muslims do not only interpret the Iran conflict differently to the wider public - they are also accessing and digesting their information on it from different places. The wider population overwhelmingly relies on the BBC and legacy broadcast news such as ITV News. Meanwhile, 22% of Muslims in the UK are getting news on the conflict from Qatari-owned Al Jazeera (which drops to just 3% for the general population). It is possible that some British Muslims of Pakistani heritage and Bangladeshi origin consume their news on the Iran conflict from channels such as Geo TV and NTV Bangla. Around a quarter of British Muslims are using Instagram and TikTok for their news and information on the Iran conflict - 26% and 27% respectively (dropping to 10% and 11% for the wider public). Compared to the general population, British Muslims are also more likely to obtain information on the Iran conflict from WhatsApp (14% / 5%) and Podcasts/YouTube commentators (9% / 3%).

Table 2: “Thinking about the conflict involving Iran, Israel and the US, which of the following sources do you most often use for news or information?” (Selected Items)

	General Public	British Muslims
BBC News	61%	56%
ITV News	29%	22%
Sky News	24%	35%
Channel 4 News	11%	15%
Al Jazeera	3%	22%
Facebook	15%	20%
Instagram	10%	26%
TikTok	11%	27%
WhatsApp	5%	14%
Podcast/YouTube Commentators	3%	9%

The diversification of news sources among British Muslims is potentially due to their relatively youthful profile. According to the 2021 Census, the median age across England and Wales was 40 years of old – dropping to 27 years for Muslims across the two home nations.⁵ Of the 3.9 million people who identified as “Muslim” in 2021, 84.5% were aged under 50 years, compared with 62.0% of the overall population of England and Wales.⁶

The evidence points towards the emergence of a highly politically-engaged and technologically-able generation of well-educated British Muslims who branch out well beyond ‘legacy’ and ‘establishment’ sources of news – especially when it comes to international geopolitics and current affairs. It is also worth noting that this younger generation of British-born UK Muslims are more likely to identify as ‘Muslim first and foremost’ when compared to older generations (who are more likely to be foreign-born and have naturally positive orientations towards British democracy due to their direct sustained experience of harsher economic, social, and political climates abroad).⁷ The view on the Iran conflict among the relatively younger British Muslim population is ultimately more likely to be shaped by non-legacy outlets, social media platforms, and online influencers (including so-called ‘podcast bros’). WhatsApp – including family/friend groupchats – also appears to be a relatively popular source of news and information.

Conclusion

The new polling delivered by JL Partners shows that British Muslims differ from the general population in terms of how they have interpreted the Iran conflict and view broader international relations. As well as being notably more hostile towards the United States and Israel, they have much warmer feelings towards

⁵ Office for National Statistics (2023), ‘Religion by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021’, 30 January. Available at:

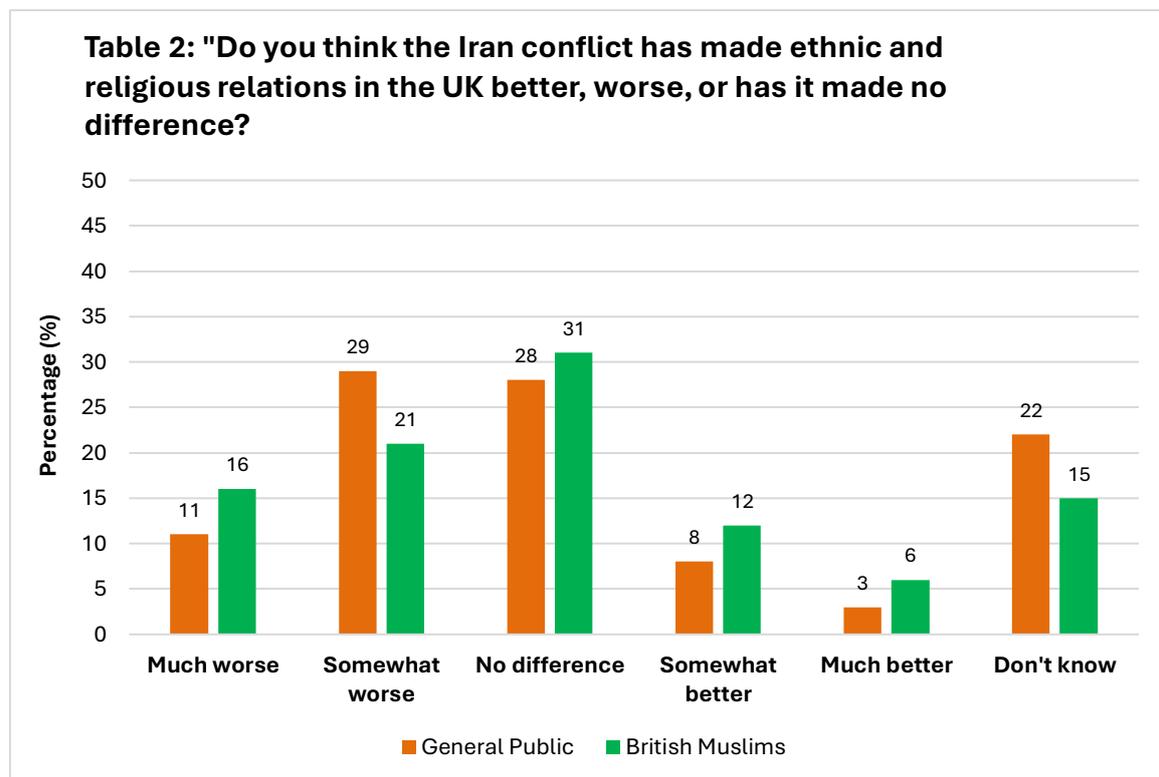
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religionbyageandsexenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=1.,18.6%25%20of%20the%20overall%20population.,> last accessed: 12 March 2026.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Burgess, K. (2025), ‘Most UK Muslims define themselves by faith first’, *The Times*, 31 March.

Available at: https://www.thetimes.com/uk/religion/article/most-uk-muslims-define-themselves-by-faith-first-kp5xlplkm?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWETsqej61b4_2le1hReju5hBZFNCZKbmMF4iH0VnS_stneP6-le9qQ7s24ngqNz-vs%3D&gaa_ts=69b2a24b&gaa_sig=rN5DMGlm6l13lUaG5V5lJm8K4liqFi8k305LyAzmbVf4Mm k2FauXkCfWC9GB97d5wJHtWldINTfuxlEr9QZ-8Q%3D%3D, last accessed: 12 March 2026.

Iran than the wider public do. Part of their overarching anti-Americanism is their dramatically less hostile views on China and Russia. Both can be viewed as revisionist powers seeking to consign American hegemonic power to the dustbin of history. This reveals a separation of sorts between British Muslims and the general population over Western geopolitics. The fresh data also highlights variations in media consumption relating to the Iran conflict, with the relatively youthful Muslim population more likely to get their news and information from less traditional 'non-legacy' sources in the online sphere.



Community relations in the UK are increasingly 'glocal', with local and domestic social cohesion being increasingly shaped by global events such as geopolitical conflicts (especially those containing a decidedly religio-political element). This has been well and truly exposed in the aftermath of October 7. The degree to which the ongoing Iran conflict will spill over into ethno-religious tensions in modern Britain remains to be seen, but two in five members of the UK public believe that it has already made ethnic and religious relations worse in the UK. British politicians, policymakers, and practitioners are faced with the serious challenge of fostering a more cohesive and resilient society in a global environment defined by its volatility and uncertainty.