

**IRAN: A
DARKENING
PICTURE AT HOME
AND ABROAD
LFI POLICY BRIEFING**

LABOUR FRIENDS OF ISRAEL

WORKING TOWARDS A TWO STATE SOLUTION

IRAN: A DARKENING PICTURE AT HOME AND ABROAD

LFI POLICY BRIEFING

CONTRIBUTIONS BY

**BARONESS RAMSAY OF CARTVALE, KASRA AARABI,
MATTHEW LEVITT AND STEVE MCCABE MP**

MAY 2022

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

BY MICHAEL RUBIN

1

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

BY BARONESS RAMSAY OF CARTVALE

2

"THE NEXT STAGE OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION": RAISI'S REGIME AND THE REVOLUTIONARY GUARD

BY KASRA AARABI

8

TEHRAN'S PROXY ARMY: HEZBOLLAH'S REGIONAL ROLE

BY MATTHEW LEVITT

16

IRAN'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD: THE CASE FOR MAGNITSKY SANCTIONS

BY STEVE MCCABE MP

21

FOREWORD

MICHAEL RUBIN, LFI DIRECTOR

I am delighted that LFI is publishing the first of a series of short papers examining some of the main challenges and opportunities facing Israel and the Middle East.

The New Middle East: A Progressive Approach, which we published last summer, had at its core the notion that, for too long, foreign policy debate around the Middle East - especially on the left - has been dominated to an obsessive degree by the tragic conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

As we argued, not only has this disproportionate focus on the world's only Jewish state done absolutely nothing to bring the prospect of peace closer – indeed, we believe that the obsessive demonisation of Israel actively undermines peace – it has also meant that there has been insufficient attention paid to the region as a whole and the significant shifts taking place within it.

Some of these developments – most notably, the Abraham Accords – are undoubtedly positive. Others, however, most definitely are not. This paper looks at perhaps the most important of these: the expansion of Iran's influence and power in the region over the past decade.

The laser-like focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by many in the foreign policy establishment, and elements of the media, has too often allowed this threat to escape the attention it deserves. This paper represents a small contribution towards both correcting this imbalance and providing a more realistic portrait of the challenges an incoming Labour government will face as it shapes its approach towards the Middle East.

At present, the outcome of the nuclear talks in Vienna remains in the balance. Nonetheless, we can say with certainty that the manner in which Tehran has conducted them – especially since President Ebrahim Raisi assumed office last August – underlines the fact that Iran's activities in the region are highly likely to become more troubling in the years ahead.

We have chosen to focus on three interlinked areas which, due to the debate surrounding how to tackle Iran's nuclear programme, are frequently overlooked: the danger posed by Hezbollah, Tehran's principal proxy army; the growing power of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; and the worsening human rights situation in Iran itself. Indeed, the pernicious manner in which the disproportionate international focus on Israel functions is illustrated by the fact that while the UN Human Rights Council has passed 95 condemnatory resolutions against the Jewish state since 2006, it has passed only 11 against Iran. This not only provides an utterly distorted picture, it also allows Tehran to escape the censure it deserves for its appalling human rights record.

This paper does not seek to provide a comprehensive set of policy proposals; instead, we outline five illustrative ideas to suggest what a progressive approach towards Iran might look like.

There are many people we would like to thank for their help in making this pamphlet a reality. Most importantly, we are enormously grateful to our authors – Kasra Aarabi, Matthew Levitt, Steve McCabe; and Baroness Meta Ramsay – for their contributions which are all fascinating and thought-provoking. I also thank the whole LFI office team for their hard work in making this publication a reality.

Finally, we would like to thank all of our supporters, parliamentarians and allies for their continued support and endless encouragement.

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

BARONESS RAMSAY OF CARAVEL

Whatever the fate of the Vienna talks, the west must develop a clear-sighted and comprehensive approach to tackling the multi-faceted challenges posed by Iran

President Joe Biden's pledge to establish a "stronger, longer" nuclear deal with Tehran was always going to be fiendishly difficult. But while the outcome of the Vienna talks may disappoint many of us who wanted to see more extensive changes to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), we must not allow that to distract us from the task ahead: to develop a clear-sighted and comprehensive approach to tackling the multi-faceted challenges posed by Iran.

This paper – the first in a new series from Labour Friends of Israel – seeks to provide an in-depth, expert-led examination of some of those challenges. We don't pretend to have the solutions, but we believe that defining the nature of the problems an incoming Labour government might face in a little over two years is an important first step to devising a policy agenda that can address them.

As we suggested last summer in our publication, *The New Middle East: A Progressive Approach*, the threat presented by Iran isn't simply confined to its nuclear programme. It also includes an expansionist regional agenda – pursued through its support for terrorist groups and proxy armies such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Shiite militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen – and a formidable ballistic missile programme. Nor should we forget that among the victims of the regime are the Iranian people themselves, who have suffered for over four decades under the heel of an authoritarian theocratic government which has scant regard for human rights and crushes dissent with brutal ruthlessness.

IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

This publication seeks to address issues beyond Iran's nuclear programme, but clearly it is intimately connected to those problems. Indeed, one of the criticisms of the JCPOA was that – despite its name – it was not comprehensive enough and that, by providing Iran with sanctions relief without addressing its regional agenda and ballistic missile programme, it simply exacerbated these problems by freeing up funds for the cash-strapped regime to expend on its nefarious activities.

There has been a lot of criticism of the fact that – four years after Donald Trump pulled out of the JCPOA – America seems to be toying with what is, in essence, the flawed agreement which was reached in 2015. This is true, but it's also the case that the Biden administration was bequeathed a weak negotiating hand and faced with a new, hardline, and utterly intransigent government in Iran. Tehran refused to even sit down with the US and negotiate face to face, and raised demands that it well knew Biden could not agree to, including an end to all non-nuclear sanctions and attempting to get the president to somehow bind the hands of his successors.

Most important, Iran has continued to breach the terms of the JCPOA: over the past year, it has refused International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors access to footage recorded on cameras they had installed at its nuclear facilities, while enriching uranium at speed so as to reduce the breakout time. Analysts have suggested that, by the beginning of this year, the period needed for Iran to produce enough highly

enriched uranium for one nuclear weapon had shrunk dramatically from one year before Trump quit the JCPOA in 2018 to around three weeks. This points to the absolute folly of the former president's decision to leave the JCPOA in a fashion uncoordinated with America's European allies and with no apparent plan to achieve his goals.

Nonetheless, however imperfect, a new agreement may provide some measure of medium-term restraint on Iran's nuclear programme. But it is essential that – unlike after 2015 – this period is used to address the non-nuclear threats posed by Iran which Tehran is determined to continuing pursuing, not least because these are intimately tied to the regime's Islamist ideology.

Dennis Ross, who served in the Clinton and Obama administrations, has [clearly set out](#) how Britain, the US and our European allies should respond to Iran's insistence that it will not discuss its missile programme or its activities in the region, by “essentially saying the nuclear talks are one thing and the region and missiles are something entirely different”. As he wrote in January: “Given the Iranian posture, the Biden administration should make clear that what is fine for you is also fine for us – meaning, if we reach an agreement on the nuclear program in Vienna, that is not going to affect what we do to raise the costs to Iran in the region.”

As Ross further explained, this was not the approach pursued after the JCPOA was concluded in 2015: “Then, there was a fear that if we sought to impose a price on the Iranians for their destabilizing actions in the region, they would not implement the nuclear deal. The Iranian desire to get sanctions relief always meant they would implement the JCPOA. But we did very little in response as they ratcheted up their aggressive acts throughout the region. Now, we need to learn the lessons of the past and make the Iranians and their clients or proxies pay a price.”

IRAN'S REGIONAL EXPANSIONISM

As Matthew Levitt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy explains in his contribution to this publication, the last decade has seen a dramatic expansion in the role played by Hezbollah – Tehran's most powerful and oldest proxy army – in pursuing Iran's regional ambitions.

Both Hezbollah's field of activities and the nature of those activities has grown significantly. There is nothing latent about this shift. Indeed, for Hezbollah it is a proud boast, with Levitt quoting a Hezbollah commander suggesting in 2015: “We shouldn't be called Party of God. We're not a party now, we're international. We're in Syria, we're in Palestine, we're in Iraq and we're in Yemen. We are wherever the oppressed need us . . . Hezbollah is the school where every freedom-seeking man wants to learn.”

Hezbollah thus now works hand-in-glove with Iran to train a network of Shia militant fighters across the region, thus extending its tentacles beyond Lebanon to Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Egypt, Bahrain and Kuwait. As Levitt details, Hezbollah is also heavily involved in illicit sanctions-busting financial schemes, arms procurement, espionage and running disinformation “boot camps” to train an “electronic army” of Iranian-backed proxy groups throughout the region.

These boot camps highlight the problem of Iran's under-the-radar online efforts to “seed the digital landscape with fabricated websites and social media personas,” as an [Atlantic Council report](#) described it in 2020. The regime's goal is clear. “We do not have a physical war with the enemy, but we are engaged in heavy information [warfare],” Iran's former intelligence minister, Heidar Moslehi, suggested in 2011. Last month, the [Australian Strategic Policy Institute](#) named Iran, alongside Russia and Saudi Arabia, as the three most “[prolific perpetrators](#)” of state-linked disinformation on Twitter.

Much of Iran's propaganda is targeted at Israel and Saudi Arabia, but there is also [mounting evidence](#) of Iranian interference in the UK's domestic politics – including in [last year's Scottish parliamentary elections](#). The US has been attempting to counter this problem with the Justice Department, for instance, last year [seizing 36 websites](#) linked to Iranian disinformation and militia groups. The UK government should urgently draw up and publish proposals setting out how it intends to combat and disrupt the threat posed by Iranian disinformation here at home, as well as the contribution we can make to tackling this problem with our international allies.

More broadly, it is now over three years since the British government decided – after much prevarication and delay – to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety. A year later, in January 2020, [the Treasury placed](#) both Hezbollah's political and military wings on the list of terrorist groups subject to its asset freeze register. However, as Tom Keatinge, director of the Centre for Financial Crime and Security Studies at RUSI, [has argued](#): “It is the powers enabled by the proscription that afford ... protection [to the British people from threats to their safety and security], not the proscription itself.”

The use of these powers is, however, complicated by the presence of front organisations. The Islamic Resistance Support Organisation, for instance, has been [described by the US Treasury](#) as “a key Hizbullah fundraising organization” and was designated in the US in 2006. However, it is not proscribed in the UK and ministers have consistently refused to answer questions on the relationship between the two groups, naming them an “intelligence matter”. Matters regarding national security and the fight against terrorism must, of course, be handled sensitively. At the same time, it is important to reassure parliament and the public that proscription powers are being used to the full. We would therefore urge the Intelligence and Security Committee to request the police, intelligence and security services to provide it with a report detailing the use of the proscription powers against Hezbollah since 2019.

BALLISTIC MISSILES

Dangerous enough alone, Iran's nuclear goals became still more threatening when combined with its continuing ballistic missile programme. For good reason, the regime has consistently sought to prevent this from becoming part of the JCPOA negotiations.

As Michael Herzog, a former head of the IDF's strategic planning and now Israel's ambassador to the United States, detailed in a paper for LFI last year: “This programme combines the nuclear and the regional dimensions of the Iranian threat. Missiles would serve as the main delivery system for a nuclear weapon. At the same time, missiles, rockets and, increasingly, armed drones are proliferated by Iran as a central tool in its regional power projection.”

Iran has the Middle East's largest and most diverse nuclear missile arsenal, with a range of up to 2,000km (1,200 miles). As the Iranians have [boasted](#), this makes them capable of reaching all US bases in the region, as well as Israel. Indeed, at the end of last year, Iran demonstrated its technology by blasting a life-size replica of Israel's Dimona nuclear compound. Moreover, Iran is [believed](#) to be the only country to develop a 2,000-km missile without first having a nuclear weapons capability.

Since the 2015 nuclear deal, Iran has [developed and unveiled](#) 10 new ballistic missiles, three new satellite launch vehicles, new transport and launch systems and methods, and multiple “missile cities” (underground missile complexes). While the US last month announced new sanctions against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) unit responsible for the research and development of ballistic missiles, in February Iran [unveiled](#) a new domestically made missile with a range of 1,450 km. At the same time, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the chief of staff of Iran's forces, [pledged to continue](#) advancing its missile programme. “We will continue on the path of growth, development and excellence for our missile power, both in terms of quantity and quality,” he said.

While Iran has advanced both the range and the accuracy of its missiles, it has also continued to claim its programme is defensive in nature. However, as [one recent analysis](#) suggested, “the regime has no legitimate defensive requirement for a surface-to-surface missile range beyond 300 km”.

This dynamic poses more than simply a regional risk. While Iran voluntarily agreed to limit its missile range to 2,000 km – effectively placing the Middle East, including Israel but not Europe and the US, under threat – prior to the 2015 talks, subsequent developments raise serious questions as to how long Tehran will keep this undertaking. Through both its space programme and other technology, Iran is developing the capability to manufacture both long-range and inter-continental ballistic missiles which could reach both Europe and, potentially, the US.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Those apologists on the hard left who see Iran as a victim of colonialism and an admirable anti-imperialist opponent of the United States rarely discuss Tehran’s domestic policies. It’s not hard to see why. In his chapter, my colleague Steve McCabe lays out in grim detail Iran’s abysmal human rights record.

Iran exhibits the worst excesses of authoritarianism: dissent and protests are brutally put down; trade unions, strikes and human rights groups banned; and the media strictly controlled by sweeping and draconian restrictions on the freedom of speech. The regime has also shown itself determined to silence dissidents and opponents who have escaped abroad: in 2020, for instance, it tricked, kidnapped and executed journalist Rouhollah Zam.

Zam is, of course, just one victim of the regime’s barbarous use of the death penalty. In 2021, it executed at least 299 people – including those convicted of crimes allegedly carried out when they were children – and we can expect that to rise thanks to new laws which will make carrying out abortions punishable by death. These new laws restricting abortion and banning free contraceptives symbolise the male-dominated theocracy’s contempt for the freedoms of Iranian women. The trappings of democracy maintained by the regime are, moreover, nothing but a façade.

But we can and should do more than offer the Iranian people platitudes about our sympathy regarding their oppression. The new Magnitsky Act-style sanctions regime, which is designed to punish those suspected of committing gross violations of human rights abroad, is highly welcome. However, given that Iran has one of the worst human rights records in the world, it is both curious and shocking that – nearly two years after the first tranche were announced – the government is yet to impose any sanctions against Iranian individuals or entities. Indeed, while various European sanctions – including for those who have violated human rights in Iran – were carried into British law when we left the European Union, this list (of some 82 individuals and one entity) had not been added to in nearly a decade. Moreover, last year the EU issued new sanctions for human rights violations in Iran – as has the United States – leaving Britain lagging behind.

As Steve McCabe rightly argues, the UK needs to ensure that there are “concrete repercussions for those responsible for a litany of human rights abuses which have occurred over the last 10 years, including the violent suppression of the 2019 protests”. But, he suggests, we also need a more “clear and transparent” system, with publicly available and consistently applied criteria underpinning the reasons why individuals are sanctioned, and a regular review process.

The cases of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Anoosheh Ashoori and Morad Tahbaz have brought to public attention Iran’s policy of arbitrarily detaining foreign nationals – a policy first evident in the US Embassy

hostage crisis in 1978-81. The regime's appalling behaviour towards such individuals and its consistent flouting of international norms has gone unpunished for too long. Moreover, we cannot expect Tehran to believe that we are serious about promoting the human rights of the Iranian people if we do not strain every sinew to protect the human rights of British citizens and dual nationals.

It is frankly ridiculous that – despite all evidence to the contrary – the UK government refuses to label Iran's detention of its citizens as “state hostage taking”, limply and obliquely referring to the cases of detained Britons and dual nationals as “consular cases”. As the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee recommended in its [December 2020 report](#): “Calling ‘State Hostage Taking’ out for what it is and taking the lead in shaping a united international response would help yield additional tools to counter this behaviour. The FCDO should use the UK's position at the UN to establish an ad hoc Committee to draft a complementary stand-alone addition to the 1979 Hostages Convention which defines ‘State Hostage Taking’ and prohibits its practice.” It is disappointing that the government's response to the report rejected this suggestion; it should think again.

“THE NEXT STAGE OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION”

Sadly, on all of these fronts, the future outlook is bleak, as Kasra Aarabi, a senior analyst at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, argues in his paper. Largely unnoticed by the west, Khamenei is now implementing his blueprint for the “next stage of the Islamic Revolution”. Installed as president, his loyal protégé – and potential successor – Ebrahim Raisi offers a combination of “indifference to violence and devotion to the regime's Islamist ideology” which are well-suited to the task of “purifying” Iran, rooting out “deviating” influences, and empowering the most radical and ideological committed forces within the regime.

Key to this task will be the IRGC – the “main pillar of the Islamic Revolution” in Khamenei's eyes – with which Raisi has a longstanding and mutually beneficial relationship. Already, the president has set about further expanding the power of the regime's ideological army – its shock troops now fill the ranks of the government. However, Khamenei's project is in direct conflicts directly with the increasing liberalisation and secularisation of Iranian society, suggests Aarabi.

Although the Iranian people will suffer most, the impact of Khamenei's ambitions are likely to be felt far beyond the Islamic Republic's borders, with what Aarabi terms the “IRGC-isation of the clerical regime's foreign policy” likely to gain greater momentum under Raisi.

At present, some activities and members of the IRGC are covered by UK and EU sanctions aimed at countering Iran's ballistic missile and nuclear programmes. However, no part of Tehran's terror army has been targeted by the UK. As Aarabi argues, the threat it poses makes it imperative that the UK government proscribes the IRGC in its entirety under the Terrorism Act 2000. Such a move would not only help to signal our determination to deter Iran's regional meddling and expansionism, but also show our solidarity with the Iranian people whose freedoms and rights it works relentlessly to crush and suppress.

CONCLUSION

Whatever the outcome of the Vienna talks, the threat posed by the Iranian regime – to its own people, the wider region and Europe itself – must be a key foreign policy priority for the next government. The understandable desire to conclude the JCPOA – and then ensure Iran's return to compliance after 2018 – has focused all eyes on the challenge posed by curtailing Tehran's nuclear programme. But that focus must not detract any longer from the urgent need to both recognise and develop a smart, proportionate and comprehensive strategy to resist Iran's destabilising regional activities, its expansionist aspirations and missile programme, as well as the need to show greater solidarity with the people of Iran.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe the British government should immediately consider:

- ◆ Punishing a number of named human rights abusers – including prison governors, military officials and regional governors – through the new Magnitsky Act sanctions regime. The UK is yet to use these sanctions against Iran.
- ◆ Introducing the immediate proscription of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – the regime’s ideological army which crushes dissent at home and supports the regime’s aggressive foreign policy.
- ◆ Abandoning its refusal to label British nationals and dual nationals – such as Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe – detained by the regime as “state hostage taking” and using the UK’s position at the UN to take the lead in shaping a united international response.
- ◆ Providing Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee with a report detailing the use of its powers against Hezbollah since the terror group was proscribed in its entirety in 2019.
- ◆ Publishing proposals setting out how it intends to combat and disrupt the threat posed by Iranian disinformation in Britain and internationally.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Baroness Ramsay of Cartvale is chair of Labour Friends of Israel in the House of Lords

“THE NEXT STAGE OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION”: RAISI’S REGIME AND THE REVOLUTIONARY GUARD

KASRA AARABI

Ayatollah Khamenei handpicked Ebrahim Raisi to forcefully impose “the next stage of the Islamic Revolution” with his Revolutionary Guard allies. This will face resistance from Iran’s increasingly secular and liberal population – and the west will likely experience its consequences

“We do not yet have an Islamic society, nor do we have an Islamic government,” [declared](#) Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in a speech to hardline clerics on 28 August 2017. “Of the different stages of [the Islamic Revolution] that I’ve outlined,” Khamenei continued, “we are still stuck in forming an Islamic government.”

Fast forward to June 2021 and the “election” of hardline Islamist cleric Ebrahim Raisi as Iran’s new president was intended to achieve this very goal. Raisi’s victory represents a [major turning point](#) for the clerical regime – something that has been overlooked by the west.

This is not because the vote actually mattered. After all, elections in Iran are neither free nor fair and only one ballot counts: namely the supreme leader’s. In previous “elections”, however, Khamenei – who handpicks candidates via his Guardian Council – would hesitantly permit a regime insider to run under the guise of a “reformist” platform in order to encourage voting. Staged elections served the ayatollah’s propaganda purposes, enabling him to veil his Islamist regime under the cloth of the “Republic.” International media would be invited to cover Iranians queuing at the ballot box with the aim of showing the outside world the legitimacy of his regime. This manufactured hardliner-reformist dichotomy served Khamenei well for over 30 years: from giving a generation of Iranian youth false hope of liberalisation in the late 1990s to making the west believe it could empower “moderates” by granting Tehran billions of dollars in sanctions relief as part of the nuclear agreement in 2015.

But aware that ordinary Iranians – who boycotted the election en masse – no longer buy Khamenei’s reformist-hardliner game, the supreme leader, for the first time, abandoned this tactic in last year’s “election”. The boycott of the elections was in large part the product of increasing authoritarian repression under the eight-years of so-called moderate President Hassan Rouhani. For ordinary Iranians, the direct role the Rouhani government played in facilitating the violent repression of the November 2019 anti-regime protests, which resulted in security forces killing as many as 1,500 civilians, was the final nail in the coffin for the idea the clerical system could be reformed through the ballot box. As the popular slogan in Iran suggests: “Reformist-hardliner, the game is over, your time is up.”

Nevertheless, for the ayatollah and his close circle, Raisi’s presidency was never just about selecting a new rubber-stamp government, rather it was about advancing Iran to what they regard as being the [“next stage of the Islamic Revolution.”](#)

To better grasp what is meant by this, western policymakers and observers must understand that for the ruling Islamists in Iran, the [1979 Islamic Revolution](#) never ended. Instead, the events of 1979 were merely a starting point to achieving something much more ambitious – in other words, the revolution was, and remains, permanent. This was explicitly laid out by the supreme leader over two decades ago. In the late 1990s, Khamenei [outlined](#) five necessary stages for the completion of the Islamic Revolution:

first, Islamic revolution; second, Islamic regime; third, Islamic government; fourth, Islamic society; and, finally, Islamic civilisation. According to Khamenei and his close allies – like Ayatollah Alamolhoda, the supreme leader’s representative to the Iranian province of Khorasan Razavi and Raisi’s father-in-law – while Iran has achieved the first two stages, the third – the creation of “Islamic government” – remains incomplete.

This is where Raisi’s election – a de facto appointment – fits in. To advance Iran to the next stages of the Islamic Revolution, the new president has been tasked with “[purifying](#)” the Islamic Republic. In practice, this means cleansing the system from “deviating” influences and empowering the most radical and ideologically committed forces to Khamenei’s regime. For Khamenei, this is a prerequisite to achieving his ideal “Islamic society”. Raisi was handpicked to move Iran to the next stages – and his credentials reveal why.

WHO IS EBRAHIM RAISI? FROM MASS EXECUTIONER OF THE IRANIAN LEFT TO PRESIDENT

As a former student and loyal follower of Khamenei, Raisi can be best described as the supreme leader’s protégé. The 60-year-old hardline Islamist cleric, who started his career in Iran’s judiciary in 1981, would first come to prominence as part of his role as a key member of the regime’s notorious “[Death Committee](#)” (heyat-e marg) in 1988.

The “Death Committee” had been established by former supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to execute Iranian leftists and political prisoners. The members of the committee, including Raisi, were carefully selected on the basis of their zealous commitment to the regime’s Islamist ideology – after all, those executed were done so on the basis of being religious infidels. Raisi’s personal role in facilitating the 1988 mass executions, when between [5,000 and 30,000](#) were killed on charges of apostasy or being an “enemy of God” (mohareb), would earn him the title of the “hanging judge”. Three decades on, Khamenei would appoint the “hanging judge” as the Islamic Republic’s chief justice in February 2019.

Raisi’s ruthless adherence to the supreme leader’s absolutism earned him the most senior position in Iran’s judiciary. But beyond this commitment, the president’s lack of charisma is particularly appealing to Khamenei. The 82-year-old supreme leader prefers individuals who lack personality as he regards them as easier to control. Yet what Raisi lacks in charisma, he makes up for in brutality. The leaked [CCTV footage](#) of Iran’s notorious Evin Prison exposed the human rights abuses that occurred in Iranian prisons during his time as chief justice.

It is precisely this indifference to violence and radical devotion to the regime’s Islamist ideology that makes Raisi the ideal president to move Iran to the next stage of the Islamic Revolution and “purify” the system from within. The stakes to impress his mentor could not be higher for the president. Raisi is well aware that his presidency is an internship in all but name for succeeding the supreme leader – a rite of passage Khamenei himself experienced before landing the top job.

THE FOUNDATION OF RAISI’S ADMINISTRATION: IRAN’S REVOLUTIONARY GUARD

The danger that accompanies the new regime in Tehran lies not only in Raisi as an individual, but the [driving force behind him](#): Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – the clerical regime’s ideological army.

It is important to note that the IRGC is no ordinary conventional state military. It began as an umbrella grouping of Islamist militias that helped to violently consolidate the ruling clergy's grip over post-revolutionary Iran. It has also been the clerical regime's main organ for exporting its Islamic revolution across the Muslim world. This role is enshrined in Iran's 1979 constitution where the IRGC is established as an "ideological army" – in contrast to Iran's regular conventional armed force (the Artesh) – with "an ideological mission of jihad in God's way; that is extending sovereignty of God's law throughout the world". Upon assuming the mantle as supreme leader, Khamenei doubled-down on the objective to export the revolution by establishing a new extraterritorial branch of the IRGC, the Quds (Jerusalem) Force – its name signifying the Guard's primary objective to "liberate" Jerusalem through the destruction of the State of Israel. Today, the IRGC de facto operates as a state-within-a-state, with its own economic, political, intelligence and cultural arms. While it has professionalised as a force, it has remained true to its Islamist militia DNA as reflected in its practices: from its formal programme of ideological indoctrination to radicalise all recruits to using terrorism, hostage-taking and hijackings as its primary *modi operandi*.

Raisi has had a deep and longstanding relationship with the IRGC. This bond was strengthened when, in 2016, the supreme leader appointed him as chairman of the Astan Quds Razavi, a Khamenei-run ideological-charitable foundation. Based in Mashhad, Iran's second city, this multi-billion-dollar foundation manages the Imam Reza holy shrine, while effectively operating as one of Khamenei's key slush funds. It is also one of the main ideological and economic partners of the Revolutionary Guard and its network of militias across the Middle East.

During his time as chairman of Astan Quds Razavi, Raisi nurtured very close ties with the IRGC, its key commanders and the heads of Iran-backed militias, including Hezbollah's Seyed Hassan Nasrallah. Since 2016, the IRGC and its senior commanders have openly rallied around Raisi. This was perhaps most visibly [displayed](#) in a carefully choreographed meeting in May 2016, when Raisi was on a podium with senior IRGC commanders – including the likes of the late Qassem Soleimani – sat at his feet: a hierarchical format reserved almost exclusively for Khamenei.

The Revolutionary Guard and its informal networks were also instrumental in unofficially driving Raisi's presidential campaigns, both in 2017, when he launched an unsuccessful bid, and in 2021 when he emerged victorious. Expanding the IRGC's power and authority is also in Raisi's own personal interest: consolidating a support base in the Revolutionary Guard for when the moment comes to select Khamenei's successor. Given that anti-regime dissent across Iran's population has reached unprecedented levels, the next supreme leader will have to rely on the IRGC's backing more than ever before. The Revolutionary Guard, in many respects, will be the kingmaker.

The expansion of the IRGC's power under Raisi is a major element of Khamenei's agenda to move Iran to the next stages of the Islamic Revolution. For the supreme leader and his hardline circle, the IRGC is the "[main pillar of the Islamic Revolution](#)" (*sotoon-e kheimeh-e enghlab*). The Revolutionary Guard is the only institution in the entire regime that has never been criticised by Khamenei. Indeed, in a [key speech in October 2019](#), the supreme leader called for the IRGC to grow in terms of power and authority "by up to 100 times". For Khamenei, the IRGC embodies the most committed and ideological section of the clerical regime – its empowerment is therefore a prerequisite to achieving the next stages of the revolution.

Against this backdrop, the IRGC has formed the [foundation](#) of the Raisi administration, with IRGC affiliates occupying top ministerial positions and many of the 874 political appointee positions in the new Iranian government. This includes both the interior and foreign ministers. The former was awarded to [Ahmad Vahidi](#), the first commander of the IRGC's extraterritorial Quds Force, who is on an Interpol "most wanted" list for his direct role in coordinating the bombing of a Jewish Cultural Centre in Argentina in

1994. The post of foreign minister was given to another IRGC Quds Force affiliate: [Hossein Amirabdollahian](#), a diplomat who previously earned the title of “Qassem Soleimani’s representative”.

THE RISE OF A NEW ELITE: IRAN’S INDOCTRINATED TECHNOCRATS

In his quest to move Iran to the next stages, Raisi has also been “purifying” Iran’s technocratic ranks, a move that has facilitated the mass rise of a new elite in Iran – one completely unknown to the west.

Iran’s hardline clerical establishment has for decades had a problematic relationship with the traditional technocratic class base in the Islamic Republic. Despite coming from religious backgrounds and being committed Islamists, the majority of these senior technocrats had studied in the west. This is a source of huge suspicion for Khamenei and his close circle, as these individuals are equipped with western-orientated, modern solutions to the Islamic Republic’s problems and are thus not qualified to run an Islamic state. In fact, the hardline Islamists have blamed decades of government mismanagement and inefficiency not on a lack of technical expertise or rampant corruption, but on these traditional technocrats, who have not undergone the necessary religious-ideological training to run an Islamic state. As Ayatollah Alamolhoda [asserted](#) in October 2020: “Belief in the [Islamic] Revolution is the difference between classical and jihadi management styles ... if this jihadi management style, which genuinely believes in the revolution and God, enters our social and political life, all the problems can be solved.”

As a direct consequence, Raisi is replacing the Islamic Republic’s old cohort of specialists, including faces familiar to the west, like Javad Zarif, a former foreign minister, and Ali Akbar Salehi, a former head of Iran’s atomic energy agency. In their place are new, so-called jihadi and hezbollahi technocrats – who, like the hardline clergy and IRGC, have undergone years of intensive, ideological indoctrination alongside their skills training. This new cohort of [highly indoctrinated technocrats](#) – known as the Imam Sadeghis – have de facto taken over Iran’s state bureaucracy and senior appointed positions across Iran’s ministries, including two ministerial positions: economics minister and labour minister. For decades, western policymakers regarded Iran’s traditional technocrats as the “pragmatic” and “non-ideological” branch of the clerical regime. However, the rise of the Imam Sadeghis signals that Khamenei has finally been able to indoctrinate Iran’s technocratic class.

These changes, the first of their kind in 43 years, are shifting Iran’s power equilibrium and have been designed to advance Khamenei’s domestic and foreign agendas so as to move the country towards the next stages of the revolution to achieve his grand civilisational ambitions. While western policymakers may be oblivious to these shifting dynamics, they are set to have major implications both inside and outside of Iran with far-reaching consequences.

THE INCOMING WAVE OF DOMESTIC OPPRESSION: UNREST TO FUTURE REFUGEE CRISIS

Domestically, these structural changes at the top are intended to help Raisi move Iran towards Khamenei’s ideal “[Islamic society](#)” – something the supreme leader believes has not yet been achieved. In turn, the hardline zealots across Iran’s government branches and bureaucracy are preparing for a new wave of top-down Islamisation of Iranian society.

It is important to highlight, however, that the gap between state and society in this regard could not be greater. Since the early 1990s, Iranian society has witnessed a gradual process of secularisation and liberalisation. Today, this has reached unprecedented levels, with [polling](#) revealing that as much as 68 percent of Iranians want a secular state and [only 32 percent](#) identifying as Shia Muslim – a clear

rejection of the Shia Islamist regime. Over time, this has manifested itself on the Iranian streets and has been met with unbridled violence by the regime and its security forces. Still, while the IRGC has been able to brutally suppress protestors, it has been unable to contain rising anti-regime sentiment among the Iranian people, which has reached record levels since the 1979 revolution.

Tracking the [pattern of unrest](#) in Iran reveals that nationwide anti-regime protests are getting larger in size and scale, as well as more violent. The 1999 student protests, for example, took place in three cities – Tabriz, Tehran and Isfahan – and left seven people killed at the hands of the security forces. A decade on, the nationwide Green Movement uprising in response to vote rigging in the 2009 presidential elections was concentrated in 10 cities and resulted in the death of 100 civilians. But Iran’s most recent anti-regime unrest, the November 2019 protests, took place in over 100 towns and cities and saw the regime’s security forces use unrestrained violence, killing as many as 1,500 civilians in less than a week. All the signs indicate that the protest trend in Iran will continue on its upward trajectory.

However, this has not deterred the ageing ayatollah from pursuing his ambitions for an Islamic society. Rather, Khamenei has acknowledged that achieving this will require a simultaneous process of top-down and bottom-up Islamisation. The latter requires a wave of grassroots activity to inculcate the regime’s ideology throughout Iranian society while simultaneously cleansing it of all traces of its non-Islamic identity. This can only be achieved through the empowerment of the IRGC and its civil militia, the Basij, at the provincial and local levels. This will give Khamenei greater control of the Iranian streets.

It is precisely this calculus that shaped the electoral manipulation in last year’s city council contests to enable a sweeping victory for IRGC-affiliated candidates. The extent of the vote rigging to achieve this outcome was shocking even by the standards of the Islamic Republic. For example, in the run-up to the vote, all incumbent city council members in Isfahan, Iran’s third-largest city, and 81 percent in Tehran were barred from running for re-election. As a result, the majority of city council members, in particular in the major cities, have ties to the IRGC and the Basij. In the capital, two-thirds of new city council members have an IRGC or Basij background, including the head of Tehran city council and the new mayor.

The impending surge of radicalism will seek to further Islamise public space in Iran, while simultaneously forcefully eradicating “non-Islamic” and western influences from Iranian society. Khamenei is well aware that, although he and his close circle have sought to manufacture the right set of conditions to achieve their ideal Islamic society, the Iranian people – not least women and young people – are likely to resist this incoming wave of Islamisation. However, this is exactly why empowering the IRGC and Basij at the local levels was so key for the supreme leader. They have the resources, manpower and willingness to enforce grassroots changes on a defiant but defenceless population.

In the short term, these changes will result in greater repression and will receive the full support of the Raisi administration. Against this backdrop, there is no doubt that anti-regime unrest will be a feature of the domestic Iranian landscape in the coming months and years. The very fact that Raisi has appointed Vahdi, who has held some of the most senior national security positions in the regime, as his interior minister, suggests the Islamic Republic anticipates protests on the Iranian streets. The empowerment of the IRGC at both state and local level will naturally result in more violent crackdowns. The lack of international consequence for the regime’s unbridled use of violence in [November 2019](#) has certainly boosted the belief of Khamenei and the IRGC that they can preserve the system through the use of brute force.

In the long term, Khamenei’s vision and its forceful imposition will have ramifications beyond Iran’s borders. The increasing securitisation of Iran’s domestic landscape will further increase the country’s brain drain, with 150,000–180,000 educated Iranians already leaving the country every year. While wealthier Iranians will seek legal paths, poorer ones will turn to human traffickers to seek refuge abroad.

Although western nations may be unaware of the changes Khamenei wants to enforce on Iranian society, its consequences are likely to reach their shores.

AN EMBOLDENED REVOLUTIONARY GUARD ABROAD

The 'IRGC-isation' of the clerical regime's foreign policy will continue at an even greater pace under Raisi.

For decades, Khamenei has adopted a dual foreign policy approach that combines diplomacy with militancy. While the former has been in the hands of the Iranian government – specifically the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – the IRGC has advanced the latter. This approach has enabled the IRGC to advance Khamenei's objectives through its nefarious militant activities – from terrorism to assassinations and hostage-taking – while allowing the Iranian government to maintain damage control for such activities at the negotiating table.

Khamenei's regime has also used this potent combination of diplomacy and militancy as a tactic to gain concessions from both regional neighbours and the major western powers – as seen throughout the continuing negotiations to reinstate the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In fact, this dual foreign policy approach is one that the regime itself recognises. In April 2021, the leaked audio file of former foreign minister [Zarif](#) revealed that the Islamic Republic itself divides its foreign policy between “diplomacy and the battlefield”, with diplomats being in control of the former and the IRGC in charge of the latter.

Under Raisi, however, IRGC affiliates have come to occupy senior ministerial roles in his administration, not least in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a result, the IRGC will, for the first time, come to occupy both arms of Khamenei's dual foreign policy, with both diplomacy and militancy strongly in its grip. This will see greater government support for the IRGC's objectives throughout the region, including more coordination and resources for Iran-backed militias from Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Houthis in Yemen. The fact that Hezbollah chief [Nasrallah](#) was celebrating Raisi's presidency as a victory for the so-called “resistance axis” is particularly telling.

The implications of this IRGC foreign policy are already starting to surface less than a year into Raisi's presidency, with the Islamic Republic adopting a more confrontational and aggressive posture, not least in the Middle East. This includes an increase in Iran-backed militia attacks – such as consistent missile strikes against Saudi Arabia and the UAE by the Houthis – as well [as direct IRGC operations](#), such as the drone attack against a commercial vessel in the Gulf of Oman that killed a British civilian.

The Revolutionary Guard has openly stated that its actions are aimed at working towards expelling US and western forces in the Middle East to facilitate the encirclement and complete isolation of what it calls “the Zionist regime”, namely the state of Israel. As senior IRGC commander Mohammad Reza Naghdi [asserted](#) in January this year: “Our hard revenge will be the expulsion of the US from the region and the eradication of the Zionist regime.”

Indeed, the IRGC maintains that the eradication of Israel and Zionism remains its official policy and a primary objective. Far from empty rhetoric, the regime has spent significant state resources in pursuit of what it regards as its working objective: from creating ballistic missiles with “[Death to Israel](#)” written in Hebrew on them to arming, training and funding Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah. State propaganda that has accompanied these actions – including the construction of a digital clock counting down to Israel's destruction, [Holocaust cartoon contests](#) and a recent image published by Khamenei's office showing the armed “liberation” of Jerusalem with the words “[Final Solution](#)” – provides a glimpse into the antisemitic worldview that pervades the clerical regime. Against this backdrop, the military

encirclement of Israel, which has been engineered by the IRGC and its proxy groups, is particularly concerning.

But hard-power gains are only the tip of the iceberg. For decades, the IRGC has used the Iranian state's soft-power organisations to construct an infrastructure to [recruit and radicalise](#) young men across the Middle East. The Revolutionary Guard has exploited the international privileges afforded to the Islamic Republic's educational, cultural and humanitarian organisations, with which it has de facto ties, as vehicles for indoctrination and recruitment for Iran-backed militias and cells. These organisations – such as the Astan Quds Razavi foundation, Iran's Red Crescent Society and Al-Mustafa International University – enable IRGC-affiliates to operate under a credible guise, providing economic and ideological support for the group's militia network.

As the former chairman of Astan Quds Razavi, Raisi has personally played a key role in facilitating such support and will have developed strong relationships with key commanders of the IRGC and those of the Iran-backed militias. The link between these soft-power organisations and IRGC militancy – and Raisi's own personal role in enabling this – was demonstrated in [January 2018](#) when the future president made a trip to the Syrian frontline and later to Lebanon to meet with Hezbollah militants.

Further consolidating this soft-power network in the region and expanding it beyond the Middle East will most likely feature as a key policy priority for Raisi and the IRGC. They have already indicated a growing appetite to develop a footprint in sub-Saharan Africa and the presence of such soft-power organisations provide the Revolutionary Guard with an entry point. These organisations also have a presence on European soil. For example, the Al-Mustafa University, which was sanctioned by the US in 2019 for playing a key role in recruitment and radicalisation of militants for the IRGC, has a [branch in London](#). The presence of these IRGC-linked institutions should be of particular concern to European states, not least as, since 2015, the Guard has increased its activity in Europe: from the assassination of Iranian dissidents in Holland in 2015 to a failed terror plot in 2018 against a Paris conference which was attended by British parliamentarians.

Finally, the clerical regime's "purification" of the Islamic Republic's technocrats and the rise of the Imam Sadeghis will also significantly impact Tehran's foreign policy abroad. Under Raisi, for the first time in 43 years, a new elite alliance is emerging between the hardline clergy, the Revolutionary Guards and Iran's indoctrinated technocrats. This will see Iran's ministries allocate more bureaucratic support, both in terms of money and manpower, to the Guard's external ambitions.

This new [ideological synergy](#) has already started to surface. For example, Meysam Latifi, the Imam Sadeghi in charge of public sector recruitment, [recently](#) echoed the worldview driving the IRGC's expansionist Islamist policies abroad when he stated that he rejects the concept of the nation-state as "western" and instead bases governance on the Shia Islamist model ("[the Imam and Ummah](#)") that legitimises exporting the Islamic Revolution to neighbouring Muslim nations. Against this backdrop, any money allocated to the regime through sanctions relief via a US re-entry into the 2015 nuclear deal is more likely than ever to advance the regime's destabilising expansion abroad.

Regardless of whether the JCPOA is reinstated or not, under Raisi, there is little doubt that the threat posed by the IRGC and its network of militias is on the rise. Effectively countering the growing challenge of the IRGC and the clerical regime more broadly will require a long-term, comprehensive strategy.

The UK government has many policy levers it can use in this regard, not least the proscription of the IRGC. The UK has so far engaged with only one aspect of Khamenei's dual foreign policy, namely diplomacy through the JCPOA. As a direct result, this has left militancy pursued by the Revolutionary Guard unchecked and, as a consequence, emboldened. Proscribing the IRGC would not close the door to diplomacy with Tehran. Instead, it would send a strong and clear message to Khamenei that the regime's

militancy and terrorism which is pursued via the IRGC – including its support for UK-designated terrorist groups like Hezbollah – will not be tolerated.

For this reason, any progressive agenda for the Middle East must include ending both the IRGC's domestic repression and violent expansionism abroad.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kasra Aarabi is a specialist in Iran and Shia Islamist extremism. His focus includes Iran's military and security forces; Shia militias across the Middle East; and Iran's domestic politics and state-societal relations. A native Farsi speaker, he is a senior analyst at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute and is also undertaking a PhD at the University of St Andrews, where his research focuses on Iran's Revolutionary Guard

TEHRAN'S PROXY ARMY: HEZBOLLAH'S REGIONAL ROLE

MATTHEW LEVITT

Committed to spreading Tehran's Islamic revolution, Hezbollah's role in Iran's malign activities has increased dramatically over the past decade and it is increasingly assuming the leadership of a broad network of Shia militant proxies

Lebanese Hezbollah, the "Party of God," is a militant Shiite terrorist organisation and a critical component of what security officials typically refer to as the "Iran Threat Network". Committed to the spread of Iran's Shiite Islamic revolution, Hezbollah is dedicated not only to the destruction of Israel but also to undermining the Gulf States and other countries in the region that challenge Tehran's hegemony and the spread of its revolutionary ideology. In the past decade, Hezbollah's role in Iran's malign regional activities has increased dramatically.

HISTORY, FOUNDING, AND TIES TO IRAN

Since its founding in 1982, Hezbollah has always been intimately connected to the revolutionary leadership in Iran. Iran played [critical and tangible roles](#) in the formation of Hezbollah, such as sending Quds Force officers to the Bekka Valley to train the nascent Party of God out of the Sheikh Abdullah barracks in Baalbek. A [1984 CIA report](#) notes that "Iran began to develop close links with Lebanese Shias soon after the Israeli invasion in June 1982. Some 800 Revolutionary Guards were [sent to Lebanon](#) through Syria to help recruit Hezbollah, provide political and religious indoctrination and military training, including instruction in terrorist tactics." In 1987, the CIA [assessed that](#) "an Islamic fundamentalist movement probably would have developed in Lebanon without outside support, but Iranian aid has been a major stimulant." Shortly after the Israeli invasion, hundreds of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) advisors and trainers set up a base in the Bekaa Valley with the goal of exporting the Islamic revolution to the Arab world.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to since declassified [US intelligence](#), Hezbollah functioned in its first years as a "network of radical Shia paramilitary groups that agree[d] on major strategic goals such as the establishment of an Islamic republic but often differ[ed] on tactical or operational matters." Such networks revolved around specific family clans, such as the Musawi and Hamadi families.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ The organisation's ideological platform stresses the [group's fundamental ties](#) to the Islamic Republic of Iran: "We view the Iranian regime as the vanguard and new nucleus of the leading Islamic State in the world. We abide by the orders of one single wise and just leadership, represented by 'waliyat el faqih' [guardianship of the jurist] and personified by [Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Musawi] Khomeini."

Despite being grounded in Lebanon and functioning as a Lebanese political party in parallel to its militant activities, Hezbollah has always profited from Iran's material and ideological support. Iran and Hezbollah first [tried to hide](#) their close ties, with Hezbollah adopting the cover name Islamic Jihad Organisation which was intended to provide "a modicum of plausible deniability," muddling its relationship with Iran. The ruse failed, however, and, as early as 1983, the CIA [observed that](#) Islamic Jihad "more likely is a cover used by Iran for its terrorist operations, whether employing local Shias in Lebanon or locally recruited agents of other nationalities" and that "[s]urrogates provide Iran with an excellent means for creating the illusion that an independent, international organisation is at work against US interests."

By 1985, the US National Intelligence Council [found](#) its “first definite link” between Iran and Hezbollah’s Islamic Jihad Organisation when US intelligence intercepted instructions from Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence to Hezbollah terrorists urging them to conduct a propaganda campaign in the name of Islamic Jihad.

Over the years, US government reports describe Hezbollah’s relationship to Iran using a variety of terms, from [“surrogate”](#) and [“puppet”](#) to [“the vanguard of an Iranian-influenced revolutionary movement”](#), and [“Iran’s most important and longest-standing non-state partner and a core member of Tehran’s Axis of Resistance”](#). Nonetheless, even from its earliest days, Hezbollah developed along two often interwoven but sometimes competing tracks. For all their commitment to the supreme leader of Iran, Hezbollah leaders have [sought to create](#) enough space for their own independent decision making while maintaining an intimate level of closeness to Iran. In an [assessment of Iranian sponsorship of terrorism](#), the CIA found “mounting evidence that the Lebanese Shias – although respectful of Khomeini and the Iranian revolution – will no longer tolerate Iranian attempts to dictate their policies”. A case in point was the release of hostages. Tehran would be [unlikely to be able](#) to force Hezbollah to free all its hostages in Lebanon, particularly when the proxy’s goals did not coincide with Tehran’s. Hezbollah, it seemed, had [“become an autonomous terrorist problem in its own right”](#).

HEZBOLLAH’S ROLE IN IRAN’S MALIGN REGIONAL ACTIVITIES

Fast forward to today, and it is clear that Hezbollah’s roles in the wars in Iraq and Syria significantly changed the nature of how the group’s alliance with Iran plays out in practice throughout the region, including significant deployments of Hezbollah personnel beyond Lebanon’s borders and a well-organised training programme to help Iran develop networks of Shia militant fighters. [Recognising this growing regional threat](#), in 2016 the Gulf Cooperation Council branded Hezbollah a terrorist group and Gulf States have cracked down on Hezbollah supporters and financiers within their borders.

Hezbollah remains committed to the destruction of Israel. For example, the group invested millions of dollars in the construction of underground attack tunnels extending from Lebanon, under the UN-demarcated Blue Line that serves as the de facto border with Israel, into Israeli territory. It also continues to develop precision-guided missiles to fire at Israeli civilian communities. However, over the past decade the group has been distracted by its significantly increased regional activities well beyond Lebanon or Israeli’s borders.

Following the January 2020 assassination of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, Hezbollah assumed more of a leadership role coordinating the activities of a broad network of Shia militant proxies –the “Resistance Axis”–on behalf of Iran’s Quds Force. Taken together, these events shifted Hezbollah’s centre of gravity in the region from being a Lebanese militia primarily focused on activities in Lebanon and opposition to Israel to a regional actor playing a leadership role for Iran’s regional network of militant proxies.

Even before Hezbollah’s 2006 war with Israel, the group acceded to Iranian requests to step up its role training Iraqi Shia militants. Mirroring the creation of Unit 1800, which is dedicated to supporting Palestinian terrorist groups and targeting Israel, Hezbollah established Unit 3800, which supports Iraqi Shia terrorist groups targeting multinational forces in Iraq. As the US Treasury Department revealed, sometime in 2005 “Iran asked Hezbollah to form a group to train Iraqis to fight Coalition Forces in Iraq. In response, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah [established](#) a covert Hezbollah unit to train and advise Iraqi militants” from Jaysh al-Mahdi, and its “special groups” (a term used by the US military to denote the Iranian-controlled Shiite militias operating in Iraq) including Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq.^[1]

In Yemen, too, [the State Department explained](#), Hezbollah dispatched trusted and proven commanders “to provide training, materiel, and personnel” – alongside Iranian Quds Force officers – in support of Houthi rebels. Hezbollah’s training mission in Yemen has been much smaller than that in Iraq, but no less effective. [According to detained Houthi fighters](#), Hezbollah trained dozens of Houthi recruits at a time in two-month basic training courses in Yemen before the recruits were dispatched to the battlefield. A [video that gained media attraction](#) in early 2016 purported to show a Hezbollah trainer addressing a group of Houthi forces in Yemen about training for assassination operations targeting Saudi Arabia.

Hezbollah has [even dispatched](#) operatives stationed in southern Lebanon to Egypt, where a [Hezbollah cell](#) first focused on smuggling Iranian weapons through Egypt to Hamas in the Gaza Strip and later shifted to target tourist and other destinations in the country.

Hezbollah also trains Shia militants from Bahrain and Kuwait. For example, in 2018 Bahraini authorities arrested over 100 Shia militants who [reportedly](#) received militant training from Iranian proxy groups like Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Similarly, in 2016 a Kuwaiti court [convicted](#) 23 militants on charges of spying for Iran and Hezbollah, buying and storing weapons and explosives, and undergoing Hezbollah militant training in Lebanon.

But none of these cases compare to the size and scope of Hezbollah’s deployment to defend the Assad regime in Syria. Around 2013, Hezbollah went so far as to make [significant structural changes](#) to its military command to oversee its massive commitment in Syria. The group added two new military commands – the first on the Lebanese–Syrian border, the second within Syria itself – to its existing ones in southern and eastern Lebanon.

[According to US intelligence officials](#), Nasrallah hesitated when Quds Force leaders first asked him to deploy Hezbollah forces to Syria to support Assad. According to a Wall Street Journal account: “Nasrallah only agreed to the deployments after he received a personal appeal from Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who made clear that Tehran expected Hezbollah to act decisively.” Once Nasrallah made the decision to engage in the Syrian civil war – first in 2011 and then in a bigger, more organised fashion in mid-2012 – he [personally assumed responsibility](#) for overseeing these activities. Indeed, Nasrallah has [directed](#) the group’s activities in Syria since at least September 2011, when he began holding weekly strategic coordination meetings with Assad in Damascus.

But Hezbollah’s malign regional activities go well beyond training proxies and deploying troops to foreign battlefields such as Syria and, to a lesser extent, Iraq and Yemen.

HEZBOLLAH’S ILLICIT FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES

As Hezbollah and Iranian Quds Force regional operations became more interconnected, Hezbollah took on additional roles running illicit financial schemes intended to evade sanctions, fund the Quds Force, and finance key Iranian allies and proxies like the Assad regime, Hamas, the Houthis, Iraqi militias, and Hezbollah itself. “Over the past year,” the Treasury Department reported in September 2019, “the IRGC-QF has moved oil worth hundreds of millions of dollars or more through [an illicit shipping] network for the benefit of the brutal Assad regime, Hezbollah, and other illicit actors.” It added: “This complex network of intermediaries enables the IRGC-QF to obfuscate its involvement in selling Iranian oil. The IRGC-QF also [relies heavily](#) on Hizballah officials and front companies to broker associated contracts.”

ARMS PROCUREMENT

Hezbollah procurement efforts in partnership with Iran [significantly expanded](#) in the context of the Syrian civil war. By early 2015, US investigations into Hezbollah operations [exposed](#) some of the group’s

extensive drug trafficking and money laundering, some of the proceeds of which “are used to purchase weapons for Hezbollah for its activities in Syria”. Meanwhile, an FBI undercover operation [revealed](#) that Hezbollah procurement networks had matured to the point that Iran was seeking to leverage Hezbollah’s ability to gain access to weapons and sanctioned goods for its own direct needs.

In 2013, Yemeni security forces [interdicted](#) the Iranian vessel Jihan 1 off the coast of Yemen and arrested eight Yemenis and two Lebanese Hezbollah operatives. Believed to be heading for Houthi territory, the ship carried several tons of Iranian weapons and explosives. In another case, US authorities [determined](#) a Hezbollah weapons procurement officer sourcing IED components in China planned for the weapons to be sent to the Houthis in Yemen. Similarly, Bahraini authorities [disrupted](#) two Hezbollah attempts to smuggle explosives into the country from Iran in August 2020. According to Bahrain’s Ministry of Interior, the suspects confessed that Hezbollah was behind the operation. Further west, Morocco broke off diplomatic relations with [Iran over charges](#) that Hezbollah operatives and Iranian agents, some of the latter under diplomatic cover, smuggled weapons to the Polisario Front in Western Sahara.

ESPIONAGE

Hezbollah has also engaged in intelligence collection operations across the region. Consider, for example, the case of Iraq-based Hezbollah operative Muhammad Farhat. According to the US Treasury Department, “as of 2017, Farhat was tasked with collecting security and intelligence information in Iraq and subsequently providing reports to senior Hezbollah and Iranian leadership”. He [also helped](#) a Hezbollah and Quds Force effort “to analyze and report on the Iraqi security situation”.

In 2015, Kuwaiti authorities [arrested](#) a cell of operatives, including several Kuwaitis and one Iranian Shia, on charges of spying for Iran and Hezbollah. That same year, an [Israeli airstrike](#) in the Golan Heights targeted a joint Hezbollah-Quds Force intelligence collection effort, killing Hezbollah’s Jihad Mughniyeh (son of the late Imad Mughniyeh) along with several other Hezbollah operatives and Iranian Quds Force General Mohammad Ali Allahdadi. In 2018, Bahraini authorities [arrested](#) a group of Shia suspected militants on charges of setting up a terrorist network in coordination with Iranian intelligence services.

The case of US military contract linguist Mariam Taha Thompson stands out in particular. While stationed in Iraq, Thompson reportedly provided a Hezbollah contact intelligence about human sources involved in the January 2020 assassination of Soleimani. [According to her plea](#), Thompson admitted accessing and sharing dozens of intelligence files, including names of human assets, to provide to her Hezbollah contact. Tellingly, Hezbollah intelligence officers did not seek information specific to Israel or Lebanon from Thompson, but information of particular interest to Iran and its proxy network.

DISINFORMATION AND CYBER OPERATIONS

Hezbollah runs disinformation boot camps in Lebanon for the purpose of building up the “electronic armies” of Iran’s proxy groups around the region. “Since at least 2012,” [the Daily Telegraph reported in August 2020](#), “Hezbollah has been flying individuals into Lebanon for courses teaching participants how to digitally manipulate photographs, manage large numbers of fake social media accounts, make videos, avoid Facebook’s censorship, and effectively spread disinformation online.” Students from Bahrain, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Syria were among the thousands of “Iran-backed social media activists” who attended the 10-day courses, which were taught by Hezbollah specialists. [In the words](#) of an Iraqi politician who was involved in sending students to these courses: “The people we sent developed their skills in Beirut and when they returned they started training activists inside Iraq.” One of the groups to benefit from this Hezbollah training course was [Kata’ib Hezbollah](#) in Iraq, which now runs its own “online façade” group,

Unit 10,000, which has developed “electronic armies capable of hacking, information operations and open source intelligence gathering”.

Iran and Hezbollah work together in the disinformation space in several other ways, as well. This includes “[the International Union of Virtual Media](#),” which Tehran created to promote Iranian and Hezbollah propaganda while obscuring the source of such information. The US Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) cyber threat actors backed by Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence [concluded](#) that Iran engaged in a “multi-pronged covert influence campaign” targeting the 2020 US presidential election while Hezbollah “took some steps to attempt to influence the election”.

“WE ARE NOT A PARTY NOW, WE’RE INTERNATIONAL”

Long the dominant power in Lebanon, Hezbollah is today a regional actor engaged in malign activities in support of Iran. [Speaking in 2015](#), a Hezbollah commander explained: “We shouldn’t be called Party of God. We’re not a party now, we’re international. We’re in Syria, we’re in Palestine, we’re in Iraq and we’re in Yemen. We are wherever the oppressed need us ... Hezbollah is the school where every freedom-seeking man wants to learn.” Since Soleimani’s death, Hezbollah has assumed still greater regional responsibilities. Looking ahead, Iranian proxies [may operate](#) in an even more coordinated fashion, with Houthi rockets targeting southern Israel and foreign terrorist operations carried out by Shia militants of varying nationalities operating at Iran’s behest and Hezbollah’s direction.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler fellow and director of the Reinhard programme on counterterrorism and intelligence at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. A former U.S. government official at the FBI and Treasury Department, he is the 2021-2022 Andrew H. Siegel Professor in US Middle East Policy at Georgetown University

^[i] Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 82

^[ii] Magnus Ranstrop, “Hezbollah Training Camps in Lebanon,” in James Forest, Ed, *The Making of a Terrorist* vol. 2, Training, Westport: Praeger, 2005, p. 252

^[iii] The United States designated Nasrallah a [Specially Designated Terrorist](#) on January 23, 1995 and a [Specially Designated Global Terrorist](#) on May 16, 2018.

IRAN'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD: THE CASE FOR MAGNITSKY SANCTIONS

STEVE MCCABE MP

Britain needs to take a much tougher approach to punish Tehran's gross abuses of human rights in Iran

Somewhat lost in the coverage of the Vienna negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme has been any talk of Tehran's appalling human rights record. Indeed, it appears that Britain's desire to reach a new agreement with the Iranian regime has stifled criticism of its continuing – and, in some regards, worsening – suppression of basic freedoms and liberties.

But this is a false choice for two reasons. First, Iran has made it clear that it is unwilling to discuss any issues – such as its human rights record, ballistic missile programme, and support for regional proxy armies and terrorism – beyond the nuclear file covered by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Nonetheless, as a group of prominent Iranian human rights activists [argued in a letter to President Biden](#) last year, these issues are in many respects interrelated. “Efforts to seek improvements in Iran's egregious human rights record should take place parallel to negotiations on security matters, recognising fully that U.S. national security interests cannot be met if the human security of the Iranian people is left unaddressed,” they wrote: “Improvements in freedom of expression and other human rights are fundamental to strengthening the Iranian government's accountability to its citizens and at the international level.”

Second, while Iran refuses to discuss these non-nuclear issues, it has also demanded that all sanctions – not simply those related to its nuclear programme – should be lifted as the price for its willingness to return to the JCPOA. Although utterly unreasonable, Iran's refusal to engage on non-nuclear issues surely allows Britain and its allies to design a range of responses and actions unrelated to the outcome of the Vienna talks.

IRAN'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

Over the past four decades, Iran's human rights record has consistently been one of the worst in the world. There are also signs that it continues to worsen. The [latest report by Freedom House](#) gives Iran a pitiful 14/100 rating for political rights and civil liberties, down two points from 2020.

While we occasionally read in the media of elections taking place in Iran, we should be under no illusion as to their nature. Indeed, voters have no opportunity to elect the most important office in Iran – that of the supreme leader – and since the 1979 revolution, only two men have held this post. Moreover, the elections which do occur can in no sense be regarded as free and fair. Far from it: last year, the arch-conservative Ebrahim Raisi was elected president after a contest in which the powerful Guardian Council – which is ultimately controlled by the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei – disqualified all but seven of the aspiring candidates, making sure as they did to block the 40 women who had put themselves forward. The regime also leaned heavily on the media to quash the already limited room for critical reporting. Unsurprisingly, more than half of voters chose not to participate in this charade of democracy.

Iranians hoping to elect a new parliament in 2020 faced a similar fixed vote, with the Guardian Council disqualifying well over half of the 16,000 who had registered to stand, thus ensuring that the ranks of those eventually elected were dominated by hardliners loyal to Khamenei. Just over four in ten Iranians –

the lowest figure since the Islamic Republic was established – turned out to vote. Moreover, the political parties which are allowed to operate in Iran do so within the strict limits of the regime's ideology, and, since the Green Movement protests of 2009 were violently snuffed out, leading reformists have been excluded from the political system and, in some cases, imprisoned.

Dissent is rarely tolerated and ruthlessly put down. The most recent widescale protests – driven by a mixture of economic and political discontent – which occurred in over 100 cities and towns in November 2019 saw the authorities unleash the security forces, including the Revolutionary Guard, [who killed](#) 1,500 people in a couple of weeks (by contrast, the 2009 protests saw 72 people killed over 10 months of unrest). As [one commentator said at the time](#) of the 2019 protests: “The recent use of lethal force against people throughout the country is unprecedented, even for the Islamic Republic and its record of violence.” In an attempt to stop the protests from spreading, and to hide its crimes from the world, the regime shut down the internet for nearly a week.

Even after quelling the protests, the [regime continued](#) what human rights groups described as a “vicious crackdown”, arresting protesters, journalists, human rights activists and students. Among those detained were children as young as 15 who were taken to military barracks and prisons such as the notorious Fashafouyeh prison.

Although on a smaller scale, Iran used force to put down several other protests by its citizens last year. Demonstrations during the summer against shortages of clean water and poor living conditions in several provinces, for instance, saw at least 11 people killed, including a 17-year-old boy.

Both the media and civil society is tightly controlled by the regime. Trade unions and strikes are banned – with activists subject to heavy prison sentences on trumped up national security charges – while [independent human rights groups](#) are harassed, shut down and their leaders arrested.

The regime's suppression of the media is assisted by laws which restrict freedom of speech in the name of national security, as well as woolly legislation which criminalises acts “detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam”. As PEN America suggested in a [recent analysis](#): “Despite its rich cultural and literary traditions, Iran is among the world's most restrictive countries for freedom of expression. While the human rights situation has been dire for decades, the state of free expression and respect for fundamental rights has deteriorated even further in recent years, placing Iran [among the top jailers of writers and public intellectuals globally](#).”

Indeed, in 2020 [PEN found](#) that Iran ranked fourth in the world for the number of writers and intellectuals it imprisons, while the Committee to Protect Journalists similarly reported that last year the Islamic Republic remained in the top 10 states which lock up journalists. Among their ranks are [Manoochehr Aghaei](#), a reporter for a state-run news site and operator of an independent social media outlet, who received an eight-month prison sentence last November for “spreading propaganda against the system”. His punishment appears positively lenient in comparison to that meted out to two journalists in western Iran who in August were given sentences of two-and-a-half-years' imprisonment and 90 lashes over false-news accusations.

Iran's continuing efforts to clamp down on free speech are seen in new legislation designed to impose further restrictions on social media users – one of the few channels remaining for people to express their dissatisfaction with the regime.

The long arm of Iranian state repression also extends to dissidents and journalists who have fled overseas. Last summer, for instance, four Iranians were indicted in the United States after the [discovery of a government plot](#) to kidnap the Iranian-American journalist and author Masih Alinejad, lure her to a third country and force her to return to Iran. More tragically, in December 2020, Iran [executed the](#)

[dissident](#) journalist Rouhollah Zam on the charge of “sowing corruption on Earth” having abducted him while he was visiting Iraq and then forced him to return Iran.

Zam’s case illustrates Tehran’s continuing use of the death penalty. [Figures published](#) by the group Human Rights Activists in Iran suggest the regime executed at least 299 people in 2021, making it second only to China in its application of capital punishment. Tehran also continues to execute those who committed crimes as children, such as Sajad Sanjari, who was hanged last summer for the fatal stabbing of a man he said had tried to rape him when he was 15.

Soon to be added to the [multitude of crimes](#) which are punishable by death – including “insulting the prophet,” “apostasy,” same-sex relations, adultery, drinking alcohol, and certain non-violent drug-related offences – will be carrying out abortions. It follows the passage of a new law last November which tightens restrictions on abortion and bars the distribution of free contraceptives. The law reflects the inferior status accorded to women in Iran: banned from certain public places, they are unable to receive a passport without the permission of their father or husband, face discrimination in the courts and the political system, and must follow strict rules on dress and personal appearance.

THE MAGNITSKY SANCTIONS

Following Britain’s exit from the European Union, the government has designed a new sanctions regime. Using powers given it by the 2018 Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act, new regulations, based on the US’ Magnitsky Law, were brought in in 2020 to both promote human rights and punish corruption.

Under its terms, the UK can impose asset freezes and travel bans on individuals and entities suspected of committing gross violations of human rights.

The regulations are [designed](#) to both act as a deterrent and to promote “compliance with international human rights law or respect for human rights”, as well as “compliance with international humanitarian law [and] respect for democracy, the rule of law and good governance”.

Violations are [defined](#) as the “right to life”, “not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” and to “be free from slavery, not to be held in servitude or required to perform forced or compulsory labour”.

The government [claims](#) the new regime is “ground-breaking” and means the UK “has new powers to stop those involved in serious human rights abuses and violations from entering the country, channelling money through UK banks, or profiting from our economy”.

As a briefing from the law firm Allen and Overy [suggested](#), the regulations have an expansive approach. “Under the Regulation, being ‘involved in an activity’ is very broadly defined and includes providing financial services to, or profiting from, the targeted activities and/or being owned or controlled by a person so involved,” it argued.

At the same time, however, the sanctions regime is highly targeted. Writing about similar legislation in the US, Mark Normington of the NGO Global Witness, argued: “By targeting individuals rather than entire countries or sectors, the Magnitsky Act avoids broad-based sanctions that can affect vulnerable populations. It also means that malicious individuals and networks can be sanctioned despite broader foreign policy priorities which could otherwise prevent effective actions.”

In July 2020, the UK [imposed the first set of sanctions](#) under the regulations. These sanctions targeted 49 individuals and organisations “involved in some of the most notorious human rights violations and abuses in recent years”. They included:

- 25 Russian nationals involved in the mistreatment and death of auditor Sergei Magnitsky, who uncovered widespread Russian corruption by a group of Russian tax and police officials;
- 20 Saudi nationals involved in the death of journalist Jamal Khashoggi;
- 2 high-ranking Myanmar military generals involved in the systematic and brutal violence against the Rohingya people and other ethnic minorities;
- 2 organisations involved in the forced labour, torture and murder that takes place in North Korea’s gulags.

As the government stated: “It is the first time that the UK has sanctioned people or entities for human rights violations and abuses under a UK-only regime, and will allow the UK to work independently with allies such as the US, Canada, Australia and the European Union.” Subsequently, the UK has [imposed sanctions](#) under the human rights regulations on individuals and entities in Russia’s Chechen Republic, Xinjiang in China, Myanmar and Belarus, and former officials from the Gambia, Pakistan, Venezuela and Ukraine. By January, more than 70 individuals and six entities were [subject to human rights sanctions](#).

While the government’s attention to this litany of human rights abuses and corruption is very welcome, the omission of Iran from the Magnitsky sanctions is curious. On Britain’s exit from the EU in December 2020, the [Iran Human Rights \(Sanctions\) \(EU Exit\) Regulations 2019](#) came into force. These sanctions [replaced](#) relevant existing EU legislation and related UK regulations and were intended to ensure that financial, trade and immigration sanctions relating to Iran continued to operate effectively. These sanctions, the government says, are “aimed at encouraging the government of Iran to comply with international human rights law and respect human rights”. (A similar, separate, regulation came into force on 31 December 2020 with regard to Iran’s nuclear programme as well as other EU-imposed sanctions relating to Iran’s non-nuclear activities).

According to the [government’s annual review](#), there are currently 82 Iranians and one entity subject to human rights sanctions, but all of these were sanctioned while Britain was still a member of the EU and it appears that no individuals have been added to this list in nearly a decade. That means that there have been precious few concrete repercussions for those responsible for a litany of human rights abuses which have occurred over the last 10 years, including the violent suppression of the 2019 protests.

PUNISHING THE ABUSERS

While hardly exhaustive, the following list is designed to illustrate both some of the individuals who should be considered for the next round of Magnitsky sanctions, as well as showing who – thus far – Britain has chosen not to punish:

1. Ali Ghanaatkar has acted as head of interrogations and as judge in Evin prison. As Chris Bryant [argued in parliament](#) last year, he has been involved in the ill treatment of detainees, including the use of forceful interrogations and threats, and in bringing false charges against them.
2. Gholamreza Ziaei is the former head of Evin prison, where a number of British nationals – including Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe – have been detained. He was [sanctioned](#) by the US in January 2018 and the EU in April 2021. “Between July 2019 and June 2020, Gholamreza Ziaei was the Director of Evin Prison, where already harsh conditions for detainees further deteriorated during his tenure,” [suggested the EU listing](#).
3. Ali Rezvani is an Iranian state media journalist. He has not only been involved in the interrogation of detainees but, as Chris Bryant has suggested, has revealed detainees’ interrogation files, broadcast

forced confessions, and spread misinformation regarding political prisoners, dissidents and hostages.

4. Hassan Shahvarpour, Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Khuzestan since 2009, responsible for commanding the forces which used machine guns against protesters and other civilians in the city of Mahshahr during the November 2019 protests. Under his command, 148 people were killed by the IRGC by heavy machine gun fire from armoured vehicles encircling fleeing protesters hiding in nearby marshes.
5. Hossein Ashtari, Commander in Chief of the Iranian police force since March 2015 and member of the National Security Council. Iran's ordinary police force, the Emdad Units and the Special Units used lethal force to suppress the November 2019 protests in Iran, causing the deaths of, and injuries to, unarmed protesters and other civilians in many cities across the country. As a member of the National Security Council, Hossein Ashtari took part in the sessions that resulted in the orders to use lethal force to suppress the November 2019 protests.
6. Magnitsky sanctions should also target intelligence officials – namely, Alireza Shahvaroghi Farahani, Mahmoud Khazain, and Omid Noori – who plotted to kidnap the Iranian-American women's-rights activist Masih Alinejad from her New York home. This same network also planned to carry out kidnappings against British-Iranians on UK soil. While the Biden administration sanctioned the individuals last year, the UK is yet to act.
7. Mohammad Javad Azari-Jahromi, former minister of information and communications technology, imposed an internet blackout during the 2019-20 protests,
8. IRGC commander Salar Abnough who described the Iranians on the streets as part of a “satanic coalition” while referring to peaceful civilian protests as a “full-fledged world war against the regime and Islamic Revolution, but one that fortunately died at birth.” Abnough himself has said that he was “on the scene” until the “final hours of involvement with the sedition” and in the IRGC's monitoring room.
9. Gholamreza Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Basij militia, which used lethal force against civilians.
10. Leila Vaseghi, governor of Qods City in Tehran, who has boasted about giving direct orders to security forces to shoot at unarmed protesters.

Britain should now draw up a comprehensive list of high-ranking members of the regime, the IRGC, judiciary and security forces responsible for human rights abuses.

But while the introduction of Magnitsky-style sanctions is a highly welcome development, we now need to build public confidence in the system and ensure the full potential of its deterrent and punishment function by introducing clear and transparent processes. There should, for instance, be publicly available and consistently applied criteria underpinning the reasons why individuals are sanctioned. The sanctions regime should be flexible to allow swift responses to human rights abuses, but there should also be a regular review process. A mechanism should be established to ensure that human rights groups and others can submit – with reference to the previously mentioned criteria – the names of those who they believe should be sanctioned, together with supporting evidence.

Iran's nuclear programme, its threat to Israel, its support for terrorism and its malign activities in the region will remain a challenge that we must confront. In our determination to do so, however, we should not forget the domestic victims of the Islamic Republic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve McCabe MP is chair of Labour Friends of Israel

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT **LFI.ORG.UK**

EMAIL US AT MAIL@LFI.ORG.UK

FOLLOW US ON FACEBOOK 'LABOUR FRIENDS OF ISRAEL'

FOLLOW US ON TWITTER @__LFI

FOLLOW US ON INSTAGRAM @LABOURFRIENDSOFISRAEL