

IRAN'S TERROR ARMY ABROAD: THE IRGC THREAT TO BRITAIN

LFI POLICY BRIEFING

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BY
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is an ideological, professionalised paramilitary Iranian organisation with significant influence over the country's political, economic and social spheres. It not only conducts acts of extreme violence against Iran's population but is the regime's primary mechanism for radicalising the masses with its extremist Shia Islamist ideology.
- Outside of Iran's borders, the IRGC has developed a malign infiltration network across the Middle East and beyond, perpetuating regional conflicts through its support for terrorist proxies. The Iranian regime is unrelenting in its efforts to silence opposition voices and critics living outside its borders, using a variety of tactics including assassination, abduction, intimidation and surveillance.
- Through its extensive soft power network, the IRGC is the regime's primary means of propagating Islamist extremism and facilitating terror-related activities internationally. The IRGC's malign activities have been felt particularly on UK soil. In October 2024, Ken McCallum, the director-general of MI5, confirmed at least 20 IRGC-backed terror plots had been foiled in the UK since 2022. According to MI5, the Iranian regime's plots now present "potentially lethal threats to British citizens and UK residents". The former head of MI6 has also warned that the IRGC's activities in the UK pose a threat to the British Jewish community.
- As an Islamist extremist organisation, the IRGC's modus operandi resembles that of terror organisations proscribed by the UK government, including Islamic State (IS), al-Qaida and Hezbollah. The UK has rightly sanctioned the IRGC, as well as many other regime targets, but these steps have been primarily aimed at curbing Iran's destabilising behaviour in the Middle East.
- This approach has failed to curtail Iran's growing influence in the UK. Tehran is actively pursuing radicalisation in the UK, carrying out violent attacks on Iranian dissidents on UK soil and facilitating terrorist campaigns. Having committed to proscribing it in opposition, it is in the UK's national interest for the Labour government to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organisation.
- The IRGC has evolved into a professionalised paramilitary force, but it has preserved its fundamental characteristics of an Islamist extremist militia group. This is reflected in its practices of ideological indoctrination, use of terror and asymmetric warfare tactics.
- The IRGC is central to steering and resourcing proxy forces, including Hezbollah and Hamas, with devastating effects throughout the Middle East. Despite recent challenges, the IRGC has shown resilience and adaptability and will continue to expand its network of proxies and fill power vacuums in the region.
- Iran and Russia have formed a formidable alliance to exchange weapons and defence technology, circumvent western sanction regimes, and stall international diplomacy and UN decision-making.
- The IRGC is currently sanctioned for its involvement in supporting Middle East destabilisation, regional groups that are designated as terrorist organisations by the UK, and Iran's nuclear programme. But sanctions do not prevent the IRGC's strategy to nurture homegrown Islamist extremism on British soil.
- Proscribing the IRGC will mean that its members cannot be active in any respect in the UK which would ultimately disrupt its efforts to nurture homegrown Islamist extremism, spread antisemitism and recruit future operatives on British soil, as well as constraining the IRGC's terror-related activities.

INTRODUCTION: SECURING AND SPREADING THE REVOLUTION

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini on 5 May 1979, in the aftermath of Iran's Islamic revolution. Its initial purpose was to serve as a counterweight to the regular army (the "Artesh") and combine several paramilitary forces that had emerged during the revolution into a single, unified and ideological force. To preserve the revolution, the IRGC's primary mission is to safeguard the ideological foundations and political structure of the Islamic Republic. Over the decades which have followed, the IRGC has played a crucial role in consolidating the ruling clergy's grip over post-revolutionary Iran and suppressing opposition groups.

The IRGC ultimately operates as an ideological army, distinct from the regular armed forces, with a constitutional mission to [extend](#) the "sovereignty of God's law throughout the world". As article 154 of its constitution [suggests](#), the Islamic Republic "supports the just struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe", thus underlining Tehran's commitment to exporting its revolution and legitimising the IRGC's efforts to promote "resistance" beyond Iran's borders.

The Iran-Iraq war, which lasted between September 1980 and August 1988, was a transformative period for the IRGC. At the war's outset, the IRGC was poorly trained and equipped and lacked coordination with the regular military. However, during the conflict, the organisation grew in size, structure and complexity, solidifying its position as a formidable military force. Since its inception, the IRGC has specialised in unconventional warfare strategies. These include the "[Mosaic Doctrine](#)", an asymmetric warfare concept developed in the wake of the 2003 Iraq war, which envisages a protracted and dispersed insurgency to compensate for Iran's potential military weaknesses. The IRGC would later deploy this strategy not to repel potential invaders, but to destabilise its regional neighbours.

During the early years of the Islamic Republic, the IRGC began sponsoring non-state armed groups in the region, laying the groundwork for its future role in projecting the regime's power and the revolution beyond its borders. The IRGC has thus developed a malign network of proxies, the "axis of resistance", across the Middle East.

The IRGC has evolved into a professionalised paramilitary force, but it has preserved the fundamental characteristics of an Islamist extremist militia group. This is reflected in its practices of ideological indoctrination; the use of terror, like hostage-taking and hijacking; and [asymmetric warfare tactics](#), including electromagnetic satellite jamming and speedboat swarm tactics in naval operations.

THE IRGC'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

The IRGC is deeply intertwined with the Islamic Republic. It answers directly to Iran's supreme leader and is therefore not accountable to the elected president or parliament, enabling it to exert considerable influence over policymaking decisions, particularly in foreign policy.

Over the years, IRGC commanders have [ascended](#) to top military and security posts, establishing a strong hold over the economy and influencing political decision-making. Successive cabinet members have been former members of the IRGC. Currently, there are a number of former IRGC members in the government of the "reformist" president, Masoud Pezeshkian, including: General Eskandar Momeni, the interior minister; Abbas Araghchi, the foreign minister; and Esmail Khatib, the intelligence minister. These senior appointments demonstrate both the power of the supreme leader and the IRGC over the president and parliament and the IRGC's infiltration of Iranian politics. Major General Hossein Salami, the current commander-in-chief of the IRGC, is [known](#) for his aggressive stance, advocating for the use of violence to enforce Islamist extremist ideology on the Iranian population and suppress opposition.

The IRGC also wields significantly more influence and power compared to the regular military. The supreme leader personally appoints the IRGC's top commander and places clerical representatives within its various branches to maintain their commitment to the regime's revolutionary objectives. Along with the regular army and national police, the organisation falls under the administration of the Armed Forces General Staff, which

is, in turn, predominantly controlled by IRGC commanders. The IRGC's Ground Force is responsible for land-based military operations; the Navy Force conducts maritime operations and patrols; and the Aerospace Force manages Iran's missile programme and air defence systems.

Domestically, the IRGC's responsibility for preserving the revolution is apparent in its active [role](#) in cracking down on non-Islamic influences and violently suppressing popular unrest. Through a combination of conventional and unconventional military tactics, the IRGC pursues and punishes domestic dissidents. During the 2022-3 protests following the death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the "morality police", the IRGC and its domestic paramilitary organisation, the Basij, deployed lethal force against demonstrators. This included using live ammunition on crowds, beating and torturing dissidents, preventing medical aid from reaching wounded protestors, and arbitrarily arresting and detaining demonstrators.

The Basij, which plays a significant role in maintaining internal security, suppressing dissent, and enforcing the Islamist ideology and values of the regime, targets primarily young, devout Shia individuals for recruitment with promises of social mobility and benefits. Its 450,000 active reservists provide vast additional manpower to the IRGC. Meanwhile, the IRGC's Intelligence Organisation targets, arrests, interrogates and tortures dissidents, even having its own section at the notorious Evin Prison.

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE IRGC: LOYALTY AT HOME AND DESTABILISATION ABROAD

The IRGC's suppression of dissent and oppression of society is guided by its violent Islamist extremist ideology. Members of the IRGC are highly indoctrinated to preserve and export the ideals of the Islamic Republic. They are required by the regime's central ideological concept of the "guardianship of the Islamic jurist" – "velayat-e faqih" – to show absolute loyalty to the supreme leader, to whom ultimate religious and political authority is [granted](#).

The Islamic Republic's commitment to [revolutionary expansionism](#) is key to the ideology of the IRGC. Through its network of violent militias, the IRGC is dedicated to spreading the revolution beyond Iran's borders. Revolutionary expansionism involves promoting loyalty to the ideals of the Islamic Republic and the supreme leader, and propagating hostility towards the west, particularly US interests in the region and Israel. The IRGC and its proxy armies share a determination to eradicate the state of Israel.

The IRGC's hostility to the Jewish state is a core tenet of its Shia Islamist extremist ideology. The organisation's Quds Force, which specialises in foreign operations, was specifically established with a mandate to export the Islamic revolution and "liberate" Palestine through the destruction of Israel. But the IRGC also seeks to weaken and delegitimise Israel and undermine US influence for geopolitical reasons. By targeting Israel, the Iranian regime seeks to position itself as a champion of the Palestinian people and achieve regional hegemony.

The IRGC's multifaceted nature as a military, economic, societal and ideological force makes it a mainstay of the Islamic Republic's power structure and the primary driver of regional destabilisation.



A 2021 UNVEILING CEREMONY OF IRGC FORCES EQUIPMENT

Image © Abouzar Cheraghi / Young Journalists Club

THE IRGC'S MALIGN INFLUENCE ABROAD: DESTABILISATION, RADICALISATION AND TERRORISM

The Iranian regime poses a grave threat to international security. Through the IRGC, Tehran extends its destabilisation efforts throughout the Middle East and beyond to western soil. Since the 1980s, Iran's supreme leaders and the IRGC have together developed international networks of individuals and entities to facilitate terrorism, nurture Islamist extremism and target individuals – primarily Iranian dissidents and the Jewish community – across the west. Through the IRGC, the regime adopts multiple strategies to undermine western security by promoting international destabilisation, domestic disruption and the suppression of dissidents.

MALIGN INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The IRGC does not recognise sovereign borders and works to weaken regional governments to create, strengthen and spread non-state proxies. The IRGC is at the operational and ideological heart of Iran's "axis of resistance". Through this axis, the IRGC threatens the interests and security of the UK and its allies, [seeking](#) to expel western influence from the Middle East, block a two-state solution and Arab-Israeli normalisation, and ultimately destroy Israel.

The Iranian regime is engaged in a constant struggle for regional hegemony and considers the US and its allies to be its main adversary. Its strategy is for the IRGC to steer and empower proxies within weak or failed states – including Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Shia militias in Iraq and the former Assad regime in Syria – that share its revisionist agenda and Islamist, or otherwise authoritarian, anti-west ideologies, regardless of sectarian differences. This focus on proxy warfare is the primary way in which Tehran advances its foreign policy objectives in the region. Using these proxies, the Iranian regime attempts to maintain a degree of plausible deniability and avoid direct retaliation against its own territory, allowing others to bear the costs and responsibility for its actions. To varying degrees, the IRGC has helped turn each of these extremist groups into powerful military actors.

The IRGC's strategic and ideological goal is to encircle Israel with hostile forces – including Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and other proxies in Syria and the West Bank – to create multiple fronts of indirect conflict. This strategy has had a devastating impact. The IRGC's long-time support for Hamas enabled the Islamist terrorist group to carry out the 7 October 2023 atrocities against Israel, in which some 1,200 people were murdered and 251 were kidnapped. Minutes from Hamas meetings, for instance, [revealed](#) that Khalil al-Hayya, the deputy of Hamas' Gaza boss, Yahya Sinwar, discussed the plan in July 2023 with Mohammed Saeed Izadi, a senior IRGC commander, who was based in Lebanon and helped oversee Tehran's relations with Palestinian armed groups.

The "axis of resistance" has, however, experienced significant losses over the past two years, with the near decimation of the Hezbollah and Hamas leadership and the fall of the Assad regime. In spite of these existential and functional losses, the ideological commitments of the IRGC, characterised by both revolutionary expansionism and strong anti-US and anti-Israel sentiments, suggests that the organisation will continue to exploit regional instabilities and fill power vacuums. Indeed, despite recent challenges, the IRGC has shown resilience and adaptability. It continues, for instance, to arm and fund PIJ, Hamas and the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades as it [seeks](#) to destabilise the West Bank to the detriment of the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Israel. It has also [escalated](#) its backing and cooperation between its two least-impacted proxies: Iraqi Shia militias and Yemen's Houthis, reportedly [directing](#) and [supporting](#) the rebels' post-7 October attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea, as well as prior attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This suggests a strategy of diversifying its relationships with proxies while potentially seeking new opportunities.

While the "axis of resistance" has had setbacks, the Iranian regime escalated its approach to regional destabilisation last year. Departing from its usual strategy of proxy warfare, the IRGC [launched](#) two

unprecedented direct attacks against Israel in 2024, including firing 300 rockets in April and 200 ballistic missiles in October.

INTERNATIONAL DESTABILISATION AND THE IRAN-RUSSIA ALLIANCE

Iran is the primary destabilising actor in the Middle East, but it also contributes to conflict and instability elsewhere. The regime's nuclear programme poses significant threats to international security, as seen in Iran's escalating uranium enrichment activities, which have brought it perilously close to the threshold of being a nuclear state. The IRGC is deeply integrated into Iran's nuclear programme through its oversight of nuclear capabilities and facilities, such as the [expansion](#) of the Bushehr power plant, as well as its responsibility for ensuring the security of the nuclear sites. For many years, the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme has been a major concern for the international community, contributing to an already volatile security environment and posing a direct, existential threat to Israel. While Tehran's alarming efforts to secure a nuclear weapon represent a first-order threat, its destabilising activities extend far beyond nuclear proliferation.

Iran supports other significant disruptive forces, including assisting Russia in its destabilising efforts in Europe. Historically, Russia was considered the dominant partner, primarily supplying Iran with military equipment. This relationship has, however, [transformed](#) in recent years, particularly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Now, Iran has become a critical military supplier to Russia, particularly in the form of drones and ammunition. IRGC commanders and affiliated companies play a crucial [role](#) in the logistics and provision of weapons to Russia. The Iranian regime and Russia have thus [formed](#) a formidable alliance aimed at undermining western influence and destabilising democratic nations.

DOMESTIC DISRUPTION

A key objective of the Iranian regime is to export the Islamic revolution by expanding its influence and weakening western countries from within. The Iranian regime uses soft-power mechanisms to facilitate terrorism, nurture Islamist extremist radicalisation and spread antisemitism. Iran has been accused of meddling in UK and Scottish parliamentary elections in an attempt to cause instability and polarisation, with the IRGC playing a pivotal role. Alongside Russian actors, the Cognitive Design Production Centre, an IRGC subordinate organisation, [sought](#) to stoke sociopolitical tensions to undermine institutions during the 2024 US presidential election, leading to the imposition of further sanctions by the outgoing Biden administration.

The IRGC has also spread false information through disinformation campaigns to exacerbate internal divisions in western societies and has launched cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure. For instance, in 2017, an Iranian hacker group tied to the IRGC [conducted](#) a cyber-attack on the UK parliament, which compromised the email accounts of 90 parliamentarians. During the 2021 Scottish parliamentary elections, cyber specialists acting on behalf of Tehran [reportedly](#) targeted voters on Twitter and Facebook by creating fake pro-independence accounts and groups.

Finally, the Iranian regime increasingly engages in "hostage-diplomacy", detaining western nationals as bargaining chips for leverage in negotiations in order to obtain political, economic or diplomatic concessions from the international community. The IRGC Intelligence Organisation is reportedly [involved](#) in the detention and interrogation of hostages and is known to have an office in the notorious Evin Prison, where, among other hostages, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Italian journalist Cecilia Sala were both detained.

SUPPRESSION OF DISSIDENTS ABROAD

The IRGC is well known for its central role in suppressing protests, undermining civil society and maintaining mass surveillance programmes directed against the Iranian people. However, the IRGC is also actively targeting dissidents beyond Iran's own borders.

The Iranian regime is unrelenting in its efforts to silence opposition voices and critics living overseas, using a variety of tactics including assassination, abduction, intimidation and surveillance. The IRGC has increasingly used drug traffickers and other criminals as middlemen for attacks abroad, providing a layer of deniability for the regime. In March 2024, journalist Pouria Zeraati, a presenter on the Iran International TV station, was stabbed in London, demonstrating the continuing threat to journalists critical of the regime. “I never seriously thought that the IRGC would go so far as to attack a British national on the streets of the UK,” he later [commented](#). Earlier, in December 2023, the IRGC was behind the foiled [plot](#) to kill two news presenters, also working on the Iran international TV station.

PLOTS AND RADICALISATION IN THE UK

Iranian journalists and dissidents are, however, not the only target of the Iranian regime. In October 2024, Ken McCallum, the director-general of MI5, [confirmed](#) at least 20 IRGC-backed terror plots had been foiled in the UK since 2022. According to MI5, the Iranian regime's plots now [present](#) “potentially lethal threats to British citizens and UK residents”. The IRGC was also in direct contact with the attacker accused of the attempted [assassination](#) of British author Salman Rushdie in New York state in August 2022, which left The Satanic Verses author blind in one eye.

Efforts to [target](#) the Jewish community in the UK have increased with evidence showing the IRGC hiring criminal gangs to spy on Jews in the UK. For example, the Foxtrot Network, a notorious Swedish-based organised criminal gang led by Rawa Majid, has operated on behalf of the Iranian regime. In April 2025, the UK government imposed sanctions on both the Foxtrot Network and Majid, citing their involvement in violence against Jewish and Israeli targets across Europe at the direction of the Iranian regime. In an interview with the Jewish Chronicle in March 2025, Sir Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6, [argued](#) that the Jewish community in the UK was subject to a particular threat from the IRGC, suggesting: “There is a threat, there is a problem whether it's the inspiration of radicals who are going to attack the Jewish community, or whether it's organising demonstrations which intimidate the Jewish community and encouraging those.” The impact of Iran's nefarious activities on British Jews is widespread. After a meeting with the Union of Jewish Students, for instance, LFI chair Jon Pearce [addressed](#) parliament saying he had “heard distressing examples of the Iranian regime organising on our campuses and stirring up hatred against Jewish students”.

In order to engage in domestic radicalisation, senior IRGC officers have sought to address British audiences. During an Instagram live event to a British student group in September 2020, for instance, IRGC commander Hossein Yekta reportedly [urged](#) UK-based students to “raise the flag of the Islamic Revolution, Islam and martyrdom” and said that they should see themselves as “holy warriors in the field of knowledge”. According to a report in the Jewish Chronicle newspaper, Yekta also stated: “You, as students of the Islamic associations, are studying at a time when universities have become the battlefield. You have become young soft-war officers, who must convey our message, which is from the blood of our men, to all the world... The youth of tomorrow must prepare themselves for governance of the awaiting Islamic civilisation. [You have] a global mission, a civilisational mission.”

In the past, Yekta has, according to the Jewish Chronicle, propagated antisemitic disinformation, [claiming](#) that Jews “created homosexuality” and that “the era of the Jews” will soon be at an end. Evidence [compiled](#) by United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) shows that Yekta is a senior commander of the IRGC's plain clothes unit, which is responsible for gross human rights violations, and operates as a key IRGC recruiter and indoctrinator. He has played a critical role in commanding and training the regime's [suppressive machinery](#), including during the 2022 Amini protests. Yekta has overseen the regime's [money laundering](#) activities to finance the IRGC's activities: from supporting terrorist groups abroad to suppression in Iran. He is also a member of the “[Habib Circle](#),” the highest informal security-intelligence network, which is headed by the supreme leader's son – and potential successor – Mojtaba Khamenei.

During an online webinar in January 2021, the BBC reported, another senior IRGC commander, Saeed Ghasemi, [praised](#) Soleimani, [described](#) an “apocalyptic war” that British students could join to “bring an

end to the life of the oppressors and occupiers, Zionists and Jews across the world” and termed the Holocaust “a lie and a fake”. “God willing, myself and you good students in Europe will be written in the beautiful list of the soldiers of the resistance from tonight,” Ghasemi stated, according to the BBC account of the event.

According to UANI, Ghasemi is also a senior commander of the IRGC’s plain clothes unit. He has played a leading role in commanding the violent suppression of Iranian civilians in successive protests, including the 1999 student protests, the 2009 Green Movement, and the 2022 Amini protests. As a senior member of the IRGC’s Quds Force, he [helped](#) train al-Qaida terrorists in Europe during the Bosnian war. He is also a member of the “[Habib Circle](#)”.

But, despite accusations of involvement in human rights abuses and engaging in radicalisation activities in the UK, neither Yekta nor Ghasemi are subject to UK sanctions.

Professor Ali Ansari of the University of St Andrews [told](#) the BBC that the talks by the IRGC commanders reflected “an attempt to encourage disruption, discontent, and basically undermine the stability of western society, and what we need is a much more robust response to it”.

Prior to proscription, the UK government should ensure that authorities, such as the police, and regulators, such as the Charity Commission, have sufficient powers and resources to investigate the activities of organisations operating on UK soil which are alleged to be promoting and hosting IRGC voices. The UK government already has the legislation to close such organisations through the 2023 [National Security Act](#). The act expands the definition of state threats and provides law enforcement with enhanced powers to combat hostile activities by foreign states. The act therefore grants authorities additional powers to monitor and disrupt such malign activities on UK soil.

As recently announced by the security minister, Dan Jarvis, the entirety of the Iranian regime – including the IRGC – will be placed on the “[enhanced tier](#)” of the new Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS). The FIRS is a critical disruptive tool for the UK and will order any individual or organisation that is directed by Iran to conduct activities in the UK – such as criminal proxies – to register that activity, whatever it is, or face five years in prison. While the government’s crackdown on the Iranian regime’s malign influence in the UK is a welcome move, stronger measures are needed given the increase in Iranian-backed terrorist activity detailed by MI5 and the IRGC’s efforts to nurture homegrown Islamist extremist radicalisation on British soil.

20 IRGC-backed terror plots foiled in the UK since 2022, MI5 revealed last autumn

425 Iranian targets subject to UK sanctions regime, including IRGC, IRGC Aerospace Force and IRGC Quds Force

500 rockets and missiles fired at Israel by the IRGC and Iran’s terrorist proxies in last year’s attacks in April and October

425,000 active reservists in the IRGC’s Basij which suppresses dissent and enforces the regime’s hardline ideology at home

THE IRGC IN NUMBERS

SANCTIONING AND PROSCRIBING THE IRGC IN THE UK

THE UK SANCTIONS REGIME

The IRGC is currently sanctioned for its involvement in supporting Middle East destabilisation, regional groups that are designated as terrorist organisations by the UK and Iran's nuclear programme. The two regimes are the Iran (Sanctions) Regulations 2023 and the Iran (nuclear) sanctions regime. Sanctions are restrictive measures that can be put in place to fulfil a range of purposes. In the UK, these include complying with UN and other international obligations, supporting foreign policy and national security objectives, as well as maintaining international peace and security and preventing terrorism. There are several forms of sanctions implemented by the UK. These include: trade sanctions (ie arms embargoes and other trade restrictions); financial sanctions (ie asset freezes); immigration sanctions (ie travel bans), and aircraft and shipping sanctions (ie deregistering or controlling the movement of aircraft and ships).

The [Iran \(Sanctions\) Regulations 2023](#) came fully into force in December 2023. Their purpose is to deter Iran or an armed group backed by it from conducting hostile activity against the United Kingdom or any other country and to encourage the regime to comply with international human rights law and to respect human rights. The regulations replaced the 2019 post-Brexit sanctions regime, which brought existing EU sanctions on Iran into UK law.

As of January 2025, 235 targets are recorded under "Iran" on the UK sanctions list and these include the morality police, the IRGC Navy (for threatening, planning or conducting attacks against ships); the IRGC Cyber Defence Command (for serious human rights violations in Iran); the IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Palestine Branch (for supporting Hamas and PIJ and threatening Israel), and units of the IRGC-QF which supports terrorist organisations outside of Iran. Senior IRGC figures have been sanctioned in the past by the UK, including Iranian former defence minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani and Major-General Gholamali Rashid, commander of Iran's central military headquarters.

There are 190 targets recorded under "Iran nuclear" on the UK sanctions list including the IRGC, the IRGC Aerospace Force and the IRGC-QF.

The IRGC is thus sanctioned in the UK because it has responsibility for Iran's nuclear programme, operational control of Iran's ballistic missile programme and has undertaken procurement attempts to support Iran's ballistic missiles and nuclear programmes. At the same time, the IRGC-QF is sanctioned because it is Tehran's principal foreign policy tool for special operations and support to terrorists and Islamist militants beyond Iran's borders.

But, crucially, when an entity is sanctioned that does not automatically mean that it is proscribed as a terrorist organisation. In the UK's case, sanctions do not cover the IRGC's strategy to nurture homegrown Islamist extremism here in Britain and identify and sign-up potential new recruits on British soil. Moreover, while sanctions primarily target an organisation or individual's financial activities, proscription has a wider scope, encompassing membership of, and support for, a terrorist organisation.

PROSCRIBING THE IRGC IN THE UK

It is clear that the current sanctions regime alone cannot, and has not, curtailed the IRGC's destabilising activities in the UK. The IRGC is not a proscribed group in the UK. Groups which are related to Iran that are proscribed include Hamas, Hezbollah and PIJ.

The criteria for proscription in the UK is based on an [assessment](#) that an organisation "commits or participates in, prepares for, promotes or encourages, or is otherwise concerned in terrorism". Internationally, 81 terrorist organisations are proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000.

Under the act, terrorism constitutes the use or threat of action which involves serious violence against a person; involves serious damage to property; endangers a person's life (other than that of the person

committing the act); or creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or section of the public. Activities constituting terrorism include planning, assisting and collecting information on how to commit terrorist acts. The use or threat must be for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause.

As discussed in this paper, the IRGC's activities both here in the UK and abroad – including its glorification of terrorism and terrorists; hostage-taking; planning terrorist plots on UK soil; and the planned use of violence and collecting information likely to be used to commit a terrorist attack – are akin to those carried out by proscribed terrorist organisations. In 2020, the UK parliament's foreign affairs select committee [found](#) that “the actions of the IRGC meet the criteria for proscription in the Terrorism Act 2000, due to its clear and enduring support for terrorists and non-state actors working to undermine stability in the region.”

But what practical additional impact would proscription have? [Proscription](#) makes it a criminal offence to belong, or profess to belong, to a proscribed organisation in the UK or overseas; invite support for a proscribed organisation; express an opinion or belief that is supportive of a proscribed organisation; or recklessly express support for a proscribed organisation.

Proscribing the IRGC will thus mean that its members cannot be active in any respect in the UK, including attending or speaking at meetings. It means it will be a criminal offence for anyone in the UK to associate with the IRGC, to profess support for it, to share any materials created by the IRGC or attend any meetings with IRGC representatives. Proscribing the IRGC will mean this behaviour would be considered a criminal offence and IRGC online material would have to be removed.

Nonetheless, like Hamas and Hezbollah, and unlike al-Qaida, the IRGC is a quasi-state actor. Thus Labour, which committed to proscribing the IRGC in opposition, said in its 2024 general election [manifesto](#), which cited the IRGC, that the party “would take the approach used for dealing with non-state terrorism and adapt it to deal with state-based domestic security threats.” This is the correct course of action. If the government determines that it cannot proscribe the IRGC under existing legislation, it should move swiftly to amend the legislation or develop a new legislative mechanism that results in the IRGC, and those who wish to support it, facing the same restrictions to which other proscribed organisations, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, are subject. The government's current review of terrorism legislation should prioritise proscribing the IRGC.

Some have argued against proscription of the IRGC on the basis that the US wants the UK to retain relations as an interlocutor with Iran. However, it is unclear that the Trump administration, which oversaw a “maximum pressure” sanctions regime on the Islamic Republic during the president's first term, has any such interest. Others have argued that proscription will sever the UK's relations with Tehran. However, while not an exact parallel, this claim was frequently made with regard to Lebanon prior to the UK's full proscription of Hezbollah, whose members have served in the Lebanese cabinet and parliament, in 2019. These warnings proved inaccurate and there was no rupture in diplomatic relations with Beirut.

Key UK allies, including the US, Canada, Sweden, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, have already proscribed the IRGC, while British Jewish communal groups such as the Board of Deputies of British Jews have [called](#) for the UK to follow suit. The UK parliament's foreign affairs select committee has in the past [called](#) for the IRGC to be proscribed, as have respected thinktanks, including the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

Proscribing the IRGC would ultimately impede its radicalisation efforts in the UK and constrain its terror-related activities.

CONCLUSION

While the IRGC has evolved into a professionalised paramilitary force, it has preserved the fundamental characteristics of an Islamist extremist militia group. This is reflected in its practices of ideological indoctrination; the use of terror, like hostage-taking and hijacking; and asymmetric warfare tactics. The IRGC plays a significant role in the suppression of the Iranian population and dissidents inside and outside of Iran. Outside of Iran's borders, the IRGC has developed a malign infiltration network across the Middle East and beyond, perpetuating regional conflicts through its support for terrorist proxies. The IRGC's destabilising activities are not confined to the Middle East, with the development of a soft-power infrastructure across Europe as a means to facilitate Iran's hard-power objectives. As the UK experiences a rise in IRGC terror plots and efforts to nurture homegrown Islamist extremism, spread antisemitism and recruit future operatives on British soil, stronger measures are needed to counter the IRGC's activities domestically.



IRAN'S SUPREME LEADER ISSUES AWARDS FOR DIRECT ATTACK ON ISRAEL

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