

**UNLEASHING HELL:
TIME TO BAN
TEHRAN'S TERROR
ARMY**

LFI POLICY BRIEFING

**LABOUR
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WORKING TOWARDS A TWO STATE SOLUTION

**UNLEASHING HELL:
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TERROR ARMY**

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BY

ROGER MACMILLAN

FOREWORD: DAVID BLUNKETT

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FOREWORD: STAND WITH THE IRANIAN PEOPLE

As the Islamic Republic indiscriminately lashes out at Britain and our allies across the region, continuing Israeli and US strikes are targeting the command-and-control centres of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). As well as being Iran's primary exporter of terrorism abroad, it is also the regime's iron fist against domestic dissent. As discussed in LFI's new policy paper, it was from these centres that the brutal repression of Iran's largest anti-regime protests in January – in which as many as 30,000 people are believed to have been killed and tens of thousands of others tortured and detained – was perpetrated and coordinated.

Iran's nuclear violations, its indiscriminate firing of ballistic missiles, and its support for terrorist proxies such as Hezbollah and Hamas have long been part of the same deadly threat.

British forces in the region are now subject to Iranian drone attacks, but the UK has long been a target for the regime. MI5 reported last year on some 20 Iran-backed plots in the UK over the previous year. Iranian dissidents and journalists who dare to speak out against the regime and the UK's Jewish community are at the sharp end of this threat. The Islamic Republic's malign actions clearly do not acknowledge borders or discern between civilian and combatant.

With the death of Ayatollah Khamenei and other senior regime figures, the Islamic Republic is facing the greatest crisis to its survival since it took power in 1979. Despite the continuing war, it intends to survive and its new leadership are as odious and hardline as their predecessors.

The new head of the IRGC, Ahmad Vahidi, is an internationally wanted terrorist who has been implicated in the murderous 1994 attack on the AMIA Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires, in which 85 people were killed. As interior minister, Vahidi presided over the brutal crackdown on the Women, Life, Freedom protests in 2022. His record symbolises the pernicious, dual-nature of the IRGC as an instrument of terror overseas and on the streets of Iran.

“The Islamic Republic’s malign actions clearly do not acknowledge borders or discern between civilian and combatant.”

Ali Larijani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, who appears to be emerging as the leading figure in post-Khamenei Iran, is responsible for coordinating the regime's horrific response to the January protests.

As Roger Macmillan argues, there are steps the UK can take now to protect regime targets in the UK and to support anti-regime protesters inside Iran.

First, we can immediately proscribe the IRGC-Quds Force – the regime's primary exporter of terrorism abroad – under existing terrorism legislation. Canada took such a step more than a decade before it designated the IRGC as a whole.

Second, we can accelerate the implementation of recommendations set out by Jonathan Hall KC last year, which will allow the UK to proscribe the entirety of the IRGC. Additionally, we can escalate and enforce sanctions targeted at senior political elites.

Third, we should expand protective measures for targets of the Iranian regime in the UK, including dissidents and the Jewish community, enforce the new Foreign Influence Registration Scheme, and identify and dismantle soft influence networks that advance the regime's objectives under the cover of cultural, academic, charitable or media activity.

Finally, we need to send a message to the regime that violent repression has consequences – especially when they may amount to crimes against humanity – and the UK should therefore refer Iran to the International Criminal Court and demand an uninhibited and comprehensive UN fact-finding mission.

The courageous people of Iran have always been the Islamic Republic's primary victims. The UK should join with allies, such as Australia and Canada, proscribe the IRGC and stand with Iranians who are at the forefront of the greatest fight for liberation in our time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lord Blunkett is a former home secretary

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD: TIME TO BAN THE IRGC

INTRODUCTION: THE REGIME CHALLENGED FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT

The killing of supreme leader Ali Khamenei in joint US-Israeli strikes on 28 February 2026 has thrown the Islamic Republic into its most profound crisis since the 1979 revolution. This is only the second leadership transition since its founding, and it is unfolding under active military bombardment.

The eventual shape of the regime, whether it endures, fractures, or collapses, remains deeply [uncertain](#). As the Council on Foreign Relations noted, leadership change in Iran could follow three primary trajectories: regime continuity, military takeover or regime collapse. But across all plausible outcomes short of total state failure, one institution is positioned to emerge strengthened: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Analysts warn that the power vacuum could produce a more aggressive military leadership fuelled by nationalist fury, and the doctrine of “strategic patience” that Khamenei championed may give way to what one analyst has [described](#) as a “scorched earth” posture. Whatever regime emerges from this crisis, the securocrats are likely to be at its centre.

The appointment of [Ahmad Vahidi](#) as the new IRGC commander-in-chief, [announced](#) within hours of Khamenei's death, is itself a statement of intent. Vahidi was the founding commander of the Quds Force (QF), the very unit this paper argues must be proscribed.

“The case for proscribing the IRGC-QF does not weaken in the fog of war; it sharpens.”

The Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman [concluded](#) that the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community centre bombing in Buenos Aires, which killed 85 people, was approved at the highest levels of the Iranian government, with Vahidi among those subject to [international arrest warrants](#). He has been wanted by Interpol since 2007 over his alleged involvement in the attack.

Vahidi is not simply a military figure; he is a man whose career traces the full arc of IRGC violence from international terrorism to domestic repression. As interior minister from 2021 to 2024, the morality police under his command were [responsible](#) for the death of Mahsa Amini, and the US Treasury redesignated him in October 2022 for his oversight of all Law Enforcement Forces deployed to suppress the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, actions that resulted in thousands of deaths.

That the regime, in its hour of greatest peril, has turned to a man wanted by Interpol for terrorism and sanctioned for mass repression tells us everything about where Iran is heading. The case for proscribing the IRGC-QF does not weaken in the fog of war; it sharpens. If the IRGC consolidates further power in the post-Khamenei order, the UK will face not a weakened adversary open to diplomacy, but an enhanced militarised state whose new commander personally embodies the fusion of international terrorism and domestic atrocity. The threshold for action was already crossed in January 2026. The appointment of Vahidi removes any remaining ambiguity.

The joint US-Israeli military action that is currently unfolding comes on top of the nationwide uprising that swept Iran in January 2026. This uprising represented the most severe episode of state repression in the Islamic Republic's history. What began as economic protests rapidly evolved into an explicit,

nationwide rejection of the regime itself, a movement seen across hundreds of cities and involving millions of Iranians. For the first time, calls for systemic change posed a direct existential threat to the ruling order.

The regime's response was unprecedented in scale and brutality. Led by the Islamic IRGC, specifically the Thar-Allah HQ and Quds Force proxies, the regime carried out mass killings under a blanket internet blackout. This blackout aimed to separate protest groups, create fear and confusion and blind the west to the atrocities. The regime murdered protestors on the streets; executed the wounded in hospitals; committed acts of torture; charged families \$5,000 for the return of their murdered loved-ones; and concealed bodies in mass graves. Despite the internet blackout, credible estimates emerged suggesting up to 36,500 deaths had occurred in just two days, with possibly over 350,000 injured. The evidence points to crimes against humanity committed on a vast scale.

Despite this magnitude, the UK response has been cautious, relying on incremental sanctions while avoiding fundamental reassessment. But the current conflict and the events of January 2026 mark a clear rupture, and the threshold for a "business as usual" response has been crossed. The UK must immediately proscribe the IRGC-QF, accelerate the implementation of Jonathan Hall's recommendations, and recalibrate its approach to reflect the reality of mass atrocity, escalating state threats and the impact on the UK's national security.

THE JANUARY 2026 UPRISING: AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT AND MASS KILLING

Triggered by acute economic pressures, with the Iranian rial reaching historic lows, demonstrations, spearheaded by Tehran's powerful bazaar merchants, erupted in the closing days of 2025. Within days, economic grievances were transformed into political revolt. Demonstrations spread to over 400 locations, cutting across ethnic, religious, socio-economic and even political lines. Protesters openly called for the end of the Islamic Republic itself. "Death to the Dictator" echoed across the country, explicitly targeting Khamenei.

The IRGC assumed operational control within a matter of days. Communications blackouts were imposed on 8 January, internet access severed and urban centres militarised. Tehran was placed under complete siege with tens of thousands of armed forces deployed. Security forces used live ammunition against unarmed demonstrators systematically, not just at flashpoints. Protesters were shot at close range in residential neighbourhoods. Individuals were executed on the spot after arrest, bypassing even the highly flawed and flimsy safeguards offered by the regime's judicial procedures.

Wounded protesters were detained from hospitals and subsequently executed. Multiple doctors who fled Iran describe treating scores with bullet wounds while security forces pursued the [wounded](#). Torture in detention was systematic: beatings, electric shocks, stress positions and denial of medical treatment. Families were denied information about detained relatives. Bodies were returned with prohibitions on public funerals or independent examination; [thousands simply disappeared](#).

With the digital blackout, death toll estimates are hard to confirm; however, trusted sources such as Iran International and The Times have reported figures as high as [36,500](#), compared to the regime claims of 3,117 deaths, an act described by human rights commentators as deliberately minimising the true scale. The true scale of the killings, injured, arrested and missing may never be known.

Khamenei personally [ordered](#) security forces to "crush the protests by any means necessary" and use live fire. Ali Larijani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, masterminded the coordinated crackdown with the IRGC deploying foreign proxies, backed by the Quds Force, the Guard's elite,

clandestine external affairs branch. With the supreme leader's death, Larijani's power appears to have been enhanced, with some reports [describing](#) him as the country's "de facto leader". The same structure responsible for overseas terrorism and assassination plots in Europe is now openly responsible for domestic mass killing. This was not riot suppression; this was a systematic, state-directed atrocity.

FIVE TURNS OF THE WHEEL

Over the past quarter-century, the regime has demonstrated a clear pattern of institutional learning in the repression of mass protest. Each major wave of unrest since 1999 has not simply been suppressed; it has been studied, internalised and used to refine a more sophisticated doctrine of regime preservation. The trajectory from the 1999 student protests to the 2026 uprising reveals an evolution from reactive violence to institutionalised, technology-enabled, pre-emptive control.

The July 1999 protests, triggered by the closure of the reformist newspaper Salam, marked the first significant urban unrest faced by the Islamic Republic after the end of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. The uprising was centred on Tehran University and driven primarily by students. The state response was violent but improvised. Members of the IRGC's Basij militia and law enforcement forces conducted night-time dormitory raids, beatings and selective arrests. While lethal force was used, it was neither systematic nor nationwide. The regime's objective was intimidation rather than annihilation. At this stage, repression remained fragmented, relying heavily on vigilante-style paramilitary actors and ad hoc deployments. However, the events revealed a critical vulnerability: universities could function as ignition points capable of galvanising broader segments of society.

“This was not riot suppression; this was a systematic, state-directed atrocity.”

A decade later, the 2009 Green movement fundamentally altered the regime's security posture. Sparked by the disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the protests were national in scale, politically existential in tone and sustained over months. The IRGC assumed a central coordinating role, marking a decisive institutional shift. The response included coordinated Basij/police operations, sniper deployments in urban areas, mass detentions, custodial torture, and televised show trials. Incidents of rape as a weapon to instil fear were also perpetrated. Digital repression also began to emerge, with internet throttling and telecommunications monitoring introduced to disrupt mobilisation. The regime absorbed an important lesson from 2009: violence must be decisive but strategically managed. Narrative control, surveillance and command centralisation were now as important as street-level force.

The 2017–2018 protests presented a different challenge. Economically driven and concentrated in provincial towns rather than elite urban centres, they spread rapidly across more than 100 cities. The regime responded with a more refined and geographically agile approach. Rather than relying primarily on spectacular displays of force, security services deployed Basij units quickly to smaller cities, used targeted arrests based on social media tracking, and sought to prevent protest consolidation. Lethal force was applied more sparingly than in 2009, reflecting an emerging doctrine of containment. The objective was to prevent momentum from building rather than to crush an already consolidated national movement. Speed and disruption replaced spectacle.

In November 2019, however, the regime demonstrated its willingness to abandon calibration when confronted with what it perceived as an existential threat. The sudden increase in fuel prices triggered nationwide unrest across nearly 200 cities. This time, the state responded with overwhelming lethality. The IRGC deployed directly on the ground, live ammunition was fired into crowds, snipers operated in urban environments, and armoured vehicles appeared in city streets. Heavy weapons were used to brutally suppress protestors on the streets of Mashahr. Most significantly, authorities imposed the first near-total nationwide internet blackout for several days, severing internal coordination and external visibility. Casualty estimates vary, but credible reporting suggests hundreds, and possibly more than a thousand, were killed. The 2019 crackdown represented a doctrinal shift toward shock-and-awe repression. With the regime's survival at stake, reputational costs took a back seat.

“The IRGC deployed directly on the ground, live ammunition was fired into crowds, snipers operated in urban environments, and armoured vehicles appeared in city streets.”

The protests that followed in the wake of the killing of Mahsa Amini in 2022 marked another adaptation in state response. The movement was broader in social composition, incorporating women, youth, ethnic minorities and working-class communities. Rather than relying solely on mass lethal force, President Ebrahim Raisi, the [“Butcher of Tehran”](#), a man whose government was filled with IRGC alumni, deployed a hybrid model combining kinetic repression with digital surveillance and judicial

intimidation. Security forces widely used shotguns, causing permanent eye injuries. Tear gas and water cannons were deployed. Live ammunition was used extensively in Kurdish and Baluchi regions. Drones were used for surveillance, facial recognition technologies were expanded, and regional internet shutdowns were imposed. Crucially, authorities reintroduced public executions tied to protest-related charges, signalling a return to exemplary punishment as deterrence. The state was no longer simply dispersing crowds; it was identifying, tracking, and systematically neutralising perceived organisers over time.

A CONTEST BETWEEN STATE CONTROL AND CIVIC RESISTANCE

Under the regime, repression is now institutionalised and anticipatory rather than reactive. Security services integrate AI-assisted social media monitoring, rapid mobile data shutdowns in emerging protest hotspots, expanded drone reconnaissance, and pre-emptive arrests before planned demonstrations materialise. The IRGC maintains visible readiness for rapid urban deployment, while the judiciary moves swiftly to issue severe charges intended to deter mobilisation. The emphasis is on decapitation: disrupting organisational nodes before they can translate into sustained street presence. This represents the culmination of lessons learned since 1999: intimidate, centralise, pre-empt, overwhelm, hybridise, and now anticipate.

Yet the renewed prominence of students in this year's stage of the protest cycle carries particular strategic weight. Universities were the crucible of the 1999 uprising and played a catalytic role in 2009 and 2022. They remain dense networks of mobilisation, symbolic centres of legitimacy and amplifiers of international attention. The regime recognises this. Informant networks on campuses have reportedly expanded, student associations are digitally monitored, and security forces often surround universities pre-emptively to prevent outward expansion. Nevertheless, the re-emergence of sustained student

activism suggests that the regime’s accumulated repressive capacity has not resolved underlying generational and political fractures.

The pattern from 1999 to 2026 reveals a state that has progressively militarised its domestic governance model. Street-level vigilante violence has evolved into a more coordinated urban counter-insurgency; blunt suppression has been augmented by digital identification and legal coercion; and episodic crackdowns have become embedded systems of continuous surveillance and rapid response. The regime has become more efficient, more technologically capable and more willing to use lethal force.

However, this institutional learning has produced its own strategic dilemma. As repression becomes more systematised and visible, it deepens social alienation and narrows the regime’s margin for political accommodation. Each escalation reinforces the perception that coercion, rather than consent, underpins state authority. The return of students to the streets in 2026 suggests that while the regime has mastered the mechanics of repression, it has not eliminated the drivers of mobilisation. Instead, it faces a society that has adapted alongside it, producing an increasingly iterative contest between state control and civic resistance.

“The central role of the IRGC, the Thar-Allah command and control HQ, and the deployment of specialised forces indicate a deliberate, nationally directed strategy of mass killing.”

Previous protest cycles left space, however narrow, for the regime to claim excesses were the actions of local commanders or to frame violence as reactive crowd control. In 2026, the coordination of repression across 400 locations, the central role of the IRGC, the Thar-Allah command and control HQ, and the deployment of specialised forces, such as the Saber Brigade, indicate a deliberate, nationally directed strategy of mass killing. Even Khamenei acknowledged that “thousands” had been killed, while blaming external actors and calling protesters “rioters and terrorists”.

For UK policymakers, this distinction matters profoundly. Were January 2026 to be treated as another episodic crackdown, the policy response will remain incremental and inadequate. But the “wheel” of repression did not simply turn again; it accelerated beyond all precedent and crossed into territory that demands a fundamentally different response.

A DIRECT THREAT TO THE UK

The IRGC threat extends directly into Britain. Last October, the director-general of MI5 [reported](#) that the security services had tracked more than 20 “potentially lethal” Iran-backed plots in the UK over the previous year. “Iran’s autocratic regime is ... frantically trying to silence its opponents around the world, including in the UK,” Sir Ken McCallum noted. Iranian-backed plots in recent years have included assassination attempts against British-Iranian nationals, journalists and dissidents. Iran International, the London-based broadcaster, temporarily relocated to Washington in 2023 after the Metropolitan Police indicated it could no longer adequately protect staff and the wider public from [significant IRGC-backed threats](#). In 2026, Manoto TV, another Persian language broadcaster, was also [forced](#) to cease live broadcasting from London due to a significant increase in threat.

British-Iranian dual nationals are systematically detained in Iran and used as hostages. Iranian diaspora in Britain report ongoing surveillance, intimidation and harassment by regime-linked individuals operating with impunity. Pro-regime groups staged demonstrations in London with reports of violence against freedom protesters.

As Sir Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6, has [suggested](#), the IRGC also presents a threat to British Jews, while, as Jemina Shelley demonstrated in LFI's 2025 publication [Iran's Terror Army Abroad: The IRGC Threat to Britain](#), the IRGC is engaged in an effort to nurture homegrown Islamist extremism on British soil, spread antisemitism and recruit future operatives in the UK.

These transnational repression activities violate UK sovereignty and threaten British residents. Proscription criminalises support for IRGC activities, provides law enforcement enhanced disruption tools, and sends an unambiguous message that the UK will not be a permissive environment for state-backed terrorism.

AN INADEQUATE STATUS QUO

To date, the UK response to January's repression has consisted of condemnatory statements and incremental sanctions. The foreign secretary announced new sanctions targeting the finance, energy, and transport sectors, and, last month, 10 individuals and Iran's Law Enforcement Forces were designated. These are not without value, but, in the face of an extraordinary rupture, can all too easily be viewed as inadequate.

“Sanctions create friction; proscription creates criminal liability and fundamentally alters operational ability.”

The IRGC is already sanctioned under UK Iran (nuclear) regimes. But additional financial sanctions do not address the core issue that the IRGC is a terrorist organisation operating with impunity. Sanctions create friction; proscription creates criminal liability and fundamentally alters operational ability.

The UK's longstanding position, that proscribing a state military body presents unique legal challenges, is frankly no longer tenable. The 8-9 January

massacres provide overwhelming evidence that the IRGC-QF meets terrorist designation thresholds through systematic civilian targeting, mass killings and coordinating crimes against humanity. State affiliation does not immunise conduct clearly within terrorism definitions.

The government has a roadmap. The recommendations of Jonathan Hall KC's 2025 review created a [state-analogous proscription mechanism specifically for entities like the IRGC](#). The government accepted these in principle, stating legislation is a priority for “as soon as possible”. Given the threat posed by the IRGC to the UK – and the crimes it perpetrated against the Iranian people in January – this must become a matter of urgency, and the necessary parliamentary time must be found.

Key UK allies, including Canada and Australia, have already acted. Cross-party consensus exists in parliament. Over 100 parliamentarians have written to the prime minister calling for immediate proscription. The political, legal, and moral case is made. It is time to summon the political will to act with the urgency the situation demands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The UK government must:

- **Immediately proscribe the IRGC-QF under existing terrorism legislation.** The IRGC's Quds Force is formally designated by a number of allied governments, albeit as part of the wider proscription of the IRGC. However, Canada proscribed the IRGC-QF in 2012, 12 years before full proscription. This can be accomplished immediately without awaiting new legislation.
- **Accelerate Hall review implementation.** Bring forward state-analogous proscription legislation as an urgent priority with a clear timeline. As a priority, make parliamentary time available given cross-party support.
- **Publicly recognise crimes against humanity.** The foreign secretary should formally acknowledge evidence indicating crimes against humanity by Iranian security forces. Support international accountability, including referral to the International Criminal Court and a UN fact-finding mission.
- **Enhance diaspora protection.** Expand protective measures for British-Iranian dual nationals and dissidents through enforcing the new Foreign Influence Registration Scheme and enhanced security service cooperation with affected communities.
- **Escalate and enforce sanctions.** Target senior political elites, IRGC and entities facilitating sanctions evasion, including cryptocurrency networks and oil smuggling.
- **Identify and remove soft influence networks.** Identify and dismantle soft influence networks that advance the regime's objectives under the cover of cultural, academic, charitable or media activity. This is not about restricting lawful speech, but about exposing opaque funding, coordination with sanctioned actors and systematic diaspora intimidation.
- **Downgrade future diplomatic engagement.** If the regime survives in some form, the UK must fundamentally recalibrate its diplomatic posture. Any future nuclear negotiations must not preclude accountability for mass atrocities. We must make clear that the restoration of normal relations is contingent on a cessation of repression and regional destabilisation.

CONCLUSION

The horrific events of early 2026 represent a watershed. The scale and systematic nature of violence have crossed thresholds that cannot be uncrossed. Evidence points clearly to crimes against humanity executed by the IRGC-QF. The UK now faces a choice: treat this moment as another episode warranting condemnation and incremental sanctions, or recognise it as a qualitative rupture demanding fundamental reassessment. The latter aligns policy with both moral reality and strategic necessity.

Proscription serves multiple strategic objectives: it constrains IRGC UK operations, provides law enforcement enhanced disruption tools, signals British resolve to allies and adversaries, and demonstrates solidarity with Iranians in their struggle against tyranny that must ultimately lead to regime change. Reform is not an option.

Critics raise legitimate concerns about diplomatic consequences, risks to detained British nationals, and the complexities of proscribing state military organisations. These deserve consideration, but cannot justify continued inaction on this matter. The regime demonstrated a willingness to use mass

killing as political control. The IRGC showed capability and commitment to systematic civilian violence. The organisation poses direct UK national security threats through transnational repression.

Canada, the US, Sweden and Australia have acted. Cross-party consensus exists in parliament. The Iranian diaspora and Jewish community call for proscription. The Hall review provided the legal pathway. The January 2026 evidence is overwhelming and mounting as survivors testify and documentation emerges.

The line has been crossed. The threshold breached. The time for proscription is now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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