

PARTNERS IN CRIME: THE MOSCOW- TEHRAN AXIS OF AGGRESSION

LFI POLICY BRIEFING

**LABOUR
FRIENDS
OF ISRAEL** 

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WORKING TOWARDS A TWO STATE SOLUTION

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THE MOSCOW-TEHRAN
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BY

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FOREWORD BY DAVID TAYLOR MP

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THE MOSCOW-TEHRAN AXIS OF AGGRESSION

FOREWORD: PARTNERS IN CRIME

The relationship between Tehran and Moscow is longstanding, toxic and a grave threat to our national security and that of our allies, both in the Middle East and beyond.

The Moscow-Tehran axis helped sustain the murderous regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. It is responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of men, women and children in Ukraine. And, as the defence secretary, John Healey, has rightly warned, Russia's "hidden hand" lies behind Iran's military methods in the conflict between Israel, the US and Iran this spring. Moscow has supplied Tehran with crucial intelligence and targeting information, drones and diplomatic support.

“Iran has sought – and succeeded – in bringing terror to the streets of our country; it seeks to recruit operatives on our shores; and it has attempted to meddle in our democratic process.”

Vladimir Putin's decision to ally Russia with the world's principal state sponsor of terrorism is one of both necessity and choice. Necessity because, as a fellow international pariah, the Kremlin has had to tap Iran's deep knowledge of how to evade sanctions and its expertise in the kind of drone warfare which has proved so deadly in Ukraine. Choice because Russia knows that, in Iran, it has a staunch ally against the values of liberalism, tolerance and democracy which we hold so dear.

For us in Britain, there's nothing theoretical about this threat. The Moscow-Tehran axis is committed to undermining and destabilising western democracies, such as our own. The danger posed by Putin is better known and understood, and more widely acknowledged, than that

presented by Iran. But it is all too real. As the intelligence community [told](#) parliament's intelligence and security committee prior to its 2024 report on Iran, Tehran is best seen as “top of the Championship rather than the Premier League, but rising”.

Indeed, like Russia, Iran has sought – and succeeded – in bringing terror to the streets of our country; it seeks to recruit operatives on our shores; and it has attempted to meddle in our democratic process while launching cyberattacks and waves of dangerous and divisive disinformation. Moreover, as we have graphically seen in recent weeks, Iran has deployed proxies in the UK to target British Jews, leading to the appalling upsurge in antisemitic attacks to which the community has been subjected.

The government recognises this threat and has taken a number of welcome and important steps. Most notably, in the king's speech last month, it announced legislation which will give it proscription-like powers against state entities such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – the organisation which rests at the heart of the regime's machinery of domestic repression and overseas terror.

But now Britain must go further. As this paper details, the robust action taken against Russia since it invaded Ukraine in 2022 provides the template.

First, we must widen and strengthen the sanctions regime deployed against Tehran, targeting its military, economic and political leadership, including the new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei;

Abdollah Hajji Sadeghi, the supreme leader's representative in the IRGC; and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, speaker of Iran's parliament and a former IRGC commander. The property empire owned by Iranian oligarchs and regime accomplices here in London needs to face the same degree of scrutiny and action as that amassed by Putin's cronies.

Second, Iran's soft power networks in Britain – frequently operating under the guise of cultural, academic, media and charitable work – should be systematically probed, identified and dismantled. We've rightly sanctioned the Kremlin's mouthpiece in Britain, RT's owner, TV Novosti. Platforms, such as Press TV, Tasnim News and Fars News, which peddle regime propaganda, promote disinformation and spread extremist content, should be similarly targeted. Nor should those charities which exploit taxpayers' hard-earned money by pursuing malign agendas under the cover of benign missions be ignored. They too must be investigated, stripped of their charitable status and shut down.

Finally, it is time to reconsider our diplomatic approach to the Islamic republic. In January, the regime reportedly butchered up to 30,000 of its own people for the simple "crime" of demanding an end to its brutal rule. In the fog of war, it continues to take revenge – and enforce compliance through terror – by ramping up executions. As Amnesty International outlined last month, the Iranian authorities have [intensified](#) their repression through "mass arbitrary arrests, accelerated grossly unfair judicial proceedings, politically motivated executions, harsh prison sentences, and asset confiscations".

There can be no return to business as usual with such a regime: we must fundamentally reassess how we deal with Tehran. To underline our intent, we should begin by expelling both Iran's ambassador to the UK and the supreme leader's representative in this country.

The agenda outlined in this paper represents "progressive realism" in action: cognisant of the threat posed by Tehran to Britain's national security and that of our allies, while showing solidarity with the people of Iran in the face of the deepening oppression they face from a regime under which they have suffered for far too long.

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INTRODUCTION: A DUAL THREAT TO BRITAIN

Britain and its allies are facing an immediate and substantial threat from the anti-western Moscow-Tehran axis, representing an acute geopolitical and domestic security danger to the UK. Through their collaboration in wars against our allies, and the undermining of Britain's national security, Russia and Iran are actively working to fracture the western alliance.

Along with China, their shared interest is to weaken key pillars of the alliance, especially the UK. Russia and Iran aim to dismantle the international order, expand their influence within their own regions, and erode ours, and spread their own malign ideologies; far-right nationalism on the one hand, and Islamist extremism on the other.

Under this government and its predecessor, the UK has rightly taken systematic steps to defend against Russian aggression through an unprecedented sanctions regime on the Kremlin's entities and elites, its propaganda arms and through diplomatic pressure. While there is no doubt that the government has recognised the Iranian threat – including through taking forward new powers to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps – the same systematic approach not yet been applied to Iran.

“The UK has rightly taken systematic steps to defend against Russian aggression. However, the same approach has not yet been applied to Iran.”

To counter this dual threat, improve our resilience and demonstrate our resolve, the UK government should:

- **Adopt the same, comprehensive sanctions regime against Iran as it has toward Russia**, working closely with allies to mirror sanctions against the depth and breadth of Iran's political, military and economic sectors.
- **Identify and dismantle the soft influence networks in the UK which Tehran uses to advance its objectives** under the cover of cultural, academic, charitable and media activity. Specifically, as it has with Russia, the UK should sanction all of Iran's propaganda platforms and close down all opportunities for the Islamic Republic to continue its information warfare against the UK. It should further end Iran's malign network in the charitable sector and carry out a China-style review to uncover the extent of its web of influence.
- **To demonstrate our firm resolve against the regime's threats, the UK should, as it has with Russia, use every opportunity to isolate Iran through international institutions and bilateral diplomacy.** This should include expelling Iran's ambassador and other diplomats, as well as the supreme leader's representative in the UK.

RUSSIA AND IRAN'S PATH TO STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

The path to strategic alignment between Iran and Russia has been long and incremental, with Tehran having been suspicious of both Moscow and the west for centuries. Following the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic's new theocratic leaders pledged they would align with neither "East nor West". Iran [supported](#) the mujahideen following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, and Moscow supplied Baghdad with weapons during the brutal Iran-Iraq war.

However, the early 2000s witnessed a convergence of interests, with Tehran needing military hardware and Russia seeking new export markets. This resulted in a 2001 cooperation agreement. Russia also began work supporting Iran's nuclear reactor project at Bushehr. At the same time, and even as the relationship bore fruit during this period, Russia supported UN sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programme and became part of the P5+1 negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme.

The Syrian civil war in the 2010s significantly [accelerated](#) cooperation between Moscow and Tehran. Russia provided aerial support to defend the Assad regime, while Iranian and Hezbollah forces worked alongside the Kremlin-aligned mercenary army, the Wagner Group, to reclaim territories from Syrian rebels. This cooperation served the geopolitical interests of both, with Russia expanding its access to the Mediterranean, and Syria becoming a transit corridor through which Iran could channel military support to its key proxy, Hezbollah, in Lebanon, to encircle, threaten and attack Israel. With the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) coordinating Iran's interests in both Syria and Lebanon, it developed a particularly close working relationship with Russia's military.

"In January 2025, Vladimir Putin and the Iranian president, Masoud Pezeshkian, formalised their cooperation by signing a 20-year 'comprehensive strategic partnership' treaty."

Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement in 2018, which had temporarily removed a range of trade sanctions against Iran, led to Washington's "maximum pressure" sanctions regime, which severely debilitated Iran's economy and isolated the country from international trade. Four years later, Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine led the US and its western allies to impose a widespread raft of sanctions against Moscow to similarly isolate it from international trade flows.

International isolation compelled both western rivals to further deepen their cooperation across the economic, strategic and military sectors, aided and abetted by China. In January 2025, Vladimir Putin and the Iranian

president, Masoud Pezeshkian, [formalised](#) their cooperation by signing a 20-year "comprehensive strategic partnership" treaty in Moscow. It commits the two countries to cooperate across a range of fields, including defence and security, such as through military-technical cooperation; intelligence sharing; a shared payment infrastructure and bilateral trade expansion; expanded nuclear cooperation; alignment in multilateral forums and "coordinated navigation of sanctions". While the agreement has significantly deepened bilateral cooperation, it does not include a NATO-style mutual defence agreement.

The Moscow-Tehran axis has also crystallised multilaterally in recent years, with Iran [joining](#) the BRICS grouping of non-western states in 2024 as well as the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation a year earlier.

OPERATIONALISING THE MOSCOW-TEHRAN AXIS

Iran and Russia's strategic alignment over the last decade has evolved into a defence axis, with both states taking substantial risks to come to one-another's aid during wars of expansion. Conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have technologically transformed how modern wars are fought and have featured both Russia and Iran and its proxies committing flagrant violations of international law through the indiscriminate targeting of civilians with impunity.

Two's a party: Iranian and Russian sanctions evasion

Iran has been subject to sanctions in one form or another since the 1979 revolution, and so is perhaps more adept than any other state at evading them. The JCPOA lessened sanctions on Iran in exchange for (unkept) commitments by Tehran to end nuclear enrichment. However, Trump's withdrawal from the agreement in 2018, and the subsequent unilateral "maximum pressure" sanctions regime, about which the US administration conspicuously failed to engage with its western allies, crippled Iran's economy and its ability to support its proxies in the region.

Despite the very real impact of sanctions on Iran's economy, the regime has developed a number of mechanisms to evade them. These include currency conversion, the bulk transfer of rials to complicit exchange houses, and the use of "hidden subsidiaries" – front companies set up overseas to disguise trade, including in petrochemicals.

“Russia speedily turned to Iran to tap its long experience of how to evade [sanctions], including through shell companies and dual-use goods.”

Russia's invasion of Ukraine elicited a swift and comprehensive sanctions regime against Moscow. Russia speedily turned to Iran to tap its long experience of how to evade them, including through shell companies and dual-use goods. The two states also use their national currencies in lieu of the dollar, with a [decision](#) in 2023 by Tehran and Moscow to connect their interbank communication and transfer systems to help boost trade and financial transactions – evading Russia's ban from SWIFT.

Prior to the conflict between Iran and the US and Israel, Moscow and Tehran were planning to deepen their cooperation in other arenas, most notably energy. Russia is a major contributor to Iran's nuclear programme. Having previously built Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant, Iran [says](#) Russia is in line to build as many as eight new plants. Moscow signed a US\$25bn agreement with Tehran to build the Hormoz nuclear power plant, while the two sides are simultaneously working on a design for smaller-scale nuclear plants.

With both countries heavily dependent on the export of natural resources, a \$40bn memorandum of understanding was [signed](#) between the National Iranian Oil Company and Russia's Gazprom, which will help develop important oil and gas fields, such as the Kish and North Pars fields. Russia also expects to support Iran in modernising its energy infrastructure, especially its gas and electrical grids.

Iran has [committed](#) to allocating land for the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway, a key missing link in the north-south transport corridor from Russia to Indian Ocean ports, with the new railway costing an estimated US\$25bn. Iran is also due to start receiving Russian gas via Azerbaijan in the coming months.

Sharing the secret sauce: Russia-Iran military cooperation in conflict

Russia's defence partnership with Iran dates back more than two decades, and Tehran's support for Moscow's drone programme predates the Ukraine war. For instance, an IRGC commander met with a Russian counterpart in 2019-20 to [strike](#) an agreement whereby Iran would help Russia build a drone command if Russia, in return, helped Iran construct a space command.

“Tehran's support for Moscow during Putin's invasion of Ukraine represents a significant strategic shift in the Iran-Russia bilateral relationship.”

However, Tehran's support for Moscow during Putin's invasion of Ukraine represents a significant strategic shift in the Iran-Russia bilateral relationship. Iran has [provided](#) Russia with at least 3,000 one-way attack or Shahed-type drones since 2022. The Shahed-136 can reportedly carry a 50-kg warhead up to 2,500 km and costs \$40,000. The smaller Shahed-131 is cheaper, carries a lighter warhead, and has a shorter operational range of about 900 km.

With a view to [helping](#) Russia manufacture its own drones, Iran transferred 600 disassembled Shahed-16 drones, components for 1,300 further drones, as well

as training and technical expertise, to Russia. Russia also developed the Garpiya-3, a modified and improved version of the Shahed, with the help of Chinese specialists. Russia has now [launched](#) tens of thousands of these drones at Ukraine, including firing 6,583 Shahed-type UAVs in April 2026 alone; 4,335 of these were identified as Shahed/Geran strike UAVs, a Russian drone that has been modified based on the Iranian design. All this is in addition to the supply of ammunition and artillery shells.

Most of the supply shipments are carried out through governmental airlines and some via the Caspian Sea. As soon as UN sanctions on such activity expired in 2024, Iran began delivering ballistic missiles to Russia. Iran is [believed](#) to have delivered Fath-360 and Ababil close-range ballistic missiles, including supplying training for these systems. Plans had also been put in place for Russia to supply Iran with 48 Su-35 fighter jets, an important step towards modernising Tehran's ageing, Shah-era air force.

Iran's eyes in the sky: Russia's support for Iran during the US-Israel war

While Russia did not react substantively in support of its ally during Israel's war with Iran in the summer of 2025, its approach has become more active in support of Tehran during its war with the US and Israel in 2026. This strategic shift achieves a number of aims for Moscow, including: inflating oil prices and taking advantage of US export sanctions, loosened by the Trump administration, to fill its depleted coffers; diverting US support for Ukraine's defences; deepening tensions within the NATO alliance between Europe and the US; and ensuring the survival of the Iranian regime.

Russia's enhanced support for Iranian combat operations has taken shape in a variety of ways. Moscow is assisting Tehran to [manufacture](#) more drones, which have proved as destructive as ballistic missiles, particularly for Iran's closest neighbours. Iran launched more than 4,550 of the Shahed-136 kamikaze drones during the recent conflict. The vice-president of the European commission, Kaja Kallas, has noted that “Iranian drones used against our Gulf partners likely

incorporate Russian tech upgrades” and the Shahed drone fired at the UK’s base in Cyprus was equipped with Russian technology to help evade detection.

Iranian and Russian officials began secretly [discussing](#) drone deliveries days after Israel and the US attacked Tehran in late February. While often fired indiscriminately and hitting civilian targets across the Gulf, Iranian drone targeting has also demonstrated considerable sophistication. Iran has [achieved](#) a new level of precision in its drone and missile capabilities by relying on Chinese and Russian-made guidance chips linked to satellite systems. Iran’s ability to target US assets in the region has surprised analysts. Western security sources [reportedly](#) believe there is a “high probability” that Iranian targeting experts are based in Russian satellite ground stations receiving precise location information. Iranian engineers have been able to combine satellite-linked guidance with Controlled Reception Pattern Antenna technology, allowing weapons to resist jamming.

“Moscow is assisting Tehran to manufacture more drones, which have proven as destructive as ballistic missiles, particularly for Iran’s closest neighbours.”

In addition to supplying key components and advice, Russia is [believed](#) to have sent complete drones to Iran for use in the war, most likely Russian-made versions of the same Shahed-136 one-way attack unmanned aerial systems that Tehran previously provided to Moscow. An Israeli strike on Iran’s Bandar Anzali port on the Caspian Sea may have been intended to disrupt Russia’s support for Iran in the war. Iran had previously [sent](#) Shahed-136s and other materiel to Russia via the Caspian Sea. Russia is now [helping](#) Iran with advanced drone tactics to hit US and Gulf targets developed from its war in Ukraine. Additionally, Russia has supported Iran in [resupplying](#) its aerial defence systems, including after last summer’s war, when it agreed to supply Iran with 500 shoulder-mounted air defence systems.

Most ominously, Russia has [provided](#) satellite imagery to enhance Iran’s targeting of regional US troops and assets. The Kremlin provided Tehran with intelligence about the locations and movements of American troops, ships and aircraft. Much of the intelligence Russia has [shared](#) with Iran is imagery from Moscow’s sophisticated constellation of overhead satellites. Russian satellites made at least 24 surveys of areas in 11 Middle Eastern countries from 21-31 March, covering 46 “objects”, including US and other military bases and sites such as airports and oil fields. Within days of being surveyed, military bases and headquarters were targeted by Iranian ballistic missiles and drones. Israel, too, has not been immune to the threat posed by Russian intelligence sharing, with Moscow [providing](#) Iran with a detailed list of 55 critical energy infrastructure targets inside the Jewish state. Russia divided the list of targets into three categories: critical production facilities; urban and industrial energy hubs; and local energy infrastructure.

In addition to military hardware and intelligence support, Russia and China have [supported](#) their ally in international forums, including vetoing UN security council measures aimed at protecting commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, which they disingenuously labelled as biased against Iran.

In an indication that Iran’s regime is far from deterred by the conflict, it plans to quickly re-establish its air defences, with Iran’s foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, [meeting](#) with Putin in April to seek the immediate delivery of the long-delayed S-400 air defence system.

THE IRAN-RUSSIA AXIS: A MULTI-LEVEL THREAT TO THE UK

Russia and Iran are the UK's primary national security threats, representing both a peer-to-peer military threat, and a sub-conflict "grey area" challenge, with both [threatening](#) domestic security through direct attacks on UK-based targets, radicalisation and misinformation campaigns, as well as subversion of democratic institutions.

“Russia and Iran are the UK’s primary national security threats, representing both a peer-to-peer military threat, as well as a sub-conflict ‘grey area’ challenge.”

Since the start of the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, UK interests overseas have been targeted on a number of occasions, and Tehran has threatened direct attacks against the UK. A one-way attack drone, which is believed to have been launched from Lebanon by Hezbollah, hit RAF Akrotiri just before midnight on 1 March. On 20 March, the IRGC carried out a limited long-range ballistic missile attack on the US-UK joint base on Diego Garcia. One missile fell short while another was intercepted by the US. Erbil base in Iraq, which houses British and American troops, has been attacked several times by Iran, including one incident where Britain's Rapid Sentry system brought down 14 drones in one night.

In parallel, Russia continues to pose the most significant security threat to the UK. Last year, Dr Fiona Hill, an author of the UK government's 2025 strategic defence review, was clear that Russia is at war with the UK. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin has frequently threatened the UK and Europe with direct attacks. In February 2026, Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chair of Russia's security council, [repeated](#) previous threats of nuclear retaliation against the UK for its support for Kyiv. The government's 2025 strategic defence review [described](#) Russia as the most acute threat the UK is facing, while, as a 2024 House of Commons defence select committee report [argued](#) starkly, Russia has both "the capability and intent to prosecute a war in Europe". Secret files [reportedly](#) indicate Russia has been mapping potential European targets, including the UK, using conventional and nuclear warheads.

Outside of conventional military threats, Iran and Russia have accelerated their "grey area" attacks. Their malign statecraft and scope of battle include destabilising key western allies like the UK through attacks on overseas targets, information-warfare and interference in democratic processes – all with a view to breaking apart the western alliance. Iran [increased](#) its targeting of individuals that it views as threats to the regime following the Mahsa Amini protests in 2022, while the Kremlin has used the UK as a field of operation to target its opponents for years. According to MI5, Britain is [facing](#) a "staggering rise" in attempts at assassination, sabotage and other crimes on UK soil by Russia and Iran, including through the [use](#) of criminal proxies and platforms such as Telegram to hire so-called disposable agents to carry out criminal acts.

Since the war with Iran began earlier this year, the Islamic Republic has dramatically stepped up its attacks against targets in the UK, particularly the Jewish community – which it considers a soft underbelly in its war with Israel. In April, police [declared](#) a terrorist incident after two Jewish men were stabbed in Golders Green – an area with a large Jewish population. Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamia, a group [believed](#) to have links to the Iranian regime and to be directed by the IRGC, claimed responsibility for the attack, having previously suggested it carried out the arson attack on Hatzola ambulances in north London in March 2026, as well as attacks in Liège, Rotterdam and Amsterdam. A

Kataib Hezbollah operative with close links to Iran has been [arrested](#) for his role in planning more than a dozen of these attacks

The stabbings followed other recent attacks including on Kenton United Synagogue, a synagogue in Finchley, a building once used by a Jewish educational charity in Hendon, an attempt to use drones against the Israeli embassy and an arson attack against an Iranian dissident media company. A number of these incidents are also being investigated for Iranian involvement.

Last autumn, the director-general of MI5 [said](#) that the security services have tracked “more than 20 potentially lethal Iran-backed plots” during the previous year, while parliament’s intelligence and security committee (ISC) [argued](#) in a July 2025 report that Tehran poses a “wide-ranging, persistent and unpredictable threat” to the UK. Alongside the Jewish community, a primary target for the regime’s plots in the UK are Iranian dissidents and anti-regime platforms such as Iran International. In June 2025, the BBC continued to [report](#) threats and harassment of BBC News Persian journalists by Iran in both the UK and Iran.

Russia has similarly had no hesitation in carrying out attacks in the UK. Last year, an inquiry into the Novichok poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury in March 2018 [underlined](#) the culpability of Russia and Putin himself. Prior to this, Russia has been [linked](#) to 14 deaths on UK soil. Last year, the British government [announced](#) that a far-right group, the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), would be banned under terrorism legislation. With links to Russian intelligence, the RIM was at the centre of a string of letter bomb attacks targeting high-profile people and institutions in Spain in 2022.

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Germany, Lithuania, Poland and other UK have allies have all [foiled](#) lethal assassination plots linked to Russia in recent years. Nearly 200 acts of sabotage, arson and other disruption linked to Russia have been mapped across Europe since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The number of Russian attacks in Europe nearly [tripled](#) between 2023 and 2024, after quadrupling between 2022 and 2023.

Soft power and information warfare has been key to Iran and Russia’s “grey area” efforts at destabilisation. 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.”

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.

Russia is [utilising](#) an in-built affinity in western far-right movements for authoritarianism and nationalism to recruit possible operatives. The relationship between Islamist ideologies and Iran is mirrored in that between the Kremlin and far-right movements, which have been key to promoting Russian narratives in the west. Research demonstrates that content [shared](#) by far-right extremist groups in France, Germany and the UK in the early stages of the invasion of Ukraine placed the blame on NATO and the United States, while promoting pro-Russian propaganda. There was evidence that the same conspiracy theories and narratives were shared by groups in all three countries.

In the cyber domain, the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), has said the most serious cyberattacks in the UK are now [conducted](#) by Russia, Iran and China. The NCSC, a part of GCHQ, [published](#) a new advisory in April detailing how Russian cyber actors have compromised commonly used routers, allowing them to covertly reroute users' internet traffic through malicious servers under their control. The July 2025 ISC report [said](#) that Iranian-linked groups had been "obtaining and analysing extensive datasets" from airlines, hotels and travel companies. It also said that Iranian-linked actors had been carrying out "spear-phishing" campaigns. Iran was reportedly [linked](#) to a cyberattack on the UK Parliament in 2017 that apparently compromised the accounts of some MPs. Disassembling the western alliance also involves interfering in democratic processes, where both Moscow and Tehran have been active in the UK. Iran likely [sought](#) to influence the outcome of the 2021 Scottish parliamentary elections. Media outlets [reported](#) on Iranian pro-Scottish independence online bot activity in 2026. The former foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, [said](#) it was "almost certain" that Russia sought to interfere in the 2019 general election.

“The Labour government has made clear its recognition of the threat posed by the Iran-Russia axis, with defence secretary John Healey having warned of Putin’s ‘hidden hand’ behind Iran’s military tactics in the Middle East.”

BINDING THE “HIDDEN HANDS”: STEPS FOR TACKLING THE MOSCOW-TEHRAN AXIS

Visiting the region during the course of the war with Iran, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy [signed](#) deals with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar – all of which had been hit by Iranian missiles and UAVs during the war – to share drone expertise and technology. Unsurprisingly, Ukraine has been one of the first to act to build an alliance against the Iran-Russia axis.

The Labour government has also made clear its recognition of the threat posed by the Iran-Russia axis, with defence secretary John Healey having [warned](#) of Putin's "hidden hand" behind Iran's military tactics in the Middle East. In May, the UK announced sanctions packages as part of a "UK day of action" against destabilising activity by Iran and Russia. The sanctions package against Iran [includes](#) organisations and individuals enabling hostile Iranian activity across the globe, and is particularly focused on Tehran's use of criminal gangs to carry out threats overseas. These steps are in keeping with the government's announcement in the king's speech to create stronger powers to tackle threats posed by states like Iran. This includes establishing the "proscription-like" power recommended by Jonathan Hall, the government's independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, which will allow the IRGC to be banned. The UK has imposed more than 550 sanctions on Iranian individuals and organisations, including sanctioning the IRGC in its entirety.

In addition to targeting entities involved in the Kremlin's appalling programme of indoctrinating Ukrainian children, the new sanctions packages [expose and combat](#) hostile Russian activity across multiple fronts, including recent attempts to interfere in the forthcoming Armenian elections. The sanctions specifically target ANO Dialog, a state-linked non-profit organisation focused on digital communications, which has worked alongside Russian intelligence services to carry out malign influence campaigns on behalf of the Kremlin.

The UK significantly accelerated its sanctions regime against Russia following its illegal invasion of Ukraine, with 3,300 targets now sanctioned and a total of £28.7bn in Russian assets [frozen](#) as of March 2026. The systematic approach to sanctioning Russia following the invasion witnessed an unprecedented collective regime of sanctions targeting every echelon of Russia's leadership, from military to political to economic. This followed the collective expulsion of Russian diplomats across the west following the Skripal poisonings. Despite Iran representing a joined up, immediate threat alongside Russia, the amount of Iranian assets seized by the UK as of September 2024 [appears](#) at most £19.3m. While there have been further sanctions in the intervening period, in March 2026, Transparency International [claimed](#) to have "identified over £200m worth of UK property bought by figures linked to the regime in Iran".

“Russia and Iran are both actively working to destabilise UK society through misinformation, support for extremism and directly facilitating attacks on targets on UK territory.”

While the UK sanctions regime against Iran has often been aligned with allies – including the US and the EU – it is not clear that the same unified approach is being taken to systematically target sanctions against all echelons of the Iranian regime. As yet, significant figures have not been targeted, such as the new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei; Abdollah Hajji Sadeghi, the supreme leader's representative – or political commissar – in the IRGC; Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, speaker of Iran's parliament and a former IRGC commander and police chief implicated in previous crackdowns.

Russia and Iran are both actively working to destabilise UK society through misinformation, support for extremism and directly facilitating attacks on targets on UK territory. The steps toward proscribing the IRGC – with new powers which will also allow the government to ban other state-backed groups targeting the UK – will significantly debilitate the Islamic Republic's ability to target the UK. However, there remain gaps in how the UK has acted to confront hostile state threats.

This is apparent in the soft influence networks in the UK which Tehran uses to advance its objectives under the cover of cultural, academic, charitable and media activity. Since October 2024, for instance, the UK has [sanctioned](#) 40 entities and individuals responsible for Russia's information warfare. In May, the UK sanctioned an additional 56 interference actors. The UK sanctioned TV-Novosti, which owns the UK TV channel, RT, in 2022.

But, despite Iran's equally pernicious and destabilising information warfare, the UK has not taken a similarly systematic approach. For instance, it has not imposed sanctions on Press TV, Tasnim News, Fars News and other platforms linked to the Iranian regime. As with charities linked to the Islamic Republic, these platforms have been spreading regime propaganda and extremist content. The UK should thus sanction all of Iran's propaganda platforms and close down all opportunities for the Islamic Republic to continue its information warfare against the UK. Likewise, it should further end Iran's

malign network in the charitable sector and carry out a China-style review to uncover the extent of its web of influence.

A similarly systematic approach needs to be taken to isolating the Islamic Republic through international diplomacy, as has been undertaken in respect of Russia. Between 2022-2025, for instance, UN Watch [recorded](#) 10 condemnatory resolutions directed against Iran, whereas there have been 36 (entirely justified) condemnatory resolutions directed against Russia. Rather than working to isolate Iran, the UK did not, for instance, [object](#) to the nomination of Tehran to join the UN's Committee for Programme and Coordination, which is responsible for shaping policy around human rights. At the same time, there has been precious little domestic attention paid to the UN's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran's [assessment](#) in March of "repression on an unprecedented scale, including violations that may amount to crimes against humanity."

The UK should also downgrade future diplomatic engagement with the regime. If it survives, the UK should, as Roger Macmillan, former director of security at Iran International, [argued](#) in a paper for LFI in February, "fundamentally recalibrate its diplomatic posture". Any future nuclear negotiations, he suggested, "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".

“There have been at least 30 debates in the House of Commons on Russia, 37 on Iran and 61 on Israel.”

The difference in approach taken by the UK towards Moscow and Tehran is easy to discern. Earlier this year, the UK [expelled](#) a Russian diplomat in retaliation for Moscow's recent expulsion of a British official and the ensuing smear campaign. Since the 2018 Skripal poisonings, when the UK expelled 23 Russian diplomats, the UK has not hesitated to use diplomacy to deter Russian aggression. There is [evidence](#) this has worked, with the expulsion of diplomats – many of them spies – impeding Russia's efforts to carry out operations in the UK.

Diplomatic action against the Islamic Republic has been limited to ambassadorial summons. While the UK has reprimanded the Iranian ambassador on three different occasions recently, the UK has not undertaken the same systematic diplomatic pressure against Iran. Despite Iran's record of hostility toward the UK – the Embassy's social media recently [called](#) for the Iranian diaspora to take up arms in defence of the Islamic Republic – the UK has not followed Australia in expelling the ambassador or other diplomatic staff. It should do so, while also expelling the supreme leader's personal representative in the UK.

In a parliamentary democracy such as Britain's, foreign policy priorities are, in part, shaped by political considerations. Unfortunately, the threat posed by Iran to the UK and its regional neighbours, and the tight relationship between Tehran and Moscow, do not appear to elicit the same level of parliamentary concern and attention as other foreign policy topics. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – which partially overlaps with the 7 October attacks and the consequent conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran – there have been at least 30 debates in the House of Commons on Russia, 37 on Iran and 61 on Israel. Indeed, in the period after parliament returned in January 2026 from the Christmas recess to the outbreak of the conflict between the US, Israel and Iran, there were at least six debates in the House of Commons on Israel, Palestine, the West Bank and Gaza, but only three on Iran. During this period, of course, the Iranian regime [reportedly](#) killed at least 30,000 people in a brutal crackdown on the protest movement, which swept the country in late December and early January.

CONCLUSION

The 2026 war in the Middle East has brought out in stark terms the threat posed by the Iran-Russia axis, both to our allies in the region as well as to our own national security interests. The UK has taken action against Iran's malign influence and behaviour, but these steps do not amount to the same systematic approach we have adopted towards Russia, especially in respect to sanctions, diplomacy and curtailing Tehran's destabilising efforts inside the UK. Iran and Russia represent the primary threat to the UK's national security, and only a joined-up approach will work against this interconnected threat.

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