

IRANIAN INFLUENCE NETWORKS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: AUDIT AND ANALYSIS

BY DR PAUL STOTT



**CENTRE ON
RADICALISATION
& TERRORISM**

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CENTRE ON RADICALISATION & TERRORISM

About The Centre on Radicalisation and Terrorism

The Centre on Radicalisation and Terrorism (CRT) at the Henry Jackson Society is unique in addressing violent and non-violent extremism. By coupling high-quality, in-depth research with targeted and impactful policy recommendations, we aim to combat the threat of radicalisation and terrorism in our society.

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Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| APPG | All-Party Parliamentary Group. |
| a.s. | Alayhis Salaam – an honorific meaning ‘peace be upon him’. |
| BICOM | British Israel Communications and Research Centre. |
| Fatwa | A legal opinion rendered by an Islamic scholar. |
| FCO | Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Now the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). |
| IRISL | Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines. |
| JCPOA | Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. July 2015 agreement between Iran and the world’s powers – the United States, the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany) and the European Union. The USA withdrew from the deal in May 2018. |
| MSP | Member of the Scottish Parliament. |
| NCRI | National Council of Resistance of Iran, an Iranian opposition group. |
| NF | National Front. |
| OFAC | United States Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control. |
| PNAC | Project for the New American Century. A think tank based in the United States. |
| Sharia | Arabic for ‘path’ or ‘way’, the religious law encompassing duties, obligations and guidance divinely enjoined on Muslims. |
| Shia | Minority sect within Islam, <i>shia</i> means ‘faction’ (Ar.), thus followers of Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. The Shia believe Ali, who became fourth caliph, had been designated Muhammad’s immediate successor in his lifetime. Ali’s son, Hussain, was killed at Karbala in Iraq by followers of Yazid, an event considered a great tragedy by Shia Muslims. This secured Yazid as caliph, and entrenched a sectarian divide which continues to this day. |
| SNP | Scottish National Party. |
| StWC | Stop the War Coalition. |
| Twelfth Imam | Messianic intercessor whose advent will herald the Day of Judgement followed by Jesus’ return. Also known as the <i>mahdi</i> (Ar. ‘rightly guided one’), he is the final in the line of <i>imams</i> , infallible guides for the Twelver Shia, the preponderant branch of Shiism. Muhammad al-Mahdi, who went into occultation and disappeared in 874, is reputed to be divinely protected until the end of time. |
| Vilayat-i-faqih | Persian term, derived from <i>wilayat al-faqih</i> (Ar.), ‘guardianship of the jurist’. The post was formally adopted with the inception of an Islamic Republic, April 1979, based on Ayatollah Khomeini’s political thought promulgated in a set of lectures in Najaf, Iraq, in 1970 which informed his approach to Muslim governance. |

Executive Summary

Iran has sought to interfere in the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom, targeting our political system via the medium of online disinformation and fake websites.

A particular focus of Iran has been encouraging Scottish separatism. Given the 'whack-a-mole' nature of taking action against such interference, it is highly likely such campaigns are ongoing.

Additionally, Iran cynically takes advantage of politicians who, not without reason, see events such as interfaith conferences or trade delegations as a necessary part of their job, without grasping that Tehran has other motives when promoting such initiatives. Its motives are rooted in values vastly different from our own, and in a desire to maintain and reproduce the Islamic Republic. It seems unlikely that all our politicians have grasped this fact. It is to be hoped that this report plays a part in shaping a debate that looks more critically at Iran and its networks, so that in future, ignorance as to the nature of the Iranian regime and its intentions cannot be a defence.

Backed by considerable wealth, Iran has successfully established connections with institutions in the United Kingdom, in particular religious and educational facilities. Ironically, in this it has been assisted by the tolerance of our political system and also financially, through the Gift Aid scheme. A review of the Gift Aid scheme, to ensure that organisations associated with non-democratic foreign governments cannot benefit from it, is now needed.

Despite effectively holding British and British-Iranian citizens hostage, some in the UK see the Islamic Republic of Iran as a country with a significant degree of political credibility. Its apologists can be found at senior levels in the Labour Party. Iran also finds support and sympathy on the Far Right and in conspiracist circles, where its world view, and anti-Semitism, is welcomed.

Regardless of the outcome of international negotiations between the world's powers and Iran, the United Kingdom needs to recognise that Iran's values are inimical to ours. Iran is an opponent not simply because of the poor diplomatic relations between Tehran and London, but because it seeks to promote a set of values, in this country, which do not sit with British support for human rights, freedom and democracy. An agreement on Iran's nuclear ambitions will not alter Iran's politico-religious work in this country, which has been remarkably consistent in its approach since 1979.

Iran continues to interfere in our social cohesion. Where once it sought to rally support against Salman Rushdie, crying 'blasphemy,' it now seeks to agitate among British Muslims over issues such as the film *'Lady of Heaven'* which it wishes to see banned.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This report is an investigation, audit, and analysis of Iranian influence networks in the United Kingdom. It seeks to detail the diversity of Iranian-related networks operating in this country, to identify their key players and points of convergence. It does not suggest that any of the identified individuals and organisations are guilty of any legal wrongdoing, or that they necessarily do Iran's bidding. It does however propose policy solutions that address the challenges posed to the UK – in the view of the author – by the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is therefore guided by two core research questions: what are the Iranian government and its connected networks doing in the United Kingdom, and how should we respond?

While the focus here rests primarily on the United Kingdom, on occasion events criss-cross the Middle East and Europe – most notably the 3 January 2020 assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the response to it in the United Kingdom by Iran's supporters. This culminated in perhaps the most important Iranian-connected institution in the UK, The Islamic Centre of England, receiving an official warning from the Charity Commission after gatherings were held in support of Soleimani.¹ The presence of supporters of the Iranian regime lighting candles, wielding pictures of a terrorist-supporting General, and proclaiming his martyrdom on the streets of London was unsettling, if entirely predictable.

A total of seven areas have been identified where Iran possesses or seeks influence: political networks, religion, the media, cultural networks, the Iranian diaspora, education and academia, and, finally, the fields of business and finance. Each will be examined in detail, although inevitably some areas – such as politics and religion – yield more information than others. This study positions the Islamic Republic of Iran as a dictatorial regime that seeks to propagate its own interpretation of Islam globally in order to secure maximum politico-religious advantage. The society established by the Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) after the 1979 revolution is one in which the Supreme Leader acts as the final, divine authority.

Severe force, such as that deployed against 'counterrevolutionaries' in 1981, has guaranteed stability under the system of the *Vilayat-i-faqih*² (guardianship of the jurist, discussed in greater detail in chapter three). This gives absolute political and legal authority to jurists.³ The Iranian system, despite its use of majoritarianism via elections, thus remains under the ultimate control of its clerics. Indeed, supporters of the Iranian system in the UK, such as Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour, argue that "Imam Khomeini restored the concept of the compatibility of religion and politics to the Muslim world".⁴ According to such views, democracy is a western concept inimical to Islam:

If they are putting democratic slogans in our mouths, they are doing so because they can derive some benefit from it: that when there is a democracy, we become weakened and can no longer assert our own opinions effectively.⁵

¹ Charity Commission, "Press release: Charity regulator issues official warning to Islamic Centre of England Ltd", 19 June 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/charity-regulator-issues-official-warning-to-islamic-centre-of-england-ltd#:~:text=The%20Charity%20Commission%20has%20issued,in%20misconduct%20and%20For%20mismanagement>.

² Baqer Moin, "Ruhollah, al-Musavi Khomeini", in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Vol 2, p.427-430.

³ Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour, "On religion, politics and democracy", in *Imam Khomeini: Life, Thought and Legacy: Essays from an Islamic movement perspective*, ed. Abdar Rahman Koya (Selangor: Islamic Book Trust and Crescent International, 2009), p.123.

⁴ Bahmanpour, "On religion, politics and democracy", p.120.

⁵ Bahmanpour, "On religion, politics and democracy", p.125.

Given that the UK is a non-Muslim country with which Iran has had poor diplomatic relations since the 1979 revolution, it may appear unusual that Iran would devote sustained efforts to maintaining and building its presence in the United Kingdom. However, the freedoms and liberties enjoyed in Britain ensure that the space exists for Iranian networks to organise and from there to seek influence. In detailing Iranian networks in this country, it is intended that those who wish to mitigate its influence, possess the necessary knowledge and tools to do so.

Using open-source intelligence methods and bringing together published and unpublished material for the first time, this study will help shift debate towards the development of effective political responses and compelling counter-Iranian narratives. This level of critical engagement with components of the Iranian state's operations in the UK has yet to be published. Conducting this analysis will allow us to examine the extent to which common ideological themes may be present – for example, around support for Iran's interpretation of Shiism or its hostility to Israel, as well as areas of divergence. The centrality of the Islamic Centre of England (ICE),⁶ an issue brought to international attention by the events following the killing of Soleimani, is also a matter of significant public interest. The current system of Gift Aid, and the status of several pro-Iranian organisations as charities – even though it should be stressed that their activities, except in the case of ICE already documented above, are in compliance with their charitable obligations – ensures that British taxpayers are in effect subsidising those whose values may well be in more sympathy with Iran's than our own.

Report Structure

This report comprises ten chapters, including identification and then analysis of seven key elements in the development and maintenance of pro-Iranian influence in the United Kingdom. These are political networks, religious institutions, media platforms, cultural networks, the Iranian and Shia diasporas, academia, and finally business and financial networks. A chapter is devoted to each.

The executive summary and policy recommendations serve as a digest of the main findings, with proposals designed to stymie the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in British communities.

Methodology

Open-source intelligence methods (OSINT) have been used throughout, with publicly available resources, such as reports and records submitted to Companies House and the Charity Commission, utilised and clearly referenced. The websites and social media accounts of a succession of organisations have also been examined, including official Iranian accounts and those based in this country hosting views sympathetic to the Iranian government. Academic literature, and that from campaign groups and the national and international media, has also been utilised. The author has sought to read as broadly as possible. This report has been subject to both internal and external blind peer review.

Background: An Uneasy History

Diplomatic relations between Britain and Iran have been poor for decades. Divisions have centred around *The Satanic Verses* controversy,⁷ the conduct of Iran's leaders and its officials in this country, British distaste for the Iranian regime, and more recently the arrest and prosecution of British-Iranian dual nationals. In 2011, the British embassy in Tehran was stormed by a mob, and the UK responded by expelling all of Iran's diplomatic representation in the UK.⁸

⁶ The spelling used here, and throughout the text, is that which is preferred by the ICE itself.

⁷ "Ayatollah sentences author to death", *BBC On This Day*, 14 February 1989, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/14/newsid_2541000/2541149.stm.

⁸ William Hague, "Foreign Secretary statement to the House of Commons on British Embassy Tehran", *GOV.UK*, 30 November 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-to-the-house-of-commons-on-british-embassy-tehran>.

On the Iranian side, Tehran seeks the return of monies it believes it is owed from the time of the Shah, and there is a historical suspicion of British actions and influence, centring most notably on the 1953 coup that overthrew Mohammad Mosaddegh.⁹

The United Kingdom finds little to admire in the theocratic regime established by Ayatollah Khomeini following the February 1979 Iranian revolution that overthrew the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a British ally. In 1989 the Iranian regime issued a fatwa against British author Salman Rushdie, as Khomeini declared his novel *The Satanic Verses* to be “against Islam, the Prophet and the Quran”.¹⁰ The attempt to enforce the Ayatollah’s interpretation of Sharia law in the United Kingdom added considerable fire to existing protests in English cities by Muslims angry about the book, as well as constituting a direct threat to Rushdie’s life.

In 1992, two Iranians from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), believed by MI5 to be developing operational intelligence to facilitate Rushdie’s assassination, were expelled from the country. The official history of the Security Service, MI5, recounts the attempts to murder the British author: “The fact that none succeeded, despite MOIS’s success in carrying out assassinations on the continent, was probably due mainly to a combination of expert protection and good intelligence.”¹¹

Iran’s conduct has ensured that it is one of the countries viewed most negatively by the British public. A 2013 poll found only 5% of Britons view Iranian influence as mainly positive, and 84% saw it as negative.¹² A 2019 Populus survey for the British Israel Communications and Research Centre found that 20% of Britons polled considered Iran to be a threat to the UK, an increase of 4% in a year.¹³

On the other side of the equation, Iran views the United Kingdom as a historic and persistent enemy. This can be rooted in Britain’s close relationship with the ‘Great Satan’ of the United States of America and, for those with longer memories, British involvement in the 1953 coup that overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. This coup, to protect British access to its interests in the oil industry, continues to play an important part in Iran’s national narrative. Since 1979, Iran has unsuccessfully sought the return of more than £450 million from Britain, paid to the UK by the Shah between 1971 and 1976, for military equipment that was only partially delivered.¹⁴ International sanctions legally prevent the British government from repaying the money.¹⁵ Such history has led Iran to take a distinct view of the United Kingdom: “There’s an old joke among British diplomats that Iran is the only country in the world that still thinks the UK is a superpower. To the Iranians, it’s not a joke.”¹⁶

A further cause of tension has been the arrest of British nationals, often British citizens of Iranian heritage and/or dual nationals, in Iran. It is a common contention that this has amounted to holding hostages in order to use individuals as bargaining chips either as part of a campaign to obtain the money owed from the 1970s or to seek further influence today.¹⁷ Hostage taking

⁹ See, for example, Peter Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.249-250.

¹⁰ The text of the fatwa is reproduced in Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (London: Vintage, 2013), p.5.

¹¹ Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (London: Penguin, 2010), p.801.

¹² “BBC World Service Poll”, 22 May 2013, https://globescan.com/images/images/pressreleases/bbc2013_country_ratings/2013_country_rating_poll_bbc_globescan.pdf.

¹³ “BICOM Populus poll of UK Attitudes to Israel and the Middle East”, *BICOM*, 3 December 2019, <https://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/bicom-populus-poll-of-uk-attitudes-to-israel-and-the-middle-east/>.

¹⁴ Karl McDonald, “Why Britain owes Iran £450m – and why it might finally pay it back”, *iNews*, 16 November 2017, <https://inews.co.uk/news/world/britain-owes-iran-450m-might-finally-pay-back-104060>.

¹⁵ Patrick Wintour, “Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe: pay £400m debt in aid urges husband”, *The Guardian*, 22 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/jan/22/nazanin-zaghari-ratcliffe-pay-400m-debt-in-aid-urges-husband>.

¹⁶ Jack Straw, *The English Job: Understanding Iran* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2020), p.19.

¹⁷ “UK rejects Iran’s blackmail over Ratcliffe detention in debt talks”, *The Arab Weekly*, 23 September 2020, <https://the arabweekly.com/uk-rejects-irans-blackmail-over-ratcliffe-detention-debt-talks>.

is a technique associated with the Islamic Republic from the earliest days of its history – the 1979-1981 US embassy hostage crisis was eventually settled by the new Reagan administration, and some \$11-12 billion of Iranian assets were released.¹⁸ The United States made further payments to Iran of \$1.7 billion in 2016, following the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement between the United States, the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany), the European Union, and Iran. The payments also coincided with the release from Iranian custody of Americans held in disputed circumstances,¹⁹ although there is no official link between the two.

Including dual nationals and UK residents, at least nine Britons have been held since 2013 by the Iranian authorities. While some, such as Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, have become household names, others have received far less public recognition. They are:

Figure 1: Disputed legal cases involving British citizens and dual nationals in Iran

| Name | Case |
|---------------------------|--|
| Kameel Ahmady | A British-Iranian academic jailed for nine years for “collaborating with a hostile government”. He fled Iran while on bail and appealing his sentence. He reappeared in the UK early in 2021. |
| Aras Amiri | An Iranian who worked for the British Council promoting Persian culture in the UK. Jailed for ten years for spying, having returned to Tehran to visit her sick grandmother. |
| Anoosheh Ashoori | A retired engineer from London, who holds British and Iranian passports. Jailed for ten years having been convicted of spying for Israel. |
| Kamal Foroughi | Jailed for seven years in 2013, having been accused of spying for Britain. Released, aged 80, in 2020. |
| Kylie Moore-Gilbert | A British-Australian academic. Arrested in 2018 after leaving an academic conference and jailed for ten years having been accused of spying. Released in 2020. |
| Roya Nobakht | From Heald Green in Greater Manchester. Arrested in 2013 and subsequently jailed for 20 years for Facebook comments criticising the Iranian government as “too Islamic” and “controlling”. |
| Morad Tahabaz | A dual US-UK citizen of Iranian heritage, Tahabaz is a conservationist from the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation. He was jailed in 2019 for ten years for spying. |
| Abbas Yazdi | A British businessman based in Dubai, Yazdi went missing in 2013 and is believed to have been taken forcibly to Iran. In 2015, three Iranians were convicted in UAE of his kidnap. |
| Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe | The most prominent British-Iranian. Arrested in 2016, she was jailed for five years on national security charges and has since been retried in a second case, where she was jailed for 12 months with an additional one-year travel ban. |

¹⁸ Michael Rubin, “Reagan deserves credit for 1981 hostage release”, *American Enterprise Institute*, 27 January 2016, <https://www.aei.org/foreign-and-defense-policy/middle-east/reagan-deserves-credit-for-1981-hostage-release/>.

¹⁹ “Senate Hearing 114-533, The terror financing risks of America’s \$400 million cash payment to Iran”, U.S. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, Subcommittee on National Security and International Trade and Finance, 21 September 2016, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg23439/html/CHRG-114shrg23439.htm>.

There is a degree of uniformity in the cases above. While Iran does not recognise the concept of dual nationality, those targeted have had clear connections to the UK, have usually been charged with espionage, and, when convicted, have tended to receive very similar sentences. Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's husband, Richard Ratcliffe, is explicit about the nature of Iran's actions and how they should be classified. While she is currently perceived to be a citizen in need of consular assistance, "I think it would protect her and protect others in the future to call Iran out for taking hostages."²⁰ Generally, Iranian networks and sympathisers in the United Kingdom keep quiet on cases such as the above. The Islamic Human Rights Commission, for example, who might be expected to intervene if an Islamic country were failing to meet necessary standards, appears to have avoided these cases.²¹ The response of Press TV to one – the imprisonment of Kylie Moore-Gilbert – is, however, discussed later in the text as an exception to this approach.

On 17 May 2019, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) announced guidance recommending that dual national British-Iranians should not travel to Iran, nor should Iranians who work for organisations perceived as being associated with the United Kingdom.²² The then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, commented:

... the Iranian regime's conduct has worsened. Having exhausted all other options, I must now advise all British-Iranian dual nationals against traveling to Iran. The dangers they face include arbitrary detention and lack of access to basic legal rights ...²³

At the time of writing, the British government advises against all but essential travel to Iran for any British national, based on its security assessment of the risks within the country.²⁴

Despite these considerable negatives, Iran has had some success at establishing connections with institutions in the United Kingdom. At the Islamic Centre of England (ICE), it has extensive involvement with one of London's most prominent mosques, and an important venue for Britain's Twelver Shia community. As the UK representative of Iran's current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, the post of Director of the ICE gives Seyed Hashem Moosavi both a degree of legitimacy and a platform from which to organise. This position, and the representative's activism, has continued even when diplomatic relations between Britain and Iran have been in deep freeze. Although the innovative media development of Press TV has to an extent stalled after it proved unable to work within the guidelines of the UK's regulatory system, narratives sympathetic to Iranian interests can be found even within mainstream political parties such as the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party.

The following chapters audit and record examples of narratives sympathetic to Iran here in the United Kingdom, as well as charting Iran's own work at advancing its political and religious interests in this country.

²⁰ Campbell MacDiarmid, "UK must treat Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe as Iranian hostage, husband says", *The Telegraph*, 26 November 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/11/26/uk-must-treat-nazanin-zaghari-ratcliffe-iranian-hostage-husband/>.

²¹ A search of the IHRC website revealed no mention of eight of the nine Britons listed in figure 1. One reference to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe can be found in a letter to the IHRC by Andrew Norfolk of *The Times* dated 4 October 2019. It was reproduced on the IHRC website on 10 October 2019. The specific point Norfolk makes about her case does not appear to be addressed. See "On The Times, Andrew Norfolk and the Paucity of Power", *IHRC*, 10 October 2019, <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/news/comment/24364-on-the-times-andrew-norfolk-and-the-paucity-of-power/>.

²² Rt Honourable Jeremy Hunt MP, "UK changes travel advice to Iran", Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 17 May 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-changes-travel-advice-to-iran>.

²³ Hunt MP, "UK changes travel advice to Iran".

²⁴ "Foreign travel advice: Iran", UK Government, 22 February 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/iran>.

Chapter 2: Political Networks

Since 1979, Iran has seen itself as both the leader of a Shiite Islamic internationalism and “as a stronghold of a transnational revolutionary movement”.²⁵ While periods of partial engagement or brinksmanship with the west have occurred, including rhetoric about a “dialogue of civilisations”, the Islamic Republic has never fully shifted from its revolutionary approach to the international order.²⁶ This potentially has an impact on the conduct of its representatives in the UK, the political relationships that Iran develops, and those that others develop with the Iran and its representatives.

2.1 Iran’s Diplomatic Structures in the United Kingdom

Diplomatic relations between Iran and the United Kingdom have been turbulent since 1979, with long periods where official relations have broken down. Iran currently has a staff of 11 officials in the United Kingdom.

Figure 2: Iranian embassy staff (as of March 2021)²⁷

| Job Title | Name |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Ambassador | His Excellency Mr Hamid Baeidinejad |
| Deputy Head of Mission | Mr Seyed Mehdi Hosseini Matin |
| 1st Counsellor (Political) | Mr Reza Nourian |
| 1st Counsellor (Consular Affairs) | Mr Seyed Nouredin Vahed Pour |
| 2nd Counsellor (Consul) | Mr Ahmad Shenavaei |
| 2nd Counsellor (Legal and International Affairs) | Mr Mesbah Ansari Dogaheh |
| 2nd Counsellor (Political Affairs) | Mr Kiumars Javidnia |
| 1st Secretary (Consular Affairs) | Mrs Goudarzi Motlagh Najmeh |
| 1st Secretary (Financial and Administrative Affairs) | Mr Hassan Davoudkhani |
| 2nd Secretary (Administrative) | Mr Morteza Kazemi Asl |
| 3rd Secretary (Press and Communications) | Mr Mahmoud Maleki |
| 3rd Counsellor (Political Affairs) | Mr Davoud Raki |

The Iranian embassy in London runs a website, under the control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran, available in both English and Persian.²⁸ It contains links to other official government sites, as well as to that of the Secretariat of the Supreme Council of Iranians Abroad. Its news section is updated regularly, covering matters from Covid-19 infection rates to the publication of new pieces of English literature in Persian. Iran’s political ideas are still presented, however – for example, on 6 January 2021 a tweet from the Iranian Foreign Ministry was reproduced as

²⁵ Bassam Tibi, *Political Islam, World Politics and Europe: Democratic Peace and Euro-Islam versus Global Jihad* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2008), p.130.

²⁶ Tibi, *Political Islam*, p.131.

²⁷ “Foreign embassies in the UK”, UK Government, last updated 8 April 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-embassies-in-the-uk>.

²⁸ Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, <https://london.mfa.gov.ir/>, accessed 10 May 2021.

a news item on the embassy's website, commemorating the death of the former head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, Qassem Soleimani. Above a picture of Soleimani, claiming he helped bring democracy to Afghanistan, are the words, "Will Never Forget Will Never Forgive."²⁹ Major regime anniversaries, such as Islamic Republic Day, celebrated on 1 April each year, are also marked on the website.³⁰

The ambassador, Hamid Baeidinejad, is a career diplomat who was part of Iran's negotiating team for the JCPOA.³¹ An English speaker, he has made some attempt to develop a public profile in the UK, speaking at the Oxford Union in 2018 and giving media interviews to leading news channels. These interventions have not served to soften Iran's image – for example, a 2019 piece with Sky News was used to issue a warning to President Trump and the United States: "Don't test us."³²

Following the tensions after the assassination of Soleimani, the Iranian military responded on 8 January 2020 by attacking US targets in Iraq. It then shot down PS752, a Ukrainian airliner flying from Tehran to Kiev, killing 167 people. While western governments concluded that the evidence pointed to a missile strike by the IRGC, Ambassador Baeidinejad insisted to the British public that Iran was not responsible for the outrage, and declared as "absurd" accusations that Iran was suspiciously trying to clear wreckage from the site.³³ When Tehran eventually admitted to accidentally downing the passenger jet in a calamitous airstrike, Baeidinejad was forced to make a retraction on his Twitter account on 11 January 2020.³⁴ That retraction was written in slightly stilted English, and Baeidinejad's tweets have won him a decent sized, but hardly huge, following of 18,800.³⁵ He tends not to debate on social media. In September 2020, after being challenged about the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Mr Baeidinejad responded by blocking the Free Nazanin Twitter account, meaning they could not read his tweets, reply to them, or contact him.³⁶

A more detailed analysis of Iran's use of social media is to be found in chapter four.

2:2 Security Issues Involving Iranian Diplomatic Staff in Other Countries

It is common international practice for intelligence officers and military officials to shelter among diplomatic and embassy staff. Although there is no evidence in the public domain of any current Iranian officials behaving inappropriately in the United Kingdom, it has to be noted that very serious incidents have occurred in other European countries. The most disturbing case is that of Iranian diplomat Assadollah Assadi, third counsellor at the Iranian embassy

²⁹ Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, News, "Our region lost a great warrior for peace", 6 January 2021, <https://london.mfa.ir/en/newsview/623391>. Iran Foreign Ministry (@IRIMFA_EN), "Our region lost a great warrior for peace. From contributing to Bonn conference to a relentless struggle to rid the region of ISIS, Gen Soleimani played a unique role in fight for stability of ME & beyond. His assassination showed US' true colors. #WillNeverForgetWillNeverForgive", *Twitter*, 31 December 2020, <https://t.co/zQeZzWq4Pq>.

³⁰ "Islamic Republic Day: Celebrating Islamic Republic Day, in its fortieth anniversary!", Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, News, 1 April 2019, <https://uk.mfa.gov.ir/en/newsview/528854/celebrating-islamic-republic-day-in-its-fortieth-anniversary>.

³¹ "Hamid Baeidinejad", *The Oxford Union*, 16 October 2018, <https://www.oxford-union.org/node/1785>.

³² Dominic Waghorn, "'Don't test us': UK's Iranian ambassador Hamid Baeidinejad issues warning to US", *Sky News*, 15 May 2019, <https://news.sky.com/story/dont-test-us-uks-iranian-ambassador-hamid-baeidinejad-issues-warning-to-us-11719902>.

³³ Sharon Marris and Andy Hayes, "Iran ambassador rejects 'absurd' claim bulldozers are clearing Ukraine jet crash site", *Sky News*, 10 January 2020, <https://news.sky.com/story/iran-plane-crash-highly-likely-jet-was-hit-by-iranian-missile-leaders-say-as-new-video-emerges-11904978>.

³⁴ Hamid Baeidinejad (@baeidinejad), "In my statement yesterday to the UK media, I conveyed the official findings of responsible authorities in my country that missile could not be fired and hit the Ukrainian plane at that period of time. I apologise and regret for conveying such wrong findings." *Twitter*, 11 January 2020, <https://twitter.com/baeidinejad/status/1215909313451036673>.

³⁵ See Hamid Baeidinejad (@baeidinejad), *Twitter*, <https://twitter.com/baeidinejad>, accessed 10 May 2021.

³⁶ Sam Volpe and AP reporter, "Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe faces new charge – and trial on Sunday", *Hampstead Highgate Express*, 8 September 2020, <https://www.hamhigh.co.uk/news/local-council/nazanin-zaghari-ratcliffe-faces-new-charge-in-iran-3671234>.

in Vienna, who was convicted in February 2021 in Belgium of planning to bomb a rally of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) in France in June 2018. Assadi was jailed for twenty years, following a joint counterterrorism operation involving German, French, and Belgian police. Three Belgians of Iranian heritage were also convicted for their role in the planned atrocity.³⁷ The French government believes that the bombing was planned by Iranian intelligence ministry.³⁸

It is worth stressing the scale of the outrage Assadi planned in France. The NCRI rally was thousands strong and attended by a 35-strong delegation from Britain. This included five MPs: Sir David Amess, Bob Blackman, Matthew Offord, and Theresa Villiers from the Conservative Party, and Roger Godsiff from Labour. Senior American politicians present included Rudy Giuliani and Newt Gingrich. According to evidence given during the trial, Assadi smuggled a bomb made in Iran in his diplomatic baggage onto a commercial flight, putting hundreds of lives at risk. As Bob Blackman MP was quoted as saying, “No normal state uses a diplomat roaming Europe with a bomb.”³⁹ The actions of Assadollah Assadi give some indication as to the reckless nature of the Iranian regime – a bombing of this scale, potentially injuring and even killing democratically elected politicians from across the world, could have led to war. Tehran denounced the bomb plot as a ‘false flag’ operation by the NCRI, designed to disrupt an Iranian Presidential visit to Europe.⁴⁰ Iran objected to the arrest of Assadi, considering it a breach of the principle of diplomatic immunity.⁴¹ However, he was not detained in the country where he had been serving, but was detained whilst on holiday in Germany. On 5 May 2021 it was announced Assadollah Assadi had dropped plans to appeal his conviction. It is unclear if those convicted with him intend to appeal.⁴²

Other incidents demonstrate that Iran is frequently suspected of using diplomatic duties and facilities as cover for hostile activities in western countries. In 2018, Albania expelled Iran’s ambassador, plus a colleague, for “damaging its national security”, and went on to expel two further Iranian diplomats in January 2020 for “activities incompatible with their status” – a common euphemism for spying.⁴³ In 2013, Bosnia expelled two Iranian diplomats, again on the grounds that they had violated diplomatic protocol.⁴⁴

In 2018, the Netherlands expelled two Iranian embassy staff, several months after the assassination of an Iranian Arab activist in the Netherlands.⁴⁵ Iran responded by declaring that all of the arrests and expulsions it had been facing was part of an attempt to prevent the nuclear deal between it and the world’s powers from being salvaged.⁴⁶

³⁷ “France bomb plot: Iran diplomat Assadollah Assadi sentenced to 20 years”, *BBC News*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-55931633>.

³⁸ “France blames Iran for foiled Paris bomb plot”, *BBC News*, 2 October 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45722523>.

³⁹ Ryan Merrifield, “Five MPs escaped death after Iran diplomat ‘smuggled Mother of Satan bomb on flight’”, *Daily Mirror*, 27 November 2020, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/five-mps-escaped-death-after-23076442>.

⁴⁰ Iranian Students News Agency, Zarif calls claims against Iranian diplomat sinister false flag ploy – ISNA 3 July 2018.

⁴¹ Islamic Republic News Agency, FM Spox terms violation of Iranian diplomat’s immunity in Belgium unacceptable – IRNA English, 14 October 2020.

⁴² Robin Emmott and Clement Rossignol, “Iran envoy drops appeal to jail in Belgium, no prisoner swap seen”, *Reuters*, 5 May 2021.

⁴³ “Albania, host of Iranian dissident camp, expels two Iranian diplomats”, *Reuters*, 15 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-albania-iran-expulsion-idUSKBN1ZE27X>.

⁴⁴ Benjamin Weinthal, “Bosnia Expels Two Iranian Diplomats”, *Foundation for Defence of Democracies*, 29 April 2013, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op-eds/2013/04/29/bosnia-expels-two-iranian-diplomats/>.

⁴⁵ Matthew Levitt, “Iran’s Deadly Diplomats”, *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, Vol 11, Issue 7 (August 2018), <https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-deadly-diplomats/>.

⁴⁶ “Netherlands expels two Iranian embassy staff: Dutch intelligence service”, *Reuters*, 6 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-iran-netherlands-idUSKBN1JW27V>.

The combination of expulsions across Europe leads Matthew Levitt to describe the French bomb plot as, “the latest example of how active Iranian intelligence operatives have been in Europe as of late.”⁴⁷

2:3 Iran's Political Relations in the United Kingdom

2:3:1 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Iran

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Iran exists “To foster good relations with the Parliament and people of the Islamic Republic of Iran”.⁴⁸ Its membership is as follows:

Figure 3: APPG on Iran

| Role | Name | Party | Date Joined |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Chair and Registered Contact | Mr Richard Bacon | Conservative | 29 September 2015 |
| Vice Chair | Lord Lamont of Lerwick | Conservative | 29 September 2015 |
| Vice Chair | Mr John Baron | Conservative | 29 September 2015 |
| Vice Chair | Viscount Waverley | Crossbench | 7 August 2020 |
| Vice Chair | Lord Anderson of Swansea | Labour | 29 September 2015 |
| Vice Chair | Mr Andrew Mitchell | Conservative | 7 August 2020 |
| Vice Chair | Lord Balfe | Conservative | 28 September 2017 |

It currently enjoys a low profile, and although Lord Lamont has been a determined advocate of renewed trade between the two countries, its officers and members cannot in any way be accused of being supportive of the Iranian regime. In the past, some of its members have attracted a much higher degree of controversy about their general actions as well as Iranian-connected issues, especially two previous Vice-Chairs: Lord Nazir Ahmed and Jeremy Corbyn MP (see Chapter 2:3:2).

Lord Nazir Ahmed of Rotherham

Lord Ahmed served on the APPG on Iran as a Vice Chair from 24 November 2016 until 5 November 2019.⁴⁹ He was a Labour peer from 1998, when he was ennobled by Tony Blair, until 15 April 2012, and again from 26 June 2012 until 14 May 2013.⁵⁰ From 16 April 2012 to 25 June 2012, and 14 May 2013 until 14 November 2020 he was a non-affiliated peer. His time in the Labour Party ended with his resignation in 2013. Having been convicted of dangerous driving, an offence for which he was jailed for 12 weeks, Lord Ahmed was accused of using a television interview in Pakistan to blame his jail sentence on a conspiracy by Jews. Lord Ahmed denied this and has stated he did not recall when the interview was held or where it was carried out. He commented, “there is extrinsic evidence which suggests the translation could not truly be representative of what I have ever said and believe. My past record sufficiently bears this out,”⁵¹ before adding:

⁴⁷ Matthew Levitt, “Iran’s Deadly Diplomats”.

⁴⁸ “Register Of All-Party Parliamentary Groups: Iran”, Parliament, 24 September 2020, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmallparty/200924/iran.htm>.

⁴⁹ “Iran APPG”, Parallel Parliament, last updated 21 April 2021, <https://www.parallelparliament.co.uk/APPG/iran>.

⁵⁰ “MPs and Lords: Lord Ahmed”, UK Parliament, <https://members.parliament.uk/member/3470/career>, accessed 10 May 2021.

⁵¹ Ben Quinn, “Controversial Labour peer Lord Ahmed resigns from party”, *The Guardian*, 13 May 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/may/13/lord-ahmed-resigns-from-labour-party>.

It is somewhat sinister that because of my pursuit of the inquiry of a murder of a Pakistani politician in the streets of London, there are elements in Pakistan who bears grudge against me and might it be the brainchild of such elements to tamper with the footage of the alleged interview.⁵²

In 2012, Lord Ahmed organised a parliamentary meeting discussing the restoration of British diplomatic ties with Iran. This was to feature James Thring, an anti-Zionist activist who is a regular guest on the Iranian state channel Press TV. After *The Jewish Chronicle* contacted the Labour Party about Thring, raising concerns that anti-Semites were being invited to speak in Parliament, Lord Ahmed backed away from the event, saying he had not been informed about the background of the participants.⁵³

In May 2018, while still serving on the APPG on Iran, Lord Ahmed was interviewed on *Going Underground*, a discussion programme on the Russian state-funded broadcaster *Russia Today*. In it he argued that Israel had been “trying their best to create this wedge between the Sunni Muslim and the Shia bloc”.⁵⁴ In this analysis, agency for the divisions between countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran is seemingly awarded, not to the leaders of the countries involved or to their policies, but to Israel. Such messages are greatly reassuring to countries like Iran because they avoid a serious discussion of Tehran’s record of stirring sectarian divisions and its regional ambitions.

Lord Ahmed resigned from the House of Lords in 2020 ahead of a report by its Conduct Committee which recommended his expulsion as he had “breached the Code of Conduct by failing to act on his personal honour in the discharge of his parliamentary activities”.⁵⁵ This report upheld earlier findings by the independent House of Lords Commissioner for Standards. Lord Ahmed rejects the findings of these investigations, which he considers to be flawed, and has announced his intention to pursue a case in the European Court of Human Rights, in order to prove his innocence.⁵⁶

2:3:2 Iran and the Labour Party

Voices in sympathy with Iran may be found within the contemporary Labour Party, and form one of the ways in which discussion of the Islamic Republic and its networks is framed. There are, of course, very different views held by many Iranian dissidents and human rights campaigners,⁵⁷ but they appear to have less utility to the politicians in the examples discussed below.

In February 2017, the Labour MP for Manchester Gorton, Gerald Kaufman, died at the age of 86. There was considerable competition within the Labour Party for this safe seat. One notable point is that, of the five candidates shortlisted to replace Kaufman, three – Afzal Khan, Yasmine

⁵² Ben Quinn, “Controversial Labour peer Lord Ahmed resigns from party”.

⁵³ Jessica Elogot, “Lord Ahmed cancels far-right meeting”, *The JC*, 14 June 2012, <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/lord-ahmed-cancels-far-right-meeting-1.33882>.

⁵⁴ *Going Underground* on RT, “608: Lord Ahmed on Iran Catastrophe, WikiLeaks’ New Era & Rhyming Guide to Grenfell Potent Whisperer”, *YouTube*, 12 May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dalYVJAOUZY&ab_channel=GoingUndergroundonRT.

⁵⁵ UK Parliament, “The House of Lords Conduct Committee has today published a report on the conduct of Lord Ahmed”, Committees, UK Parliament, 17 November 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/402/conduct-committee/news/130536/the-house-of-lords-conduct-committee-has-today-published-a-report-on-the-conduct-of-lord-ahmed/#:~:text=The%20House%20of%20Lords%20Conduct%20Committee%20has%20today,date%2C%20recommends%20that%20he%20should%20have%20been%20expelled>.

⁵⁶ Murtaza Ali Shah, “Lord Nazir announces retirement from UK’s House of Lords before expulsion”, *Geo News*, 17 November 2020, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/318893-lord-nazir-announces-retirement-from-uks-house-of-lords-before-expulsion>.

⁵⁷ See, for example, the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, “Backchat talks to Maryam Namazie about honour-based violence, blasphemy and the popular revolt against the Iranian regime, 10 May 2020”, Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain – CEMB, <https://www.ex-muslim.org.uk/2020/05/mihir-joshi-talks-to-activist-maryamnamazie-about-honour-based-violence-blasphemy-and-the-popular-revolt-against-the-iranian-regime-backchat-10-may-2020/>. There is a series of Iranian dissident organisations and campaigns in the UK, encompassing nationalist, royalist, and socialist currents.

Dar, and Nasrin Ali – had previously attended at least one rally at the Manchester Islamic Centre to mark the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran.⁵⁸ When contacted prior to the publication of this report, Cllr Ali said:

“I was invited once, by prominent members of the Pakistani Shi’ite community in Manchester to attend a dinner in honour of the commemoration of the over throw [sic] of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in support of the Iranian diaspora in Manchester. My attendance at the meeting was to show solidarity to the Shi’ite and Iranian communities in Manchester. I did [sic] not speak at the event.

At no time did I express support for the current Iranian regime or its practices. I have not attended since.”

Images from the 2017 commemoration showed banners on the walls at the commemoration featuring the Ayatollah Khomeini.⁵⁹ Afzal Khan displayed his evident respect for the Iranian revolution in the opening words of his 2017 speech:

I was a young man when the revolution actually happened, one of those who was excited, excited in a sense that for so long we saw what was happening in the Muslim world, and that in a way created hope, and I’ve been keenly following the development.⁶⁰

While the Iranian revolution may have been a cause for hope at the time, much of what was to follow replicated the faults of many revolutions down the ages: the imprisonment of dissidents, mass executions, and a political system that empowers a minority who cannot be removed from office. Perhaps the only difference between Iran’s revolution and earlier examples in history is that this time it was to be a clerical elite who would wield power. When contacted for comment Afzal Khan stated:

I can confirm that the extract from the speech accurately reflects my views as a young man. The Iranian Revolution, much like the Arab Spring, was a moment of hope across the Muslim world. Like the Arab Spring, that moment of hope was not fulfilled. I will always support the right of Iranians and all peoples to determine their own future. Do I support the brutal Iranian regime and ‘the imprisonment of dissidents, mass executions, and a political system that empowers a minority who cannot be removed from office’? No.⁶¹

One of the candidates Khan was to beat to gain the Labour candidacy, Yasmine Dar, has attended the commemoration of the Islamic Revolution at least three times. She declared in 2017, “We’re here for a celebration. A happy time. 38 years of the Iranian Islamic revolution. So, I’m absolutely happy, it’s the third year I’ve been coming.”⁶² A social worker and prison chaplain by profession, Ms Dar was elected in 2018 to Labour’s governing National Executive Committee (NEC),⁶³ a position she continues to hold. When contacted ahead of the publication of this report, Ms Dar stated:

In my speech, I talked about the importance of solidarity and community cohesion, and of combating Islamophobia in our society. At no time did I express support for the

⁵⁸ “Three Labour Gorton Candidates Attended Khomeinist Rallies”, *Guido Fawkes*, 21 March 2017, <https://order-order.com/2017/03/21/three-labour-gorton-candidates-attended-khomeinist-rallies/>.

⁵⁹ *Guido Fawkes*, “Three Labour Gorton Candidates Attended Khomeinist Rallies”.

⁶⁰ Habibi, “Afzal Khan praises Khomeinist Iran”.

⁶¹ Email correspondence from Afzal Khan to the author, 20 May 2021.

⁶² Habibi, “Yasmine Dar celebrating Khomeinist tyranny”, *YouTube*, 21 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moh02bOBImk&ab_channel=habibi.

⁶³ Yasmine Dar, “I Ran For Labour’s NEC To Bring People Together And Get Jeremy Corbyn Into Number Ten – I’m Excited To Get Stuck In”, *HuffPost*, 16 January 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/yasmine-dar-labour-nec_uk_5a5e0741e4b03c4189690fad.

current Iranian regime. I do not support any regimes, or any repressive governments, and I would not speak for them.⁶⁴

Jeremy Corbyn served as Vice Chair of the APPG on Iran from 29 September 2015 until 31 January 2018.⁶⁵ He was also part of the APPG on Iran's visit to Tehran in 2014, following which he called for an end to Iran's political isolation. Writing in the Communist Party of Britain's daily newspaper *The Morning Star*, Corbyn argued within the context of discussions on the Syrian civil war, "Continued isolation, sanctions and military threats against Iran have been counter-productive and very dangerous."⁶⁶ He advanced similar positions at the Islamic Centre of England later that year, when Mr Corbyn portrayed Iran as misunderstood in the west. Having praised a speech by the Centre's Director, the personal representative in the UK of Iran's Supreme Leader, Corbyn stated:

He was describing the history and traditions of Islam, but he was also describing the inclusivity, the tolerance, and the acceptance of other faiths, other traditions, and other ethnic groupings within Iran. And I think that is something that most people in the west simply do not understand.⁶⁷

In his parliamentary career, Jeremy Corbyn has also taken the opportunity to engage with Iran's state media, in the shape of Press TV in London. In 2009 and 2012 he declared separate payments of up to £5,000 for interviews given to the channel.⁶⁸

In 2019, during tensions following attacks on shipping in the Arabian Gulf, widely blamed on Iran,⁶⁹ Mr Corbyn rejected the FCO's position that Iran was "almost certain" to be responsible, tweeting, "Without credible evidence about the tanker attacks, the government's rhetoric will only increase the threat of war."⁷⁰

Corbyn has however also repeatedly raised the Iranian Government's human rights record. In 2020, he told the House of Commons that "I have long spoken out against the Iranian government's human rights record, including when... I visited Iran" in 2014.⁷¹ Indeed, on his return from the 2014 trip, Corbyn spoke at length on a contemporary debate on human rights and Iran, saying:

"I was part of the delegation to *Iran*, and I constantly raised issues of *human rights* and *human rights* concerns. Does my hon. Friend agree that as appalling as this case is, it is unfortunately not that unusual in *Iran*, and that any future relationship with *Iran* must include a tough *human rights* dialogue to insist that it signs up to and obeys all the *human rights* conventions and has a genuinely independent judicial system, so that such appalling travesties of justice cannot continue?"⁷²

⁶⁴ Email correspondence from Yasmine Dar to the author, 20 May 2021.

⁶⁵ "Iran APPG", Parallel Parliament.

⁶⁶ Jeremy Corbyn, "Rebuilding relations with Iran", *Morning Star*, 14 January 2014, <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/a-c23b-rebuilding-relations-with-iran>.

⁶⁷ InterviewSnaps, "Corbyn addresses Iranian revolution celebration", *YouTube*, 25 May 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/yasmine-dar-labour-nec_uk_5a5e0741e4b03c4189690fad.

⁶⁸ "Changes to the Register of Members' Interests: Jeremy Corbyn", *They Work For You*, March 2021, <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/regmem/?p=10133>.

⁶⁹ Patrick Wintour, "UK joins US in accusing Iran of tanker attacks as crew held", *The Guardian*, 14 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/14/us-accuses-iran-of-detaining-crew-after-oil-tanker-attack>.

⁷⁰ Jeremy Corbyn (@jeremycorbyn), "Britain should act to ease tensions in the Gulf, not fuel a military escalation that began with US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement. Without credible evidence about the tanker attacks, the government's rhetoric will only increase the threat of war." *Twitter*, 14 June 2019, https://twitter.com/jeremycorbyn/status/1139640621994512385?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet.

⁷¹ Jack Maidment, 'Jeremy Corbyn is ridiculed for 'talking tripe' after claiming he is a CRITIC of the Iranian government despite past paid appearances on Iran state TV', *MailOnline*, 7 January 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7861231/Jeremy-Corbyn-ridiculed-talking-tripe-claims-CRITIC-Iranian-government.html>.

⁷² HC Debate, 6 November 2014, vol 587, col 1014, [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2014-11-06/debates/14110633000001/Iran\(UKForeignPolicy\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2014-11-06/debates/14110633000001/Iran(UKForeignPolicy)).

If soft power is the ability to attract and persuade, the Islamic revolution, and Iran's position in the world since, do appear to carry some power of attraction. The Iranian government is depicted as misunderstood and unfairly maligned, Iran is portrayed as a nation that protects minorities, and the 1979 revolution is presented as an event worthy of commemoration. There appears to be little space for discussing what has happened since – that Iran's treatment of minorities, such as the Kurds, is often poor.⁷³ Or that the country's human rights, terrible under the Shah, subsequently worsened. In an overview of Iran's record, Amnesty International accuses those now in power of ongoing crimes against humanity:

The authorities continued to commit crimes against humanity by systematically concealing the fate and whereabouts of several thousand political dissidents forcibly disappeared and extrajudicially executed in secret in 1988. Mass graves believed to contain their remains were subject to ongoing destruction.⁷⁴

2:3:3 Iran and the Revolutionary Left

Iran's relationship with the Far Left in the United Kingdom is rooted in a distinct paradox. While the Ayatollahs and the Iranian left had a common enemy in the 1970s in the Shah, and in some cases forged common ground, the left was to be overwhelmingly crushed in the years after the 1979 revolution.⁷⁵ In 1985, Iran's Islamic Propagation Organization even published a valedictory text in English, *Confessions of the Central Cadre of the Tudeh Party*, in which members of the Iranian left, many broken by torture, confessed to their crimes against the Islamic Republic. Its publisher states:

In this booklet dear readers will find the full text of the confessions made by these lackeys. We hope that their outright admissions will serve to reveal more of the true identities of the leftists and their foreign masters. May Islam become victorious in all its battles against the forces of evil, corruption and oppression.⁷⁶

Publications sympathetic to the system of Iranian government, such as *Crescent International* (see chapter seven) also vigorously contest any idea Islamic forces somehow snatched power away from the left, insisting that “leftist dogmas failed during the Islamic revolution in Iran”.⁷⁷ When adopting political positions on the Islamic Republic of Iran, British socialists and communists presumably have to either remain ignorant of the bloody history experienced by many of their comrades in Iran or conclude that it does not matter. For example, an overview of the Iranian revolution in *Socialist Worker* praises it as a revolt against US imperialism and for workers' power.⁷⁸ No reference is made to the subsequent executions of socialists, or to the status of women after the revolution. Are those in the Labour Party, or on the wider left who “celebrate” the 1979 revolution, comfortable with the torture, discrimination, and murder that followed? Those murders included fellow socialists, feminists, and trades unionists.

Such contradictions reproduce themselves in ongoing campaign work, further clouding the potential to understand events concerning Iran. Organisations such as Stop the War Coalition

⁷³ There is ample evidence of Iran's ill-treatment of minorities. See, for example, Amnesty International, “Iran: Human rights abuses against the Kurdish minority”, *Amnesty International*, 2008, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE130882008ENGLISH.pdf>.

⁷⁴ “Overview: Iran”, *Amnesty International*, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/>, accessed 10 May 2021.

⁷⁵ See Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (London: I B Tauris, 2000).

⁷⁶ Islamic Propagation Organization, *Confessions of the Central Cadre of the Tudeh Party*, 2nd edition (Tehran: Islamic Propagation Organization, 1985), p.5.

⁷⁷ Tahir Mustafa, “Why Leftist Dogmas Failed During the Islamic Revolution in Iran”, *Crescent International*, 1 March 2021, <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/why-leftist-dogmas-failed-during-the-islamic-revolution-in-iran>.

⁷⁸ Simon Basketter, “Iran's 1979 revolution”, *Socialist Worker*, 20 January 2009, <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/16572/Irans+1979+revolution>.

(StWC), a grouping that brings together socialists, some Muslim representative organisations, and peace activists, have struggled intellectually to address Iranian military and paramilitary interventions overseas, even when pressed to do so. For example, at the height of the Syrian Civil War when Iran's forces played a crucial role in keeping the Assad regime in power, fellow anti-war campaigners who had previously supported the StWC complained it "one-sidedly failed to support demonstrations against the escalating Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah military interventions in Syria".⁷⁹

StWC will, however, speak out loudly if Iran is under attack. For example, it published a press release in November 2020 condemning the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, blaming America and Israel, before concluding, "sanctions against Iran must be ended and clear signals given of a return to diplomacy to defuse the situation".⁸⁰

2:3:4 Iran and the Conspiracists

Press TV has given a significant platform to British conspiracy theorists such as James Thring and Dr Nicholas Kollerstrom. As with the profile given to elements on the British Far Right (discussed below), shared attitudes to Israel and what is described as "anti-Zionism" appear to be the likely motivation for these relationships. Iran benefits from having its views, on issues such as the Holocaust or diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom, echoed by British citizens.

James Thring is the author of a 2012 book entitled *Peace with Iran*, which considers the Iranian government to be run by the people: "They run a theocratic, socialist and democratic government with a strong moral oversight based on high Islamic principles."⁸¹ While this readily sits with some of the warm appreciation for Iran found in sections of the Labour Party, Thring possesses altogether darker views – for example, writing of the attacks Al-Qaeda committed against the United States:

9-11 was blamed on Al-Qaeda when it was allegedly contrived by Larry Silverstein, leaseholder of the World Trade towers, who wanted them demolished, in conspiracy with Dov Zakheim and Richard Perle of the PNAC, to justify a new Pearl Harbour which the Israel lobby needed to trigger the war on Islam.⁸²

In 2012, he wrote to the then Foreign Secretary, William Hague MP, outlining that the attack on the British embassy in Iran was a consequence of British and western sanctions placed upon the country. He also lobbied for the return of Iran's diplomats to London.⁸³ Several months earlier, the United Kingdom had given all Iran's diplomats 48 hours to leave the United Kingdom, after a mob attack had occurred on the British embassy in Tehran.

A second high-profile conspiracy theorist with sympathy for the Iranian regime is Dr Nicholas Kollerstrom. He is a part of the 9/11 and 7/7 'truth' movements, where the view that Al-Qaeda and jihadists were behind major terrorist outrages is rejected.⁸⁴ In 2008, Press TV gave Kollerstrom a platform to present Holocaust denial, in an article for the Press TV website entitled "The Walls of Auschwitz". Here he argued that the massacre of Jews during WW2

⁷⁹ "Stop the War faces a coalition of critics", *The Guardian Letters*, 9 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/09/stop-the-war-faces-a-coalition-of-critics>.

⁸⁰ "Mohsen Fakhrizadeh Murder – Stop the War Statement", *Stop the War Coalition*, 27 November 2020, <https://www.stopwar.org.uk/article/mohsen-fakhrizadeh-murder-stop-the-war-statement/>.

⁸¹ James B. Thring, *Peace with Iran: The case for restoring peaceful relations with the Islamic republic and exposing hypocrisy over her nuclear plans* (London: Ministry of Peace, 2012), p.13.

⁸² James B. Thring, *Peace with Iran*, p.35.

⁸³ Letter from Dr James Thring to UK Foreign Secretary calling for reinstatement of Iranian diplomats in London, 23 January 2012, <http://www.jailingopinions.com/birob/thring-hague-iran-jan2012.html>.

⁸⁴ Index on Censorship, 'Debate: the Kollerstrom question', 28 April 2008, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2008/04/debate-the-kollerstrom-question/>.

was “scientifically impossible”.⁸⁵ In the cases of both Thring and Kollerstrom, their conspiracy-laden world view finds some accord, or a platform, with Iran.

2:3:5 Iran and the Far Right

The idea of political engagement between the Far Right and the Islamic Republic of Iran may sound counter intuitive. In recent years, fascist and neo-Nazi organisations have frequently made hostility to both Islam and Muslims a centrepiece of their political campaigning. It has not always been so – in March 1988, the National Front (NF) declared what it referred to as a “new alliance” on the front page of its newspaper, *National Front News*. This alliance comprised the NF, Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, Colonel Gaddafi of Libya, and Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini.⁸⁶ This was no mere rhetorical device – that year, two leading members of the NF, Patrick Harrington and Graham Williamson, attended the Al-Quds day demonstration in London, an annual event called by the Ayatollah Khomeini to show support for the Palestinians.⁸⁷

Upon the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, the NF returned to the Iranian question, firmly opposing those who had celebrated Khomeini’s passing. Iran was praised for rejecting the domination of Marxism and capital, and for eliminating freemasonry. “It was this policy that brought the wrath of the world upon the revolutionary republic of Iran.”⁸⁸ After directing readers to a further two-page assessment of “some of the great achievements of the Iranian administration” to be found in its magazine *Nationalism Today*, the NF finished with a valediction:

For ten years Ayatollah Khomeini took to the world stage and helped to stem the advance of the organized forces of iniquity. We pray that, in His infinite mercy, Khomeini’s struggle will be of good account in the Divine Judgment.⁸⁹

As was the case for some in the contemporary Labour Party, the Iranian revolution appears to have been a beacon of hope to the NF. Activists wished the new Iran well, and lauded its successes. In the particular case of the NF and Iran, common ideological ground in terms of opposition to Israel (and indeed traditional fascist concerns about the power of Jews and freemasons), plus a shared tendency towards separatism, goes a long way to explaining such sentiments.

A further motor bringing together Iran and the Far Right has been the specific issue of Holocaust denial. As the American academic George Michael has written in a survey of the convergence between the Far Right and Islamists, “The most notable instance of propaganda sharing between the extreme right and militant Islam has been in the area of historical revisionism.”⁹⁰

The former President of Iran, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, spoke up for revisionists in the west,⁹¹ and during the rule of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in particular, there was evidence of the Far Right finding a welcome in Tehran. In December 2006, Iran hosted the two-day International Conference to Review the Global Vision of the Holocaust. Among those given a platform was

⁸⁵ Dr Nicholas Kollerstrom, “The Walls of Auschwitz”, *Press TV*, 18 May 2008, <https://archive.ph/20120630053956/http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/56287.html>.

⁸⁶ Lawrence O’Hara, “Creating Political Soldiers? The National Front 1986-1990”, PhD thesis, [May 2000], <https://ethos.bl.uk/ProcessOrderDetailsDirect.do?documentId=1&thesisTitle=Creating+political+soldiers%3F+%3A+the+National+Front+1986-90&printId=398048>, p.237.

⁸⁷ Lawrence O’Hara, “Creating Political Soldiers?”, p.110.

⁸⁸ “Khomeini”, *National Front News*, Issue 120 (1989), p.4.

⁸⁹ “Khomeini”, *National Front News*.

⁹⁰ George Michael, *The Enemy of My Enemy: The Alarming Convergence of Militant Islam and the Extreme Right* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2006), p.156.

⁹¹ George Michael, *The Enemy of My Enemy*, p.158.

the British activist Lady Michèle Renouf. In Tehran she gave a passionate speech in support of the Iranian government:

I have come to Tehran to congratulate the Iranians, and those people who voted Dr Ahmadinejad as their president. For this valiant statesman, just like my noble revisionist colleagues, whose right of open debate I proudly champion, seek to speak the truth bravely, and no matter for their personal cost in being demonised, ostracised, or even imprisoned as they are in Europe and Canada, for their rational opinions, which we thought was the glory of our civilisation.⁹²

Renouf went on to stress the common ground between Christ and Muhammad, before complaining that the west was suffering from what she termed ‘holocaustianity’ – a corruption of the words Holocaust and Christianity. To Renouf, the motor driving historical events and contemporary society is the conflict between Jews and gentiles. Terms like Nazism, Zionism, and the Holocaust are red herrings:

The real issue behind them all is the conflict between Judaism’s basic anti-gentile supremacism, no matter how piously or poetically packaged, and the revisionisms of it, as I see it, held up for us to reflect upon the dangers by the two wise prophets Muhammad and Christ, who teach us to speak the whole truth bravely.⁹³

Lady Renouf denies being on the Far Right and declares that she is motivated not by Holocaust denial but by a desire to ensure “debate denial” does not occur. She has justified her positions by saying “People should have the freedom to question the accepted view of what happened. That questioning is part of our culture.”⁹⁴

2:3:6 Iran, the Scottish National Party, and Scottish Independence

Iran appears keen to promote disunity and division within the United Kingdom and seeks out separatist political movements for engagement. Tehran has put considerable effort into developing its political relationships with Scottish political elites who advocate independence. Some Scottish nationalists have not sought to rebuff the Iranians, have visited the country in search of a future working relationship, and have developed ties with Iranian-linked representatives at home. However, in 2019, increased political attention paid to pro-Iranian networks disrupted engagement between Dr Mohammad Shomali, the then representative in the UK of Iran’s spiritual leader, and the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon.

From 7 to 9 December 2015, representatives from the development and enterprise arm of the Scottish government, Scottish Development International, visited Iran to discuss future opportunities in Iran’s oil and gas sector.⁹⁵ Later that month, the former First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, led a four-day Scottish National Party trade delegation to Iran, accompanied by Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh MP, then a member of the APPG on Iran at Westminster.⁹⁶ Explaining the visit to the media, Alex Salmond presented his vision of a Scotland that would develop significant trading relationships with the Islamic Republic of Iran:

⁹² Peter Toepfer, “Lady Michèle Renouf: Speech at the Holocaust Conference Tehran 2006”, *YouTube*, 25 March 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJ9hmxZ033s&ab_channel=PeterToepfer.

⁹³ Peter Toepfer, “Lady Michèle Renouf: Speech at the Holocaust Conference Tehran 2006”.

⁹⁴ David Harrison, “Downfall of Holocaust-denying bishop”, *The Telegraph*, 28 February 2009, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/4885781/The-downfall-of-a-Bishop.html>.

⁹⁵ “Hamza Yousaf (S4W-29237)”, Scottish Government, Communities, 22 January 2016, https://archive2021.parliament.scot/S4_ChamberDesk/WA20160122.pdf.

⁹⁶ Ms Sheikh lost her seat in the 2017 general election and is therefore no longer part of the APPG. This year both Mr Salmond and Ms Sheikh campaigned for a new pro-independence grouping, the Alba Party. They therefore now have no connection to the Scottish National Party.

The key areas where Scottish expertise can be invaluable to Iran include oil and gas, finance and education. However, we also learned on our trip of outstanding opportunities in transport, communications and agriculture.⁹⁷

There was also a diplomatic motivation. In a sympathetic report in *The Herald* newspaper, Salmond stressed the high-level access he had achieved in Iran – meeting, for example, with Iran’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Mohammad Javad Zarif Khonsari, and reportedly enjoying greater access to senior officials than a previous United Kingdom Trade and Investment delegation had had. As a consequence, Mr Salmond “said that a recent SNP delegation to Iran highlighted how Scotland can use its political profile to create foreign policy initiatives and opportunities that the UK government would find difficulty in accessing”.⁹⁸ A further member of the delegation, Bill Kidd, sought greater Iranian participation in Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (PNND), and stressed the Scottish government’s opposition to nuclear weapons.⁹⁹ Whilst trade between Scotland and Iran may provide welcome employment and ongoing business opportunities, and is something other western countries have sought with Tehran, references to foreign policy initiatives, and Scottish opposition to nuclear weapons, potentially put pressure on the demarcation lines between Westminster and Edinburgh.

Both Labour and Liberal Democrat spokesmen condemned the visit to Tehran, arguing that the role of the Foreign Office and the Foreign Secretary were being undermined by Scottish nationalists.¹⁰⁰ Issues such as foreign policy and nuclear weapons are constitutionally the prerogative of Westminster. According to information released by the Foreign Office following Freedom of Information Act requests, the SNP’s visit was at the invitation of the MFA – Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs,¹⁰¹ who were also responsible for the programme.¹⁰² An FCO official commented:

I have tried to get further information from Alex Salmond’s office, but they’re not being particularly forthright on detail. They are unclear on where they are staying at this point, but it will be being arranged for them by the MFA. The person I spoke to was unclear on whether this was a fully sponsored visit. However, typically with visits like this the MFA will ‘host’, paying for visas and accommodation, and sometime flights on the understanding they will get a reciprocal visit.¹⁰³

The FCO documents also give the fullest details on who the SNP saw during their visit:

Salmond had a full programme, seeing Zarif (Foreign Minister), Larijani (Speaker), Boroujerdi (FAC Chair), Hojati (Agriculture Minister), Zanganeh (Oil Minister), Khazaiee (Deputy Finance Minister), Jelalpour (President of the Chamber), a Vice Governor of the Central Bank, plus sundry others such as Motaqi, who was Foreign Minister under Ahmadinejad. But not the President. The group also went to Qom for a day, visiting a university there and meeting a number of clerics.

⁹⁷ “Alex Salmond and other SNP politicians hold Iran trade talks”, *BBC News*.

⁹⁸ Jamie Brotherston, “SNP delegation to Iran highlights Scotland’s potential to create foreign policy initiatives”, *The Herald*, 23 December 2015, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14168707.snp-delegation-iran-highlights-scotlands-potential-create-foreign-policy-initiatives/>.

⁹⁹ Jamie Brotherston, “SNP delegation to Iran”.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Settle, “Salmond accused of grandstanding following his trip to Tehran”, *The Herald*, 23 December 2015, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14162324.salmond-accused-grandstanding-following-trip-tehran/>.

¹⁰¹ “Unclassified”, Internal FCO Correspondence, 11 December 2015, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/519601/1241-15_Digest_of_releasable_information.pdf.

¹⁰² “Unclassified”, Internal FCO Correspondence, 11 December 2015.

¹⁰³ “Unclassified”, Internal FCO Correspondence, 11 December 2015.

A reciprocal visit, however, has failed to materialise.

Although foreign policy is a matter for Westminster, the Scottish government has stated it is a supporter of the JCPOA. On 16 January 2020, Fiona Hyslop, Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs, explained:

The Scottish Government believes that the joint comprehensive plan of action is the best avenue that we have to prevent nuclear proliferation and to de-escalate tensions peacefully. We understand that the European powers have now triggered the formal dispute mechanism over Iran's breaches of key parts of the 2015 agreement.¹⁰⁴

The values of the United Kingdom are very different from those of the Islamic Republic of Iran – a country that continues to hold British citizens hostage and whose leading religious authority sentenced a British author to death. Given the history of British relations with Iran, and the nature of that regime, any engagement with Tehran needs careful consideration.

The risk of the strategic approach of the United Kingdom government being in any way blunted, especially in the key areas of foreign policy, defence, and intelligence, is worrying. All of these are issues that constitutionally sit as the prerogative of Westminster, rather than of Holyrood. It is important that any initiatives in other fields – such as trade – the devolved administrations recognise the limited extent of their bailiwick and do not allow a desire to adopt positions on international issues to risk undermining the national approach.

On 2 November 2017, Scotland's First Minister since 2014, the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon was on the agenda as speaking at the Peace and Unity Conference in Glasgow, organised by the Ahl Al Bait Society. Sturgeon was listed as speaking next to Dr Mohammad Shomali. Then director of the Islamic Centre of England, Shomali was at the time the representative of Iran's Head of State, Ayatollah Khamenei.¹⁰⁵

Dr Shomali proved to be a frequent traveller north of the border. A 2019 edition of the Islamic Centre of England's *Islam Today* magazine, dedicated to the issue of interfaith work, recounted a February 2017 visit that included a lecture at Glasgow University and a speech to MSPs at the Scottish Parliament entitled "Time for reflection: our call for unity".¹⁰⁶ In 2018, Dr Shomali attended the Peace and Unity event in Glasgow again, and was pictured with Ms Sturgeon at the conference.¹⁰⁷

In 2019, the repression of popular protests in Iran led to much greater media attention being directed towards Iranian issues, and this ensured a critical examination of both Dr Shomali and the Peace and Unity Conference (see chapter 3:7 for more on the Conference). The 2019 gathering was again scheduled to be addressed by Nicola Sturgeon, and also by the Chief Constable of Scotland, Iain Livingstone. Following coverage of alleged homophobic remarks by Mohammad Shomali, both Nicola Sturgeon and Iain Livingstone withdrew from giving keynote speeches, each citing competing diary commitments, although a more junior Scottish Government minister did attend.¹⁰⁸ Opponents of the Iranian regime make the point that

¹⁰⁴ Fiona Hyslop, "US Military Action in Iran (United Kingdom Involvement)", Meeting of the Parliament, 16 January 2020, https://archive2021.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=12459&mode=html#iob_112632.

¹⁰⁵ Liz Taite (@LizTaite), "Good to be at Peace & Unity Conference on the rights of the child. Nicola Sturgeon followed by Dr Mohammad Ali Shomali", *Twitter*, 2 November 2017, <https://twitter.com/LizTaite/status/926176014266400774>.

¹⁰⁶ *Islam Today* special edition, Issue 65, March 2019, https://issuu.com/islamtoday/docs/islam_today_65_sp_for_web, p.75-76.

¹⁰⁷ *Peace and Unity Scotland*, 1 October 2018, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/peaceandunityscotland/photos/978278689027189>.

¹⁰⁸ Marc Horne, "Nicola Sturgeon pulls out of conference with Iran cleric Dr Mohammad Shomali", *The Times*, 20 November 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/nicola-sturgeon-pulls-out-of-conference-with-iran-cleric-dr-mohammad-shomali-lgks796mn>.

had Ms Sturgeon gone ahead with the engagement, it would have handed a propaganda coup to Iran.¹⁰⁹ When contacted, Mr Shomali disputed *The Times*' reporting of the events in 2017 and of his alleged homophobic remarks describing the article as a whole as "very unfair and with too many mistakes". He also added that the First Minister had apologised to the event organiser and a Minister represented her in the meeting.

2:3:7 Iran and Irish Republicanism

Northern Ireland is the first case of Iran supporting a political movement – Irish republicanism, which seeks to break up the United Kingdom by removing one of its constituent elements: Northern Ireland. The Iranian authorities even renamed the street in Tehran where the British embassy sits as Bobby Sands Street, after the late Irish Republican Army hunger striker. The Iranian government was officially represented at Sands' Belfast funeral in 1981 and a plaque presented to his family from the "people of Iran".¹¹⁰

This show of respect is reciprocated by some within the Irish republican cause. In 2008, the British government lobbied Iranian authorities for Bobby Sands Street to have its former name – Winston Churchill Street – reinstated, but republicans petitioned the Iranian government against any shift, one writing, "In the Name of Allah the Compassionate and the Merciful... please leave the street named for Bobby Sands".¹¹¹

Following the 2020 assassination of the IRGCs leader Qassem Soleimani, dissident Irish republicans, best known for their opposition to the Northern Ireland peace process, paid their respects. Republican Sinn Féin circulated a poster, in Irish, English, and Persian, declaring, "Major General Qassem Soleimani May his faithful soul be at the right hand of God". The image was retweeted 1,400 times and liked 1,800 times.¹¹²

2:3:8 The Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC)

Perhaps the most consistently pro-Iranian political voice in London is the IHRC. Led by a British Shiite of Iranian origin, Massoud Shadjareh,¹¹³ the IHRC operates a London bookshop and events centre (discussed further in chapter seven), gives advice on immigration matters, and campaigns prominently on issues that it considers affect Muslims, both in Britain and internationally. There is much interaction between the IHRC and other pro-Iranian institutions, such as the Islamic Centre of England – for example, the ICE hosts fundraising events for the IHRC¹¹⁴ – but of greater significance is the interaction between the IHRC and the Iranian government.

Saied Reza Ameli is a director of the IHRC, a position he has held since 1 August 2006.¹¹⁵ An Iranian national and academic in the Communications Department at the University of Tehran,¹¹⁶ in 2019, Ameli was appointed to President Rouhani's Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁹ Struan Stevenson, "How Nicola Sturgeon narrowly avoided handing propaganda coup to brutal Iran", *The Scotsman*, 21 November 2019, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/how-nicola-sturgeon-narrowly-avoided-handing-propadanda-coup-brutal-iran-struan-stevenson-1401756>.

¹¹⁰ Pedram Moallemian, "The night we named Bobby Sands street", *Bobby Sands Trust*, <https://www.bobbysandstrust.com/the-night-we-named-bobby-sands-street/>, accessed 10 May 2021.

¹¹¹ Iranian petition, *Bobby Sands Trust*, 2008, <https://www.bobbysandstrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/iranian-petition.pdf>.

¹¹² Republican Sinn Féin (@RepublicanSF), *Twitter*, 4 January 2020, <https://twitter.com/RepublicanSF/status/1213562698631397376>.

¹¹³ Innes Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam* (London: Hurst, 2014), p.161.

¹¹⁴ "Event Alert: UK – IHRC Fundraiser Dinner: Help us in the Struggle for Justice", *Islamic Human Rights Commission*, 7 July 2010, <https://www.ihr.org.uk/activities/alerts/9366-event-alert-uk-ihr-fundraiser-dinner-help-us-in-the-struggle-for-justice/>.

¹¹⁵ Saied Reza AMELI – Personal Appointments (free information from Companies House) (company-information.service.gov.uk), accessed 17 May 2021.

¹¹⁶ Saied Reza Ameli, (10) Saied Reza Ameli | University of Tehran – Academia.edu, accessed: 17 May 2021.

¹¹⁷ Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, [شورای عالی انقلاب فرهنگی](http://sccr.ir) (sccr.ir) accessed: 17 May 2021.

and had previously contributed to Ayatollah Khamenei's Supreme Council of Cyberspace.¹¹⁸ Ameli's academic research is promoted on the IHRC website¹¹⁹ and sold via the IHRC online bookshop.¹²⁰

Despite this proximity to Iran's ruling elites, or perhaps because of it, the IHRC has little or nothing to say about human rights controversies in the Islamic Republic. When asked directly about the ill treatment of protestors in Iran in August 2011, the IHRC's Massoud Shadjareh claimed not to know what the questioner was referring to.¹²¹ It should be noted that in 2007, when described as "Khomeinist" and "believing in the rule of clerics", the Islamic Human Rights Commission replied that "the IHRC has no such position".¹²²

The IHRC organises the annual Al-Quds day parade in London. This is a Khomeini-inspired event designed for protestors, towards the end of Ramadan, to show support for the Palestinians and to condemn Zionism. It has frequently attracted controversy in the past owing to public displays of support for Hezbollah,¹²³ pictures of the Ayatollah Khomeini, calls for the destruction of Israel,¹²⁴ and extremist comments by speakers. For example, four days after the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower in west London, the IHRC's Nazim Ali addressed the 2017 Al-Quds day event. He appeared to blame "Zionists" for the fire, stating, "It is the Zionists who give money to the Tory Party to kill people in high-rise blocks."¹²⁵ He also stated that the Board of Deputies of British Jews had "blood on their hands".¹²⁶ The IHRC was approached for comment prior to the publication of this report but no reply was received at the time of writing.

An attempt to prosecute Mr Ali for a public order offence by the Campaign Against Antisemitism was unsuccessful. At a hearing of the ethics panel of Practice Committee for the General Pharmaceutical Council, Mr Ali's professional body, which investigated the Al Quds speech, it was found that he had made "offensive but not antisemitic comments" and was served a warning.¹²⁷ At the hearing, Ali offered an apology the panel found to be "genuine and heartfelt" in which he said that he deeply regretted the event and wished "to apologise unreservedly to anyone who does not know me and who was offended by my comments".¹²⁸ He went on to say that his intention had been to "highlight oppression against the Palestinian cause" and that "he had never intended any offence or anti-Semitism". Nazim Ali resigned as a director of the IHRC on 22 February 2021.¹²⁹

The next chapter discusses an example of contentious comments from the 2018 event, involving Sheikh Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour.

¹¹⁸ Office of the Supreme Leader, 5 September 2015, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khameni appoints new members of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace: Leader.ir.

¹¹⁹ Islamic Human Rights Commission, 9 November 2012, Bibliographical Discourse Analysis: The Western Academic Perspective on Islam, Muslims and Islamic Countries (1949-2009) Volumes 1-4 - IHRC.

¹²⁰ Islamic Human Rights Commission, n.d. Bookshop and Gallery: Bibliographical Discourse Analysis: The Western Academic Perspective o - IHRC Bookshop.

¹²¹ Habibi, "Massoud Shadjareh of the IHRC denies human rights abuses in Iran", *YouTube*, 6 October 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RhPNesID6k&ab_channel=habibi.

¹²² "A Response to the report by AWAAZ South Asia Watch, June 2006, 'THE ISLAMIC RIGHT - key tendencies'", *Islamic Human Rights Commission*, 8 July 2007, <https://www.ihr.org.uk/publications/briefings/9318-a-response-to-the-report-by-awaaz-south-asia-watch-june-2006-the-islamic-right-key-tendencies/>.

¹²³ Ben Welch, "Israel 'should be wiped off map', says Al Quds Day speaker as Hezbollah flags fly", *The JC*, 10 June 2018, <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/al-quds-day-march-israel-palestine-hezbollah-1.465351>.

¹²⁴ Ben Welch, "Israel 'should be wiped off map', says Al Quds Day speaker".

¹²⁵ "Between Campaign Against Antisemitism and Director of Public Prosecutions and Nazim Hussain Ali", England and Wales High Court (Administrative Court) Decisions, 18 December 2018, <https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2019/9.html>.

¹²⁶ "Between Campaign Against Antisemitism v Director of Public Prosecutions".

¹²⁷ *Jewish News*, Panel clears Al Quds speaker who said 'Zionists' guilty over Grenfell fire | Jewish News (timesofisrael.com), 6 November 2020.

¹²⁸ Valeria Fiore, 'GPhC: Pharmacist's 'grossly offensive' remarks result in FtP warning', 16 November 2020, <https://www.chemistanddruggist.co.uk/news/gphc-pharmacists-grossly-offensive-remarks-result-ftp-warning>.

¹²⁹ "Nazim Hussain ALI", Companies House, <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/officers/vVsISU3YVgn68rwlSALjIS6WpBg/appointments>, accessed 10 May 2021.

Chapter 3: Religious Networks

When discussing the religious influence of the Iranian state overseas, the concept of a Shia Crescent forms an important backdrop. This is the belief that Iran seeks to influence events in, or to lead, those areas where Shia Muslims are either a majority or a sizeable minority – namely Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Analysts have argued that “Iran has also taken advantage of Shia movements elsewhere to further its regional influence and challenge Saudi, U.S., and Israeli regional dominance”.¹³⁰ Against this backdrop, events in the United Kingdom may appear somewhat peripheral. Britain is a long way from the Middle East, and many British Shia turn to the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani in Najaf, Iraq,¹³¹ for religious guidance rather than to the Iranian state or Ayatollah Khamenei.

However, despite the UK’s distance from the Shia Crescent, it would be a mistake to ignore Iranian influence upon British Islam. As this chapter will establish, some Iranian-influenced networks are embedded in this country and seek to develop and then maintain their importance within our communities. Iran’s oldest connections in the United Kingdom are religious – for example, the Kanoon Towhid, the Iranian Islamic Students group, describes itself as having been active in the UK since 1985.¹³² Religious links with the Islamic Republic of Iran may cover a range of activities, from promoting events commemorating the Islamic revolution, the distribution of English language translations of Iranian religious texts, through to the type of institutional relationships found at the Islamic Centre of England. With ultimate authority resting in the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Iran does not allow for the type of separation between religion and the state that is common in the west. This makes drawing any distinction between the religious and the political extremely difficult, if not impossible to make.

Often registered as charities, many of the groups discussed in this chapter are therefore entitled to tax relief on donations, ensuring that the British taxpayer is involved in their maintenance. It must be stressed that while there is no suggestion of any charitable wrongdoing by these organisations, there is a further advantage to the proliferation of Islamic charitable institutions. As charities, the organisations concerned can engage with politicians and sections of the British state, acting as interlocutors to the wider Shia Muslim community. It is also easier for the authorities to work with a charity than it would be to engage with a political party or campaign group.

It is not easy to obtain accurate data on Britain’s Shia Muslims. Although Shia represent the minority trend both within Islam globally and within British Islam, official datasets tend not to focus on specific sectarian affiliations. The Mosque Directory website run by Tahire Mehmood Faruq attempts, among other things, to record Britain’s mosques by both affiliation and the national background of its management. It has been described very positively: “After the UK census, the site is the single most useful dataset on Islam in Britain.”¹³³ At the time of writing, The Mosque Directory estimates a mere 0.51% of Britain’s mosques to be Iranian run, and the number considered to be from various Shia schools of thought as 6.06%.¹³⁴ Speaking to Shia

¹³⁰ Patrick Clawson, Hanin Ghaddar, and Nader Uskowi, “Middle East FAQs Volume 1: What is the Shia Crescent?”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 17 January 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-east-faqs-volume-1-what-shia-crescent>.

¹³¹ Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent*, p.149.

¹³² Kanoon Towhid, *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/KaoonTowhidLondon/?ref=page_internal, accessed 10 May 2021.

¹³³ Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent*, p.6.

¹³⁴ Mosque Directory, <https://www.mosquedirectory.co.uk/>, accessed 10 May 2021. See the sections Mosque Management and the national make-up of Masjids in the UK and Mosque Following (Statistics) in United Kingdom Masjid Statistics.

community leaders for her 2014 book on Islam in Britain, the former BBC religious affairs correspondent Innes Bowen was told there are approximately 110 Shia mosques in Britain.¹³⁵

Of the Shia mosques in Britain, perhaps the most important Iranian-led mosque is the Islamic Centre of England, discussed below. Indeed, such is the prominence of this institution, it occurs in virtually every chapter of this report. Another key institution is the Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission (AIM), an organisation that is open in its representation of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.¹³⁶ Both of these organisations work with the Irshad Trust and The Islamic College of Advanced Studies, and it is common to see personnel moving between them. This, plus further examples of the sharing of trustees and senior management, is an indication of the interconnecting nature of parts of Iran-connected operations in the UK.

The organisations covered in this chapter are all entities operating legally in the UK and provide legitimate services to Britain's Shia Muslims. They also take part in interfaith initiatives. However, there are occasions when some perform a more political function by championing Iran's global perspectives. At times of high emotion, such as that which followed the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, this may become far more apparent than usual.

3:1 Vilayat-i-faqih (*Guardianship of the Jurist*)

There are many potential divisions between Shia Muslims in Britain. These may include differences such as age, language, social class, educational attainment, and national background. When considering Iranian influence, however, one of the most important is the concept of *vilayat-i-faqih*.¹³⁷ Developed by the Ayatollah Khomeini, this refers to the development of society under a guardianship-based system, usually translated into English as the guardianship of the jurist or jurist consult. When Khomeini took power in Iran, he became its ultimate authority, and offered a methodology to others seeking to establish an Islamic government. In his book on this subject, Khomeini argued that it is incumbent on all Muslims to establish government under a jurist, and the jurists of that society must take on all the duties that Muhammad performed.¹³⁸

The scale of Khomeini's ambition here, and the consequences of it, are vast. As supporter Zafar Bangash writes in a commemorative collection of essays, "What was fresh about the Imam's formulation was the broad scope of authority he suggested for the *vali-i-faqih*, including worldly authority in the absence of the Twelfth Imam." Bangash goes on to compare the concept to that of the caliphate in the Sunni Muslim world.¹³⁹ When considered in the light of the concept of *vali-i-faqih*, the cold logic of an action such as the fatwa calling for the death of Salman Rushdie, a man resident in the United Kingdom with no direct connection to Iran, becomes readily apparent.

Vilayat-i-faqih is not, however, a perspective shared by the majority of Shia; many believe in a separation of religion from politics that is very different from the Iranian model. Even the Islamic Republic's defenders in the UK, such as Iqbal Siddiqui of *Crescent International* (see chapter seven), have reluctantly admitted that this concept has not been entirely accepted in Iran,¹⁴⁰ never mind the rest of the world.

¹³⁵ Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent*, p.7.

¹³⁶ See for example AIM Islam, "According to the religious edicts of the Leader Ayatollah Khamenei(4)" AIM Islam – Posts | Facebook, 12 May 2021.

¹³⁷ Roy P. Mottahedeh, "Wilayat al-faqih", in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Vol 4, p.320-322.

¹³⁸ Roy P. Mottahedeh, "Wilayat al-faqih", p.321.

¹³⁹ Zafar Bangash, "The Imam who restored Muslims hope and pride", in *Imam Khomeini: Life, Thought and Legacy: Essays from an Islamic movement perspective*, ed. Abdar Rahman Koya (Selangor: Islamic Book Trust and Crescent International, 2009), p.69.

¹⁴⁰ Iqbal Siddiqui, "Perspectives: Contemplating the possible end of Iran's Islamic experiment", *Crescent International*, July 2009, p.7.

3:2 The Iranian Supreme Leader's Representative in London

Since 1995, four different men have served as the Ayatollah Khamenei's representative to the United Kingdom. In this role they are expected to disseminate the message of Iran's Supreme Leader, and to demonstrate loyalty to the ideals and concepts of the Iranian state as he envisages it to be. It would appear that some knowledge of English and past interaction with the United Kingdom is seen as one of the qualifications for the post. For example, Mohammad Shomali, the representative from 2014 to 2019, delivered more than 30 lectures in Manchester from 1998 to 1999 and, in an introductory text to Shiism published in 2002, thanked the then London representative, Mohsen Araki, London's Islamic College for Advanced Studies, and the Ahlulbayt grouping in the capital.¹⁴¹ In 2007, the Islamic Centre of England published a repackaged version of his text on Shiism, ensuring Shomali was already known to the faithful years before taking up the senior post.¹⁴²

When contacted, Mr Shomali said:

"Regarding the role of the representatives, it is religious in nature and not political. They represent Ayatullah Khamenei as a marja' of taqlid and not as the political leader of Iran. There are several other Shi'a religious authorities that have representatives in the UK or other countries. I had done my PhD in the UK and published many books already in English. People know of my independent stances and they know that I am not a political person. With due respect, such things look laughable to the community, interreligious circles and the academia who know me."

Figure 4: List of the Supreme Leader's representatives in London

| Dates | Name |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1995-2004 | Ayatollah Mohsen Araki |
| 2004-2014 | Ayatollah Abdol Hossein Moezi |
| 2014-2019 | Mohammad Ali Shomali |
| June 2019 to date | Seyed Moosavi |

3:3 The Islamic Centre of England (ICE)¹⁴³

Described as the religious centre with the clearest ties to Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khomeini,¹⁴⁴ the Islamic Centre of England straddles the area between Kilburn and Maida Vale in north London. The current Director of the ICE is Seyed Moosavi, the UK representative of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. The ICE was founded in 1996 by Mohsen Araki,¹⁴⁵ and its official documents declare, "At all times one of the trustees shall be a representative of the Supreme Spiritual Leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran."¹⁴⁶ The ICE was approached for comment on the validity of this, and the categorisation of it as 'pro-Iranian'. No reply was received.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴¹ Mohammad Ali Shomali, *Discovering Shi'i Islam* (Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2002), p.7, p.11.

¹⁴² Mohammad Ali Shomali, *Islam: Doctrines, Practices & Morals* (London: Institute of Islamic Studies Islamic Centre of England, 2007).

¹⁴³ The organisation gives its name as "Center", as opposed to the more usual "Centre".

¹⁴⁴ Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent*, p.144.

¹⁴⁵ Sean O'Neill, "Muslim students 'being taught to despise unbelievers as filth'", *The Times*, 20 April 2006, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/muslim-students-being-taught-to-despise-unbelievers-as-filth-gh6k75lwlh8>.

¹⁴⁶ Jake Wallis Simons, "Sturgeon's link to anti-gay Iran cleric", *The JC*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/sturgeon-s-link-to-anti-gay-iran-cleric-1.512738>.

¹⁴⁷ Email from the author to the Islamic Centre of England, 21 May 2021.

It is at the ICE that many important demonstrations and events in support of the Islamic Republic are held. For example, Iran's ambassador Hamid Baeidinejad spoke there in 2019 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Islamic revolution.¹⁴⁸ The centre regularly commemorates the 1979 revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini's coming to power, most recently with an online webinar event in February 2021 to mark its 42nd anniversary.¹⁴⁹ Its work is also appreciated in Tehran, with a written commendation from the Supreme Leader and Head of State for the then director Dr Mohammad Ali Shomali displayed on the ICE website.¹⁵⁰

It was at the ICE where crowds gathered following the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, and where protests were centred. On Saturday 4 January 2020, some 2,000 people gathered at the centre for a vigil that was also attended by Hamid Baeidinejad, the Iranian ambassador.¹⁵¹ Press reports stated that the Centre's Director, Seyed Moosavi, had issued a statement that Soleimani was "a dedicated soldier of Islam" who had been killed by "the most wicked members of the human race".¹⁵²

A Charity Commission investigation noted that the ICE had allowed a candlelit vigil for Soleimani, even though "Soleimani has been subject to financial sanctions by HM Treasury for terrorism and/or terrorist financing since 17 October 2011 following a designation under the Terrorist Asset Freezing Act 2010".¹⁵³ The next day a further event was held, and statements in support of the Iranian general appeared on the ICE's website. In June 2020, the Charity Commission issued the ICE with an official warning.¹⁵⁴ It also stressed that the Commission had an ongoing regulatory investigation into the ICE.¹⁵⁵

According to its most recent accounts, the ICE makes donations to Islamic centres throughout the UK, and refers to payments to institutions in Glasgow, Cardiff, Birmingham, Manchester, and Newcastle. However, there is no specific breakdown of the sums involved or their frequency.¹⁵⁶ There is no suggestion that these donations necessarily mean that ICE controls the agenda or output of any of the groups it donates to.

Until at least 2019, the Cultural Department of the ICE produced a regular magazine, *Islam Today*. However, the website for that publication is currently offline, and it has not updated its Facebook page since the autumn of 2019.¹⁵⁷ The September-October 2018 issue lists the editorial team as

¹⁴⁸ Islamic Centre of England, "40th Anniversary of Islamic Revolution", Islamic Centre of England, 2019, http://www.ic-el.com/en/show_news.asp?idnum=1369&state=news.

¹⁴⁹ Islamic Centre of England, "42nd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution", Islamic Centre of England, 2021, <https://ic-el.uk/blog/2021/03/05/42nd-anniversary-of-the-islamic-revolution/>.

¹⁵⁰ Islamic Centre of England, "Letter of Appreciation from the Office of Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei to the Head of the Islamic Centre of England", Islamic Centre of England, 16 October 2016, http://www.ic-el.com/en/show_news.asp?idnum=162&state=article.

¹⁵¹ David Brown, "Inquiry into charity Islamic Centre of England that called Iran's Soleimani a martyr", *The Times*, 7 January 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/inquiry-into-charity-islamic-centre-of-england-that-called-irans-soleimani-a-martyr-zp2513lpc>.

¹⁵² David Brown, "Inquiry into charity".

¹⁵³ Charity Commission, "Charity regulator issues Official Warning to Islamic Centre of England Ltd", GOV.UK, 19 June 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/charity-regulator-issues-official-warning-to-islamic-centre-of-england-ltd>.

¹⁵⁴ "OFFICIAL WARNING OF THE CHARITY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND AND WALES to ISLAMIC CENTRE OF ENGLAND LIMITED (Registered Charity No: 1058998)", *Charity Commission*, 10 June 2020, <https://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/schemes/512449.pdf>.

¹⁵⁵ "OFFICIAL WARNING OF THE CHARITY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND AND WALES to ISLAMIC CENTRE OF ENGLAND LIMITED (Registered Charity No: 1058998)".

¹⁵⁶ "Islamic Centre of England Financial statements 31 December 2018", *Companies House*, ISLAMIC CENTRE OF ENGLAND LTD – Filing history (free information from Companies House) (company-information.service.gov.uk).

¹⁵⁷ "Islam today magazine", *Facebook*, [https://www.facebook.com/islamtodaymag/?__xts__\[0\]=68.ARDt5aZOk2IUMVuxS4eUII_K_l8d7n2IfibL1Nk5gj9OfsOBE34VpsEW5dqrHjbqGFA4270VkpIdmhVSQs4ohR8nKKOBTbQ-LIGcccSGhILRCddYAPyNi8RYxODHp9MyuKjdmmjwCluTcBnRev8n5iU_m-IV4VVTsFl4QGEEmRQmUJtjt_ULvnR8s_pC95qZkQwP2QBQ5eOkx7zQpake8RLWbL2KhZzeoXoYaT&__xts__\[1\]=68.ARAAdDzFO83CXst8GLZYB61kmmOu0M74Xlbnh4el4Dtyvg43dCizqCLNoU7tJvKtyOVcPy1qBdC1G4uuai-KI-wkV0aw7spwFz81YDHgicNQoDvJ7NMAo8GL2cPb2msMgfQ8aQF-swhONesmj92WVY_3BRE8_d2JgV3SZBDaSykluwj2hefnHA](https://www.facebook.com/islamtodaymag/?__xts__[0]=68.ARDt5aZOk2IUMVuxS4eUII_K_l8d7n2IfibL1Nk5gj9OfsOBE34VpsEW5dqrHjbqGFA4270VkpIdmhVSQs4ohR8nKKOBTbQ-LIGcccSGhILRCddYAPyNi8RYxODHp9MyuKjdmmjwCluTcBnRev8n5iU_m-IV4VVTsFl4QGEEmRQmUJtjt_ULvnR8s_pC95qZkQwP2QBQ5eOkx7zQpake8RLWbL2KhZzeoXoYaT&__xts__[1]=68.ARAAdDzFO83CXst8GLZYB61kmmOu0M74Xlbnh4el4Dtyvg43dCizqCLNoU7tJvKtyOVcPy1qBdC1G4uuai-KI-wkV0aw7spwFz81YDHgicNQoDvJ7NMAo8GL2cPb2msMgfQ8aQF-swhONesmj92WVY_3BRE8_d2JgV3SZBDaSykluwj2hefnHA), accessed 11 May 2021.

comprising Mohammed Saeed Bahmanpour, Amir De Martino, and Anousheh Mireskandari.¹⁵⁸ Some of the controversy surrounding Bahmanpour are discussed elsewhere in this report.

3:4 Irshad Trust

This charity was founded at the same time as the ICE, and also by Mohsen Araki. Interaction between the two organisations continues – of its current trustees, Dr Ali Rafsanjani is also a trustee of the Islamic Centre of England.¹⁵⁹ The Irshad Trust runs a religious school in London called Hawza Ilmiyya, and a higher education institution, The Islamic College for Advanced Studies,¹⁶⁰ which is discussed in chapter seven of this report. The Irshad Trust possesses a considerable financial base; according to its most recent accounts, its funds sit at £13.6 million.¹⁶¹

It is worth stressing the seniority of the founder of both the ICE and Irshad Trust, Mohsen Araki. After staying in post in London until 2004, he returned to Iran where he is now an Ayatollah and a member of the Islamic Republic's Assembly of Experts. This body has the power, theoretically, to dismiss Supreme Leader Khamenei, and will, in time, appoint his replacement.¹⁶²

Araki's career suggests that a posting to London carries an element of prestige, or that it certainly does not weaken the career trajectory of Iran's ruling elites, despite the UK's physical distance from the Shia Crescent. The Irshad Trust was contacted for comment prior to the publication of this report and said it disputed some or all of the above allegations saying "several claims and insinuations with regards to Irshad Trust and Hawza Ilmiyyah" put to the Trust "are factually erroneous". In a statement, it said:

"Irshad Trust is a British charity founded by a number of British educationists in 1998. It deals with academic activities by offering educational programmes of highest standards in Islamic studies at an international level.

Since its inception, the Trust has provided quality education to hundreds of students (both Muslims and non-Muslims) in various fields of Islamic studies. Our graduates have made great contributions to various aspects of life in the UK.

The aim of the Trust is to promote a rational and critical study of religion. It is not engaged in the propagation of any political ideology.

The high quality of the Trust's academic programmes is endorsed by the UK institutions responsible for guaranteeing British universities' academic standards.

As an academic institution, the Trust enjoys and welcomes academic cooperation with all centres for Islamic learning. However, it is not responsible for statements or views expressed by other Islamic colleges and centres. We would like to confirm that our institution is not affiliated with any state or other organisation."

3:5 Sheikh Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour

A prominent Shia cleric in the United Kingdom, Dr Bahmanpour has enjoyed a career as an academic and author. He has held previous positions as a visiting lecturer at the Faculty

¹⁵⁸ *Islam Today*, September-October 2018, https://issuu.com/islamtoday/docs/islam_today_sep_oct_2018.

¹⁵⁹ Irshad Trust IRSHAD TRUST – 1056468 (charitycommission.gov.uk).

¹⁶⁰ Sean O'Neill, "Muslim students 'being taught to despise unbelievers as filth'".

¹⁶¹ "Irshad Trust, Annual report and financial statements for the year ended 31 August 2018", *Charity Commission*, https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search?p_p_id=uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=2&p_p_state=maximized&p_p_mode=view&p_p_resource_id=%2Faccounts-resource&p_p_cacheability=cacheLevelPage&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_objectiveId=A9623054&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_priv_r_p_mvcRenderCommandName=%2Faccounts-and-annual-returns&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_priv_r_p_organisationNumber=1056468.

¹⁶² Sean O'Neill, "Muslim students 'being taught to despise unbelievers as filth'".

of Oriental Studies at the University of Cambridge, and Director of Interfaith Relations at the Islamic Centre of England.¹⁶³ He was also the Principal at The Islamic College of Advanced Studies in north London (see chapter seven for more on this important pro-Iranian institution).¹⁶⁴

Despite his work in the field of interfaith relations, Sheikh Bahmanpour can still deliver a fiery speech. At the 10 June 2018 Al-Quds day rally in London, he commented on two of Iran's greatest enemies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, and declared that both would eventually be wiped off the map:

My message to the Jewish people of Palestine is that the British governments several decades ago, and then America, used you to wipe Palestine off the map. And you can make sure that the resistance will come and free Palestine and wipe Israel off the map.¹⁶⁵

He spoke in similarly apocalyptic terms about Saudi Arabia:

And my message to the Saudis. You are just an apprentice in politics. You don't know what you are doing. You are on the wrong side. And if you join the wrong side then you will be doomed to the damnation of the wrong side which is going to be wiped off soon.¹⁶⁶

Sheikh Bahmanpour's Facebook page states that he is Interfaith Director at the Islamic Centre of England. When the author approached Sheikh Bahmanpour for comment via the ICE, the ICE stated that he is no longer employed by them. They did not reply to a request for a forwarding email address.¹⁶⁷ Sheikh Bahmanpour was approached for comment via his Facebook and LinkedIn profiles prior to publication but, at the time of writing, no reply had been received.

3:6 Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission (AIM)

The Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission is a Shia organisation whose website translates into English the latest statements from Iran's Ayatollahs,¹⁶⁸ alongside news pages which focus on issues such as political condemnation of the French government for perceived "Islamophobia"¹⁶⁹ and workshops on the importance of the hijab.¹⁷⁰ On the AIM Facebook page, a religious event celebrating of the Mahdi's birthday on 28 March 2001, was headlined by Seyed Moosavi, of the Islamic Centre of England described as the "representative of the Ayatollah Khamenei in the UK".¹⁷¹ AIM also venerates the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example declaring on the Ayatollah Khomeini's birthday:

The virtue of this day of birth is indescribable. Whatever they ascribe to him, lacks in relation to his true status. Whatever the poets, mystics, philosophers and others have said about him is only a flicker of what he really is.¹⁷²

¹⁶³ "Academic Year 2017-2018, Shaykh Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour", The Islamic College, <https://www.islamic-college.ac.uk/publications/monthly-lecture-series/academic-year-2017-2018/>. In email correspondence with the author on 18 May 2021, the Islamic Centre of England stated that Sheikh Bahmanpour no longer worked for their organisation.

¹⁶⁴ Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent*, p.143.

¹⁶⁵ Habibi, "Bahmanpour at Quds Day – Wipe Israel Off the Map", *YouTube*, 11 June 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBOfmNoiXSA>.

¹⁶⁶ Habibi, "Bahmanpour at Quds Day".

¹⁶⁷ Sheikh Bahmanpour, Facebook About: (10) Sheikh Bahmanpour, *Facebook*, accessed 24 May 2021. Emails were sent by the author to the Islamic Centre of England on 18 and 21 May 2021. The author also approached Sheikh Bahmanpour via Facebook and LinkedIn on 21 May – again no reply was received.

¹⁶⁸ See, for example, News from Scholars", *Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission*, <https://www.aimislam.com/category/news/news-from-scholars/>.

¹⁶⁹ "AIM: France cartoons against the Prophet Muhammad are flagrant abuse and deliberate incitement", *Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission*, 31 October 2020, <https://www.aimislam.com/france-cartoons-prophet-muhammad-islamophobia/>.

¹⁷⁰ "Workshop on Hijab", *Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission*, 18 July 2020, <https://www.aimislam.com/workshop-on-hijab/>.

¹⁷¹ AIM, Hope for Humanity, (4) *Facebook* 25 May 2021, accessed 21 May 2021.

¹⁷² AIM, Imam Ruhollah Khomeini, (4) *Facebook* 26 February 2021, accessed 21 May 2021.

The AIM bookshop currently advertises 104 books for sale, with priority given to those from London's Islamic College.¹⁷³ It also features prominently the work of other organisations sympathetic to the Iranian regime, such as the Islamic Human Rights Commission. Contacted before the publication of this report AIM stated:

AIM has a religious relationship with Islamic scholars for guidance and we consider this a matter of faith. The attempt to connect our religious relationship to Islamic scholars as some form of affiliation to the government of Iran is problematic and Islamophobic in essence because it is an attempt to defame Muslim organisations due to their faith and reverence of Islamic scholars in order to misleadingly brand them as proxies to foreign states and therefore marginalising and silencing the voices you may dislike.¹⁷⁴

3:7 Ahl Al Bait Society Scotland

A registered charity, this organisation is best known for establishing the annual Peace and Unity Conference in Glasgow, discussed in the previous chapter. Ahl Al Bait Society Scotland describes the event as “an independent platform where different voices in the Muslim community, people of other faiths and local authorities get together to address urgent issues that we face in today's world at local, national and international level”.¹⁷⁵

The Conference has however become deeply controversial, providing a platform for an Iranian cleric previously the representative in the UK of Iran's Supreme Leader. In 2019 the Scottish First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, withdrew from the event citing competing diary commitments following reporting of alleged previous homophobic remarks made by that cleric, Dr Mohammad Shomali.¹⁷⁶

Although a more junior Scottish Government minister attended, Sturgeon's cancellation must have been a blow to Ahl Al Bait – the previous year she not only attended the conference but was also pictured with Dr Shomali,¹⁷⁷ a demonstration of the organisation's success at building relations with ruling elites. The Ahl Al Bait Society Scotland was contacted for comment prior to the publication of this report but no reply was forthcoming at the time of writing.

3:8 Shia Asna Ashri Islamic Centre (SAAIC), Glasgow

A registered charity since 1995, the Shia Asna Ashri exists for the “advancement of religion” and describes itself as “non-political”.¹⁷⁸ At the time of writing, the organisation is giving out minimal public information: a series of sections of its website, such as the constitution, trustees, and the “About Us” page, contain only the words “Coming soon!”¹⁷⁹

In 2019, the centre was involved in controversy when *The Times* reported that Iranian dissidents in Scotland had complained that they were filmed by people inside the venue while protesting outside. Although there is no suggestion that the Centre has been directly involved in targeting dissidents, and despite its proclaimed political neutrality, the SAAIC has been used for the provision of Iranian consular services and in 2017 held an event to celebrate the

¹⁷³ “Aim Islam Shop”, <https://shop.aimislam.com/collections/islamic-books>, accessed 11 May 2021.

¹⁷⁴ Email from Ali Jawad, Public Relations at AIM to the author, 20 May 2021.

¹⁷⁵ Marc Horne, “Nicola Sturgeon pulls out of conference with Iran cleric Dr Mohammad Shomali”, *The Times*, 20 November 2019.

¹⁷⁶ Marc Horne, “Nicola Sturgeon pulls out of conference with Iran cleric Dr Mohammad Shomali”.

¹⁷⁷ David Wilcock, “Nicola Sturgeon under fire after pictures emerge of her ‘at peace and unity conference’ with Iranian Shia Muslim cleric who once compared gay marriage to bestiality”, *Daily Mail*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9351403/Nicola-Sturgeon-pictured-Muslim-cleric-compared-gay-marriage-bestiality.html>.

¹⁷⁸ “Charity Details: Shia Asna Ashri Islamic Centre, SC024132”, *Scottish Charity Regulator*, <https://www.oscr.org.uk/about-charities/search-the-register/charity-details?number=SC024132>, accessed 11 May 2021.

¹⁷⁹ See, for example, “Trustees”, *Shia Asna Ashri Islamic Centre*, <https://saaic.org.uk/trustees/>, accessed 11 May 2021.

Iranian revolution. The SAAIC strongly denies that it is in anyway connected to the Iranian government, and has “categorically” rejected that protestors were filmed or photographed.¹⁸⁰

The Iranian embassy similarly has denied the existence of ties beyond the provision of voting services in a presidential contest saying “The Iranian government has no official relationship with the centre, a religious centre and congregation of prayers and Islamic teachings.”

The arguments between Iranian exiles and the SAAIC are not abstract debates about the right to record people in the street. Political protests by Iranians in Scotland have become a sensitive subject after reports that exiles were being threatened and being told that they and their families would be killed if they did not stop opposing the Iranian government.¹⁸¹

3:9 The Lady of Heaven Controversy

Iran considers Britain a suitable place for asserting its interpretation of Islam and conducting intra-Shia theological disputes. *The Lady of Heaven* is a 2021 film about an Iraqi child who loses his mother during the rise of Islamic State, and goes on to discover, via his grandmother, the importance of the story of Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad.¹⁸² Fatima became the wife of Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph and the first Imam of the Shia.¹⁸³

The film is based on a story originally written by Sheikh Yasser al-Habib, a Kuwaiti Shia cleric, now based in Buckinghamshire. Al-Habib's views have rankled with the Iranian government, which strongly opposes his work on the grounds that he is critical of Aisha, one of Muhammad's wives. On 27 December 2020, the Fars News Agency ran a feature reproducing the view of the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), Ali Shamkhani, denouncing the movie as “divisive”.¹⁸⁴

In Britain, the Iranian ambassador continued the fight. On 1 February 2021, Hamid Baeidinejad posted two tweets, the first declaring that he had written to Sunni and Shia Islamic centres in the United Kingdom to condemn *The Lady of Heaven*. He pointed out that the film had been produced here in Britain and was an attempt to create hatred and division between Muslims. In the second, he argued the Muslim community must “act in unity to condemn this film and resort to legal steps to ban this film in the UK”.¹⁸⁵ Given the legacy of the Rushdie affair, and the damage to social cohesion that occurred, such an intervention will make people in the United Kingdom nervous. Baeidinejad fails to understand British concepts of freedom of speech, where unless an article or film deliberately seeks to incite violence, it is unlikely to be censored or banned. Being offended by something is not sufficient.

3:10 Relations with the Muslim Brotherhood

In July 2017, Ayatollah Araki, the founder of the Islamic Centre of England, returned to London to meet with exiled leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt, who are resident in the

¹⁸⁰ Marc Horne, “Shia Asna Ashri Islamic Centre, the focus of protests, denies regime links”, *The Times*, 15 May 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/shia-asna-ashri-islamic-centre-the-focus-of-protests-denies-regime-links-pt67bfft>.

¹⁸¹ Marc Horne, “Iranian spies ‘threatening dissidents on the streets’”, *The Times*, 15 May 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/iranian-spies-threatening-dissidents-on-the-streets-vr63nm6x7>.

¹⁸² *The Lady of Heaven* (2021), *IMDb*, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13097336/>, accessed 11 May 2021.

¹⁸³ Azim Nanji, “Fatima” in *Dictionary of Islam* (London: Penguin, 2008), p.51.

¹⁸⁴ “Iran Criticizes Lady of Heaven Movie as ‘Divisive’”, *Fars News Agency*, 27 December 2020, <https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/13991007000678/Iran-Criicizes-Lady-f-Heaven-Mvie-as-%E2%80%9CDivisive%E2%80%9D#:~:text=TEHRAN%20%28FNA%29-%20Secretary%20of%20Iran%E2%80%99s%20Supreme%20National%20Security,as%20an%20attempt%20to%20distort%20unity%20among%20Muslims>.

¹⁸⁵ Hamid Baeidinejad (@baeidinejad), “In a letter to the Shia and Sunni Islamic centres in the UK, I categorically condemned the film ‘the Lady of Heaven’ produced in the UK as a divisive action and expressed our concern over the attempts to create division and hatred among Muslims at this sensitive time.” *Twitter*, 1 February 2020, <https://twitter.com/baeidinejad/status/1356216986427158530>.

United Kingdom. A picture on Araki's Facebook page showed him in discussions with Ibrahim Munir.¹⁸⁶ At the time Munir was the Acting Deputy General Guide of the Ikhwan,¹⁸⁷ and has since gone on to become Acting General Guide, after the September 2020 arrest of the organisation's leader.

They would have found it easy to identify some common ground – both the Ikhwan and Iran share a distaste for the current leadership in Saudi Arabia, and share similar positions in opposing secularism, liberal democracy, and Israel.

A meeting in London between one of Iran's senior clerics and the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood is perhaps a fitting way to close this chapter. Iranian authorities have worked hard to develop religious connections in the UK, and they have developed an ability to both sustain and project influence. This is not just the case in London, the global city par excellence, but also in Scotland where Iranian association has been seen with some of the most important figures in the country.

¹⁸⁶ Ayatollah Mohsen Araki, *Facebook*, 29 July 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/ayatollaharaki/posts/1729015530725381>.

¹⁸⁷ MEMO Middle East Monitor, "Ibrahim Munir denies reports he is now Brotherhood's Supreme Guide", *Middle East Monitor*, 10 August 2015.

Chapter 4: Media Networks

The Iranian government has sought to use the media to present its preferred image to western audiences. It has also sought to counter damaging news stories about Iran and to promote its interpretation of Islam to a wider audience. While some of this work has been extremely visible – for example, that of Press TV – Iran has also become a player in the field of online social media disinformation, establishing fake websites and seeking to influence political affairs in other countries through means fair and foul. In this, Iran mirrors other players in the disinformation game, even though its activities have not had the same level of recognition as Russia or China.

The failure to declare the Iranian state a disinformation player must change. In late 2011, the Islamic Republic invested \$1 billion in cyber technology and its infrastructure and has recruited more than 120,000 staff to combat what it sees as a cyber war against the country.¹⁸⁸

It would be naïve to expect those individuals to be employed purely on defensive duties. As will unfold later in this chapter, Iran has sought to produce fake information online in order to support at least two political causes in the United Kingdom – Scottish independence and the promotion of the revolutionary left.

Iranian TV and Film Networks

4:1 Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation (IRIB)

Including Press TV employees, in 2010 the IRIB had a bureau with more than 80 staff in London.¹⁸⁹ It is unclear how many it employs today. The IRIB's work at the international level in the dissemination of fake information online is discussed below.

4:2 Press TV

Press TV is the best-known external media arm of the Iranian state. Launched in 2007, it sought to have much the same impact internationally that Al-Jazeera enjoyed, but it became much more deeply enmeshed in controversy. Press TV was aired on the Sky satellite platform in the United Kingdom until 2012, and enjoyed high-profile presenters and guests, including George Galloway and Jeremy Corbyn. However, Press TV was never simply another TV station or news channel. Even when it came to small details, Press TV would follow the rules of the Iranian state. For example, the journalist and Muslim convert Lauren Booth has written of her experiences of the channel:

When I had appeared as a guest before on Press TV there had been no expectation that I would wear an Islamic scarf. However, as a representative of the channel on screen, I would be expected to adhere to a dress code which included the hijab.¹⁹⁰

A more sinister example of the nature of the Iranian state and its relationship with Press TV is that of journalist Maziar Bahari. In 2009, the channel showed footage of Bahari discussing his work in Iran, including the admission that he had passed pictures from protests following Iran's disputed 2009 elections to western media. Bahari was in Iranian custody at the time, and on returning to the UK he subsequently gave evidence to OFCOM that he had taken part

¹⁸⁸ Eric K Shafa, "Iran's Emergence as a Cyber Power", *Strategic Studies Institute*, 20 August 2014, <https://archive.org/details/USArmyWarCollegeStrategicStudiesInstitute1992-2015/Iran%27s%20Emergence%20as%20a%20Cyber%20Power/page/n1/mode/2up>.

¹⁸⁹ "US embassy cables: Retaliation planned after Iran jammed BBC broadcasts", *The Guardian*, 5 December 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/247209>.

¹⁹⁰ Lauren Booth, *Finding Peace in the Holy Land: A British Muslim Memoir* (Markfield: Kube Publishing, 2018), p.175.

in the interview under duress and that threats of execution had been made. OFCOM upheld his complaint.¹⁹¹ Press TV was found to be in breach of two sections of the broadcasting code:

Rule 7.1: Broadcasters must avoid unjust or unfair treatment of individuals or organisations in programmes.

Rule 8.1: Any infringement of privacy in programmes, or in connection with obtaining material included in programmes, must be warranted.

OFCOM levied a sanction of a fine totalling £100,000.¹⁹² Press TV declared it was unable and unwilling to pay this penalty and, after continuing to breach the broadcasting code, its licence was revoked in January 2012.¹⁹³

Despite losing the licence for its television station, Press TV has not gone away. It is still able to operate in London as a news website. It shows live English-language news coverage, interspersed with documentaries, and has continued to gain exclusives. In 2018, one of its journalists, acting against Labour Party rules, was able to gain entry and film inside a meeting of the Enfield Constituency Labour Party, where the future of its MP, Joan Ryan, was being decided.¹⁹⁴

4.2.1 Press TV and the case of Kylie Moore-Gilbert

In the introduction to this report, the case of Kylie Moore-Gilbert, an academic who is a joint British and Australian citizen, is listed. On her release from prison after serving two years of a ten-year sentence for spying, Press TV ran valedictory coverage. This accused Ms Moore-Gilbert of having taken “a two-year special training course for her spying mission” and positioned her activities in accordance with the regime’s religious sensitivities:

she entered Iran on the recommendation of the Zionist regime on the lunar calendar month of Muharram, during which Shia Muslims mourn the martyrdom anniversary of Imam Hussein (AS), the third Shia Imam.¹⁹⁵

The polemical nature of Press TV’s report continues, although it cannot disguise the extremely vague nature of the prosecution’s case: “She later tried to get in touch with some figures and targets to obtain economic and military information about Iran as well as the anti-Israel resistance front.”¹⁹⁶ The only source quoted in the article is the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), the state’s official news agency. No attempt was made to balance coverage by quoting any representative of Kylie Moore-Gilbert, Britain, or Australia.

4.3 Iran’s Use of Social Media

The Twitter feed of the Iranian ambassador to the United Kingdom, Hamid Baeidinejad, is described as his personal account and declares that the views expressed are not those of the MFA (Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs).¹⁹⁷ Despite that declaration, the feed, in a mixture of English and Persian, is linked from the Iranian embassy website and frequently

¹⁹¹ “Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin: Issue number 182”, *OFCOM*, 23 May 2011, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/47691/obb182.pdf.

¹⁹² “Decision by the Broadcasting Sanctions Committee. BSC 68 (11)”, *OFCOM*, 1 July 2009, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0032/52997/press-tv.pdf.

¹⁹³ “Iran’s Press TV loses UK licence”, *BBC News*, 20 January 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-16652356>.

¹⁹⁴ Aubrey Allegretti, “Investigation launched after Iranian state TV films private Labour meeting”, *Sky News*, 7 September 2018, <https://news.sky.com/story/investigation-launched-after-iranian-state-tv-films-private-labour-meeting-11492461>.

¹⁹⁵ “Video: Iran swaps Israel’s spy for three nationals jailed abroad”, *Press TV*, 26 November 2020, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2020/11/26/639389/Iran-prisoner-swap-spy-Kylie-Moore-Gilbert-Israel>.

¹⁹⁶ “Video: Iran swaps Israel’s spy for three nationals jailed abroad”, *Press TV*.

¹⁹⁷ His account can be viewed at <https://twitter.com/baeidinejad>, *Twitter*, accessed 11 May 2021.

retweets Iranian government statements. At the time of writing, he has approximately 18,800 followers. The ambassador will go on the offensive to attack critics, whom he portrays as Iran's enemies. For example, a July 2020 tweet criticised the Conservative MP Tom Tugendhat in the following manner:

The level of hatred that MP Tom Tugendhat has manifested towards Iran is beyond imagination. He never stops attacking Iran and has deep misconception regarding Iran's regional policies, which possibly was generated from his earlier association in the army in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁹⁸

Although it also lacks a blue tick, a second account of note is Emb. I. R. IRAN in UK, which purports to be a Twitter account for the Iranian embassy in London.¹⁹⁹ This primarily retweets Iranian government accounts, as well as images of the Iranian countryside and nature. Following the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, this account posted an image of the Iranian embassy in London with the Iranian flag at half-mast and praised Soleimani as a hero of the fight against terrorism, before finishing with the words, "Iran condemns this illegal act in strongest term & holds perpetrators accountable for all the consequences."²⁰⁰

While the content of Iranian state social media accounts is perhaps largely to be expected, with political interventions that are functional and bellicose if hardly game-changing, the next section focuses on Iranian strategies that are not publicly acknowledged.

4:4 Iranian Disinformation Campaigns Online

While much media coverage over the last ten years has focused on Russian online disinformation campaigns, Iran is an active player in the cybersphere. Its offensive intentions in this field have been described as "to cause harm to adversaries with clear military superiority, and at the same time, maintain a margin of denial that will prevent international censure or even sanctions and a counter-attack".²⁰¹ Having once been considered a 'third tier' country in terms of its cyber capabilities, Iran has become increasingly sophisticated in both the scope and choice of its targets.²⁰²

In 2020, the United States seized more than 100 domain names being used in influence campaigns by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These included sites such as syria-victory.com and yemenpress.org, clearly related to regional Iranian foreign policy objectives. But there were also other domains, such as criticalstudies.org, which few would immediately associate with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.²⁰³ As will be seen below, Iran's activities in cyberspace are designed to attack the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom.

4:4:1 Scottish Independence: Iran's Fake Facebook Pages

There appear to be elements within Iran that are willing to interfere in the United Kingdom's domestic politics in order to encourage Scottish separatism. In 2018, Facebook closed a page entitled "Free Scotland 2014", which had more than 20,000 followers, that was discovered

¹⁹⁸ Hamid Baeidinejad (@baeidinejad), *Twitter*, 29 July 2020, <https://twitter.com/baeidinejad/status/1288451973721853952>.

¹⁹⁹ This can be viewed at https://twitter.com/Iran_in_UK, accessed 11 May 2021. At that date it had 1,387 followers.

²⁰⁰ Emb. I.R. IRAN in UK (@Iran_in_UK), *Twitter*, 3 January 2020, https://twitter.com/Iran_in_UK/status/1213080682110603265.

²⁰¹ Gabi Siboni and Sam Kronenfeld, "Developments in Iranian Cyber Warfare, 2013-2014", The Institute for National Security Studies, *INSS Insight* No. 536, 3 April 2014, <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/systemfiles/No.%20536%20-%20Gabi%20and%20Sami%20for%20web.pdf>.

²⁰² Siboni and Kronenfeld, "Developments in Iranian Cyber Warfare, 2013-2014".

²⁰³ "United States Seizes 27 Additional Domain Names Used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to Further a Global, Covert Influence Campaign", The United States Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, 4 November 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/united-states-seizes-27-additional-domain-names-used-iran-s-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps>.

to be funded by Iran.²⁰⁴ This was part of a wider investigation into fake websites ahead of the US mid-term elections which “shows Russia is not alone in using social media to adopt disguised sites to push its own political agendas”.²⁰⁵ The Facebook investigation was a taster for what was to come – in April 2020, Facebook took down more than 500 accounts, pages, and groups that it connected to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation’s (IRIB) international operations. This is part of Facebook’s corporate policy to tackle what it refers to as Foreign or Government Interference (FGI).²⁰⁶

The computer firm Graphika dates Iran’s online interference in Scotland to as far back as 2013, to the run-up to the independence referendum. This operation, and earlier interference with Republican primaries in the United States in 2012, indicate that Iran was actually ahead of Russia when it comes to digital interventions in other countries’ elections. The IRIB’s approach took a distinct form:

In each case, the network used a combination of fake accounts, pages, and groups to push its messaging, with the fake accounts sharing and promoting the pages and groups. Rather than the website-heavy content of later efforts, this was much more based on visuals, particularly cartoons.²⁰⁷

From October 2013 to March 2014, Iran produced a Facebook page entitled “The Scotsman Cartoon”, a name redolent of, but unconnected to, the popular daily newspaper *The Scotsman*.

The page offered a series of cartoons in a wide range of visual styles but on a common theme: Scotland’s need for independence. Many of the cartoons attacked then-Prime Minister David Cameron, portraying him as the embodiment of English oppression.²⁰⁸

For reasons that are unclear, it stopped posting before the 2014 independence referendum.

In Facebook’s February 2021 “Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report”, an image is reproduced of a post from a fake Iranian online persona mocking the Scottish Conservatives. That was one of 446 accounts closed for violating the social media giant’s policies against foreign interference.²⁰⁹ In March 2021, Facebook again acted against Iranian-controlled accounts, giving an indication as to the range of issues and countries that the Iranian regime targets. Facebook told *The Times*:

The people behind this activity posted memes, political cartoons and other content in Arabic, English, Pashto and Hebrew about news and domestic politics in each targeted country, including Scottish independence from the UK, criticism of Israeli prime minister Netanyahu and US influence in Iraq and Afghanistan. They also briefly mentioned news about Covid-19.²¹⁰

While there is no suggestion that Scottish nationalist politicians have encouraged or endorsed Iran’s interference in any way, it sets a worrying precedent, not least because the issue of a

²⁰⁴ “Call for SNP to investigate Yes groups on Facebook”, *The Scotsman*, 24 August 2018, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/call-snp-investigate-yes-groups-facebook-1426495>.

²⁰⁵ Sandra Dick, “Fake pro-independence Facebook page that originated in Iran is taken down”, *The Herald*, 23 August 2018, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/16592877.fake-pro-independence-facebook-page-originated-iran-taken/>.

²⁰⁶ “April 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report”, *Facebook*, 5 May 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/05/april-cib-report/>.

²⁰⁷ Ben Nimmo et al, “Iran’s Broadcaster: Inauthentic Behavior. Facebook Takes Down Covert Assets Linked to State Broadcaster”, *Graphika*, May 2020, https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_irib_takedown.pdf.

²⁰⁸ Nimmo et al, “Iran’s Broadcaster”, p.26-27.

²⁰⁹ “February 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report”, *Facebook*, 3 March 2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/03/february-2021-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-report/>.

²¹⁰ David Leask, “Facebook shuts fake Scottish independence accounts”, *The Times*, 6 March 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/facebook-shuts-fake-scottish-independence-accounts-k036fh9m2>.

potential second referendum on Scottish independence is a deeply contentious one. Thus far, Iran's online meddling in British politics does not appear to have had a decisive impact. That is not for the want of trying. Iran has shown itself to be a country that disseminates disinformation online and establishes fake websites and internet accounts in its attempts to disrupt the political systems of those it considers to be its enemies. It has been caught doing this repeatedly. Judged within this context, Iran is likely to continue disrupting our elections..

4.4:2 The British Left – an Iranian Fake Website Aimed at Socialists

Fire Eye is a prominent US based cybersecurity company that produces cyberthreat intelligence reports and analysis. When discussing online dangers posed by nation states, it refers to the “big four”: China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia.²¹¹ In a 2018 report on Iranian influence operations, Fire Eye discovered a series of fake websites aimed at the United States, Latin America, and the United Kingdom.²¹² Fake personas were then used to promote these websites across the internet. In Latin America, the sites promoted the Presidents of Venezuela and Bolivia, both of whom have good relations with Iran. In the US, they concentrated on criticising then President Donald Trump.²¹³ Tactically, Iranian interventions appear to differ from the Russian, where there is frequently a desire to promote opposing viewpoints in order to intensify political differences.

The Russian accounts seemed to be designed to sow divisions between groups for the purpose of undermining trust in the democratic process, and creating a distraction within US politics, says Lee Foster, manager of information operations analysis at FireEye. On the Iranian side, I get the sense that it was one-sided. We didn't see pro- and anti-Palestinian content. We saw anti-Israeli commentary and pro-Palestinian commentary.²¹⁴

Fire Eye noted that a website entitled The British Left (britishleft.com) published content that overlapped with Iranian political interests, for example on the issue of Saudi Arabia. One of the site's named authors, supposedly an “Elena Kowalsky” (also given as “Kowalski”), was found to be connected to a Twitter account registered with an Iranian phone number.²¹⁵ The site and its authors tended to promote material from other sites identified by Fire Eye as likely Iranian fakes,²¹⁶ in a process of building mutual credibility.

A second site discovered by Fire Eye, CriticsChronicle.com, claimed to be based in Birmingham. Here again, a distinct political pattern emerged: “articles include those with anti-Saudi, anti-Israeli, and pro-Palestinian themes, as well as material repurposed from the Iranian state-owned media network Press TV”.²¹⁷ The site also plagiarised material from UK newspapers, including an article from *The Independent* reporting an alleged increase in insulting comments to Muslim women following comments by Boris Johnson. The website's Twitter account was

²¹¹ Luke McNamara, “The ‘Big Four’: Spotlight on Iran”, *Fire Eye*, 24 February 2021, <https://www.fireeye.com/blog/executive-perspective/2021/02/the-big-four-spotlight-on-iran.html>.

²¹² “Suspected Iranian Influence Operation: Leveraging Inauthentic News Sites and Social Media Aimed at U.S., U.K., Other Audiences”, *Fire Eye*, 2018, <https://www.fireeye.com/content/dam/fireeye-www/current-threats/pdfs/rpt-FireEye-Iranian-IO.pdf>.

²¹³ Issie Lapowsky, “What We Now Know About Iran's Global Propaganda Campaign”, *WIRED*, 24 August 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/iran-global-propaganda-fireeye/>.

²¹⁴ Issie Lapowsky, “What We Now Know”.

²¹⁵ “Suspected Iranian Influence Operation: Leveraging Inauthentic News Sites and Social Media Aimed at U.S., U.K., Other Audiences”, *Fire Eye*, 2018, <https://www.fireeye.com/content/dam/fireeye-www/current-threats/pdfs/rpt-FireEye-Iranian-IO.pdf>, p.27.

²¹⁶ “Suspected Iranian Influence Operation: Leveraging Inauthentic News Sites and Social Media Aimed at U.S., U.K., Other Audiences”, *Fire Eye*, 2018, <https://www.fireeye.com/content/dam/fireeye-www/current-threats/pdfs/rpt-FireEye-Iranian-IO.pdf>.

²¹⁷ “Suspected Iranian Influence Operation: Leveraging Inauthentic News Sites and Social Media Aimed at U.S., U.K., Other Audiences”, *Fire Eye*, 2018, <https://www.fireeye.com/content/dam/fireeye-www/current-threats/pdfs/rpt-FireEye-Iranian-IO.pdf>.

again tied to an Iranian phone number. As this report went to press, the site CriticsChronicle.com was down, whilst the website britishleft.com appears to have new owners, the Alibaba Cloud Computing Company in Beijing, and is now hosting a Chinese gaming site.²¹⁸ There is no suggestion of any wrongdoing on their part.

With The British Left domain, there emerges a lack of critical understanding concerning socialists in the United Kingdom. It would be unusual for contemporary socialists in this country to reference the nation state in the name of its organisation or website. Historically, organisations with the word “British” in the title have tended to be avoided by left-leaning activists. The name The British Left, and British Progressive Front, which was also used, were not well chosen.

In time, however, Iran may become more sophisticated.

²¹⁸ Who Is, britishleft.com, <https://who.is/whois/britishleft.com>, accessed 21 May 2021?

Chapter 5: Cultural Networks

Iranian soft power in the cultural sphere is restricted by the damaged nature of the country's reputation in the United Kingdom. Nor does Iran appear to have a well-developed strategy in this field. While the UK Iranian embassy's website has a section devoted to cultural matters, at the time of writing it consists of a list of links to just four other web pages.²¹⁹ Examples of recent success in this sphere are rare – the 2020 BBC series *Art of Persia*²²⁰ and the ongoing Epic Iran exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London are two such unusual examples.²²¹ The latter did require the museum to work with the Iranian embassy in London and the National Museum of Iran, during a period when western hostages were being arrested and imprisoned in the Islamic Republic. While a policy of non-engagement with Iran on cultural matters may not find ready support and there are many who would advocate that exhibitions of art, culture and design should be beyond politics, it remains uncomfortable to see cultural relationships being conducted against a backdrop of repression.

5:1 Language and Culture

The Centre for Promotion of the Persian Language and Literature works primarily as a language school offering courses to those in London wishing to learn Persian. Its website has previously advertised courses to be taken at the Islamic Centre of England.²²² More recently, classes have had to be switched online owing to the pandemic, but they were previously advertised at what is described as the Educational and Cultural Centre IR Iran, at Carlton Vale in north west London.²²³ These premises are better known as The School of the Islamic Republic of Iran (see chapter seven). The tendency to hold classes at venues associated with the Iranian regime may suggest at least a degree of recognition between The Centre for Promotion of the Persian Language and Literature and pro-Iranian networks in the UK. However, in a pre-publication response to this report the centre stated:

Our activities, as a registered charity organization, are purely and simply cultural. In the interest of providing a more accessible service to our students, we have been fortunate enough to be able to hire a room within the mentioned venues which instigated the use of the facilities in these Centres [*sic*] for a limited period of time. Therefore, it is not accurate to say there is a degree of recognition between our Centre and Iranian networks in the UK.²²⁴

5:2 Tourism

Iran boasts 24 UNESCO world heritage sites.²²⁵ While prospects for tourism briefly flourished after the signing of the JCPOA, the lack of political stability, Iran's poor relations with the west, and high-profile arrests of dual nationals all mitigate against British travellers heading to the country in significant numbers. There appears little prospect of this changing in the near future, not least while the FCDO advises against travel to the country.

²¹⁹ "Useful Links", Islamic Republic of Iran, <https://uk.mfa.gov.ir/en/GeneralCategoryServices/9896>, accessed 12 May 2021.

²²⁰ *Art of Persia*, BBC Media Centre, June 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/proginfo/2020/24/the-art-of-persia>.

²²¹ James Pickford, "V&A to stage biggest UK exhibition on Iranian art", *Financial Times*, 10 July 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/c94e92c8-a312-11e9-a282-2df48f366f7d>.

²²² "Learn Persian, Carlton Vale", The Centre for Promotion of the Persian Language and Literature, <http://cppll.com/learn-persian/learn-persian-carlton-vale/>, accessed 12 May 2021.

²²³ "Learn Persian, Carlton Vale", The Centre for Promotion of the Persian Language and Literature, <http://cppll.com/learn-persian/learn-persian-carlton-vale/>, accessed 12 May 2021.

²²⁴ Email correspondence to the author from Azmandian (no other name given), Centre for Promotion of the Persian Language and Literature, 20 May 2021.

²²⁵ Yasaman Bagherpour, "UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Iran", *Visit Our Iran*, updated July 2019, <https://www.visitouriran.com/blog/unesco-world-heritage-sites-in-iran/#::-:text=Among%20the%20list%20of%20countries,the%20United%20States%20and%20Japan>.

5:3 Religious Tourism

The potential of Iran as a destination for religious tourism from the UK is significant, particularly to the holy city of Qom. The Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission has previously run package trips from Britain to Iran which, given their itinerary, are likely to appeal to regime loyalists as well as to the generally devout. An 11-day trip in 2016 started with a visit to the Museum of the Islamic Revolution and the Holy Defense and was followed the next day by a visit to the former home of the Ayatollah Khomeini. In Mashhad and Qom, talks were scheduled, featuring prominent clerics.²²⁶ Prior to publication, the Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission denied any affiliation to the Iranian state and said that any attempt to portray them as having such a connection was “problematic and Islamophobic”.

In 2010, the journalist and broadcaster Lauren Booth (sister-in-law of former Prime Minister Tony Blair) converted to Islam after undergoing a religious experience when visiting a mosque in Qom.²²⁷

During a another visit to Iran, she attended the state sponsored Al-Quds day protests in Tehran, and on 3 September 2010 wrote a letter to Tony Blair denouncing Israel, the United States, and Britain’s policies, while praising the Al-Quds day march in London:

Today when the streets of London reverberate with cries of ‘Allahuakbar!’ and ‘Down Down Israel.’ Christians and Jews will join the thunderous cries of ‘Down Down Israel,’ marching shoulder to shoulder with the ‘political’ Muslims you say you fear so much.²²⁸

She also went on to praise her host and the Iranian people:

Iran is indeed the place where Islamic tradition meets political action. They are highly aware of the history of this region, the wrongs perpetrated by Israel against Palestine and the political machinations of the US and the UK governments to isolate them.²²⁹

Lauren Booth then discussed her conversion at length in an interview with Press TV’s Mohammed Saeed Bahmanpour on the channel’s *Face to Face* programme.²³⁰

However, what had been a significant propaganda coup was to turn sour, as Ms Booth began to drift away from Shia Islam and any potential Iranian influence. She found the divisions between the Shia and Sunni interpretations of the faith difficult, and writes in her memoir:

The kindly Shia Muslims I had been connected with by the Islamic Centre of England would regularly take my daughters and I to their events. I didn’t really understand a lot of what was going on at the gatherings. Some seemed like celebrations, others were filled with hysterical crying.²³¹

In a sign of the times, she was eventually to find support and a tutor after searching on Facebook: “I was looking beyond the Shia community for knowledge about the prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an.”²³² From there, Lauren Booth completed her move away from Shiism:

²²⁶ “Itinerary for Iran Summer 2016”, *Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission*, <https://www.aimislam.com/itinerary-for-iran-summer-2016/>.

²²⁷ Booth, *Finding Peace in the Holy Land*, p.199-205.

²²⁸ Lauren Booth, “Al Quds day letter to Tony Blair from Lauren Booth, in Iran”, 3 September 2010, *Middle East Monitor*, published 28 January 2014, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140128-al-quds-day-letter-to-tony-blair-from-lauren-booth-in-iran/>.

²²⁹ Lauren Booth, “Al Quds day letter”.

²³⁰ “PressTv interview with Lauren Booth – Nov 2010 – English”, *ShiaTV.net*, 9 November 2010, <https://www.shiatv.net/video/312aefd7646573eefc9>.

²³¹ Booth, *Finding Peace in the Holy Land*, p.231.

²³² Booth, *Finding Peace in the Holy Land*, p.233.

From that day onwards I felt guided to follow the Ahl al-Sunnah school of belief, the Islamic tradition of more than 90 per cent of the world's Muslim population. Sadly however, my appearances at Shia events would be used by some as 'evidence' that I followed their school of thought.²³³

Lauren Booth's conversion contains a whole series of personal and political elements, but it is also an example of the flourishing, then stalling of Iranian soft power in the United Kingdom. Iran was able to offer her a cause and a platform, and was a destination in her search for religious meaning. However, when she sought further faith-based answers, Booth eventually moved in the direction of larger currents within contemporary British Islam. Even with a new convert to Islam, Iran has not been able to overcome the disadvantages that characterise its minority position in the Sunni/Shia divide.

²³³ Booth, *Finding Peace in the Holy Land*, p.237.

Chapter 6: The Iranian and Other Diasporas

Few diasporas possess elements as openly hostile to the mother country as the Iranian exile community in the UK. This is something that can largely be explained in terms of settlement by those fleeing the 1979 revolution, and repression in subsequent decades. In its political expressions, the Iranian diaspora contains many activists critical of the existing regime. Royalist, nationalist, and socialist exiles have all opposed the Al-Quds day marches in London, and pickets and protests at sites associated with the Iranian regime in Britain are commonplace.²³⁴

Obtaining reliable data on the United Kingdom's Iranian community is not straightforward. 'Iranian' is not recognised as an ethnic category, so is not an identity readily captured by the Census or other official surveys. The 2011 Census recorded 84,735 Iranian-born people in the United Kingdom, and there will be others of Iranian heritage who may keep a close affiliation to their ancestral homeland.²³⁵ Iranian voices, however, have rarely been prominent within British life.

As a country that styles itself as acting in defence of Shia Islam, Iran possesses a degree of potential influence over Shia émigrés from other countries who have settled in the United Kingdom. This may include migrants from Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, and even those from India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Diaspora politics can be extremely complicated – while many Iranian exiles deplore the government in Tehran, there may be Iraqi émigrés who are sympathetic. Assessments have suggested, however, that Iran has rarely been able to lead Shia Muslims in the way that they hoped. In her analysis of British Islam, the BBC's religious correspondence Innes Bowen wrote, "The most striking feature of Britain's Shia community is the lack of influence that the Islamic Republic of Iran exerts over it."²³⁶

Iran faces several historical disadvantages in being accepted as the natural leader for British Shias. While many territories invaded by Arab armies in the seventh century both adopted the Arab faith, Islam, and either already spoke or came to speak Arabic, Iran largely adopted one, but not the other. The survival of Persian and the persistence of some Zoroastrian traditions indicate Iran's difference from other Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East.²³⁷ Moreover, the nature of émigré communities, with their distinct linguistic and familial divisions, is not something that readily fits into the broader political project of adherence to Iranian policy objectives.

²³⁴ See, for example, Charlie Neyra, "London protesters call for regime change in Iran", *Arab News*, 7 January 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1220731/world>.

²³⁵ "2011 Census", Office for National Statistics, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census>.

²³⁶ Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent*, p.162.

²³⁷ Straw, *The English Job*, p.26.

Chapter 7: Education and Academia

This chapter considers Iran's work in supporting the development of educational facilities in the United Kingdom, as well as the contribution of particular think tanks in providing an intellectual gloss, here in the west, for the Iranian regime.

There is also an apparent paradox – the need for western academics to approach the Islamic Republic of Iran with caution is demonstrated by the fate of the British-Australian researcher Kylie Moore-Gilbert (see chapter one), yet there has been very little academic focus in critiquing either Iranian state power or its points of influence in this country.

7.1 The School of the Islamic Republic of Iran

This is an independent primary and secondary school based in the London Borough of Brent. At the time of its last OFSTED inspection in December 2019, it had 138 pupils between the ages of 5 and 15 on its roll, and the head teacher is Mr Seyed Abbas Hosseini. The School of the Islamic Republic of Iran was formerly a Church of England primary. The building at 100 Carlton Vale, NW6 5HE, was bought by the Iranian embassy in 1997 and opened its doors under its new name in 2007. From 2013 the Iranian Ministry of Education was listed as the proprietor, followed by Seyed Abbas Hosseini from 2018.²³⁸

The bulk of what is known about this school comes from a series of highly critical OFSTED reports. After a “satisfactory” inspection in 2013, the facility has consistently failed to reach the required standards ever since.²³⁹ In 2016, the school was found to be “inadequate”, relying on guidance from the Iranian education department rather than that provided for independent schools in the UK. It was also operating early years education and a sixth form, despite not being registered to do so.²⁴⁰ By 2018, the Islamic School was still rated as inadequate, with its teaching described as “weak”. The school's safeguarding policies in particular came in for criticism:

The safeguarding policy covers most aspects of safeguarding, although information about radicalisation and extremism, female genital mutilation and forced marriage is limited. Staff confirm that they have read part one of ‘Keeping children safe in education’. However, this has not been routinely recorded.²⁴¹

The school's consistent failings led to a Department for Education warning notice in November 2018.²⁴² This was followed by a further OFSTED inspection in 2019, where the school was again classed as “inadequate”. The school roll was inadequately kept, safeguarding continued to be below standard and checks on staff were not completed before they joined the school.²⁴³ This report led to a Department of Education notice to improve in November 2020.²⁴⁴ By now, the pattern at the Islamic School of Iran was firmly established – extremely poor inspection reports followed by little or no substantive change.

²³⁸ Hannah Sommerville, “Iran's Overseas Propaganda: London, Gateway to the World”, *IranWire*, 22 November 2020, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/8084>.

²³⁹ “The School of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, *OFSTED*, <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/27/133385>, accessed 12 May 2021.

²⁴⁰ “School report: The School of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, *OFSTED*, 2016, <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/2635543>.

²⁴¹ “School report: The School of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, *OFSTED*, 2018, <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50038673>.

²⁴² “Correspondence: The School of the Islamic Republic of Iran: warning notice”, *Department for Education*, 15 November 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-school-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-warning-notice>.

²⁴³ “School report: The School of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, *OFSTED*, 2019, <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50144336>.

²⁴⁴ “Correspondence: The School of the Islamic Republic of Iran: warning notice November 2020”, *Department for Education*, 25 November 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-school-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-warning-notice-november-2020>.

7:2 The Hawza Ilmiyyah

This organisation provides religious training at degree and postgraduate level to would-be Shia clerics in London, as well as courses in Arabic, Qur'an Studies, Philosophy, and Islamic law. In the past, it has advertised in publications supportive of the Iranian governmental system, such as *Crescent International*.²⁴⁵ It describes its degree courses as being in collaboration with The Islamic College for Advanced Studies (see below).²⁴⁶

The Hawza Ilmiyyah was contacted prior to the publication of this report, and a statement was received in response from the Irshad Trust. It said that the information within this report contained "several claims and insinuations with regards to Irshad Trust and Hawza Ilmiyyah which are factually erroneous." In a fuller statement (see chapter 3), it said that its educational courses have "provided quality education to hundreds of students", the high quality of which have been "endorsed by the UK institutions responsible for guaranteeing British universities' academic standards." With respect to its collaborations, the Trust said "as an academic institution, the Trust enjoys and welcomes academic cooperation with all centres for Islamic learning. However, it is not responsible for statements or views expressed by other Islamic colleges and centres".

7:3 The Islamic College for Advanced Studies (ICAS)

Also known as The Islamic College, ICAS is based in Willesden, north London. Although ICAS provides some seminary teaching, it primarily focuses on A levels and runs a degree course in Islamic Studies in partnership with Middlesex University, which provides accreditation for the college's courses.²⁴⁷ It is also a publisher and distributor of Islamic books under the name ICAS Press. For example, in October 2020, ICAS hosted an ICAS Press book launch for *The Chronicles of the Martyrdom of Imam Husayn*, addressed by Seyed Hashem Moosavi, the Director of the Islamic Centre of England, and officials of both The Islamic College and ICAS Press.²⁴⁸

The ICAS website contains no information as to its funding sources. In 2010, BBC journalist Innes Bowen reported that, ICAS' its former principal, Sheikh Bahmanpour (see chapter three), had told her that the College was mostly funded by Iran, though it is not clear if that remains the case today or what Bahmanpour meant by the claim of "Iran" recorded in Bowen's book (ie whether this was the government or private sources).²⁴⁹ While there is no suggestion that ICAS has behaved improperly in the provision of its academic courses, there is clearly a public interest in understanding how its funding operates and whether there is a connection to the Iranian state. Both Sheikh Bahmanpour and The Islamic College were approached for comment on this issue in order to clarify it, but no reply was received.²⁵⁰ At Companies House it submits only micro accounts, which give no information as to staffing levels or sources of income.²⁵¹

7:4 Hamid Alga

Perhaps the most prominent pro-Iranian academic living outside the Islamic Republic is the British-born Shia convert Hamid Algar, Professor Emeritus at the University of Berkeley's Centre

²⁴⁵ See, for example, the advert in *Crescent International*, March 2010, p.38.

²⁴⁶ *Crescent International*, March 2010, p.38.

²⁴⁷ Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent*, p.143.

²⁴⁸ "Book Launch: Chronicles of the Martyrdom of Imam Husayn", *The Islamic College*, 5 October 2020, https://www.islamic-college.ac.uk/book-launch/?fbclid=IwAR2-urf_Q9jxO4m7ZFaN8W84fwxafnOPFyFavlg8fLzIDCISAYVa7VMuhsI.

²⁴⁹ Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent*, p.143.

²⁵⁰ Email from the author to the Islamic College, 18 May 2021. Repeated attempts to contact Sheikh Bahmanpour did not elicit a response – see footnote 191.

²⁵¹ "Islamic College for Advanced Studies, Micro Accounts, 16 December", *Companies House*, 2020, ISLAMIC COLLEGE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES – Filing history (free information from Companies House) (company-information.service.gov.uk).

for Middle Eastern Studies.²⁵² A scholar of the political role played by Shia clerics, Algar was greatly impressed by the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic revolution, and in 1981 provided the first, still authoritative, translation into English of Khomeini's work, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*. To critics, much of Algar's academic career has been spent cheering on Khomeini and his legacy and ignoring more problematic issues such as the status of women in the country.²⁵³ In a short biography of Khomeini published on the Al-Islam website by the Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project, Algar found little to fault in the Ayatollah's death sentence on Salman Rushdie. Indeed, he declared it an action rooted in Islamic jurisprudence:

The fatwa received a great deal of support in the Muslim world as the most authoritative articulation of popular outrage at Rushdie's gross insult to Islam. Although its demand remained unfulfilled, it demonstrated plainly the consequences that would have to be faced by any aspiring imitator of Rushdie, and thus had an important deterrent effect. Generally overlooked at the time was the firm grounding of the Imam's fatwa in the existing provisions of both Shi'i and Sunni jurisprudence; it was not therefore innovative. What lent the fatwa particular significance was rather its issuance by the Imam as a figure of great moral authority.²⁵⁴

Professor Algar was approached for comment by the author of this report, but no reply was received.²⁵⁵

7:5 Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) Bookshop

During the imprisonment of the British-Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert and the trial of British-Iranian lecturer Kameel Ahmady, the Islamic Human Rights Commission continued to hold speaking events at its bookshop, featuring UK academics and early career researchers. Few seemed to observe any paradox in academic events at the premises of a pro-Iranian organisation in London, while fellow researchers were persecuted in Tehran. Academics who encountered the Iranian justice system, such as Kylie Moore-Gilbert and Kameel Ahmady, received little or no solidarity from some of their British colleagues.

7:6 Institute of Contemporary Islamic Thought (ICIT) and Crescent International

One of the most consistent and enduring voices in support of Iran is the ICIT and its monthly magazine, *Crescent International*. The ICIT describes itself as "an international intellectual Centre of the global Islamic movement".²⁵⁶ The ICIT was approached by the author and asked if it is accurate to portray it and Crescent International as voices in support of Iran.

In a question and answer section of its website however, *Crescent International* says the following about Iran:

Why don't you bash Iran? This is a question sometimes asked by those not well acquainted with ICIT's intellectual work and with zero understanding of the media obfuscation within the contemporary global order. The simple answer is that Islamic Iran is getting enough bashing from 99% of the global media and we are not going to join racists and neocolonial designs against the only working Islamic model.

²⁵² "Hamid Algar", *Center for Middle Eastern Studies*, University of California Berkeley, <https://cmes.berkeley.edu/people/hamid-algar>, accessed 12 May 2021.

²⁵³ A. J. Caschetta, "'Happy Birthday, Hamid Algar' – Ayatollah Khomeini's Favorite American Turns 80", *National Review*, 6 June 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/06/hamid-algar-ayatollah-khomeini-favorite-american/amp/>.

²⁵⁴ Hamid Algar, *Imam Khomeini: A Short Biography*, Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project, <https://www.al-islam.org/imam-khomeini-short-biography-hamid-algar#comment-0>, accessed 12 May 2021.

²⁵⁵ Email from the author to Hamid Algar, 19 May 2021.

²⁵⁶ "About ICIT", *ICIT Digital Library*, <https://www.icit-digital.org/abouticit>, accessed 12 May 2021.

A slightly deeper answer lies in the fact that Crescent International's support is not for Iran per se but for the Islamic system and the God-conscious and moral leadership present in Iran. If a similar system were to emerge elsewhere we would readily support it. ICIT's scholars and thinkers base their support of the only working Islamic model on the primary sources of Islam and can confidently face anyone in an open debate on this topic.

We readily admit that Islamic Iran has some managerial and administrative flaws, but that does not disqualify it from being the only working Islamic state system that is truly independent of Zionism and imperialism. Yes, there are fifth columnists and unworthy people within Iran's Islamic system as was the case during the time of the Prophet (pbuh). Yet, even its staunchest, but sophisticated opponents agree that it is the most successful representation of the Islamic movement since the time of al-Khilafah al-Rashidah. We will not be part of the problem for Islamic Iran, but part of the Islamic value system that has taken institutional root in Iran, and we will not hesitate to advocate its successes at every opportunity. We want humanity to be free and prosperous; we will not be part of the imposed "solution" on anyone."²⁵⁷

Based in Toronto, London, Pretoria, and Karachi,²⁵⁸ the ICIT holds public events and publishes books and its regular "Newsmagazine of the Islamic movement", entitled *Crescent International*. From 1998 to October 2008, its editor was a Briton, Iqbal Siddiqui, son of the prominent anti-Rushdie protestor Kalim Siddiqui.²⁵⁹ Subscriptions for UK readers are fulfilled from an address in Slough, Berkshire.²⁶⁰ *Crescent International* seeks to move beyond the Sunni-Shia divide, promoting what it refers to as the "Islamic movement". Iqbal Siddiqui has stated:

The key objectives of this movement are the reassertion of Islamic values in Muslim societies, and the establishment of Islamic states in place of the corrupt self-serving regimes that currently predominate in the Muslim world.²⁶¹

In correspondence with a British Muslim from Birmingham who complained that the magazine was regarded as "Shia", *Crescent International's* editor replied, "We reject sectarianism of all kinds. Currently Islamic Iran, Hizbullah and Hamas represent the most outstanding examples of resistance to imperialism, and we reflect this."²⁶²

In the pages of *Crescent International*, the success of Iran has been contrasted with other Islamic movements, such as Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Iran matters, because in Tehran the Islamic forces have gained and, since 1979, held power, a task that proved beyond the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as they "surrendered to US-Zionist interests".²⁶³ Iran is also seen as particularly important as, unlike other countries in the post-colonial era, it was beholden to neither superpower. Moreover, "Imam Khomeini also did not lead a 'national' movement; he led an Islamic movement that wanted nothing less than the total dismantling of the colonial order imposed in Iran."²⁶⁴ This progress did not cease

²⁵⁷ *Crescent International*, 'About Us', <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/about>, accessed 2 June 2021, archive available at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20210423182418/https://crescent.icit-digital.org/about>.

²⁵⁸ "Contents", *Crescent International*, 2010, p.1.

²⁵⁹ Iqbal Siddiqui, "Perspectives: Muslims in the west: victims of an inescapable historical confrontation", *Crescent International*, September 2010, p.7, p.14.

²⁶⁰ "Subscribe", *Crescent International*, <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/subscribe>, accessed 12 May 2021.

²⁶¹ Iqbal Siddiqui, "Perspectives: Understanding the scope and depth of work of the Islamic movement", *Crescent International*, July 2010, p.7.

²⁶² Letters to the Editor", *Crescent International*, March 2009, p.39.

²⁶³ Zafar Bangash, "Egypt and Iran: why different outcomes?", *Crescent International*, August 2013, <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/egypt-and-iran-why-different-outcomes>.

²⁶⁴ "Editorials: Iran's Islamic Revolution turns 31", *Crescent International*, February 2010, p.3-4.

with Khomeini – for example, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is described as representing “the gold standard of Islamic leadership”.²⁶⁵ In Lebanon, Hezbollah is referred to as “the most effective resistance movement in the world”.²⁶⁶

As well as offering its ideological support to Tehran, *Crescent International* provides an intellectual platform for Iranian voices to speak to the *ummah*. In 2009, it reproduced in full the text of President Ahmadinejad’s speech to the United Nations Durban Review conference in Geneva on racism,²⁶⁷ the speech that led to a walkout by the representatives of a number of western countries.²⁶⁸ Proclamations by Iran’s spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, are also reproduced, for example those written to coincide with the hajj.²⁶⁹

Crescent International has sometimes provided supporting arguments when the Iranian system has been questioned. For example, the protests following the disputed 2009 Iranian elections were dismissed in its pages as “destabilization of the Islamic Republic by the US and its allies” by Dr Sam Mehdi Torabi, a graduate from the London School of Economics, now employed as lecturer at the Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran.²⁷⁰

Another side to *Crescent International* is its reporting of deeply contentious events in this country. For example, in 2009 it carried a two-page report by “our own correspondent in London” reporting on a 30 August 2009 Ramadan dinner at Kensington and Chelsea Town Hall (KCTH) organised by, and a fundraiser for, the group Cageprisoners (now known as Cage).²⁷¹ Among the scheduled speakers was Imam Anwar al-Awlaki, an American of Yemeni heritage, who was due to address the meeting by video link from Yemen. This caused considerable opposition, owing to accusations that al-Awlaki supported violence,²⁷² and the venue’s owners only allowed the event to proceed once he was removed from the list of speakers.²⁷³ In October 2009, *Crescent International*’s anonymous London correspondent reported:

CDs containing the audio of his speech were distributed to those in attendance albeit outside KCTH premises. The lecture has since been uploaded onto the internet with the title Banned in Britain and has reached a global audience of millions, curious as to why his words were banned.²⁷⁴

The curious did not have long to wait. As al-Awlaki’s biographer, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, explains, by late 2009 American intelligence learned that al-Awlaki had pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). That November, an American army officer, Major Nidal Hassan, killed 13 in a shooting spree at Fort Hood in Texas. Hassan had been in email correspondence with al-Awlaki and had previously worshipped under him before al-Awlaki left the United States. Five days after the massacre, on his blog, al-Awlaki wrote an article entitled, “Nidal Hassan did the right thing”.²⁷⁵

²⁶⁵ Tahir Mustafa, “News/Analysis: Iran’s presidential elections spark excitement”, *Crescent International*, April 2010, p.12.

²⁶⁶ “Hizbullah-led Alliance Wins Majority in Lebanese Election”, *Crescent International*, 8 May 2018, <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/hizbullah-led-alliance-wins-majority-in-lebanese-election>.

²⁶⁷ Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, “Racists are responsible for global security crises”, *Crescent International*, May 2009, p.32-34.

²⁶⁸ “Walkout at Iran leader’s speech”, *BBC News*, 20 April 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8008572.stm>.

²⁶⁹ “Hajj message of the Rahbar, Imam Seyyed Ali Khamenei”, *Crescent International*, 31 August 2017, <https://www.icit-digital.org/articles/hajj-message-of-the-rahbar-imam-seyyed-ali-khamenei>.

²⁷⁰ Sam Mehdi Torabi, “Insiders perspective on political events in Iran”, *Crescent International*, April 2010, p.23-25.

²⁷¹ “Cageprisoners: breaking cages of hate”, *Crescent International*, October 2009, p.17-19.

²⁷² Jamie Doward, “Islamist preacher banned from addressing fundraiser”, *The Guardian*, 23 August 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/aug/23/islamist-preacher-council-address>.

²⁷³ “Cageprisoners: breaking cages of hate”, p.17-19.

²⁷⁴ “Cageprisoners: breaking cages of hate”, p.17-19.

²⁷⁵ Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, *Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki’s Western Jihad* (London: Harvard University Press, 2020), p.42.

Giving a platform to those who were promoting al-Awlaki was therefore a deeply contentious act by *Crescent International*.

As another example, in one 2018 article, *Crescent International* criticised the UK's relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It suggested that the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, had no "conscience" and that "for her, Yemeni and Saudi lives do not matter; only British jobs and lucrative arms deals are important".²⁷⁶ A subsequent article claimed that British politicians were part of the "Anglo-Zionist empire".²⁷⁷ In a 2015 article about British terrorism legislation, *Crescent International* said "since 911 [*sic*], Western regimes have launched a crusade against the Muslim world as well as against Muslims residing in the West".²⁷⁸

In a 2014 article, one contributor while criticising global terrorism, as indeed the site repeatedly has, described Abu Hamza's conviction for public order, incitement, and terrorism offences at the Old Bailey as "specious charges".²⁷⁹ A 2003 article criticised the raid on the Mosque then led by Abu Hamza and the arrests that followed it, and questioned whether the arrests "may also be a result of increasing security cooperation between London and Tel Aviv" and pointed to the influence of a "known-Zionist" MP.²⁸⁰

When contacted prior to publication, no reply was received from ICIT.²⁸¹

²⁷⁶ *Crescent International*, 'Massive Protests Greet Saudi Terror Prince During British Visit', 7 March 2018, available at: <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/massive-protests-greet-saudi-terror-prince-during-british-visit>.

²⁷⁷ Kevin Barrett, *Crescent International*, 'Billionaire Beggar Mooches off Anglo-Zionist Masters', 1 April 2018, available at: <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/billionaire-beggar-mooches-off-anglo-zionist-masters>.

²⁷⁸ *Crescent International*, 'Lord Ahmed expresses deep concern over UK's new anti-terrorism measures', 8 June 2015, <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/lord-ahmed-expresses-deep-concern-over-uk-s-new-anti-terrorism-measures>.

²⁷⁹ Eric Walberg, *Crescent International*, 'The moral potholes in fighting imperialism', 1 May 2014, <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/the-moral-potholes-in-fighting-imperialism>.

²⁸⁰ Faisal Bodi, *Crescent International*, 'British police raid and occupy mosque as part of campaign to justify war on Iraq', 1 February 2003, <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/british-police-raid-and-occupy-mosque-as-part-of-campaign-to-justify-war-on-iraq>.

²⁸¹ Email from the author to the ICIT, 18 May 2021.

Chapter 8: Business and Finance

Previous chapters have referred to the Islamic Centre of England as one of the central institutions through which Iranian influence is disseminated in the United Kingdom. This chapter considers the business interests in the United Kingdom that intersect with Iran and pro-Iranian networks.

8:1 Islamic Centre of England (ICE)

As well as being a registered charity, the ICE is a private company limited by guarantee without share capital. At the time of writing, its annual accounts have been overdue since 31 December 2020.²⁸² Seyed Moosavi, the London representative of Iran's spiritual leader, is company secretary. Of the past and present named officers on the register, ten declare Iranian nationality, three British, and one Pakistani.²⁸³ There are considerable assets for them to manage. The ICE's headquarters, a former cinema at 140 Maida Vale, is on one of London's main thoroughfares. The organisation paid off its mortgage in 2004²⁸⁴ and holds considerable financial assets – the most recent accounts, for the year ending 2018, show some net assets of £4.16 million and cash in the bank of £214,670. That year the ICE received some £673,775 in donations and legacies, plus £103,491 in “other trading activities”. Despite this, its expenditure exceeded its income for the second year running.²⁸⁵

²⁸² “ISLAMIC CENTRE OF ENGLAND LTD: Overview”, *Companies House*, <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/03142456>, accessed 12 May 2021.

²⁸³ “ISLAMIC CENTRE OF ENGLAND LTD: Officers”, *Companies House*, <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/03142456/officers>, accessed 12 May 2021.

²⁸⁴ “ISLAMIC CENTRE OF ENGLAND LTD: Charges”, *Companies House*, <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/03142456/charges>, accessed 12 May 2021.

²⁸⁵ Islamic Centre of England, Financial Statements for the year ending 31 December 2018, *Charity Commission*, https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search?p_p_id=uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=2&p_p_state=maximized&p_p_mode=view&p_p_resource_id=%2Faccounts-resource&p_p_cacheability=cacheLevelPage&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_objectiveId=A9777164&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_priv_r_p_mvcRenderCommandName=%2Faccounts-and-annual-returns&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_priv_r_p_organisationNumber=1058998.

Chapter 9: Policy Recommendations

In any discussion of state disinformation campaigns, the challenge posed by Iran should be a permanent fixture. There is a pressing need to record Iran's role as a hostile player in this field, alongside those of Russia and China.

The United Kingdom needs to remind Iran that this country values its constitutional integrity, and that the UK will oppose and expose any attempt to promote separatism or division by foreign powers.

Scottish politicians, whether keen to trade with Tehran or seeking to oppose policies agreed at Westminster, need to be aware that their actions are watched as closely in Tehran as they are at home. Liberal democracies should wish to avoid encouraging the Islamic Republic of Iran, however unintentionally. For the principles of both Westminster and Holyrood to prosper, it is important to avoid the politics of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'.

Whatever the outcome of the negotiations between the Biden administration and Tehran, in the domestic context, Iran has long been hostile to the United Kingdom. It is an opponent of our values and has established a series of institutions here to propagate and protect its world view. Policymakers should recognise that, even if diplomatic relations between Whitehall and Tehran improve, that will not change the dynamic of Iranian influence operations.

The charitable status of the Islamic Centre of England is a matter for the Charity Commission. The ICE is currently under regulatory review by that organisation, and in 2020 received an official warning. Regardless of the outcome of those inquiries, it cannot be right that an organisation so closely associated with a hostile foreign government is able to be subsidised by UK taxpayers, via Gift Aid. With regard to *The Lady of Heaven* controversy, the UK authorities need to be aware of the potential risk posed to social cohesion and public order in this country by the Iranian ambassador seeking to encourage British Muslims to take action against a film. The message needs to be delivered to Iran that stirring up theological disputes in this country is unwelcome.

Chapter 10: Conclusions

Iran is an Islamic republic with an internationalist approach. It has enjoyed considerable success at establishing and maintaining institutions in this country. As seen with events at the Islamic Centre of England following the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the beliefs and values of those institutions are deeply concerning for anyone who understands the nature and characteristics of the Iranian state. Despite this, Iran possesses considerable soft power in the United Kingdom, with sympathy for Tehran and its ideals existing across a wide spectrum of political and religious actors. These sympathisers and supporters may be found in a surprisingly broad range of arenas, and take in sections of the political left, the Far Right, sections of the Shia Muslim community, and even conspiracy theorists. That does not mean that the organisations and individuals mentioned in this report have committed any wrongdoing or automatically do the bidding of Iran or share all its stated beliefs, more that sympathy for the Islamic Republic of Iran is a significant entity in our politics.

Iran has afforded status to some of these actors, via the venues it influences in the UK or through its media platforms. In other cases, the appeal of Iran matters less on what Iran does in this country but on abstract political positions – such as the Islamic Republic’s opposition to Israel, its anti-Semitism, or its status as a Muslim country that has opposed western nations and their values.

The need to push back against Iran’s messaging is accelerated by its actions in the field of spreading online disinformation. Iran’s actions are not harmless, but part of a desire to develop both the country’s influence overseas and adherence to its stripe of Islam, wherever possible. It is not new for Iran to oppose the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom. It was doing so forty years ago by supporting the Irish republican struggle in Northern Ireland. In seeking to promote Scottish independence via the tool of establishing fake websites and social media accounts, Iran is simply applying the latest technological methods to long-standing political ambitions. Similarly, the desire of the Iranian government and its ambassador to create division within British communities by raising the cry of “blasphemy”, as it has over *The Lady of Heaven* film, finds echoes in the earlier outrage of the Ayatollah Khomeini’s attacks upon Salman Rushdie.

Iran, and the Islamism it promotes, is a problem. In the UK, Iran’s clarity of purpose has not always been matched to a similar degree of clarity by its host. It is to be hoped that this report allows for a greater understanding of this problem, so it can be better addressed in the future.

Title: "IRANIAN INFLUENCE NETWORKS IN
THE UNITED KINGDOM: AUDIT AND ANALYSIS"
By Dr Paul Stott

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