Insight

The Iranian Network in the United Kingdom: How Can a Democracy Confront the Threat?

Danny Citrinowicz, Hannah Presken, and Avishai Sober[1] | No. 2221 | November 17, 2026

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In recent years, Iran has become one of the most significant threats to the United Kingdom's domestic security. Alongside attempts to harm regime opponents, journalists, and Jewish and Israeli targets, Tehran is working to expand its influence through a network of media outlets, religious institutions, organizations, and local activists. Some of this activity takes place openly and within the law, while in other cases, ties have been exposed to intelligence operatives, organizations affiliated with Iran, and even the use of criminals to carry out acts of violence. A series of recently revealed investigations and incidents illustrates the depth of the challenge facing British authorities: how to confront Iranian influence networks operating within the UK, identify when legitimate civic activity transitions into hostile activity, and prevent Tehran from exploiting the openness of British society to advance its objectives. The article recommends that the UK deepen its monitoring and oversight of Iranian influence networks, strengthen intelligence and international cooperation, improve enforcement against covert activity and criminal

[1] **Danny Citrinowicz** – Senior Researcher in the Iran and Shiite Axis program at the Institute for National Security Studies. Citrinowicz served for 25 years in various command roles in the leading intelligence collection and research units of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate, and in the Directorate Attaché's office at the Embassy of Israel in Washington.

Hannah Presken – Senior Researcher at ColEven, an Israeli non-profit organization working to identify and disrupt terrorist financing networks and financial accounts linked to terrorist organizations worldwide. She holds a BA in international relations and political science and an MA in security and diplomacy, with extensive experience in geopolitical research, countering terrorist financing, and combating online antisemitism.

Avishai Sober – Senior Researcher at ColEven. He holds a BA in Middle Eastern studies and an MA in security studies and counterterrorism, with extensive experience in researching terrorist financing and open-source intelligence (OSINT)collection.

elements operating on Tehran's behalf, and ensure that efforts to counter the Iranian threat do not undermine freedom of speech, religion, and legitimate civic activity.

Introduction – The Iranian Threat in the United Kingdom

For years, British security authorities have warned that the threat posed by Iran extends far beyond the borders of the Middle East. In response, London has taken a series of legal and security measures intended to restrict the activities of entities affiliated with the Iranian regime on British soil. However, a series of incidents and investigations published during 2026 — including the arrest of five individuals on September 27 suspected of plotting on behalf of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to attack RAF Fairford, a base used by U.S. strategic bombers for strikes against the Islamic Republic — raises a troubling question: are the measures taken effective in countering the Iranian influence networks and operations that have already taken root in the UK?

The cumulative picture indicates that, despite the legal measures taken, the campaign against the Iranian presence in in the UK remains far from achieving its goals. Media outlets and companies linked to Tehran-affiliated organizations, religious and charitable institutions, and activities on university campuses continue to serve as points of contact between entities in in the UK and Iran, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. The scale of this activity is concerning not only because of its potential political and social influence, but also in light of the security threats facing the UK as well as Israeli and Jewish entities operating within its borders. In this context, the British Security Service, MI5, reported that since January 2022, the service and the police have dealt with twenty Iran-backed plots that carried the potential for lethal harm to citizens and residents in the UK. The head of the service later warned that, in a single year, authorities had been required to monitor more than twenty Iranian plots with lethal potential. M15 also pointed out Tehran's use of local criminal elements to carry out missions on its behalf, enabling it to obscure its direct involvement and making it harder to expose those responsible.

These figures illustrate that the debate over Iran's presence in the UK is not limited to questions of propaganda, political influence, or freedom of speech, but also concerns a tangible security threat. The central challenge facing the British authorities is to distinguish legitimate religious, cultural, and political activity from influence operations directed by a foreign state, and to identify in advance when such ties are being exploited to gather intelligence, recruit operatives, or prepare acts of violence.

Communications Infrastructure in the United Kingdom: Commercial Activity, Iranian Influence, and Security Threats

One prominent pattern emerging from investigations published over the past year is the use of communications infrastructure and UK-registered companies by entities affiliated with Iran and organizations belonging to the "Axis of Resistance." In some cases, these are companies operating under British law, maintaining international business ties, and providing communications services to various organizations. This makes it difficult for the authorities to distinguish legitimate commercial and journalistic activity from infrastructure that could be used to advance the interests of Tehran and organizations linked to it.

In May 2026, British media published an investigation revealing that companies controlled by British businessman Yasser Al-Sayegh maintained ties with the Islamic Radios and Televisions Union (IRTVU), an organization sanctioned by the United States on the grounds that it operates under the control of the

IRGC's Quds Force. According to the report, the media network affiliated with the organization includes bodies linked to Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq, and other Iran-affiliated groups. Al-Sayegh rejected the allegations that his businesses serve as an arm of Iran and emphasized that their operations are conducted legally. Nevertheless, the findings illustrate how media outlets affiliated with the Iranian apparatus can develop institutional and business ties within the British market, even without an official or overt Iranian presence.

More serious concerns were raised in an investigation published by *The Sunday Telegraph* in March 2026 regarding Press TV, the English-language television channel of Iran's state broadcaster. The investigation addressed allegations that Iranian operatives exploit the UK's open media environment not only to disseminate political and propagandistic messages, but also to identify potential sources and gather information. According to the report, activity linked to the channel raised suspicions that contacts made under the guise of media work were also being used to explore possibilities for recruiting sources. The Press TV case illustrates the challenge facing British authorities: how to protect freedom of the press and expression while identifying cases in which activity presented as journalistic allegedly serves as a cover for intelligence gathering or operations directed by foreign security agencies.

Another layer of this phenomenon was exposed in January 2026, when *The National* reported that the Al-Masirah network, affiliated with the Houthis in Yemen, had maintained a London-registered company for over a decade. According to the report, the company's registered address was linked to a café in West London, and one of its directors also served as the CEO of the Yemeni television network. The investigation further pointed to historical ties between companies bearing the Al-Masirah name and an entity managed by Nayef Krayem, who previously served as chairman of Hezbollah's Al-Manar channel. Experts quoted in the article assessed that registering companies of this kind in the UK could provide a corporate framework, facilitate the development of business ties, and offer an overt justification for travel and activity in the country.

The significance of these cases is not limited to the operations of a particular company or media network. When companies, executives, and media outlets linked to these organizations operate within the same business environment in the UK, the central question is whether these are merely media and commercial collaborations, or whether some of these ties also facilitate the transfer of resources, coordination of operations, or advancement of missions on behalf of Iranian actors.

Universities: The Sensitive Arena of Iranian Influence

One of the most complex arenas in which to confront Iranian influence in the UK is the academic system. Unlike intelligence activity or terrorist financing, activity on university campuses takes place in a space where freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and academic freedom are foundational principles. Yet it is precisely this openness that also allows foreign actors to try to establish long-term influence through ties with student societies, educational institutions, lecturers, and religious organizations.

In February 2026, *The Jewish Chronicle* published an investigation into the network of student groups, Ahlulbayt Societies, operating at universities across the UK. The newspaper identified 45 societies and pointed to events they held where merchandise associated with the Iranian regime was sold and speakers voiced support for the Islamic Republic or its affiliated organizations. Following the death of Ali Khamenei in March 2026, memorial ceremonies and expressions of mourning at several academic institutions sparked further public debate regarding the extent of Iranian influence on campuses.

The issue is not limited to student societies. One of the main institutions in Iran's international religious influence network is Al-Mustafa International University, headquartered in Qom. The university trains clerics and provides religious education to international students; through its alumni, it maintains ties with Shiite communities around the world. In December 2020, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed sanctions on the university, alleging that the IRGC's Quds Force exploited its activities to recruit operatives for Iran-backed militias and to gather intelligence. The U.S. decision illustrates the concern over religious educational institutions being exploited for purposes that go beyond their stated mission.

In the UK, attention has focused on The Islamic College in London, a Shiite educational and training institution. Previously published information pointed to alleged ties between the college and Al-Mustafa International University, including references to the college as the university's British branch in publications affiliated with Iran. The college denied any such institutional link, but the case demonstrates the complexity of Iranian influence operations in the education sector. Religious educational institutions may serve as a legitimate framework for study and clerical training while also maintaining ideological, personal, or institutional ties with actors in Iran.

The challenge for British authorities is not to prevent religious activity or the expression of pro-Iranian views, but to ensure that academic and religious institutions are not exploited for activities covertly directed by a foreign state. This distinction is also essential to protect Shiite communities in the UK from unjustified generalization.

Beyond the ties between The Islamic College in London and Al-Mustafa, the college itself maintains a direct affinity with the Iranian regime. The clearest example is the identity of the college's founder, Dr. Saied Reza Ameli, who is also the Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution in Iran — a council added to the British sanctions list in 2023. In addition to Dr. Ameli, Iranian media identified Mohsen Araki, another co-founder of the college, noting that he was in fact dispatched by the Supreme Leader to establish the college together with another community center, The Islamic Centre of England. Although the Centre is ostensibly a separate organization operating in a different sphere, in practice its leadership largely overlaps with that of the Islamic College.

Further examples of senior figures who worked at both organizations include Mohammad Ali Shomali and Seyed Hashem Moosavi, who served concurrently as directors of both bodies. Thus, the Supreme Leader's envoys established an extensive network of influential entities in London, operating across multiple arenas to maximize their influence. In this case too, the connection to the Iranian leadership is entirely overt, perhaps even more so than that of most of their other organizations. The Islamic Centre's governing documents stipulate that, at any given time, one of the center's trustees must be personally appointed by the spiritual leadership in Iran. In 2025, the UK Charity Commission ordered the Islamic Centre to remove this requirement from its governing documents.

It is important to note that these institutions are not merely a platform for disseminating propaganda; they also open up more significant intelligence possibilities. In July 2025, the UK Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee wrote that the Islamic Centre of England may serve as a base for Iranian intelligence service operations, including active espionage within the UK.

From Influence Operations to the Use of Criminal Elements

The Iranian presence in the UK is not limited to religious, media, or political activity. In recent years, the British Security Service (MI5) has warned that Tehran is making increasing use of intermediaries and criminal elements to carry out operations against regime opponents, journalists, and other targets. This modus operandi allows Iran to distance its security apparatus from direct execution, reduce the exposure of its personnel, and make it harder for the authorities to establish the chain of command and accountability.

One of the most prominent examples of this is the attack against Pouria Zeraati, a journalist for the Iranian opposition channel *Iran International*, who was stabbed in March 2024 outside his home in Wimbledon, London, by two men who had traveled to the UK from Romania. The investigation found that the attack was preceded by extensive surveillance and planning, and that the assailants fled the country immediately afterward. In June 2026, the two men involved were convicted, and in July, they were handed heavy prison sentences. British prosecutors argued that the attack was carried out by proxies acting on behalf of the Iranian state. In her sentencing remarks, the judge ruled that the evidence clearly indicated the assault was conducted for the benefit of the regime in Tehran. The case thus became one of the clearest examples of the use of individuals not formally affiliated with Iran's security apparatus to carry out violent activity in the UK.

The use of criminal elements offers Tehran several advantages. It enables the regime to recruit individuals not associated with the state, conceal the link between those who ordered the attack and those who carried it out, and present the incident as a local criminal act. In addition to the Zeraati case, in May 2025 three Iranian nationals were charged on suspicion of acting for a foreign intelligence service and conducting surveillance on journalists affiliated with *Iran International*.

Jewish institutions and targets associated with Israel also feature in threat assessments by British security services. From Tehran's perspective, attacks on such targets may serve various purposes, including deterrence, retaliation, exerting pressure, and demonstrating its ability to operate beyond the borders of the Middle East.

A particularly alarming development came to light in September and October 2026. On October 2, British police announced that two Iranian nationals, Salam Ahmadian and Rahman Salehi, had been charged on suspicion of preparing an attack against the Jewish community in the Manchester area. According to allegations presented in court, the two men gathered information about Heaton Park Synagogue and the Manchester Jewish Museum, and were suspected of preparing to use an improvised explosive device. The prosecution alleged that they had been in contact with a third party, likely an Iranian operating from within Iran, who assisted with the planning and direction of the operation. The threat to the Jewish community fits into a broader picture of Iranian activity in Europe. Western security services have pointed to Iranian involvement in violent operations against Jewish, Israeli, and regime-dissident targets, and in some cases, the use of criminal elements and local intermediaries.

Iranian Influence Operations in the United Kingdom: From Overt Media to Covert Digital Activity

Alongside the operations of media outlets affiliated with the Iranian regime, Tehran has developed digital influence capabilities in recent years that enable it to disseminate messages, shape political narratives, and amplify public divisions in Western countries. This activity does not necessarily require

a physical presence in the target country. It can be conducted through news websites, social media accounts, networks of users not overtly affiliated with Iran, and actors who redistribute content originating from Iranian media outlets.

Concern over Iranian activity in the digital sphere has also been reflected in official British assessments. In March 2025, the UK Security Minister warned against the activities of Iranian intelligence operatives on British soil, noting that the threat is not limited to physical operations. According to the minister, the UK's National Cyber Security Centre identified hostile activity by Iran-affiliated actors against targets in the UK. In August of that year, the British government clarified in a response to Parliament that Iranian actors continue to employ methods of impersonation and digital deception to gain access to accounts and gather information.

The main danger is not necessarily that Iran will succeed in persuading the British public to support its policies. Influence operations can achieve narrower objectives, such as increasing distrust in institutions, generating controversy surrounding British foreign policy, undermining the public standing of Iranian regime dissidents, or spreading messages designed to intimidate journalists and activists. In this context, overt media activity, social media operations, and threats against figures associated with the Iranian opposition may serve complementary purposes, even when there is no evidence that they are being directed as part of a single operation.

The British Response and Recommendations

In recent years, the UK has expanded the legal tools at its disposal to counter the activities of foreign states. In July 2025, the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS) came into effect, requiring — under conditions stipulated by law — the registration of activities carried out at the direction of foreign states or certain entities controlled by them, including Iran. The significance of this arrangement lies in the fact that it is not restricted to overtly political activity. Under the appropriate circumstances, the registration requirement may also apply to commercial, academic, research, or public activities carried out at the direction of an Iranian entity defined under the law. Through this measure, the UK seeks to address situations in which foreign state activity is conducted via companies, institutions, or local actors rather than through official diplomatic representatives.

The UK's central challenge, therefore, is not limited to thwarting terrorist attacks or preventing Iranian intelligence operations. It must also address the long-term influence infrastructure that Tehran has built within the country, including media outlets, commercial companies, religious institutions, social organizations, and networks of intermediaries. Since part of this activity takes place within the bounds of the law, the challenge is to identify when legitimate civic activity becomes a vehicle for advancing the goals of the Iranian regime.

Accordingly, the UK needs to shift from a policy focused primarily on countering isolated threats to a comprehensive strategy against Iran's influence networks and covert activity on its soil. This strategy should combine intelligence mapping of Tehran-affiliated networks, increased financial transparency, enforcement against activities directed by the Iranian state, thwarting the use of criminal elements, and deepening cooperation with its allies. To this end, an integrated strategy is required, including several core components:

1. **Systematic mapping of Iranian influence networks:** Expanding the monitoring of institutional, financial, and personal ties between actors in the UK and institutions affiliated with the Iranian regime, the IRGC, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. The emphasis should be on identifying connections across different arenas, rather than examining each organization or company in isolation.
2. **Enhancing financial transparency and oversight:** Reviewing the funding sources of institutions and organizations receiving support from Iranian actors, including transfers of funds through companies, non-profits, and charitable organizations.
3. **Strengthening efforts to counter the use of criminal actors:** Expanding cooperation between the British Security Service, the police, immigration authorities, and financial intelligence agencies to identify Iranian attempts to recruit local criminals for terrorist operations.
4. **Protecting academic and religious institutions from exploitation:** Developing transparency mechanisms regarding foreign funding and institutional ties with Iranian entities, while safeguarding freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and academic freedom.
5. **Expanding international cooperation:** Deepening information sharing with the United States, European countries, and other partners, particularly regarding media networks, financial transfers, and criminal elements operating across multiple countries simultaneously.
6. **Effective enforcement of the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme:** Ensuring that the mechanism is used not only for collecting reports, but also for identifying unreported activity, conducting investigations, and imposing sanctions on violators of the law.
7. **Protecting threatened targets:** Expanding protection for exiled Iranian journalists, regime dissidents, Jewish institutions, Israeli diplomatic missions, and sensitive military facilities. Alongside physical security, accessible reporting mechanisms, cyber defense, and preparedness for surveillance and intelligence-gathering attempts are required.

Ultimately, the central test is not only the UK's ability to prevent the next terrorist attack, but also its ability to curtail the freedom of action of the networks that enable Tehran to gather intelligence, exert influence, and carry out hostile operations from within UK territory.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurz, Rinat Harash, Eldad Shavit and Keri Rosenbluh