

# Iran's Trojan Horse: Deobandi Networks, the Palestinian Cause, and the Struggle for Islamic Leadership

*By Catherine Perez-Shakdam - Executive Director Forum for Foreign Relations (FFR)*

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Historical Context: The Deobandi Movement and Khomeini’s Revolutionary Vision.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Tehran’s Covert Alliances with Deobandi Networks in South Asia.....</b>	<b>7</b>
Pakistan: Unlikely Bedfellows in “Jihad” .....	7
India and Bangladesh: Ideological Outposts and Outreach.....	9
The United Kingdom: Deobandi Platforms as Vectors of Iranian Influence.....	10
<b>Framing Neutrality as Betrayal: Squeezing Sunni Regimes via the Palestinian Cause.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Adapting to Proxy Weakness: Iran’s Pivot to Soft Power and Transnational Radicalisation</b>	<b>17</b>
The Weakening of Proxies – Reality or Exaggeration? Let’s assess the proxies’ state:.....	18
Hamas.....	18
Hezbollah.....	18
Houthis (Ansar Allah in Yemen).....	18
The Assad Regime (Syria).....	19
Networks like Deobandism as the Next Vector.....	20
From Proxy Warfare to Proxy Activism.....	20
<b>The UK Domestic Front: Countering Iranian Soft Power and Sectarian Agitation.....</b>	<b>21</b>
Deobandi Hubs and Iran’s Ideological Inroads.....	21
Risks to British National Interests.....	23
UK Policy Recommendations.....	23
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Policy Recommendations for the United Kingdom: Confronting Iran’s Ideological</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Expansionism.....</b>	<b>29</b>
1. Strengthen Legal and Regulatory Instruments Against Iranian Influence.....	29
2. Intelligence and National Security Measures.....	30
3. Community Resilience and Counter-Radicalisation.....	30
4. Public Awareness and Strategic Narrative.....	30
5. International & Strategic Engagement.....	31
6. Close Legal Loopholes for Militant Sympathisers.....	31
7. Education and Online Regulation.....	31

## Executive Summary

Iran's clerical regime is waging a sophisticated campaign to reshape its influence across the Muslim world – including in Britain – by weaponising the Palestinian cause as a Trojan horse. Tehran seeks to don the mantle of Islamic leadership in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), outflanking Sunni rivals (notably Saudi Arabia) by casting support for Palestine and fierce anti-Zionism as the ultimate litmus test of Islamic legitimacy. This research brief examines how the Islamic Republic exploits transnational Sunni Islamist currents – particularly the South Asian Deobandi movement – to galvanize Muslim opinion against Israel and the West, thereby pressuring Sunni governments into ideological submission. It explores historical and ideological intersections between Deobandism and Iran's 1979 revolutionary thought, Tehran's covert partnerships with Deobandi networks in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and even the UK, and uses the recent example of Pakistan's Grand Mufti calling for *jihad* on Israel to illustrate Iran's strategy of framing neutrality as betrayal of the *Ummah* (global Muslim community). The brief highlights the geopolitical threat this poses to Saudi Arabia's custodianship of Mecca and Medina, arguing that Iran's aim is to present itself as the *rightful leader of the Islamic world* by recasting the Palestinian struggle as a moral yardstick for Muslim rulers.

As Iran's traditional Shia proxies—Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis—suffer military setbacks or reach operational limits, Tehran is increasingly shifting towards soft power, ideological radicalisation, and strategic alliance-building to preserve and reconfigure its so-called “Axis of Resistance.” While the Islamic Republic has long employed soft power as a parallel tool of influence, the recent erosion of its Shia Crescent—undermined in large part by Israeli military and intelligence operations—has made this strategy not merely complementary but central. Confronted with the disintegration of its regional architecture, Iran is now doubling down on narrative warfare, trans-sectarian mobilisation, and political subversion as alternative means of asserting influence across the Middle East and beyond. This includes cultivating extremist Sunni networks like Deobandism as force multipliers for its agenda. A UK domestic dimension emerges as well: Britain hosts numerous Deobandi-linked institutions and communities, which could be vulnerable to Iranian propaganda and sectarian agitation. The potential convergence of Khomeinist and Deobandi extremist narratives risks importing Middle Eastern sectarian polarisation into UK Muslim communities – something Iran would cynically exploit to undermine Western cohesion and Saudi influence.

This brief pulls no punches: it depicts Tehran's clerical rulers as opportunistic puppeteers using Palestinian suffering as stagecraft for their own hegemonic ambitions, and warns of the “*unholy alliance*” between Iran's Guardians and certain Sunni zealots that imperils both regional stability and Western societies. The brief concludes with detailed policy recommendations for the UK – from countering Iranian soft power and monitoring extremist ideologues, to supporting Saudi-led moderation – in order to safeguard British interests and help neuter Iran's malignant influence.

## Introduction

In the tumultuous rivalry between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a new front has opened that transcends conventional geopolitics. It is a battle for the *soul of the Muslim world*, waged not only with militias and missiles but with mosques and megaphones. At the heart of this contest is the issue of Palestine – a cause célèbre that Iran’s Ayatollahs relentlessly champion as proof of their Islamic credentials, and which they wield as a cudgel to bludgeon Sunni Arab leaders deemed too conciliatory toward Israel. By stoking anti-Zionist fervour across the Middle East and beyond, Tehran aims to isolate and embarrass Sunni regimes (especially the Saudi custodians of Islam’s holiest sites) unless they fall in line behind the banner of “resistance.” This strategy amounts to a grand ideological Trojan horse: under the noble guise of liberating Palestine, Iran smuggles in its own ambition to supplant Sunni leadership and export its revolutionary influence into Sunni-majority societies.

Crucial to this effort has been Iran’s outreach beyond its natural Shi’a constituency, forging unlikely alliances with radical Sunni networks. The case of the South Asian Deobandi movement – a puritanical Sunni revivalist tradition that has spread from India and Pakistan to diasporas in the UK – is instructive. Historically wary of Shi’ism, Deobandi clerics would seem improbable bedfellows for Iran’s Shi’a theocrats. Yet converging political interests and shared Islamist worldviews have led to *de facto* alignments - similar to the alliance with the Sunni Hamas. Iran has deftly courted hardline Sunni ulema (religious scholars) whose rage against Israel and the West rivals its own, thereby uniting erstwhile adversaries under a common cause. The implications are both immediate and far-reaching: from Islamabad to London, calls for jihad against Israel are no longer whispered at the fringes—they are boldly declared from pulpits, rallies, and increasingly mainstream platforms. Sunni clerics, once cautious of aligning with Tehran’s Shia agenda, now echo its rhetoric with alarming ease, framing armed struggle as a divine mandate and branding Muslim states that pursue peace as traitors to Islam.

This shift did not happen overnight. It follows the logic of the boiling frog—wherein a creature placed in gradually heated water fails to recognise the danger until it is too late. The West, through its pattern of appeasement, equivocation, and endless negotiation with radical actors, has sent a clear message: that ideological extremism carries little cost and considerable strategic value. Each failure to act decisively, each concession dressed as diplomacy, has been read not as restraint but as weakness.

And now, emboldened by our inertia, these radical movements are no longer content with rhetoric alone. They are transitioning from incitement to action—targeting Jews not

only in the Middle East, but across Europe and North America, under the guise of justice and resistance. What was once subtext is now declared policy. What was once fringe is fast becoming doctrine.

The cost of ignoring the warning signs is no longer theoretical. We are witnessing, in real time, the consequences of letting the temperature rise unchecked.

This brief delves into how Iran is repositioning its regional influence by exploiting such cross-sectarian alliances and ideological sympathies. We begin with a historical overview of the Deobandi movement – its 19th-century origins in anti-colonial resistance and the surprising intersections with Iranian revolutionary thought. We then examine Tehran’s covert partnerships with Deobandi and other Sunni Islamist networks in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and the United Kingdom, shining light on a pattern of collaboration that remains hidden behind public sectarian rhetoric. A focal point is the recent Grand Mufti of Pakistan’s fatwa calling for holy war on Israel – a vivid example of Iran’s strategy to pressure Sunni regimes (like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE) by fomenting grassroots Islamist agitation that frames any neutrality on Palestine as an unforgivable betrayal of the *Ummah*.

Subsequent sections assess the geopolitical threat to Saudi Arabia and its leadership of the Islamic world. Tehran’s aim is exposed as an audacious attempt to usurp the prestige of Mecca and Medina’s guardians by presenting the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance” as more faithful defenders of Muslim honor than the House of Saud. We discuss how the weakening of Iran’s traditional proxies (Hezbollah’s setbacks, Hamas’s battering in Gaza, a quiescent Houthis in Yemen) is prompting a tactical shift: doubling down on *soft power*, *radicalisation* campaigns, and transnational ideological networks like Deobandism to carry the revolutionary torch forward.

Finally, the brief turns to the UK domestic dimension. It explores how Iranian influence operations and extremist Deobandi preaching could converge in Britain, where a large segment of the Muslim community traces its heritage to South Asia’s Deobandi tradition. We consider the risks of sectarian polarisation taking root in UK cities – a scenario that would delight Tehran’s strategists as much as it would horrify British policymakers. In conclusion, we offer robust recommendations for the UK government to counter Iranian soft power, disrupt the nexus between the IRGC and Sunni extremists, reinforce Saudi-led moderation efforts, and ultimately defend both British national security and the principle of a pluralistic, moderate Islam in the face of this new ideological onslaught.

## Historical Context: The Deobandi Movement and Khomeini’s Revolutionary Vision

The Deobandi Movement’s Origins in Anti-Colonial Revivalism: The Deobandi school of Islam was born in the embers of 19th-century colonial India, as Muslim scholars sought to reassert Islamic identity under British rule. In 1866, just a decade after the British

crushed the last Mughal revolt, a group of ulema founded the Darul Uloom seminary in the town of Deoband (north of Delhi). Their mission was both spiritual and political: by returning to what they saw as the *core principles of Islam* – strict monotheism, prophetic tradition, and sharia law – Indian Muslims could *resist British colonial domination*.<sup>1</sup> This revivalist ethos spread rapidly. Deobandi teachers joined forces with anti-colonial movements (even allying with Mahatma Gandhi's freedom struggle) and after the 1947 Partition, they fanned out across South Asia, establishing networks of madrasas from Pakistan's North-West Frontier to the streets of Dhaka. The creed they propagated was austere, puritanical, and deeply suspicious of Western influence – a *Muslim society purified of foreign corruption* was their rallying cry.

While Deobandism primarily concerned itself with reforming Sunni practice (shunning folk rituals, Sufi shrine worship, etc.), it was inherently political from inception. It venerated jihad against oppressors – not unlike contemporary Shi'a revolutionaries in Iran. Indeed, the *Taliban* of Afghanistan, arguably Deobandism's most infamous adherents, trace their ideological roots directly to the Deobandi seminaries of Pakistan. The Taliban's mantra of restoring an Islamic Emirate free from infidel troops was in many ways the modern culmination of Deobandi thought – a product of British India's legacy transposed to the 21st century.

Now fast forward to 1979 in Iran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini topples the Shah and establishes a Shi'a theocracy – but crucially, he brands it an *Islamic Revolution* with appeal beyond Iran's borders. From day one, Khomeini preached Muslim unity across sectarian lines, broadcasting the seductive slogan "*La Sunnia, la Shi'a, Islamia Islamia!*" – "Not Sunni, not Shia, [only] Islamic".<sup>2</sup> To Sunnis chafing under secular dictators or Western puppet regimes, this refrain was sweet music. It implied that Iran's revolution belonged to every Muslim who yearned to see Islam triumph over corrupt rulers. Khomeini explicitly framed Israel, Western imperialism, and local tyrants as common enemies of all Muslims, Sunni and Shi'a alike.<sup>3</sup>

In truth, Khomeini's ideology (later dubbed *Khomeinism*<sup>4</sup>) drew heavily on earlier Sunni Islamist thinkers. He admired the works of Sayyid Abu'l-A'la Maududi (the Indo-Pakistani scholar who founded Jamaat-e-Islami) and Sayyid Qutb (the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood ideologue)<sup>5</sup>. Each of these figures advocated for an Islamic state governed

---

<sup>1</sup> Diaa Hadid, "The Taliban's Ideology Has Surprising Roots in British-Ruled India," *NPR*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/08/1034754547/taliban-ideology-roots-deobandi-islam-india>.

<sup>2</sup> Ghazala Khan, "The Truth Behind Iran's Claim of Unity of the Ummah," *Ghazalikhan.com*, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.ghazalikhan.com/truth-irans-claim-unity-ummah/#:~:text=After%20the%20overthrow%20of%20Raza,Ummah%20and%20Supremacy%20of%20Islam>.

<sup>3</sup> Sanam Vakil and Naysan Rafati, "Iran's Regional Strategy: Raising the Stakes in the Hamas-Israel War," *Chatham House*, November 2, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/11/irans-regional-strategy-raising-stakes-hamas-israel-war>.

<sup>4</sup> United Against Nuclear Iran, "Khomeinism," *United Against Nuclear Iran*, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/khomeinism>.

<sup>5</sup> David Emanuel Singh, "Direct Flight to Revolution: Maududi, Divine Sovereignty and the 1979-Moment in Iran," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 33, no. 3 (2023): 579–597, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186323000143>.

by divine law and unapologetically opposed Western political models – a vision Khomeini shared. As one analysis notes, Khomeini “transcends Sunni and Shi’i particularities,” drawing on a *shared Islamist heritage* with Sunni luminaries like Hassan al-Banna (MB founder) and Qutb. Little wonder that Maududi himself, though a Sunni, celebrated the Iranian Revolution; on his sickbed he rejoiced at news of the Shah’s fall and hailed Khomeini’s uprising as a “pure Islamic revolution” uniting Muslim hearts. The message was clear: despite theological rifts, Islamists across the spectrum saw a kindred struggle in Iran’s defiance of a godless order.

This ideological consonance meant that *Sunni movements like the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Deobandi-influenced parties were initially sympathetic to Iran*. In the heady early 1980s, it was not uncommon to see Sunni Islamists extolling Khomeini as a leader of the *Ummah*. As a contemporary recalled, “each and every Muslim who was opposed to sectarianism...welcomed it [the Iranian revolution]” regardless of Sunni-Shia labels.<sup>6</sup> Sectarian differences were momentarily eclipsed by a utopian pan-Islamic fervour.

**Early Tensions and the Sectarian Backlash:** However, the honeymoon between Iran’s Shi’a revolutionaries and Sunni Islamists was short-lived. Iran’s aggressive export of revolution – especially its mobilisation of Shi’a communities abroad – unsettled Sunni regimes. In Pakistan, for instance, Khomeini’s triumph emboldened the Shi’a minority to demand greater rights, prompting Saudi Arabia and local Sunni elites to counter-mobilise *hardline Deobandi groups* as a bulwark. By the mid-1980s, Pakistan witnessed an explosion of sectarian violence: Iranian-backed Shi’a militant groups (like Sipah-e-Muhammad) on one side, and virulently anti-Shia Deobandi militias (like Sipah-e-Sahaba and its offshoot Lashkar-e-Jhangvi) on the other.<sup>7</sup> These Deobandi militants – who viewed Shias as heretics – were heavily influenced and funded by Saudi sources as part of the broader proxy war with Iran. What had begun as chants of “No Sunni, no Shia” in 1979 descended into tit-for-tat assassinations and massacres by the 1990s, shattering the illusion of unity. Over 700 lives were lost to sectarian killings in Pakistan in that period as Sunni-Shia “jihad” supplanted anti-imperial struggle [persee.fr](https://persee.fr).

Khomeini himself did little to soothe matters; his vitriolic denunciations of Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabi rulers poured fuel on the fire. After Saudi security forces killed hundreds of Iranian pilgrims during a 1987 Mecca protest, Khomeini thundered that “these vile and ungodly Wahhabis are like daggers which have always pierced the heart of the Muslims from the back,”<sup>8</sup> declaring that Mecca was in the hands of a band of heretics (the House of Saud). Such rhetoric confirmed the worst fears of Sunni monarchs – that Iran intended to one day wrest custodianship of Islam’s holiest shrine from them. The 1987

<sup>6</sup> Ghazali Khan, “The Truth About Iran’s Claim to Unity of Ummah,” *Ghazali Khan*, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.ghazalikhan.com/truth-irans-claim-unity-ummah/#:~:text=In%20those%20days%20%20was.%20was%20one%20of%20them.>

<sup>7</sup> Husain Haqqani, “Weeding Out the Heretics: Sectarianism in Pakistan,” *Hudson Institute*, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/weeding-out-the-heretics-sectarianism-in-pakistan#:~:text=The%20ongoing%20war%20in%20Iraq.Islam%27s%20Sunni%20and%20Shi%27a%20sects.>

<sup>8</sup> Martin Kramer, “Khomeini’s Messengers in Mecca,” *Martin Kramer on the Middle East*, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://martinkramer.org/reader/archives/khomeinis-messengers-in-mecca/>.

Mecca incident marked a nadir in sectarian relations, with Iran-Saudi tensions bursting into the open. Yet, it also encapsulated the core of Iran's strategy: use the symbolism of *Hajj* and *al-Quds* (Jerusalem) to claim moral leadership over Islam, painting the Saudi royals as unfit stewards who serve America and Israel instead of Islam.

In summary, the historical interplay between Deobandism and Iran's revolutionary ideology is one of convergence in anti-imperialist zeal, followed by divergence in sectarian contest. The Deobandi movement's legacy of anti-colonial jihad and strict Islamic governance found resonance in Khomeini's pan-Islamist message. Both envisioned an Islamic order transcending nation-states, where God's law prevails over Western or secular rule<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, despite sectarian labels, Iran's doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) and Sunni Islamists like the Brotherhood share a political vision that elevates religious authority above all else, seeking to unite the *ummah* under a divinely sanctioned state.<sup>10</sup> This provides the ideological groundwork on which Tehran has been able, when convenient, to partner with Sunni hardliners – including Deobandis – for common goals. But as history shows, such alliances are fraught and cynical: when principles of Islamic solidarity clash with realpolitik, sectarian instincts resurface with a vengeance.

Understanding this context is vital as we turn to the present, where Iran once again seeks to transcend sectarian barriers— this time by leveraging the Palestinian cause – in order to co-opt Sunni populations and undercut their traditional leaders. The ghost of Khomeini's 1979 call for unity lingers, now cloaked in Palestinian keffiyeh and channeled through Sunni voices that might, on the surface, appear to be Iran's adversaries. It is a remarkable turn of history that the *Deobandi ulema* who once spearheaded anti-Shia campaigns in Pakistan are now, in some cases, echoing Iran's anti-Israel rhetoric and aligning (tacitly) with Tehran's grand narrative. To this Machiavellian development we now turn.

## Tehran's Covert Alliances with Deobandi Networks in South Asia

Despite sectarian schisms, Iran's regime has proven adept at finding common cause with Sunni Islamist networks when it suits its interests. Over the past decades, Tehran has quietly cultivated relationships with segments of the Deobandi movement and other Sunni hardline factions across South Asia – often through intermediaries and ideological patronage rather than formal pacts. The goal: to weave a subtler web of influence in Sunni-majority societies by piggybacking on existing religio-political networks. These covert partnerships allow Iran to extend its reach beyond its Shi'a base, infiltrating the

---

<sup>9</sup> Forum for Foreign Relations, *The Cleric and the Activist: Iran's Guardianship and the Brotherhood's Mission in the UK*, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://forumforforeignrelations.org/the-cleric%2F-the-activist%3A>.

<sup>10</sup> Forum for Foreign Relations, *The Cleric and the Activist: Iran's Guardianship and the Brotherhood's Mission in the UK*, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://forumforforeignrelations.org/the-cleric%2F-the-activist%3A>.



intellectual bloodstream of Sunni communities with the toxin of Khomeinist anti-Western, anti-Israel propaganda.

## Pakistan: Unlikely Bedfellows in “Jihad”

Pakistan is home to the largest concentration of Deobandi institutions in the world – tens of thousands of madrassas, mosques, and the influential political party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI). Historically, many of these Deobandi elements were funded by Saudi Arabia and viscerally anti-Iran (seeing Shi’ism as deviation). Yet Iran has managed a nuanced penetration of Pakistan’s religious landscape. How? By appealing to shared anti-Zionist, anti-American sentiments and leveraging individuals and events that unite Sunni and Shia radicals against common foes.

One striking example is Iran’s rapport with *Maulana Fazlur Rehman*, the longtime leader of JUI (a Deobandi clerical party) and a major power-broker in Pakistani politics. Fazlur Rehman, despite his Sunni orthodoxy, has maintained cordial ties with Iran. He has visited Tehran and voiced support for Iranian positions on issues like Palestine and opposition to American policies. At the height of the U.S. “War on Terror,” Iranian media cultivated Sunni militant figures who opposed the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, essentially finding a meeting of minds with Deobandi jihadists fighting Western troops. In Afghanistan, Iran even gave covert aid to the Taliban (a quintessential Deobandi movement) during the U.S. occupation, despite the Taliban’s earlier massacres of Shi’as – purely because *enemy-of-my-enemy logic* prevailed. This cynical détente culminated in scenes unthinkable in the 1990s: Iranian officials hosting Taliban delegations in Tehran as *brothers-in-arms* against American “aggression.”

Within Pakistan, Iran’s cultural and charitable wings have increased outreach to Sunni communities on platforms like the Palestinian cause. The Iranian consulates and their proxies have reportedly funneled money to Sunni religious conferences that focus on Al-Quds (Jerusalem). By championing Palestine so vehemently, Tehran gains goodwill even among Sunni clergy who otherwise might distrust Shi’as. The result is a *creeping ideological alliance*. When Iran’s Supreme Leader issues a call to arms against Israel or denounces American influence, those statements find amplification in Pakistan’s Deobandi mosques and madrassas, not just in Shi’a halls. Iranian state media (Press TV, etc.) are consumed by Urdu-speaking Sunnis who share the anti-Israel passion.

This convergence was on full display in November 2023 – April 2025, during and after the Israel–Gaza war. Pakistan, despite having no diplomatic ties with Israel, saw an unprecedented groundswell of clerical anger directed not only at Israel but at any Muslim government seen as acquiescent.<sup>11</sup> Iran’s fingerprints were subtly present: its propaganda outlets and diplomats praised the Pakistani religious leadership for “standing with Palestine,” implicitly urging them to go further. When Pakistan’s top

---

<sup>11</sup> 5Pillars, “Pakistan’s Grand Mufti: Jihad on Israel Obligatory for Muslim Governments,” *5PillarsUK*, April 11, 2025, <https://5pillarsuk.com/2025/04/11/pakistans-grand-mufti-jihad-on-israel-obligatory-for-muslim-government/>.

Deobandi scholar, *Mufti Taqi Usmani* (often referred to as the Grand Mufti of Pakistan), issued a landmark fatwa calling for jihad against Israel, it echoed the very rhetoric Iran has espoused for decades. Speaking at a “National Palestine Conference” in Islamabad, Mufti Usmani declared that jihad against Israel is an “obligatory duty” for all Muslim governments in the face of Israeli aggression.<sup>12</sup> He lambasted Muslim rulers for their inaction, thundering: “*What is the use of the armies of Muslim countries if they do not engage in jihad?*” Usmani even invoked the memory of Pakistan’s secular founder Jinnah’s stance against Israel, as if to give cross-ideological cover to his clarion call.

What makes this episode so striking is that it did not emerge from some fringe back-alley madrassa or outlawed militant group. It was a formal, public fatwa—broadcast live on national television—endorsed by the very pillars of Pakistan’s religious establishment. Alongside Mufti Taqi Usmani, one of the most revered Deobandi jurists alive, stood Maulana Muneeb-ur-Rahman (himself bearing the title of “Grand Mufti”) and Maulana Fazlur Rehman, head of JUI-F and a major political force in his own right. In short, the fatwa carried the imprimatur of senior Sunni scholars from across Pakistan’s major religious currents.

Together, from a public podium, these establishment ulema issued a collective call for all Muslim nations to wage war against the “illegitimate state” of Israel. It sent shockwaves through Pakistan’s ruling elite—not because such sentiments were unheard of, but because they had now been legitimised from the very heart of the religious mainstream, not from some extremist faction at the margins.

While Pakistan has historically maintained a hardline position on Israel—refusing recognition since 1947 and voicing consistent solidarity with the Palestinians—this marked a radical escalation. Here were the country’s highest-ranking clerics publicly issuing a religious decree for armed jihad, aligning perfectly with Tehran’s pan-Islamic narrative of resistance and the eradication of the “Zionist regime.”

For Pakistan’s fragile civilian leadership and a military long intent on keeping Pakistan out of Middle Eastern entanglements, this was a nightmare scenario: a theological green light for a confrontation they had worked for decades to avoid. For Iran, however, it was a strategic windfall—a moment that even its most seasoned propagandists could hardly have scripted better.

While there is no *smoking gun* document tying Iran’s government directly to that Islamabad conference, the ideological alignment is unmistakable. Iranian media *exulted* in these developments. The rhetoric used – e.g., referring to Israel as a “*cancerous tumor*” or invoking the defence of “*the first Qibla*” (Jerusalem) – are hallmarks of

---

<sup>12</sup> Samaa TV, “Pakistan’s Grand Mufti Urges Muslim Govts to Wage Jihad Against Israel,” *Samaa English*, April 11, 2025, <https://www.samaa.tv/2087331585-pakistan-s-grand-mufti-urges-muslim-govts-to-wage-jihad-against-israel#:~:text=Mufti%20Taqi%20Usmani%20.Israel%27s%20continued%20aggression%20against%20Palestine>.

Khomeinist discourse.<sup>13</sup> Tehran, through soft influence, helped create an atmosphere where Pakistani Sunni clerics felt emboldened to take a line far more hardline than even the most radicals of Arab Sunni leaders. The result is that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and others appeared timid or traitorous by comparison – exactly the contrast Iran wants to highlight. (We will examine that contrast in detail in subsequent sections.)

Thus, in Pakistan, Iran's covert alignment with Deobandi and broader Islamist networks has manifested as a deliberate weaponisation of shared messaging. Tehran has not merely encouraged Pakistani religious leaders to champion the Palestinian cause—it has actively used and further weaponised their influence to frame the battle for Palestine as an obligatory, personal jihad. In this narrative, any hesitation to engage in “holy war” is portrayed as a betrayal of faith itself.

Iran's longer-term objective appears clear: to pressure Pakistan's leadership—custodians of one of the world's largest Muslim armies—into adopting a more confrontational posture towards Israel, or at the very least, to prevent any future consideration of détente. Already, the prospect of Pakistan recognising Israel has been rendered politically toxic. Senior clerics now cite the fatwa asserting that “Pakistan would never recognize” the Zionist state, sealing the matter in theological terms.

Thanks in no small part to Tehran's strategic cultivation and exploitation of Sunni religious authority, Pakistan remains firmly entrenched in the anti-Israel camp—a reality Iran can count as one of its quiet but enduring victories.

## India and Bangladesh: Ideological Outposts and Outreach

In India, the Deobandi school retains a significant presence (Darul Uloom Deoband itself still operates, and many Indian mosques follow its teachings). Although India's Muslim community is a minority, it is the world's third-largest Muslim population – fertile ground for influence in the long term. Iran has maintained generally good relations with India's government, but on the popular level, it reaches out to Indian Muslims on issues like Jerusalem and US policy. For instance, Iranian diplomats and cultural centers in Delhi have organized *Al-Quds Day* rallies, inviting not just Shi'a but also Sunni participants. *Al-Quds Day*, instituted by Khomeini in 1979, is commemorated on the last Friday of Ramadan as a day of solidarity against Israel.<sup>14</sup> In recent Gaza crisis years, thousands of Sunnis in countries as diverse as Indonesia and Malaysia have joined Quds Day protests, showing the broad appeal of this Iranian-declared event. In India too, especially in Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh, we see Sunni religious figures attending

---

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Levitt, “Don't Let Iran's Regime Win the Battle for Hearts and Minds in Gaza,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 28, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-let-irans-regime-win-battle-hearts-and-minds-gaza#:~:text=While%20many%20international%20leaders%20were,made>.

<sup>14</sup> Al Jazeera. “Thousands around the world rally for Palestinians on Al-Quds Day.” *Al Jazeera*, April 5, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2024/4/5/thousands-around-the-world-rally-for-palestinians-on-al-quds-day#:~:text=Thousands%20around%20the%20world%20rally,On%205%20Apr%2020245>.

Quds Day or Palestine solidarity marches shoulder-to-shoulder with Shia organizers – a small but symbolic bridging of the sectarian divide under Iran's anti-Israel banner.

Iran's state media in Urdu (which is understood by many North Indian Muslims) and even in English (PressTV) often highlight Indian Muslim voices that are critical of Israel or of India's growing ties with Israel.<sup>15</sup> The aim is to stoke discomfort within India's Muslim minority about their government's dealings with the Zionists. Tehran hopes that if enough pressure builds domestically – say, Indian ulema issuing moral condemnations – it could slow down or complicate Indo-Israeli relations. This is soft power at its subtlest: Iran can't dictate policy in New Delhi, but it can try to foment a *moral opposition* to any alignment with Israel by empowering Indian Muslim activists and clerics who oppose it.

Similarly, in Bangladesh, a Sunni-majority nation with a vibrant Deobandi madrasa scene, Iran's influence has percolated through Islamist civil society. Bangladesh's largest Islamist party (Jamaat-e-Islami) is more aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood than Deoband, but the country also has strong Deobandi institutions (e.g. Hefazat-e-Islam).<sup>16</sup> Historically, Bangladeshi Islamists have been staunchly pro-Palestine and anti-Israel – positions naturally congruent with Iran's. During the 2023 Gaza war, mass rallies took place in Dhaka with chants for jihad in Palestine.<sup>17</sup> While those rallies were grassroots, Iran's embassy praised the Bangladeshi people for their stance. It has sponsored interfaith (or rather inter-sect) conferences in Dhaka where Shi'a and Sunni scholars jointly denounce Israel's actions. There have even been reports of Iran offering scholarships to Bangladeshi Islamic students to study in Qom (Iran's religious center), a gentle way of seeding Khomeinist ideas in a Deobandi-dominated society.

What Iran seeks in South Asia is not conversion of Sunnis to Shi'ism – that would be quixotic and counter-productive. Instead, it seeks conversion of Sunni outrage into instruments of Iranian policy. By aligning with Deobandi and other Sunni networks on issues like Palestine, Iran effectively co-opts their moral authority for its own geopolitical narrative. The partnership is "covert" in the sense that it's not openly acknowledged – no Deobandi council will say "we are allies of the Ayatollah." In fact, they may still hurl theological invective at Shi'ism in other contexts. But on the political front, a remarkable alignment has occurred: *the same Deobandi fatwas that once damned Shi'as now damn Israel and the West with equal or greater fervor*. Tehran is content to let old sectarian grudges lie dormant as long as the guns (literal or figurative) of Sunni extremists are pointed towards its enemies and not towards Iranian proxies.

---

<sup>15</sup> Sami Ahmad Khan, "Iran's Urdu-Language Soft Power Strategy: Targeting India's Muslims," *Millennial Asia* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989241287270>.

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad Abbas Hassan, "Bangladesh: Islamic Resurgence, Shift In National Identity, And Rising Tensions With India – Analysis," *Eurasia Review*, February 8, 2025, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/08022025-bangladesh-islamic-resurgence-shift-in-national-identity-and-rising-tensions-with-india-analysis/>.

<sup>17</sup> "Tens of Thousands Rally Against Israel in Bangladesh," *Yahoo News*, April 13, 2024, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/tens-thousands-rally-against-israel-163700525.html>.

## The United Kingdom: Deobandi Platforms as Vectors of Iranian Influence

Iran's outreach to Deobandi and Islamist networks has not stopped at the shores of the subcontinent. It extends into the diaspora, including the United Kingdom, which hosts over 3 million Muslims – a large portion of them of South Asian heritage. The UK thus emerges as a significant theatre for what one might call Iran's "global soft war." Tehran recognizes that Britain's freedoms allow a wide latitude for religious and political activity, which can be exploited to project Iranian propaganda under the guise of free speech. Here, Iran's influence often intersects with Deobandi-linked institutions that dominate British Islam at the community level.

It may surprise many Britons to learn that *over 40% of UK mosques are run by the Deobandi sect, and most British imams are trained under Deobandi seminaries.*<sup>18</sup> This conservative Sunni infrastructure – encompassing hundreds of mosques, dozens of Islamic seminaries, and related charities – wields significant influence over British Muslim life. To be clear, the vast majority of British Deobandi institutions are not extremist per se; they tend to focus on religious instruction and community services. However, a strain of isolationist and ultra-orthodox mindset prevails, which can be susceptible to hardline narratives. Many Deobandi mosques have imported the subcontinent's theological debates and worldview, including distrust of Western governments and a *reflexive support for global Muslim causes* like Palestine or Kashmir.

Iran has capitalised on this milieu by subtly injecting its own narratives into the discourse. The annual Al-Quds Day rally in London is a prime example. Organized by pro-Iran groups (often with links to the Islamic Human Rights Commission and the *Islamic Centre of England*, a UK-based institution loyal to Tehran), the Quds Day march each year features not only Shi'a participants waving Hezbollah flags, but also Sunni Muslims and left-wing activists united in denouncing Zionism. What might have been a marginal demonstration has grown – particularly after the Gaza conflicts – into a prominent event. According to one policy analysis, *"the annual Al Quds Day rally, coordinated by groups affiliated with or sympathetic to the Iranian regime, is not merely an expression of opinion. It represents a strategic extension of Iran's ideological objectives... Through Quds Day, Iran actively weaponises the democratic freedoms of the United Kingdom... to incite hatred, glorify terrorism, and undermine social cohesion and national security."*<sup>19</sup> In short, Iran is using Britain's open society as a staging ground to export its revolutionary dogma under an anti-Israel banner – effectively *hijacking London's streets to fight Tehran's battles by proxy.*

British Deobandi institutions themselves are not openly pro-Iran, but the danger lies in ideological convergence. Many British Muslim organisations influenced by Deobandi or

<sup>18</sup> Al Jazeera. "Thousands around the World Rally for Palestinians on Al-Quds Day." *Al Jazeera*, April 5, 2024.  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2024/4/5/thousands-around-the-world-rally-for-palestinians-on-al-quds-day#:~:text=Thousands%20around%20the%20world%20rally.On%205%20Apr%2020245.>

<sup>19</sup> *Forum for Foreign Relations*, "Countering Iran: A Strategic Framework," accessed April 15, 2025,  
<https://forumforforeignrelations.org/countering-iran.>



Brotherhood thought propagate a narrative that *loyalty to the global Muslim ummah* trumps all, and that Western foreign policy (especially vis-à-vis Israel) is part of a grand war on Islam. This overlaps neatly with Iran's talking points. Both Iranian proxies and certain Sunni activist groups in the UK relentlessly accuse the British government of Islamophobia (for example, branding the UK's Prevent counter-extremism program as an anti-Muslim crusade), and they frame conflicts like Israel-Palestine or the War on Terror as a *binary jihad against infidels*. The result is a climate where extremist ideology festers and occasionally spills into overt threats – British jihadists heading to Syria or Iraq (some inspired by Brotherhood-style grievances, others by Iran-aligned militias), or domestically, hatred being stirred up against British Jews, ex-Muslims, and moderate Muslims who are deemed “traitors”.

The UK's own security services have long been wary of how *non-violent extremism* creates a mood music for terrorism. Now Iran's hand in this is becoming increasingly blatant. A UK policy brief bluntly noted that “*Iran actively weaponises the democratic freedoms of the United Kingdom... to incite hatred, glorify terrorism, and undermine social cohesion*”.<sup>20</sup> Tehran's mouthpieces in Britain (like *Press TV*, which despite being banned from UK airwaves for a time, still reaches audiences online) push conspiracy-laden content that amplifies every grievance in Muslim communities. Whether it's portraying Britain as complicit in Palestinian oppression, or defending extremists under the guise of free speech, the narrative aligns with what hardcore Deobandi or Salafi preachers might also say. The convergence of Khomeinist propaganda and Deobandi radicalism is a worrying development: one rooted in Shi'a revolutionary aims, the other in Sunni puritan zeal, but both meeting at the crossroads of anti-Western animus.

Consider the specific issue of sectarian polarisation within the UK. Historically, British Sunnis and Shi'as have lived in relative harmony, but imported tensions are occasionally flaring up. For instance, during the 2022 Arbaeen processions (a Shi'a observance) in London, there were a handful of ugly incidents where extremist Sunni hecklers (influenced by Pakistan's anti-Shi'a hate preachers) tried to provoke Shi'a marchers. Conversely, Shi'a speakers at times have praised Iran's military exploits in Syria or Iraq in ways that alienate Sunnis. While these incidents are isolated, Iran would stand to benefit from a more *sectarianised Muslim community in Britain*. Why? Because divided communities are easier to manipulate, and because Iran's loyalists can then pose as the “true defenders of Islam” against both the West and the now appointed takfiri (extremist Sunni) elements – a role they relish.

Moreover, Iran's IRGC has shown a willingness to operate on British soil in more sinister ways: espionage, harassment of dissidents, even plots to kidnap or kill. In 2022–2023, British authorities revealed they had foiled at least 15 plots by Iran to assassinate or abduct individuals deemed enemies of the regime on UK soil.<sup>21</sup> An Iranian

<sup>20</sup> Forum for Foreign Relations, “Countering the Islamic Republic of Iran's Influence in the United Kingdom,” accessed April 26, 2025, <https://forumforforeignrelations.org/research>.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Townsend and Geneva Abdul, “Met Police and MI5 Foil 15 Plots by Iran Against British or UK-Based ‘Enemies’,” *The Guardian*, February 18, 2023,

London-based TV station critical of Tehran was essentially forced to relocate to the US due to IRGC threats, an unprecedented assault on UK sovereignty. This climate of intimidation extends to community spaces: pro-Iran rallies in London sometimes feature explicit support for designated terrorist organizations (like Hezbollah) and calls for violence. The UK's tolerance of these under the banner of free expression has arguably been exploited to the hilt by Tehran's agents. As one forum on foreign relations observed, Britain's hesitance to crack down (despite new laws like a Foreign Influence Registration Scheme) means events like Quds Day – which openly glorify Iran's militant proxies – continue, representing a “critical shortfall in the UK's ability to safeguard its institutions, protect its communities, and defend its democratic values”.<sup>22</sup>

In essence, Britain has inadvertently become an arena for Iran's ideological chess game. Deobandi-linked mosques and madrassas in the UK are not Iranian-controlled, but some have provided platforms to speakers who push extreme anti-Western views that gel with Iran's narrative. And on university campuses, Islamist student societies – sometimes influenced by MB or Deobandi ideals – invite incendiary speakers who parrot Iranian talking points about imperialist conspiracies or the need for Muslim solidarity against the UK government's policies. All this undermines integration and promotes a separatist, grievance-fueled mindset among some British Muslims, which both Iran's regime and Sunni extremists *happily encourage*. The *endgame* for Tehran is to raise a generation of Western Muslims who are distrustful of their own governments and sympathetic to Iran's “resistance axis” – a pool of opinion that Iran can tap for political leverage and, in some cases, recruitment into its global extremist network.

Having mapped out Iran's covert and tacit alliances with Deobandi and other Sunni networks across South Asia and into Britain, we see a clear pattern: Tehran is expertly exploiting the Palestinian cause and other shared grievances to bridge sectarian divides and create a united Islamist front against its enemies. This is the “Trojan horse” in action – the outer appearance is Sunni anger for Palestine, but inside the horse lurk Iran's ideological soldiers, ready to capture hearts and minds for the Ayatollah's agenda. Nowhere is this more evident than in how Iran uses these alliances to put pressure on Sunni regimes, especially the one regime it detests above all: the Saudi monarchy. In the next section, we turn to how Iran is leveraging this strategy to challenge Saudi Arabia's leadership over the Muslim world, using Sunni voices as the tip of the spear.

## Framing Neutrality as Betrayal: Squeezing Sunni Regimes via the Palestinian Cause

Iran's strategic genius – if one may call such cynicism genius – lies in turning its rivals' *inaction* into *infamy*. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Tehran's leveraging of the Palestinian tragedy to shame and pressure Sunni Arab regimes. The formula is straightforward: equate *neutrality or moderation towards Israel* with a betrayal of Islam

---

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/feb/18/met-police-mi5-foil-15-iranian-plots-against-british-or-uk-based-enemies>.

<sup>22</sup> Forum for Foreign Relations, *Countering Iran*, 2025, <https://forumforforeignrelations.org/countering-iran>.

itself. By this logic, any Sunni government that doesn't actively confront Israel (or that even considers normalizing relations) is labeled a treacherous sell-out to Zionism and imperialism. It is a powerful emotional argument, one that resonates with Muslim populations who see the Palestinian struggle as a visceral, almost personal pain. And Iran – drenched though it is in the blood of Syria and Yemen – presents itself as the righteous avenger of that pain, while depicting Sunni kings and presidents as complicit cowards.

The Grand Mufti's Jihad Fatwa: A Cautionary Tale for Sunni Rulers: Revisit the Islamabad fatwa by Pakistan's Grand Mufti and allies calling for global jihad against Israel. That event was not just a local affair; its reverberations were felt across the Muslim world. For Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Jordan and others, it was a dire warning: *if even Pakistan's mainstream ulema are baying for war, how long before your own clergy and public do the same?* Tehran surely delighted in the discomfort of the Saudi leadership as they watched an ostensibly Sunni-only gathering implicitly indict them. After all, who were the fatwa's targets? Ostensibly Israel, yes, but between the lines one could read the indictment of all those Muslim armies that *haven't* rushed to Gaza's rescue. "What use are your armies?" Mufti Usmani asked pointedly – a question that could be aimed as much at Riyadh and Cairo as at Islamabad.

The message to the Arab street was clear: *your rulers, with all their billions in Western-bought weaponry, sit on their hands while Palestinians are slaughtered; therefore, they are useless at best, traitors at worst.* Iran has long nurtured this narrative. Back in 2020, when the UAE and Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords to normalize ties with Israel, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei excoriated the UAE as having "betrayed the Islamic world and the Palestinians".<sup>23</sup> Iranian officials warned those Gulf states of a "dangerous future" and being "solely responsible for the consequences".<sup>24</sup> When rumors swirled of a potential Saudi-Israel normalization, President Ebrahim Raisi snarled that any such deal would be a "*stab in the back*" to Palestinians – language aimed directly at undermining Saudi credibility.<sup>25</sup>

In the wake of the Gaza war carnage (where tens of thousands of Palestinians were reported killed), public anger on the Arab street soared. Iran adeptly fanned the flames. The International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) – a body historically tied to Qatar and the Brotherhood – issued its own call for Muslim countries to intervene militarily in Gaza. Though IUMS is not Iranian, Tehran amplified their call. Pro-Iran media

---

<sup>23</sup> Al Jazeera. "Iran's Khamenei Says UAE 'Betrayed' Muslim World with Israel Deal." *Al Jazeera*, September 1, 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/1/irans-khamenei-says-uae-betrayed-muslim-world-with-israel-deal>.

<sup>24</sup> i24NEWS. "Iran Warns Bahrain, UAE Will Be 'Solely Responsible' for Consequences of Israel Deal." *i24NEWS*, September 16, 2020.

<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/1600252935-iran-warns-bahrain-uae-will-be-solely-responsible-for-consequences-of-israel-deal>.

<sup>25</sup> Toi Staff and Jacob Magid, "Iranian President Says Israel-Saudi Ties Would Be 'Stab in the Back' to Palestinians," *The Times of Israel*, September 21, 2023,

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/iranian-president-says-israel-saudi-ties-would-be-stab-in-the-back-to-palestinians/>.



highlighted huge protests in places like Algeria, Syria, and Yemen with crowds chanting “*The people demand jihad*”. This transnational chorus of jihad has the effect of terrifying moderate Arab regimes. For instance, Egypt’s Grand Mufti (aligned with the state) felt compelled to publicly refute the IUMS fatwa as “irresponsible,” warning it could lead to disaster for Palestinians if misadventurism provoked worse from Israel. That reaction itself shows how effective the pressure was – Egypt’s government had to scramble to justify *not* declaring war.

Saudi Arabia is Tehran’s ultimate target in this game. The Saudis have trod carefully: they condemned Israeli actions and paused normalisation talks after October 2023, but they did not cut existing quiet ties nor mobilize forces. Still, the Saudi Crown Prince (Mohammed bin Salman) likely sees the sword hanging over his head: Iran wants to make him appear a traitor to Islam if he doesn’t tow the “resistance” line. Khamenei and his IRGC strategists know Saudi Arabia’s internal legitimacy partly rests on its claim to defend Muslim causes. If Iran can rob them of that by showing millions of Muslims – including Saudis’ own populace – consider Riyadh a sell-out, it strikes at the very heart of the monarchy’s narrative of guardianship.

Indeed, Iranian propaganda often directly calls out the Saudi royals. Tehran’s state TV and officials routinely refer to them as puppets of the US who have “sold” Palestine. In forums like the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation), Iran has blasted member states who normalized with Israel, calling it a “*betrayal of Muslims*” and a violation of OIC principles. An Iranian delegate in 2020 warned that any interaction with the “fake Zionist regime” is a betrayal that will “deal a serious blow to the unity” of the Muslim world. He pointed out that some countries had “revealed their secret relations” with Israel, thereby betraying the *Ummah*. This was a clear allusion to the Emirates, Bahrain, and by extension Saudi Arabia which at that time was covertly warming to Israel. *Iran was effectively outing the Arab normalization as an act of treason in an Islamic forum – a bold diplomatic ambush.*

The Palestinian cause is thus recast by Iran not just as a humanitarian or nationalist issue, but as the *paramount religious duty* of Muslims everywhere. Tehran puts it starkly: *if your leader does not actively support the resistance in Palestine, your leader is betraying God and Prophet*. Such absolutist framing corners Sunni rulers. Their choices are either to toughen their stance (to avoid being called traitors) or to face growing dissent and Islamist opposition domestically. This is Iran’s desired outcome: *radicalise the middle ground, leave no room for neutrality*. In a sense, Tehran is saying to the Sunni kings: “Either march with us against Israel, or we will help your own people and clergy hang the scarlet letter of betrayal around your neck.”

Geopolitical Earthquake for Saudi Arabia: For Saudi Arabia, which stakes its legitimacy on being “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques” (a title meant to evoke leadership of the Muslim world), Iran’s campaign is a direct threat. If enough of the Muslim *Ummah* comes to see Iran (a Shi’a Persian power) as a more authentic champion of Islam’s causes than Saudi (the Sunni Arab steward of Mecca), the Saudi claim to primacy weakens. Tehran seeks to invert the sectarian narrative: instead of Sunnis rallying

behind Saudi against Shi'a Iran, Iran wants Sunnis (or at least a significant militant subset) rallying behind Iran's vision and *against Saudi*.

Consider the optics: Iran's Supreme Leader leading Quds Day chants of "Death to Israel" before rapt crowds, versus Saudi's de facto leader MBS hosting business summits with Americans and pondering peace deals with Israel. For a devout Muslim incensed by Gaza's suffering, which leader appears to stand with the *Ummah* and which appears aloof? Iran plays on these optics masterfully. When Hezbollah or Hamas (Iran-backed) launch rockets at Israel, Iranian media frame it as *Islam striking back*. When Saudi Arabia quietly allows Israeli overflights or intelligence sharing, Iranian outlets and social media proxies whisper to the masses: "*See? The House of Saud are in bed with the Zionists.*"

Saudi Arabia's nightmare would be for Iran to successfully incite widespread unrest in the Kingdom under the banner of Palestine. One could envision, for example, radical Saudi clerics (perhaps influenced by transnational Islamist currents) issuing a fatwa similar to Pakistan's, declaring the Saudi government's lack of jihad tantamount to apostasy. While the Saudi state tightly controls its clerical establishment, there are underground Islamist networks and a public increasingly vocal on social media. Already, Saudi officials had to vehemently deny Israeli claims of cooperation during flare-ups; in one instance, Saudi Arabia publicly denied reports that it helped Israel's defense in any way, so as not to ignite backlash.<sup>26</sup> The very fact they felt compelled to deny such reports shows the pressure of public opinion fueled by pro-Palestine (and indirectly pro-Iran) sentiment.

Even Jordan and Egypt, which have peace treaties with Israel, tread on eggshells now. Jordan's king issued strident condemnations of Israel to align with his street's anger; Egypt's president had to convene summits for Gaza and allow large aid convoys, lest he be seen as complicit with Israel's siege. In the April 2024 scenario discussed earlier, when Iran attacked Israeli targets and some Arab states quietly aided Israel's defense, those Arab states took great pains to keep it secret, "reluctant to declare their support publicly" due to the popular anger at Israel's actions. Saudi even denied any intelligence sharing that some media alleged. This climate of fear among Sunni regimes is *exactly* what Iran hopes to perpetuate. If Arab rulers feel restrained by their own people's pro-Palestine fervor, they are less likely to join an anti-Iran front or normalize with Israel. Tehran thus *detonates the "Palestine bomb"* in the court of public opinion to box in its rivals.

Let's be unambiguous: Tehran's moral posturing on the Palestinian issue is brazenly hypocritical. This regime had no qualms slaughtering Syrians to save Assad, or starving Yemeni civilians via the Houthis' war. But in geopolitics, perception can trump reality. Iran's strategy is to morally blackmail Sunni governments – *dare them to be less Islamic than the Ayatollah*. It is reminiscent of Hitchens' observation that "*the essence of tyranny is not iron law; it is capricious law.*" Iran essentially sets up a new standard (all

---

<sup>26</sup> Arash Azizi, "Which Side Will Arabs Take in an Iran-Israel War?" *Atlantic Council*, August 29, 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/arabs-iran-israel-war/>.

Muslims must fight Israel now!) and then damns those who don't heed this capricious, self-serving edict.

By framing neutrality or moderation as the ultimate betrayal, Iran also conveniently justifies any of its own aggressive moves as righteous. If, say, tomorrow a proxy militia attacks a Gulf state that has relations with Israel, Iran can spin it: *well, they were traitors siding with Zionists, so they had it coming*. It's a pre-emptive moral alibi for future belligerence. Moreover, it puts countries like Saudi in a lose-lose situation. If Saudis continue a cautious approach, they risk being called traitors by the "Arab street" that Iran and its allies wind up. If Saudis pivot to hardline and scuttle peace overtures, they surrender diplomatic initiative to Iran and remain stuck in perpetual conflict mode – again a win for Tehran, which prefers a militant status quo to any peace that sidelines it.

In summary, Iran's exploitation of the Palestinian cause serves a twofold purpose: delegitimize Sunni Arab leaders and elevate Iran's own claim to Islamic leadership. Tehran is attempting nothing less than to rewrite the consensus of who speaks for the Muslim world. It wants the answer to be not Riyadh, not Cairo, but "*the Axis of Resistance*" – i.e. Tehran and its confrères – because they alone ostensibly pass the litmus test of standing uncompromisingly with Palestine. It is as if Khomeini's old dream of leading a united Muslim *Ummah* is being reloaded for the 21st century, with Gaza's ruins as the stage and Sunni Islamists as the chorus in Iran's passion play.

But as Iran pushes this grand narrative, one must ask: how sustainable is it, given that some of Iran's most crucial instruments – its proxy groups – have taken hits in recent times? What happens if Hezbollah is weakened, Hamas is crushed, or the Houthis are pacified? Will Iran's strategy collapse without its militant "Axis," or can it adapt through other means? The next section tackles these questions, examining how Iran responds to the potential fall of its proxies by shifting to *soft power and radicalisation tactics*, including deeper reliance on transnational networks like the Deobandis we've discussed. Iran's ideological war is far from over; in fact, it might just be beginning a new phase.

## Adapting to Proxy Weakness: Iran's Pivot to Soft Power and Transnational Radicalisation

Iran's regional clout has long rested on its "Axis of Resistance" – a network of proxy militias and allied regimes extending from Lebanon's Hezbollah to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, to Iraq's Shia militias, Syria's Assad regime, and Yemen's Houthi rebels. These forces have been the hard power tools of Iranian influence, acting as Tehran's sword and shield against Israel, the U.S., and Sunni rivals. Yet recent events have strained this axis. The 2023 Hamas-Israel war and its aftermath inflicted grievous losses on Hamas; Hezbollah faces unprecedented economic and political pressure in Lebanon; the Houthis are in a tenuous truce with Saudi Arabia; and even Iran's anchor, the Assad regime, has been economically devastated by war. Sensing potential weakness, Iran's leadership is already recalibrating. Plan B is in effect: if the

armed proxies are bloodied or restrained, double down on soft power infrastructure, ideological indoctrination, and new alliances – in essence, *fight with ideas and indoctrinated people when missiles and drones can't carry the day*.

A recent analysis from the Washington Institute succinctly captures Iran's shifting emphasis: *"Policymakers often focus on the IRGC's militia assets... but the formal groups are only the tip of the iceberg. The IRGC has also created a soft-power infrastructure across the Middle East and beyond... aimed at the recruitment and radicalization of local populations."*<sup>27</sup> Tehran's goal is not just to arm militias, but to arm minds with its ideology. In Gaza, for example, even as Hamas's rockets were being intercepted and its fighters killed, Iran was eyeing the *post-war landscape*. The same analysis noted that Tehran, anticipating a ceasefire, was *"eyeing post-war aid to Gaza as a way of expanding its soft-power influence, radicalizing and recruiting local Palestinians for its ideological battle against Israel"* [washingtoninstitute.orgwashingtoninstitute.org](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-let-irans-regime-win-battle-hearts-and-minds-gaza). This is a telling insight: Iran sees *destruction not only as tragedy but as opportunity*. Wherever war creates rubble and despair, Iran moves in with cash, schools, and indoctrinators to bind the wounded population to its cause.

This modus operandi is "tried-and-tested." After the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war, Iran's IRGC swiftly deployed to Southern Lebanon under the guise of reconstruction, pouring in an estimated \$100 million to rebuild homes, roads, and utilities. They built schools and clinics – but these weren't apolitical humanitarian acts. These facilities promoted Tehran's extreme ideology, effectively turning villages into bastions of pro-Iran sentiment. It was hearts-and-minds warfare, and it worked: Hezbollah emerged from 2006 not isolated as Israel hoped, but arguably more beloved in Lebanon for "resisting" Israel and then helping rebuild. Iran is poised to replicate this in Gaza if given a chance – stepping in as the hero to rebuild what it covertly helped Hamas destroy.

## **The Weakening of Proxies – Reality or Exaggeration? Let's assess the proxies' state:**

### **Hamas**

According to some reports (including an analytical scenario by the Stimson Center), the 2023 Gaza war decimated Hamas's military infrastructure – killing many fighters, wrecking tunnels, depleting arsenals. Hamas may retain a shadow of governance in Gaza post-war, but its capacity to fight Israel head-on has been dealt a severe blow. For Iran, Hamas was a valuable Sunni arrow in its quiver, unique because it is Sunni Palestinian but pro-Iran. If Hamas is crippled, Iran loses a key lever against Israel. Hence the urgency to reconstitute Hamas or shape whoever leads Gaza next (be it Hamas 2.0 or some new militant generation) with Iranian influence. Tehran likely

---

<sup>27</sup> Kasra Aarabi, "Don't Let Iran's Regime Win the Battle for Hearts and Minds in Gaza," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-let-irans-regime-win-battle-hearts-and-minds-gaza>.

increased support to Palestinian Islamic Jihad (even smaller but even more beholden to Iran) to keep Israel bogged down. If one proxy falls, Iran props up another – or radicalizes the youth to form a new one.

## Hezbollah

This Lebanese Shia militia is Iran's crown jewel, once described as having capabilities rivaling national armies. But Hezbollah has been entangled in Syria's war for a decade (suffering losses) and faces anger at home for its role in dragging Lebanon into conflicts. In a hypothetical scenario posited by analysts, a full-scale Israel-Hezbollah war alongside the Gaza war could have *"catastrophic losses: [Hezbollah's] entire high command eliminated, thousands of troops killed, and a significant portion of its arsenal destroyed."* While thankfully such a nightmare war didn't fully materialize in 2023 (Hezbollah engaged in limited skirmishes, calibrating carefully), the risk was real. If Hezbollah were ever severely weakened or deterrence lost, Iran's deterrent against Israel also diminishes greatly. However, short of all-out war, Hezbollah remains potent – it actually didn't "fall." Still, its soft-power halo in the Arab world has dimmed in recent years due to sectarian perceptions (post-2011, many Sunnis see Hezbollah as a tool of Iran's sectarian agenda in Syria rather than a pure anti-Israel champion). Iran is acutely aware of this slip in prestige. The Chatham House assessment notes that after Hezbollah's 2006 exploits, Iran's and Hezbollah's soft-power peaked, and Tehran is "eager to recover [that] in the current crisis". In effect, Iran hopes the new confrontation with Israel will *rehabilitate Hezbollah's image* as resistance heroes and not just Assad's henchmen – a soft power reset.

## Houthis (Ansar Allah in Yemen)

Far from being weakened, the Shi'a-aligned Houthis have grown more capable over time, with an arsenal of drones and missiles that can reach deep into Saudi territory – and as of 2023, even struck at Israel (firing missiles/drones toward Eilat during the Gaza war). Some analysts dub the Houthis "Iran's new Hezbollah", noting their growing strength and ability to disrupt Red Sea shipping or bombard foes, combined with the difficulty of neutralizing them in Yemen's rugged terrain.<sup>28</sup> The Houthis recently have observed a ceasefire, but if that breaks, they represent a formidable front against Saudi (and now potentially against Israel too). Iran could leverage them as both military and psychological weapons – their attack on Israel was a symbolic first in Arab-Israeli conflict history (an Arab militia outside of Palestine directly attacking Israel's territory). That is something Iran can trumpet: "look, even Yemeni revolutionaries we support are striking the Zionists, where are the Saudi jets? Bombing Yemen instead of Israel!" So the Houthis provide Iran an extra arrow in the quiver – or a spare if others falter.

---

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Slavin, "Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' Weakened But Still Dangerous," *Stimson Center*, January 10, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2025/irans-axis-of-resistance-weakened-but-still-dangerous/>.

## The Assad Regime (Syria)

Iran invested blood and treasure to save Assad, and succeeded, but Syria lies in ruins and economically wrecked. For Iran's regional influence, Assad's survival kept a corridor to Hezbollah open. But if a scenario like the Stimson one came true, where in late 2024 an anti-Assad offensive succeeded in toppling him (they imagined a shocking HTS victory in Idlib leading to regime collapse)<sup>29</sup>, that would be a colossal blow – “billions of dollars in Iranian investment evaporated overnight”. While this specific scenario is speculative and didn't happen by early 2025, it underscores Iran's vulnerability: its one Arab state ally is fragile. Iran's Plan B here is interesting – they have not hinged everything on Assad the man; they've embedded themselves so deeply (via militias, bases, demographic changes) that even if Assad were gone, Iran might seek deals with any successor, or maintain chaos to keep influence. Still, losing Syria would be the loss of a state pillar of the axis, hence Iran's diversification into influencing non-state actors even more becomes a hedge.

Given all this, it's evident Iran is hedging by shifting more weight onto ideological and soft-power strategy. The IRGC's indoctrination arms are as important as its Quds Force now. Institutions like *Al-Mustafa International University* in Qom (which recruits and trains foreign students in Iran's revolutionary interpretation of Islam), or cultural centres in Iraq and Lebanon, are critical in creating a cadre of non-Iranian loyalists who can perpetuate Iran's agenda locally. These are the hidden force multipliers – the preachers, the writers, the social media propagandists inspired by Iran.

One cannot overstate the importance of media and propaganda. PressTV, Al-Manar (Hezbollah TV), various pro-Iran websites in Arabic, Urdu, English, all pump out a steady diet of “resistance” content. Iran has invested in cyber influence too; as noted, even GCC students in the UK are targets of Iranian cyber operations aiming to hack and influence them. The ideological war is borderless – Iran wants to inspire a global subculture of Islamists who see its enemies as enemies of Islam. In many ways, this is more dangerous than the proxies' rockets. Rockets can be intercepted; a poisoned mind is harder to defuse.

## Networks like Deobandism as the Next Vector

Which brings us full circle to transnational movements like Deobandism. As Iran recalibrates, it identifies Sunni movements that can carry the torch of radicalization where its Shia proxies can't directly reach. Deobandi networks, with their vast madrasas and missionary reach (e.g., Tablighi Jamaat, which is strong in Deobandi circles, spreads conservative Islam globally), are potential vessels. They are not Iranian-controlled, but Iran can indirectly steer parts of their discourse. For instance, if a Deobandi madrasa curriculum in Pakistan begins to emphasize anti-Israel themes more than before, or if Deobandi preachers in East London start echoing Iranian talking points about Western conspiracies – that's an Iranian ideological victory.

---

<sup>29</sup> Barbara Slavin, “Iran's ‘Axis of Resistance’ Weakened But Still Dangerous,” *Stimson Center*, January 10, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2025/irans-axis-of-resistance-weakened-but-still-dangerous/>.

Iran's subtle courting of these networks also provides a sectarian insurance policy. Should sectarian tensions flare (say, if a Sunni extremist attack targets Shias or vice versa, undermining Iran's unity narrative), Iran can point to these Sunni "allies" and claim it truly represents all Muslims, not just Shias. And if any Deobandi or MB-type group gets in trouble with authorities (for instance, gets branded extremist in the UK or elsewhere), Iran can champion their cause as part of the "oppressed Muslims." This happened with the Muslim Brotherhood after the Egypt coup 2013 – Iran briefly tried to cozy up to the MB as fellow victims of a pro-Israel tyranny. That didn't go far due to Syria issues, but it shows Iran's opportunism.

## From Proxy Warfare to Proxy Activism

We might say Iran is expanding from proxy warfare to proxy activism. If bombs and bullets are less available, mass protests and fatwas will do. We saw glimpses: huge crowds in Baghdad rallied to pro-Iran cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's call to protest the Gaza war. Iraqi Shia militias (under Iran's sway) held off attacking U.S. bases in October 2023 for a time, but they relentlessly shelled the Green Zone with demands to expel the Israeli embassy (Iraq doesn't have formal ties but had a small delegation). In Bahrain, Shia dissidents (long backed by Iran) used the Gaza crisis to renew protests against the Sunni monarchy's contact with Israel. All these are *non-state political actions rather than* full militancy, showing Iran's influence operating in civil agitation mode.

Iran is effectively telling its proxies and partners: *if you can't shoot, shout*. Use the streets, use the pulpit, use social media – keep the flame of resistance alive and make life hell for those governments we dislike by whipping up their people. This is a "battle for hearts and minds" and Iran is determined not to lose it, even if some battles of tanks and drones are lost. As a Chatham House piece observed, Tehran's support for groups over decades wasn't just military; it was about "providing regular support and developing cross-border networks" and it reaped success by positioning Iranian-backed groups around Israel and Saudi Arabia's borders as pressure points. Now, with those groups under fire, Tehran is eager to regenerate their soft-power appeal to continue justifying their existence and Iran's patronage.

To sum up: Iran is adapting to any proxy setbacks by intensifying its ideological offensive. This involves exploiting every crack in the social and political fabric of the Sunni world – and indeed the broader world – to sow anti-Israel, anti-Western, and anti-Saudi sentiments that align with its goals. It leverages sectarian neutral themes (Palestine, anti-colonialism) to transcend the Shi'a base, while still pushing a radical Islamist narrative that ultimately serves Khomeinist ends. And it co-opts transnational networks (like Deobandis) as force multipliers in this ideological struggle, effectively enlisting Sunni foot-soldiers of the mind where Shi'a foot-soldiers of the gun might be in short supply.

This adaptive strategy poses a complex challenge for Western nations and regional moderates. It is far easier to drop a bomb on a militia encampment than to defuse a toxic ideology spreading in mosques and online forums. Iran's soft power war is a slow burn, but potentially as corrosive to the international order as its missiles. The next

section will localize this threat to the UK context, examining how Britain can and must respond. Because while Middle East battlefields may seem distant, the ideological battle is already in our midst – on the streets of London and Birmingham where chants of “Allahu Akbar” mix with calls for jihad in distant lands, and where the Union Jack flies uneasily alongside flags of foreign militias in protests. The UK cannot afford complacency as Iran’s shadow lengthens over the hearts and minds of communities at home.

## The UK Domestic Front: Countering Iranian Soft Power and Sectarian Agitation

From the foregoing analysis, it’s evident that Britain is not immune to Iran’s grand strategy. In fact, the UK is a target-rich environment for Tehran’s soft power and influence operations. A combination of factors – a large Muslim population with diverse sectarian representation, robust freedoms of expression, and the presence of both Iranian state actors (embassy, cultural centers) and sympathetic Islamist networks – make the UK a key battleground in the ideological confrontation with Iran. This section explores the domestic risks and offers policy prescriptions in a British context, channeling some of Hitchens’ acerbic clarity about what is at stake.

### Deobandi Hubs and Iran’s Ideological Inroads

As discussed, the UK’s Muslim communities are heavily South Asian in origin, and Deobandi institutions have outsized influence, running roughly 40-45% of British mosques and a majority of Islamic seminaries. Many British imams are Deobandi-trained, often in Pakistani madrasas or UK branches thereof. Meanwhile, Britain also hosts a significant Shi’a diaspora and direct Iranian religious presence (e.g., the *Islamic Centre of England in Maida Vale*, which is essentially an outpost of Iran’s Supreme Leader’s office). London is a city where one can find a Deobandi mosque on one street and, not far away, an Iranian-sponsored Hussainiya (Shi’a religious hall). Generally, these communities coexist peacefully in the UK. However, global events can import tensions, and Iran tries to play communities off each other to its advantage.

One concrete concern is sectarian polarization among British Muslims fueled by foreign propaganda. Iranian media in the UK often harps on Sunni extremist threats (like ISIS or anti-Shia hate preachers) to rally Shi’a diaspora under Iran’s protective wing. Conversely, some Pakistan-origin Sunni channels or preachers in the UK may demonize Shias (calling them Iranian agents or worse). If left unchecked, this could erode the social cohesion of British Muslim communities and even lead to clashes or hate crimes. The UK already has experience dealing with sectarian hate – e.g., extreme Pakistani-origin Sunni group Sipah-e-Sahaba had sympathizers in Britain who incited against Shias. Similarly, Iranian-linked groups have held programs eulogizing figures like Qassem Soleimani (the IRGC Quds force commander) – to Iranian Shias he’s a hero, to many Sunnis he’s a war criminal for Syria. This *contestation of narratives* could play out on UK soil, creating communal friction.



Iran would love to see Britain's Muslims split along sectarian lines because it can then *insert itself as the patron of one side* (the Shi'a side and any allied Sunnis) and claim moral high ground against the other (which it will label as puppets of Saudi or extremist). Already, when the UK proscribed Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist group, Iranian-backed voices in the UK cried foul, trying to portray it as an attack on "those defending Palestine." Likewise, after Sunni jihadists attack Shias (like the horrific ISIS-linked bombing in Manchester Arena 2017 which targeted all Britons but emanated from Sunni extremism), Iran's propagandists subtly push the narrative that British Shias need Tehran's protection from such Sunni militancy. It's a mafia-like protection racket logic: stir up fear, then offer protection – all to increase influence.

On the other hand, Iran also reaches out to Sunni activists in Britain on common causes. The case of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is instructive. The MB's UK offshoots (various charities, advocacy groups, media like *Middle East Monitor*) propagate staunch pro-Palestine, anti-Western-intervention rhetoric that dovetails with Iran's. A recent policy brief observed that despite sect differences, "*Iran-aligned networks and Brotherhood-influenced networks in the UK can reinforce each other's impact*". Both inculcate the idea that loyalty to the global Muslim *ummah* should override civic loyalty to Britainfile-7jxzqeirkqc6sae9hohwrj, and both cast the UK as part of an oppressive anti-Muslim world order (whether through foreign policy or domestic counter-terror laws). This dual extremism (Shia Khomeinist and Sunni Islamist) creates a feedback loop of radicalization. A British Muslim consuming this propaganda might oscillate between anger at "Western attacks on Muslims" and glorification of "resistance movements" whether they be Hamas or Hezbollah – failing to recognize that both brands of extremism ultimately threaten UK values and security. The convergence is so sharp that British security officials worry that these ideologies "blur the line between politics and faith, indoctrinating followers to see conflicts like Israel-Palestine... not in nuanced terms but as [a] binary jihad against infidels. Such absolutism has translated into real security incidents – from British nationals going abroad to join jihadist groups to hatred against Jews and others.

## Risks to British National Interests

Iran's activities in the UK are not merely about influencing opinions; they pose concrete threats to national security. As noted, MI5 and counter-terror police have their hands full with Iranian plots on UK soil – *15 foiled plots to kidnap or kill individuals in Britain* in a short span, which is extraordinary. These were mainly targeting Iranian dissidents or journalists (like the brave Persian-language reporters who had to flee the UK because of IRGC threats). But imagine if Iran can radicalize a segment of British Muslims to align with its worldview; those individuals could be used as foot soldiers in future plots or subversive activities. It's not far-fetched. We recall how Russia in the Cold War recruited from sympathetic communist circles in Western societies. Iran could similarly find fellow travelers among British extremists. A radicalized Shia youth in London might be enticed to surveil or harass an Iranian dissident for the regime; a radicalized Sunni youth inspired both by Iran and Sunni jihadism might decide British soldiers or Jewish communities are fair game for attack (seeing them as extensions of the "Zionist-Crusader" enemy). Either scenario is a nightmare for UK security.

Even short of terrorism, Iran's influence undermines UK interests by inciting social discord. The large pro-Palestine demonstrations in late 2023 in the UK were overwhelmingly peaceful and included broad civil society – but there were fringes where extremist chants and symbols appeared (e.g., praise for Hamas, or the appearance of Hezbollah flags in some Quds Day-linked rallies). The more Iran succeeds in pushing the community discourse to extremes, the more we will see friction at home. Already British Jews felt under siege during the Gaza war due to heated protests and a spike in antisemitic incidents. The UK prides itself on tolerance and multicultural harmony, but Iran “*weaponises the UK's democratic freedoms*” to undermine exactly that. It abuses free speech to spread hate and glorify violence, holding the UK's values against itself in a jiu-jitsu move.

This cannot be allowed to continue with impunity. As Hitchens might say, it's time to call things by their proper name: Iran is orchestrating extremist propaganda on British soil that acts as a fifth column against liberal society. Meanwhile, *extremist Deobandi and Islamist groups*, while avowedly non-violent in the UK, are in effect the *useful idiots* (or perhaps willing accomplices) of Tehran's grand disruptive scheme. They share enough common cause – a dislike of Western “decadence” and pluralism, a theocratic mindset, and a hatred for Israel – that they objectively end up on the same side.

## UK Policy Recommendations

The final task is to outline how Britain can counter this insidious challenge. The UK Government must craft a response that is firm, principled, and holistic. Below are key recommendations:

### **Expose and Disrupt Iranian Influence Networks**

The UK should fully utilize the new *Foreign Influence Registration Scheme* and other instruments to shine a light on Tehran's tentacles in Britain. Groups and individuals with opaque ties to Iranian institutions (be it funding flows from the Iranian embassy or coordination with IRGC-linked media) should be required to register and face scrutiny. If charities or religious centres are found to be channels for Iranian state propaganda or incitement (for example, the Islamic Centre of England has had trustees praising Khamenei's directives), the Charity Commission and security services must take appropriate action – up to and including closure or prosecution for unlawful activities. The era of turning a blind eye under the rubric of interfaith outreach or fear of offending sensibilities is over. As one think-tank report urged, the UK must “*expose and neutralise foreign malign influence*” and not tolerate events like Quds Day that incite hatred on its streets. Banning the public display of terrorist symbols (e.g. Hezbollah flags) and stricter policing of hate speech glorifying terrorist acts can blunt Iran's ability to stage moral theatrics in London that serve as jihadi recruitment tools abroad.

### **Proscribe the IRGC and Its Fronts Completely**

It is baffling to many observers that the UK has not yet fully proscribed Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, given its direct threats to

UK lives. The IRGC and its aliases (including cultural arms often masquerading as NGOs) should be designated so that membership or support becomes a criminal offense. This would empower law enforcement to go after those collaborating with IRGC activities in the UK, such as intimidation of dissidents or cyber-harassment of students (something Iran is doing to GCC students in Britain).<sup>30</sup> Additionally, increase resources for MI5 and counter-terror police to monitor and foil Iranian espionage or assassination plots. The message to Tehran must be clear: *Britain is not your playground*; every agent you send and every puppet you activate will be identified and dealt with.

### **Engage and Vet Deobandi Institutions**

The UK government and local authorities should intensify engagement with Deobandi seminaries and mosques, encouraging those that are peaceful and integrative, while isolating those preaching extremism. Many Deobandi mosques are part of the fabric of British Islam and can be partners against extremism if guided. However, it's no secret that some Deobandi mosques have hosted preachers with deeply illiberal views (e.g., anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, homophobic and sectarian rhetoric). A carrot-and-stick approach is needed: offer support and inclusion to those who embrace *British values of pluralism*, but hold to account (through public censure, loss of charitable status, or other sanctions) those that persistently propagate intolerant ideologies or flirt with Iranian propaganda. Enhanced training and accreditation for imams could be part of this – ensure UK-based imam training programs include modules on civic responsibility, interfaith respect, and the dangers of foreign extremist influence. There is precedent: after issues with certain imams, countries like Morocco offered to train imams to counter radical messaging. The UK could work with moderate Muslim nations or domestic scholars to empower a new generation of clerics who are resistant to both ISIS-type and Khomeini-type narratives.

### **Promote Sectarian Harmony Initiatives**

Government and civil society should invest in Sunni-Shia dialogue and unity efforts within the UK. This might include inter-sect community projects, joint religious festivals, and statements by Muslim leaders of all stripes condemning sectarian hate. Iran loses leverage if British Sunnis and Shias present a united front that rejects imported conflicts. Perhaps a *British Muslim Charter of Unity* could be developed, where mosques and organizations pledge not to disseminate sectarian slurs or foreign political extremism. Peer pressure within communities is powerful; if the mainstream of British Islam stands up and marginalizes those spouting Iranian revolutionary slogans or Sunni extremist rhetoric, those fringe actors lose clout. Support networks for ex-radicals and their families can also help rehabilitate those who flirted with extremism. Essentially, deny Iran the fuel for its divide-and-rule by strengthening communal bonds that transcend the Sunni-Shia divide and anchor identity in British civic life.

### **Coordinate with Allies and Expose Iran's Hypocrisy**

---

<sup>30</sup> Forum for Foreign Relations. *Threat Landscape for GCC Students in the UK*. 2025. <https://forumforforeignrelations.org/threat-landscape>.

The UK should work closely with allies like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and others who are targets of Iranian subversion to share intelligence and present a united diplomatic front. While Britain rightly critiques those countries when they err on human rights, in this context UK interests align with the Gulf states and moderate Sunni leadership in countering Iran's destabilizing agenda. Helping amplify voices from the Muslim world that call out Iran's hypocrisy – for example, highlighting how Iran oppresses its own Sunni minority even as it claims to lead Sunnis abroad, or how Iran's actions in Syria and Yemen contradict its pro-Ummah rhetoric – can erode Tehran's moral narrative. The UK's considerable soft power (e.g., BBC Persian/Arabic, diplomatic channels) can be utilised to challenge Iran's propaganda in the battle of narratives. Just as Iran's PressTV churns out disinformation in English, Britain can support truthful journalism that exposes Iranian double-dealing to the same audiences.

### **Support Saudi-led Moderation and Abraham Accords**

For long-term stability, the UK should encourage regional moderation and rapprochement that undercuts Iran's ability to play the Palestine card. The Abraham Accords (normalization between Israel and some Arabs) were a blow to Iran, but the Gaza war set them back. UK can play a role in reviving momentum by pushing for genuine improvements in Palestinian rights (to address Muslim public opinion concerns) while facilitating dialogue between Israel and Saudi behind the scenes. If Saudi Arabia can eventually secure a just agreement that includes benefits for Palestinians, Iran's monopoly on "defending Palestine" is shattered. Granted, this is largely in the realm of international diplomacy beyond UK direct control, but Britain as a UN Security Council member and influential player can table proposals, rally Europeans, and use its historical ties in the Gulf to encourage progress. Part of this is also helping fortify Saudi Arabia and Gulf states against Iranian aggression – for instance, supporting their defensive needs and cyber security – so that Iran's intimidation (like missile attacks via proxies) doesn't derail peacemaking efforts. A Middle East where states reconcile and address issues pragmatically leaves little oxygen for Iran's revolutionary meddling.

### **Double Down on Counter-Extremism at Home (Without Apology)**

The UK's *Prevent* program and broader counter-extremism strategy have come under heavy fire from the very networks we've been discussing (MB affiliates, hardline activists). They label these programs "Islamophobic" to discredit any effort to root out extremist ideology. The government must stand firm and, in fact, revitalize Prevent with better focus on the kinds of non-violent extremism that Iran and its fellow travelers push. This means refining the definition of extremist ideology to clearly include Khomeinist supremacism and not just Salafi-jihadism. Community policing should keep an eye on schools and online forums where young British Muslims might be subjected to propaganda – whether it's grooming by ISIS or by Iran-backed extremists; frankly, both are two sides of an ugly coin. And crucially, the UK should communicate with its Muslim citizens that *Prevent is there to protect them too* – as it did by foiling neo-Nazi terror plots and Iranian assassination schemes. Extremism of any stripe is a threat to the community. The government should showcase testimonials of families saved from

tragedy because a radicalization was halted. Undermining the cynical narrative of Prevent as anti-Muslim will rob Iran's UK allies of one of their favorite talking points.

### **Protect Dissidents and Uphold Free Speech (Our Weapon of Truth)**

Finally, Britain should unabashedly champion the very freedoms Iran fears. Support Iranian dissidents and reformist voices; ensure Persian-language independent media can operate out of London without fear (it was a shame that Iran International TV had to move to the US – the UK should have perhaps given it fortress-level protection to remain, as a matter of principle). Use Magnitsky-style sanctions on Iranian officials involved in human rights abuses and exporting extremism. By holding Iran accountable and giving a platform to those who challenge its narrative, the UK stands on the side of truth. Christopher Hitchens often stressed the importance of free expression as a weapon against tyranny – the UK must not let Iran's cries of offense or its manipulation of identity politics muzzle honest critique of the Iranian regime and its ideology.

In conclusion, Britain finds itself at a peculiar and precarious juncture. A foreign theocracy – Iran – is attempting to wage an ideological war on its soil, enlisting Britons to its cause of hate and division. This cannot be met with timidity or political correctness. It demands the moral courage to call out the charlatans, to defend secular liberal democracy within our Muslim communities as much as outside them. For too long, a poisonous alliance of the hard-left and Islamists (both Sunni and Shia) in Britain has provided cover for Iran's misdeeds – cloaking bigotry in the language of anti-imperialism. It's time to strip that veneer. The UK can neither outsource the problem to Riyadh nor hide behind platitudes. It must confront Iran's challenge head-on with a vigorous defence of Enlightenment values and support for those truly moderate Muslims who share them.

To borrow some of Christopher Hitchens words we may say: *"This island forged the doctrine of free speech and the rights of man; it will not surrender them to be trampled by a turbaned tyranny masquerading as piety."* Britain fought the fascism of the 20th century; in the 21st, it must steel itself to fight theocratic fascism – whether it emanates from Sunni caliph-pretenders or Shi'ite guardians of the jurist – and their useful dupes. Tehran's ayatollahs seek to wrap themselves in the flag of Islam to avoid critique; but Britain should join Muslim allies in ripping that flag away to reveal the power-hungry despots underneath.

In doing so, we defend not just British national interests and social harmony, but the true interests of Muslims worldwide, the majority of whom do not want to live under either Iranian velayat-e faqih or any other extremist rule. The Palestinians too deserve better than to be pawns in Iran's game – they need genuine support toward peace and statehood, not endless war for someone else's glory. By countering Iran's malign influence, Britain takes a stand for a more peaceful, moderate, and rational future in the Middle East and at home. And that, surely, is a cause worth the fight.

## **Conclusion**

Iran's attempts to restructure its regional influence through the exploitation of the Palestinian cause amount to a grand act of political theatre – one in which Tehran seeks to cast itself as the saviour of Islam and its adversaries as apostates and infidels. But Britain and its partners must not be audience participants to this farce; they must be critics and, when necessary, directors who rewrite the script.

This research brief has laid bare the multiple layers of Iran's strategy: the historical cultivation of cross-sectarian Islamist solidarity; the covert alliances with Deobandi and other Sunni networks in South Asia and the West; the weaponization of events like the Grand Mufti's fatwa to corner Sunni states; the direct challenge posed to Saudi custodianship of Mecca and Medina; and Iran's adaptive shift towards soft power and global radicalisation as its militant proxies face setbacks. We have also surveyed the UK dimension – how these foreign machinations resonate in Britain's cities and what can be done to protect our society from their toxic fallout.

Tehran's gambit is bold but not invincible. It thrives on opportunism, division, and moral grandstanding. The antidotes are vigilance, unity, and moral clarity. The UK and its allies should bolster those Muslim-majority nations trying to reform and resist extremism (from Saudi Arabia's cautious social changes to the UAE's promotion of religious tolerance) – for these efforts, however imperfect, deprive Iran of one of its favorite talking points: the notion that only Tehran champions Muslim dignity. Likewise, we must support the aspirations of the Palestinian people in tangible ways, so that Iran cannot hijack their suffering for endless war. Diplomatic recognitions and peace deals should proceed hand-in-hand with real pressure on Israel to curb abuses and allow a political horizon for Palestinians – depriving Iran of fuel for justified outrage.

Inside Britain, the conclusion is clear: no tolerance for intolerance. Extremism must be called out whether it marches under a black flag or a green one, a Sunni shahada or a Shi'a slogan. The UK government's updated counter-extremism strategy should explicitly mention Iranian state extremism as a threat alongside Sunni jihadism. Our public discourse must reject the false binary that one has to choose between being *pro-Palestine* and *opposing Iranian extremism* – one can and must do both, as many principled Muslims and others do. Iran's regime cares naught for Palestinian lives except as bargaining chips;<sup>31</sup> exposing that cynical calculus robs it of moral aura.

Christopher Hitchens had a special disdain for totalitarian impostors clad in religious garb. One can almost hear him eviscerating the Ayatollah Khamenei as readily as he did the likes of Henry Kissinger or the Falwellian televangelists – for all share the trait of “*poisoning everything*” they touch, to borrow Hitchens' own phrase. In that spirit, let us name Iran's current manoeuvre for what it is: a *hijacking of the Muslim conscience* by a regime whose own record is dripping in Muslim blood (Syrian, Iraqi, Yemeni, and Iranian alike). The world's Muslims do not need the permission or guidance of Tehran to care about Palestine – they cared long before 1979 and will long after the Ayatollahs are consigned to history's dustbin.

---

<sup>31</sup> Sanam Vakil, “Iran's Regional Strategy Is Raising the Stakes of Hamas-Israel War,” *Chatham House*, November 10, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/11/irans-regional-strategy-raising-stakes-hamas-israel-war>.

If there is a silver lining, it is that Iran's overreach may yet backfire. Many Sunni scholars – including some in Pakistan and certainly in the Arab world – are uneasy about aligning too closely with a Shia Persian power's agenda. Egypt's Grand Mufti and others have pushed back on the jihad craze, and ordinary Arabs can see the hypocrisy of Iran asking others to bleed while it fights to the last Arab. If Saudi Arabia and its allies play their cards wisely – showing genuine leadership on Palestine and inclusive stewardship of the *Ummah* – they can outmaneuver Iran. The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques can reclaim the narrative not by bombast but by compassionate, unifying action that Iran's sectarian revolutionaries are incapable of.

For Britain, standing up to Iran's soft power is also an opportunity to fortify our values at home. By confronting the Islamist extremism that Iran feeds into, we reaffirm our commitment to a pluralistic, secure society for all Britons – Muslim, Jewish, Christian, atheist alike. The government's duty is to protect citizens from threats both physical and ideological; Iran's campaign constitutes both. Implementing the recommendations outlined – from proscribing the IRGC to empowering moderate community voices – will go a long way toward inoculating the UK against this influence.

In the final analysis, Iran's attempt to use the Palestinian cause as a Trojan horse to seize Islamic leadership is not only a threat – it is an *insult*. It is an insult to the genuine spirit of Islamic solidarity, which Iran distorts into a self-serving cult of personality around its Supreme Leader. It is an insult to Sunni Muslims, whom Iran apparently thinks it can lure like children with sweets of anti-Zionist rhetoric while stabbing their brethren in Syria. And it is an insult to our intelligence – assuming the world cannot see through the charade.

The Islamic Republic may fancy itself a grand chessmaster moving pieces across the Middle East, but it has overplayed its hand. The image of Ayatollahs hiding behind Palestinian civilians, preaching jihad from comfortable pulpits, while secretly praying that others will march off to die – this image is becoming clearer to many. Iran's proxies are learning that Tehran will fight to the *last drop of someone else's blood*. Once that lesson sinks in widely, Iran's "resistance axis" mystique will crumble.

In confronting this challenge, Britain must be, in a word Hitchens loved, unsparing. Unsparing in criticism of Iran's regime, unsparing in defense of our society, and unsparing in solidarity with all those – from Riyadh's halls to Gaza's ruins to London's suburbs – who reject the poison being peddled.

The Trojan horse has been identified at the gate. It is now up to us to refuse it entry, and instead, to torch it with the fire of truth, letting its embers light the way to a future where neither Sunni nor Shia, Arab nor Persian, Muslim nor Jew need live under the shadow of tyrants cloaked as liberators.

---

# Policy Recommendations for the United Kingdom: Confronting Iran's Ideological Expansionism

The Islamic Republic of Iran represents not merely a geopolitical adversary but an ideological threat—a regime actively working to export its doctrine of political Shi'ism and anti-Western radicalism into the heart of Western democracies. In the UK context, this threat is compounded by Iran's alliance with extremist networks such as the Deobandi movement and its penetration into British civil society via religious, academic, and media channels. To confront this challenge, the UK must adopt a multi-layered, proactive strategy encompassing legal, security, educational, and diplomatic domains.

## 1. Strengthen Legal and Regulatory Instruments Against Iranian Influence

- **Proscribe the IRGC in full:** It is not merely a military body but an ideological vanguard and sponsor of terrorism. The UK must move beyond partial sanctions and formally designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation under the Terrorism Act 2000—just as the United States and Canada have done. The IRGC's involvement in transnational plots—including threats against British citizens—makes this both urgent and overdue.
- **Activate the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS):** Mandate the disclosure of any UK entity, religious institution, or media outlet receiving funding, training, or guidance from Iranian state-linked sources. The scheme must be enforced robustly and transparently, ensuring that Iran cannot continue laundering its ideological narratives through proxies operating under the guise of “community engagement” or “faith education.”
- **Clamp down on media arms:** Collaborate with Ofcom, the Home Office, and DCMS to monitor and restrict broadcast or online content from Iranian state-funded propaganda platforms such as Press TV. These outlets have consistently amplified anti-Semitic, sectarian, and anti-democratic messaging in breach of UK media standards and must be treated as instruments of hostile influence.

## 2. Intelligence and National Security Measures

- **Resource MI5 accordingly:** Given the Home Secretary's acknowledgement of over 15 Iran-linked plots on UK soil in the past year alone, the Security Service must receive targeted funding to expand surveillance of Iranian activities. This includes cyber operations, community radicalisation, and diplomatic missions used for covert influence.
- **Protect vulnerable communities:** Sunni-Shia sectarianism, deliberately inflamed by Iran in countries like Iraq and Pakistan, must not be allowed to take



root in the UK. Police and counter-extremism units should monitor high-risk areas for signs of incitement, infiltration, or external agitation and offer tailored support to community groups promoting coexistence.

### 3. Community Resilience and Counter-Radicalisation

- **Support grassroots unity efforts:** Launch a national programme bringing together British Muslims—Sunni and Shia—to build resilience against foreign interference. Back imams, scholars, and activists promoting a “British Islam” aligned with democratic values and the rule of law.
- **Establish a confidential reporting line:** A dedicated hotline for community members to report suspected radicalisation linked to foreign governments—including Iran—could be modelled on the successful Prevent strategy, with additional funding and training for handling ideologically sophisticated threats.

### 4. Public Awareness and Strategic Narrative

- **Expose Iran’s game plan:** Produce a publicly available white paper detailing Tehran’s manipulation of the Palestinian cause, its support for Hamas, Hezbollah and Deobandi allies, and its goal of seizing symbolic Islamic leadership from Saudi Arabia. Hold briefings for Muslim community leaders, parliamentarians, educators, and local councillors.
- **Tell Britain’s Muslim story:** Run parallel campaigns highlighting the success of British Muslims, the pluralism of UK Islam, and the dangers posed by sectarian ideologies masquerading as “resistance.” Undermine the siege mentality Tehran thrives on by showing that integration and religious freedom are not mutually exclusive.

### 5. International & Strategic Engagement

- **Renew the Abraham Accords momentum:** Support quiet diplomacy that advances Arab-Israeli normalisation. This directly weakens Iran’s regional leverage and offers young Muslims an alternative model of co-existence. The UK should position itself as a post-Brexit mediator in the Gulf, encouraging confidence-building and back-channel diplomacy between Riyadh and Baghdad.
- **Defend the rules-based order at the UN:** The UK must consistently highlight Iran’s systemic human rights abuses—including the treatment of minorities like the Sunni Baluchis, the crackdown on women, and the 2022 killing of Mahsa Amini. Use this to blunt Iran’s self-serving claims to moral authority in the Islamic world.

### 6. Close Legal Loopholes for Militant Sympathisers

- **Criminalise material support for Iran-backed militias:** Update counter-terrorism legislation to include Hezbollah, Hamas, and other Axis of Resistance groups in full. Treat British citizens who train with or fund these groups as terrorists in line with policy towards ISIS supporters.
- **Zero tolerance for hate on UK streets:** The use of flags, chants, or demonstrations in support of foreign paramilitaries or theocratic regimes should trigger immediate investigation under hate crime statutes or public order laws. The legal framework already exists—it must be enforced consistently and without fear of “offending” community sensitivities.

## 7. Education and Online Regulation

- **Media literacy as frontline defence:** Fund school and programmes that teach critical analysis of foreign propaganda—especially that originating from Iran or its ideological cousins. Develop modules in PSHE and citizenship education that address disinformation, foreign influence, and digital grooming.
- **Work with tech platforms to de-platform extremists:** Ensure swift takedown of content promoting Iranian disinformation, glorifying terrorism, or inciting hatred. Leverage the Online Safety Act to compel action from platforms that host clerics or influencers acting as mouthpieces for Iranian revolutionary doctrine.

Iran’s ideological campaign is not confined to the borders of the Islamic Republic. It is an assault on the very fabric of pluralism, democracy, and peaceful religious practice in the United Kingdom. By manipulating historical grievances, weaponising sectarianism, and co-opting digital spaces, Tehran is laying the groundwork for a long-term campaign to undermine Britain’s security from within.

But Britain, steeped in a tradition of liberal resilience, is well equipped to respond—if it chooses to do so with clarity and conviction. To confront this threat is not merely an act of self-defence—it is a reaffirmation of what this country stands for.

The time for ambiguity is over. Iran’s designs must be named, exposed, and countered. Britain’s safety—and that of its communities—depends on it.