# UK arrests three Iranians over alleged espionage targeting journalists amid rising tensions



Tensions between Iran and the UK have sharply intensified following the recent espionage charges against three Iranian nationals residing in Britain. The trio—Mostafa Sepahvand, Farhad Javadi Manesh, and Shapoor Qalehali Khani Noori—were arrested on May 3 and subsequently charged with plotting serious violence against British-based journalists, alleged to be acting on behalf of Iran's intelligence services. These charges are the latest chapter in a complex web of geopolitical strife, underpinned by a broader narrative of espionage and counterespionage between the two nations.

The UK Ministry of Defence has been clear in its stance: protecting national security is paramount, and Iran must face accountability for its actions. The Foreign Office's response included summoning the Iranian ambassador to the UK, Seyed Ali Mousavi, in a formal protest against what British officials termed “unjustified” arrests. Conversely, Iran's Foreign Ministry has labelled the detentions as politically motivated, warning that further such actions would damage diplomatic relations.

Reports indicate that the alleged espionage activities occurred over a period stretching from August 2024 to February 2025. Investigators assert that the three suspects were involved in surveillance missions aimed at locating journalists linked to Iran International, a Persian-language news outlet that has been critical of the Iranian regime. This outlet has clearly become a focal point for Iranian intelligence efforts in the UK, reflecting the broader threat landscape that British security services are now grappling with.

The case has unfolded against a backdrop of increasing incidents that have raised alarms about Tehran's operational footprint within the UK. The domain of counterterrorism has been particularly active; in addition to the recent arrests of Sepahvand, Manesh, and Noori, the Metropolitan Police were also involved in detaining four other Iranian nationals who were suspected of preparing terrorist acts. All but one of those apprehended have since been released, but the rapid developments suggest an ongoing investigation into broader threats emanating from Iranian state actors.

Yvette Cooper, the Home Secretary, underscored the serious nature of the terrosism threat, leading to a review of the UK’s counterterrorism strategy concerning state threats. The National Security Act introduced in 2023 provides law enforcement with enhanced powers to counter foreign interference, which aligns with the authorities’ focus on ensuring that the UK remains a safe haven against unwarranted espionage activities.

Iran has categorically denied allegations of orchestrating a spying mission in the UK, asserting that such claims are unfounded attempts to frame the nation in a negative light. This diplomatic tug-of-war is occurring during a period marked by a series of international incidents that have further deteriorated relations between Iran and the West. Since protests erupted in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini in September, international observers have raised concerns about human rights violations and the Iranian government's increased authoritarianism, complicating geopolitical relations.

The actions in the UK are particularly resonant against a backdrop of heightened Iranian hostility; Iranian officials have faced criticism for executing dissidents and obstructing free speech, culminating in widespread condemnation from Western governments. As such, each new disclosure regarding espionage plots adds another layer to the already fraught narrative of Iran’s engagements abroad.

Given the gravity of these developments, the situation remains perilous. The three Iranian nationals are scheduled for a court appearance on June 6, and as investigations continue, the implications for both countries could be significant. The response from both diplomatic ends signals a turbulent period ahead, with potential repercussions for international policies and national security strategies on either side.

As the situation unfolds, the UK government remains resolute in its commitment to national safety and the principles of accountability, while Iran continues to decry what it regards as unjust provocations. The dialectic between cooperation and hostility will likely shape future interactions between these two historically adversarial nations.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.
2. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.
3. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.
4. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.
5. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.
6. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpw7znqvl77o> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/3b0233de8adc4198d218296de70653d0> - Tensions between the United Kingdom and Iran have escalated following mutual diplomatic protests related to espionage accusations. Britain summoned Iranian Ambassador Seyed Ali Mousavi after charging three Iranian nationals with spying, including surveillance and plotting violence against U.K.-based journalists on behalf of an Iranian news outlet. In a retaliatory move, Iran summoned a British diplomat, denouncing the detention of an unnamed Iranian citizen in the U.K. as illegal and politically motivated. Iran warned the U.K. against further actions that could damage diplomatic relations. The British government emphasized that national security is a top priority and insisted that Iran be held accountable. In a related investigation, U.K. authorities arrested four other Iranian nationals on suspicion of planning a terrorist act, although they were released on Saturday as investigations continue. The diplomatic friction highlights the deteriorating relationship between the two nations.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/2ef30d59-3777-4741-992e-809030b275a8> - On May 17, 2025, three Iranian nationals—Mostafa Sepahvand, Farhad Javadi Manesh, and Shapoor Qalehali Khani Noori—were charged under the UK's 2023 National Security Act for plotting serious violence against Farsi-language journalists in Britain, allegedly on behalf of the Iranian government. These individuals, all residents of London and asylum seekers who arrived between 2016 and 2022, were originally arrested on May 3 as part of a larger counterterrorism effort involving eight Iranian nationals. The trio is accused of carrying out surveillance and facilitation activities, targeting journalists from Iran International, an independent media outlet based in London. The activities in question occurred between August 2024 and February 2025. Sepahvand faces additional charges for attempted violence. The Metropolitan Police underscored the gravity of the case, calling it a complex and fast-moving counter-intelligence investigation. While the three remain in custody, the other five arrested individuals have been released, with one on conditional bail. Home Secretary Yvette Cooper emphasized the need to hold Iran accountable for its alleged actions. The Iranian embassy has not commented. The National Security Act enables law enforcement to act more decisively against suspected foreign threats without a warrant.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/5255d2e7fff89683a7a138a477395b76> - Three men—Mostafa Sepahvand, Farhad Javadi Manesh, and Shapoor Qalehali Khani Noori—appeared in a London court facing charges of espionage and plotting violence against journalists based in the UK. Allegedly acting on behalf of Iran's foreign intelligence service, the trio is accused of conducting surveillance and reconnaissance activities targeting journalists from Iran International, a London-based Persian-language TV channel critical of Tehran's regime. Sepahvand faces additional charges for planning serious violence. All three suspects, who entered the UK illegally between 2016 and 2022, have been held in custody since their arrests on May 3, 2025. A fourth suspect was released without charge. The charges come amid heightened concerns from British security services about increasing threats from Iranian state actors. Authorities are working closely with Iran International and continue to investigate. Britain’s Home Secretary Yvette Cooper emphasized the need to bolster national security laws and accountability for Iran’s actions, announcing an upcoming review of the UK’s counterterrorism strategy regarding state threats. The suspects are scheduled for a follow-up court hearing on June 6.
5. <https://apnews.com/article/99144b049380fc7fe84f489113a56e3a> - Iran has executed former high-ranking defense official and dual Iranian-British national Ali Reza Akbari, despite international calls to halt the execution. Akbari, who was linked to top security official Ali Shamkhani, was accused of spying for MI6. The execution occurs amid ongoing anti-government protests following Mahsa Amini's death in September. Western nations, including the UK and US, condemned the execution, with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak calling it a 'callous and cowardly act.' Akbari was arrested in 2019, with his trial and alleged coerced confessions criticized by rights groups. The execution further strains Iran's relations with the West, already tense over protests and Iran's military activities.
6. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/4/uk-police-arrest-seven-iranians-over-alleged-threats-to-national-security> - The United Kingdom has arrested eight men, including seven Iranian nationals, as part of two investigations regarding alleged threats to national security. London’s Metropolitan Police confirmed the arrests on Sunday, saying five men, including four of the Iranian nationals, were detained on suspicion of 'preparation of a terrorist act' while the other three are being held under national security legislation introduced in 2023 to counter the actions of hostile states. In the first operation, which took place on Saturday, counterterrorism police arrested four Iranians along with the other individual, whose nationality was still being established, in London, Swindon and the Greater Manchester area in relation to 'a suspected plot to target a specific premises'. The five men were aged 29 to 46. The four Iranians were arrested under the Terrorism Act while the fifth man was detained under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act. 'This is a fast-moving investigation,' Metropolitan Police counterterrorism chief Dominic Murphy said, adding that police were exploring 'various lines of enquiry to establish any potential motivation as well as to identify whether there may be any further risk to the public linked to this matter'. In the second operation, which took place on the same day, counterterrorism police arrested three Iranian nationals aged 39, 44 and 55 in London under the National Security Act, which gives law enforcement greater powers to disrupt 'state threats', including foreign interference and espionage. The Metropolitan Police said on Sunday that the three London arrests were 'not connected to the arrest of five people yesterday'. Home Secretary Yvette Cooper described the threats as 'serious', saying the government was working with police and intelligence agencies to 'keep the country safe'. The arrests were made amid heightened concerns about Iranian operations on UK soil after the head of Britain’s MI5 domestic intelligence service said last year that the UK had uncovered 20 Iran-backed plots posing 'potentially lethal threats' since 2022. In 2023, an Austrian national was convicted of carrying out 'hostile reconnaissance' against the London headquarters of Iran International, a broadcaster that is critical of Iran’s government. The following year, a British journalist of Iranian origin who worked for Iran International was stabbed in London. In February a former British soldier was sentenced to 14 years in prison after being found guilty of spying for Iran. Iran has repeatedly rejected suggestions that it has been behind plots to attack the UK. In March, Tehran summoned the British ambassador in response to the accusations and conveyed a formal protest. And in October, Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Esmaeil Baghaei accused the UK of hosting 'terrorist' groups that promote violence.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/nov/28/former-soldier-daniel-khalife-found-guilty-of-spying-for-iran> - Former British army soldier Daniel Khalife has been found guilty of spying for Iran. Khalife, who escaped prison while awaiting trial, collected information and passed it to Tehran and was found to have gathered the names of special forces soldiers. He was cleared of a charge of perpetrating a bomb hoax at his army barracks. The 23-year-old admitted breaking out of Wandsworth prison in London in September 2023 by strapping himself to the underside of a food delivery lorry during his Woolwich Crown Court trial. Justice Bobbie Cheema-Grubb told his trial at Woolwich Crown Court that Khalife would face 'a long custodial sentence' when he is sentenced early next year.