



## Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [UK policy towards Iran](#), HC 904

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Members present: Sir Richard Ottaway (Chair); Mr John Baron; Sir Menzies Campbell; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Mark Hendrick; Sandra Osborne; Andrew Rosindell; Mr Frank Roy; Sir John Stanley; Rory Stewart

### Questions 1-79

Witness[es]: **Sir Robert Cooper KCMG**, Visiting Professor, LSE IDEAS, gave evidence.

**Q1 Chair:** I welcome members of the public to this sitting of the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is our first inquiry into UK policy towards Iran. I am delighted to welcome our first witness today, Sir Robert Cooper, visiting professor at LSE IDEAS—the London School of Economics international affairs think tank. Sir Robert, thank you very much for finding the time to come along. Is there anything you would like to say as an opening statement? I have a very general first question.

**Sir Robert Cooper:** All I should perhaps say is that I was involved with the question of the Iran nuclear programme from the time when the EU became active in it, which was 2004, until I retired, which was 2012. But what I know about is the nuclear programme. I am not a general expert on Iran.

**Q2 Chair:** That is almost exactly the reason why we have asked you to come along today. My very first general question may fall foul of what you have just said. What do you think the UK has to gain from improved relations with Iran? Are you saying that is outside the scope of your expertise?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** No. This is an important country, and a very interesting country. It is a country with enormous potential, and there is a gap in one's knowledge and activity in the Middle East if one does not have a relationship with a country like that. I say "enormous potential". I guess some members of this Committee have probably been there; you always get the feeling in Iran that there is a very lively, free, open society trying to get out, and one day it is going to come good.

**Q3 Chair:** How strong is our capacity to read Iran? Has that capacity been better in the past than it is now, or do you think that we have a pretty good understanding of what is going on?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** For myself, every now and then I began to develop a theory about what the Iranians were doing, and then I slapped my wrist and said, "Don't ever think that

you understand them.” There is no doubt that having good people on the ground, particularly people who speak Persian, who know the country and know the people, is invaluable. Can you ever completely understand them? Actually, it is sometimes quite difficult to understand people in this country, so I wouldn’t ever be sure of that, but you can certainly understand them better, and having people on the ground who have experience, knowledge, contacts is always essential.

**Q4 Chair:** Of late, we have taken a fairly cautious approach in our diplomatic relations, rather than being more open. Do you think that that is the right judgment?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** I think that a certain kind of prudence is always right, and I do not think that one should ever completely despair of relations with a country, although North Korea is a challenge. One should also not get euphoric, either—there is always some thorn with the rose. Nevertheless, the last election and the arrival of Mr Rouhani as President clearly offers an opportunity quite different from anything that we have had for the last 10 years.

**Q5 Sandra Osborne:** With regard to who is actually in charge of Iran and the various different structures there, how high is the risk that powers within Iran will block any deal on the nuclear issue?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** It is very difficult to understand what is going on inside Iranian politics, and in this issue, the President is not probably the most important single figure. The most important single figure is, I assume, the Supreme Leader, the guide. Nevertheless, experts tell me that President Rouhani has a very good relationship with Ayatollah Khamenei, and certainly he has been given some room to take negotiations forward on the nuclear programme. But, over the past 10 years, the less attractive elements of Iran, the Revolutionary Guard, the militias and so on, have gained an awful lot of influence, and I do not think that it is exactly the same country it was when the first attempt to negotiate with Iran started. I am sure that there is resistance, but that is normal, too.

**Q6 Sandra Osborne:** But given that it was quite a surprise to many people that Mr Rouhani was actually elected, why do you think that the Iranian people decided to elect him?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Well, I think that it was very striking to see Rouhani running on an election platform that said, “I’m the person who can make a deal with the West” and Mr Jalili running on a platform saying, “I never gave an inch.” With seven candidates, Rouhani got 51%, which was remarkable and a real statement about what the Iranian people want. No doubt, a big part of that was that they wanted to get rid of the sanctions.

**Q7 Chair:** How did they get him on to the ballot paper?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Well, he is a respectable man—in Iranian terms, he is a respectable man. He is a well educated cleric, as well having been to Glasgow University.

**Sir Menzies Campbell:** An overwhelming endorsement.

**Q8 Chair:** Did you know him personally? In your times as a negotiator, he was a negotiator as well.

**Sir Robert Cooper:** I met him. I was at meetings he was at. He did not appear very much in the negotiations, but he did appear at critical moments. I understand that the Committee will probably talk to Jack Straw, who I think knows him much better. We initially negotiated with the now Foreign Minister, Mohammad Zarif, and later with Ali Larijani, who is the negotiating partner with my boss, Javier Solana, and then Mr Jalili. This was a kind of downward path.

**Q9 Mark Hendrick:** To what extent has UK policy on Iran been controlled or heavily influenced by the United States? Do you think that ourselves and the European Union should take a more go-it-alone approach?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** The beginning of this negotiating process with the letter from Jack Straw, Joschka Fisher and, I think, Dominique de Villepin was done with the knowledge of the USA, but it was not US policy at the time to talk to Iran at all. What has changed has not been that we have followed US policy; rather, it has been that US policy has converged on what Britain at first and then the European Union as a whole was doing: a belief that the problem could be solved through dialogue. That had a lot of resistance in the USA in the beginning. That resistance lessened when Condoleezza Rice became Secretary of State and John Bolton was no longer Under-Secretary of State for disarmament. It changed in a very big way when President Obama was elected. There has been what I regard as a sensible policy taken by Britain and the European Union, with which the US has aligned itself and added enormous firepower and energy.

**Q10 Mark Hendrick:** Do you think that the red lines that the US put forward have served a valuable purpose in terms of containing Iran, or do you think there should be a lot more flexibility from the Americans?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** No, I think that it was perhaps a pity right at the beginning that the US took a hard line. If the US had been open to negotiations in 2003 or 2004, we might have been able to do things much faster. On the whole, I do not see any difference between the US approach and the European approach. Speaking more of the Administration than Congress, their red lines on the whole have been very reasonable. Indeed, the US has tried extremely hard to get negotiations going. We imposed sanctions primarily out of frustration at the impossibility of dialogue.

**Q11 Mark Hendrick:** Do you think the contrast between the US and the EU approaches was a bit of hard cop, soft cop? Now the US is more in line with the EU, do you think that the US could do a lot more to develop trust in bilateral relations between themselves and Iran?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** It's not easy. The US has probably tried a lot more to develop relations than is visible. At a number of stages during negotiations, the US representative who accompanied Javier Solana tried to arrange bilateral talks with the Iranians, and they would not do it. There have been lots of other initiatives, not all of them public, to try to arrange bilateral meetings, but it has not happened. This is a country whose revolution ran on the slogan, "Death to America", and that is a handicap.

**Q12 Mark Hendrick:** So this is as much a problem on the Iranian side as it is on the American side?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Yes, I think it has been, but one of the things that was encouraging, inevitable and to be welcomed was that, in the run-up to the interim agreement, there were bilateral talks between the Americans and the Iranians.

**Q13 Sir Menzies Campbell:** Can I take you back to the nuclear issue? When you were engaged on behalf of Commissioner Ashton in negotiating, did the red lines feature in what the Iranians said and in their counter-arguments? Did they look at the red lines and think of them as being an obstacle placed by the United States, or did they have some other view of them?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** If you want to look specifically at the red lines, I think there was a period when we felt that the red lines, which have been set not just by the US but by the Security Council, on the need for the programme to be suspended seemed to be an obstacle to moving forward. On the other hand, during that long period, most of the time I got no impression that the Iranians really wanted to move forward at all. A lot of the time, the negotiation was a way of staving off more sanctions, rather than because they thought they would solve the problem that way.

**Q14 Sir Menzies Campbell:** And in consideration of those red lines, did the role of Israel play any part in the extent to which United States policy, both in the Administration and in Congress, is sympathetic towards Israel?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Yes, Israel is a powerful force in US politics, but, ultimately, this was a period when no real negotiation was going on. As we have now heard, the Israeli Government, or at least Mr Netanyahu, does not like the agreement that has been reached, so Israel has not been a determining factor.

**Q15 Sir Menzies Campbell:** Finally, did the change in policy occur under President Bush's Administration, or was it delayed until the arrival of President Obama?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** The change began when Condoleezza Rice became Secretary of State. That is not to say that Colin Powell was particularly difficult, but I think he was busy with other things. The Americans sent somebody to the negotiations for the first time under Condoleezza Rice, and they took an active part in preparing negotiating positions at that time.

**Q16 Sir Menzies Campbell:** And the promotion of Mr Bolton, if that is what it was, made life a little easier. Is that right?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** That's right, yes. I don't think he will mind my saying that he is proud of the role that he played. Even so, there was still a step change when President Obama arrived.

**Sir Menzies Campbell:** Thank you.

**Q17 Sir John Stanley:** Do you think that the Israeli Government's very adverse criticisms of the interim agreement were basically for domestic political consumption in Israel, or do you think that they are of a substantive nature in relation to genuine concerns about the Iranian nuclear weapon capability?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** I don't know whether the first might be true, but I am sure that the second is true. I am sure that they have substantive and reasonable concerns about the Iranian nuclear capability. The word "capability" is always slightly ambiguous, so let us say "nuclear programme". How much capability they have is not really clear. We share that concern—I think everyone shares that concern—and it is not just a question of Iran; it is what this would do across the Gulf. It is an easy prediction to make that, if Iran actually acquired a nuclear weapon, the Saudis would accelerate their relationship with Pakistan. There would be lots of other people in the region who would re-examine their position on nuclear weapons as well. It is reasonable to be concerned about this.

On the agreement, I was not involved because this all took place after me, but the interim agreement is a very impressive document indeed.

**Q18 Mr Roy:** Sir Robert, Iranians are known as very tough negotiators—that has been said time and time again. To you, what does that mean in practice, and can you give us any examples of why they deserve that reputation?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Yes. I used to think that they would really like to have negotiation as an Olympic sport. They are very difficult. They are very tough negotiators, but lots of people are tough negotiators. They are very subtle, and you have to pay a lot of attention to the words. In the initial agreement to suspend enrichment activities, "activities" was not defined sufficiently well. This is the agreement reached with the three Foreign Ministers. As others here will tell you, the Iranian definition of enrichment activities did not include manufacture of centrifuges, so while the agreement was in force, they continued to manufacture centrifuges. They also put together a plant for converting yellow cake into UF<sub>6</sub>, which you can then enrich—that is a sort of pre-enrichment activity. They followed the letter of the agreement exactly, but were far from following its spirit.

In negotiations with the Iranians, with the long history of our relations with Iran and all of the different faults we have committed, one gets used to any concession being seized and no concessions being made in return. My most memorable personal experience was a six-hour session with Dr Jalili's deputy trying to agree an agenda for the next meeting. Actually, it was clear in the first 20 minutes that we weren't going to agree, but I thought in order to convince my principals that we'd better carry on for another few hours first. What were we discussing and at what point did I eventually say, "No, I can't agree." They were trying to arrange the agenda so that the nuclear issue would not be on it. Seeing that the six countries came together to discuss the nuclear issue and that was the only *raison d'être* of the talks, that wasn't acceptable. Anyway, the six hours it took to establish that was time well spent.

**Q19 Mr Roy:** It was said that, during negotiations between the Iranians and the EU3+3, the Iranians were able to determine what the differences were between the six countries—the six negotiators at the other end of the table—and it was therefore easy to split an opposed negotiating team. What were those differences?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Everybody is different. You put two people in a room and there is always some difference between them. America has a different position, partly because it does not have diplomatic relations with Iran, but also because it is the guarantor of security in the Gulf and it is a major military presence there. Russia has a different position because it supplied the nuclear plant at Bushehr to the Iranians and has already

got nuclear business with the Iranians. The Russians know them extremely well. They are neighbours and they tried at one point to seize a bit of Iranian territory. They have a complicated relationship with Iran, but one that has made them quite a lot of money. They are also potentially a big competitor with Iran, because the largest gas reserves in the world are Russian and the second largest are Iranian. That is complicated. The rest of us are mostly innocent people who would just like to buy hydrocarbons from Iran and not have nuclear crisis in the Gulf. But, for Europe, we are a little bit closer than China is, for example.

But yes, there are differences, and yes, the Iranians work very hard at exploiting them. They ran a campaign at one point to try to convince everyone that my boss, Javier Solana, was not the right person to be in charge of the negotiations and made systematic attempts to undermine him and so on. I think they regard this as being the normal way of pursuing national interest.

**Mr Roy:** Thank you.

**Q20 Rory Stewart:** Just to follow up on Frank Roy's questions, Britain's role in all this seems a bit opaque from the outside. Sometimes you hear statements in the House of Commons that imply that Britain has this fully independent foreign policy and is looking at everything on its own terms, but at other points Britain seems very trapped by the views of partners in the region, particularly by the United States—the idea that all that the Foreign Office is doing is trying to find out what the United States is doing, and then doing it a little bit less.

Looking back over the past 10 years, how would you characterise UK policy towards Iran? Is there a genuinely distinct UK analysis and independent view? What is the British attitude?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** If one was drawing a spectrum of the views on Iran, one would put Britain and France rather close together. The British views were very close to those of France. But at the beginning, as I said, yes, there was a distinct view, but that was a collective view of Britain, France and Germany, which I think largely reflected thinking about Iraq at the time, and wishing not to do the same thing in Iran—and ensuring that the US did not do the same—but to start a political process rather than the military one.

If you look at what has happened in the EU, in many ways, the critical point was the introduction of the sanctions in 2012. They were very tough sanctions—as tough as anywhere in the world. There was no doubt that Britain and France—with Germany, but first I would mention Britain and France—were the driving force in producing that in the EU. The British have a good deal of expertise, and they have a good tradition of Persian speakers and people who know Iran very well.

So I think there has been a contribution. Looked at from my perspective, I would say that this was an extraordinarily important contribution to the making of a collective EU policy.

**Q21 Rory Stewart:** In terms of the joint action plan, who is really making the running here? There is some analysis that suggests that the US is driving forward in one direction, and France comes in at the last moment and gets an important concession. We cannot really see Britain in this picture. How would you analyse how the joint action plan emerges and where Britain is in that whole process?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** I wasn't there when all this was happening. There are some bits of the joint action plan that you can see have particular relevance to the USA, because there is a phrase about Congress, for example, but I think this reflects a consensus among six countries.

I do not think one needs to see it in those terms. I am not sure; perhaps there was a problem with the way it was negotiated, or perhaps not everyone was aware of what was going on bilaterally between the US and Iran, and that may have produced some pique.

But as far as substance is concerned, I don't think you can identify a British bit, or a French bit, or an American bit.

**Q22 Rory Stewart:** Despite the fact that France quite clearly pushed for a concession at the end, which the other countries did not believe they could obtain, and obtained what seemed, from the outside, to be a victory?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Can you tell me which bit that is?

**Q23 Rory Stewart:** Yes. Specifically on the operation of one of the plants, the French recommendations seem to have inserted a clause that was not present in the original negotiations.

**Sir Robert Cooper:** I wasn't aware of that. One could probably find one or two other things in it to improve if one wanted to, but it is an interim agreement.

**Q24 Rory Stewart:** In terms of the Iranian willingness to get involved, what changed their mind? Who are the main drivers that made it suddenly possible on the Iranian side?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** It was the election of Rouhani—I have no doubt about that—and the disappearance of Ahmadinejad, who was a very divisive figure in Iran. I have no doubt that the sanctions played an important role. The Iranians have now done all the things they said they would do, and the IAEA has written a formal report and told us—when I say “us”, I mean colleagues in the EU—that it has never experienced co-operation to this degree before.

**Q25 Rory Stewart:** Finally, how deep is the support in Iran? Is there a serious danger that in the next two or three months, when it comes to moving from an interim agreement to the next stage, you will suddenly find a backlash in Iran from people who feel that the concessions that we have offered or the relief of sanctions are not sufficient to repair the economic damage that has been done, and the advantages that Iran is deriving are not sufficient? Will what currently seems hopeful collapse in the face of Iranian intransigence?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** That's certainly a possibility. This is an interim agreement, and it leaves lots of questions open, particularly about the time scale over which the sanctions will be removed, the time scale over which Iran will be allowed to return to a state of normality and the degree of transparency that is required. Those are all important questions. Rationally, I don't think Iran has anything to lose, unless it really wants to make a nuclear weapon. That seems to me to be a very irrational thing for it to do, because it would be extremely dangerous for it to pursue that.

**Q26 Mr Baron:** Sir Robert, I want to pursue the issue of the joint plan of action. Before I do, may I ask one question about something you said earlier about the relationship between the West and Iran over the past 10 to 15 years? There are many who believe that mistakes were made by both sides in the relationship, but you specifically pointed to 2002-03, when there were overtures by Iran, which the US unfortunately rebuffed—the axis of evil, and all the rest of it. The US took a hard-line approach at the time, which in a way led to the fall of President Khatami, a reformist President, in the elections, which made for a more hard-line approach. Do you think that the West has learned its lesson from that period—as I say, mistakes were made by both sides—in the sense that we realise that we have to nuance our approach more, given the previous history?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Yes, I think that's true. I agree with you. There were mistakes made by both sides. A lot of Iranian behaviour was calculated to make suspicions on our side deeper than they were. But on our side we probably missed an opportunity. There was also a kind of learning process on our side, as I said in answer to an earlier question. Negotiating with the Iranians is quite tough, and you need to be very careful. I think we learned something from that bit of the process.

What might have changed things in the early stages is if we had been ready to talk to the Iranians about co-operation in the civil field in a much more positive way. The people who do the co-operation on our side are companies, and none of them are going to endanger their US business, so European companies need to be absolutely certain that the US is signed on before we can really talk about co-operation with Iran.

**Q27 Mr Baron:** Do you think those lessons have been learned to the extent that that, at least in part, explains the closer relationship between the US and the EU in dealings with Iran? Can I test you a little further and ask whether you can envisage anything that would make the US and the EU become more separated in their view regarding Iran? Will the lessons from past mistakes by both sides be sufficient to make sure we have a united front going forward, and what dangers are there to that?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Well, it's going to need work by the US Administration to convince the Congress that this is the sensible way to approach Iran, and no doubt others will be lobbying against that. The US Government are not entirely in control of their negotiating hand. For the moment and in the time frame we are talking about—it says six months, but it also says renewable, so I take it that it is roughly a year—there should be stability as far as the Administration are concerned. I think the people in the Administration since President Obama's election have all been committed to finding a peaceful resolution to this problem, and they have produced many creative and imaginative ideas.

**Q28 Mr Baron:** Joint plan of action, Sir Robert. Reciprocity was always a key factor for the Iranians and their long-term criticism of the Western approach has been that there wasn't enough of it to encourage concessions. There are those who believe that the West has gone too far. Do you think we have done regarding the concessions we have made to the Iranians, or is it still all very qualified at the moment?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** No, it is extremely qualified. The critical part—several things are important for the Iranians in this—is the phrase, “enable the repatriation of an agreed amount of revenue held abroad”, because the most important part of the sanctions has been those on financial transactions, which have made it difficult or impossible for oil revenue

to reach Iran. I would not like to give you a number because I am not actively involved, but an important question there is, “of an agreed amount of revenue held abroad”. If my understanding is correct, the agreed amount is quite a small proportion of the revenue held abroad, so the concessions made so far are not gigantic. There is a lot more behind. As negotiations continue, particularly with some of the sanctions being suspended, even more revenue will be accumulated, so the incentive to make a deal will become greater over this period.

**Q29 Mr Baron:** The critics of the deal would suggest that it still leaves the path open for Iran to enrich uranium. The NPT itself makes very little mention of enrichment. Is that a valid criticism? The French in particular were concerned about the possibility of future enrichment.

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Right. With respect to the whole Iranian programme, one can ask why they ever needed to enrich uranium. Normally, someone embarking on a civil nuclear programme starts by getting uranium supplied from someone else, you build the reactor, and you learn how to make a reactor work, as with the reactor in Bushehr where the fuel is all supplied by Russia. Enriching uranium is technically difficult and after that you have to learn to fabricate it into fuel, which is just as difficult. Normally, that is the bit you get someone else to do until you have got a really big nuclear programme. The fact that the Iranian programme concentrated exclusively, it seemed, on the part of the nuclear fuel cycle that is dual use is what made everyone—a really mild term—suspicious.

**Q30 Mr Baron:** Could it be argued that they were just trying to get to the point of capability? If you look at the Japanese and less so the Germans, you could say that they are similarly at that point, without becoming a nuclear power.

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Here is a point at which we do not know what the Iranians wanted—perhaps they did not know either. It always seemed to me that there would be an extremely dangerous moment for them when they took their great stockpile of enriched uranium, for which they have no use at all, and tried to produce weapons-grade material and to turn it into a bomb. If you were lucky, that would take you a year or more, even if it worked, and then you are not sure whether your bomb will work—meantime all hell will break loose. So I always thought that the Iranians had really got a problem: they were piling up this enriched uranium, but not doing anything with it. They could not use it for civil purposes, because they did not know how to, while trying to make a bomb with it would be a very, very high-risk procedure. You could say that they got themselves into a kind of trap.

**Q31 Mr Baron:** Finally, Sir Robert, what confidence should Western negotiators have that Iran will abide strictly by the terms of any agreement? How sure can we be, given that places like Parchin are still a contentious issue?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Yes, and the example that I always used to quote—I am not sure if I can remember the location correctly—was the place where the IAEA inspectors, in response to some tip-off, were planning to visit. When they got to the site, they found not only that the machinery had all been removed, but that the building had been removed, and 2 metres of topsoil—apparently because the Iranians had decided to construct a park there.

What we have now—that is why it was wise to make an interim agreement—is a period in which I hope that a new standard of transparency can be set and that the IAEA can get really open access. That is what we ought to watch very carefully. In the past, there have

been all kinds of games played, with objections made to this inspector or that inspector, visits delayed and buildings being found to have been cleaned out and repainted—which did not mean to say that all the isotopes had been got out. All of that increased distrust. With the interim agreement, there is now an opportunity to reverse that process and for the Iranians to demonstrate that they are capable of co-operating and being transparent, building a track record.

If there is a further agreement, I am sure that that will not be an “in one bound Jack was free” agreement. I am sure that there will be a time scale in which standards of transparency will be set and have to be observed.

**Q32 Ann Clwyd:** Sir Robert, you have said all along that the sanctions are very tough. Is there any evidence that any of those sanctions have been flouted?

*Sir Robert Cooper:* I do not know enough to answer that. You have to track these things very carefully. It would be a surprise if there was not some leakage somewhere—that always happens—but on the whole I think that it is not just that the sanctions have been tough in theory, but that the implementation of them has been quite rigorous by the standards of sanctions normally.

**Q33 Ann Clwyd:** Why do you think that China decided to join in?

*Sir Robert Cooper:* Well, I think the Chinese partly consider that this is a part of the world that is a long way away from them and it is someone else’s problem. It has always required quite a lot of work to persuade them to be as active as we would like. I think their interests are similar to ours. They do not want nuclear weapons, military action or anything like that in the Middle East. They would just like to get on and buy the hydrocarbons. But they have a tendency perhaps to see this as somebody else’s problem.

**Q34 Sir John Stanley:** Sir Robert, do you think that enough has been done—and early enough—in the joint plan of action to block off the plutonium route to nuclear weapons? The action plan is almost entirely devoted, as you know, to highly enriched uranium, the HEU route. The plutonium route is only really referred to in the final step measures, and it merely says in a very tentative way: “Fully resolve concerns related to the reactor at Arak”. Surely that is not sufficient. Or do you think that the plutonium route is not one that we should be concerned about?

*Sir Robert Cooper:* No, we should certainly be concerned about it and I think the word “fully” is a very important word. I am sure that it is meant very seriously.

**Q35 Sir John Stanley:** Don’t you think that we should have dealt with that in the initial agreement, rather than just leaving until the very end?

*Sir Robert Cooper:* It is not the most immediate concern, in that the final agreement is supposed to come within a year. The problem with the Iranian programme is basically at the moment a uranium problem. But the one thing that they do promise in the course of this year is proper access for the IAEA to Arak. If we suddenly discover over this period that there is a terrific acceleration going on at Arak, then I think that will be a blow to the process.

**Q36 Sir Menzies Campbell:** If you were a betting man, what odds would you give on the interim agreement being converted into an effective final agreement?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Well, actually, I think I would be prepared to put some money on it, to be honest. This is really an impressive agreement. When I think of the agreements that we tried to negotiate during earlier phases of this, the gobbledegook that was being produced on the other side and our attempts to get round this and put some hard matter into it, this is full of really concrete stuff. I think it is very impressive. Perhaps I would also take the opportunity to say that one shouldn't underestimate the skill of Baroness Ashton, either, who did an extraordinary job the first time round. But above all, I believe that the Iranians want an agreement. So all of those things leave me rather confident and if someone is offering odds, then I think I would go for it.

**Sir Menzies Campbell:** Thank you.

**Q37 Chair:** But there are differences within the regime in Tehran.

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Yes.

**Q38 Chair:** Do you think they can be overcome?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** There, I think the impact of sanctions has been a powerful force in persuading people that their interests are not served by continuing further down the route. Nothing is certain. People do stupid things all the time, but I think Iranian interests will be much better served by reaching an understanding with the six countries on this. It is a country of enormous potential—people of enormous charm. I am sure that there are enormous opportunities for it.

**Chair:** The problem may be the differences in Washington rather than Tehran.

**Sir Robert Cooper:** There could be problems, yes.

**Q39 Mike Gapes:** I was struck, Robert, when you were referring to the level of interlocutor on the Iranian side going downhill. The Foreign Affairs Committee in 2007 had a very interesting hour and a half with Mr Jalili, which was basically a tennis match between me and him, backwards and forwards for an hour and a half, about the additional protocol.

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Oh, right. You got even to forwards.

**Q40 Mike Gapes:** I understand exactly what you are saying. There are wider issues here. I know you said you were not an expert on Iranian foreign policy, but given that you have had more contact with Iranians than probably any other British or Western person at one level or another for a period of time, how would you characterise Iran in its foreign policy dealings? Is it irrational or rational? Do we misunderstand the motives?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** No; I don't think that they are irrational. I think that their goals are probably very different from ours. Mr Gapes, I think it was you who asked the question earlier about negotiating, or perhaps it was your colleague. Sometimes they get so tangled up in their pursuit of victory in the negotiation that they lose sight of their interests, but that happens to all of us. It is a country of enormous interest—a country that is in a very strong strategic position.

There is no evidence for this but I have always personally believed that the purpose of the nuclear programme was political rather than military, and that their objective is not a military conquest of the Middle East but it is some kind of political power in the region. I think it is a little bit of the way that the Soviet Union was, in maybe the 1940s and 1950s, where the real pursuit of their objectives was through Communist parties abroad, and not through military means.

Once an Iranian said to me something like, “Have we ever invaded anybody?” I thought very quickly and said, “Yes. What about Thermopylae? Explain that.” But recently they have been more invaded than invading. It is the Shi’a community through whom they operate elsewhere.

**Q41 Mike Gapes:** On that point, clearly Iran is a big influence on what is currently going on in Syria. We are on the verge of the not particularly optimistic Geneva II discussions, where the UN Secretary-General has tried and then withdrawn the invitation to Iran. What is your take on that? Do you think that the invitation to Iran should have been unconditional?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** No. I don’t know enough about that to know what to think. What I am convinced of is that pursuit of an agreement that gives us the assurances we need on the Iranian nuclear issue is a worthwhile goal in itself. That itself is the beginning, I would hope, of a more positive phase of relations with Iran, that perhaps will enable them to lead what I would describe as a more peaceful and normal life in the Middle East, and will open them up to greater contact with us. I hope this is the beginning of the process that will turn Iran into a country that is much more normal in all respects.

**Q42 Mike Gapes:** You alluded earlier to Iran’s territorial disputes with Bahrain and some of the Gulf states. Clearly, there is a great deal of nervousness among those small Gulf states, and some of the bigger ones. As we improve our relations with Iran in this thaw, how can we reassure those countries in the region that might be nervous that we will neglect them for the sake of the greater prize of having Iran more normalised?

**Sir Robert Cooper:** That is a very important question. What they are worried about primarily is Iranian subversion through the Shi’a communities, I imagine. How should one handle that? Part of the answer may be looking at the way in which the Shi’a communities live in their own countries. That may not be advice everybody wants to hear, but it ought to mean trying to ensure the loyalty of their own citizens. But I think that is an internal question for all these countries.

**Q43 Mike Gapes:** Not much that we can do as the UK, or as the EU3, or—

**Sir Robert Cooper:** Well, I think that being transparent and open, and continuing to explain every step of the way where we are going and doing this together is vital—and, of course, the US role is vital. The relationship is, for some, ambivalent. A lot of them make a lot of money out of Iran as well, but again, I am reminded of my image of the Communist parties in Europe at the end of the war, and the Soviet Union. That is the nature of the challenge in the Gulf, but a Marshall plan is not what is needed. This is one of the few areas of the world where you do not need a Marshall plan.

**Chair:** Sir Robert, thank you very much. This has been very helpful and very informative, and is deeply appreciated.

### Examination of Witness

Witness: **Professor Ali Ansari**, Director, Institute for Iranian Studies, University of St Andrews, gave evidence.

**Q44 Chair:** I welcome our second witness this afternoon, Professor Ali Ansari, Director of the Institute for Iranian Studies at the University of St Andrews. Thank you, Professor Ansari, for coming back. Is there anything you want to say by way of an opening statement? I have a general question.

**Professor Ansari:** No, no, you fire away.

**Q45 Chair:** What has Britain got to gain from a good relationship with Iran?

**Professor Ansari:** The potential of a change in the direction of relations and the potential for positive developments could be quite dramatic. Britain has always had interests in Iran. We know that Anglo-Iranian relations have not always been terribly positive, but they have not necessarily been quite as disastrous as some of the naysayers would like us to think. I certainly think that the Russian relationship was probably worse in many respects, and yet they have managed to surmount their history, so it is possible for Britain, too, but of course Britain carries a particular inheritance. Given the situation in the Middle East at the moment, having relatively constructive, shall we say, if not positive, relations with Iran would be pretty important in terms of being able basically to have some influence, not only as regards Afghanistan and Iraq, but central Asia and the broader Persian Gulf region.

I think Iran is an important player and is likely to continue to be. Its main problem has been the nature of its governance, which has always hampered it, but if it got its Government and politics and economics right, it would definitely be the engine room of the Middle East.

**Q46 Chair:** How good are we in the UK at reading Iran? How do we compare now with the past?

**Professor Ansari:** In the past there has been an enormous resource base in not only the Foreign Office but the numerous companies that have had origins in Iran. Also, there was Britain's interest in India; British India was really Persian-speaking before it was English-speaking. There were cultural inroads into that sort of Persian mindset and Iranian outlook and attitudes; that has, for obvious reasons, been dissipated in the past 50 or so years. There is still a good and growing set of expertise. As someone who promotes Iranian and Persianate studies around the UK, I would obviously like to say that it could always be better, and that we could always do with a little more investment in those sorts of areas, but it is certainly not as bad as it was.

As for reading Iran, prediction is always difficult, as I know. It is a question of making judgments about where we think the country is going. Its politics are quite opaque, so it is always going to be quite difficult to see exactly where the lay of the land is. On the whole,

however, I would say that the reading and the mixture of opinions and views has not been as egregious as it could have been, certainly. There were periods in the 1990s where things were going probably much—I would not want to say “much worse,” but the readings were certainly not as good as they could have been. That really reflected the fact that many of the old hands at the Foreign Office were retiring, and in the absence of an embassy in Tehran, there were really no new people coming up to take those positions. I think we saw the consequences of that during the period when Khatami was President. Measures were then taken to make up for that deficiency.

**Q47 Chair:** Up until that period when the embassy was shut in 2011, how did the Iranians see us? Were we a big player in Tehran, or just one of the boys?

**Professor Ansari:** As one former ambassador always said to me, Iran is the only country where the British empire still exists. They are actually quite convinced that you run the show. There are antipathies and animosities. I have written about this issue and looked at it in some detail. It is very interesting to see this, in a way, dichotomous perception. On the one hand, they have this deep antipathy towards all things English. They always say English, by the way—they say “Inglisi” rather than “British.” Being north of the border helps, in certain respects. The fact is that they have this sort of wariness of the cunningness of the Brits. At the same time—this is very interesting to see—that wariness is matched with a deep respect for what they consider to be a British way of doing things. You can see that.

I always cite the fact that Britain is still one of the leading destinations for Iranians to travel to and be educated in or whatever. The current President has a doctorate, of sorts, from Glasgow Caledonian university. That was very much promoted in his campaign literature. This is the thing: you think on the one hand that they might think it is terrible that he has had this experience in Britain, but on the other hand, it was promoted very much as a positive that he had this experience in Britain. At least one Iranian academic said to me on a visit, “All our problems started with the seizure of the British embassy in 2011.” I said, “Do you think it’s all of them? I would have thought that perhaps other things might have led to it.” He said, “Anyway, it’s okay now, because we have a British President.” I have given up negotiating or discussing these things. It is interesting, because he thinks that because he was in Glasgow, that basically means that—

**Q48 Chair:** Or an Inglisi President.

**Professor Ansari:** Yes, that’s right. It is an interesting relationship. I would really caution against people who say that it is almost wholly antithetical. There is a powerful mythology that revolves around the overthrow of Mossadeq. Clearly, overthrowing a democratically elected Prime Minister was probably the lowest point of Anglo-Iranian relations. On the other hand, the relationship is much more complex than that and has seen lots of ups and downs. If you look at Iranian attitudes to Britain, they are much more mixed and in many ways very positive—much more positive than people would think.

**Q49 Mr Baron:** Professor, do you think we have underestimated, in the West, in trying to understand how the country works, the extent to which there are multiple centres of authority in Iran, and the need for nuance and greater understanding about where the power base lies? Let us take the nuclear negotiations at the moment. What is your assessment about who is

making the day-to-day decisions, and what does that tell us about these negotiations, going forward?

**Professor Ansari:** I do not think we have, necessarily. I would very much agree with you that we need to have a much fuller and richer understanding of the political hinterland, certainly, and the social hinterland in Iran. I think that those who work on Iran are fully aware of this subtlety and these nuances. I think that sometimes it is quite difficult to get these out to a wider public. Sometimes it is more difficult to get it out to those who are of the journalistic profession, who may sometimes like to see things in rather more simplistic tones.

I think, in the current negotiations, we have to start at the top and say that Ayatollah Khamenei has given a certain amount of blessing for these to go ahead. What he has done is basically, in my view, certainly given Rouhani and the Foreign Ministry in this respect—Zarif and others—a certain amount of rope to get on with it, but he has also covered himself quite well, because if they fail, he will be able to cut them loose.

The point is, there is a number of different power centres that are negotiating and waiting, actually, for Rouhani and others to fail. You also have to see Rouhani himself as someone who has a foot, in some ways, in either camp. We have this discussion: here is—I always find the descriptions of Rouhani interesting—a very charming, articulate, interesting gentleman. He is also somewhat opaque in his politics. I mean, his championing of liberal and progressive ideas in the June election was a bit of a novelty for many Iranians; they had not really seen that in him before. None the less, he did it, and did it rather well. He was helped by the fact that Jalili, his main competitor, was, in a sense, completely incomprehensible to most people.

There is, in a sense, a view that not only simplifies the power politics in Iran, but simplifies Rouhani as an individual and says, “This man is someone who can do wondrous things and can achieve great things, and basically has a political view that is very clear.” Actually, it has been quite difficult, sometimes, to pin down exactly what his political leanings are. I remember, when I did most of my work and fieldwork in Iran—certainly, during the reform period of Khatami—*[Interruption.]* Just as it was getting good.

**Chair:** I apologise, Professor. This is democracy at work. The sitting is suspended. If there is one vote, can everyone be back here by 10 past, and if there are two votes, by 20 past?

*Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.*

*On resuming—*

**Chair:** Professor Ansari, thank you very much for your patience. We are only two minutes late getting back.

**Professor Ansari:** I was in mid-flow, I think.

**Q50 Mr Baron:** I do not think you had finished answering the question.

**Professor Ansari:** I was basically trying to say that on the one hand, I absolutely agree with you that there has not been enough nuanced and detailed understanding of the politics and history of the country. I would probably emphasise, in some parts, the history

of the country, because I think that has been in many ways neglected. That is a pity, because Britain has traditionally been in a very strong position to understand that historical legacy. Also, as I said, that simplification is detrimental to any positive understanding of the future, and not only when it comes to the general lay of the land. We tend to focus or fixate on individuals—I think Rouhani is one—and see them in much more simplistic political colours than perhaps they have.

**Q51 Mr Baron:** Can I develop that even further, while we are talking about a simplistic approach and focusing on one individual? Everybody is focused on the change in the presidential leadership, the elections and so on, and Rouhani definitely has a different approach from his predecessor Ahmadinejad. To what extent is his support grounded in the electorate as a whole? What we would like to know as a Committee is: what strength does he have in his position? What support does he have? Is it simply a case of the Supreme Leader—I suppose the clue is in the title—giving him some slack and seeing what happens? Would it be as simple as cutting him loose? Or is there real popular demand for change that we perhaps underestimate?

**Professor Ansari:** If you want to look at Rouhani's election victory, there are a number of factors that feed into that. One of them has to be the fact that the Supreme Leader was reconciled to the fact that he would win in any modestly free vote. But there are two figures in the background that we have tended to neglect. One of them is Khatami himself, and the other one is Rafsanjani. Both of them put a lot of weight behind Rouhani, and brought their constituencies with them.

My reading of the situation is that Rouhani himself does not have the sort of social base that the other two have. Rafsanjani has a very powerful following in many elements of the bureaucracy in the country. He is widely respected in many parts of the Government. Khatami is the one who really has the reformists' heart and mind, if I can put it that way, and the populism on the street.

The unfortunate thing is that since Rouhani's election in June, both these individuals have been quite badly—I do not want to say hammered, but certainly Khatami has effectively been disowned. They could not even find the courage to invite Khatami to the inauguration; they did not think it was worth the risk. Rafsanjani, for two or three months, played a much more prominent role and made a number of speeches and very interesting comments, but he has since come under more and more attack. If you look at the constellation of Iranian politics as a negotiation in some ways—I am probably guilty of simplifying to some extent as well, of course—between Khamenei, Rafsanjani and Khatami, I would have to say, in the last two to three months, you are seeing Khamenei reasserting himself in quite an aggressive way, and doing it with the support of the Revolutionary Guards and others.

Rouhani has made a lot of promises. One of the reasons why I was genuinely surprised that he won is that the promises he made in his election were extraordinary. They were way beyond almost anything that people had expected. I personally felt there was absolutely no way he could achieve them. He would not be able to fulfil those promises. The truth of the matter is that among the big promises he made was the release of all these political prisoners, a much desecuritized atmosphere, improved human rights and this, that and the other. A generous interpretation would say that at the moment, it is work in

progress. I do not think he has made a huge amount of progress on these particular things. The Government focused more on the foreign policy aspect than the domestic.

**Q52 Mr Baron:** Can I push you further, Professor? Again, we have talked about individuals. Can I return to my original question? To what extent, perhaps, should we give Rouhani more credit than we are doing at the moment? Is he perhaps reflecting a bit of a shift in Iranian public thinking on this issue? How well grounded is he? To what extent does he reflect the wishes of his people? On one hand, we are told that they are absolutely tired and fed up with sanctions, but on the other hand, we hear experts say, “Actually, this is a matter of national pride, and sanctions have had only a marginal effect.”

**Professor Ansari:** I am of the view that—this goes back to the view about Khatami’s support during the election, and his backing Rouhani and bringing the constituency with him. Khatami said very clearly ahead of the election—“This is not the time for sulking.” The big worry was lack of turnout and poor turnout. He basically encouraged his followers— if the majority of Iranians, certainly by my reading, are given an opportunity to express their preferences, their preferences are basically for a normalisation of relations with the West. One of the things that Rouhani has promised for instance, which is symbolic but is testament to this mood, is that there will be direct flights between Tehran and New York. Frankly, that is the least of their concerns in many ways, but clearly this is something that he thinks will garner a certain amount of support.

I think that yes, Rouhani reflected that. He understood and could see after 2009 and the huge uprising that followed that you do not want to go through another fiasco like that. There had to be someone who could reflect that popular sentiment. If you looked at the crowds coming out, even in the last election, it was quite striking that, despite the repression that had occurred—let’s not have any illusions about it—people were quite courageous in the chanting that was going on in the two weeks up to—

**Q53 Mr Baron:** Very briefly, though, Professor, can I press you again, perhaps in a different way? If Rouhani were to be replaced or cut loose, as you put it, and the reformists were to lose the day and hard-liners were to come back in—one can go back to the 2005 example—would there be a backlash on the streets?

**Professor Ansari:** Yes. The short answer is that that is one of the things they worried about. I tend to view the repression that took place in the last four years as fairly systematic. Some people have argued that the regime is worried about a popular uprising. I am not so confident that people would be that willing to rush out, but the fear is certainly there. We have to marry this to the state of the economy, which is in an extremely parlous state. If Rouhani’s promise is not at least even partially fulfilled, then I think their worry is that you are going to see a certain amount of backlash on the streets. I think that is certainly on the cards.

**Q54 Sandra Osborne:** I think you have more or less answered my questions about the fact that Rouhani was elected, which was quite surprising. What about those groups who boycotted the elections for a more liberal regime? Where are they coming from?

**Professor Ansari:** Well, interestingly a lot of the more progressive and liberal elements in society did back Rouhani on the promise that he would provide political reform. If you are looking at where the criticisms are coming now, he is facing twin pressures: one from

hard-liners who think that his deal with the West is wholly imbalanced. The other from the very people you mention, who are saying, “Where are all these political reforms that you promised us?”

The argument has been that we need to deal with the economics first, and some of them have bought into that argument. But certainly there is a group of people from what you would call the progressive political wing in Iranian politics, which Khartami in many ways represents or reflects—not entirely, by any stretch of the imagination—who expected a good deal more to come out of the election and will wait for a finite time for some of these things to be delivered.

A key element, of course, is the release of Mousavi and Karroubi. They are not the only ones—they are the people who have been highlighted—but the fact that it was made such a central plank of the election campaign and the fact that this has been pushed into the long grass is something that people are a little frustrated about. But, at the same time, as long as there is some momentum on nuclear, sanctions relief and so on, he has something to offer them, if not exactly what they wanted.

**Q55 Sandra Osborne:** When the Committee in the previous Parliament did a report on Iran, there was quite a lot of movement in relation to women’s human rights and, particularly, tackling violence against women. What has been said about that, if anything?

**Professor Ansari:** Well, again Rouhani made a lot of promises in this respect. When he appointed his Cabinet, there were not any women in it and he was brought to task for that. He has appointed a number of people. I think he has actually appointed one as a vice-president for environmental affairs; she was also vice-president under Khartami. And the spokeswoman at the Foreign Ministry is obviously a woman who has been brought in.

There is a view that this is a little bit tokenistic: obviously, he is trying to respond to a general unhappiness within the populous—over 50% of whom are women—who are unhappy with the fact that he has not delivered on some of the things that he said he would. But it is certainly there. I think society in Iran has a way of agitating for its own demands and, whatever the Government does, you will see that some of the religious strictures that are more common in the Arab parts of the Gulf are being challenged on a daily basis on the Persian side of the Gulf.

**Q56 Sir Menzies Campbell:** How would Rouhani define success for Iran? And how would you define success for Iran?

**Professor Ansari:** I have said that the election brought in three strands of thought as to what might be accepted as success, and a lot of it has to do with what people perceive to be the problems. There are those who see the problem purely as a matter of sanctions and if we get sanctions lifted or alleviated will say, “That is it, we have scored what we needed to do and nothing else needs to be done.”

There are others, who probably form the bulk of the centrists and the Rafsanjani crowd, who say that this is much more fundamentally economic and that Iran needs major economic restructuring, to bring in foreign investment, and so on and so forth, which will lead in time to political change. Then there is a third group, with which I am probably

most sympathetic, who say that what needs to be done is much more of a root-and-branch reform of the system, which would involve a degree of political reform.

For me, looking at Iran with a historical gaze, we have been facing the problem of political reform and the rule of law in Iran for the better part of a century. It has been a long time coming. If you look at the writing of Iranians, they have been arguing very heavily that if you want to get a country back on its feet you need to have a constitution that is adhered to, a rule of law that is obeyed, and so on. These are ambitious targets, I grant you. I would not want to say that we are necessarily going to see them happen overnight, but for me success—if you are looking at Iran being put on a stable footing and there being success, welfare and a good standard of living for its people—would be something on a broader scale than we are currently seeing.

My fear at the moment is about the promises that have been made. Rouhani and his Ministers have made two comments that I think are slightly unfortunate. He said that the interim agreement represents the abject surrender of America to Iran, and so on. Someone also said, “The iceberg of sanctions has now begun to melt.” Well, if you look at the view from the other side, that is not at all where we are at. In order to satisfy the anxieties in society at large, they are portraying the interim agreement as the beginning of the end, with Iran being on the verge of normalisation—which I think is what Iranians want, and it is what I would like to see as a success. They are a long way from that.

**Q57 Sir Menzies Campbell:** As you mentioned the Americans—you may have heard these questions asked previously of Robert Cooper—may I ask you about the extent to which the United States put down red lines? Do you think that has been advantageous or disadvantageous? Have the red lines been advantageous or disadvantageous for the United Kingdom, and indeed for the others that made up the EU 3?

**Professor Ansari:** If you look at the early period of the negotiations in 2003 to 2005, I think they were definitely disadvantageous. The elephant in the room was the fact that the Bush Administration was constantly tweaking the negotiations from the back. It was a very poor back-seat driver in some ways. In many ways, there has been a convergence, in part because the Ahmadinejad Administration did a fantastic job of unifying almost everyone against Iran’s objectives. Now, of course, one of Rouhani’s problems is that he cannot simply turn back the clock to the situation before Ahmadinejad. He has inherited a much more difficult situation. The Americans are in some ways probably being more flexible than some of the Europeans at the moment, but it is a matter of tactical rather than strategic differences.

**Q58 Sir Menzies Campbell:** Would the flexibility that you now attribute to the United States have been of help earlier in trying to achieve the interim agreement or something similar?

**Professor Ansari:** I have written about this. If you look back to the earlier period of negotiations, I don’t think there is any doubt that the attempts to reach an agreement between 2003 and 2005 were—I wouldn’t want to lay all the blame here, because there is plenty of blame to go around—not helped by the red lines. I wouldn’t even call them red lines; the Americans just kept shifting the goalposts. Every time an agreement was reached they wanted something else, so it became very difficult indeed.

**Q59 Sir Menzies Campbell:** I asked Robert Cooper to imagine that he was a betting man and to give us an answer to that, but let me ask you this. If you were a senior member of White House staff and the President came and said, “How can we improve and develop trust between the United States and Iran?”, what three things might you tell him?

**Professor Ansari:** I wish I had been primed with that question beforehand, because I would have thought of three profound answers. The first thing I would say is, “Get your history right.” Particularly when we go back in the history of US-Iran relations, there has been far too much simplistic assessment and interpretation of what was going on. There are both pros and cons, by the way. I wouldn’t want to put it all one way, but there is an element of seeing things in a political, far too short-term way. I think you have to see things in a much more strategic, long-term way to see where the strategic interests of the United States lie. Be aware of your history and of the long view, but also be aware of the culture of politics in Iran—if I can put it that way. We see this in both directions, but far too often comments have been made that have gone down badly and tripped things up. People in the White House and other places sometimes do not really understand the consequences of what they have said. That is basically it. If I had a little more time to think, I am sure that I could think of something much more interesting.

**Sir Menzies Campbell:** That’s fine. This is not a viva. *[Laughter.]*

**Q60 Mark Hendrick:** Professor Ansari, to what extent do you feel that UK policy in the past has basically done what it could to follow US policy, rather than take a more independent view?

**Professor Ansari:** It depends on the institutions that you are talking about. If you talk to the Foreign Office and the State Department, you might find that they actually had quite similar views on many things, but neither could get their views felt in either Downing street or the White House. Different aspects of government were sometimes more in tune than we think and would have approached things in different ways to other parts. There have certainly been times when I would have liked to see Britain take a more independent line. There were certainly times during the Bush Administration when Britain should have taken a more independent line, but they did not for various reasons.

By and large, however, you have to say that the strategic view has not been that different. The goal has not been that different. I think disagreements have arisen on the means of achieving those goals. There were certainly differences of approach over the past decade.

**Q61 Mark Hendrick:** It is interesting, because you mentioned earlier that they have a British person in Rouhani—

**Professor Ansari:** I didn’t say that; they said that.

**Mark Hendrick:** Yes. Looking at American history going back to Carter, the US has clearly had a very different relationship with Iran than we have. Do you not feel that maybe the Iranian embassy siege and the legacy of the Carter Administration has perhaps stayed with them for a lot longer and made them a lot more hostile towards the US than us? At what point do you think that our thinking fell more into line perhaps more with Europeans than with the United States?

**Professor Ansari:** There is history and mythology. It is quite true that the hostage crisis has had a profound effect on the way in which Americans have viewed Iran, in the same way that other experiences have had quite different impacts on British views of Iran and vice versa. We ought to remember, however, that in 1984 Reagan authorised unofficial contact, which blew up in the Iran-Contra crisis. I always say to both American and Iranian colleagues that this notion of a 34-year war between the United States and Iran is actually fictitious. When things got really bad was actually during the Clinton Administration, because Clinton starting imposing a certain number of executive orders in terms of sanctions. When Rafsanjani originally offered an oil contract to Conoco, it was Clinton who came in and made sure that it was not allowed to go through.

What I am saying is that the relationship is probably a good deal more nuanced—to go back to that overused word—than perhaps we imagine. There are certainly hawks in America who view this as some form of war with Iran and there are a certain number of hawks in Iran who think the same, but you will also find that there are many in Iran and in the United States who do not actually follow that particular narrative and who understand that, while we have problems, which I do not want to trivialise, they are not irresolvable. I do not think that the current situation has just been one big misunderstanding, for example. There are serious issues between the countries and between Europe and Iran. However, the Americans have a particular experience, and that needs to be accounted for. The Iranians also need to acknowledge that.

**Q62 Mark Hendrick:** Obviously, we are fairly in tune with Europeans outside of the UK now. Historically, do you think that France and Germany were more disposed towards good relations with Iran?

**Professor Ansari:** Germany probably was, but not France; I would not put France in that category. I think France has had a very mixed relationship with Iran. It tends to have a much more Arabic bent, I should say, to its foreign policy—towards north Africa and the Arab world. I know that the Iranians find that quite frustrating and of course if you looked at the impact of the Geneva agreement that wasn't—when Laurent Fabius went and apparently intervened—the commentary in the Iranian press was, in some ways, quite a relief to the Anglo-Americans. It made a change.

The Germans have certainly had more constructive relations in the long term, and also the Italians, the Spanish and the others, but of course that is because they don't necessarily have that historical legacy.

**Q63 Mark Hendrick:** One thing you did say was that you felt the US was more flexible than the Europeans. What brings you to say that?

**Professor Ansari:** These things change, in fairly rapid time, but if you look at the desire and the enthusiasm of the Obama White House to get a deal, the speed at which they were moving probably took some of the Europeans by surprise. The Obama White House—let us be very specific about it—has shown a little bit more flexibility and probably caught the Europeans by surprise. But again, I would not see these as major differences at all; I would see them as quite subtle differences.

However, I think that in the first Geneva agreement, and the reason why the French and perhaps also the British did what they did —although the British didn't say much, so the

French stepped up in that sense—there was an anxiety that things were moving quicker than people had anticipated.

**Q64 Mr Baron:** Although Foreign Office Ministers will never admit it at the Dispatch Box, I think there is a growing realisation that mistakes have been made by both sides in this relationship, going back however long you want to go back. You only have to go back 10 years to remember the “axis of evil” speech in reply to approaches by Iran; that is one example. But the Iranians have made many mistakes as well. That is now becoming more accepted, but to what extent do you think that lesson has been learned—particularly by the Americans, who not so long ago were certainly more intransigent than we were in their approach to Iran? Or is this just a transitory phase? Are we going to fall back to the old rhetoric and allow our relationships to be defined by American hostility to Iran?

**Professor Ansari:** It is interesting, because you can draw some quite interesting new images of Iran and the United States in this respect. You are saying, “How flexible can we be?” and you have a very hard-line Parliament in Iran, and you have the hawkish elements in Iran who are waiting for this to fail and to go back to normal. And you can see in the United States there are elements in Congress, and others, who are quite keen to wait for this to fail, or to encourage it to fail, or whatever.

I suppose one of the reasons I would argue that the Americans are being a little more flexible is because I think they have realised that the intransigence wasn’t working; the intransigence was just becoming too difficult. So I suppose that one could say that when I say, “flexibility”, I am putting it in the context that there was a lack of any flexibility at all in some ways, and that they had settled into this nice—“complacency” is the wrong term, but basically they had a vested interest in the status quo. Let’s put it that way. Now, they are showing a degree of flexibility.

I suppose what I am anxious about if I was to comment—going back to the comment by Sir Menzies, and to your comment again—is that in compensating for their past mistakes, they over-simplify the present. That is the problem. What we do is say, “Ach, it was all a great misunderstanding. We got it all wrong. Mea culpa. Obviously, everything is lovely,” and so on. No—the real lesson that has to be learned is that, actually, it is the simplification that is wrong. That worries me in the sense that people suddenly emerge and say, “Ach, the last 30 years”—or the last 50 years, or the last 10 years—“we got it all wrong, because all those people somehow missed things, whereas we are coming with a fresh face and we have suddenly realised that it is all marvellous.”

The fact is that you are actually setting yourself up for another fall if you do that. That is the real lesson that needs to be learned. It is to look at it, going back, with that historical context and with that political hinterland. It is not all about nuclear. I know we are focused on nuclear, but open your vision and look at what is happening on the sidelines. See who is saying what to whom, how things are working out, what pressures are on Rouhani, what he is doing on another level, and see how that politics feeds into the nuclear negotiations, or vice versa. That way I think you will have a better chance of success in the long term.

It is all very good having an interim agreement, but I am very wary of the handshake on the White House lawn. When did they have the handshake on the White House lawn for the Arab-Israeli peace process? It is all great to have this wonderful, triumphant sort of

result, but the last thing I want to see is this going on interminably as we wait for the final result, because people haven't actually learnt the lessons that we need to learn.

**Q65 Mike Gapes:** Can I take you back to the discussion we had with Robert Cooper about Iran as a negotiator? In William Hague's words, Mr Zarif is "a tough negotiator, but he is very constructive." Is this negotiation about a process where we know what the final outcome is going to be, or is it actually unclear where it will end up and could the negotiation completely fail?

**Professor Ansari:** There are different groups in Iran arguing for different things. If you are looking at Zarif or others, they are acutely aware that they cannot go back with a final deal that the Supreme Leader and others will simply reject out of hand. There is an anxiety there. First, it is good to have a long negotiation, because it shows that you worked for it. Rouhani said that we could get this done in three months or six months, and so on and so forth, but the trouble with it being easy and quick is that it makes it sound as if the last 10 years of pain and suffering were absolutely pointless. As long as you are really fighting every corner, it looks as if this is something much more serious that was worth the pain. I know that people in Iran are beginning to question what the point of all this was over the past 10 years and what they have been doing. There are some things that they have managed to take away, one of them being the ability to enrich uranium, if they are allowed, ultimately in Iran. That is in some ways a major concession.

Part of it is a negotiating tactic that the Iranians use, which is basically to wear you down until you say yes, but the other thing is a certain anxiety about what people will say. There is a fear of giving too much away, because what will happen to you when you get home? There is that element. That has always been a hindrance in many ways. Ignoring the nuclear negotiations, even business negotiations with Western companies in the 1990s were tortuous, for the very reason that nobody wanted to appear to give away too much to a Western company—even though, frankly, it would have been in the mutual interest to get a really good oil or gas deal set up in the 1990s.

**Q66 Mike Gapes:** The joint plan of action owes a great deal to a shift in the US approach that you alluded to. Who actually made the running in the discussions—was it the Americans or the Iranians?

**Professor Ansari:** I am interested by this idea that there were secret negotiations in Oman beforehand. I have to say to people raising this that it does make a little bit of a mockery of the election in June, but there is this idea that the lay of the land and what they were thinking of doing had been sketched out. There was clearly a shift. To be perfectly honest, right from 2009 the Obama Administration have been saying, "We are open to some sort of negotiation or some sort of opening." It is just that, obviously, the election crisis in Iran that year put paid to all that.

It is a rare occasion—this is why a lot of people have been very hopeful and optimistic about it—when we have had that sort of marginal area, where both the Iranians and Americans have been willing to sit down and engage in a very serious way. It also helps, by the way, that Zarif and the others all speak English very well. Negotiations are much easier when everyone is speaking the same language.

**Q67 Mike Gapes:** Has this also led to any change in Iranian behaviour on other issues, for example, the number of public executions or the harassment of religious minorities such as the Baha'is or Jewish people?

**Professor Ansari:** This is the concern, and this goes back to what I was saying—I have written about this as well—because in a sense Rouhani has been allowed to play reformist abroad but conservative at home. The problem is, quite shockingly, that according to the announcements that have come through, I think Iran has executed more people this year than certainly in previous years, and may have surpassed China—this will need to be checked, I have to say—in absolute terms, not in per capita terms, if I may put that way. That is a different image, and something that we are not hearing enough about. To go back to what I said earlier, the domestic situation, to be generous about it, is work in progress. The progress has not been huge, and I can talk about that if you wish, in terms of civil rights and the other things that Rouhani said that he was going to address. Domestically, and on the elements of human rights and other issues, there has not been the progress that people would have liked to have seen.

**Q68 Chair:** On the joint plan of action, and I am sure that you have had a good look at it, can you see any flaws, weaknesses or loopholes in it?

**Professor Ansari:** The first thing I did was to look at the Persian translation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then I looked at the European Union's translation, because I always say that you are going to trip up where something is lost in translation. I have to say that the European translation was pretty good. The one that was slightly different was the American version, because the State Department issued pointers, which were slightly different, and that had to do with some aspects of the lifting of sanctions on insurance. The European and Iranian translations were pretty good, and they reflected each other rather well. In that sense, for me, I think the agreement is a good one, and I agree with others about that. It does not represent the abject surrender of the United States to Iran by any stretch of the imagination. I think it is an interim agreement, and I do not think that it represents historic or tectonic shifts, or anything like that. We would do much better by just playing it more low key and letting the negotiators get on with the main task at hand. My main worry was that something would be lost in translation, and on that point I can assure you that, in this case, the translation was a fairly good reflection of the text.

**Q69 Chair:** Do you think that Western negotiators should be confident that the Iranians will stand by it?

**Professor Ansari:** In this case, yes. The current situation is more conducive to an agreement than it ever was simply because the economic situation in Iran is probably worse than I thought, although I have got my reservations about the final agreement, which will probably take longer to reach than the six months that has been suggested. Even last year, when I came to give testimony, one of the reasons that I did not think that a political change, or shall we say a shift at the very least, would come as quickly as it did was that in many ways I underestimated the depth of the economic malaise that is hitting the country.

**Q70 Chair:** Because of sanctions?

**Professor Ansari:** Partly, but I have always said that sanctions have been the salt rubbed into a self-inflicted wound, and it is a self-inflicted wound. I have to say that, as for the management of the economy in the past 10 years, a figure that is perhaps the most shocking and that most Iranians get very upset about, but it is one that they issued actually, was that Ahmadinejad was the beneficiary of 40% of the total oil revenue earned by Iran since 1908.

**Chair:** Good God.

**Professor Ansari:** People are saying, “Where is it?” Well, we know where it is; it is being spent on Lamborghinis and other things in Tehran. But the point is to have a situation like that and still find the Government bankrupt is absurd. That tells you that whatever sanctions had happened, if you had had a Government in Iran that had managed its finances in a better way, they would have had reserves now that would have seen them through this tough time. The reason why they are in deep, deep trouble is that Ahmadinejad—and this was reported by a number of Ministers who have come in, bearing it in mind that new Governments always try to rubbish their predecessors’ competence, but in this case it was probably justified—had simply not planned for the sort of sanctions regime that was coming in. They did not take seriously the oil embargo that the Europeans imposed in July 2012, and they had not invested in the future of the country. Therefore, at the moment, the situation is dire, and those serious economists in Iran understand that it will be years, not months, before the situation improves.

**Q71 Chair:** We could get to a situation where after six months, we get there and there is not much happening, and the hawks will be calling for the re-imposition of the sanctions that were lifted. Do you think that that would be a mistake?

**Professor Ansari:** I tend to agree with the premise of the White House and many others in the United States that, in important questions of foreign policy negotiation, you have to give your negotiators the free hand they need to negotiate. I think Congress wanting to impose a trip wire has more to do with the domestic political environment in the United States than anything else and the antipathy of Congress towards Mr Obama. None the less, in important situations like this, I would give the President and his foreign policy team the ability to negotiate. Of course, if things do not work out, as people say, Congress can in six months or a year quite easily come and change the narrative.

**Q72 Mike Gapes:** Going back to the foreign policy question that I touched on earlier, do you regard the Iranians as rational in their foreign policy, or are they, as in the words of another academic—you might know the quote—“defensive, paranoid, narcissistic”?

**Professor Ansari:** That doesn’t mean that they are not rational. Going back to the American view and others, I would say that an element of ideology affects all our policies. I would say that the Iranians are rational, but I would say that the goals, ambitions and ideological parameters under which they operate are perhaps different. If you look, going back to John Baron’s comment earlier, at what Iranians want, Iranians want basically very similar things to what ordinary people want. They do not have that paranoia that some of their leadership, I regret to say, do. This is what Rouhani and his election are trying to reflect, but it is certainly true, and I think this is the problem, that the hard-line leadership in Iran have a very limited understanding of the outside world. I will put it that way. I do not think they are as—shall we say?—well travelled and well read as perhaps they should

be. That is not unique to Iran, by the way; I would not want to say that. None the less, when we ask why it is that they take certain positions, it is because they have a particular world view that is shaped by certain experiences that has not necessarily been as cosmopolitan as it could be.

**Q73 Mike Gapes:** Given the civil war in Syria and Iran's key relationship with the Assad regime and with Hezbollah, what is your take on the issue about Iranian participation in Geneva II and what has happened in the past few days?

*Professor Ansari:* I think, in an ideal world, they should be there.

**Q74 Mike Gapes:** Without preconditions?

*Professor Ansari:* Well, that is the problem. The problem is that the invitation was not handled very well, and it should have been clear. If we believe Ban Ki-moon, of course, he said that he did get oral assurances from them that they would agree to the conditions of Geneva I, and then they reneged on them publicly.

**Q75 Mike Gapes:** Did he get assurances from people who could not actually deliver.

*Professor Ansari:* That is possibly what it is, yes.

**Q76 Mike Gapes:** The Foreign Ministry are not the decisive body, and it had to be cleared up the line somewhere else?

*Professor Ansari:* I think possibly what had happened was—I do not know this for a fact—that he had talked to the Foreign Ministry, the Foreign Ministry said, “Yes, yes, of course. We agree to these. Let's go to this meeting,” and then it was countermanded somewhere else in the system and they disagreed. That has turned into a bit of a mess. It is a bit of a litmus test on how much things are changing in Iran, of course, because what we are basically seeing is that Khamenei has allowed Rouhani a certain amount of latitude on a very specific issue. Syria remains an ideological *raison d'être* for the regime and certainly for the Revolutionary Guard, and it is a good example of where that world view has become a little bit restraining. They basically said, “We have invested heavily in this. We will back Assad to the hilt.” Many people I know in Iran think that Iran's involvement in Syria is a mistake and a waste of time—up to a point, but not to the point that they are getting involved in it. It is, in a sense, turning into their own Vietnam.

**Q77 Mike Gapes:** Is that likely to have any knock-on, long-term consequence for this relationship on the nuclear issue, or is the nuclear issue and the sanctions a separate box that can carry on regardless of difficulties on Syria?

*Professor Ansari:* A certain amount of progress can be made on the nuclear issue, but my view is—I think it goes back to Sir Menzies' question on what I consider to be success—that success is something along the lines of the grand bargain that was touted in 2003. Unfortunately, it was then rejected by some elements in the United States, but a grand bargain is one where all outstanding issues are, in a sense, settled. It will take time, but it is something that needs to be done, if Iran is to reap the benefit of all this. There are some in Iran who think that a solution to the nuclear problem will mean that everything will be normal, but it will not, for the very reasons that you raise. There are widespread issues in the region, including Iran's relations with Saudi, its relations with the Gulf states, its

relations with Syria and its relations with Turkey. There are all sorts of things that need to be handled. My view is that there are people—certainly Rafsanjani and others—who are aware of that, but Khamenei is not interested. Not at the moment, anyway.

**Q78 Mark Hendrick:** This relates to the latter points. If Syria was not happening, do you still feel that you would have got this interim agreement? It might be in both sides' interests while Syria is going on to get this agreement because, for example, Obama cannot do anything about Syria, but an agreement with Iran looks like a result. Similarly, Iran wants to carry on doing what it is doing in Syria, but to look a bit conciliatory, it wants the agreement as well. The agreement suits both sides, but it is like both sides are taking their eyes off what is happening in Syria. Is this agreement a bit of a fig leaf for what is going on in Syria? The interim agreement does not necessarily mean that there will be a final agreement.

**Professor Ansari:** Iran or the US, from whichever perspective you are looking at, is really the holy grail for either side in some ways. A succession of US presidents would like to have a relationship with Iran that predates those they had in 1979. There are a good many Iranians who would like to be the ones to say, "We solved this problem," although they are not necessarily at the highest levels in Iran. Certainly from the American side, if you look at Obama's election in 2008 to 2009 and his approaches to Khamenei well before anything broke out in the Arab spring or Syria or whatever, they would have been amenable to some sort of negotiation and some sort of negotiated settlement. It reflected far more the American fatigue, in a sense, with its interventions in the Middle East that, frankly, have not been entirely successful. That might be the best way of putting it. The thing is that they wanted to find alternative means of getting to the solution. The impetus was perhaps that they got some sort of agreement on Syria's chemical weapons. Therefore, it was seen to work, and we will carry on the momentum and see if we can get something on Iran's nuclear programme separately. It provides a certain amount of foreign policy success, but it will probably be longer and harder than some in the White House have considered.

**Q79 Mark Hendrick:** You said it from the US side. What about looking at it from the Iranian side?

**Professor Ansari:** The Iranians are being driven mostly—at the higher echelons with Khamenei and the others—by sanctions relief. It is the economy. There are many people in Iran, although not necessarily in power, who see it as a necessity to have some sort of relationship with the United States—you don't have to love them, but you should have relations with them. I have to say that the Russians might have something to say about it, but there is a bit of the great game going on there.

Strictly speaking, in the upper echelons, Syria and so on are all continuing conflicts, but what they are really focused on is at least moving that potential for conflict over the nuclear issue on to a different track, getting some sanctions relief and getting the economy back on a level footing. That is what is driving them. I do not think that it is really driven by aspirations to have better relations overall with the United States—unfortunately, I should say.

**Chair:** Professor Ansari, thank you very much indeed. That was excellent, which is only what I have come to expect from someone from the alumni of Royal Russell School in my constituency. Thank you very much.

