



Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The UK and Iran, HC 415

From Monday 22 June to Friday 3 July 2020, the Committee put questions to witnesses in an online evidence forum to replace the three oral evidence hearings which had been scheduled to inform this inquiry. The numbering of some questions and the ordering of some answers has been changed for clarity, but this transcript is otherwise a faithful and complete reproduction of that discussion.

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 7 July 2020.

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Alicia Kearns; Stewart Malcolm McDonald; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith, Graham Stringer.

Questions 1-30

Witnesses

I: Kasra Aarabi, Analyst, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, Dr Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, Behnam Ben Taleblu, Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Ellie Geranmayeh, Deputy Director, Middle East and North Africa programme, European Council on Foreign Relations, Charlie Loudon, International Legal Adviser, REDRESS, Dr Sanam Vakil, Deputy Director and Senior Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, Dr Anicée Van Engeland, Senior Lecturer in International Security, Cranfield University.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Kasra Aarabi](#)
- [Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi](#)
- [Behnam Ben Taleblu](#)
- [Ellie Geranmayeh](#)
- [Charlie Loudon](#)
- [Anicée Van Engeland](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kasra Aarabi, Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, Behnam Ben Taleblu, Ellie Geranmayeh, Charlie Loudon, Sanam Vakil, Anicée Van Engeland.

Opening Statements

Anicée Van Engeland: A radical change is needed in the way of approaching United Kingdom (UK)-Iran bilateral relations to address disputes but also create new opportunities for dialogue and business;

To that end the following recommendations are outlined:

□ Recommendation 1: Find new interlocutors - it is necessary to open a dialogue with the Conservatives, called the Principalists;

- Due to the current context (British nationals held in Iran, the JCPOA, the stronghold of the Guardians of the Revolution or the Iranian military arsenal), it is urgent to diversify interlocutors within the republic to create new opportunities for a dialogue;

- This recommendation is based on the observation that enabling/empowering civil society and supporting the reformist faction isn't sufficient; this strategy should be completed by the establishment of a working relationship with the most liberal among the Principalists;

- Civil society has been weakened due to a brain drain and arrests that seek to disable activists by extracting them from society; Engaging with Reformists isn't sufficient as they too have been disabled by the authorities: most leaders are under house arrests or in exile. The reformists left are either harassed or prefer to keep quiet;

- Besides, Principalists have slowly regain control of the State apparatus since 2005 and the UK cannot solely engage with the so-called secular side of the executive represented by President Rouhani. Most Western nations have ignored the Principalists, fearing a public backlash if they engage with them. Yet, many of those conservative figures are at odds with the current system, and are even liberal in their views. President Rohani was one of these figures: he came from the principalist faction of the regime and was forced to embrace a more liberal position due to the context.

- The UK should therefore seek to identify new partners in politics, law, business, culture and others, seeking to transcend political divisions. By doing so, it will be perceived as a nation that isn't politically siding with a specific faction or interfering in political affairs;

- The implementation of this recommendations will have a positive impact, by empowering the UK to access all spheres of leadership and all segments of society equally, without prejudice, thereby creating new opportunities for political dialogue and commercial ventures.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

□ Recommendation 2: Adopt a New Narrative and Tone- The UK needs to move from a “naming and shaming” approach to a more neutral stance;

- The tone of the engagement needs to shift from a “naming and shaming” approach to being supportive and encouraging of small progresses on all political sides. This doesn’t lead to an endorsement of the most extreme Principalists. The strategy is instead to engage politicians, intellectuals, businessman and others who think differently from the UK but are opened to being enriched vi a dialogue with the ultimate goals of bridging differences, which is in the interest of all;

- The donation of medical material by the UK under INSTEX is a great first step forward and should be continued. Other neutral signs of support are to be encouraged such as the donation of humanitarian material. In that vein, the UK should actively seek to lift US sanctions on humanitarian ground, therefore gaining the sympathy of society but also new political allies;

- The UK could lead and advocate for a change in international approach to Iran, thereby demonstrating a wish to create a new relation based on mutual respect rather than the constant need to castigate Iran while embracing Saudi Arabia;

- This would be gradual and would be made possible by the positioning the UK initially as a neutral observer and helper. The UK had already begun that move with INSTEX but undermined its own strategy when it sided with the US during the 2019 tensions in the Gulf. The next step would be for the UK to exert a soft influence with regard to contentious issues, from the nuclear to human rights;

- A more neutral stance would have a major positive impact, especially with regard to the long and heavy history between the two nations. It would tremendously help activists and Reformists who are hindered by declarations of support by foreign democracies and human rights’ organisations;

- This raises the unpleasant issue of apologies of UK interferences in Iranian politics, for which it is recommended to adopt an approach of acknowledgment;

- The implementation of this recommendations will contribute to giving a “new image” of the UK post BREXIT, without ignoring the past.

□ Recommendation 3: Acknowledge the Resilience of the Islamic Republic of Iran - The system has proven to be resilient and regime change isn’t an option for external actors;

- The Islamic republic of Iran has demonstrated its ability to adapt, as the system has shifted from an Islamic republic to a hybrid mode of governance, mixing religious governance with some militarise aspects of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

governance. As a result, wanting to counter the Republic with violence will only brew violence;

- Change will be organic but can be actively supported by enabling society and leaders via positive actions, such as supporting the economic development. This demands the end of US sanctions and investments in Iran. Re-establishing sanctions in the hope of provoking a regime change is a deep lack of understanding of the functioning of the Republic and the mood of Iranians. There is a lassitude that will not lead to change the system. It only aggravates the distrust of the authorities. In such circumstances, soft power has proven to be far more effective, prompting slow changes by engaging positively.

- The UK should create opportunities: rather than indirectly contributing to the rigidification of the system, the UK has a unique opportunity. The nation finds itself as a cross-road post BREXIT and it can re-invent its foreign policy, writing a new chapter of its history with Iran. The condition sine qua non would be to find new interlocutors and put an end to the sanctions;

- Opportunities could initially be created in the field of culture with language exchanges, art exhibition, UK student bursaries in Iran... as culture as proven to be a neutral domain for other European nations present in the country. Organising events, encouraging tourism, supporting exchanges will enable the first phase of the soft power. There are many areas in which the UK can invest financially or otherwise to sustain growth, always thinking about the creation of psychological ties.

- The UK will be more useful to the people of Iran if it accepts the Islamic republic of Iran as a fact, and seek to rely on internal "drivers" to relay its views. Rather than blaming the authorities and indirectly punishing the population by punishing the authorities, the UK needs to put an end to this dichotomy civil society/state authorities. While it has been a useful didactic approach to understand that the population doesn't fully agree with the leaders, it isn't a useful instrument to promote change;

- The implementation of this recommendation will empower the UK in devising new strategies. It could then softly promote change, as a neutral observer.

Recommendation 4: Acknowledge Iran as a Regional Power and Avoid Confrontation – accept the role of Iran in the region and seek to get closer to the country and its leaders so have an influence in the region;

- This recommendation is based on a fact: Iran has become a regional power. The Republic will weigh heavily on the future of the Gulf and Middle East region thanks to the strategy of the "buffer" zone: Iran has created militias to interfere in nearby countries in the name of the protection of the Shias. By doing so, the leaders have sought to protect what matters most to them: the republic itself. The Iranian strategy is one of survival and will not change, which is why the UK needs to accommodate it to be in a position to play a role in the region;



- By acknowledging Iran as a regional power, the UK will relax the tensions with Iran, without endorsing the Iranian agenda. This could enable the UK to see a new role in the Middle East & Gulf, such as, for example that of a mediator. Active neutrality has advantages, and one of them is to endorse active mediation in a region that doesn't need further tensions. The region needs a strong and powerful nation like the UK to neutrally encourage dialogue and negotiation;
 - Accepting the role Iran plays and will play in the Middle East & Gulf helps understanding the country's view on the nuclear and the JCPOA, thereby equipping the UK with a better programmatic strategy. It is in the field of the nuclear that mediation could take all its meaning and importance for the UK. To be able to endorse this new role, the UK would have to abandon a political agenda that seeks to marry regional security issues and the nuclear issue. Each should be a different matter, addressed in its own time, with different strategies;
 - If implemented, this recommendation will broaden the sphere of influence of the UK in the region, as a pragmatic stance will help the country strike the neutrality chord between Iran and Saudi Arabia
- Recommendation 5: Example of a different approach: Defence Engagement - Work on a soft form of defence engagement with the regular State armed forces to support them;
- This recommendation stems from the observation that confrontation has proven to be fruitless. There are practical ways of engaging positively and implementing all the recommendations above. It is time for cooperation, starting with education and culture, but also business. This cooperation could reach as far as defence engagement when possible (with legitimate State forces);
 - It is a daring recommendation to encourage a soft defence engagement with the regular State armed forces, but it is one that has proven to be efficient in complex environment. The UK has a history of engaging in the field of defence and security in highly complex and divided context, obtaining excellent results;
 - The Iranian Armed Forces could, for example, benefit from a training in international humanitarian law/Laws of armed conflict training that is delivered by the International Section of the Defence Academy, with the support of Cranfield University. This would expose the forces to a new narrative that isn't Islamic or Red Cross oriented;
 - Such support would contribute to bridging the gulf between two great nations, focusing on one example, defence and security. This could then be applied to other domains, fostering an exchange of skills and a mutual, beneficial soft influence.

Strand One – Bilateral Relationship

- Q1 **Alicia Kearns:** The UK-Iran bilateral relationship has been fraught with difficulty, particularly in relation to historical grievances. Do the two



HOUSE OF COMMONS

countries really understand each other's motives? How can the UK prompt more constructive engagement with Iran?

Anicée Van Engeland: The history of the Iran-UK relation goes back to the Empire. It has been at times fruitful and, at others, frustrating, marred by cultural misunderstandings, but tainted with respect. For example, the British didn't understand that placing the Shah over the Qajar dynasty would break a linear history; they also didn't understand that the desire for modernity of the Shah was resented by clerics that had been brutally side-lined, instead of being accommodated, thereby leading to the 1979 revolution. This is why Browne spoke of two "estranged lovers" when referring to the two nations.

The consequence of British interferences in Iran has led to an obsession at the authorities' level: it is believed that the UK sends planes full of spies to Iran. This perception is mocked by the population. Most Iranians aren't "against" the UK. The majority of Iranian have access to the internet and, as they are quite distrustful of the authorities, happily engage with content from around the world via VPNs (mostly designed by Iranians living in Canada). Yet, Iranians are very nationalist and when tensions, they will support the authorities. This is why it is important to tread carefully when criticising Iran or the authorities.

The volatile relation is then still a relation. This partly explains why Conservatives/principlists relentlessly scrutinise British citizens and dual-citizens coming to the country, and sometimes arrest them: it is a way of putting pressure on the authorities of the UK (but also France) to do their bidding. It is also a message sent internally to reformists and moderate principlists: stay away from the UK. The arrest of the British ambassador can also be understood in that light: it was a warning sent by the Conservative authorities to the UK about meddling with local affairs, but also a message sent internally. In that regard, arrests can be seen as a power games in which all sides of the political spectrum are "speaking" to the UK while "speaking" to each other. This might sound complex, but Conservatives/principlists need to keep control of the system, and recent events have shown the UK in a good light: the UK didn't join the maximum pressure campaign; British citizens have signed petitions to lift sanctions on Iran; the E3 sent help during the Covid-19 crisis. This would create an unease among the conservative leaders and their supporters.

The UK is at a turning point and so is Iran. It is at time of such changes that a dialogue can happen. Educational and cultural opportunities would be key in that regard, as both countries mutually admire each other's civilisations. Educated Iranians are very keen on learning English, watching movies and series from the UK, going to the theatre, reading and other, so they are quite aware of British culture. For example, many English books are translated into Persian, including Straw's book but also light fiction. This means that a work of outreach needs to be done at other levels of society so that the old clichés can be challenged.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sanam Vakil: Both the UK and Iran have legitimate grievances, but to overcome the arch of history, both countries should invest in a strategic dialogue that seeks to redress the nature of the relationship towards trade, cultural exchanges and educational investment.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: While it is true that throughout history the UK - Iran relationship has been "fraught with difficulty," it is important not to ascribe greater power or agency to this difficulty than it really has on current policy. Policymakers in London should be weary or ascribing every grievance that the Islamic Republic may have with British policy towards Iran to that history and misunderstanding. The motives of Iran's current class of leaders are quite clear, they are revolutionary and they have revisionist intentions for the entire region. The reason there isn't constructive engagement between the UK and Iran today is not the fault of the history of UK - Iran relations dating back to the 19th and 20th century. It is the result of a series of anti-western and anti-status quo choices that the government of the Islamic republic has chosen over the past 41 years. A more productive British policy towards Iran, which can feature both pressure and engagement, is a policy that understands that Iran's myriad nuclear violations, threats to maritime security, brief detention of the British ambassador in that country, and storming of the UK embassy in Tehran are not products of history, they are choices made by revolutionary individuals in an attempt to change future British policy.

Q2 **Bob Seely:** The British Council does not operate in Iran and its cultural diplomacy efforts have been likened to espionage by the Iranian intelligence services. How can the UK overcome this challenge to cultural exchanges?

Anicée Van Engeland: The authorities have made it a crime to work for or represent the British Council in Iran. The British Council's funding comes from the FCO and is therefore perceived as political. The BC's mission statement is also very much focused on empowering individuals, and Iranians are rather worried about attempts at empowering or building capacity. The Council mainly aims at teaching English; there is a highly competitive market in Iran made up of English-language providers, including the famous Deikhoda Institute. Opening yet another language centre with some societal/arts/culture outreach will therefore have minimal impact. It might therefore be best to wait to open such centre and try other approaches in the meantime.

The French model, the IFRI, is of interest here: a wing of the embassy is dedicated to fostering academic and cultural ties. IFRI is a place for French students to stay when doing a field work. There is a library accessible to all. IFRI also publishes academic books. There are talks and conferences. This academic focus and the attachment to the embassy (although IFRI's building isn't located within the embassy) has worked well for the French, with some temporary closures due to espionage scandals (Clotilde Reiss).

The German experience is also interesting: the Goethe Institute was closed in 1981 to be re-opened later. It operates within the embassy and is a point of contact for discussion and exchange, before being closed again. The Germans now operate through DAAD to encourage students' exchange programmes, with funding.

The above demonstrates how difficult it is to operate via national centres and it might be best to work directly with local museum, universities, cultural offices and others that will be aware of the red lines not to be crossed. They will also be able to advise of the relevance of a project, the risks and the bureaucracy. This would mean that UK's soft power would be channelled via Iranian local organisations dedicated to organising cultural events, which will require some flexibility and diplomatic skills from all parties involved.

Q3 **Graham Stringer:** Some analysts correlate a successful Iran policy with a combination of economic pressure, diplomatic isolation, and threat of military action. Is this a sensible approach, and is there is credible alternative?

Anicée Van Engeland: The hard-line perspective has been advocated in the Bush era to avoid an open war with Iran: it was said that it was important to differentiate Iranian people from the authorities and that a war would alienate the population. It is combined with a belief that the carrot and the stick strategy works better than soft power or any alternative approach. Western foreign policies haven't departed from this point of view since.

While it is correct that the Iranian population think differently from most of their leaders, the hard-line approach of the carrot and the stick has alienated both the authorities and the population. This approach has also placed Iranian reformists in a difficult position when seeking to negotiate with the West.

There are other credible alternatives in general, and for the United Kingdom. One of the credible alternatives requires a radical change in the way the UK portrays and approaches Iran. Iran is a beautiful country with much to offer including the food, the arts, literature and more. Iranians are lovely and warm people. The governance system in place is the product of history. The Islamic republic didn't happen by accident and is still in power through mechanisms put in place by its leaders. Regime change in Iran is extremely difficult to negotiate due to the inherent structure of the Islamic republic: its vital organs are built to protect the system. This is partly why foreign attempts at changing the system will all fail.

Yet, not all leaders are problematic: President Khatami tried in vain to create an Islamic democracy but the Constitution is set in such a way that many committees blocked his path. President Rouhani has learned the lessons and tries to navigate the complex political and religious context. An organic solution is the one viable and credible one and those working



HOUSE OF COMMONS

for such a solution in Iran are to be supported rather than impeded by economic sanctions and other strict measures that actually fuel the principlist/conservative rhetoric.

The Chinese understood this reality: they initially considered the Islamic republic to be a threat to their interests and China was one of the last countries to acknowledge the new governance system and its leaders. It then surpassed its fear because of the interests it had in working with Iran. This is why the British authorities need to understand that improving relations with Iran is in the UK's interest, short-term (release of prisoners) and long-term (sustained trade activities).

To do, the UK should discard strict measures such as economic pressure, diplomatic isolation and threat of military actions: those methods have only but harmed their reputation among the population as Iranians are the first victims of those measures. The relevant authorities and the para-military groups that are targeted by those measures are resilient and agile: they constantly adapt to new challenges because they control the country. Iranians are the ones who see their lives slowly wasted due to the the lack of opportunities artificially created by westerns measures.

A clear and credible alternative strategy for the UK can be outlined and would consist of some of the following recommendations

Recommendation 1 : Find new interlocutors - it is necessary to open a dialogue with the Conservatives, called the Principlists;

Recommendation 2: Adopt a New Narrative and Tone- The UK needs to move from a "naming and shaming" approach to a more neutral stance;

Recommendation 3: Acknowledge the Resilience of the Islamic Republic of Iran - The system has proven to be resilient and regime change isn't an option for external actors;

Recommendation 4: Acknowledge Iran as a Regional Power and Avoid Confrontation – accept the role of Iran in the region and seek to get closer to the country and its leaders so have an influence in the region;

Recommendation 5: Example of a different approach: Defence Engagement - Work on a soft form of defence engagement with the regular State armed forces to support them;

There are other credible approaches possible, but none of these alternatives will bear fruit if the UK isn't prepared to consider Iran as an equal partner, one with a governance system and human rights' record that is to be criticised. There will be no changes as long as the people suffer economic pressure, diplomatic isolation and threat of military actions.

The issue of credibility is of importance as the UK would engage with a country that is partly led and controlled by un-democratic elements and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

where human rights are violated. This raises the issue of how a democracy engages with a non-democracy. Human rights shouldn't be sacrificed.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Broadly speaking, the nature of the Iranian threat requires a cocktail of policy tools popularly referred to as the DIME paradigm, with D for diplomatic, I for informational or intelligence, M for military, and E for economic. To be clear, there is no one size fits all solution when it comes to Iran. A sensible approach necessarily requires trying different tools from the above cocktail to see what works and what does not. However, one element which cannot be forgotten in the 41 year history of the Islamic Republic is that regime elites have seldom done a 180, or rather forsaken, key policy goals. The test case for this is the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) where Iran settled for a sub-optimal solution after facing a series of military defeats and regional setbacks, macroeconomic challenges, protests and threats to legitimacy at home, and isolation abroad. Lest we forget, Ayatollah Khomeini, the "founding father" of the Islamic Republic used to say "war until victory," but despite that slogan, after eight years of a failed war, he likened accepting a sub-optimal UNSC cease-fire resolution to drinking from "a poison chalice." The entire, to borrow a newer phrase, "art of the deal" now revolves around how to use similar policy tools and force the Islamic Republic to once again settle for what it considers to be a sub-optimal solution. Iran's leaders are committed revolutionaries. Only by threatening that which they hold dear will Western policy ever be effective in changing Tehran's behavior or goals. How long or how short lived is an altogether different matter.

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: Economic pressure, diplomatic isolation, and threat of military action, which historically characterised the US approach towards Iran, have not resulted into a successful Iran policy. They have reinforced previous structures and trends, not reduced the Iranian influence and destabilising activities in the region, and provided more, not less concerns on the nuclear front in terms of enrichment and reprocessing activities.

The only approach that so far has succeeded in altering the Iranian behaviour when this was not in line with international norms and agreements (such as the NPT) has been diplomacy and engagement, which has historically been the preferred approach for the UK and the EU. In 2003-2005, Iran suspended its nuclear activities because of the negotiations undergoing with the E3 and the incentives provided to comply with the Additional Protocol. With the JCPOA, Iran demonstrated that it responds to diplomacy more than it does to pressure and military threat. Even if sanctions might have been a motivating factor for Iran to take talks seriously, without the incentives provided in the form of sanction relief and the clarity about what it would take for Iran to benefit from changing its behaviour, it is unlikely that Tehran would have agreed to its end of obligations under the JCPOA.



Q4 **Chair:** To what extent is the UK's relationship with Iran dependent on the US's relationship with Iran? Is there a useful role for the UK to play which doesn't depend on alignment with the US?

Anicée Van Engeland: While Iran and the UK have a long history of tensions, distrust and grievances, the UK is not associated with the US. The US is the Great Satan and Israel is the Little Satan, and no relations can exist with them. The UK is perceived differently: the UK is often referred to as "the old enemy" that would seek to influence Iranian politics, sending spies in different guise. British people are often depicted as tall pale men with long coats and big hats, or as a "wily fox."

The UK and the US are therefore not always associated, which means the US relation with Iran will not directly impact that of the UK with Iran. Yet, there is awareness that the UK can play the role of the enabler of the US, as illustrated by the British role in the 1953 coup d'état. Besides, the British decision to side with the US on a few issues recently has strengthened the Iranian distrust.

There is also an awareness that the UK doesn't always side with the US; divergent views between those two nations can constitute threats and opportunities for the UK. While Iranian conservatives would seek to exploit disagreements between the UK and the US, for example, with regard to the JCPOA, disagreements with the US can also have a positive impact: the UK can present another narrative to the Iranians, one where the UK stands on its own. In turn, Iranian reformists and moderate principlists view such disagreements as opportunities to perhaps, at one stage, turn to the UK.

The UK could go beyond seeking to de-escalate tensions, taking a proactive role as a mediator. The UK is ideally placed as it understands the motivations of the US and could engage in a dialogue between the three countries.

Ellie Geranmayeh: The UK has demonstrated its value and unique role by retaining a unified position with France and Germany with respect to the nuclear deal.

The UK further has an important role to play in de-escalation tensions in the Middle East, particularly in places such as Iraq and Yemen where the US seems uninterested in taking a leadership role to stabilise these countries. Moreover the UK's traditional relationship with regional partners like Saudi Arabia means it could play a very useful role in pressing Riyadh and Tehran towards regional security dialogue - again something which the Trump administration is seemingly uninterested in.

Sanam Vakil: British security interests in the Middle East require the UK to have an independent relationship with Iran. The security interests however align with many American ones and as such the UK has worked in tandem with the US. Moreover, the UK's strong ties with the Arab Gulf



states has also impeded its Iran ties. The UK has an opportunity to protect its regional security interests by engaging more directly with Tehran.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Baked into this question is an important concept: the value of independence in British policy towards Iran. Theoretically, no state should have to depend on any other to have a fruitful or productive relationship with a third party. But, there is a reason why theory doesn't always comport with practice. The UK and the US share common policy goals, interests, and values with respect to Iran, the Persian Gulf, and the broader Middle East region. These include maintaining regional peace and stability, seeking to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by states, maintaining the free flow of oil and defending the integrity of international shipping, standing up for human rights and representative government, and pushing back on transnational terror threats and networks. Shared values and interests, when focused on one particular threat, such as the Iran nuclear threat, actually helped bring together European and American policy on Iran from 2006 - 2015, making for a more productive and multilateral pressure campaign. Together, building on a series of UNSC resolutions, the UK, the US and the broader transatlantic community were able to align their pressure policies in the face of a shared threat, and thereby made their policies more effective. In the current context, UK officials have stood shoulder to shoulder with American and other officials who cite concerns about Iran's missile, nuclear, military, and other programs. But, they are yet to join Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign. This attempt to balance Tehran and Washington off one another and save the 2015 nuclear deal has roots in the desire by E3 leaders to display their independence in a bid to persuade, rather than pressure, Iran to come back into compliance with its nuclear obligations. But this policy is already failing. Iran's nuclear violations are mounting, and Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei mocks Europeans and has warned Iranian leaders about trusting them. Iranian sanctions busting and procurement networks are rampant across the continent, with instances from Bosnia to Germany to Ukraine, and despite several years of a hiatus, Iran-backed assassinations in the European continent have resumed. Given the shared goals and values, as well as demonstrable evidence from when US and UK policy toward Tehran was more in sync, widening the gap between the UK and the US on Iran only offers one clear winner: the Ayatollahs.

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: The relation of the US with Iran has unintended consequences for the UK ties with Iran, as it became clear especially over the past 3 years. US sanctions, characterised by extraterritoriality, for instance, have since 2018 jeopardised the UK (and EU) ability to pursue its counterproliferation goals on Iran – ensuring Tehran's compliance with its nuclear obligations under the JCPOA by providing the incentive for Iran to remain a fully abiding party to the deal. Should the deal collapse without a replacement in place, the UK concerns about the nature of the Iranian nuclear programme would only intensify, without the necessary inspection and verification tools to gain better understanding on developments on the ground. US policy on Iran has also unintentionally dragged the UK into a vicious cycle of escalation in the region, with its



interests and personnel becoming the explicit targets of Iran's destabilising activities in the region as a result of the US-Iran tensions in Iraq and in the Strait of Hormuz.

While alignment with the US has historically been perceived as the best way to guarantee the UK's national security, this has therefore not been the case under the maximum pressure campaign. In fact, any statement of move which has been interpreted by Iran as an alignment with the maximum pressure campaign (the statements on replacing the JCPOA with a new Trump-led deal or the position taken on the US-led maritime security initiative) have further increased tensions between Iran and the UK and amplified the risk posed to UK troops, citizens and interests.

There are levers the UK could use to influence Iran's behaviour without aligning itself to the US under the current policy. In the short term, these relate mainly to multilateral fora such as the UN and the IAEA and to tools such as engagement and sanctions, through which the UK, in close coordination with the remaining parties to the JCPOA, can incentivise Iran to comply with the rules-based international system or hold it accountable when it does not. In the longer run, however, the UK needs to explore ways to increase its capability for action without the US, investing in its defence and security means. The Integrated Review provides the opportunity for such discussion to take place.

Q5 **Bob Seely:** What regional alliances could the UK use, or seek to develop, to improve its ability to engage constructively with Iran?

Anicée Van Engeland: Oman could be a close partner in any attempt at getting closer to Iran: Sultan Qaboos finalise the neutral approach to regional issues, and it has enabled the State to be a mediator between Iran and the GCC.

Iran has also sent a few signals towards GCC countries, looking for a Gulf alliance. This is a project that could be supported and furthered by the UK.

There is also a proposal for cooperative regional security linking Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, China, Kazakhstan, United States and Russia. This could be another opportunity for the UK to get involved.

Q6 **Royston Smith:** Is closer alignment with Iran compatible with good relations with the GCC, particularly Saudi Arabia?

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: Rather than closer alignment with Iran, the UK should strive to adopt a balanced stance between Iran and the GCC. This would improve its image in Tehran but also increase the chances of a reduction of tensions in the region. The UK is uniquely positioned to leverage its historic links to actors in the GCC, particularly Oman and the UAE, but also Saudi Arabia, and to establish parallel channels of engagement beyond the JCPOA and EU-led discussions. Over the past few months, GCC countries appeared to be directly exposed to the unintended



consequences of the maximum pressure campaign, in military and economic terms. As a result, Oman and the UAE seem particularly interested in defusing tensions and avoiding a military escalation. By taking a neutral stance and leveraging its ties in the region, the UK could play a key role in facilitating a regional-based discussion which would facilitate de-escalation and the establishment of a regional security framework.

Anicée Van Engeland: Saudi Arabia and Iran both want to be regional leaders, and the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Javad Zarif, has hinted at the idea that the two nations could work together rather than against each other. This would be an interesting project for the UK, thereby demonstrating it can actively support peace and security, in the region.

When it comes to the rest of the GCC: Oman has been the moderator between GCC members and Iran, thereby demonstrating it can be in a Gulf State's interest to have good ties with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. The UAE is also keen to come closer to Iran. In truth, there is resentment towards the US in the Gulf region: since the US Administration walked away from the JCPOA, the leaders and populations of those States feel they are collateral victims of the US/Iran tensions. The US's risky approach to Iran, including the assassination of General Soleimani, has put Gulf's states on edge as an open war in the region isn't in anyone's interests. It is also believed that the US have sabotaged attempts at regional negotiations: for example, it could be that General Soleimani was coming back from Saudi Arabia with an invitation to negotiate a regional cease-fire when he was killed.

The entire Gulf, Iran and Saudi Arabia included, is aware that the future should include a regional alliance to some level and this is why there is a push for diplomatic ties with Iran. This is an opportunity for the UK.

Ellie Geranmayeh: The UK and Iran are far from alignment and it will take years for relations between the two sides to normalise. However any form of diplomacy which creates a detente between the West and Iran - under the Islamic Republic- is likely to be met with push-back from Israel and Saudi Arabia. The UK should strive to protect its security interests in the region and - as they did with the JCPOA in 2015- clearly outline why diplomacy with Iran is necessary to de-escalate tensions and reduce the risk of military confrontation in the region.

Strand Two – Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

Q7 **Royston Smith:** To what extent does ending the JCPOA set back the UK-Iran relationship?

Anicée Van Engeland: The Iranian authorities but also the population have been irritated by the carelessness with which the Trump Administration walked away from a contract. The stakes were high for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Iranians when the JCPOA was agreed and the US dismissal was not taken lightly: it was deemed offensive and considered as yet another illustration of the practice of double standards.

Besides, Iranians were deeply disappointed with Europeans: they had hoped the EU would ensure that the JCPOA was respected. The rather meek reaction led the Iranians to believe that the EU is useless. The position of the UK is therefore of interest now that it has walked away from the EU: it has an opportunity to present another narrative on the JCPOA. For example, the UK has a nuclear expertise that it could use to assist the Iranians rather than seek to control them.

Iranian nuclear ambitions will not come to an end because the JCPOA is at risk/ended. If anything, the lack of respect of an international contract has strengthened the resolve of the Iranian authorities: protection is needed. One has indeed to understand the origin of the Iranian nuclear push to fully address the issue at hand: the Iranians need nuclear electricity. Besides, the authorities would also do anything to protect the Islamic republic.

This is why the idea of replacing the JCPOA by a Trump deal or to align the UK onto the US approach to the JCPOA would have not worked. The JCPOA is the result of months of negotiations led by top Iranian experts. It has been sold to the population as the solution to all problems in Iran. The authorities will not walk back on it for fear of losing face and for fear of giving the impression of yielding to foreign western nations.

The UK approach to the JCPOA, namely the lack of condemnation of a breach of contract or the apparent endorsement of Trump's policy have undermined the already fragile trust the Iranians had in the UK. The failure of the JCPOA was therefore a major set-back that shouldn't be ignored: it wounded the pride of the authorities and the nation. It proved again that there are double standards and the US can walk away from a contract without punishments.

One way of improving the situation would not only to salvage bits of the JCPOA and strengthen INSTEX; it would also be good to begin considering Iran as an equal partner rather than as a threat. This would in turn empower the right political factions.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Already, two major JCPOA participants, the U.S. and Iran, are not adhering to their JCPOA commitments, with one party having fully left the accord more than two years ago, and the other, gradually winding down its adherence to the accord. The JCPOA was never designed to exist in such a fashion, leading one to conclude it has already practically ended. To the question, if "ending the JCPOA" is defined as voicing support for Washington's legal and political right per UNSCR 2231 – which codified the JCPOA – to "Snap Back" or restore previous UNSCRs and multilateral penalties on Iran, then the answer is not much. Already, Iranian officials, including the Supreme Leader Khamenei blame Europe (and in particular the E3) for not being able to thwart the impact of US



unilateral sanctions on Iran since May 2018, when Washington left the deal.

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: The preservation of the JCPOA and of the UNSC2231 constitutes a crucial test in Iran's eyes when it comes to the UK's reliability as a counterpart. By continuing to invest its political capital in the survival of the nuclear deal, the UK will not only increase the chances that its counterproliferation concerns are addressed, but also reinforce its image as a nation that believes and pursues the preservation of the rules-based international system. This will contribute to improving the perception Iran has towards the UK and, indirectly, increase the chances of improved bilateral ties between the two sides.

Ellie Geranmayeh: The 2013 nuclear talks and the JCPOA form the foundations of renewed UK-Iran relations which faced a major setback under the Ahmadinejad presidency. Without the framework for diplomacy created by the JCPOA - it is hard to see how the two countries continue meaningful diplomacy to resolve security issues. Given its tense history with Iran, the UK alone will not have the same influence and leverage with Iran than as part of a European coalition.

Q8 **Royston Smith:** What elements of the JCPOA are still in force and worth salvaging?

Ellie Geranmayeh: (1) Iran's Arak heavy water reactor was filled with concrete in 2016 under the JCPOA- thereby restricting Iran's production of plutonium

(2) Iran's uranium enrichment levels remain under 4% - while exceeding the JCPOA's original 3.67% this is far lower than the pre-2013 enrichment level of 19.7%.

(3) Thanks to the JCPOA, Iran's nuclear program is the most heavily inspected in the world by the International Atomic Energy Agency. With eyes and ears on the ground, the world has far better insight into Iran's nuclear activities than it otherwise would have.

(4) Under the JCPOA Iran has voluntarily implemented the IAEA's Additional Protocol which means Iran has more reporting requirements than otherwise.

Anicée Van Engeland: The JCPOA was the best deal possible at the time, and was certainly not a perfect agreement. There are however points worth keeping:

- (1) The IAEA control;
- (2) The focus on safeguarding and the modernisation programme;
- (3) Keep the sunset clauses as incentives
- (4) Allow research

There are additional elements that could be added in a future agreement



- (1) Remove snap-back sanctions;
- (2) Work with China, Russia and the EU
- (3) Ensure the Iranian ratification of the CTBT

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Iran's overarching policy in response to the U.S. restoration of sanctions previously waived by the JCPOA was a policy of strategic patience, which evolved into a policy of graduated or incremental escalation. This escalation has been cross-domain, meaning not just violating the JCPOA, but partaking in regional escalation as well. Taken together, this escalation, coupled with timelines in the deal – such as a lapsing multilateral arms embargo on Iran – make the JCPOA not worth salvaging. Reportedly, Iran has already accumulated enough low-enriched uranium for over one nuclear weapon. Iran's lack of progress on a potential plutonium track at Arak is offset by illicit procurement AEOI chief Salehi has previously bragged about, and limitations on Iranian activities in facilities like Fordow – where there was previous transatlantic agreement on to shutter – have lapsed due to Iranian attempts to spook America into premature sanctions relief absent a better or broader deal. Keeping the JCPOA on life-support has one beneficiary: the Islamic Republic.

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: Iran has reversed its compliance with the JCPOA over a year ago, in response to the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and its adoption of the maximum pressure campaign. Over the past year, Iran has increased its stockpiles, increased the levels of enriched uranium and opened up the possibility of R&D activities previously forbidden under the deal. Yet, one year and five incremental steps later, Iran still has a longer breakout time than before the deal was reached and a robust level of monitoring, inspections and verification over its facilities and activities. This is all because of the JCPOA, even under the current, weakened state in which the deal's implementation currently is, and it would all be lost should the deal fully collapse. This would inevitably increase the chances of undetected nuclear activities or drastic shortening of the breakout time. It is thus understandable that for the UK (as well as for France, Germany, Russia and China) the JCPOA still remains vital for its national security.

Q9 **Henry Smith:** US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, has spoken of a successor to the JCPOA encompassing Iran's cessation of support for its proxies, and human rights reforms in addition to nuclear sanctions. Does the groundwork for such a deal exist?

Anicée Van Engeland: It will be difficult to have a successor to the JCPOA negotiated with Iran as long as the Trump Administration is in power: Trump is an unpopular figure throughout Iran, except among Iranians who are well-off and dual citizens (a small minority of the population). It is also unlikely that the Iranian authorities will easily embrace the idea of another agreement: the negotiation of the JCPOA was painful and long, and Iran threw all its expertise in it. They, population and authorities alike, are now bitter that the US paid so little attention to their willingness to negotiate and accept some form of control. Walking



HOUSE OF COMMONS

away from a contract was understood as a disregard for Iranians in general.

The Iranian negotiators had already rejected any discussion on regional security and on human rights at the time of the discussion on uranium enrichment, and will do so again. Leaders and the population alike don't take foreign interferences lightly. A large part of population dislikes the current governance system but Iranians are also aware that the regional security policy of Iran protects them from ISIL, Israeli attack or a Saudi attack.

As for human rights, there is a direct correlation between "naming and shaming" attempts and the increase of arrests. This demonstrates that the human rights' issue needs to be addressed differently.

Ellie Geranmayeh: While Mr Pompeo has talked about the "12 point plan" for US policy on Iran, in effect the crisis created over the JCPOA by the US exit from the JCPOA (including revoking civil nuclear waivers for the UK to cooperate with Iran on redesigning its nuclear program) has refocused all the attention back to the nuclear issue. There is little to no groundwork for serious diplomacy with Iran on regional or human rights issues in recent years as global powers have been consumed by addressing the nuclear program.

Sanam Vakil: The Trump administration had hoped to build a broader agreement with Iran by addressing nuclear, ballistic, regional and human rights issues. There is indeed a need to create a broader negotiating track. However, there has been no groundwork for such a deal for a number of reasons. The Trump team has pursued a unilateral, sanctions based policy that has sought to pressure Iran into submission. There have been no incentives offered to Iran to open the door to negotiations and no serious discussion on what would be offered to Iran for concessions. Regional issues would also require a broader regional diplomatic track, but the Trump administration has also been unable to resolve regional challenges ranging from the Yemen war, Qatar crisis, Syrian civil war let alone bring together contending parties for multilateral discussions.

Benham Ben Taleblu: It is unclear if, and in my view unlikely, that there has been any private bilateral diplomacy to lay out the contours for a new agreement between the US and Iran. However, a bigger and better agreement than the JCPOA has been publically announced as the desired goal by the White House, and its contents from a policy perspective have been enumerated in Secretary Pompeo's "12 points" speech, which came just days after the US left the JCPOA in 2018. The way to achieve such a deal is not through private concessions, but by maintaining a firm architecture of highly public economic, diplomatic, and military pressure that shows Tehran that "there is no way out but through," and that the more time Tehran takes, the greater the cost to itself. As I mentioned in an earlier response, the best historical parallel to such a broader agreement that requires the Islamic Republic to fundamentally give up on key national security objectives should be the Iran-Iraq War period, rather



than the run-up to the JCPOA. The Iran-Iraq War is rightly called the “Holy/Sacred Defense” and the “Imposed War” in Iran’s domestic political parlance. It is the most formative event in the Islamic Republic’s history whose impact on Iran’s domestic and foreign policy cannot be overstated. Twice in 2019 however, Iranian officials referred to the economic pain the country was in as being greater than the pain experienced during the war. This is a testament to what US unilateral sanctions could achieve in just over one year’s time. In the interim, the Islamic Republic has rejected talks with the US, and has tried everything from dividing the P5+1 to dividing the transatlantic community. This approach is aimed at waiting out the Trump administration in the hopes of waiting for a potential return to the JCPOA by a different US administration, as well as more broadly weighing the pros and cons of limited engagement with the international community based on the constellation of power in Tehran.

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: The E3 worked very closely with the US at the beginning of 2018 to address some of the concerns raised by the Trump Administration on some of the nuclear aspects of the deal (sunset clause, inspections) as well as ballistic missiles. But when, despite the progress made, the US decided to withdraw from the JCPOA, these discussions stopped. The closest we got to additional negotiations was when the Macron plan was presented and discussed among the parties in the Summer of 2019. Since talks between the US and Iran (mediated by France) also collapsed, however, there has seemingly not been any negotiation or groundwork for a future deal addressing nuclear, regional or human rights issues. Even the work that was conducted at the EU level through the E4 on Yemen or the Task Force on human rights issues inevitably slowed down drastically because of the pressure exerted on the E3 and the rest of the EU to prioritise the salvaging of the JCPOA following the US withdrawal.

Q10 **Chair:** Iran has stated that it will not seek talks with the US until sanctions are lifted. Should the UK be proactively trying to bring the two to the negotiation table? How could this be achieved?

Kasra Aarabi: In the past year, Iran via the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has sought to use military escalation and militancy to pressure the US and Europe to provide it with sanctions relief. The last six months of 2019 saw the IRGC attack nine commercial oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz (including a UK-flagged ship) and shoot down a US drone on international waters. It also conducted the Saudi Aramco oilfield strike, causing the biggest disruption to global oil supplies in history, and ordered its Shia militia proxies to ransack the US Embassy in Baghdad. In January 2020, the IRGC took this calculated escalation further by orchestrating a strike that killed a US citizen in Iraq and, since then, rocket attacks by its proxies in Iraq have killed two US troops and one British soldier.

Given that Iran has sought to use military escalation to achieve sanctions relief and the surge in Iranian attacks since May 2019, the removal of sanctions as a pre-condition to talks would be akin to rewarding bad behaviour and would risk emboldening the Iranian regime’s use of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

militancy as a foreign policy tool to achieve its objectives. This would exacerbate long-term challenges in the Iran-West relationship as it would send the wrong message to Iran's leaders, who would interpret this as the West bowing to militancy.

The UK can play a crucial role in bridging the transatlantic gap on policy-making towards Iran, which Tehran has sought to exploit following disagreements between Washington and Brussels over the 2015 nuclear agreement. This could include the UK brokering talks between the US and Europe before entering any future negotiations with Iran. The Islamic Republic has, and will continue to, exploit disagreements between the US and Europe to its advantage.

Ellie Geranmayeh: The UK, and in particular the PM, can play a critical role to press Tehran and Washington towards re-engaging one another in a multilateral diplomatic framework. The UK should conduct this outreach together with France and Germany to have the best influence on both Iran and the US.

Iran remained compliant to the JCPOA for an entire year after the US exit. This was clearly intended to provide time for remaining JCPOA parties to provide Iran with some economic relief in light of US secondary sanctions that triggered an exodus of British and European companies from Iran. It was only after the US effectively introduced an oil embargo against Iran in May 2019 that Iran began to up the ante both on the regional and nuclear file. Iran's President Rouhani has been clear that there remain a viable path for diplomacy if the US returns to the JCPOA. In practice however, as the shuttle diplomacy at the 2019 UN General Assembly suggests - these talks can jump-start through an economic package that injects funds into Iran.

In reality, such European efforts are not feasible till the outcome of US elections are known. Regardless of the results, the UK should begin this shuttle diplomacy - starting with an interim nuclear deal that freezes and rolls back Iranian nuclear activity in return for some economic relief that is approved by the US. Instex could prove helpful in this remit.

The UK, together with France and Germany should then build on such progress by bringing the two sides into larger discussions on the nuclear issue. Under a Biden presidency a full JCPOA re-entry by both Iran and the US is feasible - although it will nevertheless face challenges by hardliners in Washington and Tehran.

Sanam Vakil: Yes. There is a unique opportunity for the UK to take the lead in bringing all parties to the negotiating table. The UK has continued to work with Germany and France on protecting the JCPOA but at the same time has a special relationship with Washington. To facilitate discussions, the UK can begin shuttle diplomacy with Washington and Tehran to ascertain the scope of negotiations and also obtain concessionary steps from both sides. If Washington provides some incremental sanctions relief and Tehran returns to compliance with the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

nuclear deal this could be an important confidence building measure. Tehran, however, is unlikely to invest in negotiations before the US elections, but discussions are needed to stave off a fall crisis over the extension of the arms embargo.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: London's commitment to resolving the Iranian nuclear dispute through diplomacy is commendable, but there are actions that are relatively more helpful that can still be taken. The larger goal of Iranian cross-domain escalation in the nuclear, missile, regional, maritime, and cyber domains is to spook America into premature sanctions relief, alter the security policy of regional states which are looking to contain Iran, as well as frighten European states into finding ways around American sanctions while keeping the JCPOA on ice for a potential US successor administration. Tehran will come up with its own domestic logic for talks (recall in 2013, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei called for "heroic flexibility"). The best way for London to expedite Tehran's embrace of talks is to minimize the daylight between it and other members of the international community who are helping apply pressure on Tehran. More specifically, by holding Iran accountable for violations of the CSA and AP at the IAEA – BOG, working with relevant parties to address Iran's JCPOA violations through the Dispute Resolution Mechanism, and even publically acknowledging the US right (politically/legally) to "Snapback" or restore previous UNSCRs on Iran given the current crisis would be ways that the UK can signal seriousness while offering talks.

Anicée Van Engeland: Playing the mediator would be a good and viable option for the UK: Oman has endorsed such approach in the Gulf region, seeking to mediate between GCC countries and Iran. It has done so to promote its interests in the region. The UK is in a perfect position to act in a similar way: it is now detached from the EU and could start from a clean slate perspective. It will be an arduous mission but the outcomes would be worth it: it would help positioning the UK as an independent nation that uses its predominant global role to bring peace and security. It could also write a new page in the history of the relations between Iran and the UK.

There are a few obstacles for this approach to be credible: it is unlikely that such negotiations will happen as long as the current US President is in power. Donald Trump is disliked in Iran for being the man who walked away from the JCPOA, for imposing sanctions and for being the man who killed General Soleimani. The financial support the US currently brings to some activists and political opponents inside Iran is also a reminder of dark times when the CIA tried to directly interfere in Iranian affairs, ending up with the hostage crisis at the US embassy. The population's disappointment with the US began in 2009 when protesters of the Green Wave hoped for President Obama to take a strong stance. When Obama distanced himself from the protests, he created a crack in the Iranian American dream: before that, the US was quite popular. At the same time, other countries like Canada or Malaysia increased their professional recruitment of Iranian citizens, accelerating a shift away from the US.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Donald Trump, with his lack of understanding of Iran and his desire to pursue his own interests, accelerated the dislike.

Yet, Iranians and a large part of the ruling elite have always made the distinction between the ruling administration and US people. This is where fostering exchanges at the soft power level is of interest and the UK could mediate such exchanges.

Another issue will be UK's own history in Iran: British interferences have never been digested. There are still books published every year about how the British tend to interfere in Iranian domestic affairs. The population is however not fully on board with this narrative, hence the forever success of the book *My Uncle Napoleon*. The new generation of Iranians is actually curious of the world, including of the UK. This is why the British authorities should seek to present a new approach. This change of attitude would benefit the UK, gradually it leaving behind its negative image in Iran to reach goals such as the release of its citizens or the opening of commercial opportunities; it would also benefit Iran that is currently in need of new friends in Europe. This, of course, raises the issue of strategic communications on both ends, including addressing the problem of "apologies".

Since the mid-90s, the international community has enabled the Iranian civil society and has supported the Reformists. The approach to capacity-building isn't enough at the time being: the Ahmadinejad carefully deconstructed the civil society movement engineered by former President Khatami (and of which Khatami had lost control). Most activists are either abroad or arrested. Loud activism has morphed into more subtle activities such as academic conferences, publishing uncensored books that are then distributed online, online discussion, distribution of leaflets, actors or athletes speaking on the social media ... Other activists have decided that it is too risky and useless to act for the time being, and are waiting for better times. Iranian civil society is resilient and has morphed, sowing agility under pressure. The UK should assess that new strategy and understand that open support to activists endanger them at the time being. The recent protests are, by the way, not to be read from a human rights' perspective only. They are also political and were partly instigated by foreign powers.

When it comes to supporting the Reformists, it has become an arduous task: they have been weakened by the Ahmadinejad Administration and by Western's attempts at supporting them. The Principlists/Conservatives carried on their attacks against Reformists under President Rouhani, arresting activists or driving them out of the country. While there is a new generation of Reformists such Mino Khaleghi and Parvaneh Salahshouri, both elected MPs that are currently being slowly cornered by the system, it might be time to widen the net. While working civil society and Reformists is still key, it could be time for the UK to engage with moderate Principlists.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: After more than 17 years since the eruption of the nuclear crisis on Iran, one thing is clear. For this to be solved, both Iran and the US need to be involved in negotiations. The E3, and the UK as part of the group, can and have played a key role in mitigating the crisis at different stages, but for this to be fully solved the key is for the US and Iran to ultimately sit together and talk.

It is thus imperative for the UK to play a role towards this outcome. Because of its strategic partnership with the US, the UK has historically played a significant mediating role between the EU and the US, and should continue to play such role, as stressed by the Prime Minister. The UK is well positioned to convince the US that, without incentives in the form of sanction relief or a face-saving exit strategy, Iran is unlikely to cave in to pressure, agree to negotiate with the US or face economic collapse. Pressure, in itself, never managed to change Iran's behaviour, on the nuclear or on any other file. The risk is instead the weaponisation of Iran's nuclear programme or a military confrontation in the region, all of which would have dire consequences for the UK and for the world.

At the same time, the UK has also the relevant influence in multilateral fora such as the UN and at the IAEA to keep Iran accountable and try to influence the country's behaviour in close coordination with the nations that share and always have shared its concerns and security interests on Iran (France and Germany in particular).

Q11 **Chair:** Given the UK's reputation on the region, what credible options or approaches could the UK take that would actually change this perception? Would there be a danger of simply appearing weak or fickle?

Anicée Van Engeland: A credible approach should be those of a rapprochement step by step:

First steps

- Consult and rely on the expertise provided by the likes of the Iran-UK chamber of commerce to invest in Iran. This requires the end of US sanctions and the strengthening of INSTEX;
- Until sanctions are lifted, increase humanitarian support;
- Cultural and educational ties: organise exhibitions. For example, some Iranian artefacts located in the UK could be exposed in Iran for a short period of time while the Iranians have many museums' artefacts that could be exposed in the UK. The Louvres went to Tehran and the US even returned clay tablets;
- Italy, France and Germany have a research institute affiliated to the embassy: it is a place where Iranian and European researchers can meet over coffee, go to the library, attend cultural events, stay for a research field work, learn a language... The UK used to have one... it could time to re-open such place?
- Encouraging more tourists on both ends is also important;
- Organising sport events: Iranians are very fond of sports and the 1998 US-Iran football match, a politically charged game, was an opportunity for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Iranians to celebrate while praising their opponents. The context was different as Khatami was then in power;

- Track II diplomacy is also of interest although civil society is in a difficult place right now;

Next Steps

- Official visits, including Parliamentary exchanges;
- Sign an energy trade agreement with Iran;
- UK expertise could be used to support a civilian nuclear Iran. The UK could offer to send a few experts on a visit;
- Supporting the economic presence of British brands in Iran. The population loves having the opportunity to buy at fashionable low-cost brands.

And even later

- Establish students' exchanges, student scholarships without giving the impression of contributing to the brain drain;
- Grievances could be addressed in an academic fashion, through exhibitions and more;
- Defence engagement with the regular forces (which a DA speaking Persian). But this could be a daring step, so it should come at a later stage. This could start at a low-key level with an Iranian presence in UK training programme.

Obstacles

The main risk isn't so much to appear fickle but the context: Iran is currently politically controlled by Conservatives, so the above will be difficult to implement if carried out too quickly. It is certain that addressing human rights is urgent and so is the release of foreign and dual-national detainees, but slow steps are needed to create trust, hoping that a few important gestures (settlement of IMS debt? Conferences about UK-Iran history?) will bring forward opportunities.

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: The most useful way for the UK to improve its reputation, in Iran as well as in the region, is to be perceived as a reliable counterpart, as a country which keeps its word and with which one can deal with, through diplomacy, even when strong divergences emerge. It is no coincidence that the period in which ties between the UK and Iran were the strongest was during and immediately after the negotiations over the JCPOA. Dialogue, diplomacy, maintenance of different communication channels at all time increase the chances of better mutual understanding and might over time lead to changing the negative reputation the UK still has across Iran.

- Q12 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** If the UK seeks to address its negative image in Iran, what areas could be prioritised? How could soft-power initiatives could be used to further these goals?



Anicée Van Engeland: The Iranians still believe that the UK's priority is to spy and interfere in internal affairs. The priority would consequently be to change that image, in a manner that is convincing. This also means adapting the UK soft power strategy. Some aspects of the UK soft power strategy directly clash with some of Iran strategies, policies and laws. For example, the support to NGOs is considered as being an interference unless it is done in a certain way, abiding by local standards. Another issue is to rely on British institutions to enhance the UK's reputation overseas as such bodies are often perceived as being populated with spies and seeking to interfere in domestic affairs. This is why looking at priorities might not bear fruits. If thinking of terms of priorities remains the methodology of choice, then the role internet in a hyper-connected Iran is to explore. The UK could also engage in a full soft power display in more neutral areas such as humanitarian support.

An alternative could be to look at similarities between the UK soft power strategy and that of Iran: the exhibition of the Cyrus Cylinder (minus the row) is a good example of a win-win situation. Another domain to explore would be tourism sports, education or research collaboration.

Q13 **Chair:** The JCPOA is criticised for its sunset clauses. Is it feasible that a successor to the JCPOA could place indefinite restrictions on Iran's nuclear capabilities? (Tom Tugendhat)

Ellie Geranmayeh: Some provisions of the JCPOA are already enforced till perpetuity - for example the Additional Protocol required Iran to notify the IAEA when it decides to build a nuclear facility.

While there is room for some term limits under the JCPOA to be extended in any follow up agreement, this will only really be feasible if the P5+1 provides more economic dividends to Iran as part of a 'more for more' package (for example if the US provides some select Iranian banks with access to US financial networks).

It seems highly unlikely that Iran will accept significant restrictions on its nuclear program in perpetuity especially when close-by Pakistan and Israel have nuclear weapons but are not even member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Anicée Van Engeland: Firstly, it will be difficult to bring Iranian counterparts back to the negotiation table: the Iranians had sent their best experts to negotiate the JCPOA and took the agreement very seriously. The political context has also changed (partly due to Trump's violation of the JCPOA and the sanctions): the government might not be in a position to even negotiate, let alone discuss past or new sunset clauses. At the time of negotiations, the Iranian negotiator had already raised the issue of the sustainability of the agreement for the following US Administrations, thereby showing an awareness of existing threats to the future agreement. This was partly due to concerns on their own end: they knew the time was ripe on the Iranian side but the situation could change quickly (as far as negotiations are concerned, not with regard to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

compliance). Then, the Iranians are less keen to negotiate as they feel there has been a violation of the JCPOA. The political and societal actors have been adamant that they didn't breach the agreement but the US did. Now, if Iran isn't certain to have a win-win situation, no political factions will dare to start negotiating.

The biggest worry is to see the hard-liners such as the IRGC push for the withdrawal from the NPT, and speaking of indefinite restrictions will definitively empower them to do so. This is why it is unrealistic to think that Iran will ever agree to indefinite restrictions (in particular any political restrictions as envisaged by the Macron Plan): there are many factions at play on the political spectrum seeking to benefit from the current situation, and each of them is aware of the need to protect Iran's sovereignty. It was already a success when the country accepted some restrictions and the duration factor was hotly debated during the JCPOA negotiations.

Incentives are also to be taken into account: Iranians are very much aware of the trade-off system the international community thrives upon, and they need incentives: why would they sign a treaty that isn't in the interest of Iran? Besides, now that the authorities have strengthened their relations with China and Russia, one could say that Iran doesn't even need a JCPOA, so trying to impose indefinite restrictions would be fruitless.

The issue is elsewhere and could constitute an opportunity for the UK, a country with nuclear expertise: Iran has been treated differently from other NPT signatories because of its past behaviour, not consulting with the IAEA. The aim of the JCPOA was to subject Iran to control to develop trust; this is why the JCPOA mattered and why walking away from what was the best deal possible at the time had deep political consequences in Iran. The US basically told Iran that it doesn't matter whether the authorities tried to negotiate, be flexible or be compliant. The message sent by the US is that the problem is not with the nuclear; the issue is the Islamic republic of Iran. From an Iranian perspective, across the political spectrum, there is therefore little point sitting at a negotiation table and discussing sunset clauses: instead, the US needs to accept the Islamic republic as a fact, understanding that Iranians view nuclear negotiations as being about the nuclear, and not about politics.

This is why there is an opportunity for the UK to offer assistance on nuclear matters to Iran. The Iranians will develop its nuclear facilities, with or without the JCPOA. The UK could guide and advise, avoiding accidents and misuses. The UK could also, as part of the E3, encourage Iran to keep its program civilian. Another methodology is to question Iran's interest in pursuing a large-scale enrichment programme, trying to understand why Iran is so keen to protect itself but also strong enough to attack: what triggered such reaction? Why has Iran felt the need to pursue an imperialist regional security agenda? Why is Iran so keen on enriching uranium? If the UK takes the time to understand Iran's motives and if the world would question certain past behaviours, bridges would be built.



Sanam Vakil: Iran's adherence to the Additional Protocol obliges Iran to a permanent commitment unless it withdraws from the NPT. The Additional Protocol represents the continuation of these monitoring and verification provisions in perpetuity. Those who are worried that Iran will bide time and wait to build a bomb after the deal has phased out should take comfort in the increased access to facilities (both declared and not) and information provided in perpetuity by the IAEA's Additional Protocol.

It is unlikely that Iran would ever accept permanent restrictions to its nuclear programme but should a new and improved deal be negotiated, Iran would likely accept a more for more scenario where longer limits could be accepted in exchange for Iranian access to the SWIFT system.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: It is quite feasible that a success or replacement agreement to the JCPOA eliminates or greatly reduces some of the sunset issues found in the JCPOA, as currently enshrined by UNSCR 2231. Some sunsets, like the prohibition on arms exports and imports (which ends in 2020), and the prohibition on missile tests (which ends in 2023) could be tied to behavioral changes agreed to in a negotiation. For instance, Iran can be permitted access to international arms markets when it ceases underwriting terror. For nuclear specific capabilities, a future negotiating parameter for the West will have to determine is the question "how much of a nuclear program can Iran have?" or is it "can Iran have a nuclear program at all?" Answering this paradigmatic question will help determine the scope of sunsets, since if enrichment of uranium is to be technically granted, then the sunset on a pause on enrichment can be politically granted.

Q14 **Chair:** Is a replacement to the JCPOA impotent without restrictions on ballistic missiles?

Ellie Geranmayeh: No. The framework surrounding the JCPOA has been to contain Iran's nuclear activities to low levels required for a civil nuclear program, and in addition to enhance inspection and monitoring through the IAEA (Iran is currently the most inspected country in the world). These together will enlarge Iran's so-called 'break-out' capability and give enough time to the international community to act appropriately should this time frame shorten. This therefore considerably reduces the threat posed by any Iranian efforts to build missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

The most realistic way to constrain Iran's ballistic missiles would be through a regional security framework that achieves a degree of balance among the leading states. Iran's missiles are viewed by Tehran as the only viable defence and deterrence against attacks by surrounding countries that have US/UK troops present, far more sophisticated air force and Western purchased arms.

Anicée Van Engeland: Iranians will never agree to include ballistic missiles in a new JCPOA. The Iranian authorities have refused to expand



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the scope of the agreement beyond the nuclear programme, rejecting the inclusion of regional security, procurement and acquisitions, human rights...; it is consequently unrealistic to think the Iranian would now include restrictions on ballistic missiles.

Instead, the new JCPOA could be limited to the nuclear programs, as the per the Iranian wish. Another agreement could address ballistic missiles, seeking to frame their use in a regional conflict. It might seem strange in expert terms to separate the two issue but it does make sense in diplomatic and political terms.

It would be again unrealistic to think that Iran could be prevented from developing, acquiring and using such missiles. The matter should be addressed, differently, engaging in discussions about the use of such weapons as being contradictory to Islam, just using a nuclear bomb is prohibited under Islam, view supported by the majority of Iranian clerics.

Sanam Vakil: Any improvements made to the JCPOA should endeavour to address Iran's ballistic missile program including a commitment against the production and use of intercontinental ballistic missiles. However, without a regional agreement that imposes similar constraints on neighbouring countries and offers Iran military parity with its neighbours, Iran is unlikely to make any concessions.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Absolutely. US intelligence estimates have routinely, for almost over a decade in fact, assessed that if Iran were to deliver a nuclear weapon, it would likely choose a ballistic missile as the ideal delivery vehicle. They also assess that Iran's ballistic missile arsenal is the largest in the entire Middle East. This means that restricting the ballistic missile capabilities of Iran serves the dual-purposes of impeding military modernization of the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism, as well as restricting the quality and quantity of its potential nuclear delivery vehicles. To be fair, Iran already has several classes of medium-range ballistic missiles, all of which far exceed the payload and range thresholds established by the Missile Technology Control Regime as constituting a strategic weapon, in short, serving as a potential nuclear delivery vehicle. A fundamental flaw in UNSCR 2231 (which enshrines the JCPOA) was that it watered down missile testing prohibitions that existed in previous UNSCRs relating to Iran. Missile restrictions could include moratoriums on tests and transfers, payload and range caps, requirements to open the missile program and its domestic and foreign supply chain to inspection, scrutinizing and rolling back the regime's space-launch capabilities for a period, potentially eliminating select or even an entire class of missiles, and more. But failing to include any of these in a comprehensive deal would by definition make that new accord not comprehensive and undermine the very intent of diplomacy – which is to reduce threats via peaceful methods of conflict adjudication, not to provide the political space for those threats to incubate.

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: The JCPOA, indirectly through 2231, already has restrictions on ballistic missiles, though these are limited to the ones



designed to be capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. The problem has been on the clarity of the definition and on the types of activities Iran would be entailed to. Without trust between the two sides and considering Iran's reliance on ballistic missiles for its defence strategy, it is unrealistic to expect Iran will negotiate on ballistic missiles, but it is indeed possible to restrain activities on those designed to be capable to deliver nuclear warheads, as this was agreed in the past as well.

Strand Three – Human Rights

Q15 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** How has maximum pressure impacted the lives of ordinary Iranians?

Anicée Van Engeland: Maximum pressure has had a negative impact of the daily lives of ordinary Iranians. The economic impact combined with COVID-19 has driven an already exhausted people to the brink of reason. Citizens have refused to comply with social distancing measures, mixing protest against the U.S with protests against the authorities, while endangering themselves. The use of anti-depressants has exploded. The brain drain has increased as illustrated by the numbers of Canadian-Iranian citizens who died on flight 752.

Consequently, maximum pressure has backfired. An example is to be found in the lack of medical material. Iranian doctors and nurses have raised to the challenge of COVID-19, and they too have become national heroes. Yet, they have died as medical material to protect them couldn't be acquired because of the sanctions. The pressure was relieved by the INSTEX initiative to which the UK contributed, followed by many States' support. The death of doctors and nurses have caused yet another national trauma in which the U.S. is seen as actively violating Iranians' right to health.

Living standards have dropped and women have been the first victims: around 15% of the workforce is female. Recession has hit women hard as sectors where women had found opportunities, such as tourism, were hardly hit by the sanctions, the political tensions and COVID-19. This is problematic as most of those women are young and seek empowerment through work.

Rent has exploded leaving young couples unable to move out of their parents' home. Marriages, that are usually very expensive, have been postponed. Others have decided to go into debt to be able to legitimate union that otherwise would be illegal (zina is the crime of having relationship outside marriage). The young generation has confirmed a trend that started in the 2000s by engaging in a temporary marriage (sigheh) to avoid the costs of a real marriage. The issue with the sigheh is that it leaves women without financial support at the end of the marriage.

Anger is visible as Iranians equate the domestic authorities with the U.S. The existence of the internet in Iran where everyone is connected is vital:



photos and videos of children dying because they can't have access to drugs that are under sanctions circulate widely. National TV programmes have also invited more conservative citizens to speak: one case involved a mother explaining how she couldn't get an artificial limb for her growing toddler because of the sanctions. She accused both the Iranian authorities and the U.S. of being responsible. This is important to notice as even conservative Iranians are exhausted.

Kasra Aarabi: The combination of international sanctions – via “maximum pressure” – rampant corruption and domestic mismanagement has certainly increased economic hardship on the lives of ordinary Iranians, which has resulted in anti-regime dissent and triggered domestic unrest.

In 2019, the Iranian economy contracted by 7.6 per cent, the inflation rate stood at 40 per cent and the value of Iran's currency significantly plummeted. US sanctions on oil – as well as low oil prices – have also hurt Iranian economy. For example, the government budget for 2020-21 was made on the basis that Iran would be able to sell at least 1 million barrels per day (bpd) of oil at a price of \$50 per barrel. However, sanctions of Iranian oil have reduced the Islamic Republic's oil output by 90 per cent since 2018. This year (2020), according to the International Monetary Fund, Iran's oil exports will average around 500,000 bpd, which is half of the government's budgetary needs. Despite these IMF estimations, it is worth highlighting that in March, Iranian oil exports were as low as 140,000 bpd. Low oil prices have only made matters worse for Tehran, with the price of Brent reaching a new low at \$16 per barrel in April 2020.

However, it would be wrong to attribute all of Iran's problems to “maximum pressure” or the re-imposition of US sanctions as this would suggest the Iranian population were happy with their domestic situation and the direction the Iranian regime was taking before the US withdrew from the nuclear deal in May 2018. The fact that Iran experienced widespread anti-regime unrest in December 2017-January 2018 – 11 months before the re-imposition of US sanctions – underscores that domestic dissatisfaction was already prevalent prior to the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal.

Rising poverty has been a consistent feature of life under the Islamic Republic. In 2019, Iran's Islamic Parliament Research Centre estimated that as many as 57 million Iranians could be living under the poverty line over the course of 12 months. Despite these shocking statistics, Iran's leaders have shown disregard for resolving these domestic issues. For example, in response to high food prices and poorer Iranians not being able to buy food, the supreme leader's senior advisor, Ali Akbar Velayati, told Iranians to learn from the Houthis in Yemen, who, despite not having much to eat, remain committed to resistance against the West. Indeed, the regime continues to prioritise diverting Iran's resources abroad in support of pursuing its ideological objectives in the region – including support for groups like Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. For example, in 2018, the Rouhani government pledged an official commitment to rebuild



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Syria and in 2019 the Islamic Republic's state-owned companies reached an agreement to build 30,000 houses in Syria in collaboration with the Assad regime. Rouhani's announcement came at a time when his own citizens lacked adequate housing almost a year after an earthquake in the Western Iranian city of Kermanshah. Incidents such as these, coupled with rampant corruption and increasing state oppression have significantly affected public perception of the regime, with the majority of Iranians blaming their domestic problems on the regime itself rather than the US or Western sanctions. Indeed – despite seven years of a so-called “reformist” president – there is little doubt that state oppression and authoritarianism has increased, which has significantly impacted the lives of ordinary Iranians. In 2018 alone, 7000 Iranians peaceful protestors were detained by the regime. Those detained include women challenging the laws on the compulsory hijab, workers and teachers striking to protest months of unpaid wages, as well as students, environmentalists and human rights lawyers. More recently, during the November 2019 protests as many as 1500 civilians were killed and a further 8000 arrested in less than two weeks of protests. The Rouhani government also imposed an internet blackout to censor the bloodshed on the streets and delay the international reaction. Just two days ago (24 June 2020), Iran's supreme court upheld its decision to execute three young men – between the ages of 26 and 28 - who were detained for participating in the November 2019 protests, fuelling anger among ordinary Iranians.

As the most recent wave of unrest in November 2019 demonstrated, ordinary Iranians by and large blame the regime for the country's domestic ills, rather than the US or the Western sanctions. As highlighted earlier, one of the major drivers of internal dissent is the priority the regime has given to pursuing its ideological objectives internationally—such as spending billions of USD in support of its regional militias – despite increasing suffering at home. This mood is underscored by popular slogans such as “Our enemy is right here, they [the regime] lie telling us its America” and “Leave Syria alone, think about us” which have dominated protests in the past three years.

Tracking the history of unrest in Iran underlines that anti-regime dissent is becoming greater in scale and more violent in nature. For example, the wave of student protests in 1999 was concentrated in 3 cities – Tehran, Tabriz and Isfahan – and left seven civilians dead. The 2009 Green Movement took place in as many as 10 cities and had 76 fatalities. A decade on, Iran's most recent wave of unrest in November 2019 took place in more than 100 cities and towns and saw the regime kill 1500 protestors.

It is important to highlight that since 2017, unrest has been prevalent in the Islamic Republic's stronghold provinces, such as the religiously conservative Qom and Mashhad, with poorer Iranians—who make-up regime's traditional support base—driving the protests on the streets. While this may not be surprising – given that this social demographic has suffered the most from the country's ailing economy – it is hugely significant as it suggests the regime is losing its core constituency. This



HOUSE OF COMMONS

has unnerved Iran's leaders, not least as poorer Iranians have suffered most from the human and economic consequences of Covid-19. There is every indication of post-pandemic unrest on the Iranian streets in the near future – and this is something regime insiders even concede. Reports suggest Iran has already lost 15 per cent of its GDP due to Covid-19 and this figure is set to increase. Indeed, the threat of widescale unrest is now driving the Islamic Republic's Covid-19 exit strategy.

Sanam Vakil: Maximum pressure has dramatically impacted the lives of ordinary Iranians through a number of ways. The most obvious impact has been economic. Iran has experienced a massive currency devaluation, inflation is at 40%, unemployment continues to rise amid the constraints of sanctions. Ordinary people are under the burden of unprecedented economic pressure.

Having overwhelmingly supported the JCPOA, Iranians have once again become disaffected by politics and apathetic. Voter turnout in the February parliamentary elections was at an all time low and thereby saw the electoral victory of hardliner candidates.

An unintended consequence of maximum pressure is thereby also seen in the gradual electoral dominance of conservatives which will shift the tone and tenor of Iran's political debate away from engagement and reform towards confrontation and resistance.

In this climate, the government continues repressive policies. During the November 2019 protests, the government brutally repressed the demonstrations. Also, journalists, civil society activists and those on social media continue to be policed and pressured by government bodies. Maximum pressure might not be directly to blame for all of these outcomes, but maximum pressure has ultimately enabled conservatives to rehabilitate themselves and lengthen their lifespan within the body politic.

Q16 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** What characteristics of Iran's style of government caused its response to the Covid 19 crisis to be so poorly managed?

Anicée Van Engeland: COVID-19 was sent to Iran by the US. Any foreign help was deemed to be intrusive and an attempt at spying on Iran. It went so far that Afghan refugees thought the coronavirus only struck Iranians. The outcome was that the most vulnerable individuals weren't shielded, and that included supporters of the regime: for example, veterans of the Iran-Iraq war who were exposed to gas have weak lungs. A large part of the upper and middle-class chose to isolate but then had to yield when employers forced them to come out. Many now walk miles to get to work to avoid taking public transports or taxis.

In that regard, the role of the Revolutionary Guards (IRCG) is to be noted. The Guards have reacted faster than civilian and religious authorities. It isn't only because some Revolutionary Guards' leaders and war veterans have died from COVID-19; they also saw an opportunity to re-gain



HOUSE OF COMMONS

legitimacy after recent events that have casted a shadow on their role (crackdown, downing of the plane...). They have been seen spraying the streets with disinfectant, breaking gatherings, assembling masks and pushing for social distancing to fight the virus. Their efforts haven't been sufficient as there is now a second wave of COVID-19.

Kasra Aarabi: Like other authoritarian regimes, the absence of accountability and oversight has enabled the Islamic Republic to forcibly control the Covid-19 narrative, downplay the number of cases and deaths and disseminate misinformation. In Iran, the pandemic grew against the backdrop of political dissent, economic turmoil and nationwide unrest. Only months before the outbreak of Covid-19, in November 2019, the Islamic Republic experienced the largest wave of anti-regime unrest in the course of its 41-year lifespan. Support for the Islamic Republic has reached an all-time low and this context is key to understanding why the regime's approach to the pandemic was dominated by conspiracy theories, disinformation and cover-ups. Iran's leaders sought to use Covid-19 as an ideological propaganda tool – even if its actions meant spreading the virus further. In turn, the Iranian regime's response to Covid-19 was designed more towards improving its public image than providing a meaningful public health intervention. It is also worth highlighting that the Rouhani government's sheer incompetence in dealing with Iran's coronavirus crisis led to an opening for the IRGC to play a greater role and effectively lead the regime's Covid-19 response – a move that was fully endorsed by Ayatollah Khamenei. This was reflected in Khamenei's decision to appoint Mohammad Bagheri, IRGC commander and chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces, as head of a new “medical headquarters” to fight coronavirus, rather than anyone from the health ministry or government. Indeed, in many ways, Covid-19 has accelerated the IRGC's transformation from the deep-state to the state in its entirety.

The Iranian regime – from the supreme leader to President Rouhani and the IRGC – began its response to the outbreak of Covid-19 in the country with denial. The regime calculated that reporting on the virus would deter people from attending the state-run rallies on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution (11 February) and participating in the February parliamentary elections (21 February). Iranians were already calling for a boycott of these two events as a way to express their rejection of the regime, in response to the brutal crackdown during the November 2019 protests and the shooting down of a Ukrainian passenger plane in January 2020. While Iran's parliamentary elections are nothing but a rubberstamp, they still receive significant global media attention and serve as a PR tool for the regime to show-off its “legitimacy”. Given that the majority of Iranians were already calling for a boycott, Iran's leaders feared that reporting on Covid-19 had the potential to even deter regime loyalists from turning up to the ballot box. However, as the infection spread and fatalities increased, the authorities had no choice but to report on the outbreak of the pandemic, with first two official deaths reported on 19 February. Yet, there is strong evidence that the Iranian authorities were well aware of the outbreak of the pandemic in Iran way before they reported it to the Iranian people. For example, on 15 February – four days



HOUSE OF COMMONS

before the first Covid-19 cases were officially reported – when Iran’s supreme leader met with group of religious eulogists, they were not permitted approach him or kiss his hand as they had done on previous occasions. While the Islamic Republic took measures to protect Khamenei from Covid-19 as early as mid-February, it chose to prioritise its ideological propaganda needs over the welfare and public health of ordinary citizens.

Prioritising ideological propaganda over public health during Iran’s Covid-19 crisis could not be truer than in the context of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which has been leading Iranian state’s pandemic response. The IRGC and its civil militia, the Basij, jumped on Iran’s coronavirus crisis as an opportunity to burnish its tarnished by presenting itself and its ailing Islamist ideology as the nation’s saviour. The reason the IRGC has sought to exploit Covid-19 for PR purposes is because its domestic popularity has reached an all-time low after it killed 1,500 civilians in the November 2019 protests and shot down a Ukrainian passenger in January 2020, killing all 176 passengers on board. The population’s hostility towards the Guard is underscored by the new popular slogan on the streets of Iran that calls the IRGC the “our [Iranian] ISIS”.

Desperate to gain some credibility, the ruthlessly opportunistic IRGC sought to exploit the pandemic as a way to resuscitate its appeal and ailing Islamist ideology. This was marked by a systematic propaganda and disinformation campaign that sought to exploit Covid-19 as an opportunity to vilify the regime’s enemies: Israel and the US. Iran has been at the forefront spreading global disinformation about the origins and spread of Covid-19. In an attempt to revive anti-Americanism and anti-Israel sentiment, which is at the heart of the IRGC’s Islamist ideology, the head of the IRGC blamed the pandemic on a “US biological invasion” and the IRGC’s platforms spoke of a “Zionist bio-terror attack” on Iranian DNA. These conspiracy theories were supported by the IRGC’s own biotech and genetics “experts” on Iranian state TV. For example, Ali Karami, a professor at the IRGC-run Baqiyatallah University of Medical Sciences, appeared on state TV and claimed Covid-19 was a “biological ethnic weapon” that had been created by the “Americans an Zionist regime” to target Iranian DNA - which, in his view, explains Iran’s high mortality rate. Professor Karami, who also serves in the IRGC’s Basij, also claimed the reason for Italy’s high death rate was because “the genetics of Italians are very similar to Iranians”. This paved the way for spinning anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the virus, with the IRGC’s supporter channels claiming that Covid-19 was a “Zionist bio-terror attack” as Jews want to “destroy [other] religions” and take over the world – citing the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, as evidence. Indeed, the Islamic Republic has been at the forefront of spreading anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the origins and spread of coronavirus.

Conspiracy theories, such as these, were not restricted to the IRGC, with the supreme leader blaming Covid-19 on a collaboration between the US and supernatural demons, as well as figures like President Rouhani



HOUSE OF COMMONS

blaming Covid-19 on a US orchestrated plot. In their refusal to shut down mosques, the senior clergy in Qom – the Iranian epicentre of the virus – also fed into this kind of narrative, not least during the peak of the Covid-19 crisis. For example, during the outbreak in Qom, Ayatollah Seyed Mohammad Saeedi – who is the Friday Prayer leader of the Holy City of Qom, the supreme leader’s representative to Qom & the custodian of the Holy Shrine of Lady Fatimah al-Ma’sumah – blamed Covid on a conspiracy orchestrated by Trump “to damage [the holy city’s] culture on honour”. In fact, on 26 February, during the peak of the crisis, Ayatollah Saeedi, who was vehemently opposed to the closure of mosques, referred to the holy shrine as a “place of healing” for mental and physical illness and called on Iranians to attend the shrine in “strong numbers”. At the same time, as a way to discount the severity of the pandemic fearing it may produce anti-regime dissent, during the peak of the crisis Iran’s state TV broadcast programme’s comparing Covid-19 to the “common cold” and “seasonal flu”. Coupled with disinformation, actions such as these helped spread the virus further. Mosques were eventually shut down on 16th March, but not without strong resistance by the senior clergy.

Whilst attempting to vilify the enemies, the IRGC and Basij sought to present itself as the nation’s saviour to resuscitate their appeal. This includes creating a narrative that referred to their members as the “Defenders of Health” and adapting old propaganda images from the Iran-Iraq War to show IRGC fighters side-by-side with medical professionals in an attempt to co-opt sympathy for Iranian doctors & nurses. But the most cynical aspect of the IRGC’s virus-related propaganda is how it has sought to hide regime incompetence behind religious, ideological rhetoric by glorifying death from Covid-19 as religious martyrdom. The glorification of martyrdom is at the heart of the Guard’s ideology, with the IRGC’s own internal training manuals used to radicalise recruits teaching them to actively welcome death as the highest reward from God. But the martyrdom narrative was not restricted to the IRGC and in fact penetrated all levels of regime. In response to a recommendation by Iran’s Health Ministry, the supreme leader has made it official policy to give martyr status for doctors & nurses who die from Covid-19. Since martyrs’ families receive state benefits, this is a way to placate anti-regime dissent in that may arise from its handling of the crisis.

The incompetence and inability of Iran’s health ministry to respond to the virus created further vacuum for the IRGC to fill, but with responses more designed to improve its public image than to provide a meaningful public health intervention. But it is important to highlight that the health ministry endorsed the IRGC’s approach. At a time when most countries were imposing quarantines and ways to reduce human interactions, the IRGC deployed 300, 000 of its “Defenders of Health” – young members of its civil militia, the Basij – to go door-to-door in virus hit areas in a show of strength – even though its actions would contribute to more infections. The IRGC consistently framed coronavirus as akin to a foreign enemy and not a public health crisis and this was a line repeated by Rouhani’s health minister who compared the crisis to the Iran-Iraq War. These actions were compounded by the IRGC threatening doctors not to disclose details on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the true scale of the virus in Iran to prevent any damage to the regime's image. Indeed, in April 2020, a professor of medicine at Tehran university suggested the actual number of Covid-19 cases was twenty times higher than the official statistic published by the regime.

Further escalating the spread of the pandemic was an attempt by some of the clergy to exploit the public health crisis as an opportunity to reject "un-Islamic" Western scientific medicine and promote "Islamic medicine" as the cure to the virus. For example, on, 23 February, Ayatollah Tabrizian – so-called "father of Islamic medicine" that has almost 200,000 subscribers on just his Telegram channel – encouraged his followers to avoid "un-Islamic" Western scientific medicine in the fight against the virus and stated that a suppository of violent leaf oil would protect against risk of infection from Covid-19. This attempt to promote so-called "Islamic medicine" as an alternative to "Western" scientific medicine was also pushed by Iranian state TV, which aired programmes that claimed "Islamic medicine" far more effective in treating Covid-19 than "Western" scientific medicine.

While the IRGC – and Iranian regime more broadly – initially sought to exploit the virus as an opportunity for ideological propaganda, the fear of post-pandemic unrest as a result of the human and economic consequences of Covid-19 is now driving its response. Iran's GDP has already contracted by 15 percent as a result of the pandemic, and this is by no means the final figure. Fearing a new wave of anti-regime unrest, restarting the economy has taken priority for the regime and, in turn, this has led to a second wave.

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: Iran has been one of the ten worst-hit countries across the world in terms of confirmed cases and total deaths caused by COVID-19. As other countries among the top ten worst hit in the world (including the US, the UK, Brazil), Iran initially adopted a "business as usual" attitude in dealing with the crisis. This was mainly driven by the dire state of the economy, exacerbated by the impact of the sanctions imposed by the US over the past two years. The GDP, unemployment and inflation figure in Iran made it more difficult for the country to afford the implementation of the lockdown measures adopted elsewhere when needed, thus leading to an increase in the infection rate and to a worsening of the crisis.

Ellie Geranmayeh: Like many countries around the world, Iran's government faced the challenge of balancing the covid-19 public health response against the economic damage ensuing from a lock down. Given the acute economic conditions in Iran, compounded by US sanctions and the fall in oil prices, the trade off for Iran was incredibly challenging. There was also different opinions within the Iranian government as to the best approach. Iran has not gone under a nationwide lockdown but did introduce certain measures to contain the initial outbreak. However, in June and July the numbers are increasing and there are fears of a second peak. The bottom line is that Iran simply cannot afford to go into



lockdown and so it is likely to face a considerably public health fallout till a vaccine is introduced.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: 2020 has featured something of a defeat-loop for the Islamic Republic. Barely recovering from the killing of IRGC-QF Commander Qassem Soleimani, the accidental downing of the Ukrainian airliner, and poor-turnout for parliamentary elections, the regime botched the handling of the coronavirus. Despite the virus coming from the East, Tehran tried to use this as an opportunity to blame the West, drawing upon all sorts of conspiracy theories. The regime's penchant for secrecy and conspiracy set it up to handle the crisis poorly, as it began to admit its scale and scope, as well as the desire to keep the economy at least partially open (to outlast the US maximum pressure campaign) and thus shunned a proper quarantine. This led to reported spikes in infection rates. The regime's handling of this crisis feeds into longstanding perceptions about incompetence and mismanagement by authorities in Tehran.

Q17 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** The current US administration has spoken of Iran's human rights record as something which might be addressed by a successor to the JCPOA. How realistic is it that Iran would be willing to liberalise in exchange for sanctions relief?

Anicée Van Engeland: Linking themes when negotiating isn't working with Iran: the authorities prefer addressing each issue under a different round of negotiation. China has understood that and has multiplied the existence of trade agreements. This refusal to engage with several themes at once is explained by the complexity of each theme. The Iranian reaction is also explained by the rejection of foreign interferences in domestic affairs. For example, the JCPOA was long and painful to negotiate as the US wanted to link regional security and nuclear enrichment. The Iranians understood that the will of the US was to curb their regional expansion while also seeking to control uranium production, de facto placing Iran under foreign control. One has to remember history and how foreign nations tried to control the country to benefit from its natural resources. The coup d'état against Mossadegh is still bitterly resented and Iranians reject the idea of being a puppet regime.

Besides, any attempt at addressing the human rights' record of Iran has usually led to more violations. The Conservatives have understood the West has a soft point and they try to exploit it by arresting activists, journalists, academics and others. Each successive government has had a different human rights agenda, sometimes aimed at improving the situation and other times geared at violating rights. Human rights aren't a priority for the current Rohani governments and Conservatives have understood it. Violations then became systematic and often carried a double message. The first message was aimed at an internal audience. The Islamic republic will endure. The second message was aimed at the West: many of the political opponents arrested during recent protests were tortured and threatened with their life to then be surprisingly released; the authorities hoped they would then leave the country,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

abandoning their activism inside Iran to move to the UK or other nations. The strategic communication was clear: other nations are welcome to host human rights activists.

This is why making the uranium production conditional to a better human rights record will not be successful and will put Iranian activists at risk. The Islamic republic of Iran has been fortified through the decades by its leaders. It has started to fossilise after the 2009 Green Wave, and liberalisation will be difficult. The republic is slowly reaching a stage where only a massive organic upheaval could provoke its end; this is why it is urgent to act differently and support the right domestic elements in their quest for change.

Sanam Vakil: While a dialogue on human rights and pressure on Iran to address its poor human rights record is needed, it is highly unlikely that Iran would diplomatically engage on domestic political issues. After the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the continued human rights abuses seen in Saudi Arabia and other US allied countries, it would be almost impossible for the US engage in a balanced dialogue with Iran. Iran would in turn seek to raise American human rights abuses in Guantanamo or even in the Black Lives Matter protests to make the claim that the US has no moral authority on human rights issues.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: This is an important point to flesh because while Washington is working to put the spotlight on Iran's human rights violations through increased designations and penalties, the Trump administration has not actually linked human rights improvements to a broader deal. In fact, a closer look at the "12 points" speech that contains what Washington desires from Tehran in a final deal reveals several buckets of policy concerns: nuclear and missile issues, regional and terrorism issues, and only one domestic issue: the detention of foreign nationals. Sadly, there is much more that needs to be addressed on the human rights file with Tehran that does not fall into that category. Washington can and should press to address human rights while dealing with the other array of Iranian malign activity, be it at home or abroad. Not letting human rights be party of any discussion that contains talk of sanctions relief would be akin to forgetting that sanctions are the primary tool the West has to be able to persuade Tehran to make reforms to its behavior, be it foreign policy behavior or domestic security behavior. This is not going to be easy at all however, but if these issues are not dealt with comprehensively, the West will lose leverage by creating isolated tracks for talks where Tehran can impede or threaten progress on one based on how the other is going.

Q18 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** How might Global Magnitsky sanctions be used as an effective measure to counter the illegal detention of British and dual nationals?

Anicée Van Engeland: While the Global Magnitsky Act could increase scrutiny on human rights violations on Iran, it wouldn't lead to a positive outcome. While such sanctions would probably work in a different context,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

they will be resented in a country that is constantly criticised and that has a history of sanctions. The population jokes about sanctions and wonder when the US will sanction the air and the water. Consequently, in terms of strategic communications, more penalties are likely to be perceived as unjust and useless from the population's perspective.

From a more pragmatic point of view, sanctions haven't work in Iran: they didn't impact those targeted but have been very hard on the population. Instead, the population would rather see a more rational engagement including negotiations and attempts at reaching out rather than attempts at meddling, punishing or lecturing about human rights.

Finally, using the Act would therefore not counter the detention of British nationals and dual nationals: the correlation between the two will not be obvious to Iranians. The sanctions are perceived as being politically motivated while the detention is a legal matter.

Charlie Loudon: The purpose of Global Magnitsky sanctions is to enable states to target individuals who have committed gross violations of human rights by restricting their travel and freezing their assets. By directly linking individual perpetrators to specific patterns of human rights abuses, Magnitsky sanctions are well-suited to supporting behavioural change. As Foreign Secretary Raab stated in 2012: "Those with blood on their hands for serious crimes like torture should not be allowed to waltz into this country and buy up property on the Kings Road, as if nothing had happened."

Sanctions have been used to address unlawful detention in other contexts. In 2018 the US government froze the assets of the Turkish Minister of Justice and the Minister of the Interior in response to Turkey's unlawful detention of US citizen Andrew Brunson. Mr Brunson was released two months later.

As set out in more detail in REDRESS's written evidence, the clear purpose of Iran's unlawful detention of British and dual nationals has been to exert diplomatic leverage over the UK. It is essentially a practice of hostage taking. Global Magnitsky sanctions could be used to target key actors at different stages of the Iranian hostage taking process, including security forces who develop profiles for arrests, commit torture and extract false confessions; judiciary members who convict on fabricated charges; prison system personnel who maintain a level of ill-treatment; state media who produce propaganda in support of the unlawful detention; and diplomats who effectively market the detainees in return for diplomatic advantage.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Global Magnitsky sanctions can and should be used to punish those engaged in human rights violations or gross acts of government corruption. These penalties are narrowly tailored to reputationally target individuals and freeze their assets and impede their travel, thus functioning as a tool of behavior change. The exact scale and scope of the penalty can be highlighted when being issued, and should remain in place until the behavior – in this case the detention of UK



HOUSE OF COMMONS

nationals – ceases by the relevant authority. Failing to punish such behavior will only underwrite the next transgression. In the unlikely case that the threat or implementation of Magnitsky sanctions is insufficient, the travel ban and asset freeze can serve as a stigma around the target to be raised in bilateral meetings in the future.

Q19 **Alicia Kearns:** Given the illegal detention of the UK's ambassador to Iran earlier in 2020, how feasible is it that extending diplomatic protection to illegally detained British and dual nationals will adequately address the problems faced by those individuals?

Anicée Van Engeland: The extension of diplomatic protection to detained British and dual nationals will not be a solution. Firstly, dual nationals are considered as being solely Iranian under domestic law. Extending diplomatic protection is then perceived as a foreign interference in what is, ultimately, a domestic legal matter. This is why the move to extend the Iranian citizenship to children born of Iranian women shouldn't have been hailed as a gender progress: it was merely an attempt to control the "do-rageh", the mixed blood individuals.

Besides, from an Iranian point of view, these individuals have been convicted legally: the dual-nationals arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned have violated Iranian law. The judiciary of the Islamic republic has always ensured the respect with the law to demonstrate good compliance with the rule of law. The issue is obviously with the content and phrasing of the law itself and with the independence of the judiciary. Yet, again, the whole legal and judiciary systems have been created to ensure the existence of the Islamic republic. There is however room for reform within the governance framework as the problem lies with the politicisation of the law.

Charlie Loudon: Diplomatic protection is a legal process whereby a state (eg the UK) intervenes on behalf of one of its nationals who has suffered a violation of international law (such as unlawful detention, torture or ill-treatment) by a host state (eg Iran). In doing so the home state treats the abuse of its citizen as a violation of international law against the state itself. Diplomatic protection is not the same as diplomatic immunity, which is a form of legal immunity that ensures diplomats are given safe passage.

There are certain criteria under international law for receiving diplomatic protection - while not all British and dual national detainees in Iran may meet those criteria, some likely would.

Exercising diplomatic protection in respect of unlawfully detained British and dual nationals in Iran sends a clear signal to Iran and to the detainee that the UK intends to compel their release. It implies that Iran will incur legal and practical consequences until it has remedied the unlawful detention.

For dual nationals in particular, diplomatic protection recognises the detainee's predominant British nationality and makes it clear that the UK



HOUSE OF COMMONS

considers the detainee to be a UK national with all attendant legal rights. This is particularly important when countries like Iran rely on the detainee's Iranian nationality to facilitate the detention and dismiss requests for consular access.

However, applying the label of diplomatic protection alone is not likely to be enough. Diplomatic protection is by its nature a process, and to have the greatest impact it is imperative that further diplomatic and legal steps are taken. These steps should escalate in severity over time, as necessary. Such steps can include: formally requesting a private consular meeting with the detained individual and a medical examination by an independent doctor; issuing a formal protest to the detaining government; issuing a diplomatic summons to the detaining government's ambassador; commencing formal negotiations; sending the detaining government a legal memorandum outlining the breaches of international law; raising the issue of unlawful detention before the United Nations and other international fora; and imposing economic sanctions and trade measures.

Diplomatic protection can therefore be an effective tool if it is exercised in the proper way. The UK government should have a clear vision for how diplomatic protection will be utilised for detained individuals and each step should be taken in consultation with victims' families.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: While it can potentially raise the costs of action for Iran, sadly, diplomatic protection may not be enough to deter those who already feel compelled to transgress the most basic diplomatic norms. The Islamic Republic has selectively chosen to transgress these norms in its 41 year history, and has specifically targeted British diplomats (like Amb. Macaire in 2020) and British property (like the embassy in 2011) in the past.

Q20 **Chair:** What role could the FCO play to better protect BBC Persian journalists and their families?

Anicée Van Engeland: The BBC is perceived as a channel dedicated to promotion a British view of the world. This is why the authorities of the Islamic republic of Iran view it with suspicion. In their eyes, BBC Persia is a propaganda tool. It remains a trusted source of information for Iranians abroad but there is an awareness that it could be used for soft power. This explains why the authorities have intimidated, if not harassed the families of the BBC Persian journalists. The authorities are also looking for points of contact that relay the information to London: how does BBC Persia has access to info? Finally, they are seeking to spread fear among the journalists and harass the families to that end. This happens to Iranians working in other sectors as well.

Naming and shaming would seem like the solution; yet, Conservative authorities don't think much of universal human rights and won't engage with naming and shaming. They will instead use the international outrage to build a counter-narrative, speaking of double standards. It is consequently best to attempt direct negotiations at the political level; it

would also be useful to be more didactic in explaining the role of BBC Persia better.

Work has also to be done at another level: the FCO should encourage the Rouhani Administration to develop a proper human rights' agenda. The human rights situation as a whole has deteriorated every year since the end of the Khatami era. It is urgent to that the current and the next government understand that any policy needs to have a human rights component.

Q21 **Chair:** Are there non-traditional routes that could be taken to influence the Rouhani administration? Are there interlocutors who could help by shaping the ground before an approach was made by the UK?

Anicée Van Engeland: There are reformists MPs and centre/moderate principlists/conservatives who have an influence on the Rouhani administration. However, one needs to keep in mind that President Rouhani is in a tricky political situation and that his administration reflects the complex composition of the political spectrum. He has very limited room to manoeuvre.

The Iranian academic community is a great point of contact: they often work with international collaborators or conduct research abroad (as it is required in Iran academia). Most elected and non-elected political and religious figures have impressive academic credentials, and the relations between the two spheres are strong in Iran. For example, the Ministry of Affairs is full of young educated graduates who keep those ties alive, and very open to the world.

Track II Diplomacy has been used in Iran and should still be used, being aware that the current context isn't favourable for NGOs and opportunities to engage with civil society are limited. There are still common grounds that should be exploited: business opportunities, tourism, pandemics...

Q22 **Henry Smith:** What kind of assistance should the FCO provide to the families of detained nationals and dual nationals? Is this assistance adequate and provided proactively?

Anicée Van Engeland: To know how to assist families, it is key to understand the Iranian rationale for detaining foreign and dual nationals. The arrests have become a nation-building exercise which enables the conservative authorities and supporting groups to publicly claim some sort of victory for the Islamic republic. The foreign and dual nations are also a bargaining tool. Iranians across the political spectrum constantly seek to have bargaining chips, such as, for example the enrichment of the uranium beyond that allowed in the JCPOA agreement that could then be negotiated later to be controlled. In that regard, the detention of foreign and dual nationals is, for Conservative authorities, a way of negotiating with the UK, with leverage. Understanding this backdrop enables the FCO is addressing the matter better, as knowledge helps rationalising a very painful situation.



The best way to support families is to engage in quiet and discrete track II diplomacy. These detainees' life is at risk if the UK engages in the political pawn game. This isn't a political show to win elections: every move that is misunderstood by Iranians, or construed as a misunderstanding, can have consequences on detention length or conditions. Some believe that UK media support is key for families; but such media engagement is then diverted in Iran to glorify the Islamic republic. In Iran, families of political opponents engage at 90% with the quiet track II diplomacy, that sometimes does involve foreign elements such as a non-public petition to testify of the academic credentials of a professor. It has proven to be quite efficient, except when the detainee is part of a minority group.

There is also the necessity of keeping families informed and this should be achieved by having a network of foreign and dual-nationals that were released and can inform families. Jason Rezaian is a great point of contact: he has been quite open and genuine about his experience.

It is also key to have experts in Iranian affairs. involved in the whole process, from negotiations to support to the family.

Eventually, embassies in Iran usually sponsors a detainee (whether foreign, dual national or Iranian citizens) and this tradition needs to keep going. Ensuring that the embassies that are in the frontline have access to the families and can exchange with them is also key.

Charlie Loudon: REDRESS has set out detailed recommendations to the FCO regarding the exercise of consular assistance and diplomatic protection in its 2018 report: 'Beyond Discretion - The protection of British nationals abroad from torture and ill-treatment'. Further information can also be found in the 2019 APPG on Deaths Abroad, Consular Services and Assistance report on 'Why families in the UK deserve better and what can be done'. Certain of the issues have been raised previously by the FAC in its 2014 report, 'Support for British nationals abroad: The Consular Service'.

Families of detained nationals and dual nationals in Iran and elsewhere have highlighted a lack of effective consular assistance by the FCO. They have mentioned a reactive, rather than proactive approach, including a lack of communication and belated and infrequent consular visits. Where consular staff are prevented from visiting British nationals in prison, families have complained that the FCO has not sufficiently insisted on gaining access. In the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the UK Embassy has never been able to visit her while in prison and has declined to visit while she is under house arrest on furlough.

Families highlighted a lack of transparency in the decision-making process regarding the provision of consular assistance or exercise of diplomatic protection, making it unclear under what circumstances and how the FCO will provide these services. The discretionary policy poses challenges for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

families in holding the FCO accountable for any shortcomings in the assistance offered.

Overall, this translates into frequent frustrations on the part of families and an expectation gap between what the UK Government should be doing, and what it actually does in cases where it is clear that an individual has faced or is facing violations of his or her rights. Families can feel like they are in a 'constant battle' with the FCO to get the government to acknowledge violations and 'jumping through hoops' to achieve very little progress in their cases. In 2019 the Foreign Secretary commissioned a review by Dame Judith MacGregor of how the FCO handles such complex consular cases. The findings of that review should be published.

Meetings and regular communication with the FCO are of vital importance to families in receiving and sharing information, particularly where the FCO is their only link to the detainee. Family members have reported dissatisfaction in this regard. In the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, it took over a month for the family to secure a meeting with the FCO following her arrest. Moreover, some families have expressed frustration at being assigned junior caseworkers who are not in a position to pursue further action, caseworkers changing frequently, and not receiving detailed updates. As a result, families are left vulnerable and disempowered, particularly during the early stages of the detention.

In addition, families report that the FCO has been reluctant to discuss all the options available in each case. A lack of clarity from the Public Guidance as to how and what action the FCO will take on behalf of its citizens detained abroad and under what circumstances, combined with a lack of consistency and different approaches taken in different cases, often makes it difficult for families to know what to ask for and expect from the FCO.

The quality, consistency, and frequency of communication by the FCO must be improved to ameliorate the trauma suffered by families. In addition, the FCO should commit to publishing, in the annual Human Rights and Democracy report (and subject to data protection concerns), detailed information on action taken in individual cases to protect the human rights of all British nationals detained abroad.

A right to consular assistance for all British nationals should be enshrined in UK law. The FCO should also revise, re-evaluate and thoroughly update the current policy on consular assistance with the aim of achieving an accessible, clear, and well-publicised policy that puts the protection of all British (including dual) nationals from human rights violations abroad at the centre. It should publish the entire Internal Guidance Documents on consular assistance and develop clear criteria for its transparent exercise.

Q23 **Chris Bryant:** Why have the US and Australia seemingly been more successful than the UK at securing the release of their detained nationals and dual nationals?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sanam Vakil: Australia has had limited success but the case of Kylie Moore Gilbert remains and signifies that there are ongoing challenges and opportunities for negotiation there. The US has been extremely focused on released detainees as it was a Trump Administration campaign promise. To date they have obtained the release of foreign nationals and not US-Iran dual nationals. The UK should be more proactive and find opportunities to negotiate with Iran specifically delinking the issue of dual nationals from other security challenges.

Anicée Van Engeland: The UK hasn't been more or less successful than other countries: there are still Australian, US and French citizens detained. The issue is that of the "perfect moment" for a release: the arrests and detention of foreign and dual nationals is caused by internal tensions. To illustrate the complexity of the matter and how different institutions/actors play a power game: the visa for a visitor is given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), allowing an individual to come into Iran. Yet, once that individual is in Iran, they fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior (MOI). In recent years, the MFA has been rather reformists and the MOI rather conservative. Being allowed inside Iran doesn't therefore mean being welcome in Iran.

The background of people arrested, detained and then released: the Australians bloggers represented less of a threat than an academic-activist, an NGO representative and others. Indeed, Iranians have experience with academics that are spies or NGO representatives that seek to disrupt.

It is however perhaps striking that the conservative authorities have recently arrested more British citizens or dual citizens. This could be explained by the fact that they need a leverage other than the uranium enrichment when seeking to convince the UK to support Iranian interests. It could also be that the UK is known in Iran for intelligence expertise and the authorities fear the arrival of spies.

It is important to stress that while the Iranian judiciary authorities presented fully-fleshed legal arguments for the arrests of all dual nations and foreign nationals, the case of Dr Fariba Adelkhah from France stands out: the evidence against her are rather thin and the accusation file is rather light. This is unusual.

Charlie Loudon: The US, Australia, France and Germany all appear to have been more successful than the UK in securing the release of their detained nationals and dual nationals in Iran. Since 2019, all of those countries have secured the release of one or more of their nationals, it appears because they have been willing to engage in necessary transactions with Iran to secure the releases.

It is important for the UK to assess and monitor its performance against its peers and, where it continues to be marked by a relative lack of success, review its approach with regularity and accountability. There is a lack of authoritative publicly available data on the different success rates.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

However, this should not be used by the government to avoid its responsibilities. Available evidence gives a clear indication that the UK's method has not worked so far, and that the UK needs to rethink its approach and work with other countries to better address Iranian hostage taking.

The circumstances surrounding the recent successful releases of by the US, Australia, France and Germany suggest that the release of detainees relies on Iran securing an advantage in return. In the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British-Iranian charity worker detained in Iran since April 2016, there have been repeated indications that her detention is linked to the outstanding £400 million IMS debt owed to Iran. The UK's failure to settle the debt continues to put British citizens at risk.

The US has been successful in securing releases despite having a particularly poor relationship with Iran. The US has a stronger legal framework, having recently enacted the Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act, which empowers the federal government to challenge hostage taking of its nationals. The US also has more targeted leadership structures to tackle this issue, including a Special Presidential Envoy on Hostage Affairs and a Hostage Fusion Cell for coordinating across government sectors. The UK does not currently have such structures. The US government has also been willing to use the term 'hostage taking'. This is in contrast to the UK, which strictly refers to and treats state held hostages as regular 'consular cases.'

Moreover, there is strong political will in the US to secure the release of its nationals. This is evident in President Trump's commitment to bring American hostages home. By contrast, in Parliamentary debates, UK Government Ministers have downplayed the UK's obligation to protect its detained nationals and dual nationals, often focusing on the subjects' dual British/Iranian nationality. The UK should demonstrate greater political will to protect its nationals and bring them home.

Strand Four – Regional Influence

Q24 **Alicia Kearns:** The IRGC is aligned with Iran's Supreme Leader. What risks are there that proscription further hinders constructive dialogue between the UK and Iran?

Kasra Aarabi: The case for proscription is hard to ignore. It is almost impossible to see how a constructive dialogue between the West and Iran can take place at a time when the Iranian regime is pursuing militancy via the IRGC not just in the Middle East, but also on European soil - as seen with successive foiled Iran-linked terror plots in Europe since 2017. Proscribing the IRGC would not close the door to diplomacy with Tehran. Rather, it would send a strong and clear message to Ayatollah Khamenei that the regime's militancy and terrorism which is pursued via the IRGC – including its support for UK designated terrorist groups like Hezbollah – will not be tolerated.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Islamic Republic combines both militancy and diplomacy to achieve the supreme leader's, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, objectives. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) serves Khamenei's objectives through militancy, whereas the Iranian government does so through diplomatic means, often mitigating the international damage caused by the former. Crucially, a point that is often overlooked, under Iran's Shia Islamist system of governance, Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), both these organs and its leaders are accountable to, and controlled by, one man: Ayatollah Khamenei as the supreme leader of not just Iran, but the entire Islamic ummah (Muslim community worldwide), a role that is explicitly underlined in the Iranian constitution.

The idea that strengthening the Iranian government, without addressing the challenge posed by the IRGC, would embolden so-called "reformists" at the expense of the IRGC was misplaced as it was based on the assumption that both these organs are independent centres of powers. In reality, however, they are both accountable to, and controlled by, the supreme leader.

As the 2015 nuclear agreement demonstrated, the thaw in relations between Iran and the West did not change Ayatollah Khamenei's appetite for militancy which is pursued by the IRGC. Rather, the failure to address the challenge posed by the IRGC's militancy consistently undermined the agreement. The IRGC doubled down in the region – in places like Iraq, Syria and Yemen – and even increased its activities on European soil, including successive foiled terror plots in Europe. Each time the West sought to sanction the IRGC's militancy – including in Europe – the Iranian regime would use the threat of abandoning the nuclear agreement as bargaining tool to circumvent this.

Proscribing the IRGC would underscore the West's seriousness in challenging Tehran's militancy. If this is accompanied by diplomatic engagement with the Iranian government, it would send a clear message to Ayatollah Khamenei that the West is open to constructive diplomatic engagement, but will not tolerate the regime's militant activities, which is not only one of the biggest impediments to stability in the Middle East, but has been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of British troops.

For more than forty years, the IRGC has been the regime's main weapon of violently suppressing domestic dissent – as seen most recently in November 2019 protests where it killed 1,500 civilians. Careful tracking of the trend of unrest in Iran shows that protests have grown in size, scale and violence used by the IRGC. Given this context of increasing dissent, sanctioning the Guard in its entirety whilst simultaneously leaving door open for constructive engagement with the Iranian government, would be in line with the depth of anti-IRGC sentiment that is felt by much of Iran's population.

Beyond this, it is explicitly clear from the IRGC's own internal training manuals that are used to radicalise its recruits as part of a formal



HOUSE OF COMMONS

programme of ideological indoctrination in the Guard, that its ideology is violent, extremist and dependent on the distortion of religious scripture in a way that is not too dissimilar to groups the UK has already designated from ISIS to Hezbollah.

Since its inception in 1979, the Guard has also worked tirelessly to nurture its militancy across the Middle East: arming, funding and training some of the deadliest terrorists in the world. The IRGC helped create Lebanese Hezbollah, with the purpose of eradicating Israel - what it calls a "cancerous tumour" - and spreading its ideology to Lebanon. Last year, the UK government designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization with the goal of restricting its ability to raise illicit funds and spread its extremist propaganda; a move that has been followed by Germany this year. But efforts to restrict Hezbollah activity are undermined so long as the IRGC - its primary supporter - remains able to provide it with ideological, financial, and armament support. Since 2017, there has also been a surge in IRGC activity in Europe, including successive foiled terror plots across European cities and the discovery of an Iranian-linked bomb factory in London in 2019. These operations underscore that the IRGC's activities extend beyond the confines of the Middle East.

Proscribing the Guard will both bolster efforts to contain the spread and legitimisation of its violent and extremist ideology and provide a clear mandate for government, civil society groups and technology companies to comprehensively sanction, challenge and limit the IRGC's activity.

Designating the IRGC as a terrorist organisation is perhaps more important in today in the UK context than ever before. In addition to the discovery of an Iranian-linked bomb factory in London in 2019, in January 2020, the Islamic Centre of England - a UK charity run by a representative of Iran's supreme leader - held a candlelit vigil at its London premises in response to the death of the IRGC Quds Force commander, Qassim Soleimani, who was subjected to financial sanctions by HM Treasury for terrorism since October 2011. During the event, it has been reported that the speaker praised Soleimani as a "dedicated soldier of Islam" and his "martyrdom". Consequently, the charity has now received an official warning by the Charity Commission for England and Wales. The proscription of the IRGC in its entirety would provide a clear mandate for government, civil society groups and technology companies to impose an outright ban on activities linked to, or associated with, the IRGC in the UK.

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: The best way to judge what the potential outcome of designating the IRGC would be is to look at developments on the US-Iran front. The move has not weakened the IRGC nor reduced its activities and influence in the region. More than a year after the US decision to designate, for the first time, a part of the Iranian government as FTO as part of its maximum pressure campaign, this has only contributed to further escalate tensions between the two sides, with the risk of military confrontation significantly increasing following the killing of Soleimani. Iran has also retaliated to the move by designating CENTCOM and all the forces and organisations under its command, raising further



uncertainty over for the rules of engagement between the two sides. Similar developments are to be expected should the UK decide to take similar steps.

Anicée Van Engeland: While the IRGC is aligned with the Guide of the Islamic republic of Iran, the Guards also have their own agenda. The two columns of power are too often associated and yet, sometimes, their interests differ. For example, the Guide's camp was quite slow at reacting to the COVID-19 epidemic, opting to turn it into an opportunity to criticise the US and western powers. The Basij, one of the forces composing the IRGC, quickly understood that there was a human security issue at hand and went against the tide to ensure the protection of citizens. It provided them with an opportunity to work on their image. The IRGC has indeed been quite keen to improve their reputation with the population (opening of a museum lauding their own actions, development of new narrative mirroring that of the Shahnameh -The Book of Kings - when fighting ISIL...) and accidents such as the downing of the plane and the crackdown on the protests have negatively impacted that initiative.

This is why the UK should approach the two actors, the IRGC and the Guide separately but also together. They are bound together by their need to ensure the permanency of the Islamic republic of Iran that in turns protects their own interests. It is often said that Ayatollah Khomeini is still the guide because it suits the IRGC and the Guards will weigh heavily on his successor.

There is no doubt that both will cooperate and go against a UK-Iran dialogue unless they see an opportunity to it. It has been said that Rouhani was "allowed" to carry on with the JCPOA because it suited the Guide's political agenda and the IRGC's economic agenda.

This is why the UK could adopt another strategy and that is to speak to those principlists/conservatives who are politically at the centre. There are members of the Moderate and Development Party like Rouhani but are mostly the principlists former members of the Followers of Velayat Faction led by Larijani, now called the Velayi Independents.

Q25 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** What might the IRGC and Iranian Principlists stand to gain from dialogue with the UK?

Anicée Van Engeland: The IRGC will seek to protect their economic power and political influence while the Principlists will seek to protect their power. Their desire to maintain the Islamic republic from which they benefit will override anything else. The issue then becomes how to initiate a dialogue, sustain it and get concrete outcomes. The JCPOA is an example in that regard, as it was enabled by the cohesive unified front of many Iranian political and non-political actors. It is therefore possible to reach an agreement, but it will be difficult because of the current context in which Principlists are in control. The key is to find the breathing space between the US current policy and the Iranian hardliners.



Q26 **Royston Smith:** Is the IRGC too economically established in Iran for any Western-imposed financial pressure to curtail the funding of proxies?

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: While there are limited public details available on the IRGC's business activities, there is no doubt that the IRGC is economically established in Iran across different sectors, ranging from housing development, to infrastructure and media and entertainment. The problem is that, even if sanctions targeting companies, officials and individuals affiliated with the IRGC have curtailed the group's revenues and the funding provided to its proxies, during the maximum pressure campaign as well as in the past, these have not resulted in a reduction of influence or activity by Iran and its backed groups across the region.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Rather than view the interests of Iran's Supreme Leader (as a cleric) and those of the Guard Corps (as a military institution) as being structurally divergent, more recent scholarship, coupled with the past two decades of evidence out of Iran, has shown how the two are more symbiotic, constituting a "partnership." The case for pressure against one element helps to make the case for pressure against the other. Similarly, evidence marshalled against one can be marshalled against the other, as the ultimate Commander-in-Chief of Iran's armed forces is Khamenei. But specifically on the IRGC, its existence as an organization that engages in, supports, and underwrites terror, meets the low definitional threshold for being considered a terrorist organization. A case for proscription can be rooted in tracing international sanctions against former IRGC and former IRGC-QF leaders (Jafari and Soleimani) at the UN level, which were later copied by the EU Council. Practically, the U.S. has been the only government to extend terrorism penalties through designations/proscriptions against the entirety of the IRGC. While the U.S. has faced some international political backlash for listing elements of a national government rather than a non-state actor, this pressure has been minimal at best. These designations have provided for a more coherent pressure policy against Tehran, being better able to go after those who provide the group with material support at home, as well as curtailing the organization's impact abroad. Casting a wide net against the group also enables the targeting of agents, affiliates, or proxies of the group, which can support a pressure policy against the IRGC in the theaters that its tentacles are present in. To be clear, the IRGC has attempted to use regional escalation as a way to turn up the pressure on the West – particularly America – after its FTO designation in the spring of 2019. But acting like a terrorist organization in a bid to protest the labeling of the group as terror organization only strengthens the case for having made the designation in the first place.

Q27 **Alicia Kearns:** A goal of maximum pressure has been to deny Iran the financial resources needed to support its proxies and aligned groups across the region. To this end, to what extent has maximum pressure been successful?

Anicée Van Engeland: The Islamic republic began supporting proxy groups and aligned groups early on. One of the western strategies has



HOUSE OF COMMONS

been to target Iranian financial resources. Yet, there is little evidence that attempts at preventing Iran from funding proxies and aligned groups have been effective. This is mainly because any attempt of controlling funding, such as sanctions, have increased the gains of some Conservatives leaders and the IRGC.

There is a direct correlation between the sanctions and IRGC's economic control: for example, due to the current US sanctions, impoverished Iranians mostly buy Iranian products made in Iran by companies usually controlled by the IRGC. The corruption and the opacity of the Ahmadinejad Administration enabled the IRGC to develop their control of the economy. President Rouhani and his team hoped they could loosen that grip with the JCPOA, as sanctions actually enriched the IRGC. This has in turn a negative impact for anyone seeking to invest in Ira as the IRGC controls the market.

The IRGC has also other sources of funding which aren't transparent and cannot be controlled when imposing sanctions. For example, the IRGC is involved in traffic at the Iran-Iraq border, ransoming the Kurds doing traffic of drugs, arms, tobacco... The Guards also ransom traffickers involved in the Gulf black market aimed at Iran.

Besides, the IRGC have, with the blessing of some conservative authorities, created a complex system of war economy: for example, Syria pays for oil imported for Iran while Iran pumps in money to support Bashar Al-Assad. Concretely, this means that some groups in Iran have an interest in feeding the war in Yemen and Syria, the instability in Iraq and the antagonism against the West, including the UK.

The issue is also elsewhere, and it is a point of importance for British authorities: Iran will keep maintaining those proxy groups, and will find money to support them even in dire times. Iranians have been complaining for decades that the money sent to Hezbollah and Palestine should have been spent on the population. Therefore, the risk by controlling sources of funding and freezing assets is to see even more money diverted from Iranians. This is because the funding of those groups is not based on resource availability. The reason for this support is to have proxy groups' members entirely devoted to one cause: the protection of the Islamic republic of Iran. This mission is of such importance that the conservative authorities will keep spending money. The reformist and centrist factions are known for pushing against such expenditures, but they never mention it in public.

Ellie Geranmayeh: The bigger stated goal of the US administration was to change Iranian behaviour in the region. Instead, the maximalist position from Washington has pushed Iran into a corner that has resulted in Iran now pushing back through stepping up regional activities.

Without doubt, Iran's ability to finance its operations in the region will have taken a hit given the dire economic situation in the country. But its relations with regional affiliates remains strong - Iran has not 'rolled back'



HOUSE OF COMMONS

it relations with Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, Iraqi PMF units, and remains active in Syria.

As a result of the US attempt to bring Iranian oil exports to zero through sanctions, we have seen Iran lash out by shooting down a US military drone, and seizing a British tanker after the UK detained an Iranian flagged tanker in 2019. After the US assassination of Qassem Soleimani, Iran took the rare step of publicly attacking US military personnel in Iraq through missiles attacks. In further rounds of escalation between the US forces and Iraqi militia groups, a British troop was killed.

These trends indicate the dangers of the US maximum pressure policy that has doubled down on pressure but left no space for genuine diplomacy with Iran.

Sanam Vakil: The Trump administration mistakenly assumed that Iran's relationship with proxy groups was based solely on financial support. Rather Iran's partnerships are bound by common interests and anti American ideology. Indeed, despite the financial impact of sanctions, Iran has continued to sustain its regional relations. These relationships also provide Iran with strategic depth and minimise threats closer to Iran's frontier providing an important pillar of Iran's foreign policy strategy. Iran's relations with regional groups (Hezbollah, the Assad regime in Syria, the Houthis in Yemen and with PMF groups and political leaders in Iraq) are not analogous and the various partnerships are beneficial for both parties for a variety of reasons.

Kasra Aarabi: Economic sanctions have increased the strain on the Islamic Republic's ability to fund its extraterritorial activities, as has been seen with the recent financial difficulties Lebanese Hezbollah has endured. However, it is important to understand that the nature of the relationship between Iran and its network of Shia Islamist militias across the Middle East is not just financial, but is often rooted in ideology – particularly militias that are closer to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC invests a significant amount of time and resource to build ideological, cultural and clerical relationships between the Iranian regime and its regional militias. The Iranian regime considers investment in such "soft" activities as being key for nurturing reliable ties and for its longer-term objectives to export its ideological revolution to Shia communities in the region. Indeed, militias that are closer to the Iranian regime's Shia Islamist ideology, often receive greater support and the basis for their ties to Tehran tend to be much deeper than just financial and armament support.

Tehran considers supporting these groups as one of the key pillars of its ideology and as part of the clerical establishment's efforts to export Iran's state-sanctioned Shia Islamist ideology across Shia communities in the region and beyond - a mission explicitly underlined in the Iranian constitution. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that regardless of the level of resource available to Tehran, the regime will always seek to sustain some level of regional support for proxies. Enshrined in its



HOUSE OF COMMONS

founding and a major source of its legitimacy with its radical support base is a commitment to the use of violence to export the Islamic Revolution overseas and “free” the “oppressed” Shia communities from their Western “oppressors”, or what it now refers to as a “[Sunni]Arab-Zionist-Western axis.”

For over forty years, the IRGC has been the Iranian regime’s main vehicle for nurturing its Shia Islamist ideology across the region, which the Guard pursues through both “soft” and “hard” means. The tools the IRGC has used, and continues to use, to create, support and arm militant groups in the region are similar to those employed by other Islamist extremist groups: from indoctrination to material reward. In fact, the strength of the IRGC lies not just in its operational capability, but in its ability to inspire acts of violence through its violent and extremist ideology, which is based on a distortion of Islamic scripture that justifies bloodshed. In turn, to be able to function effectively, the militias Iran supports often rely not only on weapons and financing, but on propaganda for recruitment and indoctrination.

Consequently, Iran’s paramilliarisation of the region via the IRGC is an issue that has implications beyond just foreign policy towards the Iranian state as it impacts Shia communities across throughout the Middle East and beyond. This is not to say economic sanctions and “maximum pressure” has had no effect. Rather, to effectively deal with Iranian-backed militancy, sanctions should be accompanied by countering violent extremism (CVE) and countering-terrorism (CT) strategies in countries where Tehran’s militias operate.

In practical terms, this means as well as seeking to limit the IRGC’s material capability to support these groups – which can be achieved with maximum impact through proscription of the IRGC – policymakers should ensure the violent and extremist ideology that underpins the IRGC’s activities is challenged and countered. This involves supporting credible civil society groups, religious leaders and organisations in Middle East to develop counter narratives that challenge the worldview and propaganda of the IRGC, both online and offline.

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: There is little evidence that, in the case of Iran, the availability of resources is directly linked to the level of support and reliance on proxies. Proxies are perceived as an integral part of the forward defence policy adopted by Iran; therefore, reliance on them normally is independent on how economically dire the situation might be. One important factor affecting calculations in Tehran is rather the extent to which it feels threatened in terms of its security and survival: the more it feels threatened, the more likely it is to rely on these groups, no matter what little resources are available. Furthermore, given the deep-rooted relations between Iran and especially some of its proxies in the region, it is reasonable to assume that, the relations is not merely based on financial support and that, even when resources are scarce, the ties are not cut or weakened.



With the maximum pressure campaign might have thus curtailed Iran's financial resources, it certainly has not weakened Iran's support or reliance on its proxies and aligned groups across the region. In fact, because of the unprecedented level of threat under which Iran has been put under over the past two years, Iran's support and reliance on these groups might have increased.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: As a strategy of cost-imposition, maximum pressure has been immensely successful. The macroeconomic indicators in the Iranian economy, as well as reported decline in oil-exports and sales, depreciation of the Iranian Rial relative to the US dollar (on the free/black-market rate), international isolation of the regime from the global financial system, GDP contraction, and even inflation rates can attest to this. But translating those measures into setbacks for Iran's regional policy is a different matter for several reasons. These include the relative cheapness of Iran's foreign and security policy relative to those of more conventionally capable states, the capability of Tehran to try to offset those sanctions through busting and other illicit efforts, as well as the need for more than just economic measures of punishment in the theaters where Iran's proxies are active in to effect change. In short, economic sanctions have been quite effective in punishing Tehran, but are yet to produce the change needed to coerce and deter it in a sustained fashion abroad. All three factors – punishment (for past bad behavior), coercion (to stop their current activities/policy), and deterrence (once the behavior has changed, to prevent a lapse) are needed for the whole policy to be considered a success. That is why its success thus far should be viewed as a strategy of cost imposition, and it is worth continuing the policy to get us to a point where the costs force a change in behavior. Tehran's punching back in the region can oddly also be viewed as partly a measure of success, since the policy has been able to bite into Tehran's revenues quite deeply (despite much of the commentariat believing US unilateral sanctions could not achieve this) and thus be interpreted as Tehran trying to bring an end to a policy (which if not effective or punitive, would not be bothering the leadership there).

Q28 **Chair:** How could the IMS debt be settled without those funds inadvertently being used by branches of the IRGC?

Anicée Van Engeland: It will be difficult to obtain any certainty or transparency on the matter. A strategy is to make the settlement conditional as to how the money will be spent, but it is after all, an internal matter. It is up to the authorities to decide how they wish to spend the money. Iran has passed law on economic crimes and corruption but the IRGC is operating in broad day light. The authorities can therefore legally allocate the sum of money to the Guards, via their companies.

Another approach would be to deliver the amount in solid goods, such as medicine or other humanitarian material, to be negotiated with the authorities.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ellie Geranmayeh: One suggested idea is for the UK to channel this payment through INSTEX. As shareholder to INSTEX this would be relatively feasible and provide a buffer that addressed the trade deficit between Iran and Europe. However it is far from certain if Iran will accept such form of payment. In recent months Iranian officials have suggested the loan request from the International Monetary Fund could be processed via INSTEX. But the IMS debt issue is much more politicised.

Sanam Vakil: It would be very hard to control the distribution of IMS funds. However, the funds could be used to purchase technical and humanitarian goods in the UK and then sent to Iran.

Charlie Loudon: One solution that would avoid the risk of funds being used by the IRGC would be to discharge the debt in the form of desperately needed humanitarian and medical supplies for Iran in the context of covid-19, which would not be caught by sanctions restrictions. The Iranian government has signalled several times that it would be amenable to receiving payment in this way. Evidently, the pandemic gives Iran significantly more incentive to accept this form of payment. The government is urged to take advantage of the current climate to settle the IMS debt in this manner.

In order to legally transfer the humanitarian and medical supplies, the government could consider using the new EU-Iran trading mechanism INSTEX. The UK was involved in the creation of INSTEX, which allows for European parties to broker humanitarian deals with Iran which do not contravene EU or US sanctions. The first export of medical goods under INSTEX was completed on 31 March this year.

Alternatively, the Swiss Humanitarian Trade Agreement, which came into force in February 2020, enables humanitarian goods to be delivered into Iran. This is an option the UK government could also explore.

Another solution to settling the debt would be for the UK's International Military Services (IMS) and Ministry of Defence to make an application for a Treasury-issued Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI) licence to transfer the funds held in IMS' name directly to the Central Bank of Iran (CBI), rather than to Iran's Ministry of Defence (MODSAF). This could be achieved through Article 28 of EU Regulation 267/2012, which empowers the Treasury to issue a license which authorises: "the making available of certain funds or economic resources to the Central Bank of Iran, after having determined on a case-by-case basis that the funds or economic resources are necessary in connection with a specific trade contract [...]". Regarding the risk of subsequent transfer of funds to the IRGC, such a transaction would not be different from other transactions with the Government of Iran. Transactions with various Iranian government entities are permitted under current sanctions rules, and, given the fungibility of government finances, for many of those a subsequent transfer of funds to the IRGC might be a possibility. However, if the UK wanted additional assurance in this case it could require that the



transfer be made subject to an undertaking by the CBI that it not transfer funds to the IRGC.

The legal team representing Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has asked on several occasions the Secretary of State for Defence and other representatives of the UK Government to what extent they have explored these potential solutions, without response. The Committee might consider asking the Secretary of State for Defence the same question. The Committee might also consider asking the Secretary of State for Defence why the Ministry of Defence continues to prolong the UK court proceedings regarding payment of the IMS Debt, in spite of the clear risk of resulting further harm to UK and dual nationals in Iran.

Q29 **Alicia Kearns:** Iran has a productive diplomatic relationship with China and Russia – what drives those relationships, what are their shared interests, how will those relationships manifest in coming years and what threats and opportunities do they pose to the UK?

Anicée Van Engeland: The diplomatic relations between Iran and China are ancient and solid. Nowadays, ties are strengthened by a series of agreements, including Iran in the One Belt, One Road project. Iran will greatly benefit from the trade agreements as U.S. sanctions and domestic mismanagement have crippled the economy. For example, due to the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranians missed the first gas pipeline project in Central Asia (which is partly why the authorities decided to speed up the nuclear project). The China National Petroleum Corporation is now drilling gas wells in the South of Iran and will import some of the gas. Besides, the Chinese are financing pipelines to export oil and gas. The Chinese presence is historically important as it is a reminder of the pre-Mossadegh era when natural resources were exploited by foreign nations at the expenses of Iranians. This is why it has been agreed that the two nations will mutually benefit from the agreements. We therefore witness a shift of balance towards the East caused by mutual economic interests.

There are also political factors to consider: the desire of western nations to control the regional expansion of Iran and to manage its nuclear growth have irritated leaders and the population alike. The Trump presidency accelerated the shift towards the Chinese ally. Both China and Iran are disappointed with the E.U. and discontented with U.S. policy, leading them to find a common interest in backing each other up against the West. Shared interests with China are therefore also political as China seeks to find reliable allies to ensure its geopolitical and geostrategic expansion. In that regard, Iran's own expansion as a regional power is supported by China, mainly militarily. This is because China and Iran have ambitions that complete each other, rather than compete with each other. They both foresee the end of the U.S. as a great power and probably under-estimate the role the E.U. could play.

The relation with Russia is less ancient and, yet again, mostly economic in the contemporary era. Iran is a key economic partner for Russia, but there is more: the two countries have common political interests such as



HOUSE OF COMMONS

preventing the expansion of Turkey that clearly has his own "Empire-like" (Caliphate) vision of the region. Russia, like Iran, fears such expansion, leading Russia to support the Iranian regional game of war by proxy to protect the Islamic republic. Iran appears indeed as the only regional power strong enough to curb Turkish intentions that could, in the long-term, prove threatening to Europe.

Trying to suffocate Iran economically and change it politically have been mistakes that have driven the country into the arms of Russia and China. The transition from trying to work with the West of the world to turning East was easy for Iran due to old friendships between nations.

The key question then becomes to know how the UK could benefit from the existing situation without betraying its allies. From the economic point of view, the UK is losing on trade opportunities by not being involved in Iran. This leads to the big question: could the UK be an active or indirect participant to the One Belt, One Road project? This issue is crucial in a post-Brexit UK as many potential trade partners are heavily involved in this initiative. In the case of Iran, the UK is currently limited to INSTEX, a programme that doesn't satisfy the Iranians. This only but stresses the urgency of lifting the sanctions, saving the JCPOA and/or strengthening INSTEX so that the UK can find an entry point to the One Belt, One Road project by investing in Iran to create trade opportunities. The UK could also contribute to the Eurasian Economic Union, thereby indirectly working with Iran.

The issue is also political: the UK cannot ignore the new power-house in the East. As Iran is a top partner of China and Russia's new diplomacy, it becomes urgent for the UK post Brexit to approach the Islamic republic differently, seeking cooperation rather than antagonism. A strategy needs to be developed so that the UK can slowly but surely engage differently with Iran. This new approach should be less focused on "naming and shaming" and more positive in tone. Soft power is obviously the first strategy that comes to mind. One could also learn from Oman's position as a mediator in the region, demonstrating that there are alternative ways of approaching Iran.

Now, this possible new path is problematic due to the China-Russia-Iran military relations in which the UK is perceived to be on the wrong side of the friendship. This relation is a threat to the UK. The issue is yet again to turn a risk into an opportunity. The UK has become a friend of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries despite the poor governance record of those countries. They have included the Gulf countries as part of the Defence Engagement. Why would it be different with the Iran-China-Russia axis?

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi: The nature of Iran's ties with Russia and China generally changes depending on who is in power in Iran and what is the state of the country's relations with the West. When hardliners are in power, generally relations with the West are strained and Iran tends to consolidate its political, security and economic ties with Russia and China,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

both of which share Iran's anti-Americanism. For moderates and reformists, on the other hand, improving ties with the West are normally the priority, and this leads to a relation with both Russia and China which is tactical and issue-based. The more Iran aligns and relies, economically and politically on Russia and China, the more likely it is that the country will take an anti-American, anti-Western stance and violate the rules-based international system, thus posing a direct or indirect threat to the UK.

Ellie Geranmayeh: Iran's Supreme Leader has openly outlined preference for the country to expand its relations with Eastern powers - viewed as more trustworthy and uninterested in regime change. It is indeed true that Russia and China are far more transnational in their relations with Iran relative to the West - contracts and deals come with less political strings attached. Under the past decade, a primary driver for Iran to draw closer to Russia and China has been two fold: the shared resistance towards US unilateral sanctions ; and shared view that US military footprint in the Middle East should be reduced (here Syria has become the conduit for Russia-Iran military cooperation). While Rouhani attempted to balance the relationship between the West and East during his first term, this has become impossible under the Trump administration. The US secondary sanctions have led to an exodus of European companies from Iran and resulted in a downturn in Iran-UK relations. Therefore even the Rouhani administration has looked to China and Russia for both economic support, and political support at the UN Security Council. There is a shared desire by Iran and Russia to have far less Western troops on the ground in the Middle East and they will use different tools to further this goal.

Behnam Ben Taleblu: Russia, China, and Iran are all anti-status quo actors with different ideologies that are hostile to the liberal-led international system. Iran, despite having lost large portions of land to Russia in its previous Tsarist incarnation, has increasingly looked to its northern neighbor for capabilities (civil nuclear, missile, and military) that it has lacked. Similarly, Iran has looked to China as a major market for its crude oil and petrochemicals. In turn, both countries (as I have written and mentioned elsewhere) feel comfortable selectively empowering Iran so that Washington will face greater issues in the Middle East and have less resources to deal with the new great-power challenge coming from Russia and China. To be clear, while the relationship is symbiotic, it is also unbalanced, with Iran needing Russia and China more than the other way around. This has led to both states being able to string Tehran along when it comes to contracts and pricing and delivery issues, as has happened in the past. The immediate threat to the UK when it comes to this entente is the proliferation of military and WMD-related delivery vehicle technology through illicit networks in jurisdictions of weak central authority where Tehran likes to go shopping, as well as the potential for licit arms transfers under an expiring international arms embargo embedded in UNSCR 2231, which enshrines the JCPOA. The UK can and should work with its international partners at the UN to extend this embargo in perpetuity (or



ted to changes in Iranian behavior, such as a decision to stop supporting terror).

Q30 **Graham Stringer:** What percentage of Iran's GDP is spent on supporting military interventions in other countries?

Anicée Van Engeland: Information about security and defence expenditures isn't available. Different organisations outside of Iran have provided estimates. Yet, none of the numbers provided by different security and defence organisations is reliable, and they range between \$15 million up until £150 million, while some have spoken of billions. In truth, there is no evidence as to how much is being spent on military interventions in other countries. Besides, Iran doesn't make its national security review public.

Kasra Aarabi: There is almost no accurate data on how much Tehran spends on its military activities in the region as Iran deliberately keeps it off-the-record. Like other authoritarian regimes, the absence of oversight and accountability in the Islamic Republic means the Iranian regime is able to channel funds how it sees fit. In turn, expenditure of GDP on its military activities in the region will never be accurate. Conservative estimates suggest that Iran has spent at least 30 billion USD in Syria. It is important to highlight that the Islamic Republic does not typically fight conventional warfare. Its regional activities are pursued via the IRGC through asymmetrical means such as insurgency and militancy.

The insurgency and militancy employed by the IRGC in the Middle East is relatively low-cost when compared to conventional warfare, which relies on the purchase of advanced military equipment. This is why comparing Iran's official GDP military/defence budget with that of regional states with conventional armed forces is often a redundant task in itself.

As for the Tehran's funding of Iranian-backed militias – in places like Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen – this is done through various means: from official government's budget to slush funds from Khamenei-run and IRGC-linked ideological-charitable organisations (known as boynads). For example, in April 2020, it was reported that the Bonyad-e Taavon-e Sepah, the IRGC's investment foundation, paid the wages of the IRGC's Afghan Shia militia, the Fatemiyoun, which is fighting in Syria. However, it is important to highlight that funding is support of the Islamic Republic's regional militancy is not restricted to "hard" activities such as armaments, but also "soft" activities, such as ideological propaganda for the recruitment and radicalisation of young Shia fighters in the region. As an example, the Khamenei-run and IRGC-linked ideological-charity, the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, which has a presence throughout the Middle East, closely works with IRGC Quds Force commanders to carry out the IRGC's "soft power" activities in the region. It is worth highlighting that the Islamic Republic often uses charitable organisations and activities as fronts to serve its ideological objectives in the region and beyond.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Behnam Ben Taleblu: It is unclear what percentage of Iran's GDP is used to support its military interventions abroad. Technically, the arm of the Iranian government engaged in these interventions and operations is the IRGC, and even under national budgetary constraints due to sanctions and mismanagement, as well as the fallout from the global pandemic known as COVID-19, the budget of the IRGC is set to grow this Persian calendar year. That should signal where the regime's priorities are in terms of values and interests as it relates to the IRGC. But the IRGC budget will not neatly translate into the exact level of operational capacity it has abroad, as the regime has agents, affiliates, networks, and more that enable certain missions and capabilities across locales that are not encapsulated by military expenditure line items. Nevertheless, as resources dwindle over time, pressure mounts from above and below, and operations costs grow as well, the regime will be faced with further budgetary choices, which exposes it to greater risk. The challenge for Western policy makers of using only financial instruments of punishment, deterrence, and coercion with Iran is that this sort of asymmetric security policy is relatively cheap, and has a higher return on investment, forcing Iran's adversaries to spend more offsetting or dealing with cheaper asymmetric threats.