

## **Written evidence submitted by Dr Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi (RUSI) (UKI0006)**

### **Relevant Experience**

1. Research Fellow on Middle East Security at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), author of numerous publications on Iran domestic and foreign policy on outlets such as Foreign Policy, BBC News, The Telegraph, Al-Monitor and frequent commentator on the BBC, Al Jazeera, Sky News, Bloomberg, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times and France 24.
2. I obtained my PhD at King's College London and focused on the negotiations between the UK, France and Germany with Iran on the nuclear dossier between 2003 and 2015.
3. I often provide briefings to stakeholders looking at Iran, including the Foreign Office, State Department, NATO, the EEAS Iran Task Force and the Permanent Missions at the UN.
4. The following submission draws on that experience and the extensive research that I have conducted on the subject for nearly a decade.

### **Summary**

5. The UK has seen the highest degree of success in securing its strategic objectives vis-à-vis Iran when closely coordinating its policies with both its European partners (France and Germany in particular) and the US, often playing a crucial role as a mediator between the two sides.
6. Since the election of US President Donald Trump, this approach has been more challenging to carry out, particularly given the maximum pressure campaign adopted by the US.
7. More recently, steps taken by the UK have been interpreted by Tehran as a decision by the new government to fully align with the US' maximum pressure campaign, leading to tensions between Tehran and London.
8. To reverse this path and ensure de-escalation, the UK should play its traditional bridge-building role between the EU and US and help in shaping a more jointly coordinated transatlantic approach on Iran.
9. By doing so, the UK can play a leading role in contributing to providing an off-ramp to growing tensions in the Middle East, while at the same time reducing the risks of a weaponisation of the Iranian nuclear programme and of destabilising activities in the region.

### **UK's goals and strategy vis-à-vis Iran**

10. For nearly two decades, the UK has maintained three main strategic objectives when dealing with Iran: avoiding the weaponisation of the Iranian nuclear programme, reducing Iran's disruptive behaviour in the Middle East and preventing a military confrontation which would jeopardise political stability in the region and put at risk UK interests, facilities and personnel.
11. Since 2003, when the Iranian nuclear crisis first emerged, the UK has been consistently trying to achieve these goals without having to choose between its European partners and the US, and, in fact, maximising its leverage by acting as a mediator between them. Britain played its traditional role of serving as a bridge between Europe and the US. In practice, this meant that the UK often helped to find a middle ground between the two sides of the

pond, one opting for dialogue and the other keener to adopt a containment and isolationist policy towards Iran.

12. In 2003, together with Germany and France, the UK decided to engage with Tehran in an attempt to convince its government to suspend its sensitive nuclear activities. As part of the initiative led by the three European countries (known as the E3), Britain was *de facto* in charge of maintaining tacit American support for the offers made by the E3 to the Iranians during the negotiations; it was also helping to convince the Americans to openly endorse the initiative – which they ultimately formally joined in 2006.
13. Since then, the UK closely coordinated its policy on Iran with both its European partners and the US and adopted the so-called dual-track strategy, which combined dialogue with pressure through the adoption of sanctions against the Iranian nuclear programme.
14. After nearly a decade, that strategy ultimately led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a nuclear deal, announced in July 2015, which curbed Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief. The JCPOA was the product of complex negotiations as well as of effective transatlantic coordination on Iran. The deal enabled the UK to ensure two of its main objectives *vis-à-vis* Tehran were met, without having to choose between Europe or the US, but in fact, working closely with both. The goal was also to build on the JCPOA to address Iran's behaviour in the region, in order to protect the UK's third strategic objective.

### **At odds with the *maximum pressure* campaign**

15. With the election of US President Donald Trump in 2017, Europe has found itself critically at odds with the American policy on Iran for the first time in more than a decade. The new President soon manifested its criticism towards the JCPOA, a deal that he perceived as flawed. In January 2018, President Trump issued an [ultimatum](#) to the E3 countries to either fix what he defined 'the deal's disastrous flaws' or watch the US withdraw from it and reimpose sanctions against Tehran.
16. Between January and May 2018, the UK, together with France and Germany, closely engaged with the US State Department to address the concerns regarding the JCPOA raised by President Trump –the fact that it did not include issues such as Iran's ballistic missiles, that the terms under which inspections can take place in Iranian nuclear sites are loose, and that the restrictions to the Iranian programme are due to expire. Even according to the US, the E3 [made a lot of progress](#) in finding ways to address these concerns (especially the first two).
17. Despite that, on 8 May 2018, President Trump announced the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and, since then, adopted a maximum pressure campaign towards Iran, the aim of which is to lead Tehran to either negotiate a new agreement or face economic and diplomatic isolation. Over the past year, the strategy entailed, among other things, the reintroduction of nuclear-related sanctions against Iran and the suspension of sanctions waivers for Iran oil imports. Because of their extra-territoriality, these measures *de-facto* prevent Iran from accessing the global financial system and deter most countries and businesses (including European ones) from engaging in commercial transactions with Iran.
18. The US has tried to [convince the UK](#) and the [other European countries](#) to embark in the same approach. Instead, the UK, together with the other E3 countries and the EU High Representative, expressed its [regret and concern](#) over President Trump's decision and emphasised the country's continuing commitment to the JCPOA, given its importance for European collective security. When the US reintroduced nuclear-related sanctions, the UK once again joined the E3 and the EU High Representative in [criticising such move](#), arguing that the lifting of these sanctions was an essential part of the deal. They also jointly called

- on the US to [refrain from taking actions](#) that impeded them and the rest of the remaining parties to the nuclear deal (Russia and China) to fully perform their commitments.
19. Given that preserving the nuclear deal with Iran is perceived by the E3 and the other EU countries as a matter of respect for international agreements, as well as crucial for international security, since May 2018, the UK has closely coordinated with its European partners to keep the JCPOA alive and convincing Iran to remain a party to the deal, in spite of the American withdrawal. What Iran asked for in exchange for its continued compliance was the ability to continue selling oil and access the financial system services. The E3 efforts focused on the second component, and on finding ways of shielding EU operators wanting to conduct commercial transactions with Iran from US sanctions. These initiatives translated into the updating of the [Blocking Statute](#) in support of the Iran nuclear deal, and in creating, in January 2019, the [INSTEX](#) payment mechanism, a framework designed to facilitate legitimate trade with Iran.
  20. Besides maintaining close coordination with the E3 on these efforts, the UK also replaced the US as co-chair of the working group created under the JCPOA in order to assist Iran in redesigning the Arak facility to cut its potential output of plutonium.
  21. Despite all these steps taken by the UK in conjunction with the E3 and the EU, as a consequence of US sanctions, as of May 2019 Tehran was no longer able to sell its oil; INSTEX was and still is not operational and the Blocking Statute did not manage to fence the impact of the US legislation. [Because of that](#), exactly one year after the withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA, Iran decided to scale back its compliance with the deal.
  22. Since May, tensions between the US and Iran also translated into several incidents in the Strait of Hormuz, with the two countries shooting down each other's drones, and Iran allegedly being responsible for the attack and seizure of tankers in the Gulf, as well as for missile attacks on Saudi Aramco facilities in Abqaiq.
  23. The maximum pressure campaign adopted by the US thus not only jeopardised the effectiveness of the JCPOA in reducing the prospects for the weaponization of Iran's nuclear programme but also significantly increased the chances of conflict and led Tehran to take more destabilising activities in the region. All this goes against the UK's strategic objectives vis-à-vis Iran and has unintentionally dragged the country into a vicious cycle of escalation and deterrence.

### **Breaking off ranks?**

24. Over the past few months, tensions between the UK and Iran have significantly increased. Iran has interpreted some of the steps taken by the UK as a growing indication that Britain is breaking off ranks with the E3 and choosing, instead, to align itself closely to the US' policy of maximum pressure. Tehran's perception that Britain acts as a proxy of the US has triggered an escalation between the two and has unintendedly dragged the UK into the confrontation.
25. In July, British Royal Marines helped detain an Iranian tanker, known as the Grace I, in Gibraltar for violating EU sanctions by transporting oil to Syria, following a request from the US. Tehran has consequently labelled the UK's conduct as piracy, accused the UK of acting as a US proxy, and vowed to retaliate. After only a few days, Iran forces seized the Stena Impero, a British-flagged oil tanker, in the Strait of Hormuz, in apparent retaliation for the detention of the Iranian tanker.
26. Then UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt soon announced the country's commitment to establishing a [European-led initiative](#) to protect commercial shipping around the Gulf. He stressed that the initiative was not going to be part of the US maximum pressure campaign,

given the UK's commitment to preserving the JCPOA. Despite its shared concerns over Iran's destabilising activities in the Gulf, the UK thus initially tried to distance itself from the US on Iran, rebuking the country's requests to join its naval mission. That move was intended to make it easier for other EU countries, such as France and Germany, to join the maritime security force without fears of further escalating tensions with Tehran or undermining what was left of the JCPOA.

27. In August, shortly after the change in UK government, newly appointed Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab reversed such posture and announced its [decision to join the US' maritime security mission](#) in the Gulf. While British officials stressed that there was no change to London's policy on Iran, this was interpreted by Tehran as yet another signal that the UK was breaking ranks with the E3 on Iran and fully aligning with the US. The change in strategy also came as a surprise to EU capitals, which, while also keen to ensure safe shipping and deterring further threats in the Strait of Hormuz, believe that a European-led initiative would be better placed to defuse tensions with Tehran. In the three months since the UK announced its decision, no other EU country joined the US-led naval mission.
28. A further element that has increased Iran's conviction that the UK is breaking ranks with the E3 on Iran has been the statement of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who, in September, attacked the JCPOA as a 'bad deal' and called for [a new 'Trump deal'](#) to substitute it. Despite reassurances from UK officials that the country's commitment to the JCPOA remains the same, in Iran's eyes, the unity among the E3 is now broken and the UK's policy towards Iran changed. This increases the chances that Tehran will not see the benefit to reverse its decisions and, instead, continue scaling back its compliance with the nuclear deal.
29. These recent developments all risk to further lead to escalation, both in the Gulf and on the nuclear file, undermining all three UK's strategic objectives on Iran.

### **Towards de-escalation**

30. While, under the current circumstances, it is particularly challenging for any country to undertake a policy on Iran which entails working closely together with both the US and the E3/EU, because of its historical role as mediator between the two sides, the UK is better placed than any other international actor to pursue such endeavour. This path has the potential to reduce the risk of a weaponisation of the Iranian nuclear programme and the likelihood of destabilisation and confrontation in the region.
31. On the nuclear front, the UK should continue stressing its commitments to the JCPOA in conjunction with the E3 and the EU and refrain from statements that indicate a potential shift in such position. As stated before, ensuring the survival of the JCPOA is a matter of respect for international agreements and of international security, and as such, negotiations on new or additional deals should take place only while ensuring the survival of the existing nuclear deal.
32. The immediate priority should be to bring Iran back to full compliance. To achieve this goal, the UK should continue working closely with its European partners in finding ways for Tehran to benefit from such compliance and from remaining a party to the JCPOA. Given the nature of US sanctions, Iran is no longer likely to perceive INSTEX as a viable incentive, and an alternative option needs to be considered in the short term. The [\\$15bn credit line](#) offered by French President Emmanuel Macron constitutes a viable option, one that would be rapidly in place and of interest to the Iranian government. However, to be successful, this initiative needs the backing of the US and, in particular of President Trump. While Trump seemed initially open to the idea of the credit line, the US maintained its maximum

- pressure approach. The UK should convince the US to combine its maximum pressure with offers of economic relief to be delivered as an incentive, not as an outcome of negotiations, and it should also make the case for better coordination between the US and the E3/EU on Iran. This would ensure the adoption of something similar to the dual-track approach adopted by the US and the E3/EU between 2006 and 2013. Without such approach, the US is unlikely to bring Iran to the negotiating table and, in the meantime, its strategy is likely to increase the risk of a weaponisation of its nuclear programme, as well as military confrontation in the region, with direct consequences for the UK.
33. The UK should itself continue to uphold its obligations under the nuclear deal and cooperate with Iran to modernise the Arak reactor. This not only provides a guarantee that Iran's potential plutonium path to nuclear weapons remains closed. As demonstrated by the recent [visit by British experts](#) to Iran, such cooperation constitutes an avenue for Britain to showcase its desire and ability to maintain its obligations, while also improving bilateral ties with Tehran. To achieve this goal, the UK should encourage the US to continue renewing the [nuclear cooperation waivers](#), without which Iran is more likely to further scale back its compliance with the JPCOA, or even decide to fully withdraw from it.
  34. The UK should also coordinate its policies with both the US and its European partners on their shared concerns vis-à-vis Tehran, particularly when it comes to the country's development of ballistic missiles and destabilising regional activities. It should be wary of the risks posed by full-fledged alignment (or even the perception thereof) with the US' policy on Iran and, instead, pursue its continued cooperation with the E3 and the EU. In particular, the UK should revisit its position on the naval mission and explore the possibility of taking the lead on a European-led initiative which enjoys the support of its European partners while coordinating with the US and pursuing the same intended goals, without risking further escalation. The UK should also continue pursuing joint E3 statements, such as the one issued to [condemn the attack to the Aramco facilities](#) in Abqaiq, to reiterate the unity across European partners on Iran's disruptive behaviour in the region, in line with the US concerns but not with its maximum pressure policy. Maintaining its coordination with European partners is particularly important in light of Brexit and the consequent doubts raised about [the future of the E3 framework](#) and, more broadly, about UK's involvement and influence in EU foreign policy. Coordination with its European partners is also important for the UK if it wants to maintain its leverage and impact on Iran when imposing targeted sanctions. This is, once again, especially the case in light of Brexit, given that ['sanctions will be more directly affected by the UK's departure from the EU than almost any other foreign policy tool'](#).

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