

Written evidence submitted by Dr Stepan Stepanenko and Ms Catherine Perez-Shakdam (MENA0071)

About Forward Strategy Ltd

Forward Strategy Ltd. is a boutique consultancy specializing in UK, Iranian, Middle Eastern, Eastern European, and Indo-Pacific affairs. We undertake projects embodying our values of freedom, equality, and democracy, aiming to positively impact society. Driven by a mission to improve the world, we focus on projects with lasting societal benefits. Our team, with expertise in journalism, international relations, and policy analysis, excels in political risk analysis, media campaigns, and strategic planning. We offer unique insights and dedicated support in navigating the complexities of political campaigning, business development, and strategic initiatives.

About Dr Stepan Stepanenko

Dr Stepan Stepanenko is an expert in Russian and Eastern European politics, contributing to discussions on defence and national security. A former British Conservative Party activist and co-founder of the Conservative Friends of Ukraine, he also ran for office in Barnet. Presently, he's part of the Belarusian opposition's Coordination Council. His insights, featured in publications like the Daily Express and the Jerusalem Post, extend to national TV and radio in the UK, providing commentary on Ukrainian warfare and security matters. His broad expertise and active political engagement make him a distinguished figure in his field.

About Catherine Perez-Shakdam

Catherine Perez-Shakdam, a research fellow at the American Centre for Levant Studies, has significantly influenced policy with her insights into Yemen's War Economy and corruption networks. A former consultant for the UN Security Council and Research Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society, she's a media staple, contributing to outlets like Al Jazeera and the BBC. Catherine gained fame in 2021 for her decade-long infiltration of Iran's regime, gaining unprecedented access and exposing its secretive operations. Labelled an 'enemy of the state' by Iran, her work unveils the regime's true nature and challenges its narrative internationally.

Summary

UK's Strategic Approach to Iran

1. **Inadequacy of JCPOA:** The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has faced significant criticism for its failure to comprehensively address Iran's nuclear program, ballistic missile development, and destabilising regional activities. This shortcoming was highlighted in Iran's support for militant groups, particularly evidenced in the backing of the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Such actions underscore the pressing need for a re-evaluation of the JCPOA's effectiveness in ensuring regional stability.
2. **Advocacy for a Stronger Diplomatic Stance:** The United Kingdom must adopt a more assertive diplomatic and economic posture towards Iran, transcending the

current scope of the JCPOA. This approach should encompass comprehensive embargoes and explore the feasibility of removing Iran from influential positions within international organizations, such as the United Nations and the International Labour Organization. The latter is particularly pertinent given Iran's oppressive policies towards women and enforcement of stringent dress codes.

3. **Implementation of Targeted Embargoes:** The UK is advised to impose targeted embargoes on Iran, specifically designed to restrict Iran's economic capabilities. These embargoes should exclude medical goods to avoid humanitarian crises, yet effectively curb Iran's ability to finance and support militant groups.
4. **Diplomatic Isolation through International Bodies:** Proposing Iran's exclusion from key international forums is a critical step in diplomatically isolating the nation and holding it accountable for its destabilizing actions. This measure, while challenging, would signify a united international stance against Iran's malign activities.
5. **Severance of Diplomatic Relations:** A parliamentary debate is warranted on the potential severance of diplomatic ties with Iran. This action would be in direct response to Iran's persistent defiance of international norms and would significantly diminish its global diplomatic influence.
6. **Stringent Sanctions:** Implementing tighter sanctions targeting Iran's critical sectors, including oil, finance, and military industries, is vital. These sanctions would restrict financial transactions by Iranian officials and businesses in major currencies, thereby limiting Iran's capabilities in funding proxy wars and supporting terrorist entities.

Comprehensive Strategy for Iran

7. **Mapping the Iranian Regime:** Developing an exhaustive database detailing the roles and identities of individuals within the Iranian government is crucial. This mapping, underpinned by reliable sources such as witness testimonies and international reports, will ensure the effectiveness of targeted sanctions.
8. **Formation of an Iranian Taskforce:** The establishment of a taskforce, comprising Iran experts, opposition figures, politicians, and campaigners, is essential. Led by an impartial authority, this taskforce would gather and analyse information, collaborating with UK security services to safeguard sensitive data and ensure source authenticity.
9. **Royal Navy's Strategic Role:** The Royal Navy is to assume a pivotal role in securing critical maritime passages, such as the Strait of Hormuz. Joint naval patrols and exercises with allies would underscore a united international stance against Iranian provocations and ensure freedom of navigation.

Support for Democratic Governance in the MENA Region

10. **Fostering Democratic Institutions:** The UK's foreign policy should prioritise establishing and supporting democratic institutions in the Middle East and North Africa. This initiative, exemplified by the Congress of People's Deputies in Russia, is critical for regional stability, giving voice to marginalised groups and promoting democratic governance.
11. **Backing an Iranian Government in Exile:** The UK should lead efforts to establish an Iranian government in exile. This move, aligning with the UK's commitment to democratic values and human rights, would resonate positively with the Iranian diaspora and citizens within Iran. The UK's historical role in supporting governments

in exile during the Cold War underscores its capacity for such initiatives. The focus should be on facilitating, rather than dictating, to respect Iran's sovereignty and self-determination.

Evidence

1. **The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in its present iteration falls markedly short** in addressing the critical issues of Iran's burgeoning nuclear program, its advancement of ballistic missile capabilities, and its role in destabilising regional geopolitics. This shortfall is particularly evident in Iran's unwavering support for militant factions, exemplified by its backing of the Hamas-initiated assault on Israel on October 7, 2023, a move that significantly undermines regional stability. Moreover, the JCPOA's sunset clauses, which ultimately allow Iran to reinvigorate key aspects of its nuclear activities, only serve to heighten this existing threat, further compromising regional security and stability.
2. **The United Kingdom must adopt a strategic and rigorous approach that transcends mere diplomatic calls for a more robust JCPOA.** This approach should manifest in a concerted diplomatic and economic offensive designed to exert substantial pressure on Iran. Key to this strategy are comprehensive measures, including the proposal of wide-ranging embargoes aimed at curbing Iran's economic lifelines. Additionally, the UK should strongly consider advocating for Iran's exclusion from influential positions within pivotal international institutions, including the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation. This recommendation stems from Iran's egregious record on human rights, particularly its oppressive treatment of women in the workforce and stringent enforcement of dress codes, violations exemplified tragically in the case of Mahsa Amini. Such assertive actions by the UK would mark a significant escalation in its stance, directly confronting Iran's nuclear ambitions and its destabilising regional conduct.
3. **The imposition of targeted embargoes** would serve as a powerful tool to constrict Iran's economic capabilities, extending to all but medical goods. These embargoes would not only cripple Iran's ability to fund and support militant groups but would also send a clear message of international condemnation for its actions.
4. **Proposing Iran's removal from the United Nations and other international bodies** would be a bold step, underlining the severity of Iran's transgressions. This move would aim to isolate Iran diplomatically and underscore the international community's unwillingness to tolerate its destabilising activities. Such a proposal, while challenging to implement, would signal a united front against Iran's actions and pressure it to comply with international norms.
5. **The severance of diplomatic relations** with Iran merits serious contemplation within the halls of the UK Parliament. This measure stands as a direct counter to Iran's persistent contravention of international accords and its belligerent regional stance. By terminating diplomatic ties, the United Kingdom would effectively curtail Iran's global diplomatic sway. Such a decisive move would not only signal the UK's intolerance for Iran's defiance but also potentially establish a template for other nations to emulate. This action underscores the necessity of a unified and robust response to regimes that persistently undermine international order and peace.

6. **Tougher sanctions** are essential to exert pressure on Iran to change its course. These should target key sectors like oil, finance, and military industries, directly impacting the regime's primary revenue sources. Sanctions cut all financial transactions by Iranian officials and businesses in Pounds Sterling, thus limiting Iran's capacity to fund proxy wars and support terrorist groups in the region as well as setting a precedent for other states, such as the US.
7. **The United Kingdom must advocate for the implementation of coordinated international sanctions.** These sanctions should prohibit Iranian officials and entities from transactions in currencies like the US Dollar, Pound Sterling, and Euro. Key international participation is crucial to enhance impact. The UK must lead in imposing sanctions on Iranian officials and entities involved in human rights abuses and terrorism support. This will curb Iran's malign activities and underscore the UK's commitment to an ethical foreign policy. These measures will demonstrate the UK's strong stance against international norm violations, affirming its dedication to global security and human rights.
8. **Mapping the Iranian regime is key to the application of sanctions and implementing targeted measures** that effectively address human rights abuses and regional destabilising activities. Creating a comprehensive database of individuals in the Iranian government and their specific roles allows for a nuanced approach to sanctions, ensuring they impact those responsible for adverse actions rather than the general population. This mapping should be based on reliable sources, including witness testimonies, reports from international organisations, and credible intelligence. It is essential to identify those directly involved in decision-making processes that lead to human rights violations or support for militant groups. Additionally, understanding the power dynamics within the regime, including key influencers in the military, political, and economic spheres, is crucial. This information would enable the UK and its allies to design sanctions that disrupt the regime's ability to perpetuate harmful policies.
9. **Documenting specific crimes** committed by these individuals, as reported by witnesses and international bodies, is vital for ensuring accountability and justice. This documentation would provide concrete evidence that can be used in international courts or to justify sanctions and further action. It would also serve to inform the global community about the nature and extent of the Iranian regime's transgressions. Importantly, this approach would reinforce the UK's stance on human rights and international law, showing a commitment to ethical foreign policy. Additionally, such a mapping would aid in diplomatic efforts, providing leverage in negotiations by clearly demonstrating the regime's violations. The ultimate aim is not only to penalise wrongdoing but also to encourage a shift towards more responsible and ethical governance in Iran, aligning with international expectations and standards of human rights and regional stability.
10. **The UK must establish an Iranian 'task force'** to effectively execute this mapping strategy, composed of experts on Iran, representatives from opposition groups, politicians, human rights campaigners, and legal professionals. The selection of taskforce members is critical; they must possess a deep understanding of Iran's political landscape, cultural nuances, and the regime's operational dynamics. The leader of this taskforce should be an individual with a proven track record of impartiality and expertise in Iranian affairs, capable of identifying and excluding any

members who might have affiliations or sympathies towards the Iranian regime. This is crucial to maintain the integrity and objectivity of the taskforce's findings. The selection process should be rigorous and transparent, ensuring that each member brings a unique and valuable perspective to the table. The taskforce should operate with a clear mandate to gather, analyse, and corroborate information from a diverse range of sources, including testimonials from dissidents, reports from international organisations, and open-source intelligence.

11. **Close cooperation with UK security services** is essential for the taskforce to access classified intelligence and ensure the protection of sensitive information. Security services can provide support in verifying the credibility of sources and safeguarding the taskforce against potential infiltration or threats from Iranian intelligence operatives. The collaboration should also extend to sharing findings with international partners and relevant organisations to coordinate efforts in sanctioning and holding the Iranian regime accountable. This task force should not only focus on mapping current regime officials but also track their financial assets and networks, both domestically and internationally. By integrating intelligence gathering with legal expertise, the task force can assist in formulating legally sound and effective sanction policies. Regular updates and reports from this task force would help shape the UK's foreign policy towards Iran, ensuring it is based on accurate, timely, and comprehensive information. This approach demonstrates the UK's commitment to a strategic and informed foreign policy, underpinned by a strong ethical foundation and a commitment to global security and human rights.
12. **The Royal Navy must play a pivotal role in monitoring and securing strategic waterways**, like the Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of the world's oil supply passes. This would deter Iranian attempts to disrupt global oil supplies, a tactic Tehran has previously employed. Joint naval patrols and exercises with regional and international partners, such as Israel, the US and India, would enhance security in these critical areas. This not only serves to curb Iran's aggressive manoeuvres but also demonstrates a united international front against Tehran's provocations. The UK's naval presence should be part of a broader strategy that includes diplomatic efforts to ensure freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. This approach would reassure regional allies, uphold international law, and mitigate the risk of escalation due to maritime confrontations with Iran.
13. **Achieving stability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is intricately tied to the creation and support of democratic institutions**, including the formation of governments in exile. The establishment of such bodies reflects a commitment to democratic processes and can serve as a beacon for reform within the region. The Congress of People's Deputies is a pertinent example and represents an effort to create a parallel democratic structure in Russia. It aims to establish a legitimate alternative to the existing regime by bringing together elected deputies who were marginalised in the official political system. This initiative demonstrates a grassroots approach to democracy, building institutions from the bottom up, even in exile.
14. **UK foreign policy efforts need to underscore** the importance of supporting democratic movements and institutions in achieving long-term stability in the MENA region. By fostering democratic governance, even in exile, the UK can contribute to the creation of legitimate and representative institutions. These entities can serve as foundations for future democratic states, offering a pathway out of authoritarianism

and conflict. Furthermore, they provide a platform for the voices of those committed to democratic change, ensuring that aspirations for reform are kept alive and nurtured, even in challenging circumstances.

15. **Ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the Iranian opposition landscape,** the UK could initiate an inquiry into various opposition groups and figures. This inquiry would involve extensive research and engagement with Iranian diaspora communities, scholars, and diplomatic experts. The aim would be to map out the spectrum of opposition, assess the credibility and influence of different groups, and understand their visions for Iran's future. Such an inquiry would not only inform the UK's approach to supporting the possibility of establishing an Iranian government in exile but also provide valuable insights into the dynamics of Iranian politics and society. It could also serve as a platform for dialogue between different opposition groups, fostering unity and a coherent strategy for change. By conducting this inquiry, the UK would demonstrate a thoughtful and informed approach to its engagement with Iranian opposition, enhancing its role as a responsible and knowledgeable actor in international affairs.
16. **The UK should initiate and support the creation of an Iranian government in exile.** A government in exile would give legitimate representation to the Iranian opposition, ensuring their voices and aspirations are heard on the international stage. This is crucial for those who have been marginalised and persecuted under the current regime, offering them a form of political agency and a channel to advocate for change within Iran.
17. **The UK's role in supporting an Iranian government in exile could significantly bolster its relations with the Iranian diaspora and the broader Iranian population.** By providing a platform for diverse Iranian voices seeking democratic change, the UK can position itself as a champion of human rights and democratic values. This would resonate positively among the Iranian diaspora in the UK, fostering stronger community relations and enhancing the UK's reputation as a defender of democratic principles. Moreover, this support will be viewed favourably by many within Iran, projecting the UK as an ally in their struggle for political reform and human rights. Such a stance could lay the groundwork for future diplomatic and economic relationships with a potentially democratic Iran.
18. **Historically, the UK has engaged in similar efforts.** For instance, during the Cold War, the UK, alongside its allies, provided support to governments in exile from Eastern European countries that were under Soviet control. This support was not just symbolic; it included broadcasting services like the BBC World Service, which offered a platform for these governments to communicate with their populations back home. This historical precedent demonstrates the UK's capacity and willingness to support democratic movements against authoritarian regimes. In offering support to an Iranian government in exile, it is crucial for the UK to ensure that it is the Iranian people who decide their country's future. The UK's role should be to facilitate and provide a platform for the voices of Iranian opposition, rather than dictating or influencing the direction of the opposition. This approach respects Iran's sovereignty and self-determination, aligning with international norms and the UK's commitment to upholding democratic values. By positioning itself as a facilitator rather than a controller, the UK can effectively support the Iranian people's aspirations for change while adhering to its own principles of international engagement.

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