

## **Written evidence submitted by Mr Hossein Abedini at National Council of Resistance of Iran - UK Representative Office (UKI0011)**

### **The National Council of Resistance of Iran, NCRI:**

Founded in Tehran in 1981, the NCRI is a broad coalition of democratic Iranian organisations, groups and personalities.

The NCRI is an inclusive and pluralistic parliament-in-exile that has more than 500 members, including representatives of ethnic and religious minorities such as the Kurds, Baluchis, Armenians, Jews and Zoroastrians, representing a broad spectrum of political tendencies in Iran. The NCRI aims to establish a secular democratic republic in Iran, based on the separation of religion and state. Women comprise 50 percent of the Council's members. There are five organizations represented in the NCRI, including the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), the largest and most popular resistance group in Iran.

### **Executive Summary**

For many years there have been concerns about new developments in Iran leading to instability throughout the Middle East. These concerns have been amplified by sectarian conflict and political instability following the US invasion of Iraq, as well as the situation created by the Arab Spring in Libya and other countries of the region. As a result of these concerns, the West has increasingly tended toward efforts at compromising with the Iranian regime.

Lobbyists for that regime have capitalized on that trend to create obstacles to sound policies for dealing with Iran. Toward that end, they have exploited European appetites for trade with the Islamic Republic while also repeating common misunderstandings of the Iranian regime and Iranian society. Among those misunderstandings is a failure to recognize the extent of public resentment toward the existing government, and the prevalence of demands for regime change.

The objective of this article is not to criticize prior Iran policies but to analyse the present situation in that country, in order to better understand how the conditions might affect future policies. The current situation speaks for itself regarding the success or failure of policies that were in place at the time of writing.

A review of developments in Iran during recent years reveals the following:

- The regime is facing a deep economic crisis consisting of high unemployment, rampant inflation and widespread poverty. Far beyond international sanctions, the current crisis is the result of the country's economic structure being destroyed by government policies, incompetent administration and widespread corruption involving the entire regime.
- Uprisings in January 2018, November 2019 and January 2020 clearly showed that the overwhelming majority of the Iranian people support fundamental change. This position spans all demographics and is especially prevalent among poor Iranians who were wrongly perceived as a reliable base of support for the regime.
- Low turnout at events celebrating the anniversary of the Iranian revolution on February 11 and at parliamentary elections on February 21 demonstrated a lack of popular support for the regime and a general unwillingness to trade between "hardliners" and mainstream "moderates". Many officials and state-run media openly admit that there is greater mistrust for all officials than ever before.
- There is enormous potential for further uprisings and revolt against the regime. Despite 40 years of suppression, executions, torture and terror against dissidents, there is an organized

opposition movement in Iran that enjoys popular support and has demonstrated the potential of taking control of the country after the fall of the regime.

- The 2015 nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), failed to bring about change in the regime's regional policy. The regime continues to participate in killing the Syrian people, destabilizing Yemen by funding and arming Houthi rebels, supporting the Hashd al-Shaabi paramilitary force and further destabilising Iraq, and proliferating ballistic missiles. And although the military aspect of the regime's nuclear project has slowed down, it remains fully intact.

### Overview

Iran is a vast country, with a young population that has doubled in size to more than 80 million over one generation. The country has the world's third largest oil reserves and second largest natural gas reserves.

In 1979 the Shah's dictatorship was toppled by a popular revolution. However, due to the absence of democratic institutions after years of dictatorship, Ruhollah Khomeini and clerics whose network had been left intact under the Shah were able to assume leadership of the people's movement. While, the Iranian people desire was independence, freedom, and a tolerant and democratic society, Khomeini capitalized on their victory to establish a theocratic regime.

The quest for freedom had begun decades earlier in the run-up to the constitutional revolution in 1905. Iran's first constitution, based on those of France and Belgium, were completely neglected by subsequent monarchs, and the dictatorship reached its peak under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

After the downfall of the Shah, Khomeini introduced his constitution, which had been drafted by a makeshift Council of Experts comprised of 80 clerics, most of whom had strong ties to Khomeini. This constitution is based on the principle of *Velayat-e-Faqih*, or jurisprudence of the Cleric, which gives absolute power to the supreme leader, a role filled by Khomeini himself until his death in 1989. His successor, Ali Khamenei, has been in power ever since.

The religious system quickly began curbing hard-fought individual and social liberties, introducing obligatory dress codes for women, refusing civil rights such as freedom of speech and assembly, and prohibiting healthy political discourse. Religion was exploited by Khomeini to put those loyal to him and his school of thought in leading positions and to deny basic rights to other political groups.

On 20 June 1981 Khomeini ordered the bloody suppression of a peaceful demonstration organised by the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI/MEK) to protest lack of freedom. This began a reign of terror that ultimately led to 120,000 opposition members being executed for their political views. Of these, 30,000 were killed over just several months in 1988, following a fatwa by Khomeini. The overwhelming majority of these were affiliated with the PMOI.

In his very first years in power, Khomeini made regional and international expansion a pillar of his state strategy. His calls for the overthrow of the Iraqi Government provoked that country to invade Iran. This resulted in an eight-year war with its neighbour Iraq (1980-1988), which left two million killed or wounded on the Iranian side alone. The regional push was reinforced in 2003 following the US invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein. Iranian forces soon began making their presence felt across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and parts of the Palestinian territories. Regional proxies such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi militias founded and trained by Iran were systematically used during the Syrian conflict. Iranian financial resources, grouped mainly in foundations and trusts associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), have been devoted to regional expansionism for the past two decades.

As another critical strategic endeavour, the clerical regime initiated a vast, secretive nuclear project and extended it, in secret, through two separate paths envisaged to lead the regime to the bomb in the early 21 century. The project was, however, revealed by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), in 2002, triggering the monitoring of Iran's nuclear program by the International Atomic Energy Organization, and the United Nations Security Council's resolutions.

Currently the regime is engulfed in major crises. Domestically, the distinction between moderates and hardliners has ceased to hold any meaning for ordinary citizens. Therefore, people are increasingly challenging the regime in its entirety and demanding a new system of government. Meanwhile, the economic situation has deteriorated since the signing of the JCPOA. While US sanctions are exerting more pressure on the regime, many Iranians believe that their own economic hardship is primarily due to the regime's incompetence and corruption.

Participants in that corruption include Khamenei and various foundations connected to his office, as well as the IRGC and people affiliated with President Hassan Rouhani, including his brother. Yet these entities have also been engaged in increased factional feuding amidst their collective failure to meet the people's most basic needs. The regime's internal conflicts have also led to growing opposition to Khamenei within the religious hierarchy. And even within the IRGC there is disillusionment and concern about the future.

For years, Tehran benefited from the situation in the region, notably the invasion of Iraq, to pursue its malicious objectives. This is a pillar of the regime's survival. But recent protests in Lebanon and the current crisis in Iraq have dealt a major blow to the regime's regional strategy, undermining its foothold there. Over the past several months in Iraq, massive demonstrations have been urging an end to Iranian interventions in the country.

Above all, elimination of Qassem Soleimani, the Commander of the IRGC's terrorist Quds Force, was a strategic blow to the regime. Its response involved far more rhetoric and noise than real action, thus demonstrating the regime's dilemma.

The country's financial resources and technological capacities have been drained by years of foreign spending on regional wars (estimated at 16B dollars), reduced oil production due to international sanctions, double-digit unemployment, and a colossal inflation rate.

Currently, the most critical challenge to the clerics remains the coronavirus crisis in which Iran is seen as the culprit for its deliberate failure to act in a timely manner to stop the spread of the virus, giving priority to political considerations and commercial ties with China.

### **Uprisings mark a turning point**

#### **Uprising in 2017/2018**

Since 2017, Iran has been the scene of three major uprisings that shook the regime to its foundations: one that spanned December 2017 and January 2018, one in November 2019, and one that was led by students in January 2020. Contrary to the assessments of many pundits and Iran observers, the clerical regime is far from stable and has maintained its grip on power only through repression and bloodshed. This was especially clear in the aftermath of the November 2019 uprising, where 1,500 protesters were murdered in cold blood.

The first of the three uprisings began on December 28, 2017 in the north-eastern city of Mashhad and quickly spread to 162 cities and towns in all of Iran's 31 provinces. More than 8,000 protestors were detained and at least 50 killed. Fourteen more died as a result of torture while in detention.

The protests' initial slogans targeted rising food prices, but they quickly took on a political overtone and targeted the Supreme Leader Khamenei with chants of "death to the dictator" and "death to Khamenei." And by chanting "reformer, hardliner, the game is now over," activists highlighted their frustration with the entire ruling establishment. These slogans and this uprising heralded the beginning of a new era in Iran.

On January 9, 2018, Khamenei spoke about the protest. He blamed the MEK as the force inside Iran that organized the protests and insisted that this conclusion was based on specific information. He then attempted to portray the protests as the result of deception, with the MEK organizing protests under the banner of "no to high prices" as a way of attracting them to rallies that ended up denouncing the government. Khamenei then called for harsh punishment of MEK affiliates, as a category separate from the protesters as a whole.

Prior to that speech, President Rouhani asked President Macron of France<sup>1</sup> in a telephone conversation to restrict the activities of the NCRI and MEK in his country, alleging that they were behind the unrest in Iran. Several other officials and high-profile figures also attacked the MEK for its key role in organizing the protests or fomenting them, directing people's anger over economic hardship to the regime's failure.

### **The November 2019 uprising**

On November 14, 2019, the regime announced the tripling of gasoline prices in Iran. Uprisings immediately followed. The protests spread like wildfire, quickly engulfing more than 200 cities. The regime resort to the most severe means of repression. It deployed helicopter gunships, armoured vehicles, tanks and 50-caliber machine guns to put down the protest.

In response to the brutal crackdown, the people began targeting hundreds of state-affiliated institutions, including almost 1,000 state-owned banks, IRGC buildings, police precincts, and offices of Khamenei's representatives. Millions of Iranians, particularly the impoverished and deprived classes, unequivocally demanded the regime's downfall.

At least 1,500 protesters were killed during this unrest. Many were shot in the head or chest by snipers. At least 23 children were among them, per Amnesty International. More than 4,000 people were injured and 12,000 arrested, many of whom were then subjected to brutal torture.

Politically and strategically, the November 2019 uprising marked a watershed moment and a point of no return. The people started to believe in their own power. Fear switched camps. The balance of power shifted in favour of the people. The underlying basis for this uprising, just like the one in December 2017, was an explosive society.

### **January protests:**

Iran's most recent uprising was sparked by the downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752. Students took to the streets in Tehran and other cities, followed by the middle class, to denounce attempts at covering up the IRGC's responsibility for that incident.

From a social and class standpoint, the January protests complemented the November uprising, which had been led by lower-income individuals. Looking at the two uprisings side-by-side, one can conclude that the overwhelming majority of the Iranian people support regime change. And on their own, the January uprising underscores the prominent activism of university students, who have traditionally been the driving force for major upheavals in Iran, including those that led to the Shah's overthrow.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/899671/Iran-latest-news-protests-Hassan-Rouhani-Macron-Mujahadin-e-Khalq> Express, January 3, 2018, 'Act AGAINST them!' Shock as Iran demands Macron deals with French-based dissidents

For years prior to the uprising, the regime had attempted to depoliticize and pacify universities by suppressing activist students and giving preferential treatment to those who were members of the Basij civilian militia, which is controlled by the IRGC. However, that effort failed, as was made clear by the anti-government slogans employed by students in January. These included

- “Death to Khamenei,”
- “Khamenei’s is a murderer; his rule is null and void,”
- “IRGC shame on you, leave the country alone,”
- “Commander-in-Chief, resign, resign,”
- “Neither the Crown, nor the turban, mullahs’ you are finished,”
- “Death to the oppressor, be it the Shah or the Supreme Leader.”

### **Parliamentary Elections Boycott**

If these uprisings were not enough, the overwhelming boycott of the sham parliamentary election in February 2020 made it abundantly clear that the Iranian people will be satisfied with nothing short of the regime’s overthrow.

The boycott came despite the fact that the regime’s top officials, including Khamenei and Rouhani, had repeatedly called on the people to participate in the election. Khamenei even went as far as calling it a mandatory “religious duty.”

“Election is a popular jihad; strengthens the country, and safeguards the system’s legitimacy. Presence in the election and voting is a religious duty, a religious edict... Whoever likes the system must take part in the election,<sup>2</sup>” Khamenei said.

Rouhani repeatedly appealed for voting. His advisors warned people not to snub the ballot box, as it would make America happy and increase MEK activities. The IRGC and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif urged “maximum participation” as a means of combating the Trump administration’s strategy of “maximum pressure” on the regime.

Judiciary Chief Ebrahim Raisi said, “Election is an important issue. Anyone whose heart is in this system... must perform well in carrying out their duty in this regard. Whoever, with whatever motive, undermines this election, knowingly or unknowingly, wittingly or unwittingly, would be in the enemy’s camp by weakening the election.”

These appeals did little in ensuring voter participation. In every respect, the sham parliamentary election turned out to be a crushing defeat for the regime, which wanted to use it as a showcase for the regime’s legitimacy. After two days of delay and confusion, the Interior Minister announced with great fanfare that 42.57 percent of the electorate had participated, though this was much lower than what the regime had claimed in previous elections. The true number of participants in the election was well below ten percent Based on reports from tens of thousands of polling stations. More importantly, the regime announced that only 19 percent of the eligible voters had cast their ballots in Tehran, with the largest population. That being the case, for the overall participation to be 42 percent, one needs to assume that 70 to 75 percent of the eligible voters had voted elsewhere in the country. Facts on the ground in no way support this assumption.

### **The Opposition**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://bit.ly/34lBrVa>

It is vital to understand that there is a deep-rooted Resistance movement in Iran, which has remained steadfast in its opposition to the regime and its pursuit of the Iranian people's long-frustrated desire for freedom and democracy. In this respect, the situation in Iran is starkly different from other countries, which suffered instability after initial change.

Provided that regime change in Iran comes at the hands of the domestic population and the Resistance, the result would surely look nothing like countries like Iraq, where change came from outside forces. What's more, a domestic process of regime change is highly likely, because there is a political alternative in Iran, with deep roots in the country, a formidable structure, clear vision and a publicly declared program for the transitional period, and international recognition.

The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) is the longest-lasting coalition in the history of the Iranian people's struggle for democracy. It encompasses representatives of various political tendencies and ethnicities. The NCRI's platform advocates a free republic wherein people have the opportunity to elect their own representatives and the population enjoys gender equality, separation of religion and state, equality of all ethnicities, and freedom from nuclear proliferation<sup>3</sup>.

The People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI/MEK) is the backbone of this coalition and it maintains a strong and effective underground network in Iran, which is vital for bringing change to the country.

One of the best criteria to assess the Resistance's capability and effectiveness in Iran is the Iranian regime's attitude towards the organisation. Dictatorial regimes tend to violently suppress their opponents while also dismissing them as having no popular support or denying their very existence. Tehran has certainly attempted to apply this strategy to the MEK, but social realities have repeatedly forced the regime to acknowledge the threat posed by the group, despite a clear desire to avoid doing so.

Over the past 40 years, the regime has executed more than 100,000 MEK activists and has employed the most severe tactics in an effort to physically destroy the organisation. Moreover, the regime has adopted sophisticated and extensive disinformation campaigns and psychological warfare to diminish popular support for the movement inside Iran and tarnish its image internationally. Over the past two years alone, the regime has published several dozen books, produced dozens of movies and TV serials and set up hundreds of exhibitions across the country to counter growing support for the MEK.

Despite all of this, the Resistance remains more formidable than ever before. Over the past two years, it has expanded and reshaped its support into three different branches: the Resistance Units, Popular Council and the general network, which forms the bedrock social support of the organisation. And in response to growing support among a new generation, the MEK has reorganized its social network in Iran under the leadership of the MEK Social Headquarters.

This movement has demonstrated its resilience in the most difficult circumstances, which is yet another indication of its deep popular support and authenticity. Throughout the years, the movement has played a significant role in exposing the regime's meddling in the region, its terrorism and its secret nuclear program.

### **Regional Meddling and Terrorism in Europe**

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<sup>3</sup> [NCRI platform, plans and 10 point declaration of Maryam Rajavi](#)

As the world's only modern theocracy, the Islamic Republic's power has always been based on the dual pillars of internal suppression and the export of terrorism and reactionary religious beliefs. The latter was established as a feature of the state's strategy soon after the 1979 revolution, and it has been pursued at the regime's highest levels ever since. The ruling ayatollahs have actively sought to become the world's epicentre for political Islam and have explicitly described Iran as the 'mother' of the Islamic world.

The Iranian regime is probably the only state that has established organizations and institutions tasked with exporting and promoting Islamic fundamentalism in different forms. Chief among these is the Quds Force, the IRGC's foreign arm. This was established about 30 years ago with nine branches each targeting a country or specific region. The Quds Force has specific headquarters for various strategically significant countries including Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. It is now carrying out both overt and covert activities in these countries, while its commander reports directly to Supreme Leader Khamenei.

Major General Qassem Soleimani, the notorious commander of the IRGC Quds Force who was eliminated in January by the US, acted as the regime's leading figure after Khamenei and played a prominent role in the regime's malign activities both at home and abroad.

In recent years, the Quds Force played a significant role in all major conflicts and wars in the Middle East, notably in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon. In Syria, the mullahs dispatched up to 70,000 forces (Iranians and non-Iranian mercenaries) in support of Bashar Assad and provided him tens of billions of dollars in financial and material support at a time when he was routinely massacring his own people. In Yemen, the Quds Force has been the main source of support, training and logistics for Houthi rebels.

In Lebanon, Tehran's main arm has been the Lebanese Hezbollah, founded in 1982. It has played a unique role in the Iranian regime's terror apparatus and has been useful not only in exporting the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology but also in providing Iran with a convenient terrorist proxy through which to operate with impunity. All its affairs, including expenses and policies, are under the supervision of Khamenei's office. In a speech on June 24, 2014, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Lebanese Hezbollah acknowledged for the first time that Hezbollah receives all of its funds from the Iranian regime.

In Iraq, Tehran has established and sponsored a wide range of Shiite extremist bodies such as the Badr Organization, Katai'b Hezbollah, and Asa'ib Ahl- Haq.

### **Tehran's Post-JCPOA regional conduct**

While Tehran's apologists promoted the idea that the regime's regional conduct would alter following implementation of the nuclear agreement, the reality has been very different.

Tehran exploited the circumstances created by nuclear agreement to increase meddling in the region and intensify its ballistic missile activities. Its warmongering in Syria increased, as did its ethnic cleansing in Iraq and its destabilizing activities in Yemen. In December 2016, the IRGC carried out one of its greatest crimes, massacring civilians during a siege of Aleppo.

In June 2019, two oil tankers were bombed at the strait of Hormuz. Evidence showed that the IRGC's Navy was to blame. A British oil tanker was seized by Iranian forces in July 2019 and used in an effort to force the end of investigations into an Iranian ship caught illicitly taking oil to Syria.

On September 14, 2019, Iran attacked Saudi Aramco oil facilities using missiles and drones. The Prime Ministers of the UK and Germany and the President of France responded with a joint statement that squarely blamed Iran for the brazen attack.

In January 2020, despite all the economic hardships and significant shortcomings in addressing the basic needs of the public, Tehran allocated an extra 200 million euros to the Quds Force.

## **Tehran's terrorism in Europe**

Tehran's malign behaviour has directly targeted Europe as well. In recent years, Iranian diplomats in France, Albania, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Turkey have played a direct role in a number of terrorist acts and plots.

One case, which received global attention was the plot to bomb the major annual gathering of the National Council of Resistance of Iran in suburbs of Paris in June 2018, which was attended by tens of thousands of Iranian expats and hundreds of political dignitaries from the US, Canada, Europe, and Australia. A senior Iranian diplomat in Austria, Asadollah Assadi, was identified as the mastermind of the plot. He and three terrorists are now in prison in Belgium awaiting trial.

The EU imposed sanctions on two Iranian senior officials and a branch of the MOIS on January 8, 2019. This was both preceded and followed by the expulsion of Iranian diplomats from Albania. In December 2018 and again in January 2020, the Albanian government recognized multiple Iranian diplomats as being involved in terrorist plots targeting thousands of Iranian dissidents affiliated with the MEK.

## **Conclusion**

The situation in Iran has dramatically changed over the past few years and will never return to what it was prior to the 2018 uprising. Facing an increasingly discontented population and explicit demands for an end to theocratic rule, the regime has no claim to legitimacy. The situation is further complicated by a bankrupt economy, endemic corruption, escalating strife among clerical authorities and security forces, and a fundamental inability to provide solutions for any of the country's ongoing crises.

In the midst of all of this, an organised Resistance movement stands ready to step in as an interim government should the inevitable resumption of protests lead to the regime's collapse. And that outcome seems likely, because the regime is weaker and more vulnerable now than any time in the past. Moreover, forty-one years of state-driven plunder and devastation and the ensuing ills are endemic and have a contagion effect. They don't lend themselves to an easy antidote. In facing the sources of rebellion nationwide, the mullahs are helpless and at an impasse, constantly warning that another uprising, at a much greater and ferocious scale, lurks on the horizon.

Driven by hope for that regime's reform, Western countries have offered years of compromise and concessions, but these have failed to generate any returns. The regime has proved to be incapable of reform. All of its rogue policies remain intact, including its meddling in other countries' internal affairs, support for terrorism, proliferation of ballistic missiles and drive to obtain a nuclear weapon.

There is a simple reason for this. All of these policies are integral parts of the regime's strategy for maintaining its hold on power.

But that strategy has increasingly faced challenges from within Iranian society, and in the past two years a major breakthrough has occurred. The most deprived segments of society, the 'army of the hungry,' the 'army of unemployed youth' and the lower-middle class, rose up and became the engine for nationwide protests. In so doing, they shattered Western myths that portrayed these people as the regime's domestic power base.

To the extent that the middle class still exists in Iran, it had already expressed its discontent and disillusion with the regime and its desire for regime change during the 2009 uprising. Now, the regime is facing a serious challenge from the entire population, with a central force, the organised opposition, that has little or nothing to lose in confronting the regime. This is a nightmare for Tehran.

The people's slogans in all parts of the country targeted the entire regime rather than distinguishing between "reformists" and "hardliners." This too shattered Western myths, which had provided

justification for conciliatory policies in the form of the false notion that supporting the moderate faction could lead to systemic change in the theocratic system. The people of Iran have loudly rejected this idea.

It is, therefore, time for democratic governments around the world, including that of the United Kingdom, to shift their policies from standing with the regime to siding with the Iranian people in their aspirations for a pluralist, representative, and democratic republic. For far too long, Western governments have relied solely on their communication with the regime itself and have either neglected or ignored the voices of civilians and the Iranian Resistance.

Now it is time for a new approach. By setting policy in line with the Iranian people's explicit demands for regime change, the British government would not only be helping those people to attain democratic rule but would also be hastening the end of instability in the region, ushering peace and security throughout the world, and curtailing support for terrorism that has been levied against countless targets in the UK, Europe, and beyond.

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