

Written evidence submitted by Lord Lamont of Werwick (UKI0014)

This paper is a personal submission by myself and it does not present the views of anyone other than myself.

The main points of my paper are:-

- a) Relations between the UK/West and Iran are hugely influenced by the history of the Islamic Republic since 1979.
- b) There have been mistakes from both sides in the relationship. It is not the case that relations between Iran and the UK can never be improved and that Iran is inevitably an implacable enemy.
- c) Iran has its own security concerns and these should be acknowledged.
- d) Moderate politicians do exist within the Iranian political system but Western policy has done little to support them and usually undermines them.

MUST IRAN ALWAYS BE THE ENEMY OF THE WEST?

BY LORD LAMONT OF LERWICK

Merely to ask the question posed above may be to invite derision. The image of Iran in this country is by and large not a favourable one. Ask the average man or woman in the street and they will probably refer understandably to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the US Embassy siege, support for terrorism, “mad mullahs” and a theocracy.

These negative perceptions are of course not entirely undeserved. But in Iran if you asked the same question about the United States or the West, there would be many critical replies even from people opposed to the regime. They would refer to US support for Saddam Hussein in the Iran/Iraq war, Western indifference to Iraq’s use of chemical weapons, US support for terrorist groups like the MEK, the joint CIA/British coup against Prime Minister Mossadegh, and Western sanctions against Iran including medicines.

Much of the Western attitude to Iran stems from the memory of the Iranian revolution including the hostage crisis which colours US attitudes to this day. The Iranian revolution may have been hijacked by religious conservatives but not many people acknowledge that the revolution at the start was a genuinely popular one made up of different elements not just religious conservatives but also social democrats, liberals communists and secularists. In the constitution wrangling that followed the tensions and conflicts between the different elements became clear and the clergy cemented their grip on the institutions of the Islamic Republic.

Some commentators have speculated that if it had not been for the invasion of Iran by Iraq and the war that followed the internal politics of Iran might have developed differently. The 8 year long war which remains the defining episode in the history of the Islamic republic gave the regime the pretext and indeed the necessity to strengthen its grip.

Iran may be authoritarian, but it is not a totalitarian state, it is not North Korea and there are open political arguments and disputes. Much of the recent domestic history of the Islamic Republic has been one of a competition between conservative factions and more moderate elements, often referred to as “reformists”. Some analysts claim that the so called moderates or reformists are not really that moderate or that the reformists always lose and never get their hands on the real levers of power. But it is difficult to see why the conservative factions spend so much time harassing, threatening and denouncing reformists if they are not genuine and a real threat to the Conservatives. The 2009 disputed Presidential Election would not have caused such uproar if it was not felt that Elections did matter in Iran. Whenever a Reformist or Pragmatist has won the election for President they have reached out to the West. President Khatami (President 1997-2005) called for “a dialogue of civilisations”, supported the US invasion of Afghanistan and in 2003 offered a “grand bargain” whereby diplomatic relations with the US would be normalised and Iran would rein in the activities of Hezbollah. All President Khatami got for his trouble was for Iran to be labelled part of “the axis of evil”. The current President, President Rouhani, fought his first election on the platform of improving relations with the West and negotiating a nuclear deal. Had his opponent won the election there probably would have been no nuclear deal. Whenever more moderate politicians have occupied the Iranian Presidency it has seemed to coincide with a more hard-line approach in the West. President Rouhani maybe more accurately described as a pragmatist than a reformist, but he has been strongly supported by the reformists. Now as result of President Trump’s actions President Rouhani’s political popularity has been completely undermined, and other moderates who favoured engagement with the West also discredited. The next Iranian President to be elected next year is now almost bound to be a hard liner.

IRAN’S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

Iran’s nuclear programme was started by the Shah with Western support and encouragement. But one of the first actions of the new revolutionary Government was to cancel the nuclear programme. It was only in the late 80s towards the end of the Iran/Iraq war that a decision was taken to restart the programme and vital technology was bought from Pakistan. Iran has always denied that the purpose of the programme was anything other than peaceful and the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei issued a fatwa against nuclear weapons. Western Intelligence agencies did not believe Iran and suspicions were intensified after the discovery of clandestine enrichment facilities in 2003. This led to the imposition of further US and Western sanctions. However it is worth noting that the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), the co-ordinated judgement of all the US Intelligence Agencies, in a report on Iran’s nuclear programme in 2007 concluded “with a high degree of confidence” that Iran had discontinued any military nuclear programme and had had no nuclear weapons programme since 2003 though it noted Iran had an ongoing enrichment programme.

The subsequent nuclear deal (JCPOA) was agreed in Geneva in 2015. Iran was given significant sanctions relief in exchange for undertaking to limit both the quantity and type of centrifuges it operated, export much of its enriched uranium, close down the heavy water reactor at Arak. It also undertook to abide by the Additional Protocol which would give nuclear inspectors the right to make unscheduled visits to sites of interest. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) certified on more than a dozen occasions that Iran had fully complied with the requirements of the Agreement. Despite this, and opposition from his Secretary of Defence, President Trump decided to withdraw from the agreement. Among disarmament experts the Agreement was widely regarded as unprecedented and a big step forward in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. When President Trump decided to reimpose and tighten sanctions, Iran did not react by withdrawing from the Agreement but announced a series of incremental steps by which it would gradually disapply various provisions of the agreement. It was emphasised at each stage that every step was reversible, and that Iran could come back into full compliance if the other parties, including Europe, respected their obligations under the agreement.

IRAN'S ROLE IN THE REGION

This leads on to the key issue in Western eyes Iran's role in the region. Commentators frequently refer to the "malign influence of Iran in the region". Iran's power and influence are projected through its proxies such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Shia minorities in the Gulf and the Houthis in Yemen. These connections give Iran significant leverage in the region and merely to contemplate the threat they constitute is to understand precisely why Iran has cultivated them.

Iranian policy today is less about ideology or exporting its revolution than about its own national interest and its own security concerns. No one can understand Iranian foreign policy without taking into account the Iran/Iraq war which lasted longer than the first World War and although no one knows the precise number of Iranian deaths, they were certainly larger, maybe much larger, than the number of British lives lost in the Second World War. The latter ended 75 years ago, the Iran/Iraq war only 32 years ago. The Second World War still defines part of our national identity. So we should hardly be surprised that the Iranians remember equally vividly the unprovoked invasion by Iraq, are determined that the experience should never be repeated and that if there is another war, it will be fought outside their own borders.

A few years ago a former Iranian Foreign Minister remarked to me that Iran's main foreign policy fear was still Iraq. That surprised me, but the observation was made before the arrival of Daesh or ISIS who had they got control of Baghdad or large parts of Iraq would have been a very real imminent threat to Iran. Iran regards itself, through the actions of the assassinated General Soleimani as having saved Iraq from Daesh but having received little acknowledgement of this from the international community.

For similar reasons Iran fights in Syria, for its own security. Were a fundamentalist Sunni Government, or one linked to Daesh or Al Qaeda established in Syria that would bring the threat nearer to Iran. Syria was apart from Oman, Iran's only Arab ally in the Iran/Iraq war.

Critics of Iran see its policy as expansionist but others see it as a policy designed to have strategic depth and provide asymmetric defence and deterrence. This was once graphically expressed by Ali Larijani, the speaker of the Iranian Parliament, who said that if Iran was attacked by the United States they should "expect Israel in a wheelchair". If Iran were attacked, the allies of the United States would pay a price. Supporting Hezbollah on the borders of Israel is indeed a potential deterrent to any American military action against Iran.

Iran's use of proxies is also cost effective and compensates for the gaps in Iran's armed forces. Iran spends less on defence than either Saudi or the UAE. General Petraeus once remarked that the UAE air force could wipe out Iran's in a morning. Iran has a weak air force and cannot buy aircraft because of arms embargoes. The West sells huge amounts of arms to the Gulf states, which Iran cannot match, and then wonders why Iran is keen to develop missiles. Iran of course did suffer severely from missile attacks during the Iran/Iraq war.

We hear a lot from the Sunni Gulf States about the Shia crescent. To the Iranians this fear of encirclement must sound rather hollow, since they could point to the presence of the United States on all sides of their country. If there is a Shia crescent parts of it are countries that have become closer to Iran, not as a result of Iran's own actions, but as a result of American policy which conveniently for Iran removed their two greatest enemies Saddam Hussein and the Taliban.

Iran does have close connections with its co-religionists the Shia minorities throughout the region and that no doubt gives the Islamic republic leverage. These ties can be familial and in some cases go back decades or even centuries. But it also needs acknowledging that in many parts of the Middle East the Shia have been treated as second class citizens and have become more open to Iranian influence. During the Arab Spring when there was Shia unrest in several Gulf state the US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said that the Gulf States should stop just blaming Iran and address Shia grievances themselves.

In so far as Iran's relations with its Gulf neighbours reflect Sunni/Shia rivalry it is worth noting that there is plenty of Sunni antagonism from certain Gulf States towards the Shia of the region and satellite broadcasts incite hatred and murder of Shia communities. Saudi clergy have been known to describe the Shia as not Muslims.

It is worth noting that Iran's problems with its neighbours are largely with its Arab Gulf neighbours. To its north Iran's relations with Armenia, a Christian country, Azerbaijan Shia but also secular, Pakistan, a Sunni country and the Stans of Central Asia are much less volatile and relatively stable.

IRAN AND ISRAEL

A major obstacle to improving relations between the West and Iran is Iranian hostility to Israel often expressed in hateful rhetoric and notoriously Iran supports Hezbollah and Hamas. The reasons for this are also discussed above. In the long run enmity between the two countries may not be any more inevitable than it once appeared was the case between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Both countries are non-Arab countries in an Arab region. In the Iran/Iraq war Israel supplied weapons to Iran although Iranian anti-Israel rhetoric was much the same then as now.

If there were to be a settlement of the Palestinian issue that would undercut Iran's ability to project itself to the Arab street as the strongest champion of the Palestinian cause. For this reason Iran may have an interest in the issue remaining unresolved. President Khatami was once asked if Iran would accept a solution to the Palestinian issue that was approved by the Palestinians and he replied, "How could I be more Catholic than the Pope?".

Despite its hostile stance towards Israel Iran still has a small Jewish community, there are synagogues in Tehran and Isfahan, as well as a Jewish hospital in Tehran and a war memorial to Jews who fought in the Iran/Iraq war. There is also a seat reserved for a Jewish Member in the Iranian Parliament.

At the time of the JCPOA, when Iran/US relations were warming, Iran showed itself sensitive to the US/Israel close relationship. During his first visit to New York, President Rouhani went out of his way to remind audiences of the Jewish minority in Iran and he also expressed his best wishes for the New Year to Jewish people "all around the world".

IRANS ECONOMIC RELATIONS WITH THE UK AND EUROPE

After the US withdrawal from the JCPOA the US imposed far reaching sanctions on Iran and President Trump stated that it was his administration's goal to reduce Iran's exports of oil to zero. To the Iranians, whose main source of revenue for financing Government is oil, this must have seemed close to a declaration of war, indeed that was the word Iranians themselves used. Europe did not agree with the US and thought the JCPOA was worth saving. Nevertheless, the effects of US sanctions were not just to prevent US trade with Iran but also effectively to massively reduce Europe's as well. Trade cannot take place without trade finance. European banks, many of whom have US operations or deal in US dollars, were and still are concerned about the impact of US sanctions on their own business. European banks largely refuse to finance business with Iran, even including humanitarian goods such as medicines. This has hit Iran extremely hard during the Covid-19 crisis. The US insists that it allows humanitarian trade but that conflicts with the experience of many businesses. Europe has tried to devise mechanisms to protect trade from US sanctions and set up INSTEX for that purpose. To date, after several years of trying, INSTEX has done one small transaction.

The Iranians are of course keen that Europe maintains a separate policy from the US but regard European efforts to maintain trade as ineffective and in their lack of action a breach of the JCPOA.

HAS US POLICY TOWARDS IRAN BEEN SUCCESSFUL?

The US and Iran have maintained a hostile policy towards each other for 40 years. No doubt there have been mistakes and faults on both sides. Many Western observers of Iran have been predicting the imminent collapse of the Islamic Republic. It is certainly under huge pressure now with unprecedented sanctions, the collapse of the oil price and Covid-19. But like it or not Iran has shown a remarkable durability and resilience through very difficult periods, in spite of the pressure of war and past sanctions. Today the US says it is not pursuing regime change but Washington hawks simultaneously talk of a campaign of “maximum pressure” which some interpret as avoiding the phrase while pursuing the same end. After 40 years of this policy always backfiring it is perhaps time to think again and see whether a policy of more constructive engagement could yield better results. Iran is not the same country it was in 1979. The revolutionaries have grown old and have a country to run. Soon the last revolutionaries will pass on and there will be a new leadership who have no memory of the revolution.

Iran has many faults and there is much to object to not least in terms of human rights which are appalling and have not improved in the last 40 years. But Iran may have the capacity to change. This is a stable country which, however one chooses to describe it, has a constitution with a more participatory form of Government than most of its regional neighbours. Public opinion does matter. It is the heir to the first democratic revolution in the Islamic world, the revolution of 1906, an event to which President Rouhani often refers. Had the JCPOA been kept in place and had Iran been allowed to develop greater commercial ties through trade and investment with the West this potentially could also have resulted in gradually improving political relations as both sides discovered shared interests.

The fact that we do not approve of a country’s regime or some of its actions does not mean that we should not attempt to cooperate on areas of genuine common interest, and seek to avoid armed conflict. There are areas where there are common interests:-

- 1) Fighting narcotics. The UK used to have a programme with the Metropolitan police for assisting the Iranian Government fight narcotics smuggling on the Afghan border. This was discontinued a few years ago.
- 2) Anti-piracy patrols. Iran suffers from piracy in the Gulf and in the Indian Ocean, but it does not participate in any of the international joint patrols in the area.
- 3) Fighting Daesh and Al Qaeda. Sunni terrorist Groups are active in areas like Iranian Baluchistan.

- 4) Anti-nuclear proliferation. The JCPOA is not quite dead yet and could be revived under a new US administration. It certainly needs to be, this is a problem that will not go away.
- 5) Trade and economic cooperation. The Iranian market is the largest in the Gulf area. There is a hunger for Western goods and technology, rather than Asian or Russian, but the market is under served.
- 6) Fighting Covid-19. The Iranian Government has appealed for assistance in fighting the virus and President Rouhani has said that Iran will accept help from any quarter. The UK, France and Germany have given a modest joint package of assistance.

British policy in the Gulf is very much geared towards the interest of the Gulf monarchies with whom we have close commercial, and military relations including arms sales. But is our policy balanced between the two sides of the Gulf ?

Bismarck once remarked about Germany that it was too large for Europe and not large enough for the world. A similar problem exists with Iran which is too big to be ignored in the Gulf but the smaller Sunni monarchies are fearful of its influence and power. But Iran too has its security concerns as a non-Arab Shia country. In the long run there needs to be some security architecture in the Gulf that addresses the concerns of both sides. Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif has often made the argument for creating something similar to the OSCE for the region and Iran has offered to open talks with Saudi Arabia. We urgently need some diplomatic process to start as a way of deescalating the present highly dangerous situation.

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