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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 the War Studies department of King's College London with a project on the negotiations between the UK, France and Germany on the Iranian nuclear dossier.
3. I provide regular briefings to stakeholders looking at Iran, including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, State Department, Pentagon, 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. This has jeopardised the UK counterproliferation goals when it comes to Iran, but also intensified the chances of conflict and led Iran to adopt a more aggressive policy in the Middle East, the unintended consequence being an increased risk posed to UK troops, citizens or interests in the region.
7. Seeking effective ways to maximise its influence on Iran will be crucial, albeit challenging for the UK moving forward. While the priority should be to continue playing its traditional bridge-building role between the EU and US, the UK should also invest on ways to affect Iran's behaviour that do not entail an alignment to the US maximum pressure campaign, which would not achieve the intended goals.
8. Instead, by relying on its limited but effective tools at its disposal, the UK could provide an off-ramp to growing tensions in the Middle East, while also reducing the threat to the UK's security.

The UK's goal and strategy vis-à-vis Iran

9. For nearly two decades, the UK has maintained three [main strategic objectives](#) when it comes to Iran: preventing the weaponisation of its nuclear programme, reducing the country's disruptive activities in the Middle East and avoiding a military confrontation which would jeopardise political stability in the region and put at risk UK interests, facilities and personnel.
10. Since 2003, when the Iranian nuclear crisis first emerged, the UK has consistently tried to achieve these goals without having to choose between the EU and the US. Britain

maximised its leverage by playing its traditional role as a bridge between Europe and the US, often helping to find a middle ground between the two sides, one opting for dialogue and the other one pushing for containing and isolating Iran.

11. This approach had the most success in the nuclear file, which eventually led to the shaping of effective transatlantic coordination on Iran and a joint policy coupling dialogue (advocated by the European states) with pressure through the adoption of sanctions (in line with US preferences).
12. 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 deal enabled the UK to meet two of its core objectives vis-à-vis Tehran: preventing Iran from developing or acquiring nuclear weapons and avoiding the eruption of conflict in the Middle East. The UK achieved these goals without having to choose between Europe or the US, but in fact, working closely with both. The aim was to then build on the JCPOA to address the third and final outstanding objective when it comes to Iran: reducing its disrupting behaviour in the region.

At odds with the *maximum pressure* campaign

13. With the election of US President Donald Trump in 2017, however, Europe found itself critically at odds with the American policy on Iran for the first time in more than a decade and the UK has since faced significant challenges in achieving its intended goals.
14. The new President soon manifested its criticism towards the JCPOA, a deal that he [perceived as seriously flawed](#).
15. Between January and May 2018, the UK, France and Germany (the so-called E3), tried, in coordination with the State Department, to address the concerns raised by President Trump regarding the JCPOA (the fact that it does not include Iran's ballistic missiles and that its restrictions are due to expire, together with the terms under which inspections can take place in Iranian nuclear sites). Even according to the US, the E3 [made a lot of progress](#).
16. 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 strategy entailed the reintroduction of nuclear-related sanctions and the implementation of new ones to squeeze the Iranian economy and push Tehran to either negotiate a new deal or face the prospects of economic collapse.
17. The US has tried to [convince the UK](#) and the [other European countries](#) to embark in the same policy. Instead, the UK, together with the other E3 countries and the EU High Representative, expressed its [regret and concern](#) over President Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and emphasised the country's continuing commitment to it. The UK still considers the agreement as [vital for \[the UK\] national security and the shared security of \[its\] partners and allies](#)'.
18. Since May 2018, the UK has thus closely coordinated with its European partners to keep the JCPOA alive and convince Iran to remain a party to the deal, despite 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.
19. 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. Despite all the steps taken by the UK in conjunction with France, Germany and the EU, because of US sanctions, as of May 2019 Tehran has no longer been able to sell its oil or to access the global financial system. As a consequence, one year after the withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA, [Iran decided to scale back its compliance](#) with the deal, eventually leading the E3 to [trigger the dispute resolution mechanism](#).
21. The fact that the JCPOA is hanging by a thread, as a result of the US policy, poses a significant proliferation and arms control threat to the UK undermines one of the country's main strategic objectives when it comes to Iran.

The impact of US-Iran tensions for Britain's security

22. Over the past year, because of the maximum pressure campaign, US-Iran tensions in the Middle East also significantly escalated, leading to several incidents in the region and drastically increasing the chances of a military confrontation.
23. In the Strait of Hormuz, [the two countries shot each other's drones](#), Iran has been blamed by the US for [attacking oil tankers in the Gulf](#) and, more recently, the US Navy accused vessels of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy of carrying out ["dangerous and harassing approaches"](#). More broadly in the region, Tehran has been blamed -not just by the US but also by the E3 – of being responsible for a drone and missile strike on Saudi Aramco facilities in Abqaiq. Furthermore, [US forces and Iran-backed militia clashed in Iraq](#) several times, with tensions ultimately culminating in the [US killing of Qassem Soleimani](#), the notorious commander of Iran's Qods Forces, and the Iran-led retaliations to avenge the assassinations.
24. As a result of US–Iran tensions, the threat to the UK's security in the region has significantly increased over the past year, leading to its interests and personnel being directly targeted.
25. In July 2019, Iran forces [seized the Stena Impero](#), a British-flagged oil tanker, in the Strait of Hormuz. This appeared to be a retaliation to the fact that, days earlier, the 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 labelled the UK's conduct as piracy, accused the UK of acting as a US proxy, and vowed to retaliate., for the detention of the Iranian tanker, which it did. More recently, in March 2020, a [British soldier has been killed](#) in a rocket attack conducted by Iran-backed militia against the US and coalition forces at Camp Taji in Iraq.
26. Iran has also viewed some of the statements and steps taken by the UK as a sign that the country has been gradually aligning its policy with the US maximum pressure campaign.
27. The main concern in that sense has been raised by the statements of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who, in September 2019 and in January 2020, 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, the statements have been viewed by Tehran as a strong signal that the UK was breaking ranks with the E3 and fully aligning with the US.
28. Another move that has been interpreted in this way by Iran has been the decision, taken in August 2019, after the change in UK government, [to join the US' maritime security mission](#) in the Gulf.
29. While British officials stressed that there was no change to London's policy on Iran, the move also came as a surprise to EU capitals. Despite also being keen to ensure safe shipping and deterring further threats posed by Tehran in the Strait of Hormuz,

European states believed that a European-led initiative, in line with what [announced by the previous UK government](#), would better serve the UK and Europe's interests.

30. Eight months since the UK announced its decision, no other EU country has joined the US-led naval mission and, in fact, in January 2020, eight [European states, led by France, announced their own maritime initiative](#), aimed at addressing insecurity in the Strait of Hormouz, without, however, risking further tensions with Tehran. The fact that the UK is not among this group of European countries, but, instead, belongs to the US-led naval mission, means that it might be viewed as more of a target by Tehran moving forward. This is especially the case in a situation in which Iran is still seeking ways to avenge the killing of Soleimani.
31. Maximum pressure, therefore, has ultimately resulted not only in the hampering of the UK's counterproliferation goals when it comes to Iran; it has also increased the chances of military confrontation, engendered an intensification of Tehran's aggressive behaviour in the region, and, ultimately, increased the threat posed to British interests, citizens and personnel in the Middle East.

Moving forward – How to Maximise influence on Iran's behaviour

32. Because of the strategic alliance between Britain and the US, and in light of Brexit, some within the UK government might be tempted to fully align the country's policy to the US maximum pressure campaign, thinking that this would increase the chances of achieving Britain's strategic objectives on Iran.
33. However, maximum pressure so far only managed to undermine all Britain's strategic goals when it comes to Iran, while also unintentionally dragging the country into a vicious cycle of escalation and deterrence.
34. Given that a joint transatlantic policy, in line with what carried out in the past, presents the best chances of finding a peaceful solution to the crisis, the preferred strategy should be for the UK to try and play its [historical role of mediator between the EU and the US](#), in order to affect Washington's posture on Iran policy. This approach may become more promising if a change of guard takes place in the White House after the November 2020 presidential elections.
35. In particular, the UK should strive to convince the US that, without incentives or a face-saving exit strategy, Iran is unlikely to cave in to pressure, agree to negotiate or collapse economically. Instead, the risk of weaponisation of Iran's nuclear programme, as well as of a military confrontation in the region is likely to increase, with direct consequences for the UK. Britain should thus invest on guide the US towards an off-ramp, with the provision of incentives (such as sanction relief or the establishment of a credit line, similar to what offered under the [Macron plan](#)) for Iran to change its behaviour.
36. In the meantime, the UK should also seek alternative ways to affect Iran's behaviour, without aligning itself with the US maximum pressure campaign in order to avoid the direct or indirect targeting of its interests and personnel in the region.
37. This means using wisely the limited but effective tools at its disposal, such as its membership at the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN Security Council.
38. It also means using its diplomatic ties with Tehran to continue to '[encourage \[Iran\] to de-escalate, and seek a path to an alternative future through diplomatic dialogue](#)'. Without investing in such diplomatic ties, incidents such as those seen in the Strait of Hormuz or in Iraq could have much higher chances to trigger a military confrontation, as showcased by tensions between Iran and the US.

39. The UK is also uniquely positioned when it comes to historic links to actors in the region, particularly Oman and the UAE, and it should thus, through them, explore ways to incentivise Tehran to de-escalate tensions.
40. Finally, but most importantly, the UK should maintain its close coordination with its European partners, France and Germany in particular, given they continue to share the UK's concerns and approach towards Iran. 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 the UK's involvement and influence in EU foreign policy.
41. Coordination with its European partners is also important for the UK if it wants to uphold 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'](#).
42. On the nuclear front, this means the UK should continue stressing its commitments to the JCPOA and refrain from statements that indicate a potential shift in such position. Given that ensuring the survival of the JCPOA is perceived by the UK as vital for its security, negotiations on new or additional deals should take place while investing on the survival of the existing one.
43. On the regional front, the UK should 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.
44. More generally, the UK should reconsider the opportunities and risks associating with aligning itself to the US. While this has long been perceived as the best way to [guarantee the UK's national security](#), with Iran, during the maximum pressure campaign, this has not been the case. On the contrary, military cooperation with the US has drastically amplified the risk of UK troops, citizens or interests becoming the explicit targets of Iran's destabilising activities in the region.
45. The UK should thus revisit its position on the naval mission and explore the possibility of joining the European-led initiative while coordinating with the US and pursuing the same intended goals. In the long run, the UK should, on the other hand, [invest in its defence and security and find ways to increase its capability for action without the US](#).

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