

# Downgrading Iranian-British Relations: The Anatomy of a Folly

Written by Maysam Behravesht

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/01/23/downgrading-iranian-british-relations-the-anatomy-of-a-folly/>

MAYSAM BEHRAVESH, JAN 23 2012

Iran trudged into 2012 under unsettling circumstances. Severe international sanctions have already been taking their toll on its economy while a combination of sabotage activities, targeted killings, and other covert operations against Iranian military initiatives and figures are bedeviling its national security. The controversy surrounding Iran's nuclear programme has never been so fierce in the international community since its disclosure in August 2002, and pertinently enough, the spectre of war has never hovered so closely over the country since the end of cataclysmic Iran-Iraq conflict in 1988.

In the domestic sphere, a parliamentary poll of tremendous security implications is ahead while our national solidarity has arguably plummeted to perturbing levels over the past couple of years. These setbacks keep plaguing Iran against a backdrop of deepening external isolation, which stands as a formidable impediment to resolving its foreign tensions through dialogue and diplomacy. Smelling of war, 2012 or perhaps 2013 may indeed prove to be our generational *annus horribilis* to all intents and purposes, but should it be so, it will be primarily due to a fundamental *interaction deficit* that does well to give rise to a variety of "phobias," ranging from Iranophobia to Anglophobia. This is perhaps the most significant context within which the November 2011 lowering of diplomatic ties between the Islamic Republic and the United Kingdom can be seen. It was not the first time, however, Iranian-British relations underwent a systematic fissure since the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The first rupture transpired in 1980 when Britain under the new Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher closed its Tehran embassy following a number of significant unsavoury incidents. The American hostage crisis of November 1979 had already acquired an international dimension after collective efforts by the democrat administration of Jimmy Carter and its Western allies failed to see the release of captive US diplomats, forcing Washington to formally sever all its diplomatic relations with Tehran in April 1980. Around the same time, Iranian embassy in South Kensington, London, was forcefully occupied by a group of six anti-Islamic Republic pan-Arabist gunmen – identifying themselves with the Democratic Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of Arabistan (DRFLA) – who kidnapped its working staff and demanded Tehran to proclaim the independence of Khuzestan, a mostly Arab-populated province in south Iran, and free scores of Arab prisoners there. The siege, which finally ended violently through the intervention of British Special Air Service (SAS) and left some of the hostages dead, was interpreted by many on the Iranian side as a British plot to force Tehran to release the American diplomats. The perception that the Iranian embassy affair in London was in fact a Carter-Thatcher conspiracy executed by Iraqi hands soon prevailed. Detention of Iranian students demonstrating before the US embassy in London followed by the arrest of British missionaries in Iran and the growing threats to "blow up" the UK embassy were the final straws that induced Britain to shut its embassy in Tehran in August 1980. Bilateral relations were formally reduced to the level of holding an interests section in each capital a month later, in September 1980.

The second diplomatic cleft came after the late Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a religious decree (*fatwa*) in February 1989 against Salman Rushdie – a British author born to a Muslim family in India – for the authorship of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a novel that was construed by many Islamic authorities, not least the Iranian revolutionary leaders, as a grave affront to the Quran, Prophet Mohammad, and Islam on the whole, hence blasphemous. The decree demanded Muslims to execute Rushdie and the publishers of his novel "wherever

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they find them.”<sup>[i]</sup> Issuance of death sentence on a foreign citizen in absentia for blasphemy against Islam had great impacts on Iran’s foreign relations since the *fatwa* was interpreted as a radical attempt to “extend Islamic law into a predominantly non-Muslim country, Britain” which meant the breach of its national sovereignty and could entail destabilizing normative as well as security implications.<sup>[ii]</sup> With the decree thus meant to have a global reach and infringing the West’s moral boundaries, the 12 European Community member states joined Britain in summoning their ambassadors, when the Thatcher government withdrew its entire diplomatic mission from Tehran on 20 February 1989. In reaction, Iran also summoned all its diplomats from EC capitals the next day. Taking advantage of the re-radicalized ambience, the Iranian radicals moved to entirely sever Iran’s relations with the UK on 7 March 1989, seizing the initiative to consolidate their factional position within the IRI political establishment.

Fast forward to the present time, now after more than two decades, the political dynamics have substantially changed home and abroad. Arguably, revolutionary radicalism does not enjoy the same degree of popularity among Iranians as it did in 1979, nor does the international community recognize and tolerate the Islamic Republic as a nascent “revolutionary” state yet to learn to respect the established norms of inter-state behaviour, nor is it a chief source of inspiration for the Muslim nations around the globe any longer. Today, it can hardly be denied that the international atmosphere has been polarized against Iran, thanks largely to the latter’s insistence upon developing its nuclear programme in the face of stiff external opposition, not to mention its troubling human rights record. It is not 1979, nor is it 1989. Today, follies of judgment and action entail much graver consequences, to add another caveat.

## The British Embassy Takeover in Tehran

For many observers, the storming of British embassy and residential compound in Tehran by a crowd of Iranian protesters on 29 November 2011 was reminiscent of the US embassy seizure by a group of revolutionaries, who called themselves “Students Following the Line of Imam” Khomeini, on 4 November 1979. The UK legation takeover came on the heels of a majority vote in the Iranian parliament to reduce diplomatic relations with Britain to the level of charge d’affaires. Having been prompted by the purported UK involvement in the 2009 post-election protests across Iran and gathered steam over the past two and a half years, the policy was finally endorsed more specifically in retaliation for fresh sanctions levied against Tehran by London over the former’s nuclear programme.

Despite attempts inside Iran to frame the incident as a popular sequel to the 1979 occupation of the so-called “den of espionage”<sup>[iii]</sup> – which was played out more or less spontaneously by a group of impassioned revolutionary youth largely independent of the state – the move was widely seen as a premeditated action orchestrated by the top echelons of IRI leadership, and more precisely, as part of a power struggle between the dominant conservative factions within the Iranian political establishment. The unanimity and rapidity with which the international community, including Singapore, Vietnam, China and Russia – of which the last two share most of Iran’s anti-Western attitudes – condemned the raid<sup>[iv]</sup> could leave little room to contest the fact that the Islamic Republic as a state actor has long since earned a reputation for violating broadly recognized norms of international conduct, a reputation that has been steadily reinforced by repeated flauntings of intransigence on the Iranian part.

Events like this leave a lasting imprint on the global public opinion, particularly when they are viewed in a larger context of recalcitrance, which in turn makes them look more as part of a systematic pattern of behaviour demonstrated by a state actor. They go a long way towards tarnishing national identity, involve a massive normative and reputational price, and finally work to exert a profound alienating effect upon the nation-state relationship. Then one should not be surprised to see that most of the Iranian nationals applying for foreign visas usually take great pains to dissociate themselves from the government or hide their state-related work records that might carry political implications. Thanks to the recurrence of these aberrations, the already powerful sense of the Islamic Republic as an “outlaw” state has gained a firmer foothold on the international arena, but also rendered a “given” in many policy-making circles. Such an image can prove very dangerous at a time when the radical rhetoric of military confrontation with Iran – over its nuclear programme – is gathering momentum and the drumbeats of war are sounding more and more strongly day after day.

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## Geopolitical Implications of Reduced Relations

As indicated, the *Majlis* decision to lower Iran's diplomatic relations with Britain was specifically adopted in response to the British government's move on 21 November to prohibit all UK credit and financial institutions from doing transactions with Iranian banks including the Central Bank of Iran (CBI). Citing "international evidence" of Iran's banking system helping to fund its "weaponized" nuclear programme, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne underscored that "we're doing this to improve the security not just of the whole world, but the national security of the United Kingdom."<sup>[v]</sup> Yet, the all-out boycott, immature and thus astounding as it was, appeared a reckless and rash display of allegiance to the US, which designated CBI a hub of "primary money-laundering concern"<sup>[vi]</sup> almost simultaneously but stopped short, more significantly, of sanctioning it out of fears that the embargo may send global oil prices skyrocketing. While highlighting the pre-eminent position of the special relationship with Washington in Britain's foreign policy, the unilateral measure, however, demonstrated more than anything else the still powerful propensity of a Tory-ruled Britain to keep punching above its weight on the world stage. After all, London could wait to introduce the financial penalty in concert with other European powers, including Germany and France, or at least after the US had taken the lead in proscribing transactions with Iran's central bank, which acts as the foremost conduit for its oil revenues. It might be safe to argue that a Labour government would have not chosen to act so radically.

If one visualizes a key international triangle of alliance against the Islamic Republic as comprising Israel, the United States, and the United Kingdom, the UK is the only member of the trio which has a diplomatic mission in Iran, hence direct access to the Iranian corridors of power and centres of decision-making. Although heightened tensions between London and Tehran over the past years have substantially limited the former's powers of persuasion inside the latter or its chances of exerting influence with Iranian leaders, the reduction of bilateral relations will largely deprive Britain of a strategic competitive advantage in terms of sharing intelligence, launching mediation initiatives, and facilitating multilateral engagement.

The development will also undermine its decisive diplomatic edge at the European Union as far as the IRI and the international concerns about its strategic ambitions are concerned. Coupled with the rift developed between Britain on the one hand and other EU member states on the other over managing the eurozone crisis – which has virtually thrown it into a "splendid" isolation in the 27-nation bloc – as well as the prospect of Scottish independence looming large on the horizon,<sup>[vii]</sup> this can severely diminish its standing and influence within the Union, now that the question of the Islamic Republic has occupied centre stage in global politics. With the closure of British embassy in and the expulsion of UK ambassador to Iran, now London's European rivals, Paris and Berlin – both of which have active missions in the country – will be in a comparatively stronger position to lead political efforts and thus further their national preferences when it comes to dealing with Tehran. Finally, deterioration of Iranian-British relations can blight the prospects of overcoming the armed insurgency in Afghanistan while also complicating the problem of growing narcotics trade in Central and South Asia as well as their shipment to European destinations via Iran and its northern neighbours.

These said, the consequences of lowering bilateral ties are much graver for the Islamic Republic. As a skillful diplomacy heavyweight in Europe, Britain has often acted as Iran's primary channel of communication with the European Union, a role neither France nor Germany have the diplomatic capacity or the political will to fill. The experience of past years clearly illustrates that whenever IRI's relations with the UK have turned sour, its ties with the EU have taken a corresponding turn. In a similar vein, a friendly Britain on good terms with Iran has not only helped to streamline the latter's engagement with the EU, but also endeavoured to moderate radical policies pursued against Iran on the other side of the Atlantic and thus avert crises of potentially big proportions. Such a *modus vivendi* manifested itself most remarkably during the reform era in the Islamic Republic (1997-2005), when Tehran-London ties experienced an unprecedented degree of thaw by virtue, in important part, of the commitment Iranian Reformists and British Labourites demonstrated to détente and dialogue.

Disruption of communication or total lack thereof usually harms the weaker side more seriously. The immediate

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fallout of the diplomatic collision was a change of mind on the part of Britain to throw its weight behind the growing calls in Europe for banning oil imports from Iran[viii]. A moratorium on the purchase of around 450,000 barrels of oil – which Iran exports to its EU customers per day – or about 18 percent of its total petroleum exports can pose an insidious threat to the Iranian economy in the long-run, particularly given the government's massive budget deficit and the mounting instability of economic situation inside the country. Further friction with the West will also deepen Iran's isolation and inevitably push it towards heavier reliance upon two of the most unreliable but powerful international actors, China and Russia. But even then, it will hardly be "business as usual" for Tehran, since both Beijing and Moscow will raise their bids for the scarce cooperation they may consent to offer, as they have invariably done. This means that having been left with no viable option than dedication to an uneven marriage of convenience and forced to put all its eggs in one shaky basket, the IRI will pay a much higher price for what it gets, as it has been doing over the past years. Such practices, needless to say, are systematically detrimental to our national interests.

Yet, as indicated, the most significant corollary of the diplomatic crisis in Iranian-British ties concerns the cataclysmic impact it can exert upon the likelihood of military confrontation with Iran. It is a gross miscalculation on the part of Iranian politicians and policy-makers to suppose that occupation of the UK embassy or reduction of relations with the country will "teach it a good lesson," "awaken it to its mistakes," or prompt it to "revise its hostile approach" to Iran. On the contrary, with Washington and Tel Aviv hell-bent on halting Tehran's nuclear programme, Britain will undoubtedly press ahead more adamantly with its opposition to the Islamic Republic, now that it has much less motivation to restrain itself. One needs to understand that in the absence of effective communication, adversaries often gravitate towards developing worst-case perceptions about each other's intentions, which in the case of Iran means all sides involved are drawing, willy-nilly, closer to military conflict and all-out war.

The whole game is a systematic folly for which the entire Iranian nation will pay the price and of which it is the ultimate victim.

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## Notes

[i]. Ruhollah M. Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Imam* [Collection of Imam's Guidelines], vol. 21 (Tehran: Moassese-ye Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Emam Khomeini [The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works], 1385/2006), 263.

[ii]. Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 164.

[iii]. For further details, see the comments made by various Iranian officials and lawmakers including Seyyed Amir Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, principle-ist MP (<http://www.jamnews.ir/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=34327>), Mahmoud Ahmadi Bighash, member of the parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee (<http://vaghayeostan.com/news.asp?751>), Hamid Rasayi, senior member of the Islamic Revolution Fraction in the Iranian parliament (<http://www.rahesabz.net/story/45638/>), Mohammad Kazem Anbarlouyi, editor-in-chief of the conservative Iranian daily *Resalat* (<http://www.jamejamonline.ir/newstext.aspx?newsnum=100860694435>), Hassan Abbasi, the head of Iran's Doctrinal Centre for Borderless Security (<http://rajanews.com/detail.asp?id=109432>), and Mortaza Talayi, member of the Islamic City Council of Tehran (<http://www.jamejamonline.ir/newstext.aspx?newsnum=100860699542>).

[iv]. "US Condemns Attack on British Embassy in Iran," *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jXjYelBsssAMTMgQswFLU-itGggg?docId=CNG.0dcde1b95866b8ef9801a20c81c023f9.231> (accessed November 29, 2011).

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[v]. "UK Severs Ties with Iranian Banks," *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-15823622> (accessed November 22, 2011).

[vi]. Kay Solomon and Alistair MacDonald, "US Will Take Further Steps to Isolate Iran," *The Wall Street Journal*, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204443404577051061458557058.html> (accessed November 21, 2011).

[vii]. Philip Stephens, "Was This the Moment UK Stumbled Out of Europe?," *Financial Times*, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ef3c98b4-24b6-11e1-ac4b-00144feabdc0.html#ixzz1gQ8sWshC> (accessed December 13, 2011).

[viii]. "Hemayat-e Britania az Tahrim-e Nafti-ye Iran [Britain's Support for Oil Embargo on Iran]," *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC), Persian Service, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/11/111130\\_II\\_britain\\_iran\\_oil.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/11/111130_II_britain_iran_oil.shtml) (accessed November 30, 2011).

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## About the author:

Maysam Behravesch is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at Lund University, Sweden. His doctoral thesis investigates the impact of identity motives and emotive drives on the nuclear behavior of states with revisionist tendencies, deploying ontological security theory and narrative methodology for the purpose. He served as the Editorial Assistant of the quarterly *Cooperation and Conflict* for three years from 2013 to 2016 and is currently a Research Fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University.