

The Iran Question: A British Perspective

Written by Peter Temple-Morris

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PETER TEMPLE-MORRIS, MAY 9 2011

What to do with Iran or more appropriately what should Iran do with itself? How have we got ourselves into this situation? A beautiful, civilised, and hospitable country containing one of the nicer peoples on earth, and with a distinguished history to boast, becomes one of the world's most rejected nations ruled by those with standards and practices more suitable to the middle ages than the 21st Century.

The West, having played its part in creating this situation, looks on aghast as Iran heads for Nuclear Power status and the Middle East for an even more uncertain future as a result. American leadership is uncertain because of its all too close connections with the State of Israel whereas China, Russia, and other nations are all too quick to exploit Iran in the absence of the US and her more loyal allies. Add to this a clerical and dogmatic leadership, belonging to a different age, who are basically selling the country off to keep their supporters on side, with those supporters taking whatever personal benefit they can out of such a situation, and one begins to appreciate the depth of this sad state of affairs. This includes the fact that those in charge are in the main not going anywhere. They have nowhere to go. They will stand, fight and repress to keep what they have got. The late Shah in retrospect becomes more benevolent by the day!

What created this extraordinary situation? As ever History. In its long and distinguished history Iran had to sustain two major invasions. First came the Arabs, who brought Islam with them, and then the all-conquering Mongols. All were in a sense overcome by being absorbed into Iran and its ways. Out of all this came the development of a great patience with adversity which remains with Iran to this day. Coming to more modern times Iran was exploited by both the British and the Russians. Neither, because of the other, colonised it but preferred to keep it weak for their own geopolitical interests which in the British case primarily involved the protection of India and development of the Oil Industry. One can almost feel the historical resentment building up ready to be exploited by Iran's rulers, as indeed it is today.

So where does this get us? Basically this is a nation never colonised; never organised in a modern way until comparatively recently; with no modern military tradition; constantly corrupted up to the present day; and most importantly with a developed sense of how to make the best of it. It therefore takes an exceptional combination of circumstances to get the Iranian people to act decisively but when they do they really do! 1979 was the modern case in point and must be seen in the context of Iran being relentlessly rushed into the 20th Century with little time left for political or economic digestion. The 1979 Revolution was achieved as much through the Shah's weakness as his strength and in retrospect he was given little time or preparation for the appalling difficulties of his reign. His father, Reza Shah, was the first of his line and assumed the throne, with British support, in the 1920s. At a relentless pace he brought Iran into the 20th century where they should already have been. However, he was a Cossack officer and not a diplomat and had too much sympathy for the Germans when the Second World War caught up with Iran. He was deposed by a British invasion and his young son, Mohammed Reza Shah, was placed on the throne in his 20s in time to be largely ignored by the allied leaders at the Tehran Conference of 1943. What a beginning to his reign!

As if the World War was not enough as straight after that came the Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan and the Cold War. Iran's turbulent past and geo-political position assured it the continued attention of both sides and the political tension that went with it. There followed the Anglo-Iranian Oil Crisis and the anti-Mossadegh coup promoted by the CIA and MI6. All too quickly after that came the enormous commercial and political pressures of unparalleled oil and

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gas wealth with the need to modernise an infrastructure that needed more time to absorb and improve. Just to make things simpler the Nixon-Kissinger Plan appointed Iran the region's guardian of the western interest, thereby creating an enormous potential for arms exports. It is small wonder that things were set to go tragically wrong.

1979 came and went. Since then, Western relations with Iran have been an ever mobile disaster area. One of the main reasons for this is the special problem of the US in dealing with Iran and the Middle East generally. The US is tied by both policy and family, in the sense of the Jewish Diaspora, to Israel. The late Shah was a good friend of Israel which has been an added cause for anti-Israelism to become a sort of virility symbol that the Iranian Revolution is still in existence. The great revolutionary purpose, which allies with a mistaken Islamic one, is for the true Iranian revolutionary to prove himself by fighting the good fight against the "Jewish State". The US does not exactly like this and away we go. Both sides have been guilty of unnecessary excess. The Iranians by making all the mischief they can in whipping up and financially supporting their Shia allies against Israel and the Americans by foolish references to such things as Iran being a world "Axis of evil".

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 a considerable struggle for power ensued between the Mullahs and the more secular elements of the Revolution. 1983 saw the consolidation of the power of Mullahs and the exile of so-called Mujahidin-e Khalq and their liberal allies. From here on the US could have worked towards a policy of rapprochement and contact. It would not have been easy but Iran could not have resisted indefinitely. Such a policy and the contact it represented would inevitably have led to a very different Iran today. As it is, the situation we have to deal with is much more difficult. It is very unfortunate that the US still cannot put up with being rejected. It is sadly beyond the comprehension of families welcomed to the US over, say, the last 150 years that the society they have helped to create, from so little in their home countries, should not be the desire of everyone. Be it Iran, Cuba or wherever, rejection cannot be tolerated because it is not understood. So we have a stand-off, with the European allies waiting in the wings but too weak to do anything on their own.

So, modern Iran represents one of the biggest waiting games of the world today. A quite dreadful Government leading a gifted people absolutely nowhere and spending the oil revenues not on much-needed infrastructure improvements but on day to day living and subsidy of the people for political purposes. Added to this is the quite unnecessary spending in support of the terrorist activities of Hamas and Hezbollah. The US awaits developments in the vain hope that something will happen within Iran that will obviate the necessity for difficult decisions, should Israel get really alarmed at the nuclear situation. Russia looks for further commercial opportunity particularly in civil nuclear development; China sees opportunity without any impediment of principle; India and Japan take large quantities of Iranian oil and so does it all go on. What, if anything, can the West do to improve the situation? Here are some fundamental points:

1. The Iranian regime is basically weak. It is entirely dependent on oil and gas revenues which it squanders on day to day necessities.
2. Iran is capable of causing the international system enormous tensions in the foreseeable future. They are an odd man out and a rogue player in the scheme of things.
3. Iran is going for a nuclear bomb. Overtly and covertly this effort is being delayed but sooner or later they will get there. Then the fun will start.
4. When it comes to the US and therefore Western relations with Iran, Israel is always the problem. This would not be so important were it not the fact that the Israel Lobby in the USA is probably the most powerful and influential of its kind in the world. Until an American administration faces up to this and is prepared to get tough with Israel, in the face of the locally very prominent Jewish interest, all this will continue and add to the dangers of the overall situation.
5. The same goes for the Arab-Israeli peace process. Only a strong line by the US towards Israel has a hope of delivering something here. Progress would help the Iranian situation considerably.
6. Europe, as such, is in no condition to help. Sadly it has no real foreign policy or the means to carry it out.

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7. US efforts to get tough with Iran will continue to be thwarted by Russia, China, and other nations who for a variety of reasons don't accept the stated US approach to Iran.

8. What follows from all this is the reality that without the US, the West amounts to very little. The fact remains that the US approach to Iran is absolutely crucial and, if they don't get it right, nobody else will or can do it for them.

So what do we do? In terms of dramatic initiatives the answer is nothing! That answer has to come from Iran itself. Sooner or later the system and the Regime itself will break down. The Islamic Constitution, whilst it has its checks and balances, is very vulnerable to such divisions. The dichotomy of power between Iran's spiritual and secular areas will be increasingly difficult to sustain in the long run. A comparatively declining economy and growing internal divisions will create the opportunity for change. In terms of active participation in such developments, we have no option but to sit it out. However, in persuading the Iranian people we are on their side, there is much we can do.

The essential point here is that the vast majority of educated Iranians, which includes a Diaspora of millions, want change and freedom from life under the Mullahs. The Regime depends on being able to display the West, and particularly the USA and the UK, as hostile former exploiters still looking for a chance to interfere. Statements about Iran being an Axis of Evil do very great damage in this regard and unite the people with their rulers. A much less belligerent attitude internationally and constant identification with the Iranian people as distinct from their rulers is what will make it much more difficult for those Rulers to play the card of the evil foreigner at the gate. The recent activities of the British Museum provide a very good example of how to accomplish this.

The main guidelines are as follows:

1. Concentrate on human rights at every turn. It is the Regime's weakest point and shows them up before the world for the primitives they are. Their victims are the Iranian people.

2. Sanctions and action on the nuclear bomb front have to remain. However, they have to be clearly sold to the Iranian people as not preventing them having civil nuclear power. There is nothing wrong with this. It was started under the late Shah and would have been a reality many years ago were it not for the complete inefficiency of this Regime.

3. Sanctions generally need to be looked at to see where concessions can be made for the benefit of the Iranian people and sold to them as such. Some infrastructure projects might be suitable candidates and create valuable contact with the West. The more commercial contact we have, the better it is for the future.

3. The US needs to build on President Obama's repeated and moderate attempts to create dialogue with the Iranian people. His goodwill is passport to success here, and **most** important is progress with the Palestinian issue.

4. In this regard it is essential that Israel co-operate and fulfil its greater responsibilities to its friends and allies. It is paramount that the Americans be firm with Israel. It is not in Israel's best interest to be seen as the main obstacle to peace in the Middle East.

5. We must encourage and increase contacts with Iran. Commercial, sporting and cultural connections are obvious ways to do so, and which could make an enormous difference.

In all of this the Islamic Republic will be difficult to deal with and its own worst enemy. But every bit of progress brings us nearer to its people and its people nearer the freedom and democracy they want and deserve.

Peter, Lord Temple-Morris was a British MP from 1974 to 2001, when he became a member of the House of Lords and has remained so since. He was also a Chairman of the British-Iranian All-Party Parliamentary Group during 1974-2005, and President of the Iran Society Council from 1995 to 2010.