



House of Commons
Foreign Affairs Committee

Iran

Third Report of Session 2003–04

Report, together with Appendix, formal minutes, oral and written evidence

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The Foreign Affairs Committee

The Foreign Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its associated public bodies.

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Committee staff

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Conclusions and recommendations

British-Iranian Relations

1. We conclude that the Government was right to respond to the Reddaway and Soleimanpour affairs with a mixture of firmness and tact, in the interests of not allowing short-term difficulties to jeopardise long-term improvements in the United Kingdom's relations with Iran. (Paragraph 19)
2. We conclude that the Government has been right to maintain and develop its critical dialogue with Iran, and we recommend that it continue this policy, with a view to encouraging further positive changes in Iranian political and civil society. (Paragraph 22)
3. We conclude that good cultural and educational links are especially important with Iran, a country with a strong cultural inheritance and identity of its own but with many misconceptions, even among its most educated classes, of life and society in the United Kingdom. We recommend that the Government give serious consideration to increasing the resources available for Chevening scholarships and other cultural and educational initiatives in Iran, and to ensure that those resources which are available are used to best effect. (Paragraph 27)
4. We conclude that continued co-operation between the United Kingdom and Iran in the war against drugs is important for both countries and we recommend that it remain a priority objective of the bilateral relationship. (Paragraph 28)
5. We conclude that, whatever the short-term difficulties which may afflict the United Kingdom's relations with Iran following the recent flawed elections, the prospects for longer-term improvements in the relationship remain good. We recommend that the Government continue to bear firmly in mind the benefits which good relations between Iran and the United Kingdom can bring to both countries, and that it work towards realising those benefits. (Paragraph 30)

Multilateral issues

6. We further conclude that a renunciation by Iran of violence as a means of achieving Palestinian statehood—and a cessation of all practical and moral support for such violence—could go a long way towards changing the views of those in the West who currently regard Iran as a sponsor of terrorism. (Paragraph 36)
7. We recommend that in its response to this Report the Government set out what it and its allies are doing to achieve “a further and more enhanced degree of co-operation with the Iranian Government” in the war against terrorism. (Paragraph 39)
8. We recommend that in its response to this Report the Government tell us what is the current extent of support for the terrorist organisation MEK in third countries, and what it is doing to minimise that support. (Paragraph 40)

9. We recommend that in its response to this Report the Government inform us of the steps it has taken to encourage Iran to play a positive role in political, social and economic reconstruction in Iraq, and with what results. (Paragraph 42)

10. With specific reference to Iran, we conclude that the lesson to be drawn from the success of the EU troika initiative is that, by acting together with firm resolve the international community has been able to persuade Iran to modify its nuclear policies in ways which will bring benefits to Iran, to its neighbours and to the international community. However, it is important to recall that the agreement was only necessary because Iran had been developing covertly a nuclear threat capability. It is also clear from Iran's failure to declare some aspects of its nuclear programme since the Agreement was signed that continued vigilance will have to be exercised by the IAEA, backed up wherever necessary by intrusive monitoring and effective verification measures. We recommend that in its response to this Report the Government set out what steps it is taking to ensure Iran's full compliance with the statements issued by the Iranian Government and the Foreign Ministers of Britain, France and Germany on 21 October 2003 and with the terms of the Additional Protocol to Iran's NPT safeguards agreement, signed on 18 December 2003. (Paragraph 58)

Human rights in Iran

11. We conclude that the recent elections in Iran were a significant and disappointing setback for democracy in that country and for its international relations, at least in the short term. We recommend that the Government take every opportunity through its pronouncements and through its policies to remind Iran of the benefits to its own people and to its standing in the world of upholding democratic values. (Paragraph 66)

12. We conclude that the position of women in Iranian society remains unequal, but that it has been moving in the right direction. We welcome the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Dr Shirin Ebadi. However, we are seriously concerned that Iran has yet to repeal provisions allowing the stoning of women adulterers and we conclude that Iran cannot be fully accepted into the international community while such abhorrent practices remain permitted under its laws. (Paragraph 74)

13. We respect the pre-eminent position of Islam in Iran, but we conclude that Iran's interpretation of the tenets of Islam with regard to those who proselytise or who convert to other faiths is incompatible with its desire to enjoy normal relations with other countries. (Paragraph 80)

14. We conclude that Iran's treatment of its Bahá'í community is not consistent with its human rights obligations under international law. We recommend that the Government continue to press the Iranians to treat members of all religious minorities fairly and equally, while recognising the pre-eminent position which Islam enjoys in Iranian society. (Paragraph 84)

15. We conclude that Iran will surely complete its journey towards reform, but at its own pace and in its own way, having regard to its proud history and strong national identity. We recommend that the Government act as a good friend to Iran in that journey, criticising when necessary, but supporting where it can. (Paragraph 89)

Introduction

1. Iran is a country of major geo-strategic significance and political and economic importance. Its neighbours, from the Gulf States to the South, through the Middle East and the Caucasus to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the East, include some of the most volatile areas of the world. Its population of 70 million, with a median age of just 23, lives above the world's fourth largest reserves of oil and second largest reserves of gas.¹ Iran has a vital contribution to make to the war against terrorism; its long border with Iraq makes it a key player in the future of that country; and it occupies an immensely sensitive position on a major drugs route to the United Kingdom and Europe. These factors were among those which made a strong case for this Committee to produce a Report on relations with Iran.

Background to the Committee's Inquiry

2. The Foreign Affairs Committee first announced its intention to inquire into Iran in June 2000. At the time, it hoped to visit Iran in late October of that year. The visit had to be postponed, first—at the request of the Iranian side—to the Spring of 2001 and then—because of the United Kingdom general election in June 2001—to a date to be decided by the incoming Committee in the new Parliament, in consultation with the Iranians. A brief interim Report was issued in February 2001, in which the Committee explained this situation and with which it published the written evidence it had by then received.²

3. After the general election, the new Committee reaffirmed its intention to visit Iran and it was agreed with the Iranians that the visit should take place in March 2003. Once again, events intervened and, with war having broken out in neighbouring Iraq, the visit had to be postponed one further time, until October. Meanwhile, however, we had heard oral evidence on Iran and had sought further written evidence.³

4. The visit finally took place from 19 to 23 October 2003, and proved to be very worthwhile. A copy of the programme is appended to this Report.⁴ On 2 December, we followed up the visit by hearing oral evidence from the Foreign Secretary. We also continued to receive written evidence. On 26 December, a terrible earthquake struck southern Iraq, destroying the ancient city of Bam and killing 42,000 people. We extend our sympathy to the families of the dead, to the injured and homeless for the suffering they have endured.

5. In this Report, we set out our conclusions and recommendations on the United Kingdom's relations with Iran, on a series of multilateral issues in which Iran is centrally involved, and on Iran's human rights record, which affects its relations with this and other countries. A separate Report in our series on Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against

1 CIA "World Factbook", available at www.cia.gov

2 Foreign Affairs Committee, Second Report of Session 2000–01, *Iran: Interim Report*, HC 80

3 Foreign Affairs Committee, Tenth Report of Session 2002–03, *Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism*, HC 405, Ev 29–49, 132–136, 142–153, 154–158. See also list of written evidence published with this Report

4 See Appendix

Terrorism, published in February 2004, also dealt with some aspects of Iran's regional and global roles, and was also informed by our visit.⁵

Acknowledgements

6. We wish to thank those who provided us with oral or written evidence during the period of this extended inquiry. The fact that our much-postponed visit to Iran was eventually able to go ahead and to succeed in achieving its aims was due largely to the assistance of our counterparts in the *Majles* (Iranian parliament), the Iranian Embassy in London and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London and, in particular, at the British Embassy in Tehran. We are grateful to all these for their work on our behalf.

5 Foreign Affairs Committee, Second Report of Session 2003-04, *Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism*, HC 81

British-Iranian Relations

A brief history

7. The history of relations between the United Kingdom and Iran in the period before the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 is summarised with great clarity in a paper submitted by Dr Ali Ansari of Durham University to the original inquiry in 2000.⁶ Dr Ansari's paper shows that since the establishment of diplomatic relations in the early Seventeenth Century, the United Kingdom became increasingly involved in Iran, eventually supplanting France as the dominant European power and vying with Russia to exert influence over Iranian affairs.

8. Following the Russian revolution, Britain regarded Iran as an important bulwark against the spread of Bolshevism and helped to bring about the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, which lasted (with interruptions) until 1979. However, the real limitations on Iran's sovereignty were exposed during the Second World War, when British and Allied forces intervened to establish a supply route across its territory—ironically, to the old rival, the Soviet Union.

9. In events which are in the recent memory of a people and nation who trace their origins back to the beginning of recorded history, the United Kingdom, together with the United States, sponsored a coup in 1953 which overthrew the nationalist government of Dr Mohammed Mossadeq and restored the Shah to power. The original CIA account of this episode, which sheds considerable light on the roles of the Foreign Office and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), was published in 2000.⁷ The motivation behind the coup appears to have been twofold: anxiety about the nationalisation of Iran's huge oil and gas reserves; and concern that Iran might fall under Soviet influence.

10. Given this history, it is hardly surprising that Iranians are said to see the hand of the United Kingdom behind every suspicious development in their country. This endemic suspicion was given new force by the Islamic revolution of 1979, in which the Pahlavi dynasty was deposed. The Shah had followed a pro-western policy and under his autocratic rule Iran had become an economically and militarily significant power, as well as a major market for developed countries, including Britain. Following the assumption of power by a regime under Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran became more inward-looking, its prosperity declined, and its relations with the United Kingdom and with other western countries were strained.

11. The history of relations between the United Kingdom and Iran from 1979 to 2000 is set out in the FCO memorandum appended to the interim Report.⁸ Following a lengthy period when diplomatic relations were downgraded—although trading and other links continued—there were some positive developments by 1985. In December of that year, however, elements within the Iranian leadership hostile to the United Kingdom created

6 HC (2000-01) 80, pp 28-29. Dr Ansari has since moved to Exeter University.

7 The full documentation may be viewed at the web site of the National Security Archive of the George Washington University: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv

8 HC (2000-01) 80, pp 1-7

new tensions in the relationship, which eventually led to the withdrawal of all diplomatic staff from Tehran in 1987. Relations were also affected by the West's political and material support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war.

12. Following negotiations, agreement was reached to restore full diplomatic relations in November 1988, only to be thrown completely off course by the *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah Khomeini calling for the assassination of Mr Salman Rushdie. This development caused all European Union member states to withdraw their ambassadors from Tehran and it was not until the Gulf War of 1990 that signals of a more positive attitude by Iran began to be received.

13. Iran's neutrality in the Gulf War, its assistance in gaining the release of British hostages held in the Lebanon, and its willingness to engage in dialogue were factors which helped to bring about a gradual improvement in relations during the 1990s, although there were highs and lows during the decade. A European Community-Iran dialogue was established in 1992, and moved up a gear following the election of the reformist President Khatami in 1997. In September 1998, the United Kingdom and Iran agreed to exchange Ambassadors and the relationship began to be characterised as one of 'constructive engagement'.

Developments since 2000

14. The Government's policy of constructive engagement has continued to the present day, with the full support of this Committee. In December 2001, we noted that "Iran's dual status as a member of the coalition with an active interest in a stable Afghanistan on its border, and as a state of concern with a recent history of extreme hostility towards the West, lends it a particular importance in contemporary international relations" and concluded that "the Government's and European Union's policies of constructive engagement with Iran deserve full support".⁹

15. On 29 January 2002, President Bush delivered his State of the Union Address, in which he bracketed Iran together with Iraq and North Korea as the "axis of evil". This speech articulated a difference between the foreign policies of the United Kingdom and the United States towards Iran which was already well understood: constructive engagement on the one part; and confrontation on the other. To the hardliners in the US administration, Iran as a theocratic state, with its lack of respect for human rights, its implacable opposition to a two-state solution in the Middle East, its support for terrorist groups, and its attempts to develop weapons of mass destruction, was simply incorrigible. Our view was expressed in our June 2002 Report on Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism:

in the case of Iran [the United States'] aims are more likely to be achieved by robust dialogue and critical engagement with reformers than by sending Tehran a list of non-negotiable demands. In our judgment, to bracket Iran with Iraq was mistaken: Iraq is an unredeemed autocracy; while Iran has a number of elements of democracy and has been moving, however falteringly, in the direction of reform.¹⁰

9 Foreign Affairs Committee, Second Report of Session 2001–02, *British-US Relations*, HC 327, paras 167 & 170

10 Foreign Affairs Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2001–02, *Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism*, HC 384, para 201

16. These faltering steps were taken by the Iranian authorities following mass student demonstrations in July 1999 and a general election in February 2000, in which reformist candidates gained an overall majority in the parliament. However, as can be seen from Box 1 below, the Iranian constitution does not vest all power in the parliament. The clerical Council of Guardians wields considerable authority and as well as banning candidates from standing for election¹¹ may veto laws passed by the *Majles*. The judiciary has assumed what amount to executive functions—in April 2000, it closed down 16 reformist newspapers; and in February 2004 it closed down two more.¹² Although the re-election of President Khatami for a second term in June 2001 by a huge majority consolidated his position as Iran's leading reformer in office, it did little to shift the balance of power towards him and his allies in the parliament.

Box 1: Iran's many centres of power¹³

Under the 1979 Constitution, Iran is an Islamic Republic and the teachings of Islam are to be the basis of all political, social and economic relations. Overall authority is vested in the **Supreme Leader** (currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) who is chosen by the **Assembly of Experts**, an elected body of 96 religious scholars. The Supreme Leader is the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces.

The **President** is elected by universal adult suffrage for a term of 4 years and is restricted by the Constitution to no more than 2 terms in office.

Legislative powers are held by the **Majles**, or Islamic Consultative Assembly, consisting of 290 elected members representing regional areas or religious communities for a 4-year term. The Majles also approves the members of the **Council of Ministers**, the Iranian equivalent of the British Cabinet.

The **Council of Guardians** reviews legislation passed by the Majles for constitutionality and adherence to Islamic law. It is composed of 6 theologians appointed by the Supreme Leader and 6 jurists nominated by the judiciary and approved by the Majles. The council also has the power to veto candidates in elections to parliament, local councils, the presidency and the Assembly of Experts.

The **Council for the Discernment of Expediency** was created in 1988 to resolve disputes over legislation between the Majles and the Council of Guardians. In August 1989, it became an advisory body on national policy and constitutional issues for the Supreme Leader. It includes the heads of all three branches of government and the clerical members of the Council of Guardians. The Supreme Leader appoints other members for a three-year term.

Obstacles in the road to better relations

17. In the last two years, bilateral relations between Iran and the United Kingdom have been placed under particular strain by two incidents. In February 2002, Iran rejected the

11 See para 63 below

12 The papers closed in 2004 were shut down for publishing excerpts from a letter sent by Members of the Iranian Parliament which was critical of Supreme Leader Khamenei. See, eg, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3502995.stm

13 The information in this box is based on the FCO's country profile of Iran, available on its website, www.fco.gov.uk

United Kingdom's nominee as Ambassador in Tehran, David Reddaway, who was labelled in the conservative Iranian press as "a Jew who is an MI6 agent",¹⁴ each of these designations apparently being regarded as disqualifying Mr Reddaway from the office to which he had been appointed (and both, incidentally, inaccurate). It took eight months for this impasse to be resolved, with the nomination of Richard Dalton as HM Ambassador being accepted by Iran on 24 September.

18. The second incident was the detention in the United Kingdom of former Iranian diplomat Hade Soleimanpour under a warrant for extradition served by the authorities in Argentina. Mr Soleimanpour was suspected of involvement in the murderous bombing of a Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires in 1994. Iran was indignant about Mr Soleimanpour's arrest and detention in August 2003, seeing it as politically directed and failing to understand that the Government could not interfere in a judicial process. Shots were fired at the British Embassy compound in Tehran—something which would be unlikely to occur without the compliance of the relevant authorities in Iran—and the British Government rightly lodged strong protests. At the time of our visit—when we were able to view the damage to the Embassy buildings for ourselves—Mr Soleimanpour had been freed on bail, but his case had yet to be resolved. We formed the distinct impression during our visit that Iran was imposing undeclared economic sanctions against British companies and indulging in other provocative behaviour. Shortly after our return to the United Kingdom, once the judicial process was complete, the Home Secretary was able to conclude that there was insufficient evidence on which to agree to the extradition request, and Mr Soleimanpour was released from his bail.

19. The Reddaway and Soleimanpour affairs demonstrate the potential for relations with Iran to be derailed when conservative elements in the Iranian establishment come to the fore. Further incidents of this kind cannot be ruled out, but we believe that Ministers and the diplomatic service handled them with great skill and sensitivity. **We conclude that the Government was right to respond to the Reddaway and Soleimanpour affairs with a mixture of firmness and tact, in the interests of not allowing short-term difficulties to jeopardise long-term improvements in the United Kingdom's relations with Iran.**

High-level contacts with Iran

20. British government Ministers have made several visits to Iran since 2000 and a number of Iranian Ministers have visited the United Kingdom. The Foreign Secretary has visited Tehran no fewer than five times in the last three years, most recently with his French and German counterparts in October 2003, when we were also there. Our own visit was the first by a select committee of Parliament since the 1979 revolution; it followed meetings in London between the Committee and senior Iranian figures, including Foreign Minister Kharrazi. Last month's visit by the Prince of Wales in his capacity as patron of the British Red Cross contributed to this continuing pattern of bilateral contacts.

21. All those visiting Iran in an official capacity have to ask themselves whether their visit will be beneficial. Some commentators suggest that these visits reward, or at least confer a degree of respectability on, a repressive system and fail to provide incentives for the

14 See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,12858,893582,00.html>

Iranians to liberalise their society, while others believe that such contacts provide opportunities for both sides to increase their understanding and to make their views clear. Those against the policy of ‘constructive’ or ‘critical’ engagement ask what practical benefits it has brought to the Iranian people, or indeed to the United Kingdom; those in favour of the policy point to the October 2003 agreement on Iran’s nuclear programme and suggest that further advances can be achieved. During our visit, we experienced no negative reactions from those Iranians we met; on the contrary, we received a warm welcome and encountered a readiness to discuss differences openly.

22. Aware as we are of the view that high-level contacts may lend unwarranted legitimacy to the undemocratic exercise of power, we believe on balance that because such contacts help to break down barriers and to increase understanding, in the case of Iran they should be encouraged. **We conclude that the Government has been right to maintain and develop its critical dialogue with Iran, and we recommend that it continue this policy, with a view to encouraging further positive changes in Iranian political and civil society.**

Cultural and educational links

23. Cultural and educational links also play an important part in the bilateral relationship. After a period of 22 years when it was not allowed to operate in Iran, the British Council returned to Tehran in 2001. The Council has described one of its major objectives in Iran as being “to establish trust and understanding of its function among the Iranian authorities whose co-operation is essential to its activities.”¹⁵ Its programmes are aimed at strengthening educational co-operation, strengthening English language teaching, fostering cultural exchange, and developing scientific and technological links. We strongly support these aims, and were delighted to meet British Council staff during our visit to Tehran, which we were pleased to note coincided with that of a delegation from the Science Museum. It is disappointing, however, that the Iranian authorities regard the British Council with suspicion, requiring it to operate from a British diplomatic compound and restricting its activities. Such restrictions are one indication of the continuing power over such matters exercised by the conservative clerics, against the interests of the Iranian people.

24. On a more positive note, an exhibition of British sculpture opened in Tehran’s Museum of Contemporary Art in February 2004, and has apparently proved popular. None of the exhibits, ranging from the works of Henry Moore to those of Gilbert and George, could be described as being in the tradition of Islamic Art. It is therefore encouraging, both that the exhibition has been allowed by the Iranian authorities to take place, and that it has been well-attended and well-received.¹⁶

25. Another important aspect of the cultural relationship is the system of Chevening Scholarships, under which Iranian postgraduate students are sponsored by the British Government to attend university in the United Kingdom, either for extended periods of study or, increasingly, on shorter-term vocational courses. We have long supported this

15 Ev 13

16 “Iran welcomes UK art exhibition”, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/3516087.stm>

scheme, which has seen many friends of the United Kingdom achieve positions of influence in other countries. There is an obvious place for the scheme in relation to Iran, but it is a pity that in 2003 there was sufficient funding only for 10 such scholarships to be awarded to students from Iran (out of a total of 2,300 worldwide).

26. The BBC World Service also plays an important role in Iranian life. In 2000, they told the Committee that Iranian perceptions of the BBC's Persian Service ranged from those, mostly elderly, who regarded it as "an arm of the British government's sinister and self-serving plots and policies" to a predominantly younger view of it as "a source of objective and accurate information, good music and entertainment, as well as a window into a world of greater opportunity."¹⁷ We suspect that in the years since that was written, the balance has swung towards the latter perception.

27. We conclude that good cultural and educational links are especially important with Iran, a country with a strong cultural inheritance and identity of its own but with many misconceptions, even among its most educated classes, of life and society in the United Kingdom. We recommend that the Government give serious consideration to increasing the resources available for Chevening scholarships and other cultural and educational initiatives in Iran, and to ensure that those resources which are available are used to best effect.

Co-operation in the war against drugs

28. Iran lies on a major drugs trading route from the production areas of Afghanistan to the consumers of Europe. The Iranian authorities have played an honourable and important role in seeking to stem the flow of drugs across a lengthy border which is notoriously difficult to police. There has been good co-operation between the United Kingdom and Iran on efforts to improve the success rate of the Iranian border police in their efforts to stem the flow of drugs. For example, British funds have been used for the supply of night vision equipment and other aids. The sharp end of the operation, however, has been undertaken by the Iranians themselves. We understand that the Iranian border police has suffered many casualties in its battle against the drugs traffickers. **We conclude that continued co-operation between the United Kingdom and Iran in the war against drugs is important for both countries and we recommend that it remain a priority objective of the bilateral relationship.**

Prospects for the future

29. The "flawed"¹⁸ elections of February 2004 are considered in paragraphs 61 to 66 below. They may represent a swing of the pendulum of Iranian society back from democracy and openness and towards fundamentalism and isolationism. If such is to be the context within which the United Kingdom must conduct its relations with Iran over the coming years, that relationship may be a difficult one to develop. On the other hand, in our estimation the weight of Iran's overwhelmingly youthful population is certain to push the pendulum once again towards reform—as EU Commissioner Chris Patten has put it, "demography is

17 HC (2000-01) 80, p 23

18 According to Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. See "EU ministers unite to attack 'flawed' elections", *The Times*, 24 February 2004

strongly on the side of democracy in Iran”.¹⁹ Such a movement would create circumstances in which the bilateral relationship could improve still further.

30. We conclude that, whatever the short-term difficulties which may afflict the United Kingdom’s relations with Iran following the recent flawed elections, the prospects for longer-term improvements in the relationship remain good. We recommend that the Government continue to bear firmly in mind the benefits which good relations between Iran and the United Kingdom can bring to both countries, and that it work towards realising those benefits.

¹⁹ Speech to the European Parliament, 12 February 2004

Multilateral issues

Iran as a regional power

31. Before the 1979 revolution, Iran was a developing military power which looked set to dominate its region. However, in the 1980s Iran and Iraq fought a vicious war in which many thousands of their citizens perished. Both countries were weakened, but the effects were particularly felt in Iran. The theocratic government in Tehran won few friends among more secular Arab leaders to its West and South, while to the East neither the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul nor its Taliban successors were, for different reasons, sympathetic to the Iranian view of the world. Although it remained an economically active and populous country, Iran failed to project its power throughout the 1980s and 1990s and it is interesting to note that even today, and despite evidence of recent attempts to repair relations with countries such as Egypt, Iran remains in many ways isolated in its region.²⁰

32. Given its history both of war with its neighbour and of antipathy towards the United States in particular and the West in general, Iran was ambivalent about last year's conflict in Iraq. Its concerns about US-led military action on its borders were tempered by satisfaction at seeing the removal from power of its old enemy, Saddam Hussein. Dr Ansari suggested to us that "among ordinary people [in Iran], there was considerable sympathy for the coalition."²¹ However, there was also concern that, with American armed forces operating in Afghanistan on its eastern border, and in Iraq to the West, Iran might be the next member of the 'Axis of Evil' to be the object of direct military intervention.

33. On the other hand, Iran has an interest in having stable neighbours, or at least neighbours which are preoccupied with their own problems. Whether the US-led forces succeed in achieving stability and prosperity in Iraq and Afghanistan—as we earnestly hope they will—or whether those countries end up as failed states, Iran would probably be justified in feeling it has a more secure future now than it has had for at least two decades. Meanwhile, as Dr Ansari points out,

until a political settlement can be reached in both these states, Iran will be an important 'player' for the coalition. Indeed, for all the rhetoric on either side of the international divide, politicians in both the West and Iran recognise the considerable dividends to be gained through a tacit cooperation.²²

20 Iran's nuclear research and development activities—which might have provided a means to achieve greater regional influence—are considered in paragraphs 46-58 below.

21 Ev 20

22 Ev 20

Map: Iran in its region



Iran and the war against terrorism

34. In our recent Report on *Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism*, we noted the US State Department's description of Iran as "the most active state sponsor of terrorism". According to US State Department Assistant Secretary for Verification and Compliance Paula DeSutter:

Iran's support includes funding, providing safe haven, training, and weapons to a wide variety of terrorist groups including Lebanese Hizballah, HAMAS, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Liberation Front for Palestine-General Command. Its support of HAMAS and Palestinian Islamic Jihad is of particular

concern, as both groups continue their deliberate policies of attacking Israeli citizens with suicide bombings.²³

35. Iran's long-standing support for violent Palestinian rejectionist groups is a matter of record. The Head of the FCO's Middle East and North Africa Directorate, Edward Chaplin, told us in December that "they [Iran] certainly have a degree of influence through the support and training and other sorts of support they provide to Hezbollah, Hamas and perhaps Islamic Jihad." Mr Chaplin reminded us that "the EU has made very clear there will be no progress on the negotiation of a Trade and Co-operation Agreement unless Iran demonstrates progress on those issues of key concern."²⁴

36. Iran has at times appeared more hard-line on the Middle East issue than the declared policies of the Palestinian leadership. However, as we noted in our Report of last month, there have been some signs of a shift in the Iranian position. We concluded in that Report that Iran, through its links with Palestinian terrorist organisations, disrupts prospects for peace in the Middle East; and we called on the Government to encourage Iran to cut those links.²⁵ **We further conclude that a renunciation by Iran of violence as a means of achieving Palestinian statehood—and a cessation of all practical and moral support for such violence—could go a long way towards changing the views of those in the West who currently regard Iran as a sponsor of terrorism.**

37. There is, however, a further area of concern about Iran's links with terrorist groups, which is felt particularly in the United States. In her testimony before a joint US Congress/Israeli Knesset hearing last September, already quoted from above, Paula DeSutter said that

the US Government insists that Iran cease its current policy of providing a safe-haven to al-Qaida and Ansar al-Islam operatives and cooperate with international efforts to bring them to justice. The United States has been concerned for some time about the presence in Iran of al-Qaida members, including senior al-Qaida leaders. We believe that some elements within the Iranian regime have helped al-Qaida terrorists transit or find safe-haven inside Iran. Moreover, we believe senior al-Qaida terrorists inside Iran played a part in the planning of the May 12 Riyadh bombings.²⁶

38. Given the hostility of the US administration towards Iran it is hardly surprising that Iran is reluctant to co-operate with the United States on terrorism issues, although there is said to be co-operation between Iran and its neighbours in this field. And as we noted in our Report of last month, the Foreign Secretary takes a different line from that of the US. In December, he told us that

co-operation in respect of al Qaeda terrorism ... has been the subject of continuing discussions with the Iranian government. They have now I think detained fifty al

23 'Iranian WMD and Support of Terrorism', Paula A. DeSutter, Assistant Secretary for Verification and Compliance. Testimony before the U.S Congress/Israeli Knesset joint hearing, Washington DC, September 17 2003.

24 Q 10. See also para 65 below

25 HC (2003-04) 81, para 203

26 'Iranian WMD and Support of Terrorism', Paula A. DeSutter, Assistant Secretary for Verification and Compliance. Testimony before the U.S Congress/Israeli Knesset joint hearing, Washington DC, September 17 2003.

Qaeda suspects, and what we look forward to is a further and more enhanced degree of co-operation with the Iranian government.²⁷

39. In their differing descriptions of Iran's co-operation over al Qaeda and similar groups, the British and US governments appear to see a glass which is, respectively, half full or half empty. Whichever perspective is adopted, it is clear that there remain grounds for concern about Iran's willingness to make common cause with global terrorist groups. **We recommend that in its response to this Report the Government set out what it and its allies are doing to achieve "a further and more enhanced degree of co-operation with the Iranian Government" in the war against terrorism.**

40. Iran also has its own concerns about terrorism. The Mojaheddin-E-Khalq (MEK) armed group, which formerly operated from bases in Iraq, has been proscribed by the United Kingdom Government and by other EU governments as a terrorist organisation.²⁸ The Foreign Office told us last year that American forces were "systematically detaining and disarming" MEK forces.²⁹ Iran, however, remains concerned that some elements in the US have continued to support the activities of the MEK. **We recommend that in its response to this Report the Government tell us what is the current extent of support for the terrorist organisation MEK in third countries, and what it is doing to minimise that support.**

*Iran and Iraq*³⁰

41. The Foreign Secretary told us in December that "Iran has a clear interest in a restored, representative government" in Iraq.³¹ His view is that Iran is not seeking to direct Iraq's Shia community, and that the leader of that community, Ayatollah Sistani—an Iranian by birth—"makes his own decisions on the basis of, as it were, his own community and his own branch of Islam."³² Neither does he believe that Iran has any links with terrorist groups operating inside Iraq.³³ We accept that Iran has a legitimate interest in the creation of a stable, non-threatening and indeed co-operative neighbour to its West.

42. In our Report of last month on *Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism*, we concluded that Iran has the potential to be a destabilising factor in Iraq, and that the United Kingdom can play a crucial role in helping to ensure that Iran co-operates with efforts to bring stability to that country.³⁴ **We recommend that in its response to this Report the Government inform us of the steps it has taken to encourage Iran to play a positive role in political, social and economic reconstruction in Iraq, and with what results.**

27 Q 11

28 Q 1. The MEK is also sometimes referred to as the MKO.

29 HC (2003-03) 405. Ev 163

30 For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see the Committee's recent Report on *Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism*, HC (2003-04) 81, paras 28 to 34

31 Q 8

32 Q 4

33 Q 8

34 HC (2003-04) 81, para 34

Iran and the Middle East peace process

43. Iran has no border with Israel, or with the Palestinian territories. Under the Shah, it had close links with Israel. Since 1979, its stance on the Arab/Israeli conflict appears to have been dictated by ideology, rather than by Iran's national interest (although there are also strong concerns in Tehran about Israel's presumed possession of nuclear weapons). We have already commented above on Iran's record of support for Palestinian groups which reject the right of the state of Israel to exist, and have drawn attention to recent statements which suggest that Iran may be prepared to accept any decision by Palestinians to support a two-state solution. Our own visit to Iran confirmed the impression we had already formed, that the Iranians are indeed reluctantly willing to countenance what for them represents a momentous policy shift—recognition of the state of Israel.

44. We are encouraged by these indications of a new pragmatism on the part of Iran towards the Middle East Peace Process and the status of Israel. It will certainly not be straightforward for Iran to set aside decades of antipathy towards Israel; nor will the Israelis easily be persuaded that the country which they regard as the most hostile and dangerous in the region has changed its mind. The rewards for both of such a development would, however, be considerable.

45. Another state of concern—Libya—has recently performed an unexpected *volte-face* by first admitting to and then agreeing to discontinue its development of weapons of mass destruction. One essential test of Libya's seriousness of intent will be its future stance on the Middle East question, to which, like Iran, it has supported a single-state solution.³⁵ Iran is not Libya, but Colonel Qadhafi's decision, brought about by months of patient diplomacy by British and other negotiators, sets an intriguing precedent.

Iran's nuclear programme³⁶

46. The United States administration has been foremost among those alleging that Iran has been seeking to develop a nuclear weapons capability.³⁷ Former proliferation adviser to the Clinton administration Dr Gary Samore told us in February last year that Iran's nuclear activities "cannot be plausibly justified as part of a civil nuclear power programme."³⁸ On 4 June 2003, John Bolton, US State Department Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, told the House of Representatives International Relations Committee that

there is Iran's claim that it is building massive and expensive nuclear fuel cycle facilities to meet future electricity needs, while preserving oil and gas for export. In fact, Iran's uranium reserves are miniscule [*sic*], accounting for less than one percent of its vast oil reserves and even larger gas reserves. A glance at a chart of the energy content of Iran's oil, gas, and uranium resources shows that there is absolutely no

35 In Colonel Qadhafi's White Book', see www.algathafi.org/medialeast/INDEX-E.HTM

36 For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see the Committee's recent Report on *Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism*, HC (2003-04) 81, paras 204 to 221

37 A nuclear weapons capability requires not just a nuclear device, but a delivery system. Iran certainly possesses ballistic missiles capable of reaching Israel, and some commentators have suggested that it may be developing an intercontinental ballistic missile capability.

38 HC (2002-03) 405, Q122

possibility for Iran's indigenous uranium to have any appreciable effect on Iran's ability to export oil and gas. Iran's gas reserves are the second largest in the world, and the industry estimates that Iran today flares enough gas to generate electricity equivalent to the output of four Bushehr reactors... The conclusion is inescapable that Iran is pursuing its 'civil' nuclear energy program not for peaceful and economic purposes but as a front for developing the capability to produce nuclear materials for nuclear weapons.³⁹

47. As Mr Bolton noted, Iran has consistently denied that it has a nuclear weapons programme. The Iranian Ambassador in London wrote to our Chairman on 14 June 2003, enclosing a document which set out an economic case for Iran's civil nuclear programme, beginning with the words "Weapons of mass destruction have no place in the defensive doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran."⁴⁰

48. We asked the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) to carry out an objective study of Iran's energy sector, so that we would be better able to form an independent view of whether its nuclear programme is commensurate with its energy requirements. In his paper for us—which has been subject to peer review—Professor David Cope, Director of POST, concluded that some of John Bolton's criticisms were not supported by an analysis of the facts (for example, much of the gas flared off by Iran is not recoverable for energy use), but that Iran's decision to adopt the nuclear power option could not entirely be explained by the economics of energy production.⁴¹

49. It is clear from Professor Cope's paper that the arguments as to whether Iran has a genuine requirement for domestically-produced nuclear electricity are not all, or even predominantly, on one side. We note, however, that other energy-rich countries such as Russia use nuclear power to generate electricity and we do not believe that the United States or any other country has the right to dictate to Iran how it meets its increasing demand for electricity, subject to Iran meeting its obligations under international treaties. The problem has been that Iran has failed to provide assurance to those who doubt its intentions, by refusing to open its nuclear facilities to international inspection under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). That changed last year, when Jack Straw, Dominique de Villepin and Joschka Fischer concluded an agreement with the Government of Iran in Tehran.

The EU troika initiative of October 2003

50. The origins of October's mission by Messrs Straw, de Villepin and Fischer go back to the previous Winter. In February 2003, the Director General of the IAEA, Dr ElBaradei, visited a number of nuclear sites in Iran, and held extensive discussions. In his report to the IAEA Board the following month, Dr ElBaradei wrote that:

During my visit, I emphasized to the Iranian authorities that it is important for all States, and particularly those with sensitive nuclear fuel cycle facilities, to be fully transparent in their use of nuclear technology. In this connection I stressed the value

39 Full text available at www.house.gov

40 HC (2002-03) 405, Ev 155

41 Ev 6

of bringing an additional protocol into force as an important tool for enabling the Agency to provide comprehensive assurances. During my meetings with President Khatami and other officials, Iran affirmed its obligations under the NPT to use all nuclear technology in the country exclusively for peaceful purposes, and to follow a policy of transparency. To this end it agreed to amend the Subsidiary Arrangements of its safeguards agreement, thereby committing Iran to provide design information on all new nuclear facilities at a much earlier date. And I was assured that the conclusion of an additional protocol will be actively considered.⁴²

51. Dr ElBaradei paid a further visit to Iran in July 2003. It was becoming apparent by then that Iran had various concerns of its own which the IAEA alone could not address, and was seeking assurances which the IAEA could not give. A period of what the Foreign Secretary termed “intensive diplomatic activity” followed,⁴³ beginning on 4 August with a letter to the Iranian Government from the foreign ministers of the United Kingdom, France and Germany, and culminating in a decision by them to visit Tehran, in order to demonstrate to Iran that its agreement to an Additional Protocol⁴⁴ to the NPT would bring immediate and tangible benefits. This initiative, which was not without diplomatic and political risk, achieved its desired result.

52. On 21 October, Iran and the three foreign ministers agreed to the following statement:

The Iranian authorities reaffirmed that nuclear weapons have no place in Iran's defence doctrine and that its nuclear programme and activities have been exclusively in the peaceful domain. They reiterated Iran's commitment to the nuclear non-proliferation regime and informed the ministers that:

The Iranian Government has decided to engage in full co-operation with the IAEA to address and resolve through full transparency all requirements and outstanding issues of the Agency and clarify and correct any possible failures and deficiencies within the IAEA.

To promote confidence with a view to removing existing barriers for co-operation in the nuclear field:

having received the necessary clarifications, the Iranian Government has decided to sign the IAEA Additional Protocol and commence ratification procedures. As a confirmation of its good intentions the Iranian Government will continue to co-operate with the Agency in accordance with the Protocol in advance of its ratification.

while Iran has a right within the nuclear non-proliferation regime to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes it has decided voluntarily to suspend all uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities as defined by the IAEA.⁴⁵

42 www.iaea.org

43 Q 5

44 See para 55 below

45 The full text of the statement is available at www.iaea.org

53. For their part, the three foreign ministers

welcomed the decisions of the Iranian Government and informed the Iranian authorities that:

Their governments recognise the right of Iran to enjoy peaceful use of nuclear energy in accordance with the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In their view the Additional Protocol is in no way intended to undermine the sovereignty, national dignity or national security of its State Parties.

In their view full implementation of Iran's decisions, confirmed by the IAEA's Director General, should enable the immediate situation to be resolved by the IAEA Board.

The three governments believe that this will open the way to a dialogue on a basis for longer term co-operation which will provide all parties with satisfactory assurances relating to Iran's nuclear power generation programme. Once international concerns, including those of the three governments, are fully resolved Iran could expect easier access to modern technology and supplies in a range of areas.

They will co-operate with Iran to promote security and stability in the region including the establishment of a zone free from weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East in accordance with the objectives of the United Nations.

54. According to Dr Ali Ansari,

The internationalisation of the issue was essential to ensure that hardliners in Iran were not able to present the pressure to sign the additional protocols as another exercise in American double standards and arrogance. Indeed in internationalising the demands for Iran to be more transparent, presenting a united European front and tying the agreement to better political and economic relations with Europe as well as collaboration on civil nuclear technology, Britain helped ensure that Iran was more candid about its previous non-disclosures than many had expected, and more importantly, that henceforth it would fully adhere to its obligations. From the Iranian perspective it was important that its decision was not seen as a humiliating climb down, but as a dignified compromise, and the visit of the three foreign ministers of France, Great Britain and Germany, went a long way to conveying this view.⁴⁶

55. On 18 December 2003, Iran and the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) signed an Additional Protocol to Iran's NPT safeguards agreement. Under the Protocol, the Agency will have fuller access than previously to Iran's nuclear facilities, for the purpose of verifying Iran's compliance with its obligations under the Treaty. Signature of the Protocol was regarded as an important sign of Iran's earnestness; compliance with its terms will be regarded as essential if the credibility of Iran's commitment to the terms of the agreement is to be maintained.

56. The agreement did not resolve some important questions, for example about the precise meaning and durability of Iran's commitment "voluntarily" to suspend uranium enrichment, and about Iran's failure to make a full disclosure of its nuclear activities. Iran's place in the web of nuclear trading spun by Pakistan's Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan had also yet to become clear when the agreement was signed. Some of these outstanding issues were addressed in an Iranian statement on 23 February 2004, in which it agreed to suspend—again, voluntarily—all assembly and testing of centrifuges which could be used to enrich uranium, and to place such centrifuges and related components under IAEA supervision. In his report to the IAEA Board the following day, Dr ElBaradei is reported to have concluded that Iran has been developing more sophisticated centrifuges than it had previously admitted, and that it has produced or acquired nuclear materials with very limited plausible civilian application.⁴⁷ Assuming these reports to be accurate, it is clear that Iran is guilty either of careless inefficiency or of deliberate deceit.

Prospects for the future

57. Welcome though the agreement with Iran on its nuclear activities is, there can as yet be no certainty that it will achieve its objectives. A shift in the balance of power in Iran, a perceived threat from another country in the region, or unauthorised activities by a member of Iran's nuclear elite (as may have happened in Pakistan) could yet derail the agreement. In practice, we suspect, the agreement is less likely to be derailed than to have its limits thoroughly tested by the Iranians. Scrupulous enforcement by the IAEA will be necessary, backed up by continued resolve on the part of the EU troika and other parties.

58. In our Report of January 2004 on *Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism*, we concluded that

this episode demonstrates the potential of co-ordinated European action to address common security concerns, and that it demonstrates the continued relevance of multilateral arms control mechanisms.⁴⁸

With specific reference to Iran, we conclude that the lesson to be drawn from the success of the EU troika initiative is that, by acting together with firm resolve the international community has been able to persuade Iran to modify its nuclear policies in ways which will bring benefits to Iran, to its neighbours and to the international community. However, it is important to recall that the agreement was only necessary because Iran had been developing covertly a nuclear threat capability. It is also clear from Iran's failure to declare some aspects of its nuclear programme since the Agreement was signed that continued vigilance will have to be exercised by the IAEA, backed up wherever necessary by intrusive monitoring and effective verification measures. We recommend that in its response to this Report the Government set out what steps it is taking to ensure Iran's full compliance with the statements issued by the Iranian Government and the Foreign Ministers of Britain, France and Germany on 21 October 2003 and with the terms of the Additional Protocol to Iran's NPT safeguards agreement, signed on 18 December 2003.

47 See, eg, "Iran nuclear omissions worry UN", *BBC News*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3517139.stm

48 HC (2003-04) 81, para 221

Human rights in Iran

59. Iran's 1979 constitution enshrines respect for human rights within the context of an Islamic state. Islamic interpretations of human rights differ in some respects from those prevalent in the West. In this section, we consider Iran's record on human rights under three headings: political, personal and religious freedoms.

Political freedoms

60. The political situation in Iran has developed considerably since our visit in October last year, when we heard from figures at the heart of government and from independent commentators alike that the pro-reform groups would find it difficult to maintain their majority in the *Majles*. The overwhelmingly youthful population of Iran (60 percent of Iranians were born after the 1979 revolution) appears to have concluded that its interests are best served by co-existing peacefully with the clerical establishment. Young people in Iran today are able to associate freely, to listen to the music of their choice, to access the world wide web and—if such be their desire—discreetly to indulge in alcohol and other drugs. But while they enjoy fast food and western music, they have no wish to lose their Iranian identity. The clerical establishment, as the guarantor of that identity, may therefore be regarded as in some ways benevolent, while the reformist politicians are seen as ineffectual, and few young Iranians see any incentive to engage in politics.

The elections of February 2004

61. Many of those whom we met in October—including, ironically perhaps, senior members of the establishment—expressed considerable concern that apathy would be the distinguishing feature of February's elections. This was despite attempts by many leading politicians—including our host for the visit, Dr Mohsen Mirdamadi⁴⁹—to radicalise Iranian voters, through their opposition to the decision of the Guardian Council to ban reformist candidates from standing for election. Dr Mirdamadi was one of those members of the *Majles* who was barred from standing for election again.

62. Iran's political affairs are a matter for Iran, but the extent to which elections in Iran are seen to be free and fair must affect its relations with other countries, not least with the United Kingdom and its European partners. The decision of many candidates to withdraw from the ballot in protest at the decision to ban reformist candidates deprived the election of democratic validity. Iranian voters were not presented with a full choice of candidates, and they responded by abstaining in large numbers. It is difficult to know how many of those who did not vote were engaging in a deliberate protest against the banning of candidates for whom they would have wished to vote, and how many were apathetic or were disillusioned with the record of the Khatami administration or with the political system generally. Equally, one cannot be certain how many of those who voted did so only in order to have their identity papers stamped. What is certain is that democracy has suffered a blow in Iran.

49 Chairman of the International Affairs and Security Committee of the *Majles*

63. The decision by the Council of Guardians to prevent more than 2,400 candidates from standing, because those candidates' Islamic credentials were, in the view of the Council, unsatisfactory, appears to us to have been a deliberate attempt to subvert the process of reform in Iran and to frustrate the will of its people. Relations between Iran and the United Kingdom, its European partners and other democracies are bound to be affected by such anti-democratic practices.

64. President Khatami continues in office for another year, but he will have to work with a legislature which is dominated by hardliners. Yet it is possible that the incoming parliament will find it easier to achieve a consensus on the changes which will be necessary for Iran to improve its relations with other countries. The example of China is often cited as demonstrating that economic liberalisation can proceed in the absence of full political freedoms. However, while such reforms might allow Iran to do more business with the rest of the world, only the adoption of fully democratic values can ensure its complete acceptance by the international community.

65. For some time, the European Union and Iran have been discussing a trade and co-operation agreement, which in return for undertakings by Iraq to respect human rights and democratic values, would grant Iran improved access to EU markets.⁵⁰ Negotiations on the agreement proceeded slowly during the first half of 2003, and have been in a state of suspension for some months. The Foreign Secretary has said that the recent elections were "flawed" and that although dialogue between the EU and Iran should continue, the election result "will obviously create a new environment for the discussions with Iran to take place [in]".⁵¹

66. We conclude that the recent elections in Iran were a significant and disappointing setback for democracy in that country and for its international relations, at least in the short term. We recommend that the Government take every opportunity through its pronouncements and through its policies to remind Iran of the benefits to its own people and to its standing in the world of upholding democratic values.

Personal freedoms

Young people, education and employment

67. In the period immediately after the 1979 revolution, and in particular during the lengthy war against Iraq, Iran's new rulers encouraged a substantial increase in the birth rate, which peaked at over 3 percent.⁵² This disproportionately large generation has had to be provided with health care and primary, then secondary, then further and higher education. All this has been provided by the Iranian state. That such a vast undertaking has been achieved successfully, with high levels of literacy and a generally good standard of health, represents a considerable accomplishment.

50 In the words of a European Commission press release of December 2002: "The EU expects that the deepening of economic and commercial relations between the EU and Iran will be matched by similar progress in the areas of political dialogue and counter-terrorism. These are interdependent, indissociable and mutually reinforcing elements of the global approach which is the basis for progress in the EU-Iran relations."

51 "EU ministers unite to attack 'flawed' elections", *The Times*, 24 February 2004

52 See, eg, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1949068.stm. The rate now stands at 1.2 percent.

68. Iran has been less successful in providing employment for its baby boomers. Its well-educated young people too often find there are insufficient jobs suited to their skills. One consequence has been a high level of emigration among the more educated classes of young people. This is not entirely bad news for Iran, as its emigrant workers send valuable foreign exchange home and, when they return, bring with them the further skills they have learnt while abroad, but it would clearly be better for Iran if it were able to make more use of the considerable talents of its people.

The position of women in Iranian society

69. Women in Iran are in many respects freer than their counterparts in some other Islamic countries. In Iran—unlike in some other countries in the region—women may vote, hold political office, work and drive a car. Almost two thirds of new university entrants are currently women. However, women in Iran still suffer unequal rights under marital law and their employment position is significantly worse than that of men.⁵³ Iran is investing in the education of large numbers of women who cannot then find appropriate employment, to the detriment of the Iranian economy and Iranian society as well as to that of the women themselves.

70. In January 2003, we received a report from our parliamentary colleague, Dr Phyllis Starkey MP, who had led a delegation of women parliamentarians to Iran. Dr Starkey told us that:

Women are disadvantaged by the current legal system, particularly in relation to divorce, and in court a woman's testimony is valued at half that of a man. Economically women are at a disadvantage compared with men.⁵⁴

She concluded that:

Overall, we retained concerns about abuses of human rights and the crab-like progress towards real democracy, because the conservative religious authorities frequently obstruct reform. However, our delegation returned convinced that Iran was moving in the right direction and that the British policy of constructive engagement was correct.

71. While in Iran, we pursued some specific aspects of gender inequality. For example, we discussed with several of those whom we met the unequal position under Iranian law of female heads of households, and of divorced women seeking custody of their children. Until recently, women were granted custody only of female children under the age of seven and males under the age of two; all other children were placed in the custody of the father. We were informed that a proposal to change this law had been passed by the parliament, but rejected by the Council of Guardians. The matter had been referred in accordance with the constitution to the Council of Expediency. After our return, we were pleased to be informed by the Iranian Embassy in London that the Expediency Council had approved the law, and that henceforth mothers will usually be granted custody of children of both sexes until the age of seven, the position thereafter to be determined by the courts, if the

53 HC (2000-01) 80, pp 12-14; HC (2002-03) 405, Ev 151-3

54 HC (2002-03) 405, Ev 146

parents cannot agree between themselves.⁵⁵ We welcome this sensible reform, which is evidence of a pragmatism in Iranian society often overlooked in the West.

72. On the other hand, the abhorrent practice of stoning women adulterers remains part of the Iranian legal corpus. Such punishments have been subject to a moratorium, but it is very disappointing that they have not yet been abolished.

73. We were privileged during our visit to Tehran to meet Nobel Prize winner Dr Shirin Ebadi. Mrs Ebadi was a judge until 1979—an unique position for a woman under the rule of the Shah—and has been a campaigning lawyer since being removed from the judiciary, taking on and winning a number of high-profile cases. Mrs Ebadi spoke to us about her desire to see Iranian society reform itself and articulated very effectively her confidence that this will be achieved. She pointed out that, 25 years after she was sacked because of her gender, there are once again women judges in Iran.

74. Like our parliamentary colleagues who visited Iran in 2002, **we conclude that the position of women in Iranian society remains unequal, but that it has been moving in the right direction. We welcome the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Dr Shirin Ebadi. However, we are seriously concerned that Iran has yet to repeal provisions allowing the stoning of women adulterers and we conclude that Iran cannot be fully accepted into the international community while such abhorrent practices remain permitted under its laws.**

The Kazemi affair

75. The murder of Canadian-Iranian photo-journalist Zahra Kazemi in July 2003 has served to place a renewed emphasis on the lack of respect for human rights on the part of some sections of the Iranian establishment. It appears that Mrs Kazemi was beaten to death by her interrogators, having been arrested while photographing locations associated with student unrest—in particular, Evin Prison, where many of those detained for political reasons are held. The initial interrogation was carried out under the supervision of Judge Saeed Mortazavi, before Mrs Kazemi was handed over to Iran's internal security service. An inquiry by the Article 90 Committee of the *Majles*—whose Chairman we met in Tehran—established that the injuries which caused death had been administered while Mrs Kazemi was in the custody of the judiciary.⁵⁶ Despite this, the judiciary has arrested an intelligence officer and has charged him with responsibility for Mrs Kazemi's death; in return, the intelligence ministry, with the support of most of the political establishment, is defending its employee. The trial was opened and adjourned in November, with no date set for its resumption. Mrs Shirin Ebadi is representing the Kazemi family.

76. That the judiciary of any country should be found to be culpable for such a horrific abuse is deeply worrying. Those of us in the West who have supported the policy of constructive or critical engagement with Tehran must be particularly disappointed and concerned. Although we can take heart that the facts have apparently been established and

55 Ev 22

56 The Article 90 Committee (so named because it is established under Article 90 of the Iranian Constitution) fulfils an ombudsman-type role and spends much of its time investigating alleged miscarriages of justice.

made public by a committee of the Iranian parliament, it would obviously be better for Iran's international standing if these abuses were to cease altogether.

77. The Kazemi affair demonstrates one of the difficult dilemmas which face those who wish to develop a more positive relationship with Iran. Iran is a highly complex society, with competing centres of power and influence. To treat it—as one would treat most nation states—as a single entity, which is either in the 'good' camp or in the 'bad' camp, is to ignore that complexity. Dealings with all aspects of the Iranian socio-political system may be a necessary feature of critical engagement, but they must always be handled with sensitivity, and with an emphasis on encouraging the more positive elements.

Religious freedoms

78. When we visited Tehran, we met members of the *Majles* who represent Iran's officially recognised religious minorities. The Iranian constitution acknowledges the existence of the long-established Christian (mainly Armenian), Assyrian, Jewish and Zoroastrian communities and provides for each such community to elect a number of parliamentary representatives (one, in most cases) which is broadly proportionate to the officially accepted number of its believers.

79. We did not hear any criticism of the Iranian authorities from the official representatives of minority faiths, and neither did we expect to hear any. Other evidence suggests, however, that religious converts, in particular, have been persecuted. The Foreign Secretary told us that:

Under Iranian law, apostasy—conversion from Islam to Christianity or any other religion—is a crime and in theory may be punished by death. Accurate information about the actual treatment of converts or those who seek to convert others is hard to obtain and we do not have a full picture. We are not aware of cases where the death penalty has been used on Christian converts in the period since President Khatami was first elected in 1997. In 1994, a Christian convert in Mashad, a pastor, was reportedly charged with evangelising and subsequently executed. We have also heard reports of the extra-judicial killing of Christians for evangelising, most recently in 2000 in Rasht. While some converts who keep a low profile appear not to face significant harassment by the authorities, others may be subject to restrictions or punishment.⁵⁷

80. Iran is not the only Islamic country to incriminate apostates, but it is surely particularly unfortunate that the Iranian establishment apparently feels so insecure that it cannot tolerate conversion. **We respect the pre-eminent position of Islam in Iran, but we conclude that Iran's interpretation of the tenets of Islam with regard to those who proselytise or who convert to other faiths is incompatible with its desire to enjoy normal relations with other countries.**

81. We have also received criticism of Iran from the Board of Deputies of British Jews, who told us in February last year that:

While the Jewish community [in Iran] may not suffer to the extent that the Bahá'ís or Christians have, Jews nevertheless continue to live under an oppressive regime. The Jews who were falsely imprisoned on charges of espionage in 1999, have now mostly been released. However, it is believed that up to 5 men remain in prison, and according to Iranian Jewish communities abroad, a number of others have disappeared, possibly while trying to escape from the country.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, the Board concluded that “there are positive signs emerging from within Iran” and noted that increased contacts with the West are likely to add to pressure for change in Iran.⁵⁹

The Bahá'ís of Iran

82. It is notable that all three religions whose adherents are recognised as having special rights in Iran are older than Islam. However, Iran is home to many members of a younger religious community—the Bahá'ís. The Bahá'í faith originated in Iran in the 19th Century as a development of Islam and is estimated to have approximately 300,000 adherents in modern-day Iran.⁶⁰ Although Bahá'ís do not directly threaten other religions, and are not perceived as a threat outside Iran, the Iranian clerical establishment regards them as apostates and they are banned from practising their faith.

83. There appears to be little prospect of the present Iranian regime changing its constitutional position on the Bahá'í faith, and any attempt to force the issue in the way that the nuclear question was resolved would, in our estimation, be most unlikely to succeed. However, this need not be a counsel of despair. We judge that over time, Iran is likely to become a more secular state, which would in all probability develop a greater tolerance of religious minorities. Even if Iran were to remain an avowedly and constitutionally Islamic republic, the Rushdie precedent suggests that its leaders are not incapable of finding pragmatic solutions to questions of religion.⁶¹

84. We conclude that Iran's treatment of its Bahá'í community is not consistent with its human rights obligations under international law. We recommend that the Government continue to press the Iranians to treat members of all religious minorities fairly and equally, while recognising the pre-eminent position which Islam enjoys in Iranian society.

'Blood money'

85. While in Tehran, we discussed the grievance felt by non-Muslims in Iran that so-called 'blood money' was paid at differential rates, with more being paid in respect of Muslims than those of other faiths. Blood money, or *di'yeh*, can be paid under Sharia law, which allows the family or relatives of a murdered person to choose between pardoning a convicted murderer, demanding blood money or insisting on capital punishment. In

58 HC (2002-03) 405, Ev 147

59 HC (2002-03) 405, Ev 148

60 HC (2000-01) 80, p 8

61 Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie has never been (and cannot be) revoked, but it is no longer regarded as being in force.

January 2004, we were informed by the Iranian Embassy in London that the Council of Guardians had approved a bill amending the constitution to provide for equal blood money for all Iranian nationals, regardless of their religion.⁶² We welcome this change, which provides a small but important example of Iranian society moving in the right direction.

Conclusion

86. Our visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran provided us with an excellent opportunity to see and experience a country which is still half in and half out of the international community. Iran's failure to engage constructively with so much of the world has deprived it of much investment and other benefits; it has also meant that outsiders have been denied access to an astonishingly rich culture, a talented, well-educated people and a huge economic potential.

87. Iran's position at the borders of the Middle East and Central Asia lends it potentially great strategic significance in its region: militarily, politically and economically. When, as we believe they eventually will, the Iranian people put in place the reforms necessary to realise that potential, the United Kingdom will have much to gain from being in an already established relationship with Iran.

88. For the present, Iran remains very much a moving target for commentators. There is competition for dominance among different power clusters, with the clerical establishment currently in the ascendancy. In the short term, the clerics and their allies may make advances, but in the long term they will surely not be able to hold back the aspirations of the younger generation.⁶³ Young people and women are said to have formed the reformist majority in the 1997 election, and it appears that it may have been their abstention in large numbers which removed that majority in last month's elections.

89. We have previously concluded that the United Kingdom has been right to engage with Iran, even in the face of strong signals from Washington that such a policy was misguided, and even in the face of setbacks to the process of reform, such as the flawed election of February 2004. Having visited Iran, and having spoken at some length and with a degree of frankness to people of influence in that country, we stand by our earlier comments. **We conclude that Iran will surely complete its journey towards reform, but at its own pace and in its own way, having regard to its proud history and strong national identity. We recommend that the Government act as a good friend to Iran in that journey, criticising when necessary, but supporting where it can.**

63 60 percent of Iran's population is aged under 25

Appendix

Programme for the visit to Iran, 18-24 October 2003

Saturday 18th October

2300 Arrival in Tehran.

Sunday 19th October

0900 Leave Hotel

0915 Briefing in Embassy

1030 Leave Embassy

1045 Dr Mirdamadi, Chairman of Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee

1145 Return to Embassy

1200 Visit to Visa Section

1300 Lunch in Residence with Western journalists

1500 Mr Ahani, Deputy Minister for Europe and the Americas

1615 Mr Akbar Alami, Chairman of the UK/Iran Parliamentary Friendship Group (Majlis)

Monday 20th October

0930 Leave hotel

1000 Mr Karroubi, Speaker of Majlis

1130 Ayatollah Marvi, Deputy Head of Judiciary for Administrative Affairs

1445 Mr Rajab-Ali Mazrouie, Secretary General of Association of Iranian Journalists

1615 Mr Ziaefar, Secretary of Islamic Human Rights Commission

2000 Dinner hosted by Dr Mirdamadi, new Majlis building

Tuesday 21st October

0900 Leave hotel

0930 Mr Abtahi, Vice President for Legal and Parliamentary Affairs

1045 Minority MPs (Majlis)

1200 Return to Embassy

- 1230 Lunch in Embassy with British Council, Commercial and Consular staff
- 1500 Mr Hossein Ansari Rad, Chairman of Article 90 Committee (Majlis)
- 1830 Leave hotel
- 1900 Buffet dinner at Embassy

Wednesday 22nd October

- 0715 Leave hotel
- 0800 Shirin Ebadi
- 0900 Museums
- 1130 Meeting with Iranian analysts in Ambassador's Residence
- 1230 Sandwich lunch with analysts (discussion continues)
- 1430 Leave for airport
- 1550 To Isfahan
- 1700 Meeting with Deputy Governor General of Isfahan

Thursday 23rd October

- 0900 Tour of cultural sites of Isfahan
- 1200 Lunch with local politicians and administrators
- 1650 Return to Tehran
- 1830 Closing meeting with Ambassador

Friday 24th October

- 0600 Leave Hotel
- 0700 Depart for UK

Formal minutes

Tuesday 9 March 2004

Members present:

Donald Anderson, in the Chair

Mr David Chidgey	Mr Bill Olnor
Mr Fabian Hamilton	Richard Ottaway
Mr Eric Illsley	Mr Greg Pope
Andrew Mackinlay	Sir John Stanley
Mr John Maples	Ms Gisela Stuart

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (Iran), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 16 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 17 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 18 to 57 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 58 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 59 to 81 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 82 read, amended and agreed to.

Paragraphs 83 to 88 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 89 read, amended and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Third Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No.134 (Select committees (reports)) be applied to the Report.

Ordered, That the programme of the Committee's visit to Iran be appended to the Report.

Several Papers were ordered to be appended to the Minutes of Evidence.

Ordered, That the appendices to the Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee be reported to the House.—(*The Chairman.*)

[Adjourned till Thursday 11 March at 3.00pm.]

Witnesses

Tuesday 2 December 2003

Page

Rt Hon Jack Straw MP, Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Ev 1

Mr Edward Chaplin OBE, Director, Middle East and North Africa Directorate

Mr John Sawers CMG, Director-General, Political, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Edward Oakden CMG, Director, International Security, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

List of written evidence

Memoranda submitted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office	Ev 5, Ev 22
Note by Professor David R Cope, Director, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)	Ev 6
Memorandum submitted by the British Council	Ev 13
Memorandum submitted by the UK Representative Office of the National Council of Resistance of Iran	Ev 15
Memorandum submitted by Dr A M Ansari	Ev 20
Memorandum submitted by the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran	Ev 22

Reports and Evidence from the Foreign Affairs Committee since 2001

The following reports and evidence have been produced in the present Parliament.

Session 2003–04

REPORTS

First Report	Foreign Affairs Committee Annual Report 2003	HC 220
Second Report	Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism	HC 81

WRITTEN EVIDENCE

Written Evidence	Overseas Territories	HC 114
Written Evidence	The Biological Weapons Green Paper	HC 113
Written Evidence	Private Military Companies	HC 115
Written Evidence	Turkey	HC 116

Session 2002–03

REPORTS

Twelfth Report	Foreign & Commonwealth Office Annual Report 2003	HC 859 (<i>Cm 6107</i>)
Eleventh Report	Gibraltar	HC 1024 (<i>Cm 5954</i>)
Tenth Report	Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism	HC 405 (<i>Cm 5986</i>)
Ninth Report	The Decision to go to War in Iraq	HC 813 (<i>Cm 6062</i>) and (<i>Cm 6123</i>)
Eighth Report	Zimbabwe	HC 339 (<i>Cm 5869</i>)
Seventh Report	Strategic Export Controls: Annual Report for 2001, Licensing Policy and Parliamentary Scrutiny	HC 474 (<i>Cm 5943</i>)
Sixth Report	The Government's proposals for secondary legislation under the Export Control Act	HC 620 (<i>Cm 5988</i>)
Fifth Report	The Biological Weapons Green Paper	HC 671 (<i>Cm 5857</i>)
Fourth Report	Human Rights Annual Report 2002	HC 257 (<i>Cm 5320</i>)
Third Report	Foreign Affairs Committee Annual Report 2002	HC 404
Second Report	Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism	HC 196 (<i>Cm 5739</i>)
First Report	The Biological Weapons Green Paper	HC 150 (<i>Cm 5713</i>)
First Special Report	Evidence from Mr Andrew Gilligan to the Committee's Inquiry into the Decision to go to War in Iraq	HC 1044

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

Evidence	The Thessaloniki European Council	HC 774-i
Evidence	Developments in the European Union	HC 607-i
Evidence	The Inter-Governmental Conference 2004: The Convention on the Future of Europe	HC 606-i
Evidence	The Copenhagen European Council	HC 176-i
Evidence	The Prague NATO Summit	HC 66-i

Session 2001–02

REPORTS

Twelfth Report	FCO Annual Report 2002	HC 826 (<i>Cm 5712</i>)
Eleventh Report	Gibraltar	HC 973 (<i>Cm 5714</i>)
Tenth Report	Zimbabwe	HC 813 (<i>Cm 5608</i>)
Ninth Report	Private Military Companies	HC 922 (<i>Cm 5642</i>)
Eighth Report	Strategic Export Controls: Annual Report for 2000, Licensing Policy and Prior Parliamentary Scrutiny (Quadripartite Committee)	HC 718 (<i>Cm 5629</i>)
Seventh Report	Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism	HC 384 (<i>Cm 5589</i>)
Sixth Report	Turkey	HC 606 (<i>Cm 5529</i>)
Fifth Report	Human Rights Annual Report 2001	HC 589 (<i>Cm 5509</i>)
Fourth Report	Zimbabwe	HC 456
Third Report	Laeken European Council	HC 435
Second Report	British-US Relations	HC 327 (<i>Cm 5372</i>)
First Report	Gibraltar	HC 413
First Special Report	Appointment of Parliamentary Representatives to the Convention on the Future of Europe	HC 509

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

Evidence	The Inter-Governmental Conference 2004: The Convention on the Future of Europe	HC 965–i
Evidence	The Barcelona European Council	HC 698–i

The reference to the Government response to the report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number