



Third Report
from the
Foreign Affairs Committee
Session 2003-2004

Iran

Response of the Secretary of State for
Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

*Presented to Parliament
by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
by Command of Her Majesty
May 2004*

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**FOREWORD BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN
AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS**

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JACK STRAW MP

This Command Paper sets out the Government's response to the Foreign Affairs Committee's timely report on the UK's relations with Iran (HC 80).

I welcome the Committee's approach. The report highlights areas where Iranian policies are of serious concern, such as Iran's nuclear programme, terrorism, human rights, and the Middle East Peace Process. Equally, it identifies issues on which the UK and Iran could work more closely together, such as countering the drugs trade.

As the Committee's report points out, Iran is a crucial player in a region central to the challenges which the UK and the international community face: the fight against terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, international crime and illegal migration; our work to establish stable and prospering democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan; the security of our energy supplies; and the need to support the processes of reform and sustainable development in the Middle East.

I am glad that the Committee felt able to offer broad endorsement of the Government's policy of constructive but critical engagement with Iran, combined with continuing efforts to address our concerns especially on Iran's nuclear programme. Our approach will be informed by the Committee's recommendations as we move that process forward.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jack Straw". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small flourish at the end.

**THIRD REPORT FROM THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE
SESSION 2003-2004**

IRAN

**RESPONSE OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN
AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS**

The Government welcomes this timely Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee. The UK's relations with Iran affect vital UK interests in fields as diverse as proliferation, terrorism, human rights, illegal migration, and the trade in illegal narcotics. We endorse the Report's main conclusions and recommendations, and set out our response below.

UK/Iran 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)**

We agree. During the several difficult phases in UK/Iran relations in the last few years, notably the Reddaway and Soleimanpour affairs, we have remained committed to a policy of engagement and sought to prevent temporary difficulties from causing lasting damage.

- 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)**

We agree that we need to maintain a dialogue with Iran, a country whose policies affect important British interests. Isolating Iran would deprive us of a useful channel for encouraging Iran to make positive choices about its development and role in the world. Our approach aims to support Iranian efforts to reform while enabling us to raise concerns about Iran's policies in areas such as human rights, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the fight on terrorism and the Middle East Peace Process. But our engagement is conditional. We fully support the approach of the European Union, which has said that relations with Iran can move forward only if Iran takes action to address our political concerns.

- 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)**

We are seeking to expand cultural exchanges with Iran. We believe stronger cultural and educational ties will create opportunities for the citizens of both countries, and instil in Iran a more accurate understanding of British society and achievements. We endorse the Report's comments about the need to dispel the suspicion of cultural activity apparently prevalent in some quarters of Iran's clerical establishment, and are encouraging the Iranian authorities to take a more positive view.

We welcome the Report's praise for the work of the British Council. In 2001, the British Council reopened its office in Tehran for the first time since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the British Council is now contributing significantly to the bilateral relationship. The sculpture exhibition organised by the British Council at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran earlier this year was the largest UK cultural event in Iran since 1979 and we hope it will provide a springboard for future cultural partnerships.

We also welcome events drawing Iranian culture to wider notice in the UK, and welcome British Museum plans for a major exhibition focusing on Achaemenid Persia scheduled to open in mid to late 2005.

We share the Committee's view of the importance of scholarships. Iran is already a significant beneficiary of the FCO's Chevening programme. Five Chevening scholarships were awarded to Iranians in 2000/01, 11 in 2001/02, 14 in 2002/03 and 12 this year. These figures compare favourably with other countries in the region. Following a review of FCO scholarships, about which the Foreign Secretary informed the Committee on 16 January 2004, the FCO proposes next year to pilot three-month fellowships within the Chevening programme, with a focus on promoting engagement with the Islamic World. We expect Iranians to be among the first to benefit.

In addition, Iran benefits from a British Council scheme of partial scholarships intended to give high quality PhD students experience at UK universities. Scholars, who also receive financial support from their universities, are able to undertake research attachments in the UK for periods of between three and nine months. 26 scholars from Iran benefited from this scheme in 2002/03. The British Council also funds a programme of academic exchanges to promote research links between universities in the UK and Iran.

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)

We agree. The UK and Iran have a common interest in reducing the cultivation of illegal narcotics in the region, especially in Afghanistan, and in combating drug trafficking. Iran lies along the main trafficking route from Afghanistan to the UK and the rest of Europe. 95% of the heroin that reaches the UK originates in Afghanistan, and around half of all Afghan opiates are smuggled through Iran. Iran's domestic demand for drugs is also high. Official Iranian estimates suggest that the country has around 300,000 heroin addicts and up to two million opium users. Over half of Iran's prison population are believed to be serving sentences for drugs-related offences.

We endorse the report's positive comments on Iran's commitment to the fight against drugs. Iran seizes more opiates than any other country in the world, over 100 tonnes in 2003. Iran's record of interdiction compares favourably with the record of other countries in the region and beyond. Iran has paid a heavy price for its efforts: over 3,000 Iranians involved in counter-narcotics work have been killed since 1990.

We have sought to expand our counter-narcotics work with Iran, and believe the UK has been Iran's largest overseas donor in the last five years. The first British Minister to travel to Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution was Dr Mowlam, who visited in 2001 in a counter-narcotics role and signed a Memorandum of Understanding establishing a framework for future co-operation. Since then we have assured the Iranian authorities of our willingness to extend collaboration. We have recently hosted two visits by Iranian officials dealing with counter-narcotics and have received permission to have a Drugs Liaison Officer permanently based at the British Embassy in Tehran. This is the first Drugs Liaison Officer to be posted to Iran and the officer will take up the post at the end of May. We are also co-ordinating closely with Iran on counter-narcotics activity in Afghanistan.

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)

We were disappointed that many candidates were prevented from standing in Iran's parliamentary elections in February, making impossible a genuine choice by the Iranian people. For elections in any country to be regarded as free and fair, electors must be able to choose from candidates with a range of views. We agree that engagement should remain our policy, and that we should not easily be deflected

from pursuing the long-term benefits this could bring. But Iran should not mistake the basis on which engagement by the UK and other European countries is possible. For relations with Iran to move forward, Iran will need to address our political concerns in areas such as human rights, proliferation, the fight against terrorism and Iran's attitude to the Middle East Peace Process. We look forward to closer relations with Iran, including with the Majlis, once Iran has made significant progress in these areas.

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)**

We agree. We remain seriously concerned at Iran's support for groups seeking to undermine the Middle East Peace Process through violence. Peace in the Middle East is in everyone's interest, including Iran's. We agree with the Committee that an unequivocal and lasting renunciation of practical and moral support for violence by all elements of the Iranian leadership is essential if perceptions of Iran in the West are to improve. We welcomed a statement in 2002 by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Iran would not reject a two-state solution provided it was acceptable to the Palestinians. Sadly, this is not a message that has been repeated by the regime's most senior figures, nor have we seen Iran actively support the Middle East Peace Process. Indeed, influential elements in the regime continue to oppose the existence of Israel.

- 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)**

Iran shares with us and other countries a threat from Al-Qaeda terrorism. We believe Iran, if so minded, could make a vital contribution to the fight against terrorism. We have stressed to the Iranian authorities that it is essential for all countries to work closely together to defeat terrorism. We have urged them to take effective action against any members of Al-Qaeda seeking refuge in Iran. The Iranian authorities claim to have detained a number of Al Qaeda operatives: we have urged them to share information about those they are detaining, and to return them to their countries of origin.

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)

We believe that support for the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MeK) in all countries is very low. Popular support for the MeK both in Iran and overseas is far lower than the organisation's own publicity would indicate. This is hardly surprising. The MeK has acknowledged its responsibility for terrorist acts against civilian and military targets in Iran and other countries. From the mid-1980s until last year, the MeK received extensive support from Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The MeK remains a source of concern. The MeK has been proscribed by successive Home Secretaries under the Terrorism Act 2000. UK policy is that there should be no contact between Ministers or officials and members of the MeK or the National Council of the Resistance of Iran (NCRI), a group with which the MeK is closely associated. The MeK is regarded as a terrorist organisation by the EU, and the US designated it a Foreign Terrorist Organisation in 1997. Despite occasional claims by Iran to the contrary, we believe the US takes this designation seriously. Following the conflict in Iraq, the US military detained around 3,800 people at Camp Ashraf, the main MeK base 100km from Baghdad, greatly reducing the MeK's ability to carry out terrorist attacks. The US is currently screening and interviewing detainees, and will take decisions about their future once that process of screening is complete. The US has also taken steps to close the offices in the US of the NCRI.

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)

As a neighbour, Iran has a legitimate interest in Iraq. A stable, prosperous and democratic Iraq is in the best interests of Iran as well as the Coalition. We are encouraging Iran to play a constructive role. We welcome Iran's support for the formation and operation of the Iraqi Governing Council, and its broad support for the Transitional Administrative Law and plans for the establishment of a representative government. The Iranians know that the Coalition would not tolerate action designed to undermine its progress.

Ministers and senior officials remain in close contact with the Iranian authorities over the situation in Iraq. For example, British officials in Iraq met a special Iranian delegation led by Hossein Khaleghi on 14 April, and Iraq was one of the main topics of talks during the visit to London of the Iranian Foreign Minister Dr Kamal Kharrazi on 22 April.

We have encouraged Iran to play a full and positive role in reconstruction in Iraq. We have encouraged the Iranian Government to disburse funds through a new

multi-donor trust fund, the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq (IRFFI). This fund provides a straightforward and cost-effective way to direct resources towards Iraq's needs and priorities. Iran pledged \$5m to Iraq reconstruction at the Madrid donors' conference, and has also given substantial support for reconstruction at a grassroots level. Iranian funding from the government and from religious bodies has been used to develop infrastructure in southern Iraq. Iran is involved in discussions with Iraq over power supply, and has also sought a resumption of commercial ties with Iraq.

We have encouraged Iran, along with Iraq's other neighbours, to tighten border security. We welcome steps taken to date by Iran in this field, and Iran's exchanges with the Iraqi authorities on cross-border co-operation. As required, UK forces in Iraq have been in contact with their Iranian counterparts about local and cross-border issues, to reduce the potential for misunderstanding.

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)

Responsibility for ensuring Iranian compliance with its commitments and obligations rests primarily with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The Agency carries out regular inspections of nuclear and nuclear-related facilities in Iran based on rights of access under Iran's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and Additional Protocol, and voluntary access granted to verify Iran's voluntary suspension of enrichment-related and reprocessing activities. The UK and other members of the IAEA maintain close contact with the Agency in order to assist it in this task, both by providing information in response to specific IAEA questions and by passing on relevant information related to the activities being inspected.

We believe resolute action by the international community will be necessary to ensure that Iran lives up to its commitments. We are working in a variety of formats – bilaterally, and with France and Germany, and through the EU – to encourage the Iranian authorities to co-operate fully with the IAEA, and comply

with resolutions of the IAEA Board of Governors. We are urging Iran to work with the IAEA to resolve all outstanding questions about its nuclear programme. The IAEA Director-General has reported a pattern of past concealment in Iran's declarations to the Agency. We have pressed Iran to ensure that the declaration of nuclear-related activities and facilities it is required to make under the Additional Protocol is complete and final; it would be highly damaging for international confidence if Iran were to be less than fully transparent. We have also pressed Iran to rebuild confidence in the peaceful ambitions of its nuclear programme by verifiably suspending, and ultimately ceasing, all enrichment-related and reprocessing activity. We have urged Iran to refrain from moves likely to undermine confidence further, such as the postponement of IAEA inspection visits in March and the proposals to take forward work at the Uranium Conversion Facility at Esfahan and the Heavy-Water Research Reactor at Arak. Continued public statements by senior Iranian officials demanding that the IAEA Board of Governors 'close the Iran file' at its June 2004 meeting are unrealistic.

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)

We agree. We deeply regret that many candidates were barred from standing in Iran's parliamentary elections, among them a third of sitting deputies. Most of the disqualified candidates were associated with the reformist faction, and it has been claimed that in as many as half the constituencies, electors faced no real choice.

We regret that the last year has also seen a deterioration in other areas essential to a well-functioning democracy, including freedom of expression and assembly. Many newspapers have been closed down, several on the eve of the elections, and there have been increased restrictions on internet access. The media has been subject to heavier official censorship, journalists and intellectuals have been arrested and intimidated, and lawyers have been prosecuted for speaking out on behalf of their clients. Foreign journalists have also been subjected to various forms of harassment. The violent death in custody of Canadian/Iranian photo-journalist Zahra Kazemi in June 2003 epitomised many of the year's worst trends.

We welcomed the visit to Iran by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Freedom of Expression and Opinion, Ambeyi Ligabo, in November 2003. We are deeply concerned that some people who spoke to him may have been persecuted as a result. Many of Mr Ligabo's findings were disturbing, and we urge the Iranian Government to implement all of his recommendations as soon as possible. Progress so far has been disappointing. For example, six months after Mr Ligabo was assured that there would be a complete amnesty for Siamak

Pourzand, a 75 year-old journalist, this has not happened, and there are credible reports that Mr Pourzand has been seriously ill and chained to a bed. The UK and EU have repeatedly urged the Iranian authorities to free him.

We will continue to seek opportunities to press the Iranian authorities to address human rights concerns. The EU/Iran human rights dialogue, established in 2002, provides one channel. For now, the EU is prepared to continue with the dialogue, though its results have been disappointing. Topics have included torture, public executions and discrimination against women and minorities, and the EU also uses the meetings of the dialogue to raise specific cases of concern. We are prepared to support action in UN bodies, as appropriate. The UK and most other European countries co-sponsored a resolution on human rights in Iran at the United Nations General Assembly in December 2003. The resolution reflected the depth of international concern at continuing human rights violations in Iran and practices such as the use of torture, amputation and flogging, discrimination against women and religious minorities, and the persecution of people for the peaceful expression of their political views.

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)

As the Report describes, women in Iran enjoy certain rights and freedoms that they are denied in other countries in the region. They have the right to vote. There are a number of women MPs, though fewer in the current Majlis than its predecessor. Women work, drive, and make up over half of the university intake. However serious inequalities persist. The law on issues such as divorce, child custody and ‘blood money’ give women fewer rights than men, and a woman’s testimony in court is worth half that of a man. Women may not become judges. Women’s participation in the labour force is low, and domestic violence is a major problem. We share the Committee’s abhorrence that the law permits the stoning of women adulterers, though as the Report notes, the Iranian authorities have announced a moratorium on the actual practice of stoning.

We fully endorse the Committee’s praise for the brave work of Shirin Ebadi, and welcome the decision to award her the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2003. We also welcome the small steps that have been taken over the past year to equalise the position of women: for instance, in December 2003 the Expediency Council finally approved a bill to grant women improved (though still not fully equal) divorce rights, and in May 2004 the Majlis passed a bill equalising inheritance rights. However further steps are necessary and could be readily taken. We have urged Iran to sign and ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women: the outgoing 6th Majlis voted in favour of this measure but in

August 2003, it was rejected by the Council of Guardians, and the Expediency Council has yet to arbitrate.

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)

As the Foreign Secretary set out in his letter of 7 January 2004 to the Committee, we have significant concerns about the persecution of people who convert from Islam to other faiths and those who help them to do so. We know of few instances since President Khatemi was elected in which converts or those who proselytise have been executed, but information is hard to obtain and we do not have a full picture. Reports indicate that the harassment of Protestant Christians is widespread, and that Protestant converts from Islam are the subject of particular surveillance. Unconfirmed reports suggest local authorities have threatened to close down churches for accepting converts from Islam. In our exchanges with Iran on human rights issues, we have made clear that we regard the persecution of individuals for their religious beliefs as unacceptable. We have called on the Iranian Government to implement its freely-undertaken treaty obligations to protect freedom of religion.

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)

We are seriously concerned about the treatment of Bahá'ís in Iran. The Bahá'ís are the largest non-Muslim religious group in Iran, yet unlike Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians do not enjoy recognition under Iran's Constitution. Members of the Bahá'í community have had property confiscated, been denied access to education, suffered intimidation and harassment, and been denigrated in Iran's state-owned media. At least one Bahá'í is currently imprisoned for his faith, and in April 2004, the shrine of Qaddus at Babol, a sacred site of the Bahá'ís, was levelled. We have raised our concern about the Iranian regime's persecution of Bahá'ís on many occasions, bilaterally, with EU partners, and at the UN. We are deeply disappointed that the Iranian authorities continue to pay no heed to the desire of Governments and people of all faiths across the world to see Iran's Bahá'í minority enjoy basic human rights.

Members of all Iran's non-Muslim communities face widespread violations of their rights. We continue to encourage the Iranian authorities to treat religious minorities fairly and equally. Religious freedom has been a theme of discussion in the EU/Iran Human Rights Dialogue. We recognise that since President Khatami's

election in 1997, there have been a few modest measures to address discrimination –most recently, in late 2003, the Expediency Council approved a Majlis bill to raise the level of ‘blood money’ paid to Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians to the level paid to Muslims –but far more extensive reform is necessary if Iran is to live up to its international obligations.

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)

We agree. In every recent election where they have been able to choose freely between candidates with a range of views, the Iranian people have shown a desire for reform. We deeply regret that in the last two years the momentum of progress has slowed, but remain hopeful that in the long run further reforms will take place, and as friends of the Iranian people, will continue to support them where we can.



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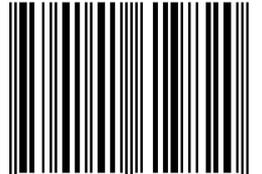
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