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REFLECTIONS ON THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION
AND IRANIAN-BRITISH RELATIONS

by

Christopher Rundle

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CHRISTOPHER RUNDLE

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Introduction

This is an amended and expanded version of a lecture given at the Institute for Middle East and Islamic Studies, Durham University, in November 2000.

Ayatollah Khomeini often began his addresses to students and members of revolutionary organisations by saying how happy he was to see so many young, smiling faces. Seeing this audience here today, I could say much the same. This reminds me that the revolution is now nearly 22 years old. While some of you may have lived through it, whether in Iran or elsewhere, many will not even have been born at the time. For you, it is history.

To help with the history, I shall start by recommending three books. The first is *The Reign of the Ayatollahs* by Shaul Bakhash. This is a concise account of what happened during the revolution, with analysis that has stood the test of time. The second is *The Pride and the Fall* by Anthony Parsons. He was the British Ambassador in Tehran in the years immediately preceding the revolution. The book contains accounts of his conversations with the Shah, discusses Iran/UK relations generally, and comments on events in Iran as they unfolded. The third is the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* - a massive quarry of information on Iran. If you turn to the entry on "Conspiracy Theories" you will get some idea why Iran and the UK have found it so difficult to build up a relationship of trust since the revolution.

The Origins of the Revolution

Let us turn now to the origins of the revolution. Any revolution can perhaps be traced back to the French Revolution, but for our purposes the Constitutional movement in Iran at the beginning of the 20th century is the best starting point. This movement against the arbitrary power of the monarchy resulted in Iran's first Constitution and the establishment of an elected Majles.

A notable feature of the Constitution - but one which was never put into effect - was that legislation passed by the Majles was to be scrutinised by a body of religious experts. The 1979 post-revolutionary Constitution was to draw on

and strengthen this concept by establishing a body called the Guardian Council, made up of six clergymen and six Islamic lawyers, whose duty it is to see that any new laws are consistent with both Islam and the Constitution.

The Constitutional movement contained elements interested primarily in democracy and elements seeking a return to the Sharia. The first Constitution has been described as representing an uneasy compromise between tradition and modernity. (The same could be said with even more force of the Constitution adopted in 1979.)

Closer to our time, the seeds of the 1979 revolution were sown in the 1960s when the Shah embarked on his White Revolution - so called because it was bloodless. Key measures in his program were land reform, the enfranchisement of women and the election of local councils. These measures were, by and large, opposed by the clergy. They saw the extension of the vote to women as being contrary to Islamic principles. They opposed land reform on the ideological grounds that property was sacred in Islam, and since many of the clergy were large landowners they also had a practical interest in opposing reform. The law on local councils aroused suspicion because councillors were to take their oath of office on the "holy book" rather than on the Koran specifically, and it was feared that the way might be opened for the election of Bahais. Another measure which the clergy found objectionable was the establishment of the Literacy Corps, which sent young men and women to the villages as teachers; this impinged on the clergy's traditional role there and was seen as threatening to spread secular ideas among the peasants.

The White Revolution was part of a drive by the Shah to modernise Iran and develop what he referred to as the "Great Civilisation". This involved not only internal reforms and breakneck industrialisation but increased co-operation with the West. In fact the immediate cause of Khomeini's exile in 1964 was his protest at legislation which gave legal immunity to American military advisers in Iran.

The Iranian authorities no doubt thought that with his exile he would pass into political oblivion. It is true that in 1967, when I first visited Iran, no one mentioned Khomeini. At that time, too, the clergy seemed to have little influence. But my teacher was certainly cynical about the Great Civilisation.

My main textbook, the Shah's *The White Revolution of the Shah and the People* and attentive listening to Radio Tehran provided me with a rich mine of political clichés of the time but, in retrospect, did little to enlighten me on Iranian social thought. While many Iranians did benefit from the Shah's reforms, intellectuals took the imperial ideology with a large pinch of salt and the clergy, while defeated in their political confrontation with the state and forced into quietism, retained a degree of autonomy within their own institutions which was to prove significant later.

1978

Let us jump now to 1978. By that time there were signs of widespread, though largely uncoordinated, opposition to the Shah. The opposition came not just from the clergy but, as at the time of the Constitutional movement, from bazaar merchants who, as well as being close to the religious establishment, saw their position threatened by big business as the Shah strove to turn Iran into one of the world's five leading industrial nations. Opposition came also from student bodies in Iranian universities and institutions abroad and from left-wing political groups such as the guerrilla organisations *Cherikhaye Fedaiye Khalq* and *Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Khalq*.

The spark which ignited the fuse of revolution came in the form of an article derogatory to Khomeini which appeared in the newspaper *Ettela'at* in January 1978. It led to protest demonstrations in Qom and bloodshed as the security forces moved to put them down. There followed mourning ceremonies at 40-day intervals, large-scale religious processions with political overtones on certain holy days, riots in a number of cities and, ultimately most telling of all, widespread strikes.

When I visited Iran for three weeks in the autumn of 1978 as part of a Middle East tour I was anxious to find out more as to what was happening, and in particular to learn about the nature of the Islamic opposition. With the latter aim in mind, I called on a senior academic figure close to the royal family. He explained that in Iran, as in a number of other Asian countries at a similar stage of development, what the people now sought was a return to their roots. As a result of the Shah's program of modernisation and Westernisation much of the population felt disoriented. This was particularly true of the rural poor who had flooded to the cities during the economic boom of the early 1970s. They wanted to reassert their identity. With them, Khomeini's message struck a simple chord.

Another, younger, academic, who happened to be a student of Islam, was genuinely enthusiastic about the possibility of holding genuinely free elections (as recently promised by the Shah for 1979). He and some of his friends were gearing themselves up for this. The majority of the clergy, he said, would be satisfied with a return to the Constitution and respect for Islam.

I visited Tabriz, hometown of one of the leading Ayatollahs, Kazem Shariatmadari, himself a moderate figure who played an important role in the revolution but who later lost the political power struggle with Khomeini. Pictures of him were all over the Tabriz bazaar - whereas a year earlier one would have expected the pictures to be of the Shah and his family. Traders in the bazaar to whom I talked said that what they were opposing was the Shah's *zolm* (tyranny).

I also travelled to Isfahan, via Qom. Outside Qom we stopped in a field for a picnic lunch. Not long after we got there two bearded youths appeared on motorcycles. I wondered if we were going to be turned out of the field, but it transpired that they were just curious at seeing foreigners and wanted to talk to us. They told us that they were going round the local villages delivering cassettes of Khomeini's speeches. The cassette was indeed one of the principal means by which his message was disseminated in Iran. (Compare this with the later use of faxes by international dissident groups and more recently the Internet.) Another was foreign radio stations. The BBC was frequently accused of complicity with the opposition because of the coverage it gave Khomeini and his pronouncements. When they discovered that we were British, the two men on motorbikes were soon asking us about the BBC and about feeling towards Iran in the UK.

When we got to Isfahan, much of the talk was of the strikes which had been taking place there - particularly closures of the bazaar which had been called by a local cleric. This illustrated the widespread nature of opposition and the ability of the clergy to call the tune.

The Revolution

Far from taking the form of a neat palace revolution or military coup - or even the seizing of power by an organised political party - the Iranian

revolution came about as the result of a protracted series of demonstrations, clashes and strikes which progressively eroded the authority of the Shah's government. Above all, as those who took part in the mass rallies have testified, it was a populist revolution. The two demonstrations in Tehran in December 1978 each involved hundreds of thousands of people.

The Shah, powerless, left Iran in mid-January 1979, and Khomeini returned at the end of the month. By then a system of dual government pertained - on the one hand the half-paralysed central government, on the other the local neighbourhood committees which had sprung up round the mosques during 1978 to organise resistance to the Shah and provide practical support to the community. Among other things, they distributed kerosene for heating during the winter.

Eventually members of the armed forces either swapped allegiance, deserted, or stood by as the revolutionary forces took control. (The parallel with Milosevic's fall in Serbia in 2000 is by no means exact, but there too the loyalty of the security forces finally crumbled.) On 11 February 1979 the Supreme Military Council declared itself neutral. Revolutionary forces then took over. A Provisional Government was set up in Tehran with Mehdi Bazargan as Prime Minister, and Khomeini moved into a position of supreme authority.

The main slogan of the revolution, Independence, Freedom, an Islamic Republic (*esteqlal, azadi, jomhuriye eslami*), provides a good basis for explaining why the Shah was overthrown. The call for independence meant that Iran was seen as having become too dependent on foreign powers, particularly the United States; it was not just a matter of political and military dependence but for many, including Bani Sadr, one of economic dependence on the West also. The call for freedom meant, in short, that the Shah was perceived as an autocrat. The Iranian people wanted release from his rule, though definitions of freedom were to vary markedly once he had been overthrown. For the more liberal politicians it meant democracy and civil liberties, while Islamic scholars were to define it as the ability to live according to Islamic tenets and to free oneself from that which is evil.

The call for an Islamic Republic, which became more strident once Khomeini had reached Paris, brought together the two strands of Islam and revolutionary politics. The Shah was seen as hostile to Islam, or at best

ignoring it, and as we have noted many people wanted to return to Islamic values: they were reacting to the excessive Westernisation which had overtaken Iranian society and the corruption which went with it. At the same time, the determination of the more radical elements to overthrow the institution of monarchy was made clear in the call for a republic.

To all this can be added the economic factor. Bakhash talks of the dislocation caused by a reckless economic program, of the economy overheating and prices soaring, and of rural migrants swelling the shantytowns of the large cities, where they became disoriented. Parsons describes the conditions for the poor in south Tehran as scandalous, and tells how the national electricity grid gave way under the weight of industrial and domestic demand in the summer of 1977. It would be true to say that the linked problems of economic deprivation and social discontent formed the background to the revolution even if, as Khomeini famously said, it was not brought about over the price of water melons.

So how did Khomeini come to lead the revolutionary movement, with its many different components? Ironically, he was helped by being in exile as the Shah's problems mounted. Out of reach of the Iranian authorities, he could say things and meet people that no one in Iran could. Most of his time in exile he spent in Najaf, in southern Iraq. From there he was able to keep in touch with the Shia clergy in Iran, many of whom were his former pupils. He was in touch also with Iranian student organisations in Europe and the United States and with a number of non-Iranian Shia groups which were sympathetic to his cause. In Iran the clergy supporting him disposed of something which no other Iranian opposition group did - a network of mosques and seminaries through which the revolutionary message could be disseminated and which could organise action by the faithful largely out of reach of the authorities.

Another factor in Khomeini's favour was that Iran was by and large a traditional society. Although there may have been some rewriting of history since the revolution, the Islamic trend was undoubtedly the predominant one among the opposition in the year preceding it. For secular opposition politicians in Iran Khomeini was, whether they liked it or not, the focal point of opposition to the Shah. Many of them therefore supported him in the hope that they could influence him and that, beyond that, when the Shah was overthrown they might themselves shape events. After he went to Paris in

October 1978 - where, incidentally, he gained better access to the world media - Khomeini was visited by a number of politicians. His statements at that time seemed calculated to reassure people that democracy was on the way. The liberal and socialist opposition did not, by and large, realise that Khomeini would exercise as much political authority as he did, or that he would exercise it as he did.

Khomeini's implacable nature and determination were another important factor. From the time of his exile, and indeed before, he was consistent and relentless in his condemnation of the Shah's policies. He became the senior figure in the opposition not just by nature of his religious credentials - a number of his contemporaries were equally senior - but also through his long political record. In the months leading up to the revolution he doggedly refused to compromise, rightly believing that the Shah's regime would continue to crumble. He thus outbid more moderate players.

Summer 1979

In the summer of 1979 I spent three months in Iran. By then the referendum on the Islamic Republic had taken place. Khomeini had said that there should be neither one word more nor one word less, meaning that the republic should be "Islamic" but should not be styled a "people's" or "democratic" republic. Bazargan, the gradualist Prime Minister of the Provisional Government, was complaining of having been handed a "knife without a blade" and of Tehran being "a town of a hundred sheriffs" as the clergy wielded supreme authority behind the scenes and local revolutionary organisations vied for power at street level.

In those days there were a plethora of political groups active outside the university in central Tehran. There one could get anything from cassettes of Khomeini's speeches to the political programmes of Marxist and Maoist groups to statuettes of Kuchik Khan, the leader of a rebellion in northern Iran in the 1920s. Prominent among the leaflets being handed out were those of the pre-revolution guerrilla groups. Following the February revolution there had been a so-called "spring of freedom" (*bahar-e azadi*). In the summer it had clearly not lost all its bloom.

A major event in the summer was the inauguration of the Assembly of Experts, the body whose task it was to debate the new draft Constitution. I was able to attend the event. Significantly, it began with a message from

Khomeini which was read by Hashemi Rafsanjani. This marked him out as Khomeini's favourite lieutenant. He played the part well, striding in confidently and declaiming the message to a hushed audience. The message was also an indication of Khomeini's overarchingly superior position. In it, he said that the Constitution must be "one hundred per cent Islamic".

The deliberations of the Assembly of Experts were crucial to the future of Iran. The draft Constitution presented to it, largely the work of the French-educated lawyer Hassan Habibi, provided for a democratic framework of government, with a President elected by direct universal suffrage of both men and women and an elected Majles of 270 Deputies. Shi'ism was to be the official religion, but in the draft the clergy were not accorded a dominant political role. Commentators considered that it was by no means a fundamentalist document.

During discussion, that changed. Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e faqih* (governance of the jurispudent) was grafted on to the Constitution, so that above the elected President was placed a supreme authority, the Leader - in the first instance Khomeini himself. Whereas there had seemed a possibility early on that Khomeini might retire to Qom and just act as a guide, now he was to be formally recognised as the supreme political authority.

Another feature of life in those days was the number of executions. While relatively little blood had been spilt before the revolution - incidents like the massacre in Jaleh Square in September 1978 excepted - after the revolution so-called "revolutionary justice" was responsible for the summary execution of thousands of supporters of the Shah. The main targets were the military, the security services (Savak) and high-ranking politicians. Not a day seemed to pass that summer without news of further executions of army officers in particular. By then supporters of autonomy movements in the Kurdish and Arab areas of Iran were being added to the list. Evin prison was becoming infamous for the number of executions taking place within its walls, and other buildings in Tehran were being used for the same purpose. Pleas by Bazargan and others for moderation and respect for human rights fell on deaf ears. (Khomeini is even on record as saying that criminals should not be tried, since such a trial would itself be against human rights.)

The atmosphere was thus very charged, and foreigners were not popular. This was driven home to me one day as I was walking through an area of central Tehran, in which street vendors had their stalls. From the back, a large bearded man started chanting "*Sag-e khareji koshteh bayad shavad*" (the foreign dog must be killed). He may have been unaware that I understood him.

If the atmosphere at street level was not good, where international relations were concerned things did not seem beyond repair. The UK still had an Ambassador in place and the Americans were thinking of sending a new Ambassador to replace William Sullivan, who had left in March. But the story of Sullivan's departure was a lesson in confusion as his staff picked their way through the various security forces which were vying for authority on the way to the airport. Equally confused, on a smaller scale, was the departure for London of a friend of mine who had been visiting on business: I had last seen him jumping over a row of desks in Mehrabad airport.

1980

In the summer of 1980 I spent one month in Iran. By this time the regime had consolidated itself to a large degree. Bani Sadr had been elected Iran's first President and a new Majles had been elected.

Bani Sadr was elected partly because Khomeini ruled at that stage that a clergyman should not stand for President, partly because the hard-line clerical faction opposed to Bani Sadr made a mess of selecting their candidate - their first choice was disqualified - and partly because voters thought that Bani Sadr, as well as being close to Khomeini and therefore having political clout, would be able to manage the economy.

The elections to the Majles were fiercely contested. In some cases they were manifestly rigged. Few supporters of Bani Sadr were elected. The main clerical party, the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), commanded a majority on most issues.

Overall, there had been a lurch towards extremism after the occupation of the American Embassy in Tehran in November 1979. The occupation was not ordered by Khomeini, but was soon used by him and his hard-line supporters to radicalise policies both internally and externally. For the international community in general, and certainly for the UK, the hostage crisis dominated

policy towards Iran in 1980. The American attempt to rescue the hostages in April, which ended in disaster in the desert near Tabas, heightened tension. Tehran that summer was full of rumours of foreign intervention and internal plots. Some of these may have been fictional, but one which had some basis in fact was a conspiracy at the Hamadan air base in July. After it more than 100 military personnel were executed.

On the streets of Tehran the continued presence of the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* was a prominent feature during 1980. Their leader, Masoud Rajavi, had failed to be elected to the Majles, most probably because of ballot-rigging. (Listening to the partial counts as they were reported daily by Tehran radio, I had been struck by the way he kept slipping down the list, and eventually off the bottom.) But the *Mojahedin* remained a force to be reckoned with, holding large rallies from time to time and handing out leaflets at street corners. Their newspaper *Mojahed*, virulently anti-IRP, was said to have a circulation of half a million. It was in the summer of 1980 that Khomeini, who had been opposed to them from the outset, began calling them *monafeqin* (hypocrites).

1981-84

The years 1981 to 1984 I spent in Iran. Internally, this was the period when left-wing opposition to the regime was crushed. Externally, the main preoccupation was the war with Iraq, which had begun in September 1980. To some degree the war with Iraq united the country. Persian nationalism was revived in parallel with militant Islam: Khomeini spoke now of "our nation" (*mellat-e ma*) as much as of the Islamic community.

One of the turning points of the war was the recapture in May 1982 of Khorramshahr, the only major Iranian town to be occupied by Iraqi forces. (Abadan was never taken, though its refinery was badly damaged by artillery fire.) On that afternoon half the population of Tehran seemed to be out on the streets. People were handing out sweets, even to foreigners, and at night there was a deafening noise as Tehran's anti-aircraft batteries sounded off in celebration.

In those days the main evening TV news began with two minutes of martial music, with pictures of caravans of soldiers going to the front. "We are going

to Karbala" was the repeated refrain. Religious emotion was stirred up, the Shia love of martyrdom played upon. Leading clerics were shown visiting the front and leading prayers at battle headquarters.

An abiding memory of those days is that of a visit to a hospital in Tehran where victims of Iraqi chemical warfare were being treated. It is debatable how effective in military terms the Iraqi use of CW was, but it certainly had an effect on Iranian morale, both military and civilian. In the last months of the war, when Tehran was being hit by Iraqi Scud missiles, government-sponsored advertisements appeared in the Tehran daily papers explaining what action people should take if there was a chemical attack. Such advertisements must have caused widespread anxiety.

Internally, the year 1981 was one of the bloodiest. The power struggle between Bani Sadr and the IRP came to a head, and an alliance of a kind was forged between Bani Sadr and the *Mojahedin-e Khalq*. Khomeini, while at first appearing neutral, sided eventually with the clerics, allowing his "favourite son" to be impeached by the Majles and then formally dismissing him. Khomeini's true colours thus came through: the laymen who had been his closest aides in Paris - Bani Sadr, Sadeq Qotbzadeh and Ibrahim Yazdi - were expendable. Bani Sadr fled abroad with Masoud Rajavi in July, Qotbzadeh was later to be executed for his part in a conspiracy, while Yazdi was sidelined and derided as a "liberal".

Violence took various forms in 1981. One day in June the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* took to the streets in attempted insurgency against what they considered a new form of dictatorship. The security forces, helped by *hezbollahi* gangs, proved more than a match for them. I remember having to drive down some sidestreets to avoid clashes near Ferdowsi Square. But the violence was limited. What followed was more terrible.

Although there was never a full-scale civil war, after Bani Sadr was dismissed the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* began a campaign of terrorism. There was a day when buses were set ablaze in central Tehran: palls of smoke could be seen for miles. There were also days when one could hear shoot-outs between the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* and the security forces, who were rooting out their "safe houses". The *Mojahedin-e Khalq* were responsible for a series of assassinations of prominent clerics, including the Friday prayer leaders of some major towns. Most telling of all were the explosion at IRP headquarters

which killed Ayatollah Beheshti and some 70 others during a meeting, and the explosion at the Prime Minister's office which killed both the Prime Minister, Mohammad Bahaonar, and the President, Mohammad Rajai. (On the former occasion I had come back that evening from a trip to the north, to hear later an explosion downtown louder than any I had heard before. Next morning the radio carried the news of the assassinations. Soon there were posters all over town of the "72 martyrs". The posters later appeared in Iranian Embassies and other offices abroad, drawing attention to the terrorism against the regime and adding to the martyr complex.)

In foreign relations, Iran was largely isolated during this period because of the aftermath of the American hostage crisis and greater international sympathy for Iraq than Iran in their eight-year war. The Iranian government tried to be pragmatic, saying that it could have relations with all countries except Israel, the US and South Africa (the last being considered a racist regime). While Khomeini's theory had divided the world into oppressors (*mostakbarin*) and oppressed (*mostazafin*), diplomacy and practical necessity were demanding a more subtle approach. A small illustration of Iranian ability to cut corners was provided by the official who wrote on a customs form that the origin of certain goods was "Death to America"!

As so often in Iranian politics, there were dissenting voices. Thus the author of an article in a magazine published in Qom wrote that those who imagined that it was possible to spread Islamic principles and values by means of diplomacy were attempting to "carry water in a sieve". But even at this stage Iran's foreign policy was becoming less ideological.

The End of the War, and the Death of Ayatollah Khomeini

By mid-1988 the Iranian offensives into Iraqi territory which had been taking place since 1982 had lost momentum. Basra was no longer under serious threat. The military balance had shifted back to Iraq, which had recaptured Fao and was increasingly penetrating Iranian territory. The Iraqis were also bombarding Tehran with Scud missiles. The Iranian economy, though remarkably resilient during the war, had nevertheless reached a "red light" as later admitted by Rafsanjani. Added to this was an increasing feeling inside Iran that it had made too many enemies. In July 1988, therefore, Khomeini agreed to end the war. He likened his action to swallowing poison.

This act of pragmatism, which went contrary to Khomeini's previous unwillingness to consider peace as long as Saddam Hussain was in power, went in parallel with his decision on the internal political front to appoint an "Expediency Council" which would resolve disputes between the Majles and the body above it, the Guardian Council. The new Council was to resolve such disputes on the basis of state interest. The Council acquired formal status when the Constitution was revised in 1989 (Article 112). Its role was then expanded to include advising the Leader on matters which he might refer to it.

After Khomeini's death in 1989 Iran confounded the sceptics and there was a smooth transition of power, with Seyed Ali Khamenei becoming the new Leader and Rafsanjani taking Khamenei's place as President. Two of Khomeini's closest followers were thus in charge, though Khamenei lacked his predecessor's seniority in the religious hierarchy and his personal charisma.

The years of Rafsanjani's Presidency have been well described by Anoushiravan Ehteshami in his book *After Khomeini: The Second Iranian Republic*. As he points out, most of those in office after Khomeini's death came either from the ranks of the 1979 Revolutionary Council (like Khamenei and Rafsanjani) or from the first post-revolutionary Majles elected in 1980. It could be added that many others in executive positions had served in revolutionary organs such as the Revolutionary Guards in the year after the revolution. As revolutionaries were drawn more and more into the administration, so an increasing air of pragmatism could be observed. A reform process was under way, though it did not find anything like full expression until the election of Mohammad Khatami as President in 1997.

During Rafsanjani's Presidency a beginning was made towards patching up Iran's relations with her Arab neighbours and with Western Europe. Iran and the EU began six-monthly talks which became known as the "Critical Dialogue". But relations with the US remained hostile. In Iran the very idea of having discussions with the Americans was virtually taboo. On the American side, the policy of dual containment announced in 1993 meant that the US would not consider normalising relations unless there was a change in Iran's behaviour across the board.

A new chapter in Iranian politics began with Khatami's Presidency in 1997. Khatami is that rare thing, a philosopher President. He studied Western philosophy in Qom and deepened his knowledge of Western thought while in charge of the Iranian Islamic Institute in Hamburg. He is a reformist who stands for liberty, social justice and tolerance within the framework of a revitalised Islam. In foreign policy, he has put forward the idea of a "dialogue of civilisations" which would reduce tensions and take the place of confrontation. His election victory was largely unexpected but reflected a widespread desire for change. His opponent, Nateq Nuri, previously Speaker of the Majles, was seen as the establishment candidate, being conservative in outlook and close to the Leader.

Since coming to office Khatami and his supporters have met with determined opposition from the conservative camp, who are strongly placed in the Leader's office, the judiciary and the law enforcement forces. Khamenei, though said to be temperamentally inclined towards a liberal cultural agenda, seems since becoming Leader to have become a prisoner of that position. While not identified with the most extreme conservative elements, he is considered *de facto* leader of the "moderate" conservative grouping. His constitutional position of course over-rides that of the President. Khatami, for his part, has openly complained that he lacks the power to stop violations of the Constitution or to implement it fully. At the same time, he is hamstrung by having to observe elements of that very Constitution which go against democratic principles. The reformist movement has been slowed down. But the trend is unlikely to be reversed; it has too much support from the younger generation in particular.

Iran/UK Relations

The relationship between Iran and the UK since the revolution has been strained. After Israel and the US, Britain was the country which the new regime in Iran trusted least. The main reasons for this were our closeness to the Shah, our closeness also to the Americans, and past British interference in Iranian affairs.

This interference took various forms. In the nineteenth century, with the competition between Britain and Russia over India and Central Asia, the Qajar government in Iran was placed under immense pressure to favour

British interests; one result of this was the granting of concessions such as the one given to Baron Reuter for the creation of the Imperial Bank of Persia. In the early twentieth century the grounds of the British Legation provided sanctuary for over 10,000 pro-Constitution demonstrators. British armed forces intervened in Iran in both the First and Second World Wars. Britain was rumoured to have supported the coup by Reza Khan (later to become Reza Shah) in 1921, and Britain with Russia forced his abdication for pro-German sympathies in 1941. In 1953 Britain and the US were involved in the ousting of the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and the restoration of the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, to his throne. The list is almost endless.

Given this history, it is not surprising that the new government in Iran was afraid of possible British meddling. And among the Iranian public Britain became the subject of various conspiracy theories based on supposed British omnipotence. The most ridiculous of those, which still enjoys some currency, was that the UK masterminded the revolution in order to sabotage the American position in Iran. There was also a joke current in Tehran in the 1980s that if you lifted up Khomeini's beard it would say "Made in Britain". Add to this the experience of the BBC correspondent who, when waiting in the queue to join the aircraft taking Khomeini back to Tehran from Paris, was told not to worry, nothing could happen until the BBC was there!

The BBC was eventually a target of the new regime just as it had been of the Shah, who had complained to our Ambassador that the BBC was biased and had said that the Iranian public saw it as a mouthpiece of the British government. (I spent some time in the run-up to the revolution listening to BBC Persian Service broadcasts for signs of bias, but found none.) After the revolution there were similar complaints from the revolutionary authorities, who like the Shah found it difficult to believe that the BBC was independent.

After the revolution the number of staff at the British Embassy was reduced, though the Ambassador stayed in place until the spring of 1980. In the autumn of that year the Embassy was closed after a warning was received from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that they could not guarantee its safety. A British Interests Section was then established, technically within the Swedish Embassy which was protecting our interests but located physically within our own Embassy building with the Swedish flag flying outside.

Two other events in particular strained our relations in 1980. One was the occupation of the Iranian Embassy in London by a group of terrorists in April. The occupation was eventually ended by the SAS storming the building - an event partially captured on British television. By then one of the Iranian Embassy staff had been assassinated. During the rescue operation all but one of the terrorists were killed and a second member of the Embassy staff was killed by the terrorists. The hostage-takers turned out to be a group of Arab Iranians supported by Iraq who wanted autonomy for their region in south-west Iran and the release of Arab prisoners held there. Needless to say, their terms were not met. Although the Iranians officially thanked us for the way the occupation was ended, inevitably there were some in Iran who thought that inadequate protection had been given to the Embassy in the first place. Two books were written about the incident. The Observer rushed out a book called *Siege: Six Days at the Iranian Embassy*. In 1982 two Britons, Chris Cramer and Sim Harris, who had been visiting the Embassy on the day in question and had been caught up in the events, published a book called *Hostage*. (Two points of possible interest which I can vouch for from my own personal experience are the incongruity of the police incident headquarters being set up amidst the finery of the Royal School of Needlework just down the road from the Embassy and the presence there - now normal in such circumstances - of a psychiatrist to gauge the mood of the hostage-takers.)

The second event was a demonstration outside the American Embassy in London which turned violent and led to the arrest of scores of Iranian students. Before being tried they were dispersed to a number of prisons, including Brixton and Holloway. One of my tasks in London was to accompany the Iranian Charge d'Affaires on his visits to the prisons. On one occasion he was accompanied by a senior Ayatollah, who addressed the students and counselled them to have "revolutionary patience" (*sabr-enqelabi*). Most of them took his advice, but at least one went on hunger strike.

It was the arrest of these students which led to demonstrations outside the British Embassy in Tehran and to its eventual closure. So while, contrary to Tehran rumour, we did not close the Embassy in order to show solidarity with the Americans over the hostage crisis, the crisis did lead indirectly to the Embassy's closure. The incident had a spin-off later when students returned

to Iran and, in at least one instance, were in a position to put a spoke in the wheel of our bilateral relations.

In the first years after the revolution the message which we were seeking to convey to the Iranians was that we accepted the revolution and had no quarrel with it. The first part of this some of them may have taken in, but the second suffered in translation and seemed to arouse perplexity as there were clearly a number of issues on which we did not see eye to eye. One such was the Persian Gulf: when I discussed the area with the relevant department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and said that we favoured stability, they made it clear that Iran did not! For some years the ideologues were talking of the need to topple the pro-Western Shaikhly Rulers.

These were hard times not just for Iraq, which was at war and suffering from revolutionary upheaval, but for many foreigners in Iran. One of my duties in Tehran was to visit a British prisoner held in Evin prison on spying charges. During one of these visits I was taken to see the head of the prison Asadollah Lajevardi. When I asked if we could make regular visits, he gave a wry smile and asked if regular could mean once a year! Happily, the prisoner in question was later transferred to a more relaxed prison outside Tehran, and eventually released. As was so often the case, the charges against him had been trumped up by someone who held him a grudge and he had become a political pawn. Later another Briton, Roger Cooper, was likewise held on false charges. He was sentenced to "Death Plus Ten Years" - the title of the book he wrote after his release.

A host of other matters divided us in the twenty years after the revolution. They included from Britain's point of view Iran's support for terrorism, the abduction of British hostages by *Hizbollah* in Lebanon, Iran's policies on weapons of mass destruction, her lack of support for the so-called Middle East Peace Process, human rights violations, and Khomeini's statement condemning Salman Rushdie to death (see below). The Iranians too had grievances, including the presence of members of the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* in the UK and the support of some British members of parliament for them, alleged British double standards vis-à-vis Iran and the Arab states and vis-à-vis Iran and Israel (both had some validity) and (with less validity) favouring Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war. At one stage the UK was even being accused, falsely, of supplying chemical weapons to Iraq.

The UK in fact deserves credit for its part in drawing up Security Council Resolution 598, an even-handed resolution which helped end the Iran-Iraq war. Rejected at first by Iran in 1987, it served as a lifeline when her resources were exhausted in 1988. As well as calling for a cease-fire and an honourable settlement, it included language concerning responsibility for the conflict, the need for reconstruction efforts with international assistance, and measures to enhance the security and stability of the region. That Iran has received nothing in the way of reparations and has not been included in any broad regional security arrangements is but one of the grievances which she has against the UN and the international community. She has inevitably compared her treatment with that accorded Kuwait after that country was attacked by Iraq.

On the diplomatic front, after the closing of the British Embassy in 1980 it suited the Iranians to keep the UK at arm's length and block any move towards reopening it. With the ending of the Iran-Iraq war and Iran's drive to improve relations with the world as a whole, the Embassy was reopened towards the end of 1988. But this was not to be for long. Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*, which was considered an insult to Islam, led to Khomeini issuing an edict condemning Rushdie to death in February 1989, and to Iran formally breaking diplomatic relations in March.

Diplomatic relations were resumed in 1990 following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, which gave both countries an incentive to be on talking terms. At this time there were still British hostages in Lebanon and Roger Cooper was still in prison, but British thinking was that it was better to be able to discuss these matters face to face than to keep Iran at arm's length. Relations nevertheless remained fairly poor until 1998, when it was agreed to exchange Ambassadors and a diplomatic solution was found to the Rushdie problem, with the Iranian government disassociating itself from Khomeini's the edict: it said it would take no action to threaten the author of *The Satanic Verses* and would not encourage or assist anyone to do so.

Two things stand out in the Rushdie affair. One is that the Islamic revolution, which came with a mission to unite Islam and politics - it accused Western powers of having separated them - later engendered a government which for pragmatic reasons distanced itself from an edict of the religious Leader. The other is the discussion within Iran as to whether Khomeini's edict was a *fatwa*

(a religious opinion binding only on the followers of a particular authority) or a *hokm* (a political command or judicial sentence). It suited statesmen such as Rafsanjani to claim from the beginning that this was just the opinion of one jurispudent among many, rather than a command from the politico-religious supreme leader. Some senior religious authorities, on the other hand, considered that this was in fact a *hokm*. Overall, the episode is an illustration of the complications which may arise when religion and politics are mixed.

The edict has not been revoked or countermanded, and the bounty promised by the 15 Khordad Foundation, whose head is appointed by the Leader, remains in place. The danger to Salman Rushdie has therefore not gone away completely, though it has been greatly reduced.

Since 1998 there has been a steady, but slow, improvement in bilateral relations. In May 1999 Ambassadors were appointed (for the first time since 1980). Iran's Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharrazi, visited London early in 2000. But while President Khatami himself has visited Italy, France and Germany since coming to office the historical sensitivities of Anglo-Iranian relations are such that there are no plans for him to visit the UK.

Practical co-operation is nevertheless on the increase. This is evident not only in the number of trade delegations in both directions but in British assistance to Iran in preventing narcotics trafficking and in shouldering the refugee burden. In January 2001 the British Council resumed operations in Iran, at a low level. Cultural and educational contacts are certainly on the increase.

On the British side the policy is now declared to be "constructive engagement", with a desire to move things forward in areas where that is possible. For Iran, increasingly committed to pursuing national interest rather than ideological goals, promotion of ties with Europe is a key foreign policy objective. The UK is seen as a key player in Europe, and by some as a possible stepping stone to better relations with the United States.

The future for Iran/UK therefore looks, at last, fairly bright. The road ahead is likely to be bumpy, but there is a will on both sides to overcome any obstacles.

Successes and Failures of the Islamic Revolution

The revolution in Iran did not cause quite the political earthquake in the Middle East which some predicted, or feared, at the time. But it did have profound effects in the region and repercussions elsewhere. Its main successes may be summarised as follows:

- The overthrow by mass action of a powerful monarch with well equipped armed forces who enjoyed the backing of the world's greatest superpower.
- Holding on to power despite internal unrest, invasion by Iraq, and international isolation. (This was perhaps the greatest achievement.)
- Bringing about a growth in national pride. Iran has become more independent.
- In the present phase, progress towards a kind of Islamic democracy. Success in this has been limited in scope, but there is more freedom of expression in Iran than in most neighbouring countries and a vigorous intellectual debate.

Failures include the following:

- Corruption. Before the revolution there was much talk about rooting out corruption, but the new elite have with a few exceptions (notably Khomeini himself, Khamenei and Khatami) shown themselves as corrupt as their predecessors.
- Lack of social justice. Post-revolutionary society is divided into privileged and non-privileged, even if subsidies and charitable institutions provide a safety net for the worst off.
- Human rights violations. These include summary executions, discrimination against minorities, and the recent judicial campaign against reformist intellectuals. Justice has all too often been arbitrary and politically motivated.
- Economic mismanagement. President Khatami has described the economy as "sick". The self-sufficiency sought early in the revolution has not been achieved. Iran is more reliant on oil and gas now than before the revolution. Owing to lack of business confidence there has been an acute

shortage of investment, both domestic and foreign.

The intention here is not to draw up a precise balance sheet. In many respects, as the revolution has matured so have things gradually improved. Iran is at present a vibrant society, though one still wrestling with the problems inherent in the post-revolutionary Constitution. (To what extent should power be with the people, to what extent with the revolutionary clerical establishment?)

The Iranian revolution has proved more durable than many expected. It has also handled potential crises better. The transfer of power after Khomeini's death was smooth. The belief by many in Tehran that Khatami's Presidency would be short-lived and some sort of coup d'état might be mounted by the conservative camp has likewise been confounded. It may also be noted that elections to the Majles and the Presidency have never been cancelled - even during the war with Iraq - and that the Majles has never been suspended. Iran is far from being a perfect model of democracy, but its record in these respects at least is good.

Postscript: President Khatami's Re-election

Khatami's re-election as President in June 2001, with over three-quarters of the votes cast, showed that the reformist trend was dominant at the popular level and that the conservative establishment were not in a position to contest the result: so weak indeed was the conservatives' position that they did not put forward a prominent candidate, for fear of humiliation.

The result was a clear demonstration of support for Khatami's programme of political and economic reform. Khatami himself said that it made him determined to press ahead with reform and not backtrack from his chosen path. At the same time, he indicated that he would continue to exercise patience rather than seek confrontation.

The previous obstacles to change, rooted in the Islamic Republic's Constitution, remain. The road ahead will be bumpy. But by the end of his second term of office Khatami will hope to have brought about a greater measure of accountability in Iran's political and economic structures, to have enhanced the powers of the President and Majles at the expense of the many

unelected bodies, and to have achieved more meaningful reform of the judiciary.

In foreign affairs, relations with the EU and the UK are set to improve further, with Iran likely to show more confidence and vigour. But relations with the United States remain problematic. Although Iran would value relations with the United States above all else, she can afford to play a waiting game. There is a consensus among political groups in Tehran that no grand gesture should be made to Washington, and with the Bush administration giving more weight to security concerns and the Arab-Israel dispute than to thoughts of political accommodation with Iran the process of normalisation may well grind to a halt for a time.

To sum up, twenty-two years after the revolution factionalism is still rife in Iran but there is a clear mood in favour of greater freedom and democracy; and in international affairs she has largely emerged out of her isolation. The process of change can be expected to continue, though it will continue to be slow. Neither counter-revolution nor a return to the excesses of the early days of the revolution is likely.

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