



Meeting Summary

Iran Thirty Years On

Speaker: Professor Gary Sick, Professor of International Affairs, Columbia University; Director, Gulf2000 Network

Chair: Michael Axworthy, Director of the Centre for Persian and Iranian Studies, University of Exeter

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Iran Thirty Years On:

Professor Sick noted that there are different aspects of US and Iranian politics as well as different aspects of interaction between the two countries and he selected only some to cover in his talk.

He began with the proposition that Iran and Israel are the two new rivals in the Middle East. This is the starting point if we want to understand what is happening in the region.

Professor Sick turned to consider the state of affairs in the region which the US is responsible for, to a certain degree. After 9/11 Iran emerged stronger and more confident. The US overthrew the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the worst enemies of Iran in the east and in the west. Thus, the US has upset the balance of power in the region.

Professor Sick also suggested that although the Iranian influence is real in the region, the Arab factor is also important.

- **The Arab factor**

Sunni Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt are not as important as they used to be in Middle East politics and they fear they will be left out if the US and Iran restore relations to the same degree as before 1979. They find themselves between two poles, Israel and Iran, and are very uncomfortable there. However, Professor Sick noted that it is very unlikely that this would happen. The Arab states are not the only ones who fear losing their position. Israel does as well.

- **The Israeli factor**

Israel is the dominant power in Middle East policy-making in the region and it fears that its position is threatened. As Iran has become more important, Israel sees it as its main rival.

Professor Sick suggested that the rivalry between the two countries can provide a context for regional events. For instance, the recent assault on Gaza can be also

viewed, in the context of the Israel-Iran rivalry, as an attempt from the Israeli side to demonstrate its strength to Iran.

The Israeli long-range exercises in the Mediterranean last year and the fact that the Israelis were reported to have asked the Bush administration for permission to fly over Iraqi airspace on the way to Iran could be seen as direct preparation for an attack on Iran by Israel. Or, as Professor Sick perceived it, these are signals to the world in general and to Europe in particular that if they are not tough on Iran with regard to the nuclear issue, there will be consequences. Even if Israel did not really intend to fly over Iraq they were sending the signal that they will not put up with anything from Iran and that the US and Europe should know this.

- [The Iranian threat](#)

Professor Sick does not believe that Iran is the most dangerous threat that the US and Europe face. Afghanistan and Pakistan are more serious threats as they are failing states with a history of terrorism, and access to nuclear weapons in the case of Pakistan. In addition, choreographing a smooth exit from Iraq is not a simple thing.

Iran, on the other hand, is a middle level power with a largely unpopular and dysfunctional government headed by a firebrand populist president with limited power. Iran's GDP is about the same as the US state of Florida. 85% of Iran's hard currency revenues are received from oil. Inflation is running at over 25%, and many of the educated young population are looking to emigrate if they possibly can. Iran's annual defence expenditure totals about \$19bn, that is 2.5% of GDP and half of the amount Saudi Arabia invests annually. Iran is not an irrelevant country but its strength should be put in context because there has been a tendency to exaggerate this.

- [The nuclear issue](#)

Iran began developing its nuclear programme in the middle of the 1980s at the time when Saddam Hussein was using WMD against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. It was widely believed that Iraq was developing a nuclear weapon.

According to US intelligence Iran terminated weaponization of its nuclear programme in 2003 when the threat embodied by Saddam Hussein was eliminated.

Professor Sick identified three lessons to be learnt from the past: first, although the production and use of WMD is prohibited by Islam, Iran will be prepared to develop and use a nuclear weapon if seriously threatened. Second, Iran was prepared to terminate weaponization of its nuclear programme once the threat was removed. The third lesson relates to speed and urgency. After two decades of development, Iran has a single nuclear power plant, which is still not functioning. It also has a uranium enrichment programme with centrifuges, which are monitored. To develop a nuclear weapon is a slow-motion process. Some suggest that it takes ten to twelve years from the time when you decide to develop a nuclear weapon to actually having it. Professor Sick suggested that we should use that time for dialogue rather than attacking Iran before it reaches nuclear capability as some people argue.

Professor Sick turned to consider the question of what Iran wants. In his opinion Iran wants to make its nuclear programme sufficient to afford the capability to build a nuclear weapon if they decided they need it. The example of the Shah shows that the idea is not new in Iran. The Shah developed a nuclear programme that was capable of building a nuclear weapon in 18 months: the so-called '18 months surge capability'.

Here Professor Sick emphasized the difference between the capability of building a nuclear weapon and actually having it. Some experts say there is no distinction between the two perceptions. However, Professor Sick sees the distinction as very important and noted that there are countries that have the capability to build a nuclear weapon and we live with that fact every day and do not make a big deal about it.

Professor Sick suggested that the negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue should be focused on how to keep Iran away from getting the weapon. There should be as much transparency as possible to ensure the world knows what they are doing and to have their system under close observation so if Iran decides to build a nuclear weapon the international community would know about it. Iran has said it is willing to accept monitoring.

It is also a matter of fact that there is a certain time distance from the point of deciding to build a nuclear weapon to the point of possessing it. If you can be sure to have early warning and know at the same time that they are some way from having the capability of building a nuclear weapon it is an outcome worth trying to get. As Professor Sick noted it may not be the best that can be done but it is not the worst.

- [Practical strategy](#)

Professor Sick recommended using the time before the election in Iran in June 2009 to send positive signals from both sides to prepare the ground for serious talks between the two countries after the election. Iran should know that the US does not intend to overthrow the regime in Tehran. The US government should engage in a constructive way if Iran is prepared to do the same, and should show respect which is something Iran wants to see. The message that is coming from President Obama and the people around him is getting through in Iran. Professor Sick hopes for a public debate in Iran about the relations they should have with the US. This is something that has not happened before. Looking at polls in Iran, which have stayed constant; about 70 per cent would like to see a better relationship with the United States. A candidate in the presidential election might pick up on this.

Professor Sick noted that Iran has said repeatedly that it wants to play a constructive role in the region, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq. So in the meantime these three countries, along with the US, could establish a group that would focus on security issues that cannot be solved without the neighbours working together. In this way the US will find out whether Iran really is prepared to play a constructive role in the region. It would test whether working with Iran is just a theoretical idea or if it is possible in practice.

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Professor Sick hoped to see good signs from both sides that will allow the beginning of a new approach after the Iranian election. The US might have some good initiatives to talk to the new Iranian government. The new president of Iran will not be the final arbiter on these matters, but he will be part of the elected government. Professor Sick concluded that Iran's reaction to these small steps over the first few months is the most accurate guide in formulating a longer term American strategy for the future.