

GSF SEMINAR

‘Iran: Is Confrontation Inevitable - Prospects and Options?’

**Committee Room 4A
House of Lords**

Wednesday 9th March 2011

On 9th March 2011, Global Strategy Forum (GSF) held a seminar entitled *‘Iran: Is Confrontation Inevitable – Prospects and Options?’* The seminar took place in the House of Lords under the co-chairmanship of Lord Lothian, Chairman of GSF, and the Rt. Hon Jack Straw MP, GSF Advisory Board member.

The speakers were: **Dr. Jack Caravelli** (JC), Director of Non-Proliferation, National Security Council 1996-2000; **Professor Christopher Coker** (CC), Professor of International Relations at LSE; **Elbridge Colby** (EC), Research Analyst at the Center for Naval Analyses, Washington DC; **Peter Jenkins CMG** (PJ), UK Ambassador to the IAEA 2001-2006; **Rt. Hon Lord Lamont of Lerwick** (NL), Chancellor of the Exchequer 1990-1993; **Dr. Alan Mendoza** (AM), Executive Director, The Henry Jackson Society; **Sadeq Saba** (SS), Head, BBC Persian Service; **Professor Philippe Sands QC** (PS), Barrister and Professor of Law, University College of London; and **Rt. Hon Jack Straw MP** (JS), Foreign Secretary 2001-2006.

The seminar took the form of an opening address by the Rt Hon Jack Straw MP, followed by two panels. Respectively, these covered the political, nuclear, diplomatic and nuclear context and the options for the Western policy response.

Speakers identified the following main themes:

OPENING ADDRESS: *‘Iran in Perspective – What Should Western Strategy Be?’*

In his opening address, Jack Straw set the historical and contemporary context, highlighting the strongly contrasting interpretations of history held by Iran and the West. While the West generally sees its involvement in Iran as benign and regards Iran as the offender against the international community, Iranians see things differently. In their perception, Western injustices in the first half of the 20th century – for example, in the operation of a tobacco monopoly and the imposition of extortionate terms for oil production – were compounded by Western complicity in

the 1953 overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadeq, the propping up of the Shah, tolerance of abuses by Savak, Western support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War and the US imposition of sanctions under the 1996 Iran Libya Sanctions Act. More recently, this pattern has continued in the spurning of Iranian helpfulness after 9/11, the 2002 'Axis of Evil' demonisation, and the non-delivery of promises proffered in the E3 (UK, France, Germany) initiative of 2004. Against the background of these perceptions, Iranians have a strong sense of victimhood – feelings that are amplified by the unique form of Shiite Islam that is predominant in Iran.

Drawing on these factors, the current regime has been able to build a degree of support based on an organised structure of grievances. The Green Revolution has been contained. The regime is also benefiting from the increase in the oil price and the departure of some of its most committed adversaries, for example Hosni Mubarak. It is entirely possible, however, that the pro-democracy forces now sweeping the region will eventually weaken the regime.

Looking forward, there are no easy options for addressing the Iranian nuclear question. Iranian intentions are obscure. Military action is, however, an unattractive option. A better course is the pursuit of a 'grand bargain' modelled on the original E3 ideas. In any case, time and patience will be required.

SESSION 1: The Political, Nuclear, Diplomatic and Legal Context

Iranian self-perceptions: Iran is a deeply divided society, as shown by the removal from office of former president Rafsanjani and the disappearance from view of senior reformers like Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi. One section of the population is economically dependent on the state for welfare and economic viability, while the young, well-educated middle class is more alienated. The regime, however, is able to exploit a sense of its own 'opposition' branding to build support for its uncompromising diplomacy. The regime has aspirations to play a leading regional role. (SS)

Nuclear capabilities: The intelligence picture is not conclusive, but Iran has for at least two decades devoted significant resources to its nuclear and missile programmes (JC). Despite its membership of the NPT, it has conducted covert dealings with Pakistani proliferators. This pattern of behaviour is continuing. Iran is not necessarily interested in a settlement with the West as its defiance of the US burnishes the Iranian leadership's anti-imperialist credentials (SS). Iran now disposes of sufficient quantities of LEU that, should it decide to proceed to weapons grade, it could probably produce a nuclear weapon within three-six months. That having been said, there is no agreement within the intelligence community about when this 'threshold' will be crossed (JC). An alternative interpretation (PJ) is that Iran is focused on mastering the nuclear weapons technology, but without proceeding to production.

Negotiating history: Despite the current stalemate, negotiations have from time to time offered promise of a breakthrough. Both the 2003 Tehran Agreement and the

March 2005 offer from the E3 in retrospect look like missed opportunities. Now the negotiating venue has shifted to the UN Security Council in New York with a two-track approach – inducements balanced by sanctions – on offer. (PJ)

The legal framework: If sanctions fail, what would be the status of international law in terms of a military strike against Iran? (PS). The existing UN Security Council Resolution 1803 governing Iran does not authorise the use of force, so the judgement would turn on the interpretation of the self-defence provisions contained in Article 51 of the UN Charter. These set out the circumstances under which anticipatory or preemptive action may be justified. Much depends on the assessment of how ‘imminent’ a threat is posed. The 1837 ‘Caroline incident’ sets a high bar in that the threat must be overwhelming and not addressable by other means. On one front, Iran might be vulnerable to an assessment that its potential acquisition of a nuclear weapon constituted an imminent threat to another state: namely, the persistent threats its leaders have aimed at Israel. (PS)

Next steps: Speakers were concerned that the existing approach is not working. Some ideas (PJ) for reviving diplomacy included less emphasis on capabilities and sanctions, more confidence building, involvement of powers such as Turkey and India, more emphasis on common interests, and less attention to Israeli inputs. A renewed push by the E3 could be beneficial.

In the Q&A session, the following points arose: the BBC Persian service reaches about 10-12 million listeners in Iran; computer simulation would probably allow Iran to build an usable weapon without testing; the IAEA’s capacity for independent investigations is not great, especially in the absence of the inspections regime offered under the NPT additional protocol; in the event of an Israeli strike on Iran, the latter had the capacity to mobilise Hamas and Hezbollah against Israel. This was a constraint on Israeli decision-making.

SESSION 2: Options for the Western Policy Response

Speakers in this panel generally took the line that the prospects for preventing Iran becoming a nuclear weapons state are slim. The policy options for responding to this reality are unappealing. Even advocates of military action recognise that this is a far from desirable course of action.

Divisions between the P5: While there is agreement among the P5 (US, UK, France, Russia, China) that they should seek to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, there are differences between them that Iran can exploit. The US and EU work from the same script but encounter a ‘risk trap’, either doing too much or too little. Russia, by contrast, is looking for the ‘post-American moment’ in the Middle East when it will be able to reassert its leading role there. China sees the Middle East, including Iran, as a bilateral energy source rather than as a global problem. It is thus less sensitive to the global risks of nuclear proliferation. A nuclear-armed Iran would also cause countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia (and the wider GCC) to seek to appease

Iran (CC). The result of these divisions will make it very difficult for international pressure to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

Assessing diplomacy and sanctions: Several speakers (NL, AM, EC) agreed that diplomacy is failing. They disagreed about the reasons. Some (NL) argued that the West had misunderstood Iran, for example by backing Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, by not rewarding Iranian help prior to the invasion of Afghanistan and by misreading Iranian hostility to fundamentalist Islam. There was agreement (NL, AM) that intelligence about Iranian intentions is deficient, the key area of uncertainty being whether Iran wanted to develop a physical bomb or just master the technology.

Military action or containment: The speakers (AM, EC) who addressed this theme agreed that neither option is attractive. One (AM) drew attention to the cost of containment and the absence of Cold War-style alliance structures that underpinned the containment of the Soviet Union. By contrast, the other speaker (EC) highlighted many of the Cold War factors – the overwhelming capability of the Western deterrent threat, the ability of Iran to meet Western demands as a rational actor without fundamentally compromising its interests, and the presence of real will – that would make a containment regime plausible. The choice was a difficult one. Air strikes would not necessarily prevent a nuclear Iran but would send a clear message that Iran should change its behaviour (AM). Against this course of action, it was argued (EC) that a flexible ‘non straightjacket’ containment structure, including security guarantees to regional states, would be the least bad option.

Other approaches: It was suggested (NL) and supported from one of the audience participants (Sir Jeremy Greenstock) that a broader-based diplomacy should be practised. This would include regional actors like Iraq, Pakistan, and especially Turkey. Iran should be integrated into regional economic structures and should be encouraged to conduct joint exercises with GCC militaries and to cooperate with Western counter-narcotic objectives. An obstacle to these ideas would come from the US for whom the 1979 hostage crisis remained the decisive influence.

In the Q&A exchanges, the following main points arose: the democratic evolution in the former Warsaw Pact had enjoyed the support of the Helsinki process and something on the same lines should be operated in the case of the Middle East democratic awakening; the potential contribution of Turkey was stressed; constructive engagement rather than confrontation should be practised.