

BRITISH DIPLOMACY AND THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION 1978 - 1981

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Abstract

Exploiting recently-released files from the United Kingdom's National Archives at Kew, this thesis is a case study of the complexities of engaging in diplomacy with a revolutionary regime – a regime that had come to power in a state with which there had previously been friendly co-operation and profitable commercial relations. Specifically, it analyses the evolution of the British diplomatic experience and especially the role played by British diplomats in dealing with Iran between 1978, when widespread discontent against the Shah made it clear that his pro-Western regime might not survive, through the revolution of 1979, the dawn of the Islamic Republic and the American embassy hostage crisis, until the end of 1981, by which time it was clear that Anglo-Iranian relations were mired in difficulties, with Britain conducting business via an 'interests section' under a protecting power, Sweden. The main purpose of this thesis is to investigate how well British diplomats performed as they conducted relations during a major revolution, against a highly uncertain backdrop, with Iranian domestic affairs in constant flux. Comparisons are made to the British experience of previous revolutions, especially those in France, Russia and China.

In exploring the relationship and interactions between Britain and Iran, the thesis not only looks at how foreign policy towards Iran was shaped by the British government in London (particularly via the Foreign and Commonwealth Office), but also at how the British embassy, and later the interests section, in Tehran, helped to shaped policy at home while dealing with the grave uncertainties in Iran. To this end, in addition to looking at major international issues, like the fallout from the hostage crisis, the implications of the Iranian upheaval for the Cold War and the impact of the Iran-Iraq conflict, the thesis explores three major questions. In chronological order these are: the supposed failure of the embassy, under Sir Anthony Parsons, to predict the downfall of the Shah (where the thesis draws on works that discuss intelligence 'surprises'); how diplomats at the embassy faced the upheaval in Tehran, during the revolution itself; and how the interests section was established and staffed, under Swedish protection. The thesis therefore combines some of the conventional focus of works of international history (such as political crises, war and trade) with questions that have arisen from the literature on diplomatic practice (such as the daily work of ambassadors, the value of interests sections as compared to embassies and interactions within the diplomatic corps).

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Abbreviations

AIOC - Anglo-Iranian Oil Company

ARAMCO - Arabian-American Oil Company

BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation

BP – British Petroleum

CENTO - The Central Treaty Organisation

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

CPRS - Central Policy Review Staff

DTE – Diploma in Teaching English

EC – European Community

FCO - Foreign and Commonwealth Office

IRA - Irish Republican Army

IRP – Islamic Republican Party

MFA – Ministry for Foreign Affairs

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NIOC - National Iranian Oil Company

OPD - Overseas Policy and Defence Committee

OPEC - Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

PLO – Palestine Liberation Organisation

PRC – People’s Republic of China

ROC – Republic of China

SAS – Special Air Service

SAVAK - *Sāzemān-e Ettelā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar* (Organization of Intelligence and National Security)

UN – United Nations

U.S. – United States

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Introduction

'Why cut the thread of friendship with the shears of uncertainty?'

Abdur Rahman Khan, *Letter to the Viceroy of India*.¹

On 30 November 2011, following an attack on its embassy in Tehran, William Hague, the British Foreign Secretary announced his decision to close it down, and ordered its staff and dependants to leave Iran.² The Swedish government agreed to assume the role of protecting power for British interests in Iran from 15 July 2012 and British nationals requiring urgent consular assistance were asked to contact the Swedish embassy in Tehran.³ This episode was not without precedent, as Britain experienced almost the exact same situation in early September 1980, when it closed its Tehran embassy and Sweden assumed the role of protecting power. The decision to close the embassy in 1980 was a significant one given the immense importance Britain had placed for centuries on close relations with Iran and came after a series of events, in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution of the previous year, which made the position of British diplomats there almost untenable.

This study analyses the performance of those charged with British diplomacy, particularly those in the mission in Tehran, during the Iranian revolution, between 1978 and 1981, as Britain's position changed from a favourable one under the Shah to an unfavourable, even beleaguered, one under the post-revolutionary regime. The views of key diplomatic personnel, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and British ministers, will be examined to explain how Britain's policy in regards to Iran was shaped, both at the policy making and administrative levels, so as to establish what the means of diplomacy were, in addition to the ends, and how effectively these means were exploited. In order to establish this a number of key issues will be addressed including: the state of the Tehran mission and general Anglo-Iranian relations before the revolution; why the embassy failed to predict the revolution; to what extent policy was shaped by too great a focus on trade; why it was difficult to deal with a revolutionary regime; why the embassy was closed and an interests section opened; how exactly the interests section operated and performed; and why it proved impossible to reopen the embassy at an early date.

¹ Curzon, George, *Persia and the Persian Question: Volume Two*, (London, 1966), 585.

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-15966628> accessed 23 January 2014.

³ Berridge and James, (*A Dictionary of Diplomacy* (2nd ed), (Basingstoke, 2003) define a protecting power as 'a state which undertakes to protect the interests of a second state in the territory of a third'.

In charting the evolution of Britain's diplomatic relationship with Iran during this period, a number of factors will be considered, including: historical experience (notably the impact of the long-standing presence in Iran); geography (not least Iran's important strategic position in relation to British interests in the Middle East and the sub-continent); economics (the importance of Iran to British commercial interests and as an oil producer); world politics (the desire to not 'lose' Iran to the Soviets, at a difficult point in the Cold War, as well as the need to balance British interests against co-operation with American and European allies); and domestic concerns (how policy was influenced by both ministerial and public views in Britain). Adding to the significant factors which shaped London's policy were events on the Iranian domestic political scene, which were out of British control but had to be contended with. These included a general Iranian reluctance to engage in traditional diplomatic discourse, the lack of a clear, coherent power structure in Tehran and internecine conflict, which caused constant changes in key positions of authority and tended to undermine the position of liberal-minded individuals who were open to dealing with Britain on a friendly basis.

The period 1978-81 saw Britain first operate a normal diplomatic mission with a friendly power; moving then to operate a much reduced presence in a volatile state; before finally being forced to close its embassy and operate as an 'interests section' under Swedish protection, whilst still maintaining formal diplomatic relations with Iran. During this eventful period, embassy staff, the FCO and British government ministers faced a diverse range of challenges, shaping policy towards a state marked by violence and uncertainty, which severely tested the skills of both policymakers and those charged with carrying policy out. It should also be noted that Iran's diplomatic mission in Britain, with an embassy in London and consulates in Manchester and Hong Kong, continued to operate in the period under discussion. In order to understand Britain's diplomatic relationship with the revolutionary regime, and analyse the impact of Iranian aims and objectives on British policy, this study will also ascertain what the aims and objectives of the Iranian mission in Britain were, as Tehran decided to continue diplomatic relations with Britain despite simultaneously making numerous hostile declarations against it.

The semantics of the word 'diplomacy' has been the subject of much debate, with one observer pointing out 'it says much about diplomacy that so many people have offered such different definitions of it. None of these disagrees with the rest, but they contain enough variety between them to suggest what a sprawling craft diplomacy is compared with most others'.⁴ This study will use Berridge and James' definition as 'the conduct of relations between sovereign states through the medium of officials based at home or

⁴ Moorhouse, Geoffrey, *The Diplomats: The Foreign Office Today*, (London, 1977), 268.

abroad, the latter being either members of their state's diplomatic service or temporary diplomats...diplomacy is therefore the principal means by which states communicate with each other, enabling them to have regular and complex relations'.⁵

In terms of distinguishing between foreign policy and diplomacy, former Foreign Secretary (1977-79) David Owen's assertion that 'foreign policy is about what has to be done; diplomacy about how to do it'⁶ is the general framework within which this study will operate. Berridge and James also note 'the use of the word "diplomacy" as a synonym for foreign policy, which is especially common in the United States, can obscure the important distinction between policy and the (non-violent) means by which it is executed'.⁷ Thus, while due attention will be paid to the views of the Foreign Secretary, the FCO and other policy-makers in Whitehall, much of the focus will be on such institutions as the embassy, the ambassador, the interests section, the diplomatic corps in Tehran and the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

For the purposes of this study, it is important briefly to outline how the machinery in the UK operates to decide foreign policy. Parliament, the Press and public opinion may sometimes have a role but tend only to influence foreign policy spasmodically, as day-to-day control is in the hands of the FCO. Research for this dissertation did not suggest that Parliament, the Press and public opinion had much impact at all on policy towards Iran, although they will be mentioned at isolated points. The key decisions on Britain's foreign policy are taken in Whitehall, which has a series of ministerial and civil servants' (or 'official') committees which tie departments together, the chief one in the overseas field being the ministerial Overseas Policy and Defence Committee (OPD), which includes the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary. The most important committee is the Cabinet itself, made up of leading ministers, but this cannot possibly look at all international issues, only the most vital ones. In practice, the Prime Minister and their office at Number 10 has come to intervene on key issues of foreign policy, especially since 1914, so the relationship between the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary is an important one. However as this study will show, in the case of Iran, despite some involvement by the Prime Minister, Cabinet and OPD, it was the FCO that was the decisive factor in shaping policy in London.

⁵ Berridge, Geoff, and James, Alan (eds), *A Dictionary of Diplomacy* (2nd ed), 69-70.

⁶ CAB 129/202, CP(78)72 (7 July 1978).

⁷ Ibid.

The FCO relied on the Tehran embassy to carry out policy. In terms of what embassies do, Berridge⁸ has divided their role into:

- a. Representation
- b. Promotion of friendly relations with the receiving state
- c. Negotiation on particular issues and agreements
- d. Lobbying to secure particular decisions from the receiving state
- e. Clarifying intentions of the sending state on particular matters
- f. Political reporting and intelligence gathering from the receiving state
- g. Policy advice to the home government
- h. Providing Consular Services (including issuing visas) to businesses, tourists, expatriates, etc.
- i. Commercial diplomacy or trade promotion (a role that grew in importance for British diplomats in the post-war period).
- j. Propaganda, sometimes called public diplomacy, in the receiving state.

The basic functions of embassies were set out in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, negotiated under the auspices of the UN. They are: to represent one state in another state; 'protecting in the receiving State the interests of the sending State and of its nationals'; negotiating agreements; reporting on 'conditions and developments' in a foreign country; and 'promoting friendly relations'.⁹ This list therefore overlaps with Berridge, but he gives a rather fuller idea of the roles embassies may play. Where differences of opinion can arise is the proportion of work an embassy dedicates to each field. This, as we shall see, was a major discussion point in the case of the Tehran embassy where its primary activity in commercial work was scrutinised. Some have been critical of the way in which political work was eschewed in favour of commercial work whilst others have argued the embassy was correct in primarily serving commercial interests. But in all areas of embassy work, it will be seen that British diplomats had a much more difficult time in the wake of the 1979 revolution than they had before. This study will reveal how the capabilities of an embassy can change when operating in a revolutionary environment and hamper the ability to perform the full set of embassy functions as set out by Berridge. Comparisons will also be made where possible with other contemporaneous missions, as well as historical missions which have operated in states experiencing revolution.

⁸ Berridge, Geoff, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice (4th edition)*, (Basingstoke, 2010).

⁹ The Convention is online at http://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf accessed 15 March 2015.

Historiography

The author's interest in the subject of revolutionary diplomacy was first aroused through work on the Bolshevik approach to diplomacy in their first year of government. Having come to power through revolutionary means, the Bolsheviks were not recognised by many states, who vehemently opposed the socialist ideology which underpinned the new regime's rule. However, with the First World War still underway, engagement with the Bolsheviks was necessary both for those such as Britain who had previously counted Russia as an ally and also for Germany, who entered negotiations at Brest-Litovsk in order to bring an end to the war on the eastern front.

A basic difficulty was that the Bolsheviks shunned diplomacy on the grounds that it was a capitalist tool. In Leon Trotsky's 1914 work *The War and the International* he showed his distaste for it, stating 'the exposure of diplomatic trickery, cheating and knavery is one of the most important functions of socialist political agitation'.¹⁰ Ultimately, for Trotsky diplomacy was an outdated capitalist method, mistakenly dealing with governments and not ordinary citizens.¹¹ Lenin's influential *Imperialism - The Highest Form of Capitalism*, published in mid-1917 argued that imperialistic rivalries amongst the great European powers was the main cause of the First World War. Lenin believed diplomacy failed before and during the war as it did not prevent the conflict because it was not an open and transparent process. Diplomacy was not only morally corrupt and alien to the values of democracy, but also increased suspicion and hostility amongst the great European powers.¹²

Though despising diplomacy it was soon seen as a necessary evil. Lenin had to engage in the diplomatic process as a means of ending the war. The Bolsheviks also wanted to use diplomacy as a means of spreading the worldwide socialist revolution and in doing so their ideologically-driven diplomats came into conflict with governments in the countries to which they were posted. Thus by using 'bourgeois' diplomacy to serve their own purposes, to the detriment of the 'bourgeois' states, 'the Bolsheviks were not seeking to master the bourgeois state system, but to replace it with a new system'.¹³

In a manner similar to the Bolsheviks, more than a century earlier, the French Revolutionaries also shunned diplomacy. Their diplomats, too, sought to export the

¹⁰ Der Derian, James, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement*, (Oxford, 1987), 195.

¹¹ Roetter, Charles, *The Diplomatic Art*, (London, 1965), 77.

¹² Morgenthau in Kertesz, Stephen, and Fitzsimons, M (eds), *Diplomacy in a Changing World*, (Westport; Connecticut, 1959), 10.

¹³ Uldricks, Teddy, *Diplomacy and Ideology*, (London, 1979), 13.

revolution abroad and behaved in such a manner which was considered an affront to other states.¹⁴ As Frey and Frey point out, 'in their fervor they discarded all diplomatic conventions and rejected the system as a whole. To do otherwise would have compromised the revolution itself'.¹⁵ The Bolshevik and French examples show that even though other states did not want to engage with new revolutionary regimes, these regimes could not be ignored; thus engagement with them was unavoidable and the relationships were frequently marked by distrust and misunderstanding.

The Iranian revolution, like the French and Russian revolutions, has been the subject of intense academic study. There has been a wide and diverse amount written on the causes and consequences of the revolution as well as what happened during and after it.¹⁶ There have also been studies on Iran's role in the Cold War and its foreign relations with the USA (including the hostage crisis of 1979-80), Britain and the Soviet Union; all three of which had a history of involvement in the country in the twentieth century.¹⁷ However, there have been no studies of how Britain conducted its diplomacy with Iran in the immediate post-revolutionary period, certainly not in the context of analysing the methods by which diplomatic affairs are conducted with a revolutionary regime which does not necessarily want to engage in traditional diplomatic relations with other states.

There have been several studies on Anglo-Iranian relations in the early part of the twentieth century, which is no surprise given Britain's involvement in Iran's internal affairs during this period. The creation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and Britain's role in the respective overthrows of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1941, and Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953, are but a few examples of Britain's attempts to shape the make-up of the Iranian economy and government to suit its own interests. Martin¹⁸ and Wright¹⁹ have compiled collections of essays charting Britain's role in Iran over the course of several hundred years. In terms of Britain's role in Iran's constitutional revolution

¹⁴ See Frey, Linda, and Frey, Marsha, "The Reign of the Charlatans Is Over": The French Revolutionary Attack on Diplomatic Practice in *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Dec 1993), 706-744.

¹⁵ Ibid, 707.

¹⁶ These range from early studies such as Mohamed Heikal's *The Return of the Ayatollah: The Iranian Revolution from Mossadeq to Khomeini*, (London, 1981) to later studies such as James Buchan's *Days of God: The Revolution in Iran and its Consequences* (London, 2012).

¹⁷ Marian Kent's *Moguls and Mandarins: Oil, Imperialism, and the Middle East in British Foreign Policy*, (London, 1993) analyses the centrality of oil to the Anglo-Iranian relationship. On U.S.-Iranian relations see also Robert Cottam's *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study*, (Pittsburgh, 1998), Babak Ganji's *Politics of Confrontation: The Foreign Policy of the USA and Revolutionary Iran*, (London, 2006) and Kenneth Pollack's *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America*, (New York, 2005). On the Soviets, see Aryeh Yodfat's *The Soviet Union and Revolutionary Iran*, (London, 1984) and Sephr Zabih's *The Left in Contemporary Iran: Ideology, Organisation and the Soviet Connection*, (London, 1986).

¹⁸ Martin, Vanessa (ed), *Anglo-Iranian Relations Since 1800*, (London, 2005).

¹⁹ Wright, Sir Denis, *Britain and Iran 1790-1980*, (London, 2003).

between 1906 and 1911, Bonakdarian²⁰ offers a penetrating analysis, while the works of Gholi Majd²¹ and Sabahi²² offer critical perspectives on London's interference in Iran after the First World War – with the former in particular delivering a withering assessment.

Following the Second World War, Britain was faced with difficult questions surrounding its imperial ambitions, which included a 'formal' presence in some areas (the colonies) and an 'informal' one in others (as was the case with periodic interference in Iran). It experienced a marked economic and financial decline, which forced it to retreat as a world power, losing control of most of its empire by 1970 and withdrawing from military bases, including those in the Persian Gulf. In light of this retreat, Britain's reliance on trade with Iran took on added importance, in particular after the decision to withdraw from all areas 'East of Suez'. The works of Fain²³ and Young²⁴ provide insight on how the imperial retreat decisions of British policymakers in the 1950s and 1960s shaped the British presence in Iran in the 1970s, but equally profound changes were about to be caused by the fall of the Shah. The works of Keddie²⁵ and Saikal²⁶ all offer some analysis on Britain's role in 1970s Iran. Later studies such as the edited collection by Avery, Hambly and Melville²⁷ reflect on Britain's role in shaping events in pre-revolutionary Iran.

Regarding Britain's inability to predict the Iranian revolution, various works in the field of 'surprise' and intelligence failure were consulted. On this topic Betts²⁸ is an excellent starting point. The edited collection by Maurer et al²⁹ contains several essays on why broad intelligence failures occur with the essays by first Lowenthal and second Jervis looking at the inability of the Americans to make an accurate assessment on Iran. Jervis³⁰ produced a study in the spring of 1979, commissioned by the CIA, to look at American intelligence failings in Iran and this study, recently declassified, forms part of a

²⁰ Bonakdarian, Mansour, *Britain and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911: Foreign Policy, Imperialism and Dissent*, (Syracuse; New York, 2006).

²¹ Gholi Majd, Mohammad, *Great Britain and Reza Shah, The Plunder of Iran 1921-1941*, (Gainesville; Florida, 2001).

²² Sabahi, Houshang, *British Policy in Persia: 1918-1925*, (London, 1990).

²³ Fain, W Taylor, *American Ascendancy and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region*, (New York, 2008).

²⁴ Young, John, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy: A Case Study of British Practice, 1963-1976*, (Cambridge, 2008).

²⁵ Keddie, Nikki, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*, (New Haven; Connecticut, 1981), 275.

²⁶ Saikal, Amin, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah*, (New Jersey, 1980), 159.

²⁷ Avery, Peter et al (eds), *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume 7: From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic*, (Cambridge, 1991), 174-296, 426-428, 608-638.

²⁸ Betts, Richard, 'Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are inevitable', *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Oct., 1978), pp. 61-89.

²⁹ Maurer, Alfred et al (eds), *Intelligence: Policy and Process*, (Boulder; Colorado, 1985).

³⁰ Jervis, Robert, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*, (Ithaca; New York, 2010).

wider work on the intelligence failure. As for the 'surprise' element of other revolutions, Karan's³¹ work on the fall of the Soviet Union was especially valuable.

Also important to this study have been the numerous in-depth studies of Iranian politics during and after the revolution which provide the context for how Iranian foreign and diplomatic policy was shaped. Many of these studies have been produced by Iranian expatriates including Arjomand³², Bakhshash³³, Rezun³⁴ and Taheri³⁵. Arguably the most significant event which shaped Iranian foreign relations in the post-revolutionary period was the 444 day hostage crisis at the U.S. embassy, which had deep ramifications for the regime. The hostage crisis has come under intense academic scrutiny from academics, with work by Bill³⁶, Harris³⁷, Houghton³⁸ and Rubin³⁹, but these focus on relations with the U.S. rather than Britain.

When Iran became embroiled in an eight-year war with Iraq in 1980, it had a significant impact upon its relations with other states as Tehran became reliant upon arms imports and trade in the war against Iraq. Analyses of how the Iran-Iraq war affected Anglo-Iranian relations include the work of Bulloch and Morris⁴⁰, Hiro⁴¹, and two edited works, one by Maul and Pick⁴², the other by Rajaei⁴³.

When militants opposing the new revolutionary regime occupied the Iranian embassy in London, from 30 April to 5 May 1980 in a siege which lasted six days, the governments of Britain and Iran were brought together as a collective, working towards the same purpose of ending the siege, which was orchestrated by a group of militants who wanted independence for the province of Khuzestan. Members of the British public were able to view what happened in the siege as it was played out on live television and the event

³¹ Karan, Timur, 'The Inevitability of Future Revolutionary Surprises', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 100, No. 6 (May, 1995), pp. 1528-1551.

³² Arjomand, Said Amir, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran*, (New York, 1988).

³³ Bakhshash, Shaul, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, (London, 1985).

³⁴ Rezun, Miron (ed), *Iran at the Crossroads: Global Relations in a Turbulent Decade*, (Boulder; Colorado, 1990).

³⁵ Taheri, Amir, *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution*, (London, 1985).

³⁶ Bill, James, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*, (New Haven, 1988).

³⁷ Harris, David, *The Crisis: The President, the Prophet and the Shah – 1979 and the Coming of Militant Islam*, (New York, 2004).

³⁸ Houghton, David Patrick, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Iran Hostage Crisis*, (Cambridge, 2001).

³⁹ Rubin, Barry, *Paved With Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran*, (New York, 1980).

⁴⁰ Bulloch, John, and Morris, Harvey, *The Gulf War: It's Origins, History and Consequences*, (London, 1989).

⁴¹ Hiro, Dilip, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, (London, 1989).

⁴² Maul, Hanns, and Pick, Otto (eds), *The Gulf War: Regional and International Dimensions*, (London, 1989).

⁴³ Rajaei, Farhang (ed), *Iranian Perspectives on the Iran-Iraq War*, (Gainesville; Florida, 1997).

was also given substantial written media coverage with detailed accounts being produced by both Brock⁴⁴ and the Sunday Times' 'Insight Team'.⁴⁵

As well as consulting works on Anglo-Iranian relations, and on British or Iranian foreign policy, this thesis is concerned with diplomatic method therefore several works on this subject were consulted. The thesis has benefited in particular from the work of Berridge⁴⁶ on the roles and duties performed by those operating in the diplomatic apparatus, as well as Young's⁴⁷ analysis of contemporary British diplomatic practice. The diplomatic dictionary of Berridge and James⁴⁸ is an invaluable aid for those wishing to understand the terms of reference used in the diplomatic world. Excellent starting points for the general theory of diplomatic conduct are the studies produced by Hamilton and Langhorne⁴⁹ as well as the seminal works of Satow⁵⁰ and Nicolson.⁵¹ Plischke's edited collection⁵² is an insightful series of essays on the topic. The operation of Britain's foreign policy and diplomatic machinery in the post-war period is well covered in a number of works, most notably those by Trevelyan⁵³, Moorhouse⁵⁴, Dickie⁵⁵ and Edwards⁵⁶. Studies of general British post-war foreign policy and how this shaped diplomatic practice, as reflected in the work of Hennessy⁵⁷, or the edited collections by Johnson⁵⁸ and Ziegner⁵⁹ are useful to contextualise and frame Britain's diplomatic policies in relation to Iran, but none of them discuss that issue directly.

In terms of analysing the impact revolutionary states have had on the international order, there have been a few studies including those by Calvert⁶⁰, Armstrong⁶¹, Walt⁶²

⁴⁴ Brock, George, *Siege: Six days at the Iranian Embassy*, (London, 1980).

⁴⁵ Sunday Times 'Insight Team', *Siege!: Princes Gate, London, April 30 - May 5*, (London, 1980).

⁴⁶ Berridge, Geoff, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice (5th edition)*, (Basingstoke, 2015).

⁴⁷ Young, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy*.

⁴⁸ Berridge, Geoff, and James, Alan (eds), *A Dictionary of Diplomacy (2nd ed)*.

⁴⁹ Hamilton, Keith, and Langhorne, Richard, *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration (2nd edition)*, (London, 2010).

⁵⁰ Nicolson, Harold, *Diplomacy*, (London, 1939).

⁵¹ Roberts, Ivor (ed), *Satow's Guide to Diplomatic Practice (6th edition)*, (Oxford, 2009).

⁵² Plischke, Elmer (ed), *Modern Diplomacy: The Art and The Artisans*, (Washington, 1979).

⁵³ Trevelyan, Humphrey, *Diplomatic channels*, (London, 1973).

⁵⁴ Moorhouse, Geoffrey, *The Diplomats: The Foreign Office Today*, (London, 1977),

⁵⁵ Dickie, John, *Inside the Foreign Office*, (London, 1992).

⁵⁶ Edwards, Ruth Dudley, *True Brits: Inside the Foreign Office*, (London, 1994).

⁵⁷ Hennessy, Peter, *Whitehall*, (London, 2001).

⁵⁸ Johnson, Gaynor (ed), *The Foreign Office and British Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, (Abingdon, 2005).

⁵⁹ Ziegner, Graham (ed), *British Diplomacy: Foreign Secretaries Reflect*, (London, 2007).

⁶⁰ Calvert, Peter, *Revolution and International Politics*, (London, 1984).

⁶¹ Armstrong, David, 'The Diplomacy of Revolutionary States' in Melissen, Jan (ed), *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice*, (Basingstoke, 1999).

⁶² Walt, Stephen, *Revolution and War*, (Ithaca; New York, 1996).

and Sadri⁶³. Both Calvert and Armstrong's studies seek to address how revolutions shape the study of international relations theory in terms of the ructions they cause to the world order and add new actors. Walt focuses specifically on how revolutions have normally been followed by war involving those states which have undergone a revolution. Sadri meanwhile compares and contrasts the foreign relations strategies of China, Cuba, and Iran in the first decade of their post-revolutionary periods. Berridge has worked extensively on how states conduct diplomacy and his study⁶⁴ is a fascinating insight into how countries, either with broken relations or lacking diplomatic recognition, conduct diplomacy with each other. Craig⁶⁵ is particularly useful for analysing the conduct of diplomacy in troubled times as is his later work with George.⁶⁶ However, as yet there have been no specific analyses of how non-revolutionary states engage in diplomatic conduct with revolutionary states (there are only cursory mentions in the existing literature as part of wider analyses with different focuses) and it is precisely this gap in the historiography which this study is seeking to fill. However, Ullman⁶⁷, Uldricks⁶⁸, Hughes⁶⁹, Keeble⁷⁰ and Miller⁷¹ do provide insight into some of the difficulties states and diplomats have encountered when faced with the challenge of dealing with revolutionary states. There are a number of issues which need to be considered with regards to states which have been through a revolution such as the issues of breaks in diplomatic relations and recognition. The works of Peterson⁷² and Young⁷³ provide detailed coverage on the latter. One of the most interesting case studies on the British recognition of and wider attitudes toward revolutionary states was that of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 which has been analysed in the works by Boardman⁷⁴, Feng⁷⁵, Tang⁷⁶ and Porter⁷⁷.

⁶³ Sadri, Houman, *Revolutionary States, Leaders and Foreign Relations: A Comparative Study of China, Cuba and Iran*, (Westport; Connecticut, 1997).

⁶⁴ Berridge, Geoff, *Talking to the Enemy: How States without 'Diplomatic Relations' Communicate*, (Basingstoke, 1994).

⁶⁵ Craig, Gordon, *War, Politics and Diplomacy: Selected Essays*, (London, 1966).

⁶⁶ Craig, Gordon, and George, Alexander, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of our Time* (3rd ed), (New York, 1995).

⁶⁷ Ullman, Richard, *Anglo-Soviet relations, 1917-1921. vol.1, Intervention and the War*, (Princeton, 1961).

⁶⁸ Uldricks, Teddy J, *Diplomacy and Ideology: The Origins of Soviet Foreign Relations 1917-1930*, (London, 1979).

⁶⁹ Hughes, Michael, *Inside the Enigma: British Officials in Russia 1900-1939*, (London, 1997).

⁷⁰ Keeble, Curtis Sir, *Britain, the Soviet Union and Russia*, (Basingstoke, 2000).

⁷¹ Miller, Melanie Randolph, *Envoy to the Terror: Gouverneur Morris & the French Revolution*, (Dulles; Virginia, 2005).

⁷² Peterson, M J, *Recognition of Governments: Legal Doctrine and State Practice, 1815-1995*, (Basingstoke, 1997).

⁷³ Young, John, 'States not Governments': Reforming Britain's Practice on Diplomatic Recognition, 1973-1980 in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 9, (2014).

⁷⁴ Boardman, Robert, *Britain and the People's Republic of China, 1949-74*, (London, 1976).

⁷⁵ Feng, Zhongping, *The British Government's China Policy, 1945-1950*, (Keele, 1994).

⁷⁶ Tang, James Tuck-Hong, *Britain's Encounter with Revolutionary China, 1949-54*, (Basingstoke, 1992).

In addition to consulting the literature on the general conduct of diplomacy, this study made use of a number of works that look specifically at the examples of how individual embassies and ambassadors operated. Young has edited collections with others which look at the recent history of British ambassadors to Paris⁷⁸ and Washington⁷⁹. In terms of the experiences of the Americans, Rofo and Holmes⁸⁰ have looked at the history of the American embassy in London from 1938 to 2008 whilst Young⁸¹ has documented the tenure of U.S. ambassador to London David Bruce, from 1961 to 1969. Amongst his numerous works in the field of diplomacy and diplomatic practice, Berridge has also written on the challenges faced by embassies resident in countries that are engaged in armed conflict.⁸² However, whereas the majority of these studies are biographical in nature and concentrate on embassies operating in friendly states, this study adds to the literature by looking at the highly unusual case of the evolution of an embassy operating in a revolutionary state, where diplomatic relations sharply deteriorated from positive to negative and diplomats faced the daily danger of violence.

The experiences of diplomats operating in friendly states serves as an informative comparison to those diplomats who have to operate in more trying conditions such as revolutionary Iran. As Young⁸³ notes, not all diplomatic posts fulfil the same functions and there is no such thing as a 'typical' embassy. The works, noted above, on British missions in Washington and Paris, show that these performed multiple roles (fulfilling the full set of Berridge's list of embassy functions) and had access to policy-makers at the highest level in their host states; they also worked in a relatively comfortable and secure environment. This was very different to the experience of small posts in the less developed world, where embassy staff may feel isolated and vulnerable, or to those operating amid political turmoil, such as happened in Tehran. As Britain's relationship with revolutionary Iran continued to deteriorate it was forced to eventually downgrade from an embassy to an interests section with Sweden serving as a protecting power. Berridge⁸⁴ and Young⁸⁵ have both documented the experiences of British interests

⁷⁷ Porter, Brian, *Britain and the Rise of Communist China: A Study of British Attitudes, 1945-1954*, (London, 1967).

⁷⁸ Pastor-Castro, Rogelia, and Young, John (eds), *The Paris Embassy: British Ambassadors and Anglo-French Relations, 1944-79*, (Basingstoke, 2013).

⁷⁹ Hopkins, Michael et al (eds), *The Washington Embassy: British Ambassadors to the United States 1939-1977*, (Basingstoke, 2009).

⁸⁰ Rofo, Simon, and Holmes, Alison, *The Embassy in Grosvenor Square – American Ambassadors to the United Kingdom 1938-2008*, (Basingstoke, 2012).

⁸¹ Young, John, *David Bruce and Diplomatic Practice: An American Ambassador in London, 1961-69*, (London, 2014).

⁸² Berridge, Geoff, *Embassies in Armed Conflict*, (London, 2012).

⁸³ Young, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy*, 65.

⁸⁴ Berridge, Geoff, *The British Interests Section in Kampala 1976-7*, (2012).

<http://qrberridge.diplomacy.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/BIS-Kampala-Essay-38.pdf>

sections in other states in the 1960s and 1970s which provide comparisons to the Tehran case.

Primary sources

This study has been undertaken with the substantial use of recently-declassified British archival material (held at The National Archives at Kew), particularly the files of the Prime Minister's Office (PREM) and the FCO. These files document the inner workings of Whitehall and expose the thinking of individuals who shaped policy at home and worked as part of the British mission in Iran. In analysing their thoughts and actions, this study will gauge how the various actors involved played their part in the conduct of diplomacy. CAB 128 files (minutes of Cabinet meetings) are particularly revealing on Cabinet discussions over Iran. In contrast there is nothing noteworthy as regards Iran from 1977 to 1981 in the CAB 129 files (the memoranda used at Cabinet meetings). CAB 130 files document the activities of the Official Group on Iran, an inter-departmental body at civil servant level. The group first met on 2 November 1978 and gathered on several occasions over the course of the next few years with representatives from different government departments working together to produce reports for ministers as a means of forming policy on Iran. CAB 148 files, documenting the meetings of the OPD, were also utilised, although discussions of Iran there were quite few. The files at Kew also provide a vivid picture of how staff in the Tehran embassy tried to stick to their administrative tasks against the backdrop of an Iranian revolutionary landscape which underwent constant metamorphosis.

Board of Trade (BT) 241, Treasury (T) 381 and assorted Ministry of Defence (DEF) 13 files also contain some significant materials from the period covering British interests in Iran. However, there is a lot of crossover with FCO files as the reports, submissions, telegrams and other communications from the Tehran embassy were also shared with other government departments. It is apparent from these files that there was little, if any, criticism of the FCO and Tehran embassy from other government departments on matters such as the failure to predict the revolution. Instead the focus is primarily on analysing the impact of the revolutionary unrest upon commercial interests and how to continue and expand on British trading and commercial interests in such a turbulent environment. The minutiae of business deals thus features prominently in these files. The same can also be said of a handful of files on Iran in this period held by the Bank of England archives.

⁸⁵ Young, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy*, 219-224.

Unfortunately, few private papers collections proved to be of any value to the study. Searches of private papers, including those of Labour premier (1976-79) James Callaghan and his Foreign Secretary, David Owen, failed to reveal any significant documents, while the papers of Owen's successor (1979-82), Lord Carrington, at Churchill College, Cambridge, were closed in the period in which this study was conducted. An exception was the collection left by Sir John Graham, including public lectures and talks which he gave on his experiences in Iran, which can be found in the Liddell Hart Centre at King's College London. There was some material utilised from Margaret Thatcher's private papers at Churchill College, Cambridge; however most of the material in relation to Iran can also be found at the National Archives. Interviews from the Churchill Archive Centre's British Diplomatic Oral History series, including those conducted with the last four ambassadors to Iran before the revolution, were also exploited. Although the interviews were carried out well after the events discussed, they were extremely useful in gaining a first-hand insight into the realities which determined British policy, including what it was realistically possible to achieve. This was especially apparent when the respective ambassadors answered questions on whether Britain could and should have predicted that revolution would occur.⁸⁶

In addition, personal interviews were conducted by the author with the following individuals:

- Sir John Graham (British ambassador to Iran, 1979-1980);
- Sir Nicholas Barrington (head of the British interests section, 1981-1983);
- Lord David Owen (Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 1977-1979);
- Sir Alan Gordon Munro (head of the Middle East Department of the FCO in the post-revolutionary period).

The interviewees were admirably frank and candid about their experiences; opening up to their own personal failings, as well as those of the FCO and British government. Memoirs were another valuable source, not least those of Barrington⁸⁷, Pahlavi⁸⁸ and Parsons.⁸⁹ Perhaps the most significant memoirs, however, were those of David Owen who has provided a detailed account of his experiences in dealing with Iran. He has taken a great interest in Iran, not only because of his intimate involvement in British

⁸⁶ Perks, Robert, and Thomson, Alistair (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, (London: 2006) is a valuable collection which gathers the various arguments on the merits and difficulties of using oral history.

⁸⁷ Barrington, Nicholas, *Envoy: A Diplomatic Journey*, (London, 2014) and Barrington, Nicholas, *Nicholas Meets Barrington*, (London, 2014).

⁸⁸ Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza, *Answer To History*, (New York, 1980).

⁸⁹ Parsons, Anthony, *The Pride and the Fall: Iran 1974-1979*, (London, 1984).

foreign affairs at the time of the revolution, but also because of his personal relationship with the country, which came about through his visits there at various stages of his life.⁹⁰ In addition to his memoirs, Owen, a former doctor, has analysed how the Shah's illness affected his ability to lead his country and how the concealment of his illness from his allies played a significant part in shaping the policies of Britain.⁹¹

Since Carrington served as Chair of the Iran society in the late 1970s and as Foreign Secretary in the immediate post-revolutionary period, it comes as something of a surprise he does not discuss Iran in his autobiography in any detail.⁹² Nor is Britain's approach to Iran subject to scrutiny in his biography by Patrick Cosgrave.⁹³ Nonetheless, it is clear from the list of material in his private papers that Carrington maintained a central role in shaping policy on Iran. These papers may therefore shed extra light on the subject when they are released.

Chapter outline

The early chapters of this study will focus on how positive relations were before the revolution, in order to chart just how greatly the relationship changed. Following this introduction, chapter one provides an account of Britain's involvement in Iran up to the 1970s as a means of establishing why Iran was important to British interests and how the British presence shaped Iranian views of Britain. Chapter two details the experiences of the mission in Iran in the 1970s as a means of contextualising what exactly Britain's position was in Iran at the start of 1978. This discusses such issues as the size of the mission, the background of the ambassadors posted there in the 1970s and the work the embassy engaged in. The focus of chapter three is on how the embassy dealt with Iran's descent into chaos. Here, the pivotal roles of Parsons and Owen are given particular attention. Chapter four then provides a detailed discussion of why the mission failed to predict a revolution would take place, a subject which has already been the source of some debate in the historiography, and also the extent to which Britain was caught by surprise by the revolution.

Moving on to the post-revolutionary period, chapter five addresses how Britain, with a new ambassador at the helm in Sir John Graham, dealt with immediate concerns including the question of recognition. Chapter six looks at the particular challenges of

⁹⁰ Owen, David, *A Time to Declare*, (Harmondsworth, 1992).

⁹¹ Owen, David, *In Sickness and in Power: Illness in Heads of Government During the Last 100 Years*, (London, 2011).

⁹² Carrington, Lord, *Reflect on Things Past: The Memoirs of Lord Carrington*, (London, 1988).

⁹³ Cosgrave, Patrick, *Carrington: A Life and A Policy*, (London, 1985).

adjusting to a new regime during a period of post-revolutionary turmoil, down to November 1979. Chapter seven outlines Britain's reaction to the 4 November 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy and how the ensuing hostage crisis, which so traumatised policy-makers in Washington, affected Britain's own diplomatic relations with Iran. Chapter eight then details the dramatic change in Anglo-Iranian relations, from the siege on the Iranian embassy in London in early May 1980 to the decision by Britain in early September 1980 to close its embassy in Iran and operate as an interests section, with Sweden acting as a protecting power. The final chapter chronicles the operation of the interests section, until the end of 1981 under the respective heads of the interests section Stephen (Ned) Barrett, his virtual namesake Stephen (Jeremy) Barrett and Nicholas Barrington.

It is not the aim of this study to provide a comprehensive guide on how a state should conduct its diplomatic affairs with another state which has undergone a revolution. Such a study would require detailed comparisons to other examples, such as how London dealt with the French and Russian revolutions. Rather this work should be viewed as a case study of the challenges that arose with a particular revolutionary state and how another particular state, the United Kingdom, reacted to these challenges. This follows broadly along the lines of Johnson's observation that 'if diplomacy is about the process and machinery of negotiation, they will be determined in part by the unique circumstances of individual situations. That, in turn, leads to evolution of strategy, which prompts either adaptation or resistance from those engaged in the process.'⁹⁴

Finally, a word must be said about nomenclature. As is the case with any study of Iran and Iranian personalities, there is a plethora of options when it comes to the individual spelling of names. The particular spellings here are not intended to cause any offence.

⁹⁴ Johnson, Gaynor (ed), *The Foreign Office and British Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, 2.

Chapter 1. Britain's relationship with Iran before the 1970s

'(Iran is) the single most important country from our point of view outside the west'.¹ James Callaghan

British Prime Minister James Callaghan's comment, in an interview with local newspaper *Kayhan International* during his visit to Iran in March 1976, was made at a time when the two states enjoyed excellent diplomatic relations, allowing trade to flourish. It can be construed as hyperbole, a blatant attempt to curry favour with his hosts. However, considering the not insignificant part Iran played in Britain's plans to navigate through the economic doldrums of the 1970s, it is understandable why Callaghan made it. Indeed, the Prime Minister's words echoed those of other British statesmen at several junctures before the revolution, as Iran was pivotal to British interests throughout the twentieth century. The history of the British presence in Iran shows a persistent desire to establish an economic and political foothold in the country. This policy helped shaped the perceived status of London as an interfering and meddling power in the minds of the Iranians, a theme which will be revisited throughout this study in explaining the course of British actions in relation to Iran.

Early relations

Iran has had political relations with Britain since the late Ilkhanate period in the thirteenth century when King Edward I of England sent Geoffrey of Langley to the Ilkhanid court to seek an alliance.² This involvement eventually manifested itself in Britain and British businessmen seeking to take advantage of Iran's rich resources by establishing close relationships with the incumbent Persian powers. In 1872 Nasser al-Din Shah negotiated a concession with British citizen Baron Julius de Reuter, granting him control over Persian roads, telegraphs, factories, extraction of resources and public works. Even the arch-imperialist Lord Curzon conceded that the concession 'was found to contain the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that has probably ever been dreamed of, much less accomplished, in history'.³

The concession was met with alarm by Iranians who were concerned by the prospect of a foreigner potentially exercising significant economic influence; this 'constituted a

¹ Morgan, Kenneth, *Callaghan: A Life*, (Oxford, 1997), 455.

² Clawson, Patrick, and Rubin, Michael, *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos*, (New York, 2005), 25.

³ Curzon, George, *Persia and the Persian Question: Volume One*, (London, 1966), 480.

serious threat to Iran's economic and political independence'.⁴ As a forebear of later dissent against a decision taken by an autocratic leader, widespread popular opposition forced Nasser al-Din Shah to cancel the concession. As Keddie notes 'the story of the movement against the Reuter Concession presents in embryo some of the features of later Iranian oppositional movements: a heterogeneous coalition of notables, ulama, and common people, some primarily opposing Western or infidel innovations, some patriotic or progressive, and some simply self-interested or influenced by Russia, united against a move they saw as the sale of Iran's resources, and possibly control over the country, to foreign infidels'.⁵

Subsequently, on 20 March 1890, Nasser al-Din Shah granted a concession to Major G.F. Talbot for a full monopoly over the production, sale and export of tobacco. This again drew the ire of the Iranian public who protested en-masse against the proposed monopolisation of a product which was a profitable product for many landholders, large and small merchants, shopkeepers and exporters.⁶ The protests resulted in the Shah being forced to cancel the concession in January 1892.

1905 - 1941

The favourable treatment granted by the Shah to British interests was eroded by the developments which took place as a result of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-07. The revolution led to the establishment of a Majlis (parliament) which was intended to check the power of the Shah. For the British, the revolution presented a new challenge as they were forced to acclimatise to the new political landscape of engaging in diplomatic and political relations with elected individuals. This meant London had to build new relationships as well as consolidate existing ones, not an entirely straightforward task given some of the newly empowered in Iran were less than enamoured by Britain and the need to serve British interests.⁷

Though there were many in Iran who would have welcomed the prospect of diminishing British influence, this was not possible so long as the country was in the servitude of London. By the end of World War One, Iran was indebted to Britain to the tune of £225,000 worth of subsidies a month.⁸ As a means of consolidating its presence

⁴ Keddie, Nikki, 'Iran Under The Later Qajars 1848-1922' in Avery et al (eds), *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume 7: From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic*, (Cambridge, 1991), 187.

⁵ Ibid, 189-190.

⁶ Ibid, 195.

⁷ Keddie, Nikki, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*, (New Haven, 1981), 275.

⁸ Hiro, Dilip, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, (London, 1985), 295.

following World War One and taking advantage of the weakened Iranian economic position, Britain drew up the Anglo-Persian treaty of 1919. Under its terms London would supply advisers for the Iranian government; British officers and arms would be sent to the army; a large loan of £2 million repayable in 20 years time at 7% interest would pay for the advisers and army; transportation and communications would be developed; and the tariff would be revised.⁹ However, when it was publicised the reaction was fierce and vocal both in Iran and beyond. The Americans, who had their own designs on Iranian oil fields, were particularly vociferous in their criticism of the treaty.¹⁰

Though, the treaty was formally denounced by the Majlis on 22 June 1921, Britain continued to conduct its affairs as if it were still in force and used this to establish control over a significant portion of Iran's oil fields. Experts who were sent to reorganise the armed forces, secured an option for a railroad from Iraq to Tehran and considerable influence over Iranian finances. London also brought about the revision of Iranian tariffs in 1920 so as to make them more favourable for British imports by letting them enter at lower rates.¹¹

Keddie notes that in drawing up the treaty, 'what was wholly unappreciated in London was that the events of the past two decades had effectively destroyed whatever credibility Great Britain had once enjoyed in Iran. On the contrary, hostility towards her was now being expressed with an intensity reflecting the fervour of the new, xenophobic nationalism, which had hitherto passed unnoticed by British officials in the Middle East, accustomed to the old, easy pre-war world of... *Pax Britannica*'.¹² London's attempt to force its own terms upon the Iranians did little to improve the Iranian perception of the British as a greedy, meddling and overbearing power.

The desire to exploit the resources of Iran and the resultant antipathy which developed in the psyche of Iranians was strongly shaped by the discovery of oil. In 1901 William Knox D'Arcy, a millionaire London socialite, negotiated an oil concession with Mozaffar al-Din Shah. Though initial prospecting efforts proved to be fruitless, a large oil field was discovered in 1908 in Masjed Soleiman in Western Iran. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) was established in 1908, becoming the first company to extract petroleum from Iran. In 1935 the APOC was renamed the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) and in 1954 British Petroleum (BP).

⁹ Sabahi, Houshang, *British Policy in Persia: 1918-1925*, (London, 1990), 18.

¹⁰ Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, 83.

¹¹ Ibid, 83.

¹² Hambly, Gavin, 'The Pahlavi Autocracy: Riza Shah 1921-1941' in Avery et al (eds), *Cambridge History. Volume 7*, 216.

After its establishment, the AIOC attempted to revise the terms of the initial concession with new ones that were even more favourable to the company. On 7 November 1917, Charles Greenway, the chairman, presented the board with a set of proposals. Greenway proposed the company cancel its claim for compensation for the cutting of pipelines by tribesmen in 1915 and also make the immediate payment of royalties due to the Persian government. In return he hoped the government would accept the company's main demands, namely the extension of the expiry date of the concession from 1961 to 1986, and a change in the basis of calculation of royalty from 16% of total profit to two shillings per tonne of oil produced.¹³ Greenway intended to free the company from any accountability to Iran, as calculation of the royalty gave the Persian government access to the company's account books and thus, technically, a say in its operations.¹⁴ The company was disappointed, however, as the British government decided that changing the terms of the concession would reduce the Persian government's reliance on London's monthly advances and thus make it less docile.¹⁵ This did not stop the company from becoming a predominant force, the biggest employer in Iran in the 1920s.¹⁶

Aside from its economic involvement in Iran, Britain also influenced political developments. On the night of 21 February 1921 a bloodless coup, led by Colonel Reza Khan Pahlavi, deposed the Shah. While there is no written evidence of British civilian involvement in the coup, it is now known that the commander of their military forces in Iran, General Edmund Ironside, backed Reza Khan's rise to power in the Cossack Brigade and encouraged him to undertake a coup, with an embassy report from 1932 conceding the British put Reza Khan Pahlavi 'on the throne'.¹⁷ Whether or not London helped instigate the coup, the perception in the minds of the Iranians was they were behind it which, as Hambly notes, was 'an instinctive explanation of anything out of the ordinary which happened in the country'.¹⁸

The Second World War

Britain drew further ire from many Iranians when it co-occupied the country during World War Two along with the Soviet Union, as part of Operation Countenance, launched in August-September 1941. Iran was important in terms of its strategic location; the purpose of the invasion was to secure oil fields and consolidate Allied supply lines for the

¹³ Sabahi, *British Policy in Persia*, 15.

¹⁴ Ibid, 15.

¹⁵ Ibid, 15.

¹⁶ Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, 295.

¹⁷ The National Archives, Kew, FO 371/16077, E2844, (8 June 1932).

¹⁸ Hambly, Gavin, 'The Pahlavi Autocracy: Riza Shah 1921-1941' in Avery et al (eds), *Cambridge History. Volume 7*, 219.

Soviets fighting against Axis forces on the Eastern Front. Though Iran was officially neutral, Britain and its allies feared Reza Shah Pahlavi would form an alliance with the Axis Powers and so deposed him in September 1941, replacing him with his son, Mohammad Reza Khan Pahlavi.

When Mohammad Reza Pahlavi wrote his autobiography, following his own deposition, he launched an embittered attack on the British, claiming they 'had their fingers in strange pies. They were always interested in forging links with diverse groups in nations they wished to control, and they had long exercised a good deal of control over Iran'.¹⁹ He also claimed his father 'knew how much the British feared and hated him...he and I had talked often of British treachery. His distrust of British intentions went back to World War I and to the 1907 partition of the country, which he now felt was being repeated'.²⁰

Furthermore, he did not believe support for him from the British and the Soviets was genuine in the slightest, as their ambassadors had allegedly been absent from his coronation, and the Allied powers were forced to accept his accession to the throne when popular demonstrations in his favour showed them they had no alternative.²¹ Moreover, he accused the British of knowing 'how to manipulate Iranian politics and to operate beyond my then limited authority. They controlled elections to the Majlis or Parliament - the British used to bring a list of eighty candidates to the Prime Minister in the morning...they got most of what they wanted, pushing our economy into even deeper trouble'.²² Although these views can be labelled as a diatribe against a power which denied him refuge after his deposition in 1979, it serves as another example of Iranian resentment over British involvement in its affairs – resentment made stauncher by the events of 1951-1953.

The overthrow of Mossadegh

Fain has observed 'Britain's traditional role as the most important Western power in the Middle East and Persian Gulf provided London with a great deal of political capital in the post-war world... They believed it helped preserve Britain's stature as a great power with global interests and responsibilities'.²³ This role was severely challenged by the election of Mohammad Mossadegh to the position of Prime Minister on 28 April 1951. His administration implemented a range of social reforms including the introduction of

¹⁹ Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza, *Answer To History*, (New York, 1980), 59.

²⁰ Ibid, 68.

²¹ Ibid, 68.

²² Ibid, 70.

²³ Fain, Taylor, *American Ascendancy and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region*, (New York, 2008), 31.

unemployment compensation, factory owners being ordered to pay benefits to sick and injured workers, and peasants being freed from forced labour in their landlords' estates. On 1 May 1951, Mossadegh nationalised the AIOC, expropriating its assets and cancelling its oil concession, which was only due to expire in 1993. The decision infuriated Britain.

Hostilities soon followed with Mossadegh's government refusing to allow Britain any involvement in Iran's oil industry and London in turn endeavouring to ensure Iran could sell no oil. Britain froze Iranian accounts in Sterling balances; imposed a trade embargo and appealed to the International Court at The Hague – but the court ruled Britain had no jurisdiction on the case as Iran had the right to nationalise the oil industry if compensation was paid. However, other major oil companies supported the AIOC. The entire Iranian oil industry came to a virtual standstill with oil production slipping to 10% of pre-nationalisation capacity.²⁴ At the same time, BP and ARAMCO doubled their production in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq, to make up for lost production in Iran so no hardship was felt in Britain. Finally, in October 1952, Mossadegh declared Britain an enemy and severed diplomatic relations.

The restoration of its oil interests was of paramount importance to Britain and it realised the only way in which this could be achieved would be through the ousting of Mossadegh. According to CIA officer Kermit Roosevelt, he was approached by British Intelligence in the autumn of 1952 in London to overthrow Mossadegh, but he explained he needed clearance from his own government.²⁵ Feeling they were 'dangerously overconfident', Roosevelt claims British intelligence travelled twice to Washington to discuss the project in late 1952 and early 1953.²⁶ The reasons behind the American decision to take action in Iran has been summed up by Dean Acheson (Secretary of State until January 1953), who noted, 'having lost their chance to negotiate the desirable way, they (the British) now had to use the Iranian vocabulary; the longer they delayed, the more difficult the Iranians would be...Britain might drive Iran to a Communist *coup d'état*, or Iran might drive Britain out of the country. Either would be a major disaster. We were deeply concerned'.²⁷

In March 1953, the new US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, instructed the CIA to draft plans to overthrow Mossadegh. The eventual plan, Operation Ajax, was led by

²⁴ Saikal, Amin, 'Iranian Foreign Policy 1921-1979' in Avery et al (eds), *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume 7*, 441.

²⁵ Roosevelt, Kermit, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran*, (New York, 1979), 107.

²⁶ Ibid, 119.

²⁷ Acheson, Dean, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*, (London, 1970), 506.

Kermit Roosevelt and focused on convincing the Shah to issue a decree to dismiss Mossadegh from office. But the Shah was terrified to attempt such a dangerously unpopular and legally questionable move, and it would take much persuasion and many U.S. funded meetings to successfully change his mind.

In August 1953, the Shah finally agreed to Mossadegh's overthrow and formally dismissed the Prime Minister in a written decree. As a precautionary measure, he flew to Rome. Soon, massive protests, engineered by Roosevelt's team, took place across Tehran and elsewhere culminating in pro-Shah tank regiments storming the capital and bombarding the Prime Minister's official residence. Mossadegh managed to flee from the mob and surrendered the following day. On 22 August, the Shah returned from Rome. The new government, led by Prime Minister General Fazlollah Zahedi, soon reached an agreement with foreign oil companies to form a consortium and restore the flow of Iranian oil to world markets in substantial quantities, giving the United States and Britain the lion's share of Iran's oil. This consortium, comprising BP with a 40% share; five American companies with 8% each; Shell with 14%; and the Compagnie Francaise des Petroles (C.F.P) with 6%, ended the monopoly enjoyed by the AIOC which was disbanded.²⁸ In return, the U.S. provided huge sums of funding to support the Shah's new regime, including his army and secret police force, SAVAK, until his overthrow in 1979.

Anglo-Iranian diplomatic relations were restored in December 1953 and initially a chargé d'affaires, Denis Wright, was chosen to head the mission. He chose as low key a manner of re-establishing the British presence by not carrying out a ceremonial handover of the embassy from the incumbent Swiss who were housed in the building during the break in relations.²⁹ Wright explained the need for a cautious approach was necessary as 'because of past history the Persians distrusted us. Because of this I felt that we should move cautiously and keep our heads down'.³⁰ The ousting of Mossadegh, whilst in the short term successful in restoring Britain's oil interests, left an indelible imprint on the Iranian psyche with successive generations of Iranians, including those instrumental in deposing the Shah in 1979, using 1953 as another example of Britain as an interfering power, bent upon exploiting Iran's natural resources. As a means of solidifying its relationship with the new regime, Britain helped form the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). The organisation had Britain, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Turkey as members, was

²⁸ Saikal, Amin, 'Iranian Foreign Policy 1921-1979' in Avery et al (eds), *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume 7*, 443.

²⁹ Wright, Sir Denis interview – British Diplomatic Oral History Project (BDOHP), Churchill Archive Centre, Cambridge, 20.

³⁰ Ibid, 20.

headquartered in Ankara and part of a number of Western-led regional grouping against the Soviets. But Dimitakis is of the view that 'for London and Washington the defence of Iran was the epicentre of CENTO's mission'.³¹

The post-war diminishing of British power

Though Britain emerged victorious from the Second World War, its financial power had been undermined; this had an inevitable impact on its presence in the world, including in Iran and the wider Middle East. The reality of the post-war world for Britain was that it could no longer exert itself in world affairs as it had done previously and it became no longer a question of what it *wanted to do* in terms of foreign policy, but rather what it *had the power to do* in order to match its influence to its resources. London's inability to control the escalation of hostilities in Palestine, in addition to the loss of India, served as stark, early examples of this.

The reliance upon the Americans for support in ousting Mossadegh was reflective of a post-war world in which Britain's status as a world power had greatly diminished in contrast to the ascendant USA, which was now a superpower. Where, previously, London had shown itself to be adept at managing its own affairs in Iran and imposing its will upon the Iranians, it now had to accept the reality that the mantle of most influential Western power in Iran and the wider Middle East had unmistakeably passed to the Americans. Roger Makins, the British ambassador to Washington noted as much in January 1954: 'There is on our side a very understandable impression that the Americans are out to take our place in the Middle East. Their influence has greatly expanded there since the end of the Second World War...'³²

Britain's decline from its former power was hastened by the process of decolonisation with the partition of India in 1947 followed closely by independence granted to Burma and Ceylon (1948), Sudan (1956), the Gold Coast and Malayan states (1957) and Nigeria (1960). Numerous other colonies also become independent by 1970. Decolonisation was far from a serene process. With regards to Kuwait, for example, Britain took steps to withdraw in early 1961, first by removing its special court system (which handled the cases of foreigners resident there), which allowed the Kuwaiti government to begin to exercise legal jurisdiction under new laws. Kuwait became fully independent on 19 June 1961 but this was not accepted by Iraq which wanted to claim

³¹ Dimitakis, Panagiotis, *Failed Alliances of the Cold War: Britain's Strategy and Ambitions in Asia and the Middle East*, (London, 2012), 135.

³² TNA, CAB129/66, C(54)53, (25 January 1954).

the newly independent state for itself. When it appeared Iraq was mobilising itself for a military invasion, Kuwait sought assistance from Britain, who as part of Operation Vantage set about rapidly deploying aircraft, ships and troops to the region which helped avert an invasion.

Though Britain's global power was loosening, it maintained a presence in the Middle East, at least for a time, in the Persian and Arab Gulf including Aden (the only Crown Colony in the Middle East), Muscat, Qatar and Kuwait as well as keeping close links with former mandates in Iraq (down to 1958) and Jordan. This allowed Britain to prolong its great strategic position in the region which was underpinned by control of key waterways, allowing it in turn to keep a handle on its oil, investment and trade interests. Given the considerable losses it had incurred in fighting World War Two and amid continued struggles in places such as Palestine and India, the presence in the Middle East was now more vital than ever in propping up the British economy. Fain notes 'British policymakers clung doggedly to their 'informal empire' in the Middle East'.³³ They did so by having political agents who 'acted as the eyes and ears of the British Empire in the Gulf. They advised the local rulers on financial and diplomatic matters, promoted British commerce with the emirates, and exercised criminal and civil jurisdiction over all non-Arab foreigners in the region'.³⁴

The distinction between what Britain wanted to do in terms of its involvement in world affairs and what it had the power to do became more pronounced in the years after Mossadegh's overthrow. As Young notes, this can be attributed to the fact that 'the years between the Suez crisis and the entry to the European Economic Community (EEC) saw a continuing poor performance by the British economy, the rapid decline of the Sterling Area, the independence of almost all that remained of the formal Empire and deep uncertainty among political leaders about the country's place in the world'.³⁵ This erosion of the ability to influence international relations as in years past, culminated with the announcement in April 1967 under Harold Wilson's Labour government that Britain would be withdrawing from military bases 'East of Suez', which essentially meant in Malaysia-Singapore and the Persian Gulf.³⁶ The decision was then accelerated in 1968 to the end of 1971, due in part to the devaluation of the Pound in November 1967.

³³ Fain, *American Ascendancy*, 32.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

³⁵ Young, John, *Britain and the World in the Twentieth Century*, (London, 1997), 168.

³⁶ In general see Dockrill, Saki, *Britain's retreat from East of Suez: the choice between Europe and the world* (Basingstoke, 2002).

Withdrawal 'East of Suez' and its consequences

According to Fain, the Americans were keen to avoid becoming directly and permanently embroiled in the turbulent affairs of the Persian Gulf and did much to prop up the British position 'by supporting the British pound and by offering diplomatic and political assistance to the British government in its efforts to preserve the political stability and economic pliability of the Persian Gulf states'.³⁷ The decision to withdraw 'East of Suez' was met with dismay by the Americans who felt they had been left stranded.³⁸ For Britain, American support in itself was not enough to rescue its' ailing position, as it continued to be placed in peril by the fragility of its economy. The writing was already on the wall, so to speak, even before Wilson's announcement, with the forced departure from Aden and South Arabia in 1967.³⁹ As such, Britain entered the 1970s in a position of retreat, forced to operate within severe economic and military limitations, unable to wield its old political influence in the region. Yet conversely, the Middle East remained of great importance and a former British diplomat, Sir Alan Munro, notes that, in spite of making a conscious effort to withdraw, the Middle East remained an area of active diplomacy for London.⁴⁰

Imperial retreat also had a direct impact on Anglo-Iranian relations most notably over the status of Bahrain, Sharjah, Abu Musa Island and the Tunb Islands. Discussions over the future of Bahrain had been a source of Anglo-Iranian contention with the Iranians initially favouring a referendum, but backing down in the face of fierce opposition from both British and Bahraini leaders. It was eventually agreed by the respective parties to refer the issue to the UN who took on the responsibility of settling the issue by conducting a survey in Bahrain to determine the political future of the island, polling islanders on whether they preferred independence or Iranian control. The final report produced the conclusion that the overwhelming majority of Bahrainis wanted independence. On 11 May 1970, the UN Security Council endorsed this, with both Britain and Iran accepting the report, bringing their disagreement over Bahrain to a close. Independence for Bahrain was declared on 15 August 1971 and a new treaty of friendship with Britain followed.

³⁷ Fain, *American Ascendancy*, 2.

³⁸ Ibid, 141-142.

³⁹ For a full account see Mawby, Spencer, *British Policy in Aden and the Protectorates 1955-67: Last Outpost of a Middle East Empire*, (London, 2005).

⁴⁰ Munro, Sir Alan Gordon interview – BDOHP, 7-8.

Soon after the 'East of Suez' announcement, however, Iran moved to assert its dominance over certain parts of the Gulf.⁴¹ On 30 November 1971 (two days before the official establishment of the United Arab Emirates) Iran and Sharjah signed a Memorandum of Understanding concerning the island of Abu Musa which allowed Sharjah to have a local police station and Iran to station troops on the island. Iran then proceeded successfully to annex Abu Musa and the Tunb islands by force on 30 November 1971.

In assessing the impact of ceding these territories the then British ambassador, Sir Peter Ramsbotham, has noted Britain 'had defence treaties with the Trucial States, and they depended on us to sustain them, all the way down...overnight, we were going to withdraw, and change our defence treaties into treaties of alliance, with no defence responsibilities'.⁴² Sir Peter had extensive consultations with the Shah about the consequences of this withdrawal, particularly in regards to managing the oil production arrangement with these islands.⁴³

Iraq proceeded to take Britain to the UN Security Council over the question of the cessation of these islands, which in turn caused the Shah considerable concern. Ramsbotham has explained what happened next as Britain went to great lengths as it sought to appease the Shah, which served to further emphasise the significance London placed on maintaining strong personal relations with the Shah:

'We were rather on the defensive with him, so we countered (this was partly me and partly [Foreign Secretary] Alec Home, together) with the poor Queen... by getting her to invite the Shah... to Ascot, where he stayed over Ascot week in Windsor Castle, where my wife and I were invited. All the Royal Family were there, one after the other. We were laying it on thick to win our position back. You couldn't do that at the Elysée or the White House. It's one of our things which nobody else has. After the wonderful dinner late that evening, The Queen took us all round seeing things, quite amazing things, including ancient manuscripts of Persian history, which the Shah hadn't seen before'.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Fain, *American Ascendancy*, 180.

⁴² Ramsbotham, Sir Peter interview – BDOHP, 37.

⁴³ Ibid 38.

⁴⁴ Ibid 38.

Summary

Britain up to the 1970s maintained a long standing interest in Iran. Aside from being pivotal to oil and trade interests, Iran's strategic position was crucial in connecting Britain to its wider interests in the Gulf and Middle East region (as well as, before 1947, the Indian empire). Its importance was underlined by Britain's involvement at key junctures of modern Iranian history including the Reuter Concession, the tobacco protests, the creation of the AIOC, the making of the Anglo-Persian treaty, the occupation of Iran during the Second World War and the overthrow of Mossadegh. But with the post-war retreat from empire, Britain's position in Iran diminished considerably and London entered the mid-1970s relying upon the Shah to protect its commercial interests and oil supplies. Close diplomatic ties underpinned this relationship, ties which will be examined more closely in the following chapters.

Chapter 2. The British mission in Iran in the 1970s

'For the first couple of years or so the commercial boom was unbelievable... I was probably receiving personally, say, between five and ten Chairmen of companies every day. My Commercial Section was like Wembley Stadium! It was just packed with people the whole time; it was a fantastic boom.'¹ Sir Anthony Parsons

The machinery of British diplomacy

To understand how Britain conducted its diplomatic relations with Iran it is first important to outline the British diplomatic apparatus which existed in the 1970s. According to Berridge² diplomatic relations exist as the normal condition between states enjoying mutual recognition in order, to facilitate free and effective bilateral communication. In terms of David Owen's assertion that 'foreign policy is about what has to be done; diplomacy about how to do it'³, it is the government which decides foreign policy for diplomats to implement. However, as Sir Paul Gore-Booth⁴ explains, sometimes 'the two get mixed up especially when a diplomat is advising on policy or a member of the government normally engaged in policy decision takes over a diplomatic operation which seems to merit top-level or summit discussion'. Such a point is important to note for the purposes of this study in trying to establish what, if any, impact the FCO and Tehran embassy had upon the formulation of the government's Iran policy. For Berridge⁵, although missions abroad should be engaged 'in lively dialogue on the bilateral relationships in which they are at the sharp end, it is important that [government] should not surrender too much influence to them'. Those involved in the formulation and delivery of policy have distinct responsibilities. Government ministers are elected by the general populace whilst the civil servants charged with delivering policy undergo a formal recruitment process; thus the two are accountable to different sets of stakeholders. Although the voices of those delivering policy cannot be ignored in the formulation of policy what is up for debate is the extent to which civil servants should be allowed to shape policy.

¹ Parsons, Sir Anthony – Churchill Archive Centre, Cambridge, British Diplomatic Oral History Project (BDOHP), 14-18.

² Berridge, Geoff, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice (5th edition)*, (Basingstoke and New York, 2015), 99.

³ CAB 129/202, CP(78)72 (7 July 1978).

⁴ Edwards, Ruth Dudley, *True Brits: Inside the Foreign Office*, (London, 1994), 21.

⁵ Berridge, *Diplomacy*, 10. See also Moorhouse, Geoffrey, *The Diplomats: The Foreign Office Today*, (London, 1977), 390.

Edwards⁶ leaves no doubts as to who controls the situation when it comes to British foreign policy: 'The Foreign Secretary is the overlord. It is he who has to persuade the Prime Minister and the Cabinet to back his foreign policy...'. Foreign Secretaries may possess an admiration for civil servants who serve under them, meaning that a relatively harmonious relationship ensues. Or they may possess a certain amount of disdain for the civil servants, which can lead to difficult relations. When his official car arrived late during his Paris visit in 1966, the volcanic Foreign Secretary George Brown erupted at the British ambassador Patrick Reilly, telling him 'your job is simply to see that my car is available when I want it. I do everything that is important here.'⁷

Moorhouse⁸, writing in the mid-1970s, talked of the 'perplexing' state of affairs when only the USA and Soviet Union employed more diplomats than Britain in spite of its dire economic situation. However, when one considers the role diplomats played in boosting Britain's economic position, through trade with countries like Iran, the decision to have such large numbers can be seen as entirely logical. If there was a debate to be had on these large numbers, it ought to have been in relation to the extent to which diplomats' political work suffered as a result of over-emphasis on trade promotion; this was an issue pertinent to Iran in the 1970s.

Whilst the FCO is the principal department through which Britain's foreign policy is delivered, it is the task of missions abroad to deliver policy (via Berridge's functions of an embassy outlined in the introduction) and help build healthy relations with countries around the world. For Berridge⁹ the very existence 'of the mission highlights the sending state's recognition of the receiving state and the value it attaches to normal relations with it'. Of course diplomatic relations vary depending upon a number of factors, including the stability of the country in question as well as their attitude toward Britain. This will be evident in this study, as Britain's relationship with Iran changed from a friendly to a tense one.

Central to the performance of an embassy, according to Berridge¹⁰ is the ability to create strong working relationships:

⁶ Edwards, *True Brits*, 24.

⁷ Young, John W, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy: A Case Study of British Practice, 1963-1976*, (Cambridge, 2008), 72.

⁸ Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 43.

⁹ Berridge, *Diplomacy*, 120.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 121.

'to be as well networked as possible; to cultivate extensive social contacts, especially in influential quarters; to honour local customs and mark important local events, insofar as these are compatible with its own values; and, in the process, avoid giving gratuitous offence if some unpleasant message has to be delivered to the host government, a newspaper editor, or anyone else. By these means it is easier to gain influence and gather information, and the embassy is better placed to handle a crisis in relations should one subsequently develop'.

As we shall see in this study, by building strong working relationships prior to the Iranian revolution the embassy was able to flourish, particularly in commercial work. However, it may not be possible to have such relationships with states such as revolutionary Iran, where some of those charged with delivering foreign policy had little interest in building harmonious relationships. This poses the question of what exactly can be done when those with whom you wish to develop relationships do not share the same sentiment.

There have been a number of excellent works produced by historians on the experiences of embassies and ambassadors including Britain's Washington embassy¹¹, Britain's Paris embassy¹² and US ambassador to Britain in the 1960s David Bruce¹³. These provide a fascinating insight into the lives of diplomats as they went about delivering (and in some instances shaping) policy. However, as Young and Berridge¹⁴ point out, the work of the Washington embassy (and the point can be applied to other embassies to close allies, like France and Germany) was 'carried out in a relatively privileged, comfortable and secure environment. Cross-cultural understanding was made easier by the linguistic, ideological and historic links between the two countries'. Thus 'it must be stressed at once that ambassadors' jobs vary so enormously that generalising about the significance of their work is perilous'¹⁵ and nowhere was this more evident than in Iran where British diplomats went through the whole gamut of emotions as they went from operating in a relatively stable country to one which experienced severe revolutionary turmoil.

Indeed, the challenge of dealing with revolutionary states is markedly different to the challenge of dealing with friendly states, where at worst relations can become strained, over certain issues but there is never a break in relations. In terms of British

¹¹ Hopkins, Michael F et al (eds), *The Washington Embassy: British Ambassadors to the United States 1939-1977*, (Basingstoke, 2009).

¹² Pastor-Castro, Rogelia and Young, John (eds), *The Paris Embassy: British Ambassadors and Anglo-French Relations, 1944-79*, (Basingstoke, 2013).

¹³ Young, John, *David Bruce and Diplomatic Practice: An American Ambassador in London, 1961-69*, (London, 2014).

¹⁴ Young, John and Berridge, Geoff, 'Conclusion' in Hopkins, Michael F et al (eds), *The Washington Embassy* 230-231.

¹⁵ Ibid, 229.

ambassadors to the United States, the tenure of Lord Inverchapel between 1946 and 1948 was seen as a failure by many, especially in contrast to his more able successor, Sir Oliver Franks¹⁶, whilst Patrick Dean, serving between 1965 to 1969, suffered in his relationship with President Johnson thanks to Britain's decision to not become involved in Vietnam and to withdraw from East of Suez.¹⁷ In the case of Anglo-French relations de Gaulle was absent for a ceremony on 6 June 1964 to commemorate D-Day, as he had not forgotten that the Americans and British had prevented his entry to France for over a week in 1944.¹⁸ In 1963 and 1967 he vetoed British applications to join the EEC and relations were again strained over the 1969 'Soames Affair'.¹⁹ Yet in spite of these episodes, this did not mean that a break in relations would follow.

As a means of comparison, when relations are 'normal' with important partner states such as the U.S.A., then the scale of operations is immense. During World War Two for example, a new larger more active embassy was created in Washington to handle increased cooperation meaning 'the embassy had five main branches: the service attachés; the commercial section; the Chancery, which dealt with general political, Commonwealth and specialist areas, as well as the activities of the Labour attaché and scientific attaché; the Treasury and supply section; fifthly, administration which covered the library, buildings, accounts and so on'.²⁰ The Tehran embassy also had relatively large operations but these diminished as chaos ensued on the domestic Iranian scene.

The British diplomatic elite

Those privileged enough to deliver British diplomacy at the highest levels came from very particular backgrounds; possessing certain characteristics and personality traits. The Diplomatic Service in the 1970s, Young points out, was almost unequivocally elitist as,

'the members of this elite were still predominantly male, upper class and Oxbridge educated. They were 'generalists', mostly educated in history or the classics, rather than experts with any technical knowledge... The FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] was accused of being an elitist, closed, snobbish institution, out of touch with the rest of society. It was hierarchical, relatively

¹⁶ Folly, Martin, 'Lord Inverchapel 1946-1948' in Hopkins, Michael F et al (eds), *The Washington Embassy*, 52.

¹⁷ Colman, Jonathan, 'Patrick Dean 1965-1969' in Hopkins, Michael F et al (eds), *The Washington Embassy*, 150.

¹⁸ Ellison, James, 'Pierson Dixon 1960-65' in Pastor-Castro, and Young (eds), *The Paris Embassy*, 91.

¹⁹ See the wider essay on Christopher Soames' tenure as ambassador to Paris by Furby and Ludlow in the edited collection by Pastor-Castro and Young.

²⁰ Hopkins, Michael F et al, 'Introduction' in Hopkins, Michael F et al (eds), *The Washington Embassy*, 3.

small for a Whitehall department and had a professional ethos all of its own that smacked of a kind of Freemasonry.²¹

As such, while these individuals possessed a great deal of intellect and enviable networks of contacts, they were not immune from allegations of cronyism and generally being out of touch with the average working man. For Moorhouse²², 'as a word suggesting rare distinction, there is nothing to compete with "ambassador", judging by the frequency with which it is attached to first class hotels, nightclubs, expensive drinks, cigarettes and other luxuries throughout the world'. Sir Kenneth Brill of the CPRS (Central Policy Review Staff) sent the then Foreign Secretary, James Callaghan, a paper in which he outlined it was time for a review of the FCO, similar to the Duncan Report of 1968. The CPRS faced an almost thankless task, since the Diplomatic Service was loath to see any radical changes to an established entity which, to their minds, worked well in terms of personnel recruitment. The CPRS report when published encountered fierce resistance from the Service, the Defence Attachés, the British Council²³ and the BBC External Services each with its own establishment lobbyists²⁴. None were keen on the CPRS's recommendation for the abolishment of the Diplomatic Service as a separate entity, with its functions to be housed within the Home Civil Service, grouped along with overseas trade development.²⁵ Ultimately the Diplomatic Service won out. A White Paper by the Callaghan government in reply to the Commons Expenditure Committee in August 1978, made clear that the Service would survive as a separate entity from the Home Civil Service. The reputation of the CPRS then 'sank like a stone'.²⁶

What the Diplomatic Service's aversion to change meant in the context of Anglo-Iranian relations was Britain posted a succession of ambassadors who were, though extremely capable, from the same elite background as their counterparts in postings all around the world. In light of Iran's immense importance to British interests, being posted there as an ambassador was the privilege of an elite few, a 'plum role' ranking not far behind the USA or France. The expectation of those working in Iran was to promote trade as much as possible, especially after the 1969 Duncan Report had emphasised trade promotion as part of a diplomat's job, although not necessarily at the expense of the political role.²⁷

²¹ Young, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy*, 26.

²² Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 242.

²³ The British Council, founded in 1934, specialises in international educational and cultural promotion of the UK. See Donaldson, Frances, *British Council: First Fifty Years*, (London, 1984).

²⁴ Hennessy, Peter, *Whitehall*, (London, 2001), 269.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 269.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 272.

²⁷ Young, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy*, 40-49.

By the 1970s the work of an ambassador had changed greatly from its traditional role. Seasoned diplomat Humphrey Trevelyan²⁸ noted that 'in the old days the ambassador was purely political...nowadays, whatever his personal predilections, he... must give serious attention to matters other than politics. He must regard himself as an economist, a commercial traveller, and advertising agent for his country; he wields a weapon of culture for political ends; he promotes scientific and technical exchanges and administers development aid'. The change was such that 'half a century ago, every British ambassador would have been horrified had he been required to concern himself with such work to the extent now expected of most heads of mission. It would be the same as asking him to serve in a shop'.²⁹ That the role of an ambassador should include duties beyond the traditionally purely political remit was accepted as more and more embassies became engrossed in commercial work, including Tehran. Young points out that 'diplomats were not expected to sell products themselves, but they were expected to provide support to exporters in the form of advice, expertise and the organisation of trade fairs'.³⁰ The critical point of contention was on what activities should be prioritised and what the overall balance should be - which was a point that came to the fore when serious questions were asked in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution about the Tehran embassy's prioritisation of economic activities over political ones. On this, Trevelyan³¹ emphasises that commercial activities should not detract the ambassador from 'his basic political job, to negotiate with the other government and to keep his own government informed about anything in the country to which he is accredited which affects his country's interests'.

Sir Denis Wright appointed ambassador

Denis Wright, British ambassador from 1963 to 1971, was educated at Brentwood School and St Edmund Hall, Oxford, a typical elitist education for a diplomat. However, prior to joining the Foreign Office he served in 1935 as an assistant advertising manager at Gallaher and Company Tobacco Manufacturers, meaning he already had some background in commerce. During World War Two he was posted to the consulate at Constantza, Romania then went on a longer stint in Turkey, which gave him some familiarity with the Middle East. After serving as First Secretary (Commercial) in Belgrade, the Foreign Office used his commercial expertise to appoint him in 1949 as Superintending Trade Consul in Chicago followed thereafter in 1951 by his appointment

²⁸ Trevelyan, Humphrey, *Diplomatic channels*, (London, 1973), 15.

²⁹ Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 300.

³⁰ Young, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy*, 55.

³¹ *Ibid*, 15.

as head of the Economic Relations Department of the Foreign Office. He first worked in Tehran as chargé d'affaires from December 1953 following the resumption of Anglo-Iranian diplomatic relations, after the Abadan Crisis. He therefore had considerable relevant experience for the ambassador's post.

Wright succeeded Sir Geoffrey Harrison, but did not hold him in high regard, noting, 'He didn't go down well with the Persians. It's much easier to take over from an unpopular ambassador than a popular one, so I had no difficult act to follow. Nobody ever asked me about him'.³² In choosing Wright to serve as ambassador, the Foreign Office had identified someone who spoke excellent Farsi, having travelled extensively throughout the country thereby also giving him an understanding of local culture and the Shi'ite variant of Islam followed by the majority of the populace. This knowledge, in tandem with the experience he had acquired in his earlier career in commerce, as well as his exposure in the Diplomatic Service to economics and trade relations, made him the ideal candidate to maintain and build on existing trade links.

Wright strongly believed he was the right man for the job in light of his role in the resumption of diplomatic relations in 1953 for which he 'got a lot of kudos...It was a very different Persia then. It was a small group of people, and I knew everybody who mattered, and had a good reputation'.³³ Although being able to consult members of the elite would have its benefits, in that they knew the goings on around the regime, they may not have been as useful in offering a critical perspective on the Shah or understanding the opposition to him.

What mattered to the Foreign Office was that Wright utilised his skills to enhance Britain's standing with the Shah and thus help Anglo-Iranian trade grow exponentially. By his own account, he did not have to converse with the Shah in Farsi because the Shah spoke good English. But Wright's ability to speak Farsi helped him greatly when he travelled the country, as he did not need a translator and was able to converse with locals; 'that sort of thing goes a long way in a country like Iran where, on the whole, Europeans don't bother to pick up the language'.³⁴ It helped Wright to develop an insight into the social, economic and political nuances of Iran as well as the Iranian psyche hence why he completed such a long posting as ambassador. However, again, this engagement with citizens around the country did not necessarily include engagement

³² Wright – BDOHP, 33. The exact reasons for Wright's antipathy towards Harrison are unknown but Harrison was caught in a KGB honey-trap in 1968, ending his tenure as ambassador to Moscow.

³³ Ibid, 33.

³⁴ Ibid, 32.

with those in opposition, critical of the regime, as Wright would have been mindful of the pitfalls of such engagement – namely the likelihood of displeasing the Shah.

Anglo- Iranian trade and diplomatic relations under Wright

In 1960 British exports to Iran equated to £36.6 million whilst imports were £48.6 million.³⁵ This had risen by 1970 to £66.3 million of exports and £76.1 million of imports³⁶ part of a wider trend whereby successive governments emphasised the need 'to promote Britain's commercial and financial interests overseas by assisting British business in the generation of visible and invisible exports, including defence sales, the promotion of inward investment and the protection of British investments abroad'.³⁷ From a contemporary diplomat's perspective as 'British power has declined and with it British political responsibilities, commerce has become one of the most fashionable activities of most British embassies'.³⁸ This meant the Tehran embassy at the time was 'almost totally geared to the trading relationship'.³⁹ A deal for the provision of 800 Chieftain tanks was signed in 1971 with the Shah ordering 23 'Training Theatres' in one go, which were military auditoriums designed to simulate battle conditions, at a cost of £854,000 per 'Training Theatre'. On the oil question Wright had to contend with the Shah's desire for higher oil production which forced the ambassador, along with his American counterpart, to put pressure on the oil companies in the face of threats from the Shah there would be demonstrations outside the embassy as well as a reduction in arms purchases.⁴⁰

Anglo-Iranian relations during Wright's tenure were more complex than appeared, beneath the surface of excellent relations and burgeoning commercial links. Indeed, Wright encapsulates this himself by offering two completely contradictory statements on Anglo-Iranian relations, first by stating 'relations, by and large, were extremely good with Iran, and may never have been better in some ways'⁴¹ but also declaring, 'relations were difficult, but never unpleasant'.⁴² Such contradictory statements may reflect that the Anglo-Iranian relationship was a marriage of convenience which benefited both parties commercially and also allowed the regime to consolidate its power at home, safe in the knowledge it enjoyed the support of not only Britain but also the USA.

³⁵ Brenchley, Frank, *Britain and the Middle East: An Economic History 1945-87*, (London, 1989), 175.

³⁶ Ibid, 179.

³⁷ Dickie, John, *Inside the Foreign Office*, (London, 1992), 45.

³⁸ Trevelyan, *Diplomatic channels*, 103.

³⁹ Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 297.

⁴⁰ Wright – BDOHP, 34-35.

⁴¹ Ibid, 36.

⁴² Ibid, 36.

Wright was able to enjoy easy access to the Shah mainly through an excellent relationship with Asadollah Alam, a close friend of the emperor, seeing him every morning. This was in contrast to many other British missions, including those in Paris and Washington by the late 1960s, where there was rarely daily contact between the ambassador and the Presidents. The Tehran mission under Wright was in a truly privileged position where it was able to have dialogue at the highest level with relative ease. It was this close dialogue which Moorhouse⁴³ believes helped Wright deliver 'a remarkably difficult enterprise abroad by some personal skill', as he 'was widely credited with persuading the Shah of Iran to renounce his claim to Bahrain in the 1960s, when pressing them might have left the Middle East in a bigger mess than it was already'. Wright was also on good terms with the Prime Minister, Amir Abbas Hoveyda, but was careful not to get too close to him as he was a deadly enemy of Alam. During this time the Shah attracted a lot of negative international press because of his human rights abuses which London avoided commenting upon. The ambassador was aware of the problem, however, and dissuaded the Queen from attending the Shah's lavish celebration at Persepolis, held between 12 and 16 October 1971, to mark the 2,500 year anniversary of the Persian Empire, festivities that cost hundreds of millions of dollars and led to criticism of the Shah's extravagant spending when many of his subjects were mired in poverty.

Following instructions from the Foreign Office, the ambassador did not involve himself or the mission with any opposition to the regime. For Berridge and Young such a stance is prudent as 'generally speaking, the most valuable thing an embassy can do for its own government is to bend to its wishes the policy of the state to which it is accredited, especially if that state is a powerful one'.⁴⁴ In this case being seen to communicate with those opposed to the regime would most certainly have attracted the disdain of the Shah and compromised Britain's own relationship with him to some degree. It must be emphasised here that, even if Wright advocated a policy of engaging with opposition elements, he would not have been able to do so as long as his superiors at the FCO told him not to do so. In avoiding engagement with the opposition whilst maintaining strong relations with the incumbent regime, Wright was not the first envoy to act in such a manner. Operating in the volatile climate of Russia between 1910 and 1917, for example, ambassador George Buchanan, 'scrupulously avoided any appearance of interference in domestic politics, but was careful to keep in touch both with the Court and with all the leading politicians of the Duma'.⁴⁵

⁴³ Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 262.

⁴⁴ Young and Berridge, 'Conclusion' in Hopkins, Michael et al (eds), *The Washington Embassy*, 231.

⁴⁵ Ullman, Richard, *Anglo-Soviet relations, 1917-1921. Vol.1, Intervention and the War*, (Princeton, 1961), 8.

Wright comments, 'in the light of history this may have been a mistake but the Shah, being the man he was – difficult and intensely suspicious of us – would have got to know and would have lost any confidence in me. My job was to get on with the Shah and promote British interests'.⁴⁶ These sentiments were echoed by his successors, notably Sir Anthony Parsons, and underlines how difficult the situation was. Though the Shah committed horrendous human rights abuses in suppressing opposition, actively to engage with the opposition would have placed in jeopardy the relationship with him, with an adverse impact upon trade interests. A theme which will be analysed in further detail in chapter four is how and why successive missions had failed to predict the overthrow of the Shah; but on the issue of the opposition, Wright has stated that he underestimated, along with his successors, the ability of the opposition and in particular the mullahs to cause serious problems: 'by 1970/71 there were signs, looking back, where one should have put up a warning sign, but I didn't'.⁴⁷

Perception was everything and Wright did not want the Shah to be given any ammunition to feed his suspicions of British collusion with the opposition. On one occasion the ambassador took his guest Sir Frank Lee, who was then Master of Corpus Christi Cambridge, to Qom one Sunday. Upon learning Ayatollah Khomeini was at home, he immediately sent a message to the Shah informing him he was sightseeing with Lee, so as to avoid having him hear of the visit later and suspect he was mixing with the opposition.

As Wright points out, the relationship with the emperor was a delicate one as, even though the Americans were clearly the dominant Western presence in Iran,

'the British were believed to be behind everything in Iran. The Shah saw the British hand everywhere. If anything went wrong, the Shah's first instinct was to blame the British for it. It made my position rather fun, because here was I, representing a second-rate power whom he thought pulled all the strings'.⁴⁸

Wright's observation underlines how, in spite of close relations with the Shah, this did not prevent him from being prone to bouts of suspicion. This suspicion of Britain in the Iranian psyche, shaped over decades, would present a problem for London following the Islamic revolution as those who came to decide and deliver the new regime's foreign policy held a less than favourable impression of Britain.

⁴⁶ Wright – BDOHP, 36.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 34-35.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 34-35.

Sir Peter Ramsbotham

Sir Peter Ramsbotham, who succeeded Wright, was from an even more privileged background. Born in 1919, the second son of Viscount Soulbury, the only white Governor-General of Ceylon, he was educated at Eton and Magdalen College, Oxford. Having contracted polio in 1938, instead of being sent to France at the outbreak of World War Two, he went to the Security Section of the War Office. After the revision of his military grade in 1942-43 he went into the army, where his fluency in French saw him lead a counter-intelligence unit in Normandy after D-Day. He ended the war as a Lieutenant-Colonel. At 26 he was posted to Hamburg as part of the Central Commission to assist with de-nazification. It was there in 1948 that he was encouraged by his boss, the later ambassador to West Germany, Sir Christopher Steel, to take the Foreign Office examination. He failed at the first attempt due to poor arithmetic, but passed six months later. He was then posted to Berlin and was there during the blockade. He then served as a first secretary in the Foreign Office's Department of Economic Relations in 1950-53, during which time he was part of the team that negotiated with Mosaddegh over the Abadan crisis.

At the age of 34 Ramsbotham moved to New York, as head of chancery in Britain's delegation to the UN, before becoming head of the Foreign Office's policy planning department in 1961, a post often given to 'high flyers'. After a stint as Head of Chancery in Paris, he took a two-year sabbatical at the Institute of Strategic Studies in London after which in 1969 he was appointed high commissioner in Nicosia, Cyprus. He became ambassador to Iran in 1971.

Later, in 1974, on leaving Tehran, he landed the biggest job in the diplomatic service as ambassador to the United States during which time he enjoyed an excellent relationship with Presidents Ford and Carter and was much admired in America. However, Foreign Secretary David Owen controversially replaced him with his friend Peter Jay, economics editor of *The Times* and son-in-law of Prime Minister James Callaghan, who had no diplomatic experience whatsoever.⁴⁹ Ramsbotham's final appointment was as Governor of Bermuda.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ See Roy, Raj, 'Peter Ramsbotham, 1974-77' in Hopkins, Michael F et al (eds), *The Washington Embassy*, 209-28.

⁵⁰ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/sir-peter-ramsbotham-diplomat-who-served-as-ambassador-to-washington-before-being-controversially-replaced-by-peter-jay-1949390.html> accessed 07 April 2015.

Ramsbotham as ambassador 1971-1974

In terms of the requisite characteristics of the individual to replace Wright, the Shah was unequivocal in his preference for someone who was not a Middle East expert, tainted by close relationships with the Arabs. That someone was Ramsbotham, who in later years candidly reflected upon the reason why he was chosen as

'not for any gifts I had, but for the gifts I hadn't! The Shah had made it clear that clever, Arab-loving officers in the Foreign Service... were not acceptable. 'I hate the Arabs. They've all been colonised by you. We've never been colonised...' There were a lot of other people I think who deserved it more than me but they had been to Arab posts. So I got it by default, if you like'.⁵¹

That London made the necessary arrangements to accommodate the Shah's preference for a non-Middle East expert highlights the importance placed on a strong bi-lateral relationship, conducive to British trade in a troubled global economic environment. However, whilst he was not a Middle-East expert, Ramsbotham was also chosen to serve as ambassador because 'the Foreign Office needed close to the Shah a man whose nose twitched at the smell of high politics and defence'.⁵² This was a delicate time when Britain was withdrawing from the Persian Gulf. Iranians had abundant historical reasons to resent the presence of the British but this was exacerbated further, in Ramsbotham's view:

'when we started exporting (like the Americans) all the worst sides of our culture. What you export is not the best side of your culture, it's the cheap, the shoddy side, and that's what they saw... And the mullahs, the spiritual mullahs out in the countryside, got turned on very much by all that was happening. The Shah really wasn't aware of a great deal of this'.⁵³

It is interesting to note Ramsbotham's comment that Iran, in 'the decade 1964 to 1973 witnessed a consistent expansion of the economy without parallel in contemporary Iranian history'⁵⁴, but that it simultaneously remained a deeply divided country between the haves and have nots, a division which was to be one of the seeds of the revolution.

⁵¹ Ramsbotham - BDOHP, 36.

⁵² Moorhouse, *Diplomats*, 295.

⁵³ Ramsbotham - BDOHP, 36-38.

⁵⁴ McLachlan, K.S, 'Economic Development, 1921-1979' in Avery et al (eds), *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume 7*, (Cambridge, 1991), 619.

The appointment seems to have worked well, in that the new ambassador saw a lot of the Shah who would summon him 'at awkward hours. First, one had to dress up in one's diplomatic uniform, then, when I got to know him better, I could go in a black tie. He wanted to talk'.⁵⁵ He was tasked with continuing the work of his predecessors in focusing on commercial relations. This was at a time when 36% of Britain's military sales were going to Iran.⁵⁶ In fact, during his time in Tehran, Anglo-Iranian trade saw exponential growth. Exports of £78.6 million and imports of £109.5 million in 1971 grew to exports of £278.6 million and £513.3 million of imports by 1974.⁵⁷ The importance of strong relations was underlined on 23 October 1973, when the Queen visited Tehran en route home from an official visit to Australia. The Shah seized the opportunity to expand the discussion of international relations and defence. During their conversation the Queen asked if the Russians 'were making difficulties' in Iran; the Shah replied 'not openly, but their objectives are clear'.⁵⁸

Acquisition of the Abu Musa and the Tunb islands, as discussed in the previous chapter, served to imbue the Shah with great confidence. With continued American support he was extremely eager Iran should assume Britain's role in the Gulf as the latter's strength continued to erode.⁵⁹ However, the Americans did not count on the Shah using his powerful voice within the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to drive the price of oil up exorbitantly. With the onset of the Arab-Israeli Yom Kippur War, which started on 6 October 1973, a monumental decision was taken by OPEC on 11 October 1973 to set oil prices themselves, without reference to the oil companies. On 16 October 1973, in response to U.S. aid to Israel, OPEC announced its decision to raise the price of oil by an astounding 70% to \$5.11 a barrel. An oil embargo also ensued, cutting supply of oil to countries including the USA and the Netherlands, lasting until the end of March 1974.

Although Britain was not the target of the embargo, it was detrimentally affected by the OPEC price hike. For example, flying, driving and boating on Sundays were banned. The combination of strikes by coal miners and railroad workers caused an energy crisis over the winter of 1973–74 which in turn proved a major factor in the change of government in 1974, from Conservative to Labour. The OPEC crisis tested the patience and resolve of a Britain that was in a most delicate economic shape. Given London believed it enjoyed

⁵⁵ Ramsbotham – BDOHP, 37.

⁵⁶ Parsons – BDOHP, 14-18.

⁵⁷ Brenchley, *Britain and the Middle East*, 254.

⁵⁸ Dimitakis, Panagiotis, *Failed Alliances of the Cold War: Britain's Strategy and Ambitions in Asia and the Middle East*, (London, 2012), 160-161.

⁵⁹ Fain, W Taylor, *American Ascendancy and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region*, 191-194.

excellent relations with the Shah, his behaviour came as a surprise as he refused to listen to either London or Washington.⁶⁰

Sir Anthony Parsons

Born on 9 September 1922, Anthony Derrick Parsons, who succeeded Ramsbotham, was the son of a British Army colonel. After an education at King's School, Canterbury he earned a degree in Arabic and Turkish at Balliol College, Oxford, which could only hold him in good stead for a career specialising in the Middle East. He then served in the army for fourteen years with his final posting as an assistant military attaché in Baghdad. Leaving the army in 1954, he started a distinguished diplomatic career which took him to embassies in Ankara, Amman, Cairo and Khartoum. He continued his Middle Eastern focus as Political Agent in Bahrain from 1965-69 after which he served as counsellor in the United Nations mission in New York from 1969 to 1971 before returning to London as an Under Secretary in the FCO from 1971 to 1974. For five highly significant years, from 1974 to 1979, Parsons was ambassador to Iran after which he went to the United Nations as Britain's permanent representative, where his most difficult task was to defend his country's policy during the Falklands War. He retired from the Diplomatic Service in 1982 but, unusually, was a part time special adviser on Foreign Affairs to Margaret Thatcher for a year thereafter.⁶¹

Parsons began his stint as ambassador at a time when there was genuine concern over Britain's diminishing role in world affairs. Speaking to Cabinet in April 1974 the new Foreign Secretary, James Callaghan warned 'our place in the world is shrinking: long-term political influence depends on economic strength - and that is running out'.⁶² Against this backdrop, the new ambassador was instructed to continue the work of his predecessors in maintaining close relations with the Shah. Yet for Parsons such reliance was dangerous:

'Our principal anxiety was that the regime had become over-dependent on the Shah as a person and that his sudden removal from the scene, through assassination, illness or accident, would create a dangerous power vacuum. By the same token, we felt that he had become excessively isolated and dependent upon the support of his armed and security forces'.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ramsbotham – BDOHP, 39.

⁶¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/14/world/sir-anthony-parsons-british-diplomat-is-dead-at-73.html> accessed 07 April 2015.

⁶² Callaghan, James, *Time and Change*, (London, 1987), 326.

⁶³ Parsons, Anthony, *Pride and the Fall: Iran 1974-1979*, (London, 1984), 4.

This was written with the benefit of hindsight, but over the course of his tenure, despite lingering concerns about the political stability of Iran, he expected the Shah would surmount obstacles and stay in power. Parsons believed strongly that in spite of the risks, Britain needed to continue to take advantage of the commercial opportunities presented by the Shah's pursuit of 'the Great Civilisation'⁶⁴ more so after he had given himself credit for masterminding OPEC's strategy of increased oil prices, which so harmed the economies of the West. These risks were underlined by unrest on the Iranian domestic political scene which in the first half of 1975 alone saw twelve political assassinations, including two American military officers and a member of staff of the U.S. embassy. Furthermore, the provinces saw an upsurge of bombings with explosions at the Iran-American Society and the British Council in Mashhad. Parsons' belief in the continued survival of the Shah was almost unshakeable leading him to state 'my general conclusion therefore was that the political and economic malaise of 1975 did not constitute a threat to the existence of the regime'.⁶⁵ For Parsons to hold such a view was neither unusual or naive given the Shah remained in a strong position as he continued to enjoy the support of the armed forces and used the SAVAK secret police to suppress opposition (which was not homogeneous in any case) to his regime.

As to why London did not use its influence to coax the Shah into making changes for the betterment of his country, the economic reliance upon Iran was such that it was considered imprudent to rock the boat in a manner which would adversely affect relations. In his memoirs, Parsons counselled, 'I did not believe that it would help for us to offer him advice on how to run his internal affairs, distasteful and counter-productive though some of his methods were...we would only receive a whole colony of fleas in our ear and reduce our access to and influence with him. He had a long memory and the spectre of British interference in Iranian internal affairs was dormant, not dead'.⁶⁶ As we shall see in the next chapter, encouraging the Shah to stop the complete suppression of opposition was not without its own dangers. Choosing to follow a policy of liberalisation, following pressure from the Americans, proved to be catastrophic as opposition elements came to the fore and helped instigate his ultimate demise.

The ambassador's relationship with the Shah was, from the outset, a close one, much the same as those enjoyed by Wright and Ramsbotham; by the end of 1975 they had met face to face or in company with others, on an average of once every few weeks. This was in spite of growing opposition to the regime in Britain, with Parsons noting that

⁶⁴ Parsons, *Pride and the Fall*, 10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 18.

'the growing hostility of the British Press and elements of public opinion in Britain towards Iran has not yet affected inter-governmental relations. The ease of access which I have to the Shah and his ministers... provide evidence of the strong foundation on which our political relationship now rests'.⁶⁷ Aside from meetings with the Shah, Parsons, like Wright, realised the importance of engaging Asadollah Alam. Until his death from leukaemia in 1978, Alam was the second most powerful man in Iran, ahead of even the Prime Minister. He was probably the only person, apart from the Empress, who could speak frankly to the Shah, disagree with him and persuade him to change course. Parsons and Alam became good friends and Parsons relied upon him for advice and information.

The Shah was by no means an easy person with whom to deal with. Moorhouse⁶⁸ characterised him as,

'a very complex ruler who wants to create an Aryan Japan out of a traditionally Muslim peasant society, who has a lofty contempt for the democratic rot he observes in Western Europe, who has a lurking admiration for the refined old discipline of the English public school. He despises the permissive society tolerated by London, yet he has no desire to see Great Britain's total collapse'.

For Parsons, the Shah had an excellent knowledge of foreign policy but a poor understanding of domestic policy. The reasons behind this disparity, he believed, was because,

'he heard the truth from foreigners about foreign policy matters and about Iran's performance as it affected foreign powers, and he did not shrink from it... But, on domestic matters where foreigners feared to tread, my belief was that he was only told what he wanted to hear, that his vaunted intelligence services were as bad in this regard as his ministerial technocrats and the sycophants of the Court, and that his isolation prevented him from gauging the temper of his people at first hand'.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ The National Archives (TNA), Kew, FC08/2980, Annual review for 1976 (1 January 1977).

⁶⁸ Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 297.

⁶⁹ Parsons, *Pride and the Fall*, 24.

Continued commercialisation of the mission

Parsons sought to reorganise the embassy in a manner which was conducive to meeting economic needs, a reorganisation which had been completed by the end of 1975. This meant 'the embassy was primarily organised as an agency for the promotion of British exports and for the general commercial, financial and economic interests of Britain'.⁷⁰ For the purposes of export promotion Parsons strengthened the commercial and economic section by adding extra personnel at desk level and delegating the main responsibility for export promotion and economic reporting to his deputy, who had previously been involved solely on the political side. Even service attachés became involved in servicing the defence sales programme, with their principal task being commercial not political.⁷¹ This was justified by the ambassador on the basis that the

'study of the internal political situation in Iran was an important, but subsidiary activity: important because we needed to report accurately to London and to give sound advice to potential British exporters and investors; subsidiary because of the discretion required in the collection of information and because, in my judgement, a major effort would only endanger our relationship with the regime without providing compensating advantages in terms of additional information beyond what we could acquire by open observation and the use of our experience and analytical powers'.⁷²

As Edwards has noted, from time to time the debate resurfaces over whether the Foreign Office should deal closely with commercial matters or whether it should leave it to Chambers of Commerce, as the Germans do. For Edwards, until British businesses are legally required – like their German counterparts – to contribute financially to Chambers of Commerce, the idea is a non-starter. Having a completely separate service, like the French, is also not an option; though there was previously a separate British Department of Overseas Trade it was abolished as it was found not to work well. Instead, commercial policy was shaped in the late 1970s and early 1980s by the FCO in liaison with the Department of Trade and Industry.⁷³

⁷⁰ Parsons, *Pride and the Fall*, 40.

⁷¹ Ibid, 37.

⁷² Ibid, 40.

⁷³ Edwards, *True Brits*, 200.

The significant increase in Anglo-Iranian trade continued during Parsons' tenure. Exports of £278.6 million and imports of £513.3 million in 1974⁷⁴ grew to exports of £752 million and imports of £527.8 million in 1978.⁷⁵ In July 1974, Iran agreed a \$1.2 billion loan to Britain to be paid in three tranches. By the time of the final tranche, however, Iran did not want to pay the outstanding balance and Britain waived the payment. The funds were instead used to proceed with a deal to purchase British arms, a deal which had been previously delayed through a lack of Iranian funds.⁷⁶

As such, by 1975, at a time of sluggish economic growth, Iran had actually become Britain's fastest growing market, with Moorhouse commenting, 'there is probably no other British embassy where the workload is so intensively weighted in favour of commerce'.⁷⁷ There were 4000 business visitors a year to the embassy meaning staff were stretched and the ambassador spent 80% of his time on commercial matters.⁷⁸ Edwards concurs with Moorhouse, stating 'in a country where major purchasing decisions were made at the centre, the British embassy could unlock the key doors for the right salesmen, and the diplomats addressed themselves to seeking out opportunities for British business as well as easing its access to government'.⁷⁹

The importance of Anglo-Iranian trade was underlined by the situation affecting the beleaguered Chrysler car company. The Department of Trade and Industry reported to Parliament about public expenditure on Chrysler UK Ltd in March 1977.⁸⁰ But before a crucial cabinet meeting, a telegram arrived from Parsons saying the future of Anglo-Iranian trade would be in jeopardy if Chrysler's contract in Iran collapsed. £162.5million was subsequently spent on propping up Chrysler.⁸¹ If not ultimately deciding British policy on the issue, the actions of Parsons showed that individual ambassadors might, in certain circumstances, have a real impact on key government decisions.

The political side of the mission

The prioritising of the commercial side of the mission meant the political section remained relatively small with little desire on Parsons' part to call for reinforcements, as 'he did not want to read a lot of elegant reports about social conditions in Iranian

⁷⁴ Brenchley, *Britain and the Middle East*, 254.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 259.

⁷⁶ Graham, Robert, *Iran: The Illusion of Power*, (London, 1978), 112-113.

⁷⁷ Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 300.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 299.

⁷⁹ Edwards, *True Brits*, 199.

⁸⁰ HC596-1, BT241/2844.

⁸¹ Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 297.

villages'.⁸² He rationalised this low key activity on the political side as a step to minimise the perception in the Iranian psyche of British meddling in Iran's domestic affairs. The chancery had only a small number of senior and junior officers, with two or three Persian speakers. Their job was to advise and report on the internal situation and conduct business with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and other departments, including SAVAK. The decision to have such a relatively small political section, compared to other key embassies, as we shall see in chapter four, came under fire from some quarters as it arguably played a part in the mission's failure to predict the revolution. The embassy also only retained one press officer, which perhaps damaged its ability to analyse the strength of the opposition and anti-British sentiment.

By late 1975 there were between 15,000 to 20,000 British nationals in Iran with British Council centres teaching English in Tehran and four other cities. There were also military teams and civilians working on defence contracts in Tehran and elsewhere; some were training the armed forces or servicing British defence equipment. In fact, there were approximately 15-20 Anglo-Iranian manufacturing and service joint ventures in Tehran and the provinces, which assembled and manufactured everything from cars to rubber gloves. Also present in Tehran were British contractors charged with building infrastructure projects. Parsons and his staff often went to visit these projects and used the personnel involved to gather intelligence. In the latest extension of activity in these fields, Britain agreed on 17 March 1978 to expand the existing repair shops for some 1,000 Chieftain tanks already at the disposal of Iran, and set up a mini-assembly line for the tanks on order in 1979.⁸³

Despite Parsons' best efforts, the embassy continued to be viewed with suspicion. In stark contrast to his predecessor, he arrived in Iran with expertise on Turkey and the Arab world which automatically made him a target of suspicion. The presence of fluent Persian speakers on the embassy staff actually proved to be a hindrance as well as a help, which was evident when the Ministry of Defence posted an officer to the Chieftain tank commission. Upon discovering the officer was fluent in Persian, he was duly declared *persona non grata* by the Iranians.⁸⁴ Yet in spite of this challenging working environment, the ambassador and his mission had little choice but to press on with the expansion of commercial activities.

⁸² Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 296.

⁸³ Saikal, Amin, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah*, (New Jersey, 1980), 159.

⁸⁴ Parsons, *Pride and the Fall*, 39.

By way of comparison to the British presence in Iran, at the time ambassador William Sullivan started his tenure in 1977, the U.S. embassy housed 2000 staff and there were consulates in Tabriz, Isfahan and Shiraz as well as U.S.-Iranian societies in Meshed, Ahwaz and Hamadan. But very few staff had much experience in Iran and only a limited number spoke Farsi.⁸⁵ This meant the Persian Press could not be understood and that contact with Iranian people was difficult.⁸⁶ This was in complete contrast to the expertise housed in the British embassy⁸⁷ and raises interesting questions about the extent to which such expertise was advantageous. After all, U.S. trade with Iran prospered as much as British trade with Iran. Moreover, neither the British nor the Americans were able to predict the downfall of the Shah nor were they able to avert Iranian hostility toward them after the revolution. In effect, so long as Iran under the Shah wanted excellent diplomatic relations with Britain and the USA, the diplomatic missions would have had very few difficulties in executing their work. Thus, the relative lack of expertise on Iran in the U.S. embassy did not prove much of an impediment to American commercial aims. But all that would change after the revolution.

The embassy's response to the Shah's growing woes

In 1976 and 1977, after pressure from the Americans, the Shah started liberalising his regime. Some have claimed this was forced upon him by President Carter's threat to withdraw support over human rights abuses, but this is not something which was accepted by Parsons, who once declared 'I do not know the truth but I did not accept this theory then and I do not now'.⁸⁸ Liberalisation saw greater political freedom as well as improved treatment of those opposed to the regime. Political prisoners were released, a new law was enacted forbidding detention without trial and newspapers featured more critical analysis.

However, these changes were limited only to the political sphere with the economic situation of many of the Iranian people remaining dire. When, in August 1977, Amir Abbas Hoveyda was replaced as Prime Minister after thirteen years by Dr Jamshyd Amouzegar, he placed a new emphasis on economic austerity. Parsons recognised the quagmire into which the regime was sinking by disregarding those who offered reasoned

⁸⁵ Sullivan, William, *Mission to Iran* (New York, 1981), 40.

⁸⁶ Taheri, Amir, *Nest of Spies: America's Journey to Disaster in Iran*, (London, 1988), 78.

⁸⁷ Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 79.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 48.

criticism of government policy, thereby making the process of greater freedom of expression redundant and increasing hostility toward the regime.⁸⁹

James Callaghan echoed Parsons' thoughts in his reflections on his visit to Tehran on 6 March 1976, where he was received in the ornate Golestan Palace. The Shah was accompanied by an entourage of ministers who amounted to nothing more than lackeys, absolutely deferential to his whims. Callaghan could not help but notice the Shah's disengagement from the trials and tribulations of Iranians in everyday life: 'I cannot claim that I foresaw in 1976 that he would be overthrown only three years later, but we were all agreed that his refusal to share power, the employment of draconian measures of modernisation, and the regime's dependence on repression to maintain its authority meant that in the long run it must prove unstable'.⁹⁰

Parsons later blamed himself for not heeding the advice of his staff to use his influence and the goodwill he had acquired from the Shah through the embassy's policy of non-interference to press upon him the limitations of the process of liberalisation.⁹¹ Indeed he had the opportunity to engage with the emperor on this matter when, at the end of 1977 he met the Shah, Hoveyda and the Minister of Court frequently on the matter of a corruption trial in London involving a serving British officer, in which damaging allegations about the Shah were emerging in public. In summarising the position at the end of 1977, Parsons believed there was no revolutionary situation in Iran as the Shah still enjoyed the loyalty of the armed forces, loyalty in the face of which no powerful opposition stood much chance of coming into being. Thus the Shah 'was still in control and I anticipated no threat to his regime. The problems he faced were troublesome rather than dangerous'.⁹²

In the eyes of Parsons the most prudent policy for Britain was to 'continue to pursue our major economic and commercial interests in Iran with all the vigour at our disposal...much had been achieved and there seemed to me to be plenty more achievement to come'.⁹³ This view was reinforced when, between 4 and 24 October 1977, the longest, largest and most comprehensive British Cultural Festival ever mounted up to that point overseas took place, funded by the British Council, Iranian government and British private sector. In organising the festival, London was fulfilling the public diplomacy part of Berridge's embassy functions.

⁸⁹ Parsons, *Pride and the Fall*, 53.

⁹⁰ Callaghan, *Time and Change*, 390.

⁹¹ Parsons, *Pride and the Fall*, 53.

⁹² *Ibid*, 58.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 46.

On 12 April 1977, in response to the doubts surrounding the position of the Shah, Parsons produced a report entitled, 'Is the emperor fully clothed?'⁹⁴ Here Parsons, as he had done at earlier junctures, emphasised that though the Shah was experiencing some difficulties, this did not equate to the probability of his being overthrown. This was because he continued to enjoy the support of the police and armed forces, which meant any opposition was scotched. The report was published just before the new Foreign Secretary, David Owen, visited Iran between 13-15 May to foster even closer relations. During the visit, the Shah told Owen relations between the two states had never been better.⁹⁵ Iran remained a pivotal part of Britain's economic interests and it is therefore difficult to agree with Hunter's assertion that

'regional developments had dramatically diminished Iran's value for Britain. In 1978, the Persian Gulf Arab states were rich and stable; Egypt had rejoined the Western camp; and the chances for Arab-Israeli peace had increased. Thus, the prospect of the Shah being replaced by a more popular and less ambitious Islamic nationalist government had become more appealing'.⁹⁶

Summary

During the 1970s the single most important purpose of the British diplomatic mission in Iran was the promotion of commercial interests. Anglo-Iranian economic relations prospered in the 1970s with the staffing of the mission heavily weighted in favour of commercial activities and ambassadors were carefully selected to maintain the closest possible relations with the Shah. Parsons played a particularly vital role in shaping policy toward Iran, as seen by his influential intervention on the Chrysler decision. It meant less emphasis was placed upon the political side of embassy work, including surveying the domestic Iranian political scene. So far as Berridge's functions of an embassy are concerned, the Tehran embassy, operating as it did with a full complement, fulfilled all the functions – but with a disproportionate emphasis on commercial activities. Whether this was justified or not is debateable, especially as some later believed that the weak political side of the embassy contributed to the failure to predict the revolution. However, given the reliance upon Iran for trade interests it is understandable why the commercial side of the embassy was so strong. This approach was driven by priorities in

⁹⁴ FCO8/2980, 'Is The Emperor Fully Clothed?' (12 April 1977).

⁹⁵ TNA, CAB128/61, CM(77)20th (19 May 1977).

⁹⁶ Hunter, Shireen T, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*, (Bloomington, 1990), 145.

London, where the role of diplomats as trade promoters was especially emphasised after the Duncan Report and seemed especially vital in an era of stagnant economic growth.

In the midst of Iran's growing commercial value to Britain lurked the stark reality that, beneath the surface, opposition to the regime was gathering pace for various reasons, including human rights abuses and the economic squalor faced by many ordinary Iranians. Yet, in spite of this growing opposition, Parsons believed by the end of 1977 that, though there were challenges to the Shah's rule, this was not enough to depose him as he still enjoyed the support of the armed forces. Actually, the gathering storm in Iran became a fully-fledged tsunami in 1978, leading not only to the Shah's downfall but also to questions about why the UK mission failed to predict a revolution.

Chapter 3. Iran's descent into Chaos

'So by the end of 1978 pretty well all the country, willy-nilly, had joined the revolution. It really was an extraordinary experience. It must have been just the same, I suppose, only more so I think, as being ambassador in Paris in 1789 or in St. Petersburg in 1917.'¹ Sir Anthony Parsons

1978 was one of the most tumultuous and epochal years in the history of Iran. It began with the Shah positioned as an absolute monarch and ended with him on the verge of being ousted by a revolutionary uprising. The causes of this have been dissected at length by historians and political scientists in a similar fashion to the causes of other revolutions. Amidst the turbulence, Britain had a keen interest in maintaining its presence in Iran. This chapter will detail London's reaction as events unfolded, with particular attention paid to the experience of Ambassador Parsons and his embassy.

In establishing some of the key roles of an ambassador, Young² notes that 'however well respected ambassadors were in their own embassy and however good their relations were with leaders at home, the main arena in which they displayed their skills was in dealings with the host government'. Moreover, 'some would... argue that an ambassador can help to shape policy, especially towards the government to which he is assigned'.³ This will be evident as Parsons and his embassy worked to engage with the Shah's regime as the revolutionary crisis unfolded and frequent reports had to be sent to London so that the government could decide its reaction. As we shall see, the embassy played a critical part in the formation of British policy as it encouraged the Callaghan government not to abandon the Shah's regime. Whereas, before 1978, the embassy was engaged almost exclusively in trade promotion, the year saw an increased emphasis on political reporting in response to the worsening Iranian internal situation, thereby fulfilling Berridge's claim that 'reporting home on present conditions and probable developments in the receiving state... remains a valuable role of the normal embassy, immersed as it is in the local scene'.⁴

The first serious sign of unrest was on 9 January 1978, when bloody protests took place, in the holy city of Qom following the printing of an article in the Tehran daily *Itilla'at* which grossly vilified Ayatollah Khomeini, who was still living in exile. On 19 February

¹ Parsons, BDOHP, 14-18.

² Young, John W, *David Bruce and Diplomatic Practice: An American Ambassador in London, 1961-69*, (London, 2014), 67.

³ Ibid, 93.

⁴ Berridge, Geoff, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice (5th edition)*, (Basingstoke and New York, 2015), 123.

1978, street battles lasting over 12 hours erupted in Tabriz, with the government claiming nine people had been killed. Parsons decided to speak to the Shah, concerned over the welfare of the 20,000 British citizens in Iran, 500 of whom were in Tabriz. He responded by saying that though the situation was serious, his plans for liberalisation remained.⁵ Parsons noted that despite the rioting,

'it was surprising the extent to which normal life continued and how, in spite of the gravity of each individual incident, there appeared to be little or no evidence of a general build-up of tension...foreign trade delegations poured into Iran and it was hard to imagine that we were living on the edge of a volcano...This ostensibly full return to normality between incidents was outside my experience and lulled all of us into a false sense that the situation could not be so bad after all'.⁶

British Ministerial visits to Iran

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the primary reason for such a sizeable diplomatic presence in Iran was the promotion of commerce. By 1977 Iran was producing 16% of Britain's oil with BP Iranian oil accounting for 40-45% of the global total. Moreover, £200 million of industrial goods, motor cars and military equipment were sold to Iran, along with 750 Chieftain tanks and 250 Scorpions (armoured reconnaissance vehicles).⁷ On 10 May 1978, the Iranian Ministry of War signed an agreement with the British government owned Millbank Technical Services for the construction in Isfahan of a small-arms ammunition factory. In short, Iran still mattered greatly to Britain and its economic wellbeing.

With such broad commercial interests, which included defence contracts, the FCO was not the only government department with an interest in Iran. The Secretary Of State for Defence, Fred Mulley, met with the Shah on 25 March on Kish Island. After an exchange of pleasantries the Shah discussed a range of international matters and the majority of the meeting covered talks on a number of defence contracts.⁸ The Tehran embassy helped facilitate the visit and took care of Mulley during the visit. Mulley followed this visit with another between 7 and 10 July.⁹ The purpose of the visit was to present the Rolls-Royce chair and vice-chair to the Shah, to discuss the possibilities of Rolls-Royce entering into a contract to manufacture gas turbine engines and provide an opportunity

⁵ Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall*, 63.

⁶ Ibid, 64-65.

⁷ Owen, David, *A Time to Declare*, 387.

⁸ BT241/2928, MO25/2/77/1.

⁹ DEFE13/1320. HDS/PO/1248. 20 July 1978.

to discuss various other matters. Two meetings were also held with Vice Minister of War, General Hassan Toufanian. It should be noted that, based on evidence from the relevant files, there was no criticism at the time from the Ministry of Defence nor the Department of Trade and Industry over the service provided by the embassy, as it worked to deliver commercial results in which several government departments held a shared interest.

Margaret Thatcher, then leader of the Conservative opposition, also visited Iran in April 1978. For her to visit in such circumstances showed her desire to cultivate personal links with the regime, for the further promotion of British interests in the event she came to power. Thatcher arrived at a challenging time for the Shah, as he was effecting his liberalisation policies, for which she commended him.¹⁰ She also blamed US President Carter for adopting the unhelpful stance of supporting the regime whilst publically criticising its human rights record.¹¹

On 28 April, Thatcher met with Parsons who impressed her with his knowledge of what was happening in Iran. He relayed his belief that the Communist Tudeh party was the main threat to the regime; the Mullahs and their supporters also posed a threat, but Parsons, in common with other Western analysts tended to underestimate the potential power of religious feeling in Iran; while the main hope for the Shah was that he had the support of the army, which quelled all unrest. Thatcher later admitted, 'none of us foresaw how quickly the Shah's position would crumble'.¹² After the relative calm of the Détente years, Cold War tensions resurfaced from the mid-1970s onwards. Iran, was important to the Superpowers economically and the fact it shared a border with the Soviet Union meant that both London and Washington remained in fear of 'losing' it to the Communist bloc. The Tudeh party, formed in 1941, played a part in the unrest through its organisation of strikes and demonstrations, as well as making university campuses hotbeds of revolutionary activity. Throughout the period 1978-81, the embassy would report back to London the activities of the Soviets and the Tudeh party, as there was an eagerness to counter any Communist threat.¹³

¹⁰ Thatcher, Margaret, *The Path to Power*, (London, 1995), 381.

¹¹ Ibid, 380.

¹² Ibid, 381.

¹³ On the Soviet presence in Iran, see: Yodfat, Aryeh Y, *The Soviet Union and Revolutionary Iran*, (London, 1984) and Zabih, Sephr, *The Left in Contemporary Iran: Ideology, Organisation and the Soviet Connection*, (London, 1986).

When Thatcher met the Shah on, 29 April, she felt 'there was nothing in his manner to suggest he believed that time was running out'.¹⁴ He did not give any indication of resentment against critical voices from his Western backers and instead spoke repeatedly about how his country was on the front line in the struggle against communism. He did however express distaste for the manner in which he believed the Persian-language BBC World Service reports consisted largely of propaganda against his government. Thatcher 'went away impressed by his grasp of world affairs. But, of course, no amount of such wisdom is proof against the kind of subversion which he was facing at home'.¹⁵

According to Hennessy¹⁶, David Owen, the Foreign Secretary, 'had a bruising relationship with all its (Foreign Office) grades'. Yet what is clear from the archival documents is that he was not critical of the Tehran embassy; during his tenure he maintained a professional working relationship with Parsons and his mission. Owen followed Thatcher's visit with his own in May. He was taken aback by the extent to which Britain was held in suspicion by Iranians, who ascribed to the British intelligence services formidable powers of subversion. During his visit, serious rioting occurred in Qom and Tabriz, with the unrest spreading to Tehran on 11 May. Thousands of demonstrators, led by religious leaders, marched through the bazaar area. Police threw tear gas and fired over their heads, with about 100 reported injured.

In his audience with the Shah on 12 May, Owen expressed his deep concerns over human rights abuses; surprisingly, the Shah did not respond adversely.¹⁷ Despite this, the Foreign Secretary had decided to supply CS Gas (a crowd-control agent) to Iran, rationalising the decision by stating that, had this not been supplied, 'we would be sidelining ourselves. Our influence would cease'.¹⁸ Such was the Shah's performance during the meeting that Owen, like Thatcher before him, was lulled into believing the situation was stable. He later admitted, 'I confess that it was this self-confident, assertive image which stayed with me in 1978 while we debated what we should do to bolster the Shah's government. But it was false. People very rarely change and he was still indecisive and weak. Our big mistake was to fall for the Shah's carefully constructed self-image'.¹⁹

¹⁴ Thatcher, *The Path to Power*, 382.

¹⁵ Ibid, 382.

¹⁶ Hennessy, Peter, *Whitehall*, (London, 2001), 402.

¹⁷ Owen, *A Time to Declare*, 322-323.

¹⁸ Ibid, 395.

¹⁹ Ibid, 323.

That Thatcher and Owen's respective visits took place in such close proximity reflected the fact that a British general election was on the horizon. Both, as representatives of competing parties, saw it best to survey the political landscape in the country (and in particular the position of the Shah) in response to reports about growing unrest. However, visits to Iran by British dignitaries were also due to a reciprocal desire on the part of the Iranians to maintain cordial relations. This was why in June 1978 a group of British MPs visited Iran after an invitation, issued earlier in the year, to come as guests of the Majlis. The visit was considered a 'great success' by all.²⁰

Assessments of the domestic Iranian scene in mid-1978

Despite the growing unrest, Parsons reiterated his belief it would not lead to the demise of the regime. This was outlined in a letter to Owen on 10 May, entitled 'what happens if the Shah dies' (an earlier, similar analysis having been written on 4 July 1974). The ambassador believed the Shah would stay at the helm as he had the support of the army and had survived greater turbulence in the past, though the ambassador added he was 'slightly less optimistic than I was in 1974'. It was also suggested there were not many alternative candidates to take over and, while there was the chance of the Crown Prince taking over before 1980, for him to do so before problems were resolved was hazardous.²¹ The clear implication of the letter was that it was better to stick with the Shah, who had proven to be a capable partner, and that it was imprudent to side with an alternative when there was no clear, viable alternative.

Given the Shah's increasingly difficult position Parsons was required at the very least to start thinking about viable alternatives. The internal option of the Crown Prince seemed the most attractive. Despite later criticisms of the embassy for failing to cultivate links with opposition groups, the FCO agreed it was neither sensible nor realistic to do so. The reasons were outlined in a paper by Ivor Lucas, head of the Middle Eastern Department, in which he agreed with Parsons that the Shah would not be overthrown. Lucas was of the view that 'it is illusory to suppose that there is some potentially friendly opposition group which we could cultivate against the day when it achieves power and we can reap the dividends of our prescience'. To establish links with opposition groups, who in most cases were anti-Western, would risk alienating the Shah. As such, Lucas felt that 'the best we can do is to maintain as neutral a posture as is consistent with our vested

²⁰ FCO8/3199, Visit to Iran by Members of Parliament (29 June 1978).

²¹ The National Archives (TNA) at Kew Gardens, PREM16/1719, Parsons to Owen (10 May 1978).

interest in the Shah, and remain ready to adapt ourselves to change as soon as it occurs'.²²

It is apparent from Parsons' letter and Lucas' report that, at a time of great uncertainty over the Shah's future, Britain chose a pragmatic course, avoiding any knee-jerk temptations to liaise with a fractured opposition, which was comprised of a variety of groups with varying beliefs and aims. None of these groups were in a position of ascendancy in mid-1978 and there were no guarantees any of them would welcome British support. Moreover, the Shah had previously survived bouts of unrest as he had always enjoyed the support of the armed forces. The intensified political reporting from the embassy was borne out of necessity, in order to ascertain the likely impact of the unrest on British commercial interests. In making their assessments both Lucas and Parsons echoed diplomats of other Western states, who chose to maintain a working relationship with the incumbent regime.

The BBC Persian Service

The BBC Persian Service was developed in 1940 to prepare and broadcast British war-time propaganda. The Service was viewed with suspicion throughout its history by some in Iran, for being an extension of the British government's presence and a powerful tool in subverting politics in a manner favourable to British interests. The Shah always had a loathing for the Service, but this was accentuated as his regime faced increased turbulence.

As discussed in a detailed study by Sreberny and Torfeh, the Service rose to prominence in 1977-79. It reported on political developments even if they were anti-regime, expanding listenership beyond intellectuals and the upper classes. This expansion occurred because it provided a counterweight to state run television and radio, providing a platform where voices of opposition could be heard. London was accused by Royalists of revolutionary collusion overtly, through BBC coverage, and covertly, via the Islamic fifth column, to undermine the regime.²³ Indeed, the Shah was unequivocal in describing the BBC as his number one enemy and complained vigorously to London.²⁴ In fact, 'such

²² FCO8/3194 (6 July 1978).

²³ Amuzegar, Jahangir, *The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution: The Pahlavis' Triumph and Tragedy*, (New York, 1991) 87.

²⁴ Sreberny, Annabelle and Torfeh, Mossoumeh, *Persian Service: The BBC and British Interests in Iran*, (London, 2014), 78.

was the imagined power of BBC broadcasts that the Shah related them directly to the continued UK relations with Iran'.²⁵

Whenever the Iranian ambassador in London, Parviz Radji, approached the FCO he was told official British policy necessitated he take up grievances directly with the BBC. Radji, catalogues in his memoirs, the number of times he met senior figures within the BBC between June 1976 and the end of January 1979 to express his protestations.²⁶ Pressure from the regime forced serious conversation within British circles. A meeting of BBC Board of Governors held in July 1976 showed the FCO considering for the first time abolishing the Persian Service under mounting Iranian pressure.²⁷

The Service also created clashes between Parsons and the FCO. Parsons advocated a Service which should report mainly on business and trade and not become too involved in politics.²⁸ In this, he was in agreement with the Shah that the broadcasts were being perceived as the view of the British government and were detrimental to good Anglo-Iranian relations. The FCO repeatedly challenged Parsons' position, with Nicholas Barrington telling him, 'I hope you don't mind my saying that I was slightly surprised by the strength and monolithic nature of your views'.²⁹ Throughout 1978 Parsons continued to apply pressure on the BBC, but to no avail as the Service carried on its broadcasts in the fashion that it had always done, much to the chagrin of the regime.³⁰ That Parsons became so embroiled in the issue, owing to his desire to shape policy, ultimately led to him clashing with his home department namely the FCO. The ambassador chose to pursue such a course with the need to preserve commercial interests and a close working relationship in mind. However, in adopting such a stance, he left himself open to accusations from others of going 'native' and allowing too close a relationship with the Shah to affect his personal judgement.

Ultimately, the Service won out as it enjoyed the support of those such as Owen who, in a Cabinet White Paper on overseas representation, declared:

'the nation benefits from the unique reputation of the BBC's External Services as a well-informed unbiased source of world news and comments, and from the attention which is therefore paid to the information they provide about Britain and

²⁵ Sreberny and Torfeh, *Persian Service*, 83.

²⁶ Radji, Parviz C, *In the Service of the Peacock Throne: The Diaries of the Shah's Last Ambassador to London*, (London, 1983).

²⁷ Sreberny and Torfeh, *Persian Service*, 80.

²⁸ Ibid, 81.

²⁹ Ibid, 79.

³⁰ Ibid, 94-95.

British policies... The BBC's External Services are a proven success and represent a national asset which we should be careful to preserve'.³¹

That Parsons was unable to change policy over the Persian Service highlights how, even though he had a hand in shaping certain policies, most notably on the commercial side, he was not able to have such an influence over all areas. Ultimately, the decision was not his to make as the British diplomatic apparatus confers upon the Foreign Secretary the task of making decisions, leaving the delivery of policy to those such as Parsons who may not necessarily agree with the policy. Parsons was thus forced to engage with a Persian Service with whom he was at odds.

Parsons leaves for the summer

At the end of May 1978, Parsons decided to take leave for three and a half months. Before his departure, he sent a number of assessments to London explaining the growing seriousness of the situation, the cause of which was the liberalisation policies. He also pressed the absolute imperativeness of the Shah's need to regain control, whilst at the same time adding the caveat that he saw no risk of the overthrow of the regime since the armed forces remained loyal.³² Interestingly, both the embassy and the FCO, at this time and from the start of the year, did not countenance the possibility of the overthrow of the regime and work towards contingency planning to prepare for such an eventuality. That the opposition remained diverse and disparate with no one clear opposition figurehead at the time in the manner of a Lenin, Mao or Castro to prepare for no doubt affected planning.

Whilst Parsons was absent, the domestic situation escalated to a worrying degree for the Shah. On 1 August there were anti-government demonstrations in ten Iranian cities, with further riots in Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz on 10 August, leading martial law to be declared in Isfahan. The mission advised the British community there was no need to leave Isfahan or Shiraz yet, but there was a need for 'discretion in their movements, being careful in particular to avoid crowds, mosques, and the bazaars. We are also advising that unnecessary visits to Isfahan be postponed'.³³ Trouble spread, on 16 August, to Tehran when the bazaar was closed. Troops were deployed to suppress disorder stemming from demands for the rigid enforcement of Islamic law via the closure of cinemas, bars and night clubs, as well as opposition to television and the

³¹ TNA CAB129/202/3, CP(78)73 (7 July 1978).

³² Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall*, 66-67.

³³ PREM16/1719, TELNO505 (14 August 1978).

emancipation of women. For the future Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, 'the vilification of the Shah and his regime were more important than the glorification of Khomeini. For every one slogan for Khomeini, there were probably more than two against the Shah'.³⁴

The civil unrest started to have an impact on the FCO's attitude toward liaising with the Shah's opponents. Where Lucas had in his paper of 6 July explained the pitfalls of conversing with the opposition, his stance had softened by 9 August, when he advised of the need by the embassy to discreetly engage with them:

'As the Shah's control over his country becomes less absolute, the future of the regime and the nature of likely successors increase in importance. There is also a lively and partisan interest in Britain in Iranian affairs, particularly human rights aspects. We need prompt reporting from chancery of internal disturbances or any events which could attract attention in Britain. We also need to know what dissidents in Iran are thinking and how serious a threat they pose to the regime. Contacts with the 'opposition' must obviously be handled with care but the embassy should do what discreetly they can'.³⁵

In spite of Lucas' advice there is no evidence the embassy started to engage with opposition elements. There is no clear explanation for why this was the case and why the embassy did not follow directives from London. It may simply have been the case that, in line with Parsons' previous judgement, it was felt better to avoid engagement altogether - more so because no one dominant opposition group had emerged.

If there was no sense of foreboding about the civil unrest up to now, then the revolutionary match was almost certainly lit by the tragic fire at the Cinema Rex on 19 August, which killed over 400 people. The tragedy set off a search for those culpable and, for some, the finger of blame pointed in the direction of the Shah's secret police, SAVAK. On 27 August, Prime Minister Jamshid Amouzegar resigned and was replaced by Ja'afar Sharif-Emami on the condition he had a free hand. The devolving of greater power to the Prime Minister meant the Shah's power monopoly had been breached.³⁶ Sharif-Emami, who had been Prime Minister in 1960-61, was chosen because of his close links with religious leaders. The day after his appointment he announced all casinos and gambling clubs would be closed. He also abandoned the new 'Imperial' calendar, introduced in 1976, in favour of the traditional Islamic lunar calendar. Callaghan, keen to

³⁴ Arjomand, Said Amir, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran*, (New York, 1988), 103.

³⁵ FCO8/3220 (9 August 1978).

³⁶ Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall*, 68.

maintain good relations, wrote to his new counterpart: 'Please accept my congratulations on your appointment and my best wishes for the success of your administration. Iran and Britain have important and historic links and I look forward to continue co-operation on the many issues in which we share common interests and values'.³⁷

According to Amuzegar, Parsons' absence affirmed to those Iranian Royalists who were convinced London was complicit in usurping the regime; the leave was deliberately timed to abandon the Shah when he most needed support.³⁸ Callaghan has lamented the absence noting, 'in retrospect, it was a mistake for Anthony Parsons to have taken an extended summer leave, for by the time he returned to Tehran in the middle of September bearing a message from the Prime Minister to the Shah, we had nearly lost any chance of influencing events'.³⁹ Yet it is quite pertinent to ponder what, if any, difference the presence of Parsons would have made to stop the crisis. In the short term he may have been able to advise the Shah on steps to avert a crisis. However, there was no guarantee the ambassador would have been listened to; there was no guarantee the Shah would have been able to act upon Parsons' advice; and there was no guarantee any potential action taken by the Shah would have averted the crisis. Regardless of whether he would have really made a difference, however, the important thing was that others *believed* he would have done so; this underlined the high regard in which he was held, having worked successfully to build a close working relationship with the Shah.

The events of August 1978 were caused by deep-rooted problems. Both Thatcher and Parsons had questioned the Shah's domestic policy, but it would have been difficult for Parsons to advise the Shah to turn back, especially when liberalisation had American backing. Owen admitted 'we wanted decisive liberalisation from a man who could not be decisive and was not liberal'.⁴⁰ Though Parsons' absence may have caused a decrease in the Shah's interaction with the mission; it must not be forgotten that commentators including Parsons, Owen and Thatcher had already remarked upon the Shah's obliviousness to his country's problems, with a sycophantic court full of incompetent advisers. Thus, it is difficult to agree that Parsons' presence would have saved the Shah.

³⁷ PREM16/1719 (31 August 1978).

³⁸ Amuzegar, *The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution*, 87-88.

³⁹ Owen, *Time to Declare*, 396.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 397.

Parsons returns to Iran

Parsons flew back to Iran on 13 September. His return coincided with further civil disturbances. On 8 September the infamous Jaleh Square Massacre had taken place, causing the deaths of over a hundred people after troops fired on protesting crowds. Tehran and 11 other cities were now placed under martial law. But Owen told the Cabinet that, while the situation was unstable and it was difficult to see how events would develop, the armed forces would remain loyal to the Shah and would restore order. The effects of the regime's fall would be disastrous, as 'it was likely that Iran would be plunged into chaos, since it was very improbable that a coalition of such disparate elements would hold together for long. If this happened, the stability of the whole region would be seriously threatened'. It was therefore prudent to support the Shah and encourage him to continue with his policies of modernisation.⁴¹

After Parsons' return and that of the recently-absent U.S. ambassador William Sullivan, both envoys met the Shah almost every other day at his behest, 'for long, discursive audiences'.⁴² Interestingly, Sullivan has made the candid revelation (which hints at problems with his own government not taking heed of his reports) that 'he (the Shah) did not specifically ask for our guidance, and we had none to give him. Although Parsons and I both reported these conversations in detail to London and Washington, neither of us ever received any overall guidance from our governments to pass on to the Shah'.⁴³ Parsons' first audience with the Shah after his return was on 16 September, when the Shah:

'was ready to discuss the internal crisis without reserve or inhibition and gave me the unprecedented impression that he would welcome my personal view...he saw the present troubles, serious as they were, as part of a transitional period... At the end of our audience he asked me whether the British government still supported him...I gave him the necessary assurance, pointing to a message which I had just delivered from the Prime Minister'.⁴⁴

⁴¹ TNA CAB128/64, CM(78)31st (14 September 1978).

⁴² Sullivan, William, *Mission to Iran*, (New York, 1981), 167.

⁴³ Ibid, 168.

⁴⁴ Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall*, 71.

Yet, despite this apparent willingness to act upon Parsons' advice, he and Sharif-Emami showed continuing hostility towards the BBC, which they saw as working against the regime.⁴⁵

For all the difficulties, Parsons continued to press for supporting the regime as the only viable option.⁴⁶ Support for Iran was underlined in a letter sent by Callaghan to the Shah, in which the British premier declared his sympathy for the country's plight and his hope for the problems to be over, so that liberalisation policies could continue.⁴⁷ However, in a moment which encapsulated Britain's imperfect relationship with the Shah, Owen, in anticipation of the emperor leaking word of the letter, advised that a pre-emptive press briefing should be held immediately after Parsons handed it to the Iranian leader.⁴⁸ Even though Parsons visited the Shah, often along with Sullivan, to reassure him of their support, the Shah 'found in these sentiments little solace, many doubts.'⁴⁹ He felt the path of liberalisation which was forced upon him was incompatible with the law and order which was to be maintained.⁵⁰ He continued to harbour doubts about his allies, with Parsons having to re-assure him the Americans were not working with opposition forces.⁵¹

During Parsons' meetings he not only reflected the views of the FCO, but those of other departments, like the Department of Trade and Industry and Ministry of Defence. In a meeting with the Shah⁵² on 10 October to discuss Britain's tank contract Parsons explained that if this contract was cancelled thousands of British workers would be in danger of unemployment. The Shah replied that the Iranian government might have to ask Britain to accept oil instead of cash for this contract at least for the time being. Parsons asked point-blank if the contract would continue to which the Shah said 'so far as I am concerned, it will' but for Parsons 'his words made clear that the final decision is no longer in his hands'.

Retrospectively, Parsons felt that 'by mid-October the situation appeared desperate but not entirely hopeless', concluding that Iran was now a tripartite regime with the Shah in the background; the Prime Minister was trying to run the country and defuse the crisis

⁴⁵ PREM16/1719, TELNO618 (25 September 1978).

⁴⁶ Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall*, 77.

⁴⁷ PREM16/1719, Callaghan to the Shah (14 September 1978).

⁴⁸ PREM16/1719 - Iran. Memo by David Owen.

⁴⁹ Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza, *Answer To History*, 169.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 170.

⁵¹ PREM16/1719, TELNO616 (25 September 1978).

⁵² BT241/2928. TELNO 675, (11 October 1978).

and the military were uneasily trying to maintain order.⁵³ In mid-October Parsons and Sullivan met with the Martial Law Commander, General Oveissi, to emphasise that rumours of an Anglo-U.S. support of a military takeover were unfounded. Parsons later wrote that 'both our governments favoured progressive democratisation as the only way to solve the crisis...the effect of a military coup on Iran's Western friends and allies would be disastrous'⁵⁴, on the basis the military were inexperienced and nationwide strikes would happen immediately should it take over.

Khomeini moves to Paris

As disorder continued unabated, so Khomeini moved from Iraq to Neauphle-le-Chateau, twenty miles west of Paris, on 6 October, where he remained until February 1979. During that time he gave over 120 interviews. A telephone link was established between Paris and Tehran with his declarations taped, transcribed and Xeroxed in hundreds of thousands of copies.⁵⁵ According to Bakhash,

'this exposure gained the Iranian opposition sympathy and acceptance abroad, reinforced Khomeini's position at home by reassuring the wavering middle classes, and further eroded the self-confidence of the Shah's government. Second, given the excellent air and telecommunications links with Tehran, Paris permitted much closer coordination between Khomeini and the leaders of the revolutionary movement in Iran than had been possible at Najaf. It was in the Paris period that Khomeini's domination of the opposition movement came to be acknowledged by key Iranian political leaders...'.⁵⁶

In contrast, Parsons believed at the time moving to Paris was a mistake for Khomeini, as leaving the Muslim world for the Christian world would lead to a decline of his influence. The ambassador also hoped Khomeini would not visit Britain: 'I was keeping my fingers crossed that the Ayatollah's known dislike of Britain would spare us the embarrassment of his presence, although the Iranian government must realise that we would not infringe our own laws on their behalf either by refusing him admittance or by muzzling or deporting him, provided that he did not misbehave'.⁵⁷ This apprehension about Khomeini explains why a decision was made against establishing contact with him, via his

⁵³ Parsons, *Pride and the Fall*, 81.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 84.

⁵⁵ Bakhash, Shaul, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, (London, 1985), 49.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 49.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 80.

confidante Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, whilst at the same time supporting the regime by making arrangements for a British riot control expert to visit Tehran.⁵⁸

Although Parsons might believe Khomeini's move to Paris was a mistake, the regime was clearly worried by his ability to influence events from afar. Before his move to Paris, Sharif-Emami had a meeting where he asked if the British would consult with the Russians to bring Khomeini under control. The ambassador replied in the negative, arguing the Russians would use the situation to cause mischief.⁵⁹ Parsons and Sharif-Emami discussed the possibility of again exiling Khomeini to Iraq, should he return to Iran. But this would have been difficult because of Iraqi fears of his influence over Shi'ite opinion. The alternative, a move to another Muslim country such as Turkey, would mean he would still attempt to get back into Iran. Nonetheless, Parsons advised Khomeini should immediately be exiled in the event of a return to his homeland.

The Shah was clearly perturbed by the threat posed by Khomeini, insisting his return would make the situation uncontrollable, while arresting him would have severe consequences.⁶⁰ The Shah was convinced the French would curb Khomeini's political activities but such conviction proved vain. On 19 October, the Ayatollah said, in an interview, he was prepared to urge his followers to armed rebellion to establish an Islamic Republic. Despite his own fears over Khomeini's influence, Sharif-Emami did not believe he would return in the near future and had made a mistake in going to Paris, arguing if he stayed there then his influence would dwindle.⁶¹ This view was shared by Parsons who argued 'there is now a widespread view that Khomeini had made a grave mistake by going to the Christian world and that it may prove increasingly difficult for him to sustain the supercharged level of his message of opposition to the regime'.⁶²

Nevertheless, in an attempt to establish dialogue with Khomeini, Sharif-Emami sent emissaries, mainly mullahs, to Paris with three messages. Firstly, agitation had caused loss of lives and it was not right for a Muslim leader to instigate this; secondly Khomeini would not bring down the Shah; and thirdly, if he returned to Iran he would be arrested. These contacts failed to bring Khomeini into a dialogue. Yet, Sharif-Emami still had hope, believing excellent relations had been built up with the Ayatollahs in Qom. Parsons, too,

⁵⁸ Owen, *Time to Declare*, 398.

⁵⁹ PREM16/1719, TELNO637 (3 October 1978).

⁶⁰ PREM16/1719, TELNO662 (11 October 1978).

⁶¹ PREM16/1719, TELNO669 (12 October 1978).

⁶² PREM16/1719, TELNO684 (19 October 1978).

believed that 'an accommodation between the present Prime Minister and the leading Ayatollahs could still be achieved'.⁶³

Though, to some observers, it appeared Khomeini was the principal opposition figure, he actually remained one opposition voice amongst many. To criticise Britain for not engaging with Khomeini at this point fails to take into consideration that there was no guarantee he would even return to Iran after the deposition of the Shah. Where criticism can be levelled at Parsons, however, is in underestimating the strength of Khomeini's following and, having made such a misjudgement, being then unable to plan and prepare for the ramifications of a Khomeini return.

The crisis deepens

Though Parsons repeatedly expressed his view that the Shah would remain in power thanks to the military, in October 1978 he started to fear the worst. On 8 October rioting erupted in several towns, continuing throughout the month and, by 31 October, strikes completely halted the flow of oil, provoking grave concern in London. In a memorandum written to Callaghan by the Secretary of State for Energy, David Ennals, it was warned that 'oil production is currently at a halt and may not recover fully for some time'.⁶⁴

In a letter to Owen, Parsons stated that unrest had put the future of the regime in jeopardy. The opposition was 'not homogenous or cohesive', but Islamic feeling was strong and 'although it is doubtful that the Iranian people as a whole want a theocratic state, popular support for Khomeini has reached the point where any agreement with the more moderate clergy may not be enough...The Prime Minister has claimed privately that the return of Khomeini could plunge the country into civil war'. The ambassador noted there were few economic slogans on banners; most protestors simply wanted the end of the regime. In spite of this, he counselled the Shah should continue to be supported as even at this stage, he represented the most credible choice as a partner. To deviate from supporting him would risk London being accused of Machiavellian scheming by those who had always had deep suspicions of Britain.⁶⁵

Based on Parsons' judgement, Owen appeared in a TV interview (which he later regretted), where he argued Britain could not hedge its bets and 'it would not be in our

⁶³ PREM16/1719, TELNO707 (30 October 1978).

⁶⁴ PREM16/1719 (1 November 1978).

⁶⁵ PREM16/1719, Parsons to Owen (9 October 1978).

interests for the Shah to be deposed', despite his appalling human rights record.⁶⁶ But Callaghan was becoming concerned by the unravelling of events in Iran, as outlined in a memorandum calling for an immediate assessment of the situation 'to identify, if possible, any courses of action which might be open to the UK both to assist in arresting a further worsening of the position and to protect British interests'. The Prime Minister expressed concern 'that the Shah is unlikely to be helped by any further public expressions of support from British ministers'.⁶⁷ Callaghan's worry was partly due to evidence of an unfavourable response in Iran itself to British statements of support for the current regime. The Leader of the Opposition in the Lower House of the Majlis, on 24 October, bitterly criticised Owen, for supporting 'alien and anti-Iranian policies' in his recent statement of support for the Shah.

At this time an assessment was provided by the political section of the Tehran embassy, which highlighted the practical difficulties they faced:

'Reporting on disturbances is good. More difficult for the post is reporting on the likely trends of dissident activity, which is diffuse and fragmented, and largely centred on vociferous individuals with whom contact is neither practical nor politically expedient. The principal "opposition" figure is in exile in Paris. The post nevertheless does what it discreetly can; and its close contacts with the Iranian Security Services contribute to assessments of the threat to the regime... There is little scope in the present turmoil for identifying those likely to emerge as political leaders as the Shah's power becomes less absolute'.⁶⁸

This assessment highlights how, in revolutionary situations, it is difficult to predict events, particularly when there no single principal actor upon whom analysis can focus. Along with the reporting of Parsons throughout the year, it is apparent that the embassy, though not losing its emphasis on commercial work, most certainly increased its political activities. But was the level of political work sufficient? Had there been more individuals engaged in political work at the embassy, there is no guarantee it would have improved the accuracy of reporting, whereby it could have been predicted at an early stage that the Shah would fall, particularly when other states also failed to make an accurate assessment on this question. But it is possible that, with more resources, given its long-standing presence in Iran, the British embassy might have been able to provide more accurate forecasts.

⁶⁶ Owen, *Time to Declare*, 398.

⁶⁷ PREM16/1719 (27 October 1978).

⁶⁸ FCO8/3377 (September/October 1978).

The Shah told Sullivan and Parsons, on 1 November, that he had persuaded Abdullah Entezam to form a coalition government with nationalists and secularists.⁶⁹ This represented, in the eyes of the Shah, the best, if not the only solution as a military government was not viable. Parsons met with the Shah again on 4 November to discuss alternatives to his rule.⁷⁰ In particular, the ambassador expressed his concern at the misinformation from the U.S. State Department, who apparently believed that military rule was the only viable remaining option. The Shah agreed a military government would not be successful and re-affirmed his support for a coalition government.⁷¹

British Cabinet Meetings in early November also discussed the Shah's proposal to form a coalition government, his desire to continue with the policy of liberalisation and possible early elections.⁷² Emphasis was placed on Britain's 'immense' economic commitments in Iran, including defence contracts with the view that 'on balance, the Shah had a chance of surviving'. The Cabinet meetings further emphasised the Shah as the best option in the continued absence of credible alternatives:

'It was very difficult to see far ahead... From the point of view of our interests it was difficult to see a better alternative to the Shah. But if he survived he was likely to have to operate in very different circumstances in the future and more as a constitutional monarch...The Prime Minister said that if the Shah were to be overthrown he would almost certainly be replaced by a regime which would be far less attractive. For example, a military government would not pursue the same liberalising policy as the Shah was trying to do... On the other hand we need not give the impression that the Shah's regime could be regarded as democratic in our terms: nor would it do either the Shah or Her Majesty's government any good if we became labelled as his sponsor'.⁷³

Continued support for the Shah was rationalised on the grounds that Khomeini was not enamoured with the British. On 6 November one of Khomeini's followers made statements to the Reuters news agency, based on what the Ayatollah allegedly said:

'The Iranian people have a deep rooted hatred of the British government, particularly for having forced the Shah on them. Our people's attitude is hostile to the British government but not to the British people. When a new democratic

⁶⁹ PREM16/1719, TELNO726 (1 November 1978).

⁷⁰ PREM16/1719, CAB002/04 (4 November 1978).

⁷¹ Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, 168.

⁷² TNA CAB/128/64/17, CM(78)37th (2 November 1978).

⁷³ Ibid.

government comes to power in Britain, a government based on mutual respect and justice, we shall be glad to work with it'.⁷⁴

But, the British approach of refusing to engage with Khomeini was in stark contrast to the French, who argued that muzzling or expelling Khomeini would only make the situation worse.⁷⁵ Some might look upon French efforts and ponder why Britain did not make such approaches. Here it is important to re-emphasise how Britain and France had completely different histories in relation to Iran. The French were not looked upon as unfavourably; having had no history of political intervention in the country, they were not, like Britain, the subjects of a long held negative impression which burnished in the Iranian psyche and extended as far as the Shah - who, despite having a close relationship with Britain, was still prone to bouts of accusatory hysteria. Khomeini, whilst not constantly critical in his statements toward London, gave no indication he would pay any mind to British voices if he came to power.

London's opposition to Khomeini was not only based on ideological grounds. It was also difficult for Britain to contemplate an Islamic takeover as the clergy was not an organised collective.⁷⁶ Another problem, as expressed by the head of chancery, David Miers, was that, as of yet, the religious opposition had not formulated any clear policies. Instead, there were the shared ideals of the opposition in general, calling for better justice, less corruption, less of SAVAK and more democracy.⁷⁷ Although it remained in Britain's best interests to support the Shah, it was agreed public declarations of this would no longer be prudent with 'a low public profile now the best way to ensure the safety of British nationals and British interests in the country, to the limited extent that they have hitherto come under serious general threat'.⁷⁸

On the economic front there was the fear of the turmoil having adverse impacts. In 1977 Iran was the biggest market in Asia (654.6m) and exports rose 28% over 1976 but so far in 1978 exports were running at only 17% over the 1977 figure. According to one report, 14% of British domestic oil requirements were met by Iran and the presence of British firms in Iran and the Iranian-British Chamber of Commerce showed the importance of the country to the British economy in terms of employment. In considering what would happen if the Shah was overthrown, the report concluded a military regime would not give up defence contracts and would most likely seek oil

⁷⁴ TNA PREM16/1720, TELNO944 (6 November 1978).

⁷⁵ PREM16/1720, TELNO904 (4 December 1978).

⁷⁶ FCO8/3208, Islam in Iran (5 November 1978).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ PREM16/1719, Prendergast to Cartledge.

bartering; an Islamic regime would look to minimise the influence of oil companies and improve lives of Iranians, thus impacting on local British employment; while a Communist regime would nationalise the oil industry.⁷⁹

Such were the concerns over the gradual disintegration of the regime and the possible impact of this on Britain, that an inter-departmental 'Official Group on Iran' was set up in Whitehall. This first met on 2 November 1978. Represented at these meetings were the FCO, Treasury, Bank of England, Home Office, Ministry Of Defence, Departments of Trade and Energy and the Law Officers. Although the FCO assumed the leading role on matters relating to Iran as the crisis deepened, the formation of this group showed a multi-departmental approach was being taken, because of the range of interests involved in dealing with Iran, from trade, loans and diplomatic relations to military co-operation and the presence of hundreds of Iranian students in British universities. The Group's initial role was to draft a report 'to give ministers a quick but comprehensive view of the economic and political parameters of the developing situation in Iran with particular regard to the direct interests of the United Kingdom'.⁸⁰ This report, issued a week later, concluded the ongoing crisis would have serious repercussions for economic and trade interests with all departments expressing concern over the situation.⁸¹ It is significant that, rather than engage in finger pointing to apportion blame for any failings by the Tehran embassy, energies were spent on working collaboratively to assess the situation at hand. That there was a harmonious relationship between the various departments was unsurprising given the fact they all shared the same objective, which was to ensure the protection of commercial interests.

In a Cabinet ministerial committee meeting on economic strategy on 13 November⁸², the Department of Trade and Industry relayed its 'prime concern' to maintain visible exports to Iran (£750 million a year) and invisible earnings (over £400 million a year). Concern was also expressed about the difficulties which could arise in terms of oil supply loss. In terms of a policy stance there was no deviation from that expressed by the embassy and FCO, it being categorically stated 'the U.K.'s economic interests would be better served by a continuation of the present regime than by a period of prolonged internal disorder, or any alternative regime which is likely to emerge'. It was readily admitted that, 'there is, however, little which the UK can do at present to influence the outcome'. So, there was a high degree of consistency across departments on the position on Iran.

⁷⁹ PREM16/1719, 'Iran: Commercial Contingency Planning' Report on British trade in Iran.

⁸⁰ TNA, CAB130/1060, GEN149(78)1st Meeting (2 November 1978).

⁸¹ CAB130/1060, GEN149(78)6 (9 November 1978).

⁸² BT241/3045. EY(78)45. (13 November 1978).

Defence Secretary Mulley met with General Toufanian on 21 November⁸³ where he reiterated the stock British view that events were being watched 'anxiously and with sympathy. Iran occupied a strategic position of great importance to the West, and the British government had made clear its hope that the Shah would re-establish order and stability in Iran so that the liberalisation programme could continue and free elections could be held'. Toufanian asserted that the situation had stabilised and that 'the majority of Iranians did not wish to see the Shah overthrown, or to have the disorders continue'. Knowing that the British had a vested interest in the survival of the regime, he also enquired about the possibility of having a distinguished expert in counter-terrorism visit Iran to help with the situation.⁸⁴ The Ministry of Defence in conjunction with the Tehran embassy identified Exeter University lecturer Dr Richard Clutterbuck as the best expert. However, due to his commitments he was unable to visit Iran before 22 December. In fact, the visit never occurred, as the situation had by then become irretrievable for the regime.

While regular assessments were carried out to gauge the stability of the Shah's regime, it is interesting to note how the lessons from past revolutions were not used to inform them. Peter Beck⁸⁵ has produced a study looking at the extent to which history was used to create policy by the Treasury and Foreign Office between 1950 and 1976. His conclusion is that, although historians were consulted on a whole gamut of issues, right up to 'the mid 1970s the historical dimension was more frequently ignored than used by policymakers'.⁸⁶ For Beck, even though government departments still undertook historical work to search for precedents, as background to current events and in-house histories of particular crises, 'such activities proved largely reactive and *ad hoc*, rather than proactive, integral and routine'.⁸⁷ In line with Beck's observation, both the FCO and the Tehran mission were guilty of disregarding Britain's experience of earlier revolutions when advising the government on policy. There was a complete absence of detailed studies from diplomats about how their predecessors had dealt with other revolutionary states in the past, even in twentieth century examples such as Russia, China and Cuba. Though it was the hope that the Shah's regime would not collapse, it would have done no harm to conduct such studies to help inform policy. This is not to say that using history is guaranteed to help deal with a contemporary situation; more so when events are quite beyond your control. However, by looking at past revolutions, valuable lessons

⁸³ DEFE13/1320. MO26/9/15. (21 November 1978).

⁸⁴ DEFE13/1320. D/HDS/1/23. (30 November 1978).

⁸⁵ Beck, Peter, *Using History, Making British Policy: The Treasury and the Foreign Office, 1950-76*, (Basingstoke, 2006).

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 241.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 242.

could have been drawn on the potential problems that can arise in a state experiencing violent upheaval and the impact these might have on diplomatic questions.

The British embassy is attacked

Although Iran had been in turmoil for months, the USA and Britain only fully felt the impact on 5 November, when both their embassies were attacked. The British was set on fire, leaving it without communications and forcing an emergency communications link to be established.⁸⁸ The damage to the Chancery, where the all-important political and economic reporting was done, proved extensive, but the third floor remained fully operational.⁸⁹ A personal apology from the Shah was issued, closely followed by an apology on the telephone from the Foreign Minister.⁹⁰

Parsons viewed the attack with dismay, suspecting the army had made no significant attempt to protect the building and adding, 'Iran is a country where the truth makes only rare appearances, and we shall never know exactly at what level this passive policy was decided'.⁹¹ Britain had remained stoutly opposed to a military government and it was Parsons' belief that, 'deliberate orders must have been given to the troops to stand by and let the rioters do their worst, the object being to allow a situation to develop which would compel the Shah to appoint a military government. There could be no other explanation'.⁹² Parsons' view was supported by Sullivan who asserted 'the Shah had ceased the practice of having the British ambassador accompany me after the British government had failed to endorse the establishment of a military government in the wake of the events of November 4'.⁹³

On 6 November, the Shah broadcast to the nation that, having been unable to form a civilian coalition, he had appointed a military government headed by General Gholam Reza Azhari, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces since 1971. Immediately, the military ordered the arrest of thirty-two former ministers and officials on charges of corruption and oppression. On 8 November, Amir Abbas Hoveyda, Prime Minister for most of the preceding thirteen years, was also arrested. In a Cabinet meeting, Owen said the arrest of Hoveyda showed an attempt to erase the past which, in tandem with clamping down on corruption by the Royal family, showed the Shah had learned a major lesson from

⁸⁸ PREM16/1720, Duty Clerk to the Prime Minister (5 November 1978).

⁸⁹ PREM16/1720, TELNO744 (6 November 1978).

⁹⁰ FCO8/3219, TELNO785 (9 November 1978).

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall*, 97.

⁹³ Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, 191.

recent events. Owen again said it was in Britain's interests for the Shah to remain in power. A military government without him would be no improvement and a government under the anti-British Khomeini would be far worse.⁹⁴

Parsons met the Shah on 7 November, telling him of the problems encountered at the embassy and inconsistent presence of military guard for protection.⁹⁵ The Shah immediately made a telephone call and the embassy was more heavily guarded. After a further meeting on 12 November the issue of compensation was mentioned, with the Shah stating 'we are waiting for your bill'. When given a figure of £200,000 he did not flinch and promised recompense was on its way.⁹⁶ But by now Parsons felt his frequent meetings with the beleaguered emperor were becoming repetitive in content; 'the situation is so fluid and so fast moving that I think it is better to leave it to me to play the hand from moment to moment as I judge best'.⁹⁷

Despite the embassy being attacked, Owen stated 'I am at present advised that there is little risk to our staff or other British nationals, though they are all being advised to stay indoors or at home until the situation stabilises'.⁹⁸ Anything other than a call for calm would have created unwelcome uncertainty in the minds of people in Britain, concerned about the wellbeing of expatriates in Iran. A contingency planning file from the time, contemplating what should happen if the Shah were to fall, was dominated almost entirely by papers dedicated to the commercial impact on Britain.⁹⁹ But Owen's statement in parliament did not stop 'the British community becoming increasingly nervous, especially with the spreading of disquieting rumours'.¹⁰⁰

The Shah on the brink

The installation of a military government did nothing to stem the tide against the Shah. General Azhari announced on 28 November that all processions would be banned in the Shi'ite mourning month of Muharram, starting on 3 December, but this did not stop large numbers coming onto the streets of Tehran on 1 December. Troops dispersed the crowds the following day and again on 3 December. Due to these disturbances, British citizens were advised to avoid leaving their homes, but if the need arose then to avoid travelling

⁹⁴ TNA, CAB128/64, CM(78)38th (9 November 1978).

⁹⁵ PREM16/1720, TELNO772 (7 November 1978).

⁹⁶ FCO8/3219, TELNO800 (12 November 1978).

⁹⁷ PREM16/1720, TELNO2663 (8 November 1978).

⁹⁸ PREM16/1720, Secretary of State's Parliamentary Statement (6 November 1978).

⁹⁹ FCO8/3195 (24 October 1978-24 November 1978).

¹⁰⁰ PREM16/1720, TELNO783 (9 November 1978).

by foot and return by night.¹⁰¹ As a precautionary measure, the British School in Tehran was closed. On 7 December a petrol bomb was thrown at the home of the air attaché. Fortunately, he and his wife were unhurt.¹⁰²

Nonetheless, President Carter told a press conference that he expected the Shah to survive. Carter re-affirmed his confidence in the Shah, stating the U.S. would not interfere in Iran and would not let others do so.¹⁰³ Yet, on 10 and 11 December, demonstrations, numbered in the millions, occurred.

Owen now met with the Iranian Foreign Minister, Amir Khosrow Afshar, in London. The Foreign Secretary stated he would be criticised for arranging the meeting; he nevertheless wanted to show there was 'no shift in British policy', asking Afshar to relay the message that Britain would help the Shah if it could. Afshar noted how Khomeini, driven by hatred for the Shah, had virtually excommunicated anyone talking to the government. Owen agreed there was no hint of compromise from Khomeini.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, in Iran, Parsons remained convinced the best resolution to the crisis lay in the Shah relinquishing power to the Crown Prince; abdication was not an option, as then the military would take over, which would be damaging for British interests. Parsons also noted, 'however, slender the chances may be, I still believe the Shah is right in continuing the search for a political solution without accepting any of the scenarios which require him to withdraw'.¹⁰⁵ But, desperate for options, Owen asked Parsons whether the Shah would be happy to adopt a more ceremonial role like European monarchs.¹⁰⁶

In the final days of December 1978 attacks on British citizens and properties increased. Due to disturbances in Tehran, Parsons lamented 'we have therefore had to make our political contacts by telephone, unsatisfactory means of communication since the lines are obviously tapped'.¹⁰⁷ On 30 December, the British Council centres in Ahwaz, Shiraz and Mashhad, as well as the American and Turkish consulates in Tabriz, were attacked. This was the point at which Parsons realised events had truly gone beyond the Shah's control and felt London should discontinue talks with him; the situation was up to the Iranians to resolve and that British or American meddling would only do harm.¹⁰⁸ In a

¹⁰¹ PREM16/1720, TELNO871 (2 December 1978).

¹⁰² PREM16/1720, TELNO949 (8 December 1978).

¹⁰³ PREM16/1720, TELNO4909 (12 December 1978).

¹⁰⁴ FCO8/3200, Owen and Afshar (14 December 1978).

¹⁰⁵ PREM16/1720, TELNO998 (19 December 1978).

¹⁰⁶ PREM16/1720, TELNO1006 (21 December 1978).

¹⁰⁷ PREM16/1720, TELNO1025 (28 December 1978).

¹⁰⁸ Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall*, 122.

telegram to London on New Year's Eve, Parsons concluded 'the general situation, including the stretching of economic resources, has now reached a stage where, if you or your dependants have no important need to remain in Iran, you or they are advised to leave'.¹⁰⁹ As a result plans for evacuation of British subjects to the sovereign military bases in Cyprus were put in place, to be initiated by the ambassador, approved by ministers and carried out by the Ministry of Defence.¹¹⁰

To assess the situation in Iran it was proposed to send a former Labour Foreign Secretary, Lord George Brown, to investigate matters. Parsons was vehemently against this idea, reasoning that Britain would be 'exposed to accusations of interference and intrigue and there might well be repercussions against us.' Brown in turn argued he was visiting at the behest of Shahpour Bakhtiar, who had asked him to come over to help negotiations with the Shah, and that it would be embarrassing to step down at this stage.¹¹¹ Forced to accept that Brown would be visiting, Parsons, in a meeting with Bakhtiar, emphasised that the visit was not an attempt by the British government to interfere in Iranian politics.¹¹²

Bakhtiar was chosen by a hapless Shah to become Prime Minister, on 4 January 1979, when Western support for him had all but dissipated: 'I finally decided to name Bakhtiar Prime Minister after my meeting with Lord George Brown, once Foreign Secretary in Britain's Labour government. We were old friends. He took my hand and pleaded with me to leave the country. Just take a two-month vacation, he said. Then he strongly endorsed Bakhtiar'.¹¹³

Callaghan and Carter, together with Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of West Germany and French President Giscard d'Estaing, met between 4 and 6 January 1979 at the Guadeloupe Summit and discussed Iran among other topics. Callaghan opened the discussion by saying that, based on reports from Parsons, the Shah was lost and no workable alternative to existed.¹¹⁴ The Prime Minister added Britain would not give him refuge, even though Thatcher had promised to do so should the Conservatives win the upcoming election.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ PREM16/1720, TELNO1037 (31 December 1978).

¹¹⁰ PREM16/1720, Message No 3 from Middle East Dept of FCO in answer to questions from Callaghan (30 December 1978).

¹¹¹ PREM16/1720, TELNO1035 (31 December 1978).

¹¹² TNA PREM 16/2131, TELNO13 (2 January 1979).

¹¹³ Pahlavi, *Answer To History*, 171.

¹¹⁴ Afkhami, Gholam Reza, *The Life and Times of the Shah*, (Berkeley; California, 2009), 501.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 543.

In contrast, the Americans discussed the following options, with the State Department favouring option (a), National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski favouring option (b) and Carter favouring option (c):¹¹⁶

- (a) An active U.S. effort to promote a civilian coalition with the Shah as constitutional monarch.
- (b) U.S. encouragement to the Shah to 'buck up' and form a firm military or civilian government.
- (c) No active U.S. involvement (except for private assurances to the Shah that the U.S. is prepared to back whatever course he decides to take), plus a continued public expression of support for the Shah and of confidence in Iran's ability to resolve the current crisis.

Such a lack of uniformity on the part of the Americans had long hampered the development of a united Western front according to Owen; 'For us it certainly made the formulation of a coherent strategy with the United States virtually impossible'.¹¹⁷ Owen's view was supported by Ambassador Sullivan, who later noted that the U.S. embassy 'drifted through the remainder of November and into December with no guidance from the Department of State or from Washington in general'.¹¹⁸

U.S. judgement was partly determined, and made more complicated, by the supposed threat posed by the Soviets and their allies in the Tudeh. Fears over Soviet intentions were revealed in Brezhnev's statement in *Pravda* on 19 November 1978, when he made it 'clear that any, particularly military, interference in the affairs of Iran, a state directly bordering on the Soviet Union, would be regarded by the Soviet Union as affecting its security interests'.¹¹⁹

Parsons' last visit to the Shah was on 8 January 1979, when he was asked what to do. The visit echoed the one made by ambassador George Buchanan in January 1917 to Tsar Nicholas II, shortly before the overthrow of his regime, in a last ditch attempt to offer advice on how the regime could be salvaged. Buchanan had warned Nicholas that unless he changed his policy and replaced his ministers with men who retained the confidence of the people as well as the Court, then his Empire was doomed. But the Tsar did not

¹¹⁶ PREM16/2131, TELNO14 (2 January 1979).

¹¹⁷ Owen, *A Time to Declare*, 399.

¹¹⁸ Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, 204.

¹¹⁹ Yodfat, Aryeh Y, *The Soviet Union and Revolutionary Iran*, (London, 1984), 47.

listen and instituted no changes.¹²⁰ Parsons said the views he gave were personal and not representative of the British government: the Shah was in an untenable situation and it was best to leave the country.¹²¹ This advice was delivered in the context of Bakhtiar's appointment as Prime Minister, seen by the Shah as his own last ditch attempt to avert disaster, but which won no popular support whatsoever. Parsons concluded 'the prospects for a return to stability by means of the Bakhtiar government are now very bleak... The government has made various policy statements this week, though none of them sufficient to recover any political initiative'.¹²² Unable to stem the tide, the Shah finally conceded defeat and departed the country for Egypt on 16 January 1979.

Summary

1978 was the year in which the Shah lost his grip on power. The ever-worsening riots and strikes, orchestrated by a diverse range of opposition groups, culminated with him being forced to flee the country. The loss of the Shah was a hammer blow to London, as 'Iran under the Shah was a valuable ally, a highly lucrative market, a stabilising force in the turbulent region after British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf at the end of 1971, a reliable supplier of oil, the largest market for British goods and service in the Middle East, and a steady client for British arms sales'.¹²³ In terms of fulfilling Berridge's functions of an embassy, the Tehran mission was still able to continue in 1978 with all the functions, in spite of working in an increasingly volatile environment. The main change came with an increasing shift to political activities, as assessments were made on Iran's descent toward revolution. However commercial activities remained important, since there were still profitable contracts to be fulfilled. Other government departments had an interest in Iran, a Working Group was created to handle the fallout from the crisis and the situation was also discussed at Cabinet meetings.

Throughout most of 1978 Parsons was unyielding in his view that the Shah would ride out the storm. British policy was, right up until the last days of his reign, supportive of the Shah's regime in the apparent absence of any credible alternatives. Neither were any studies carried out in the FCO to understand how events had unfolded and impacted upon diplomatic conduct in earlier revolutions, such as those in Russia and China earlier in the century. In January 1979, Parsons finally accepted the inevitable, but the inability

¹²⁰ Ullman, Richard, *Anglo-Soviet relations, 1917-1921. vol.1, Intervention and the War*, (Princeton, 1961), 9.

¹²¹ Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall*, 125.

¹²² PREM16/2131, TELNO96 (10 January 1979).

¹²³ Amuzegar, *Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution*, 94.

of the ambassador, his embassy and the British government to predict the revolution was severely criticised by contemporaries. The next chapter will be dedicated to an analysis of how far such criticisms are justified.

Chapter 4. The embassy's failure to predict the Iranian revolution

'On reflection, my impressions of Iran seem to have something of the quality of those paintings in which the French nobility on the eve of the Revolution disport themselves amid contrived pastoral scenes'¹. Margaret Thatcher

Margaret Thatcher's colourful reminiscence underlines the extent to which the Iranian revolution, despite continued and worsening unrest over the course of 1978, still caught many people unawares. The Shah was not a leader who had been a stranger to crises in his time and he had, in his own autocratic fashion, suppressed all instances of unrest against his regime since his return to power in 1953. That he would fail to do so in 1978 was not predicted by most observers. However, he became one of a line of apparently all-powerful leaders abandoned by his people and his military, in the manner of Louis XVI and Tsar Nicholas II.

In spite of his flaws and the mistreatment of his people, the Shah long remained for Britain the best choice as a partner in Iran. Amidst the turbulence of the wider Middle East his rule, over a quarter of a century from 1953, represented some semblance of order. For decades he had seemed a secure ruler, who could be relied upon by Britain to work with in furthering its commercial interests. His deposition was nothing short of disastrous for Britain, more so because there was complete uncertainty over whether London would enjoy friendly relations with the new regime, allowing the commercial relationship with Iran to continue undisturbed. Consequently the prospect of losing this important partner drew a great deal of vexation as well as criticism from some quarters, some of who focused on the Tehran embassy's failure to predict the revolution and take the requisite steps to plan for life without him. Parsons himself was perplexed as to how the revolution happened, going over the issue with other diplomats in the corridors of the FCO. Michael Palliser, who as Permanent Under-Secretary was the leading civil servant in the FCO, suggested to him that he hold an open teach-in at the FCO on the subject. This was an unusual event, as a senior diplomat was admitting fault in front of others, but it was nevertheless an excellent example of learning lessons of diplomacy by hindsight.²

In searching for answers, Foreign Secretary David Owen commissioned an FCO report analysing policy on Iran in the years leading up to the revolution, focusing on how the

¹ Thatcher, Margaret, *The Path to Power*, 382.

² Dickie, John, *Inside the Foreign Office*, (London, 1992), 236-237.

revolution was not predicted and whether a different policy might have saved the regime. The then 33-year old Nicholas Browne was chosen to author the report. Browne had served in the embassy as third secretary in Tehran from 1971 to 1974 and in later years returned to Iran, serving twice as chargé d'affaires and then as ambassador from 1999 to 2002. He delivered an assessment of foreign policy and the embassy's performance which in parts was sympathetic whilst in other parts was critical. In essence, Browne believed:

'It is hard to escape the conclusion that the embassy was concerned that British government and British business would lose interest in Iran if they broadcast the message that there was a real risk to stability, and that they allowed this to affect to some extent their judgement of the political situation... It is natural for a government with heavy commitments in a Third World country to look on the bright side and hope that the worst will not happen, but it can also be dangerous. The British performance over Iran clearly demonstrates the importance of separating in the mind of an assessment of what it is hoped will happen to maximise the benefit to Britain, and what it is objectively believed will happen in the light of a dispassionate examination of the evidence'.³

Browne's report was acclaimed within the FCO for the thoroughness of its research and lucidity of assessment. Parsons himself expressed the view, 'Nick Browne's report is very fair. I agree with many points, particularly the conclusion (recommendations). I made many of the same points after my return from Tehran in April 1979'.⁴ Whether one agrees with his assessment or not, Browne's report in tandem with other popular criticisms, can be used as a basis upon which to critically analyse the performance of the FCO and the embassy – and more specifically the question of why exactly they both failed to predict the revolution.

Others have echoed Browne in emphasising the embassy was too focused on business. Dickie has pointed out, 'in the intense competition of the economic boom all the diplomats in the embassy were regarded as commercial attachés almost to the extent of being blamed if a contract was not secured for a British company'.⁵ However, by concentrating too much on export promotion, where Parsons was expected to see at times six company directors from Britain a day, the pressure of day-to-day commercial work did not leave enough time for embassy staff to engage in the requisite political

³ FCO8/3601, British Policy on Iran 1974-1978 (1980), 81.

⁴ FCO8/3601, Parsons to Miers (5 June 1980).

⁵ Dickie, *Inside the Foreign Office*, 238.

reporting. Writing at the time, Moorhouse was also of the view 'there is probably no other British embassy where the workload is so intensively weighted in favour of commerce'.⁶ For Edwards such a situation is very risky as, 'the primary job of Foreign Office staff – whether diplomats or spies – is the collection and analysis of political information of importance to Britain: all other activities must be secondary. And that is true. If an embassy does not have an accurate grasp of what is going on in the country in which it operates, all its activities are threatened'.⁷

Owen disagreed with those who did not want to see overseas diplomatic missions operating primarily as commercial entities (preferring the primary engagement to be in political work as per tradition). Writing in a Cabinet White Paper on overseas representation he was categorical in saying,

'the political work of an embassy cannot be divorced from its economic work, or from export promotion, aid administration or cultural activities. All should be mutually reinforcing; and none can be conducted in a vacuum without reference to each other or to the overall effort of the Mission. The Government, having carefully studied various recommendations, believe that the present integrated staffing of posts abroad brings benefits immeasurably greater than those which might flow from separate export promotion or aid administration services'.⁸

In other words, Parsons was simply doing no more than what was asked of him in terms of using the embassy to promote trade interests. Such an emphasis on diplomats as trade promoters had been part of British practice for many years, having been particularly underlined in the 1969 Duncan Report.

Pandering to the Shah?

The emperor, for all his bluster, was in a wholly volatile position which meant by 1978, as Owen later put it, he 'was vulnerable, perched on an unstable edifice', with a lack of structured governance mechanisms meaning SAVAK, the Prime Minister, the Supreme Commanding Officer and the Central Bank represented independent interests.⁹ Browne believed, in no uncertain terms, Britain was guilty of excessive pandering:

⁶ Moorhouse, Geoffrey, *The Diplomats: The Foreign Office Today*, (London, 1977), 300.

⁷ Edwards, Ruth, *True Brits: Inside the Foreign Office*, (London, 1994), 199.

⁸ TNA CAB129/202/2, CP(78)72 (7 July 1978).

⁹ Owen, David, *A Time to Declare*, 395.

'unfortunately the policy of flattering the Shah and acceding to his requests in order not to take the risk of confrontation and possible damage to British interests entailed cost as well as benefit. The policy meant that from the mid-1960s onwards the Shah was no longer able to benefit from frank discussion of all Iran's problems with his closest allies, Britain and the United States'.¹⁰

In analysing Browne's assertion that pandering affected Britain's ability to provide constructive political advice a number of considerations need to be made. Had Britain spoken in frank terms, then would the Shah have listened given his natural mistrust of British intentions? Would he have wanted to implement changes suggested by Britain in the first place? Even had he listened then would he have been in a position to implement changes? Might speaking in frank terms have adversely affected the Anglo-Iranian commercial relationship?

Browne's view was held in some other quarters where it was thought that, by being excessively deferential, the embassy was not in a position where it could talk to him on an even footing and in doing so force him to realise the error of his ways.¹¹ However, not everyone concurred with Browne. Sir Alan Munro, in 1979 the head of the Middle Eastern Department of the FCO, wrote his own post mortem on Iran.¹² In it he concluded, 'Sir Anthony Parsons had achieved a relationship of remarkable frankness with the Shah, which appeared to offer a real chance of influencing him in a positive way'. This conclusion was underlined by the fact Parsons met more frequently with the Shah than arguably anyone else in his position. Munro emphasised Britain had to maintain a strong relationship in order to be in a position where it could speak out against his consistent breach of human rights, which Munro highlighted as arousing a strong feeling in Britain in the 15 years before the revolution.

Certainly Owen felt Parsons' influence on the Shah was one which was strong and was most keenly felt when the ambassador was absent. In this regard, Owen has pointed to the negative impact of Parsons' extended summer break in 1978 which the Foreign Secretary felt it was a mistake to take, especially because the relationship was so personal; no one else in the embassy would have been able to have an influence on him.¹³ The strong relationship Parsons had cultivated, facilitated fruitful Anglo-Iranian commercial relations thus, if the relationship is to be judged by using commercial

¹⁰ FCO8/3601, British Policy On Iran 1974-1978 (1980), 86.

¹¹ Ibid, 86.

¹² FCO8/3377, Iran: A Post Mortem (21 February 1979).

¹³ Owen, *A Time to Declare*, 396.

relations as the barometer of success, then it was, on the whole, a success. The emphasis on commercial activities meant the political side of the embassy was undermanned, therefore limiting Britain's scope for analysing in great detail the unrest on the domestic Iranian scene. Though Parsons on occasion did give advice¹⁴ in order to help the Shah, this in itself would not have been enough to help the latter avoid the numerous crises which afflicted Iran in 1978. The country was in such a perilous position it would have taken something drastic beyond mere reforms for the regime to survive. Thus the question to ponder is: would it have been in Britain's interests to suggest to the Shah he step to one side, when there were no certainties over whether his replacement would have been a partner with whom Britain could do business?

In the first instance, there was no guarantee the Shah would have heeded Parsons' advice due to his innate mistrust of Britain whenever the discussion was about internal politics. Moreover, the ambassador for all his abilities, as one man, would have found it hard to succeed where others had failed. In the 1970s the Shah's failed liberalisation policies were only enacted after heavy pressure from the Americans, who wished to see him step away from some of the worst excesses of his autocratic regime. However, liberalisation was ultimately a failure; it could not address some of Iran's deepest and most severe problems, such as the poverty which affected large parts of the population, creating a deep chasm between the haves and have not's. Furthermore, Parsons could not prevent him from making grave errors of judgement, such as the ill advised printing of an article in the Tehran daily *Itilla'at* which vilified Khomeini in January 1978, setting off the chain of unrest which was to debilitate Iran that year.

Rather than simply stating that inherent weaknesses in the Shah's regime were ignored by British officials, a more appropriate assessment would be that London was duped by the Shah into thinking he was a stronger ruler than he actually was. This in turn created a facade down to 1978, marked by a belief that he was in a secure position to implement the requisite changes needed to steer his country away from crisis. Owen later felt strongly about this, believing he too was culpable in being deceived by the Shah. A meeting with the Iranian leader in 1978 'reinforced in my mind the image of a powerful leader, not remotely akin to the dithering, indecisive Shah of 1953. I confess that it was this self-confident, assertive image which stayed with me in 1978 while we debated what we should do to bolster the Shah's government. But it was false'.¹⁵ Owen also believed

¹⁴ Sullivan, William, *Mission to Iran*, 167.

¹⁵ Owen, David, *In Sickness and in Power: Illness in Heads of Government During the Last 100 Years*, (London, 2011), 205.

the Emperor had shown himself to be indecisive and a coward in 1953, by fleeing Iran.¹⁶ As such, the Foreign Secretary admitted, 'we failed to remember how weak he was before he took on the airs of an autocrat. We were far too deferential before his charade of leadership while he vacillated month by month. We failed to infuse him with the decisiveness and ruthlessness which were necessary not just for his survival but for his country's rejection of an Islamic revolution'.¹⁷

The Shah was also duplicitous in hiding away the details of his terminal illness. According to Owen, at one stage only eight (and at the most twelve) people knew of the illness; it was no accident that he did not choose British doctors to treat him as he did not want Britain to know what was happening.¹⁸ The ramifications of not knowing about his illness were serious given the whole nature of Britain's relationship with him would have changed. Owen is of the belief his downfall could have been avoided if his illness was known about, meaning western governments could have managed the situation by forcing him out on grounds of ill health and having influence over who would succeed him.¹⁹ In pushing him to one side and convincing him to step down, it was Owen's view that the best alternative solution, as pressed by Parsons in 1978, was to institute a Regency, with his son taking over, but without autocratic powers.²⁰ Whether such a course could have succeeded is, of course, doubtful, but it might have been worth trying.

Failures in engaging with opposition elements?

Browne's report was also critical of Britain's inability to connect with opposition elements which he felt contributed to a failure of gaining a full understanding of what was happening in Iran in terms of the political situation. According to Browne the questionable policy of avoiding contact with opponents of the regime began in the 1960s. He agreed that, once the regime had asserted its authority, contact with opposition elements would have been risky, but the embassy should have made more effort to gain information from the National Front and the mosques in 1977 and 1978, which would have alerted the embassy more to the continuing importance of Shi'ite Islam as an opposition force and to the attitudes of the traditional merchant classes. Minimal contact with opposition elements meant the embassy became dependent on SAVAK for information. Furthermore, Browne concluded, 'if contacts had never been

¹⁶ Owen, *A Time to Declare*, 387-388.

¹⁷ Ibid, 386.

¹⁸ Interview with David Owen by the author (23 May 2013).

¹⁹ Owen, *In Sickness and in Power*, 213-214.

²⁰ Owen, *A Time to Declare*, 386.

allowed to lapse in the first place it would have been more difficult for the Shah to complain'.²¹

In answer to this particular criticism, Parsons was in complete disagreement with Browne and it is worth reproducing his response at length:

'The report does not emphasise adequately the constraints under which we were acting... After 150 years of gross British interference in Iran's internal affairs, all Persians, including the Shah, were obsessive about the hidden hand of the British. Our only hope of establishing a profitable working relationship with the Shah was to do everything possible to allay these suspicions and nothing to feed them. Hence the deliberate policy carried out by myself and my two predecessors of avoiding all contacts with the Mullahs and the old politicians, the two elements where our hidden hand had been most active in the past. I take Nick Browne's point that, having dropped these contacts, it was extremely difficult to resume them. But the truth is that, if we had not dropped them, we would never achieve the relationship with the Shah which we needed in order to further our interests... It was not just that the Shah's own suspicions would have been fuelled by the continuation of such contacts. The contacts themselves would have taken our active interest in them as evidence of support and would have used this as a weapon in their campaigning against the Shah... During my first four years in Tehran, I agonised endlessly over this problem and you must have been present at some of the discussions we had about whether we should be bolder in re-establishing such contacts. We always decided that the game would not have been worth the candle. We would have antagonised the Shah without sufficient compensation gain to our political analysis. I still stand by that view'.²²

Parsons was not alone in his views. Munro felt the difficulty with the Mullahs was that they were not initially seen as potential revolutionaries, as their actions and attitudes were mostly reactionary.²³ There was a general underestimation by outside analysts of the potential for religion to become a main driver of radical change. Munro also felt it was difficult to communicate with the Mullahs and therefore, being unable to communicate with them, it was impossible to comprehend that they might eventually collaborate with modernist secularists in overthrowing the regime. In addition, Munro felt 'contact with opposition elements was anathema to the Shah and hard to conceal from

²¹ FCO8/3601, British Policy On Iran 1974-1978 (1980), 78.

²² FCO8/3601, Parsons to Miers (5 June 1980).

²³ FCO8/3377, Iran: A Post Mortem (21 February 1979).

him. Moreover even had the assessment of opposition been more correct, it may be wondered whether the prescription for UK policy would have been effectively different. The fact remains that our bread was buttered on the Shah's side and we wanted to see it stay that way'.²⁴

Both Parsons and Munro have pointed out a number of difficulties associated with engaging or attempting to engage with opposition elements. Even though the imperial regime was in an ever worsening position over the course of 1978, it still continued to enjoy the support of the army in this period, which enabled it to cling on to power. Although contact with the Mullahs and the National Front may have given Britain a better understanding of the situation, such contact was fraught with dangers and difficulties. With such a close relationship with the Shah, which enabled Britain to further its commercial interests, the question must be asked whether it would have been prudent to jeopardise this relationship by antagonising him by way of engaging with the opposition. If, against the odds, he had survived, then had Britain engaged with the opposition, then this would most certainly have been viewed upon with disdain by him and he would have in all likelihood castigated Britain for reverting to type by scheming to control affairs in Iran. It is for this reason Britain did not abandon him in 1978, as he was plunged deeper into crisis and even whilst he was teetering on the brink, and also why British politicians from opposite sides of the political spectrum such as Owen and Thatcher went to such great lengths to maintain good relations by visiting him in 1978. Within this context, the notion of engaging with opposition elements was not pursued as there was a very real fear that this had the potential of leaving British fingers badly burned. On this it is worth quoting Moorhouse²⁵ at length:

'If you put morality to even the coolest of ambassadors, in a land where dissidence smoulders underground as hotly as the sun shines above, he will invariably give you the same retort. It is that he has no business to be getting on terms with the dissidents, however much he may or may not sympathise with their cause, in anticipation of a successful coup. Coups do not always succeed, and to be even distantly implicated in one that backfired would be a disastrous diplomatic gaffe by the representative of a country which can no longer advocate by gunboat'.

²⁴ FCO8/3377, Iran: A Post Mortem (21 February 1979).

²⁵ Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 277.

Hamilton and Langhorne²⁶ share the sentiment, commenting that,

'If a diplomat is to succeed as an intermediary, he needs to maintain the confidence of the government to which he is accredited, and that in some countries could be forfeited by attempts on his part to establish relations with individuals opposed to the existing regime, or disaffected groups within society. The honourable spy can all too easily become the distrusted subversive'.

There were other problems associated with contacting opposition elements in Iran. In 1978 there was a broad range of opposition ranging from those promoting theocracy to those promoting secularism and everything else in between. There was not one opposition group which was dominant above all others and had assumed a leadership position. With the opposition being so disparate and inchoate it was difficult to identify who exactly to engage with, for there was no way of predicting who amongst the opposition would ultimately hold power if the Shah was deposed; that is if he was even deposed. In such a situation it was difficult for Britain to 'back a horse', as the runners and riders so to speak were many, all choosing divergent courses with no form behind any particular horse to give an indication they would be successful. Furthermore, there was no guarantee that even if contact was made, opposition groups would have been willing to engage with a Britain which was viewed with great suspicion and mistrust, owing to its perceived historical role in meddling in Iranian affairs, which had in turn created in the Iranian psyche (held even by the Shah himself) a vision of it as a mischievous state. As Munro notes 'the bazaaris had long memories of 1904, 1945 and 1953'.²⁷ Thus what happened in Iran ran counter to Trevelyan's²⁸ somewhat baffling observation that an ambassador 'will meet no hostility in countries which his own country has dominated or attacked in the past'.

There are some who argue there was one dominant opposition personality with whom contact should have been made, namely Khomeini, who was in Paris during the latter stages of 1978. But Owen has expressed doubts about such an engagement, stating that contact was not made because the Shah would most likely have found out.²⁹ Browne shared Owen's view, noting 'mediation with Khomeini himself would have undoubtedly

²⁶ Hamilton, Keith and Langhorne, Richard, *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration* (2nd edition), (London, 2010), 236.

²⁷ Interview with Sir Alan Munro by the author (13 February 2012).

²⁸ Trevelyan, Humphrey, *Diplomatic channels*, (London, 1973), 24.

²⁹ Interview with Owen (23 May 2013).

been fruitless because of his deep-seated distrust of the British and his own unwillingness to contemplate compromise'.³⁰

Britain was not alone in choosing not to establish contact with opposition elements. The Americans, who had enjoyed a far greater presence in Iran after 1953 than Britain, had no contact with political dissidents up to Spring 1978 due to the U.S. relationship with SAVAK³¹. By then the U.S. 'embassy reacted rapidly in establishing contact'³² yet this did nothing to avert Iran from disaster. Ultimately the problems engulfing Iran were many, varied and deep; problems which the regime had failed to address and problems which no last minute contact with opposition elements would have resolved. The fact is that, though the Shah was at the edge of the precipice, he remained the best choice as a partner, even more so in the absence of any viable alternatives.

Disconnect between the embassy and the FCO?

Another failing of British policy according to Browne was the disconnect which existed between the embassy and the FCO.³³ He pointed out the FCO were uneasy about the embassy's despatch in January 1978, but did not press home their concerns as business interests skewed their interpretations of what was really going on; British businesses would lose interest in Iran if the message was broadcast that there was a real risk to stability. Browne believed advanced knowledge of the regime being overthrown may not have stopped it from being overthrown, but would have at least broadened policy options.³⁴

Parsons denied Browne's assertion reports from Tehran were optimistic because of a desire not to cause alarm in London. Rather, the belief the Shah would survive was based on personal political judgement, leading Parsons to declare 'in the end, I was proved wrong, but I do not regret having kept off the fence'.³⁵ For Parsons, the problem lay not in any disconnect between the embassy and the FCO but rather in the repercussions of choosing a course of carrying out a mission where the political section was purposely diminished in favour of the commercial section. A better solution would have been 'a greater number of political officers in the chancery and also regular meetings in London between the department, leading academics, well informed political

³⁰ FCO8/3601, British Policy On Iran 1974-1978 (1980), 90.

³¹ Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, 145.

³² Ibid, 145.

³³ FCO8/3601, British Policy On Iran 1974-1978 (1980), 80.

³⁴ Ibid, 81-82.

³⁵ FCO8/3601, Parsons to Miers (5 June 1980).

journalists etc with a subsequent active dialogue between the department/planning staff and the embassy would have built up a greater awareness of the lessons of history'.³⁶

However, as noted in the previous chapter, the failure to engage with historical precedents to inform the case of Iran was endemic of a wider malaise within the British diplomatic apparatus, which meant that the 'lessons of history' were rarely drawn upon.³⁷ Parsons' views were echoed by Munro who felt if the embassy had had the resources to give greater weight to political work as compared with practical commercial work (which would have been against the whole tendency of staffing priorities of the 1970s) and, had there been more Persian speakers in the chancery, then more accurate assessments could have been made.³⁸ Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that, in making more accurate assessments and predicting the regime would collapse, Britain would have been alone amongst the international community; there was not a single state which correctly foresaw the revolution. As Trevelyan³⁹ notes 'the ambassador is not a professional historian or political scientist. His thoughts are probably neither very profound nor new. But what they want at home is not an academic thesis, but a practical view'. Parsons' practical view over the course of 1978 was that the Shah would ride out the crisis as he enjoyed the support of the armed forces; which was in line with the view held by his counterparts operating in Iran.

Rather than a disconnect between the FCO and the embassy, Owen felt the problem was one of poor intelligence gathering. 'One of the Foreign Office's minor mistakes over a decade or more was to take short-term advantage of the skills of our Persian linguists to improve our commercial performance at the expense of in-depth political reporting'.⁴⁰ This meant not having contact with Iranian opposition leaders or Mullahs and relying on SAVAK for intelligence when, instead, a separate Iranian intelligence unit within the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) and better links with the Israeli Intelligence Service, Mossad, should have been implemented. The embassy began to lose some of its political intelligence through a lack of engagement with important people whom SAVAK judged to be hostile to the regime or otherwise unsound; the situation was made worse when contact was lost with existing contacts when older diplomats retired.⁴¹ The reason for this intelligence failure was down to a desire not to get on the wrong side of the Shah, which led to a whole series of arrangements whereby MI6's presence in Iran was scaled

³⁶ FCO8/3601, Parsons to Miers (5 June 1980).

³⁷ Beck, Peter, *Using History, Making British Policy: The Treasury and the Foreign Office, 1950-76*, (Basingstoke, 2006).

³⁸ FCO8/3377, Iran: A Post Mortem (21 February 1979).

³⁹ Trevelyan, *Diplomatic channels*, 96.

⁴⁰ Owen, *A Time to Declare*, 391.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 391.

down, almost to the extent it was non-existent.⁴² Unfortunately, MI6 documents and the files of the Joint Intelligence Committee (which co-ordinated overseas intelligence gathering, under FCO chairmanship) are not likely to be released on the period for many years. But, when they are, a 'missing dimension' in British policy can be filled and Owen's claims will be well worth investigating.

Owen believed there was no disconnect between the embassy and the FCO and his views are consistent with others such as Parsons in emphasising how the real issue was being lured into a false sense of confidence in the Shah. In answer to the question of consultation back and forth between London and Tehran, he has stated:

'it is an impressive system. There is constant communication and constant debate... There was no absence of discussion and there was pretty good information too. We were not deprived. We may have made the wrong decisions. The biggest mistake we made was not realising that we were dealing with a weak man. When you get summoned into the great presence of the Shah, and he is there like a cockatoo, and he has lunch with you and your wife in the Palace, it was hard to remember that this was a man of very little substance'.⁴³

As to contingency planning in case the Shah lost power, Parsons relayed concerns to London via his report entitled 'Is the Emperor Fully Clothed?' and his letter entitled 'What if the Shah dies?'; both have been covered in previous chapters. However, there is a distinct difference between pondering what happens if the Shah is no longer around and deciding what to do when he is on the verge of downfall, yet still represents the best option of a partner in the absence of other viable options. Thus it is apparent the problem lay not in a disconnect between the embassy and the FCO, but rather the question of what to do in a most difficult situation where an important partner is threatened by the prospect of deposition and there is no perfect solution on what exactly to do – particularly when there is a chance, however remote and slim, he might survive.

Indecisiveness and indecision?

Further contributing to failures was, according to Browne, indecisiveness and indecision which cost Britain where a more active approach either towards intervention or withdrawal was needed at an advanced stage.⁴⁴ This meant that,

⁴² Interview with Owen (23 May 2013).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ FCO8/3601, British Policy On Iran 1974-1978 (1980), 90.

'by late October it was too late for a military Government to succeed. Mediation would only have worked if Britain had kept its contacts with the opposition in previous years...If the British had broken off contact with the regime at an earlier stage there would have been a number of penalties and probably no benefit... It seems very doubtful that they would have gained any credit from the opposition... They might even have earned themselves some contempt by seeming to change sides when the going was tough'.

The situation in Iran was tricky to say the least. As with any state experiencing severe disturbances, it was difficult to determine how exactly events would unfold. Although it is easy, with the benefit of hindsight, to reflect that clear warning signs were there to suggest the Shah was on the verge of being deposed, the reality was he continued to enjoy the support of the military, which allowed him to cling on to power. This is a point which was repeatedly made by Parsons, especially as the regime had faced previous crises and overcome them⁴⁵: 'where we went wrong was in underestimating the capacity of the various strands of opposition in Iran to combine and their tenacity in working for the objective of the overthrow of the Shah.'⁴⁶ Furthermore, Parsons felt 'inclined to think that our lack of perception derived not from a failure of information but from a failure to interpret correctly the information available to us. We were looking down the right telescope but were focused on the wrong target. Here I blame myself unreservedly'.⁴⁷ However, because previous uprisings were quashed, it can be understood why Parsons and others made such an underestimation with regards to the possibility of the Shah riding out the crisis and why the ambassador re-iterated his belief, throughout 1978, that he would ultimately survive.

As Browne points out, there were difficulties associated with abandoning the regime even at a late stage and this is something with which others concur. Munro notes that 'even had we read the signs right, it would have been difficult for us to modify our policy in radical fashion, without producing a loss of benefit without compensating advantage for the perceivable future'.⁴⁸ With limited scope for long-term planning available simply because of the sheer unpredictability of events, Britain, rightly or wrongly, chose to stick with the existing regime rather than switch to an alternative player, a stance which has been explained by Owen: 'from my vantage point of London, it seemed that Iran had reached that moment in international affairs when a country has to be left to determine

⁴⁵ Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall*, 132-133.

⁴⁶ FCO8/3601, Parsons to Miers (5 June 1980).

⁴⁷ Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall*, 134.

⁴⁸ FCO8/3377, Iran: A Post Mortem (21 February 1979).

its own destiny. I believed, in a confusing situation, in following the old naval maxim: "In a fog, slow right down but don't change course".⁴⁹

According to Munro what happened was a classic case of what he calls the 'momentum syndrome' where you 'don't upset things, don't rock the boat, things are going very well and with luck they will continue to do and let's spend all our effort and our considerable talents as a service benefiting, nursing, cultivating this excellent relationship that we have'.⁵⁰ This 'momentum syndrome' meant Parsons was under pressure to expand commercial relations with an abhorrent regime mired in dealing with tumultuous events beyond their control. Had there been British engagement with the opposition then the Shah, already suspicious of the BBC's Persian Service, would have found out via SAVAK. So much was at stake that it was in Britain's best interests to have the Shah in charge; upsetting him by looking at possible alternatives could have proven very costly.⁵¹

An Intelligence 'Surprise'?

The failure to predict the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime, and the finger-pointing which followed, can be contextualised within the wider literature on 'surprise' and intelligence failures, leading to the question, to what extent was Britain and its diplomatic apparatus caught by surprise by events in Iran? Before attempting an answer, it is important to point out the difficulty of comparing intelligence failures in this instance with other contemporary and historical intelligence failures as the subject is a broad one which requires a more comprehensive analysis. Nevertheless, an attempt will be made to gauge if there was an element of surprise as far as Britain's failure to predict the revolution was concerned.

Lowenthal⁵² defines intelligence failures as 'the inability of one or more parts of the intelligence process - collection, evaluation and analysis, production, dissemination - to produce timely, accurate intelligence on an issue or event of importance to national interests'. Richard Betts, the doyen of academics studying this subject, has stated that 'intelligence failures are not only inevitable, they are natural'.⁵³ Lowenthal⁵⁴ further notes 'intelligence failures are real; they have happened and they will happen again'.

⁴⁹ Owen, *In Sickness and in Power*, 208.

⁵⁰ Sir Alan Munro, BDOHP, (16 May 1996), 8-9.

⁵¹ Interview with Munro (13 February 2012).

⁵² Lowenthal, Mark, 'The Burdensome Concept of Failure' in Maurer, Alfred et al (eds), *Intelligence: Policy and Process*, (Boulder; Colorado, 1985), 51.

⁵³ Betts, Richard, 'Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are inevitable', *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Oct., 1978), 69.

⁵⁴ Lowenthal, Mark, 'The Burdensome Concept of Failure' in Maurer et al (eds), *Intelligence*, 43.

Intelligence failures are thus discussed mostly as a post-mortem activity when things have gone wrong.

On the particular subject of predicting revolutions, very little has been written, although Karan⁵⁵ has published an article, from a social scientists' perspective, on how the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 took most by surprise and seeks to draw comparisons with other revolutions which were also not predicted to happen:

'Why might individuals with deep insight into a social system, or with privileged access to information about its undercurrents, fail to foresee its impending explosion? What is it that can keep even the most astute and best informed members of a society unaware of imminent political changes of epochal significance? These questions are especially puzzling since now, in retrospect, various signs of the impending revolutions in France, Russia, Iran, and Eastern Europe are transparently obvious'.⁵⁶

In the Iranian example, Karan points to intelligence failures by the Americans, where the almost-complete absence of Farsi speakers hampered intelligence efforts. The question to ask here then is: if there were more Farsi speaking staff would the revolution have been predicted by the Americans? In all likelihood this would not have changed things much as Britain and the Soviets had a good number of Farsi speakers yet this did nothing to help them when it came to predicting the fall of the regime. As Jervis⁵⁷ observes, 'the fact, for instance, that the senior CIA analyst on Iran had a fine command of that country's language, religion, culture, and politics did not prevent him from sharing the basic misconceptions held by people who know much less about that country'. Soviet intelligence failures were such that the entire leadership of the Tudeh were sacked because the party had been so inaccurate in its forecasts to the Soviet government.⁵⁸ In a similar manner to the British position the Americans too 'overestimated the stability of the regime. They overestimated the Shah's strength and underestimated the number of groups and individuals who opposed him and the intensity of their feelings'⁵⁹, believing that he could split the opposition and weather the storm.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Karan, Timur, 'The Inevitability of Future Revolutionary Surprises', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 100, No. 6 (May, 1995), 1528-1551.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 1530-1531.

⁵⁷ Jervis, Robert, 'Improving the Intelligence Process: Informal Norms and Incentives' in Maurer et al (eds), *Intelligence*, 116.

⁵⁸ Karan, 'The Inevitability of Future Revolutionary Surprises', 1530.

⁵⁹ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 37.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 83.

American and Soviet intelligence failures underline the point that Britain was not alone in being caught by surprise by the events which unfolded in Iran.

Karan makes the point that 'unanticipated regime changes will tend to occur in politically repressive countries - ones whose regimes enjoy little genuine legitimacy and are sustained by general fear'.⁶¹ Such a statement is easy to make in the aftermath of the fall of a repressive regime, but is very simplistic as it fails to take into consideration why revolutions do not take place in *all* politically repressive countries. Whilst the majority of revolutions have indeed taken place in politically repressive states, what is very difficult to predict is when exactly the incumbent regime will lose its grip on power and what precise event will act as the catalyst for revolution. Russia had been mired in turmoil from the turn of the twentieth century yet the Tsar doggedly clung onto power through various crises, which meant that when he finally lost the support of his armed forces in 1917 it came as a genuine surprise.

In the Iranian example, in spite of numerous revolutionary flashpoints, such as the Jaleh Square Massacre and the Rex Cinema Fire, Parsons and the Americans too predicted the Shah would remain in power as he had previously quelled unrest with the support of the armed forces. What they and others failed to envisage was when exactly the Shah would lose the support of the armed forces and in turn power in Iran. Hindsight can lead some to analyse events and deduce 'well this could have been avoided, if (such and such) had happened'. But what such analyses fail to take into consideration is that what happened in Iran (and indeed in other revolutions) caught everybody unawares precisely because it is so hard to forecast future events when so many variables are in play at once and when past experience shows the incumbent regime has the necessary support to continue its rule. Already, on 4 March 1978, an article in *The Economist* said foreigners were reporting that the Shah was troubled and disillusioned by events.⁶² But, while many such sources reported on a Shah who was facing difficulties and was afflicted by a crisis of confidence, crucially, none of these stated he would fall.

Whilst the Tehran embassy had a limited political section, a planning department had been created within the FCO which by 1973 had four staff. However, as Dickie⁶³ notes, 'even with crystal balls, the planners vision is limited' more so in the case of revolutions as 'no one can be categorical about when it is advisable for a diplomat to send the foreign

⁶¹ Karan, 'The Inevitability of Future Revolutionary Surprises', 1546.

⁶² Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 93.

⁶³ Dickie, *Inside the Foreign Office*, 224.

office warning of an imminent revolution'.⁶⁴ Heymann⁶⁵ is of the view that 'policy does not speak with a single voice. Policies have multiple authors. The numerous players who take part in policy formulation differ in temperament, education, and experience, as well as personal and institutional loyalties. As a consequence their attitudes toward intelligence and their propensity to accept or reject its assessments will also vary widely'. Yet this was not the case for the British in Iran; there was clearly a uniformity of views from London to Tehran that the Shah would survive and the best course of action was to continue to support him.

Betts⁶⁶ makes the observation:

'Intelligence veterans have noted that "estimating is what you do when you do not know", but "it is inherent in a great many a situation that after reading the estimate, you will still not know". These observations highlight an obvious but most important obstacle to accuracy in analysis. It is the role of intelligence to extract a certainty from uncertainty and to facilitate coherent decision in an incoherent environment. (In a certain and coherent environment there is less need for intelligence).'

What Britain did was make a calculated estimate based on hard evidence that the Shah had ridden out previous crises and continued to enjoy the support of the armed forces. Moreover, countless commentators from the time including Callaghan and Owen highlighted (in retrospect) how they were duped by the Shah's ability to make it appear as if all was well and that he had a firm handle on the situation. Austin⁶⁷ calls this 'a halo effect' whereby in the case of US officials; having a strong relationship with the regime meant 'intelligence officers and diplomats who maintained liaison with the Shah's government allowed their positive views of the source of the message to colour their views about the reliability of the message'. This was not so much surprise in the manner of Pearl Harbor in 1941 and Yom Kippur War in 1973, but a case of doggedly clinging on to the hope the Shah would not fall. The point with some revolutions is they happen when the military abandons support but it is extremely difficult to pinpoint when exactly this will be.

⁶⁴ Dickie, *Inside the Foreign Office*, 237.

⁶⁵ Heymann, Hans, 'Intelligence/Policy Relationships' in Maurer et al (eds), *Intelligence*, 60.

⁶⁶ Betts, Richard, 'Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are inevitable', *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Oct 1978), 69.

⁶⁷ Austin, James, 'The Psychological Dimension of Intelligence Activities' in Maurer et al (eds), *Intelligence*, 206.

Robert Jervis (at the time a professor of political science at UCLA) was commissioned by the CIA in the spring of 1979 to produce a report, which has been declassified in recent years, looking at American intelligence failures in Iran. In his report, Jervis is categorical in stating 'better intelligence would not have led to an effective policy'.⁶⁸ Although, this is in reference to the American case, it can also be applied to the British example, as both states had such heavy commercial interests in Iran that even predicting the downfall of the Shah would not necessarily have led to a better position. This is because it is not easy to build relations with a prospective new regime (more so when one has no idea what the make-up of the new regime will be) particularly when the relationship with the old regime is so strong and can be used by the new regime as a stick with which to beat both Britain and America (which, as we shall see, is what happened).

In essence, the thought of losing the Shah was such a nightmare scenario that his fall was not countenanced, borne partly out of hope and partly out of his track record in riding out previous crises. Thus, even if his fall was predicted, there was very little Britain could have done differently in terms of policy. As Jervis⁶⁹ points out, 'one might think that early warning would be especially useful because there is time to influence events. But in many cases decision-makers will have an established policy, one that will be costly to change, and early warnings can rarely be definitive'.

In conclusion, it can be said that the British government was caught by 'surprise', but only in the same manner in which others were. On this Jervis⁷⁰ quite rightly points out that 'predicting revolutions is very hard. They are not well understood by social science and almost by definition must come as a surprise to many informed observers, especially those in authority. If the latter understood what was coming, they would flee, use force, or make concessions'. The Shah clung on to power for as long as he did because he genuinely felt he could retrieve the situation and the thought of handing over power to his son at an earlier stage, such as in January 1978, never crossed his mind, even though he was terminally ill. Those who were accurate in their assessments were not better analysts than those who believed that the Shah would survive. Though they were correct on this occasion, they had got it wrong in the past when they had previously expected him to fall. In any case, it would have been simply unrealistic for a government such as Britain's with such heavy commercial interests, to abandon support for a long term ally based on the views of some individuals who predicted he would fall, more so when there was no absolute guarantee that he would fall and when the opposition was

⁶⁸ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 3.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 167.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 26.

so disparate and inchoate. Though there was an element of surprise with the downfall of the Shah, as there is with any revolution, there was no guarantee Britain would have fared any better in a post-revolutionary Iran had it accurately predicted the revolution, because there was no sensible alternative to the position which continued to support the Shah and hoped for his survival.

Summary

Browne's report concentrates on the failings of the *political* activities of the embassy and, although he raises pertinent points regarding the need for better and more nuanced political reporting, this was extremely difficult given the limited importance which was placed upon the political section compared to the commercial section, which even led to the political section being undermanned. Given the importance of Iran to Britain's economy it is understandable why such an emphasis was placed upon commercial work, and in any case London had made trade promotion central to diplomatic work since at least the 1969 Duncan Report. Of course, whether this should have been emphasised to the point of detriment to the political side is debateable. But one important question to consider is: if the embassy had placed greater emphasis on the political side, how would this have been perceived by the Shah? Browne believed policy options would have been broadened and this may have been so; but it may reasonably be asked whether the Shah would have listened, when he had a deep mistrust of Britain and was prone to errors of judgement which not even the Americans could stop.

It is easy to be critical of diplomats when they have failed to make an accurate assessment. This is part of the process of accountability and the high expectations we have of diplomats based on their experience and expertise. Yet no matter how expert they are and no matter how great their training or experience, it is still a task of exceptional difficulty to forecast accurately what will happen in a country going through revolutionary turmoil. In such situations, where unpredictability is the norm, it is impossible to undertake either long-term planning or to push for a radically different change in policy. Pragmatism is essential where any short-term planning is required; otherwise diplomats continue to keep a close eye on events as they unfold, being prepared for any eventuality. The Shah remained the best choice as partner and, because he had survived previous insurrections and continued to enjoy the support of the armed forces, it would have been difficult to predict his fall with real confidence. Though the revolution came as a surprise, even if events had been accurately forecast then there was very little which could be done other than continue to support him. It was not even the case where there was a difference of opinion across government

departments on the matter; all in Whitehall shared a mutual interest in supporting the incumbent regime as it was the best way of preserving existing commercial interests.

It has already been said that Britain was not alone in failing to predict the demise of the Shah. Others were culpable in failing to make such a prediction, including the Americans (who had five intelligence agencies gathering information in Iran).⁷¹ The conclusion of a CIA study in early August 1978 even read 'Iran is not in a revolutionary or even a pre-revolutionary situation'. A Defence Intelligence Report of 28 September concluded the Shah would remain 'actively in power' for the next ten years, despite the Black Friday Massacre of 7 September. Reading the memoirs of the American ambassador William Sullivan, the similarities with Parsons are striking: 'We felt that the Shah was in trouble, we thought that his economic plan and his forced industrialisation were wrenching his society in ways that could cause political difficulties, but we did not see this as the beginnings of a revolution'.⁷²

For a last word on the issue it is perhaps fitting to quote the words of Owen, who bore primary responsibility for British foreign policy:

'The honest answer is that we all knew [the Shah] was vulnerable...The question was could we cut and run... Now on that decision, I took the decision, there is no one else to blame but me. I to this day think that we were right... If you ask me at any stage in 1978, of the Shah's chances of surviving, I would have at the very least said 50-50. We did not think we were on to a winner, in fact we were pretty sure we were on to a loser. The question was how do you get out of this bloody thing?...You are looking after British interests and your basic assessment all the time is what is the British interest? If the Shah has a 25% chance of surviving and the alternative is Khomeini then you go with the Shah'.⁷³

⁷¹ Hiro, Dilip, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, (London, 1985), 312-313.

⁷² Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, 142.

⁷³ Interview with Owen (23 May 2013).

Chapter 5. A new Ambassador and the Question of Recognition

'The first stage I call momentum syndrome, whilst the second stage I call "salvage" with post revolutionary regimes. Our whole emphasis was to see how we could salvage our old relationship with new faces and new prejudices with history playing a part'.¹ Sir Alan Munro

Following the Shah's fall, Britain faced the challenge of establishing a diplomatic and working relationship with a very different regime. Sir Alan Munro described the task as a 'salvage' operation because it was indeed London's desire to rescue what it could of its position from the chaos of revolutionary Iran, where remnants of the old order were purged and internecine conflict sparked minority uprisings. In the first few months of the revolution, Britain faced a number of issues which affected its standing in Iran, including: recognition of the change of government; whether to grant refuge to the Shah and his family; and how best to engage with the new powers. These issues had to be addressed while there was still uncertainty over the future of the country and Britain faced hostility from some quarters as a result of its long-standing support for the Shah. As such, the British experience is an interesting snapshot of the challenges faced by states wishing to engage with new revolutionary regimes.

Parson's tenure ends

Hardly had the Shah fled Iran, than Parsons too left his post. He left behind an embassy staff which was, according to head of chancery David Miers, low on morale as 'they had been operating under very difficult conditions since the burning of the embassy and junior staff had had to put up with considerable hardship and general aggro' and 'some message of thanks or encouragement from the office would be very much appreciated'.² Miers felt another cause of low staff morale was the uncertainty over what their new allowances would be.³ Added to the issues over staff morale were problems affecting radio communications. Due to frequent power cuts more than normal use of emergency generators occurred. This was in itself a problem as diesel fuel had to be expended to operate these generators, but supplies were running low, which meant staff were hampered in being able to carry out their daily activities.⁴

¹ Interview with Munro (13 February 2012).

² FCO8/3395, 'Morale at Tehran' (16 January 1979).

³ FCO8/3395, 'Tehran: New Allowances' (16 January 1979).

⁴ FCO8/3395, J M Brown to Lucas (15 January 1979).

The experiences of staff in the Tehran embassy echoed that of their predecessors in other revolutionary states. In Russia after the Bolshevik revolution, embassy staff had to walk around with candles as the electric supply in Petrograd was constantly interrupted. Communication was also difficult as the telephones often failed to work and newspapers criticising the regime were quickly suppressed 'making it impossible for officials to obtain much accurate information about affairs either in Russia or abroad'.⁵ Thus, 'the strain of daily life inevitably took its toll on British representatives and their families'.⁶ In China, when Communist troops took over Mukden on 18 November 1948; the British government lost contact with its consulate there. Two months later the Tientsin consulate was also cut off. Both consulates were also prevented from using radio transmitters.⁷ Any assessment of missions operating in revolutionary regimes must therefore take into account the element of violence, insecurity and unpredictability as a variable in how the mission operates. Although operating in different time periods, diplomatic staff in both Iran and Russia had to carry out their duties in difficult circumstances, which had an impact not only on morale but also on how effectively they were able to do their jobs. Whilst not abandoning their duties, there was a great deal of psychological stress faced by diplomatic staff having to operate in a threatening environment. Charged with having to look after the wellbeing of British citizens, diplomatic staff became concerned with their very own wellbeing. Whilst, the situation remained volatile it was difficult for the embassy to fully execute its functions in line with Berridge's list. There was no way of knowing where exactly the country was heading and what the attitudes of a new government would be toward Britain. The best option was to keep a low profile and continue to look after British citizens and existing commercial interests.

Although the Ayatollah was still in France, Parsons' valedictory despatch declared 'Khomeini rules the streets'.⁸ The difficulty facing Britain was that, while Bakhtiar had been appointed as Prime Minister by the Shah, he did not have the power or influence of the Ayatollah who held the keys to Iran in absentia. The new government was unable to govern, having failed to acquire popular support, with Khomeini declaring it illegal.⁹ Parsons was in agreement with an Iranian Deputy in feeling that the best, perhaps the only way of saving the country was for the Ayatollah and the generals to co-operate. The difficulties were compounded by Khomeini being unwilling to meet emissaries of

⁵ Hughes, Michael, *Inside the Enigma: British Officials in Russia 1900-1939*, (London, 1997), 124.

⁶ Ibid, 102.

⁷ Feng, Zhongping, *The British government's China policy, 1945-1950*, (Keele, 1994), 111-112.

⁸ PREM16/2131, Iran – Valedictory Despatch (18 January 1979).

⁹ PREM16/2131, TELNO165 (20 January 1979).

Bakhtiar and as such 'it was difficult to know who had most influence in his entourage or what advice he was getting from them. At present he seemed to want to influence events from a distance'.¹⁰

On Britain's relationship with Bakhtiar, Owen has noted,

'I think that at that stage we had made the decision that we would not take sides and that our days of influence were over. Events were outside of our control and trying to spot and back people seemed to me futile as the game was up therefore it was better to sit tight and let events sort themselves out.... So... we thought give him a fair run and do nothing to impede him, helping them if we can but there was not much belief that we could do things'.¹¹

Owen's statement is an admission that, in chaotic post-Shah Iran, the Prime Minister had no popular mandate to rule and was in effect powerless. London could no longer influence events as it had done in the past; thus a pragmatic 'wait and see' approach was adopted.

The arrival of Sir John Graham

Parson's replacement had to be a senior diplomat familiar with Middle Eastern politics; someone capable of navigating Britain through a difficult situation. That individual was Sir John Graham who came from an aristocratic family, being the 4th Baronet. A child of Britain's Imperial times, he was born in Calcutta on 15 July 1926. After studying at Eton College, he served in the Grenadier Guards before going on to Trinity College, Cambridge. Upon leaving Cambridge he joined the Diplomatic Service and enjoyed a distinguished career, principally in the Arab Middle East, which included stints in Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Libya and Kuwait. He also served as Principal Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary, a post given to recognised 'high flyers', before being posted as head of chancery at Washington. He was Ambassador to Iraq in 1974-77 and Deputy Under-Secretary at the FCO in 1977-79.¹²

At the time of Graham's appointment, Bakhtiar's government was almost powerless; his position was made all the more redundant by the fact he had been handpicked by a despised autocratic leader who was no longer in the country. Reporting to Cabinet, Owen

¹⁰ PREM16/2131, TELNO61 (19 January 1979).

¹¹ Interview with Owen (23 May 2013).

¹² Interview with Graham (28 May 2013).

noted Bakhtiar had virtually no chance of remaining in power, especially after attempts to broker an understanding with Khomeini failed to bear fruit.¹³ However, Khomeini remained in France and had not declared any intention to take over as the new ruler of Iran. As such, in his absence and in the absence of anyone else credible of exercising power, Bakhtiar, despite his weak position, held the only official semblance of authority.

This meant that an otherwise straightforward aspect of diplomatic protocol, namely the presentation of credentials by Graham, became a cause of concern and the subject of careful deliberation in the FCO.¹⁴ To whom exactly should the new ambassador present his credentials in the midst of a power vacuum, where there was no clarity as to who was the head of state? The presentation of credentials is the formal notification presented to a host country authenticating a new ambassador's status and competence, and it is usually given to the head of state.¹⁵ Parsons had been advised by the Iranian Foreign Minister to suggest that Graham hand over an unsigned copy of his credentials to the Foreign Minister only, pending the outcome of the political crisis. Graham in turn proposed the possibility of a set of credentials simply addressed 'to whom it may concern' as head of state, leaving untouched the politically thorny issue of who was likely to perform that role in the near future. For the FCO, there were four potential accreditors: The Shah; The Regency Council (Sayed Jalaaladdin Tehrani being the senior member); Bakhtiar; or the Islamic Revolutionary Council (once it was formed).

In terms of having the credentials accepted,¹⁶ it was acknowledged past support for the Shah would not help matters:

'it would be politically naive of us to expect a future revolutionary Iranian government to accept with equanimity a new ambassador whose credentials were made out to the leaders of the regime which they were intent on displacing ... You pointed out, however that the Queen would be placed in difficulties if we were to seek to advise her... that Mr Graham's credentials should be made out to a revolutionary regime when the Shah remained at least de jure if not de facto sovereign of his country.'¹⁷

¹³ CAB128/65, CM(79)4th (25 January 1979).

¹⁴ FCO8/3395, 'HM Ambassador; Tehran; Credentials' (22 January 1979).

¹⁵ Berridge and James, (*A Dictionary of Diplomacy* (2nd ed), 61, 163-164, 212-213.

¹⁶ Ibid, 2.

¹⁷ FCO8/3395, 'HM Ambassador; Tehran; Credentials' (22 January 1979).

It was felt presenting credentials to the Regency Council would pose the same objections in the eyes of Khomeini as presenting credentials to the Shah. The dilemma over credentials shows how an otherwise simple aspect of diplomatic protocol can become complicated when it concerns a state where there is no certainty over who holds effective power. Owing to the hostility between the respective parties in Iran, the act of presenting credentials became a delicate operation. Not only was it difficult deciding whom to present credentials to, but there was a realisation that presenting credentials to just one party had the potential to put Britain in a negative light in the eyes of any party to whom credentials were not presented. That is why a sensible approach was taken in surveying the scene and not committing the embassy to the presentation of credentials to just one party.

The situation for the Bakhtiar government continued to deteriorate, with the embassy reporting at the end of January, it 'never succeeded in administering, far less governing, within the country and is now little more than a group of individuals trying, with a certain amount of military support, to survive'.¹⁸ The conclusions of Cabinet meetings held at this time show Owen declaring the situation in Iran to be absolutely chaotic, with it being impossible to foresee what would happen. Khomeini, he felt, had decided to return but would not have done so without some prior agreement with the military. In the meantime British citizens had now been evacuated from the main cities.¹⁹

It was against this chaotic backdrop that Graham took up his post. It was originally intended for him to arrive in December, but this was postponed as 'we did not want it to look like rats leaving a sinking ship'.²⁰ Instead he set off on 23 January, having met Parsons in London to be briefed on the situation in Tehran, but the journey served as a portent of the chaos he would encounter once in Iran. When he was in the air as the sole passenger on the airplane, he was told the airport in Tehran had been closed by the Bakhtiar government in an attempt to stop Khomeini from entering the country, after he had stated on 20 January in Paris he would return in time for prayers on Friday 26 January. Thus Graham stopped off at Kuwait and only arrived in Tehran on 31 January to serve the remaining 2000 British subjects.²¹ He saw his mission as follows:

'Our principal interest was to protect our own citizens who were involved in various businesses throughout the country...My principal task was to get to know

¹⁸ PREM16/2131, TELNO234 (29 January 1979).

¹⁹ CAB/128/65/6, CM(79)6th (01 February 1979).

²⁰ Interview with Graham (28 May 2013).

²¹ Liddell Hart Military collection at King's College London, '*Living with a Revolution*': Lecture given by Sir John Graham to the East European International Relations Summer School, Oxford, Summer 1991.

the incoming government. We hoped to be able to establish relations when we could talk to them one-to-one on a level basis...I think our policy was to see how things arose, how things went along and to try and understand what was going on... We did not really have a settled policy once the Shah had gone...²²

Of course, Graham was not the first ambassador sent abroad by his government to defend its economic interests in a revolutionary state. The US envoy to revolutionary France, Gouverneur Morris, was told his most important task would be the 'patronage of our commerce and the extension of its [sic] privileges, both in France and her colonies'.²³ Although Britain may have been unusual in placing such a great emphasis on commercial activities to the detriment of political activities, the example of Morris highlights that they were not unique in this respect.

On the afternoon of his arrival Graham went to see the Foreign Minister to whom he presented the *copies d'usage* of his credentials. The minister confirmed the understanding he had reached with Parsons, that there would be no objection to Graham carrying on business without waiting for the formal presentation of credentials.²⁴ Both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Prime Minister's office were guarded by a tank, but there was no one there in the private offices as the civil service was on strike.²⁵ That same day Khomeini returned in triumph, greeted by millions lining the streets of Tehran, whipped up by religious fervour. His cavalcade made the 12 mile journey south to the Cemetery of Martyrs, where he addressed 250,000 supporters and was openly critical of Bakhtiar's government. He immediately appointed Mehdi Bazargan as his Prime Minister so that Iran now had two Prime Ministers at the same time. As a result, as Graham later put it, 'embassies in deciding which one to approach had to proceed pragmatically: which one, given the subject matter, was the more likely to be able to deliver?'²⁶

Avoiding a difficult choice, the new ambassador decided to deal with both rivals, meeting separately with Bakhtiar and Bazargan on 5 February. This was a prudent approach as it avoided a commitment to one party – a commitment which would have most likely angered the snubbed party and could have harmed Britain's interests if they subsequently came to power. There was also a concerted effort to establish contact with

²² Interview with Graham (28 May 2013).

²³ Miller, Melanie Randolph, *Envoy to the Terror: Gouverneur Morris & the French Revolution*, (Dulles; Virginia, 2005), 134.

²⁴ PREM16/2131, TELNO253 (1 February 1979).

²⁵ Interview with Graham (28 May 2013).

²⁶ Graham, *'Living with a Revolution'*, (1991).

some of Khomeini's entourage; however, Graham was not involved in this directly.²⁷ In these initial dealings, it was emphasised that it was for the Iranian people to choose their government; London had always dealt with governments formed under the 1906 constitution; the criteria for recognition was well known; and there was no intention to get involved in the internal affairs of Iran.²⁸ The new ambassador's stance echoed that of his predecessor, British ambassador to Russia George Buchanan, who after the Bolsheviks had come to power, gave a statement on 8 December 1917 in front of 25 journalists declaring a desire to not interfere and to remain neutral.²⁹

After his initial meetings Graham lamented, 'as a newcomer to the scene the tragedy of the present state of the Iranian revolution appears to be that, with the exception of the Ayatollah himself, so many principal actors desire in effect the same outcome. So we have a battle of wills, while the country continues to run down'.³⁰ This was after Khomeini had, on 4 February, announced he would declare a holy war if attempts at a peaceful settlement failed. Bakhtiar replied in kind in a radio interview, saying he did not believe in a holy war of Muslim against Muslim, but if violence broke out he would answer a bullet with a bullet. With so much animosity in the air, the official line from the FCO was 'we must salvage what we can out of the Iranian collapse...British interests are likely to suffer with a revolutionary Islamic regime but we intend to play for time and hope that experience of government will teach Khomeini something of the realities facing Iran'.³¹ To add to the confusion faced by the embassy at this time, various Komitehs sprang up, brandishing their own vigilante form of justice. In the absence of strong government, they exercised almost complete autonomy yet did not really talk to each other. Thus, in instances where British citizens were arrested by a Komiteh the embassy had to approach Bazargan's office to secure release.³²

On 6 February, in a sign of the damage the regime change could do to British exports, the Bakhtiar government repudiated or discontinued defence contracts (of which there were around 50 supporting an estimated 20,000 jobs³³) worth around £1,900 million with the United Kingdom.³⁴ The Ministry of Defence, reporting to the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (the highest ministerial committee in this field below the full

²⁷ PREM16/2131, TELNO275 (4 February 1979).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ullman, Richard, *Anglo-Soviet relations, 1917-1921. vol.1, Intervention and the War*, (Princeton, 1961), 28-29.

³⁰ PREM16/2131, TELNO288 (6 February 1979).

³¹ FCO8/3379, FCO brief on PUS's meeting with the Secretary-General at the Quai D'Orsay (6 February 1979).

³² Interview with Graham (28 May 2013).

³³ CAB148/178, DOP(79)14 (15 March 1979).

³⁴ Ibid.

Cabinet), said a number of defence contracts were winding down in any case and were unlikely to be renewed by the new regime. It was thus important to preserve as much civil contracts as possible and remember British legal entitlements in the final settling of accounts with the Iranians.³⁵ The Secretary of State for Defence, Fred Mulley, visited Iran between 8 and 18 February to discuss the cancellation of contracts with representatives of the Bakhtiar government. Before the talks, preliminary discussions were held with embassy staff and Graham. Mulley's³⁶ observations encapsulated the difficulties facing Britain:

'We are now in the situation where we have in effect a letter of repudiation and nobody with whom to negotiate. It is my belief that it would be proper to go and try and sell what we have to limit the damage primarily to ourselves and secondly to any future Iranian government... It is, in my opinion, still a very dangerous place and it could be some time before any resemblance of real government appears. All of the staff at the embassy both military and civilian worked long and frustrating hours negotiating our evacuation and we are all very grateful.'

Bakhtiar was clearly a lame duck Prime Minister, with Khomeini's support behind Bazargan. But Khomeini remained a reclusive figure, difficult to access, yet occasionally making grand statements to a captive and enraptured audience. He had still not declared any desire to assume official leadership. In such a situation, members of his entourage set about conducting affairs, but the difficulty was gauging whether the message they delivered was truly that of the Ayatollah. Worryingly, he had made a number of declarations against the 'evil' Western influence which had permeated Iran over preceding decades. However, Ayatollah Lahouti arrived at the embassy, on 11 February, and gave an assurance that Khomeini, while not available for calls, was Britain's 'friend and we were under his protection'.³⁷ In deciding how to respond, the recommendation from London to the embassy was consistent with the pragmatic stance which had been adopted, 'unless you feel strongly that for us to make no statement would prejudice your day to day dealings with the de facto authorities and endanger your embassy and the British community, we should prefer to say nothing for the moment'.³⁸ In an environment in which violence and unpredictability reigned, rendering long-term planning almost impossible, the only option open was to wait and see how events would unfold and deal with them accordingly.

³⁵ PREM16/2131, TELNO275 (4 February 1979).

³⁶ TNA DEFE 13/1321. D/HDS/1/23. HDS visit to Iran. 26 February 1979.

³⁷ PREM16/2131, TELNO335 (11 February 1979).

³⁸ FCO8/3374, TELNO216 (12 February 1979).

The issue of recognition

(a) The theory of recognition

Berridge and James define the recognition of a government as 'the recognition by one state of a new government in another, especially one which has come to power by unorthodox means'.³⁹ Peterson, in his seminal study of the subject, defines recognition in international law terms as the 'acknowledgement of the existence of an entity or situation indicating that the full legal consequences of that existence will be respected'.⁴⁰ For Young, 'the subject of recognition is basic to the way in which relations are conducted between states: they cannot easily communicate if they do not recognise one another's existence. The question is also a difficult one in international law because, in practice, governments often adopt a pragmatic approach when specific instances of recognition arise'.⁴¹ In political terms, 'recognition removes all barriers to bilateral inter-government relations. The way is cleared for establishing or resuming formal diplomatic relations, establishing or resuming full consular relations, and concluding any sort of bilateral agreement on any subject. Yet recognition is no guarantee that the full range of bilateral relations will be, or will remain, established'.⁴²

There are two distinct types of recognition which Berridge and James⁴³ define as follows:

'De facto recognition: A form of recognition of a government or of recognition of a state which is provisional, either because of uncertainty regarding the immediate future of the recognised entity or because of the political reluctance on the part of the recognising state to accord the entity an unqualified status. If, later, unqualified status is granted, it will usually be referred to as de jure recognition'.

'De jure recognition: Recognition of a government or of recognition of a state which is unqualified. It is often so termed after a period during which the recognised entity has been accorded de facto recognition by the recognising state'.

³⁹ Berridge and James, *A Dictionary of Diplomacy*, 225.

⁴⁰ Peterson, M J, *Recognition of Governments: Legal Doctrine and State Practice, 1815-1995*, (Basingstoke, 1997), 1.

⁴¹ Young, John, 'States not Governments': Reforming Britain's Practice on Diplomatic Recognition, 1973-1980', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 9 (2014), 55.

⁴² Peterson, *Recognition of Governments*, 102.

⁴³ Berridge and James, *A Dictionary of Diplomacy*, 66-67.

Added to the distinction between de facto and de jure recognition was the consideration of the part played by the Estrada Doctrine (which had been adopted by many states, including most of the EC) which Berridge and James define as follows:

'the doctrine that the recognition of government is superfluous and, indeed, is insulting in circumstances where it involves passing judgement on the legitimacy of a government which has come to power by unconstitutional means. Announced in 1930 by Don Genaro Estrada, the Foreign Minister of Mexico, this doctrine has grown in popularity over recent years. However, it's adoption does not relieve states of the political necessity of deciding whether they are willing to enter into or continue diplomatic relations with a new regime...'.⁴⁴

(b) The Bolshevik Example

In terms of precedents on recognising revolutionary regimes, there are two examples in the twentieth century which show the complexities of the matter and the evolution of British policy. Aside from the difficult questions that might surround recognition itself, a brief look at these two examples – the revolutions in Russia in 1917 and China in 1949 – will draw out some of the broader challenges created for diplomacy by the emergence of radical new regimes, not least their unpredictable behaviour and challenge to accepted international norms. The Bolshevik revolution was disastrous for Britain on ideological grounds with the genuine fear communism could spread to other European countries. However, Russia was still involved in the First World War as an ally and it was in Britain's best interests for this involvement to continue, so that Germany would remain stretched by having to fight on two fronts. Thus, the problem facing Britain was that it had to deal with a regime with which it was at ideological loggerheads, yet needed in practical terms to fight the Germans. Before Britain could recognise the Bolsheviks there were two questions which needed to be addressed:

'(a) Would the Bolsheviks be able to retain their hold on power and establish themselves as the government of the whole of the former Imperial Russia?

(b) What would be the effect of a Bolshevik government in Russia on the prosecution of the war against Germany?'⁴⁵

On the former question the hope was they would not retain power, but if they did then it was crucial that they carried on Russia's involvement in the war. When ambassador Buchanan received a note declaring Bolshevik intentions to open negotiations with the

⁴⁴ Berridge and James, *A Dictionary of Diplomacy*, 95.

⁴⁵ Keeble, Curtis Sir, *Britain, the Soviet Union and Russia*, (Basingstoke, 2000), 21.

enemy, 'it was impossible for the ambassador to reply to notes addressed to him by a government which his own government had not recognised'.⁴⁶

Ullman⁴⁷ describes the stance of the revolutionaries:

'The Bolsheviks were acutely conscious that they had not been recognised by any foreign power... They did not really expect to be recognised, and so they continually expressed their disdain and contempt for the forms and methods of "bourgeois" diplomacy. Yet at the same time they insisted that these forms and methods should be observed; observation of them, after all, would imply recognition of the Soviet regime as the *de facto* government of Russia'.

The Bolsheviks had hoped existing diplomatic staff would serve them as they served the provisional government. On 5 December 1917, Leon Trotsky, the Bolshevik foreign minister, sent a message to all diplomatic personnel requesting an immediate pledge to the new regime. However, few diplomats responded positively to the message. Instead, the ambassadors of the provisional government organised themselves into a group, variously called the Council of Ambassadors or the Russian Political Conference, to fight Bolshevism. This meant not only a passive resistance to Trotsky's orders but also an active campaign to prevent the recognition of the regime by other governments.⁴⁸

In response, the Soviets tried to appoint their own ambassadors without first consulting the governments to which they were sent. However, because of wartime disruption and blockades it was almost impossible to dispatch diplomatic agents to the Western capitals; thus the Bolsheviks tried to appoint wherever possible men already residing in their country of assignment. The task was also made difficult because the regime had not been recognised yet.⁴⁹ When some neutral embassies refused to visa the passports of Bolshevik diplomatic couriers on grounds of recognition, Trotsky concluded that embassies in Russia 'would not be allowed to use couriers, nor to claim diplomatic immunity, unless their governments granted similar privileges to the Soviet government'.⁵⁰ Moreover, Trotsky stated to a British officer 'that since Sir George Buchanan was accredited by a government which did not recognise the Soviet

⁴⁶ Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet relations, 1917-1921. vol.1, Intervention and the War*, 25.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 36.

⁴⁸ Uldricks, Teddy, *Diplomacy and Ideology: The Origins of Soviet Foreign Relations 1917-1930*, (London, 1979), 22.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 23.

⁵⁰ Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet relations, 1917-1921. vol.1, Intervention and the War*, 36.

government to one which no longer existed, the ambassador was actually only a private individual not deserving of diplomatic privileges'.⁵¹

The Russian embassy in London, formerly in the service of the Provisional Government and under the leadership of chargé Constantin Nabokoff, was in situ throughout 1918. However, the British government decided to engage with the Bolshevik representative Maxim Litvinov at the end of December 1917. This was because there were policy makers who believed that, since the Bolsheviks were in *de facto* control, interaction with them might yet prevent Russia from signing a peace treaty with the Germans. Britain was forced to deal with him also in order to prevent the closure of their own embassy in Petrograd. Nabokoff argued that the diplomatic rights given to embassies could not be enjoyed by a private individual.⁵² And in fact Litvinov did not enjoy direct relations with the British government; instead he conducted diplomatic relations through informal conversations with Rex Leeper, a Foreign Office official. They met in places like Hyde Park to discuss important issues like the Bolshevik leadership's attitude towards concluding a peace with the Germans.⁵³

By refusing either to oust Nabokoff or recognise Litvinov officially as Russian ambassador, the issue of recognition was effectively skirted over. To make sure of maintaining amicable relations with the Bolsheviks, Britain sent Robert Bruce Lockhart as an emissary to Russia although he was only 30 and not a member of the regular diplomatic service. He did however speak excellent Russian having been in Russia between 1912 and 1917 and had developed contacts with individuals in positions of power and influence.⁵⁴ The arrangement involving Litvinov and Lockhart meant the respective parties could stay 'unofficially in touch via unofficial touch',⁵⁵ for which they were granted 'certain diplomatic privileges, including the use of ciphers and the right to send couriers to their respective governments'.⁵⁶ Although Litvinov was satisfied being granted some leeway to conduct diplomacy, he would have only been fully satisfied were the British government to recognise the Bolsheviks as the *de facto* government of Russia and in the process recognise him as an official diplomat.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet relations, 1917-1921. vol.1, Intervention and the War*, 37.

⁵² Nabokoff, Constantin, *The Ordeal of a Diplomat*, (London, 1921), 189.

⁵³ Ibid, 208-211.

⁵⁴ Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, 127.

⁵⁵ Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet relations, 1917-1921. vol.1, Intervention and the War*, 59.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 61.

⁵⁷ Pope, Arthur Upham, *Maxim Litvinoff*, (London, 1943), 131.

When the Russo-German peace Treaty of Brest Litovsk was ratified on 6 March 1918, thereby ending Russian involvement in the war, Britain sent troops to Russia to aid the anti-Bolshevik forces in the Russian Civil War. The Bolsheviks remained un-recognised by Britain and Litvinov was promptly deported. It was not until the signings of trade agreements between Britain and the Soviets in March 1921 that effective *de facto* recognition was granted but *de jure* recognition was not extended until 1924.

Immediately after the Bolshevik takeover, Britain could have recognised the new regime given that it remained an ally in the war, but instead recognition was not granted on the grounds that not enough control over territory was established to warrant *de facto* recognition, let alone *de jure* recognition. Crucially, it was hoped the new regime would not need to be recognised as it was hoped they would quickly fall having failed to establish themselves and lost the Civil War (which also helps explain why Britain became embroiled in the Civil War). When this did not turn out to be the case, and the Bolsheviks established their control over Russia, recognition was a reality which could not be escaped, even though there remained deep ideological differences between the two states.

(c) The Chinese Example

In stark contrast to the Bolshevik example, the new People's Republic of China (PRC) was recognised early,⁵⁸ in spite of ideological differences with the new regime. Unlike the Bolsheviks who took a few years to establish full control (fighting a Civil War in the process in order to do so), the Communists in China were able to proclaim a new state having defeated their Nationalist enemy and taken effective control of the Chinese mainland. Professor Lauterpacht, a legal expert, writing in *The Times*, on 6 January 1950, backed the government position by saying if a revolutionary regime was in control of a bulk of territory, with the obedience of the mass of population with a reasonable degree of permanence then recognition was "due as a matter of right".⁵⁹

As Feng⁶⁰ points out, 'the fact that Britain had larger interests in China than any other foreign power at that time was the most important consideration which influenced not only her decision to maintain the embassy, but also other significant policy issues with regard to China'. The decision to extend recognition was a pragmatic one, designed to safeguard interests in China, Hong Kong and elsewhere in the Far East, interests which could not be protected by British officials in China unless diplomatic relations were

⁵⁸ On 6 January 1950 after Mao Zedong had proclaimed the establishment of the new state on 1 October 1949.

⁵⁹ Boardman, Robert, *Britain and the People's Republic of China, 1949-74*, (London, 1976), 20.

⁶⁰ Feng, *The British government's China policy, 1945-1950*, 116.

established. Having suffered severe losses in the Second World War, which undermined Britain's standing on the international scene and left it in economic difficulty, it was no surprise to see it guard its interests in China in much the same manner it would in Iran thirty years later. In addition, Boardman⁶¹ has argued it made no sense 'to abandon British interests without first attempting to establish some channels of communication with the new authorities, even if this meant only trying to obtain compensation before a final withdrawal'.

Recognition was, however, opposed by Britain's principal ally, the United States, and the issue became a source of Anglo-American tension. Washington saw the issue on purely ideological grounds and did not want to recognise a Communist power, choosing instead to recognise the defeated Nationalist Kuomintang regime of General Chiang Kai Shek, which had established the Republic of China (ROC) on the island of Taiwan. In reply to the Americans and justifying the British position, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin told the United Nations, on 26 September 1949, that this was not a question of ideology as 'there have been many conquests of China but no conquerors. Each, in turn, has been absorbed by the Chinese people'.⁶² The point was 'that the Peking regime was Chinese. Its leaders were Chinese Communists; but they were Chinese first and Communist second'.⁶³

Thus the official position was that recognition of the new regime did not mean moral approval of it: 'the regime in Peking was a fact; facts had to be recognised; therefore, the Peking regime should be recognised. Such recognition would not imply any statement as to the legitimacy of the regime, or any suggestion that Britain approved of the ideology or policies of that regime'.⁶⁴ On this question of recognition there was agreement across the British political spectrum. Winston Churchill, as leader of the opposition, stated that, 'recognising a person is not necessarily an act of approval...one has to recognise lots of things and people in this world of sin and woe that one does not like',⁶⁵ whilst also adding 'the reason for having diplomatic relations is not to confer a compliment, but to secure a convenience'.⁶⁶ The Americans took a more stringent approach, wanting a guarantee the new regime would fulfil its international obligations as a prerequisite for recognition. The British disagreed and did not ask for Chinese assurances of respectful treatment of British staff in China as 'the proper treatment of

⁶¹ Boardman, *Britain and the People's Republic of China*, 20.

⁶² Ibid, 19.

⁶³ Ibid, 19.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 20.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 21.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 24.

diplomatic and consular officials should be automatic. To ask for assurances on this point might imply that this was not the case'.⁶⁷

Recognition of the PRC did not work out in the manner Britain hoped and some obstacles remained before full diplomatic relations could exist. Feng⁶⁸ highlights how 'the Chinese authorities did not consider diplomatic relations were automatically established by the exchange of notes between the two governments'. Communist leader Mao Zedong was deeply suspicious of the intentions of the 'imperialist' powers.⁶⁹ London was taken aback by the Chinese insistence on negotiations prior to an exchange of ambassadors.⁷⁰ Instead of being a formality, whereby the talks would be of a technical nature, covering such matters as immunities, communications, and where consuls might be stationed, Britain was unhappy to find that side issues were being raised, acting as an obstruction to proper relations. The PRC demanded concessions on the Chinese seat at the UN and the foreign assets of the Republic of China.⁷¹ Complicating matters further was continued American support for Chiang Kai Shek's Taiwanese government: Britain (though it had recognised the Communist regime) was seen to be guilty by association as America's closest ally.⁷² Matters were not helped by the fact Britain maintained a consulate in the Taiwanese city of Tamsui until 1972.

In any case, talks on diplomatic representation were halted by the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. Thus 'the failure to establish formal diplomatic relations with the new regime following recognition meant that the British authorities both in China and London were unable to make official representations to the Chinese government about the difficulties facing British communities'.⁷³ In June 1954, following talks at the Geneva Conference, the PRC agreed to station a *chargé d'affaires* in London. The same talks resulted in an agreement to re-open a British office in Shanghai. British representation to the PRC was to remain at *chargé d'affaires* level until 1955 when Sir Con O'Neill became ambassador.

⁶⁷ Boardman, *Britain and the People's Republic of China*, 21-22.

⁶⁸ Feng, *The British government's China policy*, 115.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 140.

⁷⁰ Boardman, *Britain and the People's Republic of China*, 45.

⁷¹ Ibid, 46.

⁷² Ibid, 47.

⁷³ Feng, *The British government's China policy*, 156.

For Porter⁷⁴, 'recognition is a political act, conferred or withheld in accordance with the government's ideas of what the national interest requires, although within the range of what is politically practicable'. In the case of China, it was very much in British national interests to extend recognition as a means of preserving economic interests, a position held not only by the government but also by the opposition. Conversely, Porter⁷⁵ also points to the detriments of non- recognition 'for not only is it, as a means of exerting pressure, entirely inadequate when applied to a large, self-contained and efficient totalitarian state... Moreover, the absence of diplomatic contact between two or more of the great powers is certainly unsatisfactory and may be dangerous'.

Here it appears as if Britain learnt its lesson from the Bolshevik experience and evolved its position. Though economic interests were predominantly behind the decision to recognise, the PRC and the Chinese communists were in fuller control than the Bolsheviks; also, ideological criteria was not applied to the PRC in the same manner in which it was with the Bolsheviks. In order to protect its economic interests Britain, unlike America, applied pragmatic criteria to recognition and not ideological ones. The application of such criteria by Britain was repeated in the case of Iran. However, the Anglo-PRC case is an example of Peterson's point, noted earlier in the chapter, which is that recognition does not guarantee that the full range of bilateral relations will be, or will remain, established. For full diplomatic relations to exist there needs to be a process of mutual accord but, as just seen, this was not the case in the PRC where recognition by Britain did not lead to full diplomatic relations. There would be parallel problems with Iran.

(d) Recognising the new Iranian administration

In order to conduct diplomatic affairs with the new regime, the question of recognition had to be addressed, more so because it was unclear who held power. Even though Bazargan had been appointed as Prime Minister, Khomeini was viewed by the people as their de facto leader – despite not declaring himself as such. British policy on recognition in the 1970s had previously been outlined in the 1974 Goodison minute:

'Unlike many other states, it is the long established practice of Her Majesty's government to treat the recognition of a regime which has come to power unconstitutionally as subject to a conscious act of recognition. Our criteria for recognition are that the regime should have effective control of much the greater

⁷⁴ Porter, Brian, *Britain and the rise of Communist China: a study of British attitudes, 1945-1954*, (London, 1967), 31.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 43.

part of the national territory and should enjoy the obedience of the mass of the population, with a reasonable prospect of permanence...once granted, recognition is not usually withdrawn and it is certainly not necessary to renew it with every change of government, if these changes are constitutional'.⁷⁶

This meant that up to 1980, Britain differed from many other countries (including many of its European Community partners) in extending recognition to particular governments rather than states.⁷⁷ On the recognition of revolutionary governments Foreign Secretary George Brown, in February 1967, summed up Britain's policy as follows: 'The general practice which Her Majesty's Government has followed [...] is to recognise *de jure* a government, established by revolutionary action, when Her Majesty's government considers that the new government enjoys, with a reasonable prospect of permanence, the obedience of the mass of the population and the effective control of much the greater part of the territory of the State concerned'.⁷⁸ As an example of policy in the 1970s, in January 1972 when the elected premier of Ghana, Dr Kofi Busia was overthrown by the military, though he had enjoyed British support in the past and implored Western governments not to recognise the new regime, 'African countries favoured recognition and, after two weeks, London had little choice but to fall into line'.⁷⁹ This was because the military had the necessary control to warrant being acknowledged as being in power.

Young notes that under pre-1980 British practice, it was not necessary to renew recognition with every change of government, so long as these changes were made in a *constitutional* fashion.⁸⁰ The difficulty in the Iranian case was the country had experienced a *revolutionary* change of government and had not yet established a constitution; therefore the issue needed to be dealt with along the lines set out by Brown. Similar to the PRC situation, there was a desire to recognise the new Iranian regime as a means of safeguarding commercial interests. The decision was not a straightforward one. As Young observes, 'decision-makers really did feel uneasy about those they had to deal with. It also confirms that recognition was about *reality* not morality'.⁸¹ Therefore, 'to be in relations with the government should not mean you

⁷⁶ FCO9/2061, Goodison minute (30 April 1974).

⁷⁷ Young, 'States not Governments', 55-79.

⁷⁸ House of Commons Debates, fifth series (HC Deb 5s), vol. 742, column 7.

⁷⁹ Young, John W, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy: A Case Study of British Practice, 1963-1976*, (Cambridge, 2008), 223.

⁸⁰ Young, 'States not Governments', 57.

⁸¹ Young, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy*, 223.

approve of it, but only that you have interests of the country which you want to protect and therefore have to deal with the people who are governing it.⁸²

Graham felt the Iranians wanted to gain recognition in order to kick start the process of increasing the country's lucrative oil exports, which had declined as a result of the internal turbulence.⁸³ It was felt to be in Britain's best interests to recognise Bazargan's government immediately, via official contact, as the Iranian public were in support of a government which had the Ayatollah's blessing.⁸⁴ That the Bazargan government was still in its infancy in terms of administrative organisation presented an obstacle. But contact had already been made over the solution of immediate problems, such as the security of the embassy and the safety of British subjects. Overall, it was felt best to move in step with the rest of the European Community (EC) partners as far as possible. After much national debate, Britain had finally joined the EC in 1973 and had joined in the organisation's attempts to co-operate on foreign policy matters, a process known as 'political co-operation'. Having become a new member of the organisation, London did not want to be seen to be operating at variance with its European partners on such matters as dealings with Iran.⁸⁵

Britain recognised Bazargan's government, after consultations with EC partners, on 13 February, one day after Bazargan became the sole Prime Minister, Bakhtiar having stood down.⁸⁶ The new government now tried to recover the 300,000 weapons distributed to young revolutionaries in Tehran between 9 and 11 February, but those from the secular and leftist guerrilla organisations refused to give up their arms. There was also a need to establish a new security force which enjoyed popular support and excluded former SAVAK employees, reform the judicial system, punish those guilty of being responsible for massacres in the prerevolutionary period and purge royalist elements from all spheres of Iranian life.⁸⁷ The need for order was made all the more pressing by the actions of the Komitehs which had sprang up all around the country, dispensing their own brand of revolutionary justice and running amok. The Komitehs were not uniform, with various and distinct ones in existence, each espousing their own political and religious beliefs and acting with almost complete autonomy.

⁸² Trevelyan, Humphrey, *Diplomatic channels*, (London, 1973), 17.

⁸³ Interview with Graham (28 May 2013).

⁸⁴ FCO8/3374, TELNO350 (13 February 1979).

⁸⁵ See Nuttall, Simon, *European Political Co-operation* (London, 1992).

⁸⁶ PREM16/2131, Lever to Cartledge (14 February 1979).

⁸⁷ Hiro, Dilip, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, (London, 1985), 105.

Khomeini himself was not averse to dispensing his own brand of revolutionary justice as he acted swiftly to set up a secret Islamic revolutionary court in Tehran, where on 15 February the court handed out death sentences to four generals. Despite private protests from Bazargan, Khomeini allowed summary executions to continue until mid-March, by which time 68 had been executed. The multiple human rights abuses put Graham in an unenviable position as, though the British position was to voice concerns over such abuses where possible, the ambassador did not want to do so at this stage. He explained, 'given our earlier position about human rights in Iran under the Shah we have a certain status but it would need to be done carefully especially if we are to avoid the counter-charge that we did not make any protest at injustices under the Shah'.⁸⁸ The issue over human rights abuses highlights how difficult it can be to adopt a critical position on an important issue when your government has not been critical of the indiscretions of the old order. As a result, in terms of Berridge's list of embassy functions, it was impractical to carry out all the functions (and in particular the aspect of public diplomacy) with equal vigour when cordial relations had yet to be established with the new authorities. In such a situation it made sense for the embassy to limit its activities, by concentrating on safeguarding British citizens and existing commercial interests.

One of the principal reasons why the new government was recognised, under the principles set out by George Brown, was because it was capable of gaining the support of the masses.⁸⁹ The problem remained however that Bazargan, though enjoying the support of Khomeini, still had what Graham described as an 'obscure'⁹⁰ relationship with the Ayatollah, which meant it was difficult to state for certain whether the new government would establish its own identity. Despite this, Bazargan was still keen to make an impression, so when he met Graham in mid-February he gave an assurance 'that his government would take steps to protect foreign embassies and citizens, whom he hoped would stay as friends'.⁹¹ This was broadly in line with Khomeini, who had declared foreigners were allowed to stay and work in Iran.⁹²

These assurances did not prevent a mob attack on the U.S. embassy on 14 February which highlighted the ongoing difficulty of controlling vigilante elements.⁹³ In addition,

⁸⁸ PREM16/2131, TELNO701 (19 February 1979).

⁸⁹ PREM16/2131, TELNO369 (14 February 1979).

⁹⁰ PREM16/2131, TELNO349 (13 February 1979).

⁹¹ PREM16/2131, TELNO363 (14 February 1979).

⁹² PREM16/2131, TELNO369 (14 February 1979).

⁹³ PREM16/2131, TELNO357 (14 February 1979).

the U.S. consulates in Tabriz, Isfahan and Shiraz also suffered, with the Tabriz consulate attacked twice, set on fire and one consul nearly lynched.⁹⁴ The experience was hardly a novel one for the Americans in a revolutionary state, as on 14 January 1950 United States consular property in Peking had been seized.⁹⁵ As a result of the attacks on U.S. interests, Graham encouraged the evacuation of British subjects, reasoning 'that we could not know how the situation would develop; secondly that if things turned really sour and involved the foreign community, we were too many to handle; and thirdly that if the British community was to take the recommendation seriously, the embassy staff had to give a lead'.⁹⁶

Summary

Charged with bringing level-headedness whilst operating in an environment that was anything but, Graham faced daunting challenges from the minute he set foot in Iran. His experiences in the early days of his tenure underlined the monumental difference between operating as a diplomat in friendly, stable states such as the USA or France, and states like Iran where violence and unpredictability were the prevailing elements. In the former states it is easy to fulfil the functions of embassies as set out by Berridge, whereas in the latter many embassy functions may have to be scaled back. As post-revolutionary violence ensued and the Komitehs ran wild, British citizens were evacuated and the prospects for trade became uncertain, while insecurity also had an impact on the morale of mission staff. In such circumstances consular and commercial activities were prioritised. It was impossible to carry out public diplomacy, which would only have aroused the ire of the authorities, and the collection of reliable political intelligence was very difficult.

Despite such problems, the new ambassador set to work in a no-nonsense fashion. Emblematic of the pragmatic approach that he would adopt throughout his tenure, the issue of the presentation of credentials was handled quickly by handing them to both parties. Quickly tackling the issue of recognition was also a sensible decision, given that it removed the potential of any antipathy arising from withholding it. The decision not to speak out against human rights abuses committed by the new regime was also wise, since it was only likely to arouse an angry reaction. Thus, Graham was able to settle into his role quickly, resolving the complex challenge of recognition, evacuating British citizens and reacting to human rights abuses in a clinical manner, which did not attract

⁹⁴ Sullivan, William, *Mission to Iran*, 271-272.

⁹⁵ Boardman, *Britain and the People's Republic of China*, 45.

⁹⁶ Graham, 'Living with a Revolution', (1991).

unwelcome attention and, in the process, allowed Britain to remain under the radar so to speak. But post-revolutionary violence continued and Britain had by no means succeeded in establishing cordial working relations with the new regime, as the next chapters will show.

Chapter 6. Adjusting to a revolutionary state

'There is no great mystery about revolution... It is, quite simply, the politics of violence'.¹ Peter Calvert

Post-revolutionary turmoil

Aside from the post-revolutionary cull of former ministers and officials, Iran experienced fierce internecine conflict in various parts of the country. The northwest had three million Kurds who sensed an opportunity for autonomy after the fall of the Shah; so when the government tried to establish control in Kurdish areas it encountered fierce resistance. Fighting broke out, on 18 March, in Sanandaj, the capital of Kurdistan. On 13 July Kurdish guerrillas killed thirteen members of the Islamic Revolutionary guards serving as the prelude to widespread violence which broke out in August and continued for three months. Callaghan, in Cabinet, emphasised the importance of evacuating British citizens whose presence was not essential.²

The post-revolutionary turmoil occurred in part due to a lack of a clear, codified power structure bound in formal terms by a constitution. Khomeini acted on numerous occasions as a figurehead, but failed to act on a day-to-day basis as his country's ruler. The convoluted political power structures meant that,

'While the final authority was exercised by Khomeini, state power was divided between the government led by Mehdi Bazargan and the Islamic Revolutionary Council headed by Ayatollah Motahhari. In theory, day to day administration was to be conducted by the Bazargan government, and formulation of overall policies by the IRC. However, in practice, the division was not so clear cut. Top Civil Servants were not always loyal to their ministers, and the cabinet and the IRC shared certain members, including seventy two year old Bazargan'.³

Prominent members of the new government, including Bazargan, Ibrahim Yazdi, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh and Abol-Hasan Bani-Sadr – were in touch with Khomeini during his years in Najaf and then later formed his entourage in Paris. All subsequently became lay members of the Islamic Revolutionary Council, appointed by the Ayatollah in mid-

¹ Calvert, Peter, *Revolution and International Politics*, (London, 1984), 159.

² CAB128/65, CM(79)8th (15 February 1979).

³ Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, 104.

January 1979.⁴ However, as Bakhash notes there was competition and a rift between the provisional government and the Revolutionary Council.⁵ This came about as the clerics begrudged the fact they and their protégés were excluded from cabinet. At the same time, Bazargan found it difficult to manoeuvre whilst the Revolutionary Council was designated as the supreme decision-making and legislative authority in the country. Sitting in Khomeini's presence it approved Bazargan's appointment as Prime Minister and confirmed his ministerial choices, with Bazargan taking care to consult with the Council on his major domestic and foreign policy decisions. In terms of foreign policy 'almost all favoured an explicitly anti-imperialist, neutralist foreign policy and a commitment to oppressed people everywhere'.⁶ Though Khomeini was the figurehead, he remained independent of the revolutionary council to stay immune from its mistakes.⁷

From the outset, others in positions of power acted independently of Bazargan's government in the name of Khomeini. As Graham reported the convoluted power structure to London:

'The new government's ability to enforce policy decisions remains to be proved...The government's relations with Khomeini's headquarters (the Komiteh) remain unclear. The Komiteh represents a powerful alternative source of loyalty and organisation. People so far prefer to take their problems to the Komiteh rather than to the government. Most of Tehran's rudimentary security forces report to the Komiteh. The Komiteh is organising and carrying out the trial and execution of senior figures from the previous regime...At lower level there are locally organised revolutionary committees... increasingly they are taking upon themselves responsibility for security, the arbitration of local disputes and the provision of basic services. We are already having to deal with such committees for some of our own problems...There is no institutionalised link between all these committees of different kinds and the government'.⁸

It was very difficult to establish clear channels of communication with Bazargan's government to safeguard and promote British interests when the new government was unable to rule in the manner it wished to do so. This was why the embassy continued to follow a pragmatic 'wait and see' policy; avoiding making clear commitments whilst

⁴ Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, 104.

⁵ Bakhash, Shaul, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, (London, 1985), 65.

⁶ Ibid, 80.

⁷ Daneshvar, Parviz, *Revolution in Iran*, (Basingstoke, 1996), 133.

⁸ PREM16/2131, TELNO258 (18 February 1979).

hoping things would settle down so that business could be carried out effectively. In the case of Iran, the convoluted power structure governing the new regime, a structure which was subject to almost daily change, meant it was exceptionally hard for the embassy to carry out the full set of Berridge's functions with equal focus. This was because there were no clear channels of communication open with the host government to facilitate the execution of all these functions. Though the embassy continued to carry out its work in all Berridge's functions, some areas – such as consular and commercial activities – took precedence over others, such as propaganda (sometimes called public diplomacy) as it sought to keep a low profile. This low profile was adopted, not only to help carry out essential consular and commercial duties, but also because Britain did not enjoy the same relationship with the new regime that it did with the Shah's.

Khomeini

Khomeini, problematically for London, was dogmatic in his views of Britain and its perceived historical role of interfering in internal Iranian affairs. Engaging with him proved to be a difficult challenge. His view of the great powers was 'their plan is to keep us backward, to keep us in our present miserable state so they can exploit our riches, our underground wealth, our lands and our human resources. They want us to remain afflicted and wretched, and our poor to be trapped in their misery'.⁹ As such, 'if the Muslims fear that the foreigners have drawn up a plan to conquer their lands, whether directly or by the intermediary of their agents acting outside or inside the country, it is their duty to defend the Islamic lands by any means possible...'¹⁰ As Hussain notes, Khomeini did not promote a desire to hold power and authority for his own ends. This was because 'the first characteristic of the Islamic state was the question of sovereignty. All sovereignty within an Islamic state was vested in God. In other words, the Caliph or the Imam merely ruled on behalf of God. Power was not concentrated in the hands of men to rule as they pleased'.¹¹

Martin notes the Ayatollah's main preoccupation was protecting Iran from foreign and secular encroachment, ridding it of its dependence on foreigners through foreign loans and the influence of foreign companies.¹² Khomeini in the autumn of 1978 was determined to overthrow the Shah's regime and eject foreign influence in order to create

⁹ Khomeini, Ruhollah (Translated by Algar, Hamid), *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, (Berkeley, 1981), 34.

¹⁰ Ibid, 439-440.

¹¹ Hussain, Asaf, *Islamic Iran: Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, (London, 1985), 54.

¹² Martin, Vanessa, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, (London, 2003), 126.

an Islamic state.¹³ Arjomand concurs: 'both before and after the revolution, he [Khomeini] had, with utmost clarity, stated his twin aims: the establishment of an Islamic theocracy and the *complete eradication* of Occidentalism, or Western cultural influence that, according to him, had ravaged Iran for nearly a century.'¹⁴ According to Ganji, 'Bazaragan sought to further what he perceived to be Iran's national interests, whereas Khomeini rejected nationalism as an un-Islamic concept'.¹⁵

For Khomeini it was imperative the revolution be exported abroad and to this end, those Iranian plenipotentiaries working abroad should perform the duty of proselytisers. The Ayatollah was unwavering in this belief. In March 1981, he told a group of diplomats who had been recalled to Iran for consultation:

'The export of ideas by force is no export. We shall have exported Islam only when we have helped Islam and Islamic ethics grow in those countries. This is your responsibility and it is a task which you must fulfil. You should promote this idea by adopting a conduct conducive to the propagation of Islam and by publishing the necessary publications in your countries of assignments... You must publish journals. Such journals should be promotive and their contents and pictures should be consistent with the Islamic Republic, so that by proper publicity campaigns you may pave the way for the spread of Islam in those areas'.¹⁶

Khomeini's desire to spread the revolution abroad was not without precedent. Diplomats posted to missions abroad by the French revolutionary regime regularly engaged in acts of effrontery as they doggedly sought to promote the ideals of the revolution abroad.¹⁷ Citizen Grenet was sent to the U.S. to serve as a plenipotentiary but, after making a series of speeches to the people inciting them to overthrow President Washington, he was promptly expelled.¹⁸ The Bolsheviks too possessed an intense loathing for traditional diplomacy but wanted to use it to encourage a worldwide socialist revolution, thus emissaries were sent in an official diplomatic capacity to spread news of the revolution.¹⁹

¹³ Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, 150.

¹⁴ Arjomand, Said Amir, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran*, (New York, 1988), 138.

¹⁵ Ganji, Babak, *Politics of Confrontation: The Foreign Policy of the USA and Revolutionary Iran*, (London, 2006), 31.

¹⁶ Ramazani, R K, 'Khumayni's Islam in Iran's Foreign Policy' in Dawisha, Adeed (ed), *Islam in Foreign Policy*, (Cambridge, 1983), 19.

¹⁷ Frey, Linda, and Frey, Marsha, "The Reign of the Charlatans Is Over": The French Revolutionary Attack on Diplomatic Practice in *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Dec 1993), 706-744.

¹⁸ Calvert, *Revolution and International Politics*, 129.

¹⁹ Senn, Alfred Erich, *Diplomacy and Revolution: The Soviet Mission to Switzerland- 1918*, (London, 1974), 1.

But in making the promotion of the revolution a key function to be performed by Iranian plenipotentiaries, Khomeini was going against the conventions of traditional diplomacy which set out the primary function of diplomacy as the attempt to build understanding between states via engagement. In the case of Britain, as we shall see, the revolutionary approach to diplomacy by the Iranian embassy caused problems between the embassy and those representing the interests of the United Kingdom. Moreover, Iranian diplomats, like their Bolshevik and French predecessors, were now expected to serve a republic where previously they had served a monarch. As Frey and Frey point out, this shift towards republicanism meant the revolutionaries envisaged 'the secret machinations of the king would be replaced by the negotiations of the people'.²⁰ No longer representing the interests of one autocratic individual, but rather those of a collection of individuals brought to power via revolution, these diplomats had their brief changed completely. Adjustment on their part was essential as was adjustment on the part of those wishing to engage with them.

Whilst Khomeini had some specific views on foreign policy, nothing was said about exactly how diplomacy was to be practiced. In this, Khomeini was not the first revolutionary to have no direction on the issue. Before 1917, leading Bolsheviks had not really explored in great depth what socialist diplomacy would look like. This was not seen as a major issue in any case, because things would fall into place and 'diplomacy would become the servant of revolution'.²¹ The teachings of Marx and Lenin did not issue specific directives on diplomatic practice or theory.²² Similarly, in the Iranian example there was nothing to guide the Islamic conduct of diplomacy apart from the actions of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and his successors in their dealings with rulers of non-Muslim lands. Nevertheless, the Iranian Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) was subjected to drastic and constant changes, like the military and other institutions, as a result of repeated purges, resignations and exiling. Furthermore, the new regime wanted 'to overhaul both the ministry and the Iranian diplomatic missions abroad in keeping with ideological tenets, direction and priorities of the Islamic Republic'.²³

The Bolsheviks, too, implemented radical changes to their diplomatic apparatus²⁴ as did the French revolutionaries where 'after Fructidor 1797, the Directors discharged anyone rendered suspect by aristocratic birth or by monarchical service. The Directors instructed

²⁰ Frey and Frey, "The Reign of the Charlatans Is Over", 708.

²¹ Uldricks, *Diplomacy and Ideology*, 13.

²² Ibid, 192.

²³ Ramazani, R K, 'Khumayni's Islam in Iran's Foreign Policy' in Adeed Dawisha (ed), *Islam in Foreign Policy*, 18.

²⁴ See Uldricks, *Diplomacy and Ideology*.

Talleyrand, then minister of foreign affairs, to appoint men dedicated to the Revolution.²⁵ Those wishing to engage with the new Iranian regime had to contend with representatives who were given express instruction to promote the revolution; they held little interest in the other more traditional facets of diplomatic conventions. It bears repeating that, although there were these historical precedents for the difficulties of engaging with a revolutionary regime, neither the embassy nor the FCO thought of studying them. Had they done so, they may perhaps have been able to draw out valuable parallels and used these to inform policy.

The situation for states like Britain was compounded by the fact that those revolutionaries were, in most instances, inexperienced and unqualified in diplomacy and were therefore unable to understand and work within the established bounds of diplomatic practice and terminology. As Craig points out, the problem of revolutionary states in general is that they lack the experience, assurance and in some cases even the trained public servants needed to conduct foreign relations.²⁶ This, as we shall see, would cause grave problems for London in its attempts to interact with the new regime at an administrative level.

Graham recollects the experiences of the Danish ambassador as an example of the difficulties of engaging with Khomeini. In the first instance Graham believed it was doubtful whether the Dane would get permission to go to Qom. The ambassador did go to see Khomeini with an interpreter in tow but the Ayatollah's statement, in Arabic or Farsi, was such that the interpreter was reluctant to translate his words then and there. He told the ambassador he would instead tell him what Khomeini said on their journey back on the airplane.²⁷ Thus even securing the opportunity to meet Khomeini was not necessarily a productive development, given his unpredictable nature and apathetic attitude towards communication with foreigners.

The desire not to rock the boat with the new regime was outlined publically by Owen, who declared in the House of Commons that, 'by our recognition we made plain our wish to have good, close relations with the new government... A dramatic change has taken place in a country of pivotal importance. We will best maintain our interests by being seen to respect the judgement of the peoples of the region and by working with them as they shape their own destiny'.²⁸ Yet, so long as the post revolutionary hangover

²⁵ Frey and Frey, "The Reign of the Charlatans Is Over", 725-726.

²⁶ Craig, Gordon A, *War, Politics and Diplomacy: Selected Essays*, (London, 1966), 251.

²⁷ Interview with Graham (28 May 2013).

²⁸ PREM16/2131, Iran. Secretary of State's Statement in House of Commons (20 February 1979).

continued it was difficult to establish meaningful working relationships in a country where the mob continued to run riot. The British Council premises in Shiraz, owned by the British government, were taken over as a barracks by local militia on 21 February.²⁹

The fears over Khomeini were magnified by his potential to disrupt the progress in the Arab-Israel dispute, which had recently seen President Carter broker an Egyptian-Israeli peace deal, at Camp David in September 1978. That Yasser Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was the first foreign dignitary to visit Khomeini was seen as a clear indication by Owen of a desire to instigate hostilities against the Israelis, a grave situation which would be made worse if the new regime allowed the PLO access to sophisticated military equipment it had inherited from the Shah.³⁰ In a report produced by Britain's Official Group on Iran, it was noted the Israelis were already feeling the effects of regime change with their Iranian oil supplies, which accounted for 60% of overall supplies, being cut.³¹ Iranian actions were in line with Calvert's³² view that revolutionary states reject the existing international diplomatic order because they regard 'themselves as no longer being bound by the rules of the system to whose growth they have not contributed'. The new regime cared nothing for American attempts at brokering Middle East peace; Tehran's focus was on causing detriment to the mortal enemy that was Israel. To deal with a state which adopted such a stance and did not 'play by the rules of the game', so to speak, was an immense challenge.

The report by the Official Group, entitled 'consequences of the change of regime in Iran', argued that, with chaos reigning, it was difficult to predict with certainty what would happen next. Khomeini was critical of Western and British influence prior to the revolution and it looked as if he wanted to rid Iran of foreign influence meaning CENTO was effectively dead. He was not greatly enamoured with the Soviets and was expected to maintain a non-aligned position. Bazargan was more pragmatic in realising relations with foreign powers were needed to stabilise the economy. The changes in Iran had dealt a blow to Western security interests as a reliable military ally had been lost. Therefore, defence exports were likely to be curtailed but not wholly eradicated.³³

Regardless of the troubles, planning in London was firmly geared towards the eventuality Khomeini would soon assume power and the ramifications of such a development, as his

²⁹ PREM16/2132, TELNO451 (21 February 1979).

³⁰ CAB128/65 (22 February 1979).

³¹ CAB130/1097 (19 March 1979).

³² Calvert, *Revolution and International Politics*, 120.

³³ CAB130/1097 (19 March 1979).

position was 'solid and unchallengeable, if not entirely unchallenged'.³⁴ In a memorandum by the Cabinet Secretary, Sir John Hunt, Prime Minister Callaghan was pressed urgently to establish a study 'to consider the implications of developments in Iran for our wider political, strategic, and economic interests: and to submit a report as soon as possible to the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee'. This was to have input from the FCO, economic departments, the Chiefs of Staff, the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Assessment Staff, under the chairmanship of the Cabinet Office.³⁵ The initial thoughts of this new group were that Iran's foreign policy would be unfavourable towards the West in the short term, but its own national interests would in the long run work against more extreme policies. First contacts with Bazargan and senior ministers indicated Iran did not want to turn its back on the West; thus it was imperative for London 'to show sensitivity and understanding in discussion with the Iranian authorities about the future of our civil and military contacts with Iran'.³⁶ The basic fact, that neither Graham nor the embassy were yet the source of complaint from the new government, was precisely because sensitivity and understanding had been applied in order to meet key consular and commercial priorities. As we have seen, a conscious effort was made to steer clear of contentious issues, such as the abuse of human rights.

The troubles continue

As February ended the internal situation showed no signs of improving, the British stance being it was 'preferable Khomeini and Bazargan to remain together and establish firm government, but their chances are no better than even. Anarchy may grow worse and last for some time'.³⁷ It was decided the best course was to let the revolution run its course and avoid detailed public comments. It was unlikely the country would recover commercially for at least a year. The preference for Bazargan was due to his relatively reasonable approach, as evidenced by a letter he wrote to the embassy in which he expressed his regrets over the events of 14 February and promised arrangements had been made to avoid a repeat.³⁸

On 1 March, Khomeini was welcomed back to his native city of Qom by a crowd estimated at a million strong. In a speech at the Theological Seminary he denounced the idea of democracy in Iran and demanded a pure Islamic state declaring 'democracy is

³⁴ PREM16/2132, TELNO463 (22 February 1979).

³⁵ PREM16/2132, John Hunt Memorandum to Prime Minister: A09006 (21 February 1979).

³⁶ FCO8/3379, Notes for European Political Co-operation: Political Committee: Paris 27-28 February 1979 (21 February 1979).

³⁷ FCO8/3379, FCO brief on Iran for European Council, Paris (1 March 1979).

³⁸ FCO8/3664, Letter by Bazargan (7 March 1979).

another word for usurpation of God's authority to rule'.³⁹ Furthermore, it was Khomeini's belief 'a legislature would not be needed, he noted, since all the necessary laws were laid down by the Koran and Islamic traditions. Islamic tribunals, unencumbered by appeals courts, bureaucracy, and Western law, would settle in days cases that languished for years in the Shah's courts'.⁴⁰ The revolutionary purge of the old regime continued, with two more senior army officers and a member of the secret police executed by firing squad in Tehran on 9 March after appearing before a Revolutionary Tribunal. On 15 March the former Prime Minister, Amir Abbas Hoveyda, was brought before an Islamic Revolutionary Tribunal, accused of corruption and war against God. He was executed on 7 April.

On 13 March, Iran left the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). Originally established in the mid-1950s, it was through CENTO that Iran allowed the Royal Air Force to use air bases for spying missions over the Soviet Union.⁴¹ With the decision to leave CENTO coming so soon after the Shah had been deposed, it was clear the new regime did not place any importance on Cold War alliances.

In May 1979, a new Conservative administration, under Margaret Thatcher, came to power in Britain, promising radical policies at home and a 'resolute approach' abroad, with policy being 'highly ideological, eschewing the more traditionalist and pragmatic assumptions of its predecessors'.⁴² The days of Détente were pretty much over and Cold War tensions re-surfaced almost from the outset of Thatcher's premiership, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 and the Western boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics being but two examples of the new East-West tension. There was abiding concern over the supposed Soviet desire to impose its influence on Iran. Yet while, on 3 March, the Soviet communist leader Leonid Brezhnev 'welcomed the victory of the revolution' and hoped for an improvement in relations with Tehran, to Moscow's disappointment Khomeini refused to be charmed.⁴³

One of Lord Carrington's first actions as the new Foreign Secretary, was to instruct Parsons and Munro to go on what Munro had called a 'salvage' mission to the Gulf where they visited most states, apart from Kuwait, in order to renew old acquaintances and say 'hello we are back, not with soldiers, but we are back to help you with your defence and

³⁹ Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, 106.

⁴⁰ Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs*, 73.

⁴¹ Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, 309.

⁴² Byrd, Peter, 'Introduction' in Byrd, Peter (ed), (1988), *British Foreign Policy Under Thatcher*, (Oxford), 1.

⁴³ Dimitakis, Panagiotis, *Failed Alliances of the Cold War: Britain's Strategy and Ambitions in Asia and the Middle East*, (London, 2012), 183.

security and generally to keep in closer touch'.⁴⁴ The mission included a stop in Tehran, where Munro told Graham he had come over to meet people, get his own impressions and report back on how the Iranians felt about Britain. Munro also met Bazargan who said 'we want to keep in touch with you, we are glad that you have come and we will see how things go'.⁴⁵ But Munro felt his 'position was being eroded at the time by bearded folk who did not really show their faces. It was an inchoate society and we were looking for one or two pillars where there was rubble everywhere'.⁴⁶ The lukewarm reception for Munro, confirmed it would be difficult to establish effective channels of communication with the regime.

Although London had begun to deal with Bazargan as Prime Minister on 13 February, this did not completely resolve the question of diplomatic recognition, especially on whether this was *de facto* or *de jure*. The FCO received many enquiries on this question, as the Shah had not officially abdicated his throne and no head of state had been appointed by the 'provisional, revolutionary and Islamic government'.⁴⁷ Bazargan, unlike Bakhtiar had not been appointed by the Shah or the Majlis; instead his authority came from being nominated by Khomeini as head of the revolutionary movement. Clarifications on these matters were sought from the government's legal advisers and the response was recognition of the new government was *de jure* because 'if recognition is not expressly declared to be *de facto* it is presumed to be *de jure*. Britain could have continued to recognise the Shah as *de jure* and Bazargan as *de facto* but this is not possible as the Shah was no longer seen as the head of state. It follows that we have recognised a provisional revolutionary government which has not yet determined its constitutional basis and has not yet appointed a Head of State'.⁴⁸

This debate shows how, where revolutionary states are concerned, recognition may not be resolved in a straightforward manner. Whilst there is confusion over the nature of power structures it is very difficult to categorically apply *de jure* recognition. In any case, it is important to note that the questions over *de jure* recognition were not raised by the new Iranian regime; it did not appreciate or care for the nuances of the different types of recognition and did not raise the matter in discussions with Graham or the embassy.

⁴⁴ Interview with Munro (13 February 2012).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ FCO8/3374, Iran: Recognition of the Government and the Position of the Shah (8 March 1979).

⁴⁸ FCO8/3374, Response by Denza to note by Gorham (9 March 1979).

However, problems for Bazargan persisted as he did not enjoy the full and unequivocal support of Khomeini, whilst the activities of the Komitehs continued to undermine the power of the new government.⁴⁹ By the middle of March the internal crisis had still not abated, which meant British policy makers were still unable to carry out long-term planning.⁵⁰

The Shah in exile

Although he had departed the domestic Iranian scene in January 1979, the Shah still cast a shadow with revolutionaries demanding his return so he may face justice. After having initially sought refuge in Egypt, he moved to Morocco with the aim of eventually seeking permanent refuge in either Britain or the USA. Taking him in was riddled with danger since, if either London or Washington granted refuge then they would most certainly have created a furore in Iran. As to the question of whether he could be granted refuge, it was pointed out he qualified for settlement on several grounds including: under Immigration Rules, as a person of independent means; Britain had a longstanding history of admitting rulers from friendly countries; he could be granted refugee status if other countries did not admit him; and he might successfully appeal if the decision was made not to admit him.⁵¹

Despite the dangers of allowing him refuge, there were still some in Britain who felt that as a debt of loyalty to an old ally, this should be granted. Alan Hart, an ex BBC TV broadcaster, having known the Shah for many years, tried to act as an intermediary between the deposed leader and the UK in the last months of the Labour government. Owen gave Hart's role short shrift as he did not trust the reliability of Hart as an intermediary.⁵² The Foreign Secretary wanted to relay the message to Hart that if the Shah came to Britain, then the embarrassing debacle of extradition would ensue; chances were the embassy in Iran would be attacked; despite his protestations, the likelihood was his entourage would plot his return to Iran whilst he was in Britain; and the prospect of assassination plots would be high and security resources would be stretched.⁵³

⁴⁹ PREM16/2132, TELNO409 (12 March 1979).

⁵⁰ PREM16/2132, 'Implication of Developments in Iran (EY (79) 15)' (20 March 1979).

⁵¹ PREM16/2131, Chilcot to Cartledge (14 February 1979).

⁵² PREM16/2131, Lever to Cartledge (9 February 1979).

⁵³ PREM16/2132, Lever to Cartledge (21 February 1979).

The issue presented a real threat to the prospect of a healthy Anglo-Iranian relationship. Though Callaghan in an ideal world wanted to grant him entry, it was advised doing so would be unwise for fear of infuriating the incumbent regime. It would be prudent to let the situation calm down, by which time the Shah could make alternative arrangements.⁵⁴ The Shah made further soundings about the possibility of visiting Britain, but this was dismissed: 'Dr Owen does not feel justified in putting UK nationals in Iran at risk and believes therefore that we should continue to discourage the Shah'.⁵⁵

While there were clear grounds for not admitting him, it was impossible to completely ignore him, which is why, unbeknown to the public, Britain helped facilitate his transit from Morocco to the Bahamas.⁵⁶ Owen informed the embassy in the Bahamas 'the idea of the Shah spending some time in the Bahamas and then moving on to settle in Latin America could offer a satisfactory way of removing him from the limelight' but also pressed upon the embassy to 'make it clear to the Bahamians that you are not acting on the Shah's behalf... We are not involved in the Shah's own plans for his future. Nor can we offer help over providing for his security'.⁵⁷

However, there remained the potential for requests to be made by the Royal family to visit or permanently settle in Britain. One issue was the possibility that, if the Shah or his family did arrive, the new regime in Tehran might request their extradition. Britain did not have an extradition treaty with Iran but 'an absence of an extradition treaty will not prevent the reigning government from demanding that we return to them fugitives from "revolutionary" justice'.⁵⁸ In order to help with the difficult prospect of members of the Shah's family requesting to come to Britain the FCO divided the Pahlavi family into two broad categories:

- 'a) those closest to the Shah (his immediate family and his sisters) who could arouse major political controversy in this country and in Iran because of their record of past activities;
- b) other members of the family e.g. half sisters and half-brothers together with their families whose activities have gone relatively unremarked by Iranian critics of the Pahlavis'.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ PREM16/2131, Cartledge to Lever (19 February 1979).

⁵⁵ PREM16/2132, Lever to Cartledge (5 March 1979).

⁵⁶ FCO8/3392, TELNO23 (23 March 1979).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ FCO8/3392, Iran: Extradition Policy (30 March 1979).

⁵⁹ FCO8/3392, Iran: Entry to Britain by Members of the Shah's Family (30 March 1979).

In March 1979, the FCO requested they be notified by the Home Office if applications were made by the former group who should, in the first instance, be discouraged from applying even though they might qualify under immigration rules. As for the latter group, it was proposed they not be discouraged or dissuaded from coming to the UK and be treated as any other Iranian nationals, but at the same time advised to refrain from political activities which could be embarrassing to the British government and generally conduct themselves in a quiet and discreet manner.⁶⁰

To put an end to any hopes the Shah harboured of entering Britain, Thatcher, having come to power on 4 May and following advice from Parsons, sent Sir Denis Wright secretly to the Bahamas to tell him he would be refused entry.⁶¹ The reasons for this were outlined in a briefing note prepared by Munro in which it was explained that his security in Britain could not be guaranteed nor that of British nationals in Iran who might face reprisals by the new regime should he be granted entry. Munro also feared damaging relations with the new regime and the 'strong possibility of retaliation e.g. over oil supplies, the award of contracts to British firms, the ability of British firms to continue working in Iran, perhaps even a breach of diplomatic relations'.⁶² Thus the Shah's hopes were dashed in the same manner as Tsar Nicholas II, who was denied asylum in Britain in 1917 despite the pleas of his London ambassador.⁶³

Meanwhile, in Iran, there remained virulent antipathy towards the old regime. On 13 May the head of the Central Revolutionary Court, Ayatollah Sadegh Khalkhali, announced that the Shah had been sentenced to death by the Iranian nation. Whereas Britain had remained relatively quiet on the matter, the Americans, on 17 May, condemned the 'reign of terror',⁶⁴ but this simply led to demonstrations throughout Iran on 25 May.⁶⁵ There were a number of reasons why the U.S. statement was issued including the continued persecution of Iranian Jews, hostility towards Israel and the Bazargan government's failure to accept the appointment of Walter Cutler as the new U.S. ambassador.⁶⁶ The difference of approach between Britain and the USA on the subject of human rights abuses had an impact on their respective fortunes in Iran. What was viewed as human rights abuse by some was, for the Iranians, a process of bringing to justice those who had exploited the country in the past. By staying quiet on the issue,

⁶⁰ FCO8/3392, Iran: Entry to Britain by Members of the Shah's Family (30 March 1979).

⁶¹ FCO8/3392, Lever to Cartledge (21 May 1979).

⁶² FCO8/3392, Munro to Parsons (17 May 1979).

⁶³ Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, 89.

⁶⁴ Rubin, Barry, *Paved With Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran*, (New York, 1980), 289.

⁶⁵ Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, 318.

⁶⁶ Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation*, 135-136.

Britain was able to have an ambassador accepted and operate a full embassy, whereas the Americans had to make do with appointing a chargé d'affaires, Bruce Laingen, in early June.

A mission facing challenges

In terms of the everyday business of operating a mission, Graham inherited an embassy which 'was virtually at full strength, only a voluntary thinning out having taken place' so far.⁶⁷ This had mainly occurred due to the stresses and strains of working in a country crippled by violence where there was very little regard for the sanctity of international protocols protecting diplomatic missions. Having experienced the attack on the embassy on 5 November 1978 and witnessed the attack on the American embassy on 14 February 1979, as well as attacks on other embassies, some individuals were affected by the low morale Miers had noted at the beginning of the year and thus wanted to leave the mission.

The mindset within the mission was one of caution, with a reduction in the holding of 'sensitive' papers taking place, but the problem with this was what was considered as sensitive was open to interpretation depending upon ever changing circumstances.⁶⁸ One difficult staffing challenge was the prospect of a summer during which chargé d'affaires Miers was scheduled to be on leave along with the only three trained Persian speakers – David Reddaway, Christine Laidlaw and Norman Macsween.⁶⁹ This meant that, though leave could be staggered, 'operational effectiveness will be bound to deteriorate. Already Persian is a more important asset than it was under the previous regime. With the demise this week of the English language Persian press, the importance of our Persian speakers has increased markedly'.⁷⁰ To counter this problem it was proposed to send the wife of a staff member, Chris Rundle – she was an Afghan-born Persian-speaking interpreter at Heathrow's immigration desk – to Iran to serve alongside her husband.⁷¹

Whereas, before the revolution, the embassy was focused on commercial activities, there was now a noticeable shift away from this. This was evidenced by starkly diminishing Anglo-Iranian trade relations, with British exports to Iran totalling £231.8 million in 1979 (down from £752 million in 1978) whilst imports fell from £527.8 million in 1978 to

⁶⁷ Speech by Graham at Trinity College, Cambridge Commemoration Dinner, 9.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 18-19.

⁶⁹ FCO8/3395, Miers to Beamish (28 March 1979).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ FCO8/3395, Miers to Beamish (3 May 1979).

£243.6 million in 1979.⁷² Miers provides a fascinating insight into this shift, which is worth quoting at length:

'The local staff position is rather more complicated. Commercial work has diminished, at least temporarily, but there has been a heavy increase on the consular and Information sides... We have been careful not to exceed the numbers permitted in our overall establishment and remain conscious of the need to operate as economically as possible... Whether the consular traffic continues to increase, or even remain at its present high level, will depend partly on the stability of the internal situation, but more especially on the reigning government's future policy on students travelling abroad. The same applies to the staff whom we have had to take on to prepare a daily press summary... The suppression of the English language press in April has obliged us to do a daily summary of the Persian press if we are to remain in touch with events... I suggest, if you agree, that we should review the position in six months time to see whether the temporary appointments which we have made should become permanent ones'.⁷³

Added to these issues was the problem of the consular section of the embassy coming under pressure, as a result of introducing a strict system of control over Iranians who contacted the embassy before leaving for the UK. Part of the solution was promoting to grade 9 the official in charge of the Registry.⁷⁴

The changes experienced by the embassy led to the FCO looking to examine the volume of telegraphic traffic for two key departments whose activities affected the embassy, namely the Consular Department and the Migration and Visa Department. It was felt that, with some adjustments in reporting techniques, there would be less traffic, as public interest in Iran was now decreasing, although the revolution was by no means over, but urgent reports would still be needed when Parliament was sitting.⁷⁵ Moreover the change of regime meant there would no longer be the level of engagement on international matters that there was with the Shah, automatically reducing telegraphic traffic.⁷⁶

⁷² Brenchley, Frank, *Britain and the Middle East: An Economic History 1945-87*, 259.

⁷³ FCO8/3395, Miers to Miller (30 May 1979).

⁷⁴ FCO8/3395, Miller to Munro and Tatham (30 May 1979).

⁷⁵ FCO8/3395, Gorham to Perry (11 July 1979).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

The expectation was that the Consular Department and Visa Section would witness the most telegraphic traffic yet this would drop as the British community continued to drop in size. With regards to the issue of visas it was noted

'formally speaking, we are continuing to operate under the visa abolition agreement but in practice we have persuaded the Iranians to use a quasi-visa system to try and remove difficulties for Iranians at all ports of entry. There is always the possibility that both sides may agree to go over to a full visa system with all the telegraphic traffic that would entail... Everything depends upon how things settle down in Iran. If there is a further turn for the worse, sparking off another wave of Iranians seeking to leave their country, then we would all be in trouble'.⁷⁷

Meanwhile in London, government departments still worked together on preserving commercial interests. On 10 April 1979, Graham met with members from the Department of Trade and Industry in London to discuss developments in Iran where, he explained, 'the situation remained tense however and was obviously potentially explosive'. There was no sign of any disagreement on British policy during the meeting.⁷⁸ Collaboration between departments was most evident over the issue of repayments of the loan granted to the National Water Council. In a letter from the Under-Secretary of the Treasury, David Hancock, to Stanley Payton of the Bank of England, on 5 March 1979⁷⁹ he pointed out the first repayment of \$200 million was due to be paid in May and there was no question of withholding this. In the Treasury it was said that, as Britain was honouring its obligations, this should mean the Iranians were under pressure to honour theirs; but he did not see how the point could be exploited 'without giving the impression that we might actually refuse to pay up-which could damage our credit'. As such, he sought the opinions of the Bank of England and John Moberly of the FCO. In reply, the following day, Payton wrote that he could see no benefit in pressing the Iranians on the matter.⁸⁰ Moberly, in reply on 9 March to both Hancock and Payton, concurred with his colleagues.⁸¹ Thus the first repayment of \$200 million was made in May 1979, with a further \$200 million due in November 1980 and the rest to be paid in instalments throughout 1981. The question pondered earlier in the year was whether repayments should be made earlier as 'any offer would be a gesture of

⁷⁷ FCO8/3395, Gorham to Perry (11 July 1979).

⁷⁸ TNA. BT 241/2845.

⁷⁹ TNA. T381/189.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

goodwill which might earn the UK some credit both within the Iranian government (it might help ensure continuation of Bazargan's government) and with the public'. However, on balance, at this juncture it was decided against early repayment.⁸² The Bank of England, Treasury and FCO were thus united in a moderate approach to Iran.

Khomeini continues to exert his authority

In the continued absence of a viable alternative, the British position was to persevere in supporting Bazargan, as his regime was 'most likely to continue to have profitable political and commercial relations with us. We can offer discreet encouragement (public support would be the kiss of death) but our influence will be marginal. An initial relationship with Dr Bazargan's regime has been positive'.⁸³ The Prime Minister continued to face difficulties with Graham noting 'the events of the last few weeks have led to a confused picture, in which future developments are harder than ever to predict... The clearest feature has been the apparent reassertion of its influence by the hard-line Islamic element in the Khomeini entourage... The government is looking increasingly like an Executive Panel, while the real decisions are taken by the Khomeini entourage (the nebulous Revolutionary Council)'.⁸⁴ Thus for all the merits of dealing with Bazargan, because he had been appointed by Khomeini and was a relatively reasonable figure, the depressing reality was that, because he did not hold any real power (with ultimate power being held by the inaccessible and reclusive Ayatollah), engaging with him was no silver bullet for establishing successful relations with the regime. However, whilst Khomeini remained elusive, engaging with Bazargan was still a sensible option given that he evidently enjoyed the Ayatollah's favour to some extent. This at least meant Britain was not engaging with someone Khomeini considered as an enemy.

As an illustration of the surreal environment within which the mission was operating, Graham, after speaking to the Iranian head of protocol, found his credentials would have to be presented again. This was because circumstances in Iran were exceptional with no Head of State, Bazargan serving merely as an unelected Prime Minister and head of the provisional government. There was something of a Catch-22 situation. '[It] was essential that the established head of state should sign the credentials: the Iranian problem was that having no constitution, they had no head of state'. The new ceremony, he was assured, would be simple and informal.⁸⁵ Graham reported the experience of presenting

⁸² Bank of England Archives. 13A3121. 9 July 1979.

⁸³ FCO8/3279, Papers for Incoming Minsters: Middle East Trouble Spots (12 April 1979).

⁸⁴ PREM19/76, TELNO584 (10 May 1979).

⁸⁵ FCO8/3374, TELNO610 (17 May 1979).

his credentials in a letter to Carrington. There was little fanfare and, after handing over the letter, he had a brief conversation with the Prime Minister, who 'was extremely friendly and expressed a desire for close relations with Britain'. Graham reflected 'I believe (it best), for this country and for British interests if he were to succeed in his task of establishing constitutional government, but the forces working against him are many and strong. He is a dogged and courageous man, however'.⁸⁶

British perceptions of Bazargan were in stark contrast to the way in which Khomeini was viewed. Owen is of the opinion that

'the nature of the man was that you could not build relations with him. You were dealing with a fanatic... Fanaticism is dangerous, very dangerous, very very dangerous, bad things are done by fanaticism. Khomeini was a bad man and we all knew it and the whole region knew it...'.⁸⁷

British opinions of Khomeini were shaped by his stance of being 'deeply suspicious of Britain, resentful at our press criticisms of trials, executions and other excesses and ready to suspect that we seek to reverse the verdict of the revolution (although stopping short of trying to put the Shah back on the throne)'.⁸⁸

The extent of the challenge facing Britain was reflected in the changes which took place in the Iranian embassy in London. Six months after the revolution, Dr Ali Afrouz, a 29 year old graduate, was made chargé d'affaires. Upon assuming control, he took several noteworthy steps, starting with changing thirty staff members, mostly in the consular section, and trying to get rid of the SAVAK agents in the embassy's consular section by asking them to return their diplomatic passports. He also poured out the embassy alcohol, declaring 'we are not throwing big parties anymore... we don't send MPs wine and Persian carpets anymore'.⁸⁹ The issue of alcohol was a touchy subject as evidenced by the experience of Graham, who learned from the MFA the revolutionary committee had barred the import of alcohol by embassies meaning his wine, ordered in January and shipped in May, was still in customs.⁹⁰ Changes were implemented in the London embassy, as they were elsewhere, due to the desire to remove those diplomats who had loyalties and ties to the old regime. This was similar to previous revolutions. In the

⁸⁶ FCO8/3395, Graham to Carrington (13 June 1979).

⁸⁷ Interview with Owen (23 May 2013).

⁸⁸ FCO8/3381, Heads of Government Meeting Lusaka, 1-8 August 1979 (9 July 1979).

⁸⁹ Sunday Times 'Insight Team', *Siege!: Princes Gate, London, April 30 - May 5*, (London, 1980), 6.

⁹⁰ FCO8/3395, TELNO821 (7 August 1979).

French case, 'the Directory continued to question the commitment of those diplomats who had served the Old Regime or those associated with a traitorous faction'⁹¹ and thus set about ousting plenipotentiaries representing the old regime.

Diplomatic relations with the provisional government

Though the provisional government lacked power, this did not dissuade Graham from meeting its senior members. In his first interview with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr Kamal Kharazi, he emphasised 'we desired good relations and friendship with prosperous and self-reliant independent countries... we had enjoyed good relations with the previous regime in Iran precisely because we respected the right of the people of Iran to order their own affairs, and it was in the same spirit that we wished to have good relations with the present government'.⁹² Kharazi in turn stated Iran too desired good relations with Britain, but was concerned with difficulties faced by Iranians visiting the country. Graham explained difficulties did not exist and it was simply the case that, with Britain not having identity cards, checks at borders had to be more stringent. The system was working well, but cases of mistreatment could be investigated if Kharazi brought specific cases. A discussion was also held on compensation claims for damage to the embassy. Graham's engagement with key Iranian ministers was viewed positively by London as their 'goodwill in the prevailing revolutionary situation is important to us for the protection of our financial interests (and the welfare of the remaining British community)'.⁹³

Graham also suggested inviting Finance Minister, Ali Ardalan, who was one of the few ministers to venture abroad (with recent visits to Copenhagen and Brussels), to Britain as he was scheduled to visit Belgrade in early October for the International Monetary Fund's annual meeting. This was viewed as a favourable proposition. The visit of Ardalan would be relatively uncontroversial, given he was a former bureaucrat and thus free from revolutionary excesses, but it would be more appropriate for the Treasury to invite him, as he was the equivalent of the Chancellor of Exchequer. It was emphasised there was no alternative to the current regime, so it was important to establish dialogue at ministerial level for the protection of British interests including repayment of debts to British firms, settlement of defence contracts and compensation for nationalisation of

⁹¹ Frey and Frey, "The Reign of the Charlatans Is Over", 724-725.

⁹² FCO8/3375, Graham to Chancery (2 September 1979).

⁹³ FCO8/3375, Gorham to Peretz (4 September 1979).

banks and other assets as well as to address the issue of British loans to the Iranian National Water Council and access to oil.⁹⁴

The series of meetings with senior ministers continued when David Gilmour, the Lord Privy Seal (who effectively acted as deputy Foreign Secretary to Lord Carrington) met with Iranian Foreign Minister Dr Ibrahim Yazdi at the UN General Assembly. It was emphasised that Britain was prompt in recognising the new government and desired good relations, which meant zero interference in Iran's internal affairs. It was also stressed that mutual interests remained and, apart from trade, Britain desired to see the Gulf and the wider region free from foreign interference. Sympathy with the problems facing Iran after the revolution was also expressed, with the question being asked whether there was anything Britain could do to help.⁹⁵

The embassy continued to operate on a much smaller scale than in its heyday in the Imperialist era. Relations with the ailing provisional government remained good, but power had decisively shifted to Qom, where Khomeini was resident and with whom no direct contact had yet been established. The reduced scale of the embassy's activities was reflected in the reduced bag frequencies which had diminished to fortnightly with a non-confidential bag being sent twice a week.⁹⁶ In October 1979 at the Middle East Heads of Mission Conference in London, Carrington commented:

'Iran's revolution is clearly far from over. Lengthy period of instability and uncertainty ahead...We must clearly try to keep on good terms with the government of the day. Impressed by the good working relations the embassy have built up since the revolution but do not delude myself that we shall ever enjoy a close relationship with the Ayatollah's theocracy'.⁹⁷

In such a situation it was therefore 'essential for the protection of British interests that our own embassy in Iran continues to enjoy good access to Iranian ministers'.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ FC08/3375, Gorham to Peretz (4 September 1979).

⁹⁵ FC08/3381, FCO brief on Lord Privy Seal's Visit to the UN General Assembly: October 1979 (28 September 1979).

⁹⁶ FC08/3375, Memo on British Embassy in Tehran (3 October 1979).

⁹⁷ FC08/3285, Secretary of State's Opening Remarks at Middle East Heads of Mission Conference, London (23 October 1979).

⁹⁸ FC08/3375, Hannay to Moberly (26 October 1979).

When the new constitution of Iran was finally adopted by referendum on October 24 before going into force on December 3 later that year there were several articles put in pertaining to the new regime's foreign policy:

Article 152

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it, the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects and its territorial integrity, the defence of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonist superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent States.

Article 153

Any form of agreement resulting in foreign control over the natural resources, economy, army, or culture of the country, as well as other aspects of the national life, is forbidden.

Article 154

The Islamic Republic of Iran has as its ideal human felicity throughout human society, and considers the attainment of independence, freedom, and rule of justice and truth to be the right of all people of the world. Accordingly, while scrupulously refraining from all forms of interference in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the just struggles of the mustad'afun against the mustakbirun in every corner of the globe.

Article 155

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran may grant political asylum to those who seek it unless they are regarded as traitors and saboteurs according to the laws of Iran.

In defining its foreign policy in such categorical terms and enshrining it within its constitution, the new Iranian Republic emphasised a clear division between the dominant and the dominated; the oppressors and the oppressed; and the subjugators and the subjugated. In making such a distinction there was a clear opposition to the injustices committed by certain foreign powers and it was this mentality which underpinned the events of 4 November 1979 and thereafter – events which would deeply affect the British presence in Iran.

Summary

For Trevelyan⁹⁹, an ambassador operating in a less friendly country has the advantage of not being tied down by the weight of expectation from home ministers; who do not predict anything 'agreeable' from the situation. However, this was clearly not the case for Graham, upon whom there was an expectation to steady the ship in a choppy post-revolutionary situation, where predicting the turn of events remained an exercise of estimates rather than certainties. His track record in the highest echelons of the diplomatic service meant he was chosen as one of the most experienced and reliable diplomats available at a time when economic interests needed to be salvaged in the tumultuous environment of a post-revolutionary state. The challenge faced by Britain in terms of establishing and conducting diplomatic relations after the fall of the Shah was a profound one. 1979 was a year marked in Iran by internecine conflict which was a continuation of the unrest of 1978, with the difference being that those who were united in their desire to overthrow the old regime were now fighting each other over influence. In the absence of a constitution and a structured form of government the country was led by a figure, namely Khomeini, who did not hold any official position but still made the most important political and religious decisions, which served to undermine the provisional government, headed by Bazargan.

It was within this context Britain had to conduct its affairs with the primary objectives being to continue to promote commercial interests whilst also safeguarding those citizens still remaining in Iran. The changes experienced in the Tehran embassy were a natural consequence of operating in a revolutionary state, where it was impossible to carry on with the same scale of pre-revolutionary activities. Rather than a question of how successfully the mission executed Berridge's functions of an embassy, it was more a question of how priorities changed within the mission, so that consolidation and protection of existing interests became the focus over the expansion of interests. As Graham notes, 'throughout this time there was, of course, little or nothing that an embassy could do to influence events. Our task was twofold. To try and inform ourselves as well as we could of what was going on, and to establish links with the newly emerging authorities; and to do what we could to protect the British community'.¹⁰⁰ In these circumstances, the mission did its best to conduct diplomatic relations in the most traditional and common-sense way by continuing to engage with the provisional government. It did so with some success, but it was hampered by not being able to gain

⁹⁹ Trevelyan, *Diplomatic channels*, 32.

¹⁰⁰ Speech by Graham at Trinity College, Cambridge Commemoration Dinner.

access to Khomeini who in any case – despite the odd indication to the contrary – was hostile towards foreigners in general. The issue of the Shah's desire to move to either Britain or America was also a political 'hot potato' and would present itself again, with devastating consequences, for the U.S. – and with deep ramifications for Britain.

Chapter 7. Britain and the fallout of the U.S. embassy hostage crisis

'I think that there was a good deal of good will on our side but it was really trampled upon by, which I cannot emphasise enough, the appalling effect of the occupation of the American embassy which changed everything and made it very difficult'.¹ Sir John Graham.

The U.S. Embassy is taken hostage

Whilst Britain already found it difficult to operate in an Iran engulfed by revolution, whatever headway was made in establishing contact with the provisional government, was severely disrupted by the events of November 1979. The issue of the Shah seeking refuge in the West came to a head when the Americans admitted him, on 22 October 1979, to a New York hospital, for treatment of his cancer. The decision provoked a furore in Iran. Demonstrations ensued and, on 4 November, students stormed the American embassy in Tehran, subsequently holding around fifty staff hostage for no less than 444 days. It was the first time an entire embassy had been taken hostage, in direct violation of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, with the host government apparently powerless, or unwilling, to end the situation. It highlighted that embassies are 'peculiarly vulnerable targets for ideological, religious and political zealots who are anxious to punish the powers whom they believed responsible for their real, or more usually supposed, ills, sufferings and oppression'.² Jimmy Carter's administration faced the conundrum of having to negotiate the release of the very people who had served as their main conduit to engagement with Iran. The day after the embassy was taken over an Iran Working Group was set up in the State Department Operations Centre. Composed of specialists from various departments, the Group worked 24 hours a day and sought to build up a coalition of governments which could apply pressure for the hostages to be released.³

Bazargan's departure

The actions of the students drew condemnation from the international community and even opposition within Iran. Outraged at such a wanton violation of diplomatic conventions, Bazargan and his cabinet resigned. Hiro notes the government had 'faced

¹ Interview with Graham (28 May 2013).

² Hamilton, Keith and Langhorne, Richard, *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration* (2nd edition), (London, 2010), 215.

³ Harris, David, *The Crisis: The President, the Prophet and the Shah- 1979 and the Coming of Militant Islam*, (New York, 2004), 210.

opposition from the Islamic Revolutionary Council at the policy-making level, and from the Islamic associations in the foreign ministry and the Iranian embassy in Washington at the administrative level'.⁴ Bazargan's departure was met with despondency by the British who felt 'in this atmosphere of renewed revolutionary fervour there is only limited scope for effective action by others and by the West in general to defend our interests. Given the strong feeling against foreigners, attempts to bring pressure upon the authorities could be counter-productive'.⁵ Complete power had now fallen into the hands of a Revolutionary Council dominated by Khomeini, who did nothing to restrain xenophobic elements.

The conundrum, as Cottam put it was, 'just what could the United States do to compel an Iranian government, led by a man who honoured martyrdom, to release the imprisoned Americans?'⁶ The Ayatollah was very careful to support the taking of the hostages whilst at the same time absolving himself of responsibility, claiming to be powerless to prevent the students' actions. Cottam has observed, 'Iran under Khomeini could thus be described as totalitarian but without a dictator'.⁷ Bani-Sadr has supported Cottam, retrospectively claiming 'the takeover of the U.S. embassy was wholly in line with Khomeini's strategy of focusing hostility abroad. He attributed such importance to the event that he described it as a second revolution, more important than the first'.⁸

From the onset of the revolution, other states had found it difficult to engage with a regime that not only was inexperienced in the arena of diplomacy, but also shunned the conventional diplomatic apparatus favoured by most states. Although Islamic law recognises the principle of diplomatic inviolability, Khomeini viewed this as secondary to the evils of contact with foreign 'infidels'.⁹ According to Calvert, 'one of the characteristics of a revolutionary "style" is frequently the rejection of traditional diplomatic methods and techniques, on the grounds that they are "loaded", that they represent the features of an international order that a revolutionary state opposes'.¹⁰ It was this rejection which would make the task of helping secure the release of the hostages, and indeed wider diplomatic engagement, an almost impossible task over the following few years.

⁴ Hiro, Dilip, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs* (London, 1985), 318.

⁵ FCO8/3382, Hannay to Moberly (7 November 1979).

⁶ Cottam, Robert, *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study*, (Pittsburgh, 1988), 212.

⁷ Ibid, 230.

⁸ Bani-Sadr, Abol Hassan, *My Turn to Speak: Iran, the Revolution and Secret Deals with the U.S.*, (Washington, 1991), 5.

⁹ Ibid, 52.

¹⁰ Calvert, Peter, *Revolution and International Politics*, (London, 1984), 152.

The initial British reaction

As Geoffrey Moorhouse says, 'the worst thing a country can do to another, short of declaring war, is to end official contact by recalling its own ambassador and closing its own embassy, simultaneously telling its opposite number to shove off home'.¹¹ But, despite worsening relations and the seizure of the U.S. Embassy, the British were reluctant to break off diplomatic relations. The initial feeling in the FCO was that, 'in spite of the disconcerting events of the last few days, Iran's long-term economic and strategic importance to the West is such that we must do all we can to keep the bridges open with her'.¹² In spite of the gloomy situation, maintaining contact with the regime was deemed essential because, aside from important long-term British interests being at stake, an Iran which had broken off from the West would be more vulnerable to Soviet influence.¹³

Berridge explains that a formal breach in relations 'happens when one party to a bilateral relationship indicates that it no longer has any desire, in principle, to conduct conventional diplomatic relations via formally accredited missions with the other. In consequence it withdraws its own mission from the receiving state and requires the latter to recall its own diplomats'.¹⁴ Such an act is considered as a last resort, to be used when all other possible avenues have been exhausted. The Americans broke diplomatic relations on 7 April 1980, only after a number of strategies had been unsuccessfully employed in order to end the impasse over the hostages. As Ghorbal points out, breaks usually occur in fits of anger or frustration and it is only after a break that states realise the magnitude of their action. They then 'find themselves in real need of some form of contact, direct or indirect...it is precisely at times of estrangement that relations are needed most. A dialogue is essential, and talking back and forth is the only way to clear a complicated situation'.¹⁵

The case of Bolshevik Russia is an example of how difficult the situation can become when relations are severed. On 31 August 1918 a pro-Bolshevik mob invaded the British embassy in Petrograd and the English naval attaché, Captain Cromie, was killed in the ensuing gun battle. British nationals in the building were rounded up, but a few officials

¹¹ Moorhouse, Geoffrey, *The Diplomats: The Foreign Office Today*, (London, 1977), 279.

¹² FCO8/3382, Hannay to Moberly (7 November 1979).

¹³ FCO8/3382, Hannay to Moberly (14 November 1979).

¹⁴ Berridge, Geoff, *Talking to the Enemy: How States without 'Diplomatic Relations' Communicate*, (Basingstoke, 1994), 3.

¹⁵ Ghorbal, Ashraf, 'The Interests Section as a Practical System of Diplomatic Contact' in Newsom, David (ed), (1990), *Diplomacy Under A Foreign Flag*, (Washington DC, 1990), 79.

destroyed at least some of the embassy ciphers and documents. The head of the British commercial mission was arrested at gunpoint.¹⁶ Then, on 3 September, the chief British political agent in Russia, Bruce Lockhart was arrested for attempting to subvert the loyalty of a rifles unit in the Red Army. In response, the Bolshevik emissary Maxim Litvinov was arrested in London and subsequently deported on the grounds that he had used sealed diplomatic pouches to ship revolutionary materials into Britain.¹⁷ With Iran too, Britain faced the very real prospect of violent harm being done to its interests and citizens if it decided to sever relations.

There are other drawbacks to severing relations which help explain why Britain was reluctant to take such a step. They include losing the various benefits which come from having an embassy in a foreign capital. Retired diplomat Peter Hall has argued 'ministers would not be able to arrange meetings, understand the local political and economic situation or get advanced information on personalities, opportunities and dangers, unless an embassy were there to help'.¹⁸ For Young¹⁹:

'Such roles as the protection of individual citizens, the provision of consular services and the promotion of friendly relations would all be very difficult without an embassy. Negotiations, even if carried out by a special envoy, require preparation and follow-up, which is best done at local level. Reporting may be done, to an extent, by the media, but journalists are only interested in certain types of story, their concern with most items are transitory and they do not have access to the high quality of information about the top level of foreign governments that professional diplomats have'.

A few days after the US embassy was seized, Graham met with the Vice-Minister for Political Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Kamal Kharazi, and said that what had happened with the U.S. embassy was 'separate from the government and contrary to its wishes'.²⁰ Kharazi's response highlighted the ongoing problem Britain faced in that, though successful interaction with the MFA was possible, the department did not carry much influence with the reclusive, but belligerent Khomeini. President Carter himself would later echo these frustrations by declaring 'the most difficult part of

¹⁶ Hughes, Michael, *Inside the Enigma: British Officials in Russia 1900-1939*, (London, 1997), 138.

¹⁷ Uldricks, Teddy, *Diplomacy and Ideology: The Origins of Soviet Foreign Relations 1917-1930*, (London, 1979), 50.

¹⁸ Young, John, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy: A Case Study of British Practice, 1963-1976*, (Cambridge, 2008), 64.

¹⁹ Ibid, 63.

²⁰ FCO8/3378, TELNO1108 (8 November 1979).

the Iranian question is that there's no government entity with whom we can communicate or negotiate or register a complaint or a request'.²¹

The continued rejection of accepted diplomatic norms by the new regime corresponds with Armstrong's view that, in contrast to conventional diplomats, revolutionaries 'if they have a conception of international society, see it as an oppressive, unequal and immoral structure of power'.²² In essence, the recalcitrant regime refused to engage with an international community which it felt was culpable for supporting the Shah and now opposed the revolution.

The British embassy suffered its own attack on 5 November by revolutionary guards, who came over the walls but soon left after, conducting what they called an 'inspection' for arms. Graham believed the real reason for the intrusion by the guards was to search for some missing Americans, who were not at the U.S. embassy when it was taken over.²³ During the raid one intruder claimed Khomeini's office had been called and instructions were given to end the intrusion. Miers, now back at the FCO, judged that 'there is no established authority capable of disciplining a group which decides to take the law into its own hands in a popular cause like attacking the American embassy'.²⁴

The attacks left Britain to analyse the threat to its mission. One second secretary of the embassy, Stephen Lamport, argued that security was not strong enough, either in terms of the structure of the building or the number of security personnel, to withstand a mass intrusion. Thus there was a need to draw up contingency plans in case of further attacks.²⁵ Another conclusion, drawn by Miers, was that the attack on the American embassy had shown embassy files in particular had no protection. Fortunately, virtually all sensitive files in the British embassy had been destroyed and would continue to be so. Any files which should not be destroyed, because they were so important, were sent for safekeeping in London. A few documents might also be kept in two incendiary deed boxes, kept in a bag keep, with the duty security officer instructed to lock it in the event of an attack.²⁶

²¹ Carter, Jimmy, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States 1980-1981. Book I. January 1 to May 23 1980* (Washington, 1981), 39.

²² Armstrong, David, 'The Diplomacy of Revolutionary States' in Melissen, Jan (ed), *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice* (Basingstoke, 1999), 44.

²³ Speech by Graham at Trinity College, Cambridge Commemoration Dinner (Undated).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ FCO8/3387, 'The security lessons of 5 November' (11 November 1979).

²⁶ FCO8/3378, Miers to Gorham (11 November 1979).

The volatility of Iranian politics led Graham to describe 'the situation as unpredictable... I cannot forecast how long this phase will last'.²⁷ One of the embassy's main concerns was with the safety of British subjects. The estimate of the size of the expatriate community was no more than 500 (down dramatically from 20,000 at the start of 1978, following a steady exodus).²⁸ Graham met thirty representatives of the community on 12 November, when he stated 'that there had been a lurch towards extremism and that the situation was delicate and unpredictable. Xenophobia and spy-mania were apparent'. While Americans bore the brunt of this, the threat to Britain and other European countries remained; thus he re-iterated his advice, originally given at the onset of the revolution in February, that those without a strong need (defined as business or contractual obligations or family ties) should consider leaving. If the embassy was attacked and unable to function, British Airways and Gray Mackenzie had agreed to coordinate arrangements for the community to depart. The meeting also provided the embassy with an opportunity to update its 'pyramid' system for distributing information amongst the community, with those present asked to pass what was said to other countrymen in their companies, but not the Press.²⁹

The ambassador also reported on staff anxieties brought by the experience of working in an unpredictable situation, susceptible to bouts of violence. Though morale had been fairly good after his last trip to London, recent events 'emphasised our vulnerability and created an understandable measure of psychological strain which is hard to dispel'. Morale could be improved by facilitating the movement of personal effects home. These had already been exposed to the attacks on the embassy in 1978 and 1979, therefore it was difficult to get insurance cover for civil disturbance and the Iranians would not provide compensation. It was also proving difficult to get valuables past the Komitehs in customs, as diplomatic exemptions from search had disappeared. In light of this, he wanted the FCO to make financial compensation quickly for the losses to diplomats occurring on 5 November; this was important to the individuals concerned even if the sums involved were small. In addition, Graham expressed his hope that those who left as part of the thinning out of staff to downsize the embassy, despite wanting to stay and see it out, would be treated as generously as possible in the matters of allowance and future postings.³⁰

²⁷ PREM19/76, TELNO1122 (12 November 1979).

²⁸ PREM19/76, TELNO1146 (13 November 1979).

²⁹ PREM19/76, TELNO1096 (13 November 1979).

³⁰ FCO8/3396, TELNO1154 (14 November 1979).

When the Tehran embassy was attacked in November 1978, though this naturally disturbed staff, they could still get some comfort from knowing the Shah retained power and was committed to aiding repairs to the building. But in November 1979, the incumbent regime did not show the same sympathy and it was natural for embassy staff to wonder whether they, like the Americans, might become the victims of a hostage situation. In spite of the challenging circumstances, it is evident that embassy staff continued to operate with a certain degree of success. Evidence of this lies in the fact that there were no criticisms of them from either the ambassador or government departments in London. Operating with a smaller staff and serving a smaller expatriate community, the embassy continued to work away on consular activities and protecting commercial interests.

On 12 November, Carter suspended oil imports from Iran, followed by a decision on 14 November to freeze Iranian assets in U.S. banks. During a telephone conversation between Carter and Thatcher on 19 November, he requested that Britain, alongside other European Community members, reduce the number of staff in their embassies and let Khomeini know of their deep concerns over the hostage crisis. Thatcher told Carter the British embassy had been steadily reducing its numbers.³¹

Contacts via the Diplomatic Corps and London

The diplomatic corps, an institution little discussed in academic literature, has been defined as 'the body of diplomats of all states... who are resident at one post'.³² There is generally little need for the corps to meet frequently whilst operating in stable host states, but in states which are unsettled the corps can become active in protecting its members' rights and security. It gives diplomats the chance to collaborate in conditions where the usual forms of political reporting can diminish, as missions reduce in size and there may be an exodus of foreign citizens. A number of states had already significantly reduced their staff sizes in Iran before the hostage crisis and they were followed by several others, including Australia and Britain. As a result of the hostage crisis, one group within the diplomatic corps that was especially significant to Britain, namely the EC resident ambassadors in Tehran, which met daily, sometimes even twice a day – an experience Graham found to be positive, helping him cope with the hostile atmosphere of a revolutionary state:

³¹ PREM19/76, Telephone conversation between Thatcher and Carter (19 November 1979).

³² Berridge, Geoff, and James, Alan (eds), *A Dictionary of Diplomacy* (2nd ed), (Basingstoke, 2003), 72. One of the few works on the corps is Sharp, Paul, and Wiseman, Geoffrey (eds.), *The Diplomatic Corps as an Institution of International Society* (Basingstoke, 2007).

'We got to know each other very well and, since all our governments were navigating in uncharted waters, our collective advice, I believe, carried weight in capitals. It was a very interesting experience from the professional point of view, and I believe the experience of cooperation among the EC embassies in Tehran gave a significant impetus to the growing practice of coordination of policy in the community and the machinery known as Political Co-Operation...'.³³

A group of resident ambassadors called upon Foreign Minister Bani-Sadr in late November, when he explained that, although not every Iranian could be controlled, the occupation of the U.S. embassy had given the government an opportunity to ensure other diplomatic missions were respected.³⁴

Aside from such joint action, contact with the regime was possible at the London end, where on 29 November, John Moberly, the FCO assistant under-secretary responsible for the Near and Middle East, met with the Iranian chargé d'affaires, Ali Afrouz. Moberly said there was no point talking about the hostage crisis, as British feelings were well known. Instead, it was better to discuss issues of mutual interest, especially business. Though he was, according to Moberly, at first 'excessively nervous and perhaps a little suspicious', Afrouz assured him Iran wanted to do business and had taken steps against trouble makers causing problems for the British embassy. Both states faced the problem of dealing with the increased number of Iranian visitors to the UK and in order to remedy this, the chargé suggested a re-introduction of the visa system. He also queried why ex-Iranian diplomats, who had been sacked after the revolution, were still allowed to work in the UK, to which Moberly replied these people could remain as they were not breaking the law and were supporting themselves from private funds. Throughout the conversation Afrouz launched a defence of Khomeini using 'revolutionary jargon', whilst also insisting the Ayatollah could 'look at problems in a relatively pragmatic and sympathetic way'.³⁵ The meeting highlighted the difficulty of dealing with revolutionaries who were not grounded in the traditional art of diplomacy. The desire to glorify the revolution meant Afrouz was more preoccupied with targeting members of the old regime resident in Britain rather building a fresh relationship with London.

³³ 'Living with a Revolution': Lecture given by Sir John Graham, 16-17.

³⁴ PREM19/76, TELNO1224 (24 November 1979).

³⁵ FCO8/3375, Record of meeting between Moberly and Afrouz (29 November 1979).

American pressure and the issue of economic sanctions

In Iran, Britain now had 21 embassy staff and 6 dependants, while the size of the expatriate community shrank to about 300. Exports between January and October 1979 were £180 million, down from £654 million over the same period in 1978 but, significantly, Iran still provided about 5% of Britain's crude oil imports.³⁶ Sending messages remained a problem. Graham proposed to reduce the frequency of 'Sitreps' to every other day, but he was still making sure to report specifically on any particularly significant development.³⁷ The Iranians were also experiencing organisational upheaval as a circular was issued announcing the initiation of a purge of the Civil Service, intended to reorganise the administration on more Islamic lines.³⁸ This would probably mean further personnel changes, making it more difficult to engage with the regime.

Another significant factor was that London came under persistent pressure from the Americans to take effective action in protest over the hostage crisis. One action advocated by Washington was a complete closure of the British embassy. But Graham argued this 'would leave us however with no possibility for further diplomatic action. It would leave unprotected our communities and trade, and it would leave the field open to the East Europeans for an indefinite period (once out, we might not find it easy to go back). In our own case, it also risks the take-over of our two compounds, valuable assets for which we should not see compensation'.³⁹

Another option, promoted during a meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Thatcher, in early December, was a freezing of Iranian assets in London, one of the world's foremost financial centres. The Prime Minister argued such a move was too drastic, having only previously been taken in times of war, and could have a damaging impact on the banking system worldwide. In any case, the British government would have to pass legislation to take the necessary powers, which would take time, allowing the Iranians to withdraw all their assets.⁴⁰ This Anglo-American difference of opinion illustrates Moin's argument that, 'for all the expression of outrage emanating from Washington and the capitals of Europe, no agreement existed within the West on an appropriate response'.⁴¹

³⁶ PREM19/76, Essential Facts Brief (December 1979).

³⁷ PREM19/76, TELNO1266 (5 December 1979).

³⁸ PREM19/76, TELNO1294 (6 December 1979).

³⁹ PREM19/76, TELNO1282 (5 December 1979).

⁴⁰ PREM19/76, Record of PM's meeting with Secretary Vance (10 December 1979).

⁴¹ Moin, Baqer, *Khomeini*, (London, 1999), 226.

Then again, despite expressing scepticism about Vance's proposal, Thatcher still held a meeting with the Governor of the Bank of England to discuss it. Here it was argued that, even if a freeze were possible, there were powerful economic arguments against any move in this direction. If Britain took action against a country with whom it had no direct quarrel, then 'this would result in grave risks for the UK as a banking centre and for the international financial system. Other countries would lose confidence in sterling as a reserve currency and would take their assets elsewhere'. It was far better, if European governments were to take any action in support of the Americans, to act on trade with Iran rather than hit at the payments mechanism. Any action would also have to consider the prospect of endangering British citizens.⁴²

Doxey⁴³ defines international economic sanctions as 'penalties threatened or imposed as a declared consequence of the target's failure to observe international standards or international obligations'. By not taking action to end the hostage crisis, the Iranian regime was certainly failing to observe international obligations. However, the question of penalising it economically was not an option that could easily be agreed upon by the international community. The application of sanctions and its wider efficacy is a contentious issue. For some it is a policy which can compel states into acting correctly, whilst others argue it is largely ineffective and only increases the level of hostility between states. Inevitably, different states also have differing opinions whenever the prospect of sanctions is raised. In 1979-80, the Americans, having seen their citizens taken hostage, were in no doubt that sanctions were a viable option to end the hostage crisis. Conversely, while Britain was dismayed to see its closest ally attacked, it still had its own citizens and interests to protect and feared that sanctions might lead the Iranians to take action against them. That London's EC partners took the same approach meant Britain could justify its policy as part of a wider bloc policy and escaped isolation on the issue.

In outlining London's position on sanctions, Carrington was certainly keen to balance support for the Americans with minimising damage to British interests. This was true of political, as well as economic sanctions. For example, breaking off diplomatic relations would make it hard to restore them with Iran afterwards and could even drive it into the arms of the Soviet Union. It would also create grave risks for the world financial system as well as jeopardise British trading and financial relationships.⁴⁴ On the economic side,

⁴² PREM19/76, Letter from PM's Private Secretary to George Walden (FCO) to discuss PM's meeting with Secretary Vance earlier on in the day (10 December 1979).

⁴³ Doxey, Margaret, *International Sanctions in Contemporary Perspective* (2nd ed), (Basingstoke, 1996), 9.

⁴⁴ PREM19/273, TELNO1951 (26 December 1979).

major British contracts in Iran included Chrysler's British subsidiary supplying £150 million of car kits and the Marples Ridgeway contract of £125 million to build a motorway.⁴⁵ William Wilson, MP for Coventry Southeast, wrote to the Prime Minister on 20 December 1979 expressing his concern that a trade embargo would adversely affect thousands of his constituents who were employed locally in a Talbot factory.⁴⁶ In Cabinet, Carrington explained that because so many of Iran's overseas assets were in London, Britain was in a precarious position as any economic action might lead to reprisals against the Tehran embassy and British citizens.⁴⁷ That Britain was not alone in its reluctance to take action was highlighted by a communiqué, issued at the NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting on 13 December, stating there was no desire to intervene in Iran's domestic affairs.⁴⁸

The question of non-military actions was considered by the Official Group on Iran, who met several times during December. The Group argued that the most prudent course of action was 'a continued policy of patient diplomatic pressure within the normal bounds of international law-despite the difficulties this restraint may come to involve for President Carter with his domestic opinion. Further delay and restraint carries least risk to the hostages and offers a chance of Iranian second thoughts'.⁴⁹ The continued existence of the Group and a lack of dissent in its collaborative efforts showed that the desire to reach multi-agency solutions to challenges remained unabated.

The British were, then, caught in a quandary. The Americans were their strongest allies and demanded firm action be taken as a show of solidarity. But such action might risk Britain's whole relationship with, and interests in, Iran. A paper by Miers⁵⁰ looked at what could happen if Britain was seen to be leading on sanctions alongside the Americans. He concluded it was important to work closely with EC partners (with whom Britain was said to be in a 'profound alliance'⁵¹), as Iran was reliant upon the Community for trade. It was also important to remember that the embassy, now down to nineteen staff and seven dependants, was at risk. Specific measures which could be taken by Iran against British interests included harassment of the embassy, other institutions (like the British Council) and nationals, ranging from inconvenience to violence; the denial of new business contracts; pressure within the commercial world and banking system to divert

⁴⁵ Alikhani, Hossein, *Sanctioning Iran: Anatomy of a Failed Policy*, (London, 2000), 71.

⁴⁶ TNA. BT241/2845.

⁴⁷ CAB128/66, CM(79)26th (20 December 1979).

⁴⁸ Alikhani, *Sanctioning Iran*, 71.

⁴⁹ CAB130/1127, MISC27(79)3rd Meeting (12 December 1979).

⁵⁰ FCO8/3376, 'Iran: Risk of Retaliation in the Middle East against Britain' (20 December 1979).

⁵¹ Moorhouse, *The Diplomats*, 378.

trade away from the UK; the withdrawal of Iranian assets held in Britain; and a break in diplomatic relations. It was difficult enough operating in a revolutionary state riddled by violence and unpredictability. Being forced to balance loyalties between important allies in a manner which not only protected existing interests in Iran, but also safeguarded relations with allies, made the experience doubly difficult.

The question of withdrawal arises

The reduction in embassy staffing led Graham to declare in mid-December 1979:

'we are reduced as far as we can go consistent with continuing to operate, at a reduced level, in all fields. This means we are all right on the chancery side: we can manage, with delays, all the consular work, including visas, that comes our way: we can deal with a much reduced flow of commercial work and hold a watching brief on the defence: and finally, we can administer ourselves, which with the two large compounds and a large local staff, whom I judge it unwise to pay off at the present time (quite apart from the hope that one day we may need them again) constitutes an irreducible load'.⁵²

He felt further reductions in UK-based staff to a core, in addition to himself, could be made which would enable essential political work to be done and emergency consular cases fielded, but little more, meaning for example optional visas could no longer be issued. Ultimately, he felt it unrealistic for Britain 'to engage in economic war with Iran and at the same time expect our community or embassy to be protected here'. Again, staff were still worried that should they have to abandon their possessions as a result of having to leave in an emergency situation then there was no insurance company which would provide cover and the Iranian government would not give compensation. In such a situation Graham hoped the government would cover the losses.

A meeting held between resident ambassadors in Tehran, on 20 December, highlighted the difficulties in trying to communicate with the regime. Some in attendance believed there was in effect no government, with the students determining policy. However, Graham felt this was 'too stark and over-simplifies the position'. Khomeini was reluctant to provide clear instructions unless he was fairly sure it would be obeyed. This was, according to Graham, 'consistent with his view of the role of religion and with his claim to be, not a decider of policy, but a mouthpiece of the will of the people or of God, Vox

⁵² FCO8/3396, TELNO1373 (20 December 1979).

Populi, Vox Dei, with a vengeance which, provided the people are good Muslims, he could argue are the same. It is a two-way street and to a large extent Khomeini reacts to the public feeling which he creates'.⁵³

In light of the prevailing uncertainty, contingency planning was undertaken to assess the impact of a further reduction in staff. Significantly, the view from the FCO was that a recall of staff need not involve a formal break in relations, as Article 45 of the Vienna Convention provided for the appointment of a 'protecting power', to look after British interests and the embassy building, in the event of a temporary recall. Recommendations were sought on a suitable protecting power, so the idea could be floated in the appropriate capital, whilst bearing in mind any protecting power would have to be acceptable to the host state, although it was legally sufficient to notify the Iranians of the name of the power and wait to be challenged by them, rather than seeking their approval. Other possibilities included a non-resident accreditation (that is, using a diplomatic mission based outside Iran) from which frequent visits could be made; having a sole member of staff to act as chargé d'affaires (in effect a caretaker not transacting diplomatic business); and, finally, appointing a senior member of the locally employed staff (under article 19 paragraph 2 of the Vienna Convention), or the embassy legal adviser, or another lawyer, simply to handle rudimentary administration.⁵⁴

In response, Graham said he was preparing contingency plans and it would be helpful to have guidance on the precedents; but he doubted whether the question of a protecting power should come up, as he questioned whether a formal break of relations would really occur. In terms of the withdrawal of staff, it was entirely probable some of the locally-engaged employees would have to be paid off, though, on the assumption Britain would be back in future, efforts should be made to re-deploy them (for example, by employing the drivers as extra guards) or send them on extended leave. As a break was not yet being effected, meaning there was no need for a protecting power, Graham believed a UK-based supervisor should be employed to keep an eye on all properties and the remaining locally-engaged staff; but he questioned whether it would be normal for such a person to be accorded diplomatic status. On wider administrative matters, the ambassador noted there needed to be a restricted schedule of communications, as a casual courier could not be found for the period after 27 December. Moreover, while freight bags would continue, there remained the possibility that the position for foreign

⁵³ PREM19/77, TELNO1374 (22 December 1979).

⁵⁴ FCO8/3396, TELNO816 (20 December 1979).

airlines could also become difficult. All-in-all, Graham wanted to hold staff on standby, ready to return to London at short notice.⁵⁵

Thus, serious thought was being given on the future of the embassy. Even if there was no formal break in relations, it was possible to appoint a protecting power, so as to safeguard the embassy building and protect British interests. But, it was also reasoned a resident supervisor would be essential under a protecting power to act as a *chargé d'affaires*, as even if he conducted no political work, without such diplomatic protection, he would be exposed to intimidation.⁵⁶ To explain British thinking to the Iranians, Graham said he would arrange to meet Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh at an appropriate time, to discuss withdrawal on the grounds of wishing to avoid embarrassment to both governments, whilst also mentioning the protection arrangements. Ghotbzadeh in turn issued a public statement, on 25 December, calling on all Iranians to respect the immunity of embassies. The statement was welcomed by the British; however, not much reliance was placed on it given previous experience.⁵⁷

After mulling the question over, on 27 December Carrington recommended that all staff except one pull out. Importantly, this would not represent a formal break in diplomatic relations; the Australians and Italians would be approached to look after British interests rather than acting as the protecting power in a formal sense. The one staff member left should be a Persian speaker with no dependants. Carrington requested Graham's recommendations on timings for his proposal, so that diplomats intending to return after their holidays could be informed.⁵⁸ The Foreign Secretary instructed the High Commission in Canberra to approach the Australian government about looking after British interests. In making such an approach, emphasis should be placed on the fact this was not a break in diplomatic relations, but rather a temporary withdrawal of representation in view of Britain's particular vulnerability. A decision was required soon, as embassy staff could potentially fly out as early as the morning of 31 December.⁵⁹

In any case, on 27 December, nine more staff left, meaning there were only seven left, excluding the ambassador. It was mooted that the Americans could be persuaded to postpone going to the UN Security Council, so plans could be made to evacuate the

⁵⁵ FCO8/3396, TELNO1382 (22 December 1979).

⁵⁶ FCO8/3396, TELNO1382 (22 December 1979).

⁵⁷ PREM19/273, TELNO4349 (26 December 1979).

⁵⁸ FCO8/3396, TELNO829 (27 December 1979).

⁵⁹ FCO8/3396, TELNO646 (28 December 1979).

remaining seven.⁶⁰ As for the expatriate community, this had now gone down to around 200 and they had all been given explicit warning of the possibility of economic sanctions being deployed in the near future, as well as being warned about the embassy's ability to provide only a minimal service in such an instance.⁶¹ The decision over whether to withdraw or not was a most difficult one as, though there were obvious reasons for it, most notably the security threat posed to the embassy and community, there were also drawbacks. The revolutionary regime were already hostile toward Britain and, since there still remained significant economic interests, for London to withdraw all its staff might be interpreted as an unfriendly act, which would jeopardise fruitful relations in future.

Whilst the decision to withdraw was being taken, Graham sensed the Iranians might not wish to see the departure of Western embassies and might be willing to make a more serious effort to protect them, even if sanctions were enforced.⁶² Carrington's plan for imminent evacuation was changed. The precise timing was kept under review, but there was an intention to move staff out on the morning Parsons spoke on a UN resolution for the imposition of specific sanctions against Iran.⁶³ As it transpired, UN Security Council resolution 461, adopted on 31 December 1979, condemned the hostage crisis but did not call for sanctions.

In early January 1980 Graham felt 'the disadvantages of withdrawal are so obvious and considerable that I believe we should hang on to see how things go'.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, he was a pragmatist who realised that, while withdrawal was not a good idea, it might well occur. In such an event, he advised the public line should be that withdrawal was to be welcomed on the grounds that foreigners were not needed in Iran. In addition, he advised that his fellow EC missions were thinking along the same lines in case of a withdrawal, with an administrator or caretaker to be left behind and no formal break in relations.⁶⁵ So, Britain continued to march in step with its European partners.

To withdraw or not?

Due to the continuing debate over economic sanctions, the question of withdrawal of the remaining diplomatic staff lingered. The ambassador continued to express his doubts,

⁶⁰ PREM19/273, Private Secretary of PM to Lever (27 December 1979).

⁶¹ PREM19/273, Bullard to Hurd (27 December 1979).

⁶² PREM19/273, TELNO1402 (28 December 1979).

⁶³ FCO8/3396, TELNO836 (29 December 1979).

⁶⁴ PREM19/273, TELNO002 (2 January 1980).

⁶⁵ PREM19/273, TELNO23 (6 January 1980).

arguing it was best to stay; it was doubtful whether the Iranians would want to add another embassy violation to its list of indiscretions. Whether a decision was taken to withdraw or not, Graham found his colleagues in the diplomatic corps were in agreement with him in considering sanctions an ineffective measure which would severely impair, if not completely destroy, the prospect of the more responsible members of the Revolutionary Council looking for an amicable solution.⁶⁶

In mid-January, Carrington queried whether, if the Iranian diplomatic mission was asked to reduce the size of its mission (which comprised of 16 diplomatic and 13 non-diplomatic staff), there would be retaliations in Iran against the British embassy and whether there would be retaliation if all EC countries could be persuaded to take similar measures. The Foreign Secretary also asked how the Iranians would react if a visa requirement was imposed on Iranians.⁶⁷ In reply, Graham stated that the reduction of Iranian embassy staff in London would probably be seen as a deliberate gesture of hostility, with the likelihood of the Iranians demanding his recall since they only had a chargé d'affaires heading their embassy in London. There was, however, the possibility for reductions to happen in tandem, in both the British embassy in Tehran and the Iranian embassy in London. On the issue of visas he advised that notice be given of a wish to terminate the existing visa abolition agreement but, legally speaking, it could be suspended without notice. The immediate effect of this would be to cause panic and the embassy would be inundated with enquiries, especially if the airlines were to refuse to carry Iranians not in possession of visas. The issue of visas had the potential to provoke a mob reaction against the embassy, stimulated by the government which would have public opinion on its side. Another consideration was that, even if the embassy was to merely act as a post office for visa applications, more staff would be needed, though they could be locally-engaged, under UK-based supervision.⁶⁸ Based on his recommendations it was proposed to Thatcher that any prospective action against the Iranian embassy be postponed for the time being.⁶⁹

By late January there were signs the crisis might be easing. On 23 January, Miers recommended a gradual return of staff and that the 24 hours' notice to leave be removed. The reaction in Tehran to the UN resolution had so far been low key and he concluded that, 'there is now little prospect of...measures which would be likely to provoke the Iranians into retaliation against the embassy'. But he also added a note of

⁶⁶ PREM19/273, TELNO39 (8 January 1980).

⁶⁷ PREM19/274, TELNO51 (17 January 1980).

⁶⁸ PREM19/274, TELNO35 and TELNO36 (18 January 1980).

⁶⁹ PREM19/274, Armstrong to PM (21 January 1980).

caution, saying that the pressure of work on the embassy was great and staff were very stretched.⁷⁰ Graham too wanted an increase in staff, on the basis that Britain was unlikely to announce any sanctions of a kind which would make a public impact in Iran.⁷¹

At a Defence and Overseas Policy Committee meeting, chaired by Thatcher, it was agreed the American policy of applying sanctions, in the absence of a mandatory UN resolution, was not an effective tactic to help secure the release of the hostages. The committee therefore agreed to reject the American proposal for Britain to apply sanctions on a voluntary basis.⁷² In early 1980, over the course of several meetings of this high-level committee, the issue of the Kharg came also to be discussed.⁷³ The Kharg was a ship commissioned to be built in the UK by the Shah's regime, now nearing completion. It was agreed in early February that, in view of ongoing crises, it would be best to delay the release of the ship until 31 March.⁷⁴ The delivery was subsequently delayed until 11 April but, before the release, an Iranian delegation identified three faults in the vessel which they maintained was the shipbuilder's responsibility to correct.⁷⁵ Then, even though delivery was set for 25 April, upon the Iranians paying the final £10 million instalment of the total £39 million bill, they were forbidden from commissioning the ship and their application for an export licence was refused. Eventually in mid-September 1980 the ship's entire crew, who had been looking after the ship, were withdrawn, leaving it to stand empty and uninsured. The release of the Kharg would remain an important talking point in Anglo-Iranian relations, as we shall see in later chapters.

The discussions over staffing levels and possible withdrawal highlight one of the key administrative dilemmas facing states operating in revolutionary states. Whilst breaking relations or lesser actions (such as closing embassies but still retaining relations) are seen as actions to be avoided at all costs, the reality is that the situation may arise where it is no longer safe for staff to remain. This is in spite of the continued need to protect existing interests and citizens. Because the decision to withdraw is such a grave one, presenting as it does significant ramifications for relations with the host state both in the present and in the future, states are usually reluctant to do it. However, if they are forced to do so, then the question is, when is the exact time at which it becomes unfeasible for staff to remain? This is not an easy question to answer and it may still

⁷⁰ FCO8/3658, Miers to Moberly (23 January 1980).

⁷¹ PREM19/274, Lever to PM's Private Secretary (28 January 1980).

⁷² CAB148/189, OD(80)1st Meeting (22 January 1980).

⁷³ CAB148/189 and CAB 148/190.

⁷⁴ CAB148/190, OD(80)9 (8 February 1980).

⁷⁵ CAB148/190, OD(80)34 (11 April 1980).

become something of a snap decision. Though the decision was eventually taken to remain in January 1980, the matter would arise again later, with a very different outcome.

Further engagement with the regime

Whilst the international community was deciding what constituted the most effective action over the hostage crisis, Iran continued to experience profound political change, especially when Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr was chosen to serve as president. Graham noted there would be objections from the public, both in Britain and the U.S., should either Thatcher or Carrington send a message of congratulations and therefore counselled against this.⁷⁶ However, given Bani-Sadr was to be the first president of Iran in history, he felt a letter of some kind should be sent after the Ministry of the Interior formally confirmed the new president's election. Thatcher thus sent a very brief message stating, 'Your Excellency. Please accept my sincere congratulations on your election as the first President of the Islamic Republic of Iran'.⁷⁷ Bani-Sadr's historic achievement did nothing to extinguish the inherent factionalism which continued to afflict Iran. Graham pointed out that, even before the new president assumed office, a rift seemed to be developing between him and the religious members of the Revolutionary Council.⁷⁸

It was also in early February that Britain was able to deliver its legal opinion on the attack on its embassy on 5 November 1978: it was 'very clear that the government of Iran was responsible under international law. They were forewarned of serious risk to the embassy premises and knew of the actual attack, but made no effort at all to discharge their duty of protecting the embassy premises. We have extremely clear first-hand accounts of the sequence of events and clear evidence of the damage inflicted'.⁷⁹ As a result, the head of chancery, Martin Williams called on Ameri, director of the third division in the MFA (which dealt with all Western European countries), and asked about compensation for damage to the embassy.⁸⁰ Ameri claimed he did not know the latest position, but promised to look into the matter, confirming his government's intention to pay compensation. Williams replied that the Iranian government had never before provided any indication it would pay compensation, but he hoped this would be forthcoming soon, otherwise the matter would remain an irritant.

⁷⁶ FCO8/3594, TELNO101 (29 January 1980).

⁷⁷ PREM19/274, TELNO55 (29 January 1980).

⁷⁸ PREM19/274, TELNO107 (30 January 1980).

⁷⁹ FCO8/3664, Denza to Miers (7 February 1980).

⁸⁰ FCO8/3664, Williams to Grier (5 March 1980).

The meeting showed that whereas Williams, as a member of the British civil service, could carry out the duties entrusted to him by his government, Ameri was powerless as an Iranian civil servant representing a department recovering from the ravages of revolutionary change, which had displaced experienced staff and, with them, the skills to carry out effective diplomacy. The power structures in Iran remained inchoate and the impact on the bureaucracy was such that it remained directionless, with an absence of clear authority at the top.

Early February 1980 also marked the anniversary of the revolution, for which the Iranian embassy in London invited British representatives to a celebratory event on the 11th. This created a delicate situation: it was inappropriate to attend due to the ongoing hostage crisis, but at the same time Britain did not want to prejudice its chances for improving relations once the hostages were released. Carrington decided the right response would be to limit official attendance at the reception to those who dealt with the embassy at working level, which meant officers of first secretary rank or below.⁸¹ The message was duly delivered to Afrouz over the telephone. He, in turn, said he understood the British position, adding that he welcomed the call and hoped too for a swift resolution to the crisis.⁸² With Iran mired in controversy with America over the hostage crisis, to expect Britain to celebrate the revolution smacked of diplomatic insensitivity. Nevertheless, London handled the affair shrewdly, not fully endorsing the celebration, but still sending official representation at a low level so as not to offend the Iranians.

The uncertainties of operating in Iran

With the situation calming somewhat from the vitriolic days of November-December 1979, Graham continued to push his view that Western embassy closures would leave the field open to the expansion of Soviet influence. He further reasoned the closure of embassies was a 'drastic' measure and, should they take effect, then it would be necessary to leave a caretaker and have a protecting power. It was better instead to take less firmer actions such as the withdrawal of ambassadors or the closure of visa sections, which would have much less impact than complete withdrawal. On balance, he felt these measures would help Bani-Sadr (who, he was convinced, still wanted the release of the hostages) as it would strengthen the argument the president had been using, which was that the detention was detrimental to Iran's interests.⁸³ The argument

⁸¹ PREM19/275, Lever to PM's Private Secretary (8 February 1980).

⁸² FCO8/3594, Moberly to Miers (8 February 1980).

⁸³ PREM19/275, TELNO287 (18 March 1980).

against stringent actions was further promoted by a memorandum produced after another EC Heads of Mission meeting in Tehran, on 18 March 1980, where it was agreed that, 'the imposition of economic sanctions whether by the U.S. alone or in conjunction with others... is unlikely to change Iranian policy. The economy is already in ruins as a result of the Revolution, with little contribution from the economic measures already taken by the U.S'.⁸⁴

Between 24 and 31 March the ambassador visited London for meetings with FCO officials (including Miers, Lamport and Munro) on subjects including the hostages, trade, defence sales, the British Council, the embassy establishment and immigration.⁸⁵ He was also interviewed by the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee which had just been established by the Thatcher government. During the session he explained to the Committee how the balance of power in Tehran was a provisional one, though Khomeini was the undoubted figurehead. As for the safety of the embassy, the ambassador felt it faced much less risk right now than it had done previously.⁸⁶

Visas and the continuing pressure to punish the Iranians

One of the main challenges to the embassy at this point was its work on visas. Visa issuance is another little-studied aspect of diplomacy, but one which can have a profound effect on bilateral relations between states⁸⁷ and may present a serious administrative challenge for states working with revolutionary states. What was previously relatively straightforward, due to adequate manpower and friendly relations, can become a major problem as the reduction of staff has a severely restrictive effect on the issuing of visas. This difficulty can be made more pronounced as requests for visas increase from individuals wishing to escape the turmoil of a revolutionary state. In revolutionary France, for example, American envoy Gouverneur Morris received many requests for passports from those wishing to flee France and become American citizens.⁸⁸

In the case of the British in Tehran, a note was prepared explaining that in order to establish numbers of staff needed to process visas, there was a need to first establish how many Iranians were applying for visas and for what length of time. There were

⁸⁴ PREM19/275, TELNO288 (18 March 1980).

⁸⁵ FCO8/3667.

⁸⁶ FCO8/3571, Graham interviewed by Parliamentary Committee (2 April 1980).

⁸⁷ See Stringer, Kevin, 'Visa Diplomacy', *Diplomacy and statecraft*, Vol. 15 (2004), 655-82.

⁸⁸ Miller, Melanie Randolph, *Envoy to the Terror: Gouverneur Morris & the French Revolution*, (Dulles; Virginia, 2005), 209.

172,000 Iranians who entered the UK in 1979, of whom only 24,000 were returning residents. There were also 3776 refusals at the ports. At present each visa officer required 20 to 30 minutes to deal with each applicant, meaning a maximum of 15 visa interviews a day per visa officer, allowing time for paperwork. The volume of these applications varied according to season from a minimum of 150 a day to 608 during the summer. Therefore roughly 10 to 40 visa officers were required to cope with the demand. At one stage the previous summer there was a waiting time of eight weeks for a visa application which got shortened to 4 weeks meaning the re-imposition of a mandatory visa requirement could in theory double the size of the demand.⁸⁹

The request for an increase in staff to deal with increased visa applications was dismissed by various legal advisers who argued,

'To impose a visa system without the staff to administer it, or to limit the number of visas granted by imposing much stricter qualifications, would risk exposing our embassy to local resentment and possibly mob action... A visa requirement would have a severe effect on almost all influential Iranians who, whatever their political views, travel frequently to Europe... Taken with measures to restrict the Iranian diplomatic presence in Europe the regime would find its influence over the large émigré community and contact with its foreign supporters greatly reduced'.⁹⁰

The issue of visas showed that, despite the deterioration in Anglo-Iranian relations after the revolution, Britain was keen to avoid any actions which antagonised the Iranians for fear of jeopardising existing economic interests and putting at risk the safety of those émigrés who remained in the country.

Also of abiding concern were the hostages. In early April 1980, the U.S. ambassador called on the Lord Privy Seal, David Gilmour, and pushed for Britain both to intensify sanctions and break off diplomatic relations. He also asked about the possibility of London providing refuge to 15 Iranians, who were either critics of the new regime or married to American citizens. Gilmour agreed to the latter request, as long as the number was indeed limited to 15. Thatcher was also in agreement, despite the risk of retaliation against diplomats in Iran but, in a good example of her ability to take a detailed interest in Iranian matters, asked that the decision be given little publicity.⁹¹

⁸⁹ FC08/3658, Jamieson to Harrison (2 April 1980).

⁹⁰ FC08/3603, 'Iran: Draft for Cabinet Committee' (11 April 1980).

⁹¹ PREM19/275, PM's Private Secretary to Gomersall (8 April 1980).

Britain had, on 13 January, voted for a draft UN Resolution which called for the imposition of an import embargo on Iran (excluding food and medicine), banning new contracts for services and new credits, and reducing Iran's diplomatic personnel stationed abroad. The Resolution, however, was vetoed by the Soviets, which indicated they might be trying to secure influence in Tehran.⁹² By April 1980 the issue of sanctions had still not gone away, despite British and European resistance. A lead editorial in the *Washington Post* complained, 'it seems the allies are taking the United States' latest request to apply diplomatic and economic sanctions against Iran not as an urgent priority but as a routine one that is safe and proper to meet with the king of half-measures characteristic of European diplomacy'.⁹³

The Americans could, of course, take unilateral action and they finally decided, on 7 April, to break off diplomatic relations with Iran.⁹⁴ This inevitably rekindled discussion about the withdrawal of European diplomats from Iran. In the absence of the formal imposition of sanctions by the Community members, the EC diplomatic corps in Iran felt there was also the option of withdrawing ambassadors and closing embassies but, should these actions be taken, then it would be virtually essential that other countries, preferably from among the non-aligned states, should be persuaded to take similar action.⁹⁵ The issue was discussed on the morning of 10 April at a meeting of EC heads of mission in Tehran, there being a 'general air of gloom, if not fatalism'. This was because the challenge of balancing support for Washington against the danger of Iranian reprisals was so tough.⁹⁶

In mid-April, Carrington was again asked by the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee to assess the case for breaking off diplomatic relations with Iran, or such lesser measures as withdrawing embassy staff.⁹⁷ This was also a time when Iran again violated diplomatic norms. On two occasions, on 10 and 11 April, the courier bringing the diplomatic bag was ordered at Tehran airport to open the bag. Following the first incident an immediate protest was made at the MFA and assurances were given the incident would not recur, yet the following day it did. The embassy again protested, but assurances given by the MFA were invalid so long as individuals and committees, who

⁹² Lieber, Robert, 'The European Community and the Middle East' in Legum, Colin (ed), *Crises and Conflicts in the Middle East – The Changing Strategy: From Iran to Afghanistan*, (New York, 1981), 92.

⁹³ PREM19/276, Lead editorial in *Washington Post* entitled 'What is an Ally?' (11 April 1980).

⁹⁴ Department of State, *American Foreign Policy Basic Documents 1977-1980*, (Washington, 1983), 758.

⁹⁵ PREM19/275, TELNO359 (8 April 1980).

⁹⁶ PREM19/276, TELNO368 (10 April 1980).

⁹⁷ PREM19/276, Notes on OD Meeting regarding Iran (15 April 1980).

had since the revolution arrogated to themselves responsibility for security at the airport, could not be controlled.⁹⁸

These incidents exposed another difficulty of dealing with revolutionary regimes in that they either do not possess the requisite knowledge of diplomatic protocol, or else they do possess it and choose to ignore it. The inviolability of diplomatic bags has long been an established facet of diplomatic relations,⁹⁹ based as it is on the notion of trust between states on the basis that the bags do not contain materials likely to create friction between states.

It was decided that John Moberly should speak to Dr Afrouz on the matter, on 17 April, pointing out that these actions violated the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. When Moberly saw Afrouz he called the two incidents 'an unacceptable abuse of diplomatic privilege'. Afrouz was asked to convey to his government Britain's 'forceful disapproval of the incident, and to urge that steps be taken to ensure that this did not recur'.¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, it emerged that it would not be possible for the Australians to act as a protecting power, since they would not be replacing their ambassador who left in March and as they, too, would be caught up in economic sanctions against Iran. They were planning to keep the size of any continuing mission very small. It was posited that a sensible alternative would be to turn to Sweden, due to their experience and competence in acting as a protecting power, the location of their embassy – conveniently sited in relation to the British embassy – and neutral status.¹⁰¹

When the Foreign Ministers of the nine EC states met in Luxembourg, on 21 April, they agreed the following measures be implemented as soon possible:

- (i) reduction, where possible, in embassy staffs in Tehran and/or the recall of ambassadors;
- (ii) a reduction in the number of diplomats accredited by the government of Iran in their countries;

⁹⁸ FCO8/3658, Lamport to Moberly (16 April 1980).

⁹⁹ 'The most fundamental rules of diplomatic law-that the person of the ambassador is inviolable and that a special protection must be given to the messages which he sends and receives from his sovereign-have been observed from time immemorial among civilised states': Roberts, Ivor (ed.), *Satow's Guide to Diplomatic Practice* (6th edition, Oxford, 2009), 97.

¹⁰⁰ FCO8/3658, TELNO245 (17 April 1980).

¹⁰¹ FCO 8/3658, TELNO404 (20 April 1980).

- (iii) the reintroduction, where not already in force, of a visa system for Iranian nationals travelling to member countries of the Nine;
 - (iv) view with the holding of permission for the sale or export of arms or defence-related equipment to Iran;
 - (v) coordination of views on the purchase of Iranian oil...;
 - (vi) coordination of views on the signature of economic agreements or service contracts with Iran...
4. The following measures on Iran which were vetoed in the Security Council resolution in January should be implemented:
- (i) a ban on exports and their shipment, except for food and medicines to Iran;
 - (ii) action on Iranian loans, deposits and credit;
 - (iii) a ban on new service contracts with Iran;
 - (iv) a ban on oil imports from Iran.¹⁰²

Carrington, in a telegram to the British ambassador in Sweden, noted that, if the decision in favour of sanctions was taken in Luxembourg on 22 April, then this could lead to the closure of the Tehran embassy, with speed being of the essence if the Iranians retaliated.¹⁰³ As the Swedes had said they would not be withdrawing their mission whatever decision was made, Carrington asked the ambassador in Stockholm if he could approach the Swedish MFA and see if they would agree to look after British interests in the event of withdrawal. He was also to explain that a caretaker nucleus of two persons would be left to look after British premises and residual interests. These could form a British 'interests section' in the Swedish embassy, whether diplomatic relations were formally broken or not. The plan was for the ambassadors of the Community Nine to convey their views to Bani-Sadr on 28 April, with the Iranian chargé d'affaires on the same day to be handed a note at the FCO requiring him to reduce the number of staff in the Iranian embassy and consulates, and giving him notice of Britain's wish to suspend the terms of the visa abolition agreement between the two states.¹⁰⁴

The situation had just become even worse thanks, after Carter approved an ill-fated secret rescue mission. On 24 April 1980, eight helicopters flew from the aircraft carrier *U.S.S Nimitz* to a remote spot in eastern Iran. Severe dust storms disabled two of the helicopters and a third helicopter became unserviceable, bringing the total below the six deemed vital for the mission. Carter agreed the mission must be aborted but, as the

¹⁰² FCO8/3603, 'Draft Statement by Foreign Ministers of the Nine Meeting in Luxembourg' (21 April 1980).

¹⁰³ FCO8/3658, TELNO39 (22 April 1980).

¹⁰⁴ PREM19/276, Notes on Meeting held in Luxembourg on 15 April of the Foreign Ministers of the Nine (23 April 1980).

helicopters repositioned themselves, one ran into a tanker aircraft, killing eight servicemen. With the attempted rescue turning into a disaster, some Iranians questioned whether London had prior knowledge of it, pointing to the reduction of embassy staff as evidence of collusion. The questions were dismissed out of hand by the British.¹⁰⁵ But it was another worrying sign for the future of the British presence in Iran.

Summary

The attack on the U.S. embassy on 4 November and the hostage crisis which ensued put Britain in a difficult position, where there was very little room for manoeuvre. That such a blatant breach of the Vienna Conventions had taken place showed Iran to be far from a safe place for foreign diplomats. It was in this period that the realities of operating in a revolutionary state really hit home. The British expatriate community, which numbered 20,000 in January 1978, dwindled to around just 200 by early 1980. The embassy, too, experienced a significant reduction in numbers and, rather than carrying out the full set of Berridge's embassy functions, efforts focused further on consular and commercial activities in a continuation of the policy which had been in place since the onset of the revolution. Though the embassy was breached by Iranian vigilantes on 5 November, on the whole Graham avoided negative attention from the Iranians and remained committed to conducting affairs in a low key manner. But, before the hostage crisis Graham already had difficulty trying to get access to Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council and, after the departure of Bazargan, these difficulties became much starker. Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council entrenched their positions and clashed with the relatively liberal Bani-Sadr, whose government found itself with only limited authority, unable properly to guarantee the safety of foreign diplomats.

The difficulties of engaging in diplomacy with a revolutionary regime also came to the fore as the Iranians proved difficult to connect with and showed no desire to release the American hostages, despite repeated pleas from the international community. Britain, along with its EC partners, was reluctant to take action in the form of sanctions despite intense pressure from its key ally, Washington, to do so. Instead, other forms of action were discussed, with the eventual decision taken to downsize the staffing and workload of the embassy. Serious thought was given to closing the embassy as a very real threat to British citizens and interests emerged in the aftermath of the hostage crisis, but such an extreme course was avoided, at least for the moment.

¹⁰⁵ PREM19/276, TELNO425 (26 April 1980).

Chapter 8. From the Iranian embassy siege to becoming an interests section

'It fully dawned on me this morning that I was back in Tehran when the telephonist reported to me that we have received a number of telephoned threats, accusing the British government of having murdered the Shah and promising retaliatory action'.¹ David Reddaway.

The siege at the Iranian embassy in London

On 30 April 1980 six armed men stormed the Iranian embassy in London. They were members of the Democratic Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of Arabistan (DRFLA), an Iranian Arab group campaigning for the independence of Khuzestan, a region afflicted by civil conflict since the revolution. They demanded the release of comrades from Iranian jails and their own safe passage out of Britain. When the British government refused, a siege ensued until 5 May 1980 with 26 people, mostly embassy staff, held hostage. Amongst the hostages were several visitors to the embassy and a British police officer who had been guarding it. The siege and the British government's attempts to break it was played out on television to millions around the world.

Immediately after the taking of the embassy, Carrington sent the following message from Thatcher to Bani-Sadr:

'I should like you to know of my deep personal concern about the situation at the Iranian embassy in London. This intrusion constitutes an act of terrorism and an infringement of the immunity of diplomatic staff which the British government finds totally repugnant and is acting firmly to counter. I hope that this incident will be resolved speedily and I can assure you that the safety of the lives at stake will be a paramount consideration... I wish to assure you that we shall be keeping in constant touch with you and your government'.²

The attack presented a number of challenges. There were some in Iran who believed Britain, with its historical reputation of covert scheming, was collaborating with the hostage takers. As a result, a serious threat was made to Graham, telling him to leave the country in three days or he would be targeted and the embassy blown up.³ The ambassador departed, somewhat hastily, on 3 May with Wyatt, leaving Barrett in charge,

¹ FCO8/3644, Reddaway to Lamport (28 July 1980).

² FCO8/3660, TELNO270 (30 April 1980).

³ FCO8/3658, TELNO455 (1 May 1980).

even though no plans had been put in place for Barrett to operate under a protecting power.⁴

After the hostage takers killed one of the hostages on the evening of 5 May, the special operations regiment, the SAS, conducted an assault. During the 17-minute raid, all but one of the remaining hostages were rescued, and five of the six hostage takers were killed. Bani-Sadr sent his thanks to the British government⁵, whilst the next steps for Britain were considered in a report by Miers where he recommended Graham should now return to Tehran, to convey a proposed private message of conciliation from Thatcher to Bani-Sadr and ask that embassy staff should be increased to twelve. The ambassador's return was necessary as his 'recall to London was presented as being for consultations in the light of events at the Iranian embassy. For him not to return now would be explicable to the Iranians'. He was also in agreement with Graham's suggestion that a guard of honour for the dead Iranian diplomats should be formed at the airport, from which their bodies were to be flown home. On the question of the imposition of visas, Miers noted this was now easier to justify to the Iranians in light of the attack on the embassy, but must not be done in a manner which would cause unnecessary aggravation or excessive frustrations for visa applicants. A week's notice should be given and provisions made to ensure three staff were ready to handle applications, though this news should not be provided before Thatcher's message had reached them. With another EC meeting to discuss sanctions looming, he cautioned against the rigid imposition of sanctions as 'such action, which would require the withdrawal of our embassy from Tehran, seems hardly consistent with the new atmosphere which we hope to cultivate in the aftermath of the siege, or with the diplomatic activity by interested nonaligned parties which we hope to promote'.⁶

Miers' report, as well as ones prepared by FCO officials during the period, highlight how difficult it is to engage in contingency planning when it is uncertain how relations with a revolutionary regime will look in the near, let alone distant, future. British diplomats tended to create reports in reaction to events, to assess what to do in already difficult situations, rather than daring to look ahead too far. The key element to these reports was the speed in which they were prepared. This was in order to make them as relevant as possible, given that events were moving so swiftly. Moreover, in preparing reports, FCO staff had to consider several permutations in any given situation, as numerous possibilities existed as to where events might lead. This was in complete contrast to the

⁴ PREM19/277, TELNO456 (2 May 1980).

⁵ PREM19/277, Bani Sadr to Thatcher (12 May 1980).

⁶ FCO8/3661, Miers to Moberly (6 May 1980).

way in which work was conducted in politically stable countries, where long-term planning could be carried out in the knowledge that the likelihood of major change was relatively slim.

Graham returns to Iran

Not everyone was in agreement with Miers' proposal to have Graham return. The Permanent Under-Secretary of the FCO, its senior civil servant, Sir Michael Palliser, agreed in a meeting with Hurd that for the ambassador to return at this moment in time 'might give rise to the impression that he was involved in some sort of shuttle negotiation with the Iranians, or simply be taken as vacillation. There was no guarantee if he returned this time that we might not very shortly after pull him out again in what continues to be a volatile situation'.⁷ Nevertheless, Graham did return to his duties though discussions on his permanent departure continued to be held, with Carrington favouring Alan Goodison as a replacement whilst also proposing the post of ambassador be downgraded. The Foreign Secretary felt the ambassador should leave in June, with Goodison taking over in Autumn, whilst Wyatt took charge in the interim.⁸

Back in Tehran, Graham expressed his concern to London over a number of issues pertaining to the recent siege, including the cost of rebuilding the embassy, the Iranian desire to extradite the remaining terrorists and a suspicion in Iranian circles Britain was holding information back about the group responsible for the siege so as to cover up its own involvement. In order to avert potential problems he suggested the Iranians be spoken to soon, before either side had time to assess the likely bill for damages to the embassy in London; possibly Britain could withdraw its own claim for compensation and both governments could carry their own losses in these unfortunate circumstances.⁹

On the issue of sanctions, Britain was in roughly the same position in May 1980 as it had been in November 1979, in that it wanted to support its American ally but not take part in harsh measures that upset Tehran. Tellingly, there was also a continuing desire to align actions with that of EC partners: 'Our main objective is to present a credible demonstration of support to the Americans whilst not doing lasting damage to our trade. In particular, we should do no more than our European partners'.¹⁰ On the horizon was a forthcoming meeting of EC Foreign Ministers in Naples to discuss economic sanctions. In

⁷ FCO8/3661, Minute by Humfrey (6 May 1980).

⁸ PREM19/277, Walden to PM's Private Secretary, (21 May 1980).

⁹ FCO8/3660, TELNO479 (12 May 1980).

¹⁰ PREM19/277, Minutes of Meeting held between PM, Ian Gilmour, Douglas Hurd and Tom Tenchard (22 May 1980).

anticipation of this, Graham spoke out against a trade embargo, arguing it would be damaging to Britain whilst having little effect on an already run down Iranian economy.¹¹ This argument had added credibility at a time when there was a chink of light as far as the softening of Khomeini's stance was concerned, with Ahmed Khomeini, arguably his father's greatest confidante, reportedly becoming increasingly won over by Bani Sadr. As an alternative form of action, Graham advocated the continued boycott of oil purchases as the most effective measure to hurt the Iranians, as this was an action which presented relatively little damage to Britain in the present oil market.¹²

The Iran (Temporary Powers) Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 8 May, providing for economic sanctions that would only apply to future contracts, and would not affect the implementation of those already made by British exporters. The Bill was duly passed by both Houses and received the Royal assent on 15 May. When EC foreign ministers met in Naples on 17-18 May they agreed to implement trade sanctions, however this was restricted only to contracts signed *after* the hostage crisis in November. But the terms proposed at Naples were rejected in parliament and the British position was thus revised only to affect those contracts which were entered into after the sanctions policy had been agreed upon at Naples. Consequently, the Department for Trade announced new contracts would be forbidden from 30 May 1980, meaning existing business would still be able to continue.¹³

Meanwhile Khomeini, had become markedly more active, receiving a stream of visitors and making several public statements.¹⁴ In late May, Carrington held discussions with the Americans and relayed their thoughts to Graham. They suggested Graham contact leading clerics in the Revolutionary Council as well as those close to Khomeini and they also asked him to identify senior figures in the Majlis who might be able to assist them. In addition, they sought advice on when exactly a number of American proposals should be discussed with the Iranians namely: the intention to recognise the reality of the revolution and the new government; a pledge of non-interference; and willingness to take part in a joint commission on currently frozen Iranian assets.¹⁵ This example shows how Graham had built up a network of contacts, with relative success, within the liberal elements of the new republic, hence why he was trusted by the Americans to advise

¹¹ PREM19/277, TELNO484 (13 May 1980).

¹² PREM19/277, TELNO439 (14 May 1980).

¹³ Lieber, Robert, 'The European Community and the Middle East' in Legum, Colin, (ed), *Crises and Conflicts in the Middle East – The Changing Strategy: From Iran to Afghanistan*, (New York, 1981), 192.

¹⁴ PREM19/277, TELNO518, (22 May 1980).

¹⁵ PREM19/277, TELNO306 (22 May 1980).

them. The ambassador continued to push for positive Anglo-Iranian relations, as evidenced by his attendance at the opening of the Iranian Assembly on 29 May.¹⁶

Graham's tenure ends

After months of deliberation, it was finally decided to end Graham's tenure in June 1980, after sixteen months in post, and make Wyatt the new head of the mission as chargé. In his valedictory despatch Graham wrote that his time in post saw the country dominated by Khomeini whilst the rest of Iranian politics was characterised by undisciplined, competing bodies and parties below him, engaged in incessant bickering. Bazargan and the Liberals had failed because they had no real authority; they never enjoyed the backing of the Ayatollah. The overriding principle behind Iranian foreign affairs was a 'neither East nor West' doctrine, which led Graham to issue the following warning:

'The revolution has not changed the Persian combination of arrogance and inferiority complex; but fortified in their conviction of moral strength by the ousting of the Shah, the new rulers will strive even more than before to obtain the benefits of cooperation from both East and West, without paying any of the price, whether in ideological or commercial terms. For such people the revolution cannot be confined to Iran'.

Overall, he summarised his time along the following lines:

'Having started in 1979 with an embassy staff of some 40 British and a British community, much reduced from its peak, but still numbering over 1500, I leave a staff of only nine UK-based officials and a community of under 300... we have become accustomed to working with a minimum of records... I pay tribute to the perseverance and resource of the British business community who from the depths of 1979, push British export trade with Iran in the first quarter of this year to an annual rate of about £400 million'.¹⁷

In spite of the difficulties experienced by the mission, Graham was optimistic over future prospects for Anglo-Iranian trade, though whether such optimism was justified is open to debate given the lingering problem of establishing effective engagement with the revolutionary regime.

¹⁶ PREM19/496, TELNO534 (29 May 1980).

¹⁷ FCO8/3578, Iran: Valedictory Despatch by Sir John Graham (4 June 1980).

Before leaving Iran, he met Bani-Sadr to take his leave. The President spoke 'philosophically of the difficulties he confronts, a country freed from a dictatorship but not yet accustomed to self-government, with a ferment of ideas, ranging from those who seem set, wittingly or unwittingly, on introducing a new dictatorship leading to fascism, to the more extreme ideas of populist democracy'.¹⁸ Bani-Sadr's comments provide an insight into how the moderates in the government remained relatively powerless compared to Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council. Yet, the liberals still tried to conduct foreign affairs in as normal a manner as possible. For example, Afrouz on behalf of Ghotbzadeh, sent quite a fulsome birthday message to the Queen, when a shorter one would have been possible: 'I have great pleasure in conveying to your Excellency my sincere felicitations together with my best wishes for your health and success and for the welfare of the people of the United Kingdom'.¹⁹

In assessing Graham's tenure, the extraordinary circumstances within which he operated must be considered. As noted in chapter 5, he was one of the few diplomats who could have taken on the ambassadorship owing to his experience at the uppermost echelons of the diplomatic service, including time in the Middle East. The task of salvaging British interests was not an easy one and required a highly dexterous hand. Graham had to deal with various individual crises, such as the attack on the British embassy in November 1979 as well as the hostage crisis at the American embassy. Working in a country where violence and unpredictability is the norm is an unenviable task. It clearly had an adverse psychological impact on embassy staff. In spite of this and threats to his own safety, the ambassador set about the task of protecting British interests and citizens with determination and common sense. His task was made all the more difficult by the policy he was asked to pursue in the wake of the American embassy seizure, which called for balancing support for the American plight with the avoidance of draconian measures (in line with EC partners) which could detrimentally affect relations with Iran. His success can be gauged by the fact that British relations with the Iranians, if no better, were no worse than when he took over.

The problems continue

On 18 June 1980, pro- and anti-Khomeini supporters clashed in Kensington High Street, leading to the arrest of three Iranian students. Two were quickly released whilst the other was detained. But the Iranian embassy was unhappy, regarding the arrests as an act against the regime, and warned that if proceedings were taken against the arrested

¹⁸ PREM19/496, TELNO556 (5 June 1980).

¹⁹ FCO8/3595, Letter by Dr Ali Afrouz (17 June 1980).

student, a demonstration could be expected outside the embassy in Tehran.²⁰ Afrouz called at the FCO on 20 June at his own request, desiring an exchange of views due to the fact that he might soon be recalled permanently to Tehran. He said that Thatcher was viewed in Tehran as a female duplicate of Carter. When the U.S-Iranian dispute was resolved then Britain could be left in an exposed position. This was something Afrouz said he personally would regret. Miers replied that support for the Americans was a question of principle not expediency. Britain did not oppose the revolution, respected the Iranian right to choose its own government and also hoped for good relations after the release of the hostages.²¹

After Graham's departure, the embassy continued to find that diplomatic protocols were contravened, an example of which was the Iranians asking the Pakistani guard at the building to provide information about visitors.²² As acting Dean (or head) of the diplomatic corps, the Czechoslovakian ambassador had been in regular contact with the MFA on the subject of diplomatic immunity and the matter was said to be before the Revolutionary Council. Bani-Sadr was prompted to retrieve the situation by approving a Bill relating to diplomatic privileges, including the exemption of baggage from inspection and customs duties as well as a separate Bill under which arrangements for foreign journalists would come under the direct control of the MFA. Wyatt however was pessimistic as to whether these Bills would have any practical effect. He had heard of a recent ominous remark, by an Iranian official, saying 'after what we have found in the espionage nest, there will be no more diplomatic immunity in Iran'.²³

The difficulties experienced by diplomatic missions were for Wyatt a reflection of wider events on the domestic scene. With Khomeini firmly now back in the driver's seat the complete Islamicisation of Iran was in full swing as he urged the need for ever more Islamic purity and piety, which manifested itself in the removal of Imperial insignia from official government stationery in addition to the purging of thousands of officials and women being ordered to wear Islamic dress. Wyatt felt the deterioration of the general atmosphere was 'a sure sign of increased insecurity on the part of a regime lashing out wildly at hidden enemies' and there was no indication as to how long the situation would last.²⁴

²⁰ FCO8/3579, TELNO345 (19 June 1980).

²¹ FCO8/3661, Miers to Williams and Lamport (20 June 1980).

²² FCO8/3658, Reddaway to Lamport (23 June 1980).

²³ FCO8/3571, TELNO613 (26 June 1980).

²⁴ FCO8/3571, Wyatt to Miers (3 July 1980).

Adding to the potential issues that could worsen relations was the spectre of what might happen when the Shah died. In contingency planning for his death, Carrington recommended against any official message, as he was no longer a reigning monarch and 'any message would be exploited by our enemies in Iran as evidence of alleged hostility to the Iranian Revolution. Action against our embassy or nationals in Iran, although unlikely, could not be ruled out. This would be consistent with such precedents as they exist, for example the cases of [the former Chinese leader] Chiang Kai Shek or [the deposed Emperor of Ethiopia] Haile Selassie'. However this did not rule out private messages of sympathy to the Shah's wife nor a short statement of regret at his death referring to his friendly dealings with successive British governments, in accordance with the precedent of the death of Haile Selassie. If there were pressure for British representation at the funeral then the attendance of the ambassador in Cairo would be acceptable; alternatively an ex-ambassador to Iran would be preferable to a current member of government.²⁵

As Khomeini's stranglehold on power tightened, the signs for the liberals were not encouraging, with Wyatt reporting Ghotbzadeh was on the verge of being displaced.²⁶ Also in a weak position was the Majlis:

'The Majlis... will not be an efficient legislative instrument because of its members lack of experience, because of the lack of discipline in the various parties and... because many of its members will use it as a debating chamber rather than an instrument of government. There is no clear link between the deputies and ministers...'.²⁷

For Britain, a difficult situation was becoming almost impossible. Engaging with Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council had always been a difficult task and, with the weeding out of liberals from the government, London was fast running out of individuals with whom to conduct business. The wholesale changes affected the MFA, as those with 25 years' service or more were amongst those purged from their roles, meaning Britain was losing established contacts.²⁸ Ghotbzadeh issued a statement on 9 July emphasising that a new foreign policy, based on drastic changes inspired by Khomeini, would soon be implemented. This was in line with established behaviour by revolutionary regimes. The Bolsheviks had made similar wholesale changes to their diplomatic apparatus after 1917.

²⁵ FCO8/3644, Lever to Alexander (4 July 1980).

²⁶ PREM19/496, TELNO643 (9 July 1980).

²⁷ FCO8/3571, 'Notes on Iran: June 1980' by Rundle (8 July 1980).

²⁸ FCO8/3571, Wyatt to Miers (13 July 1980).

Leon Trotsky as the first Commissar for Foreign Affairs, delivered an ultimatum to Tsarist diplomats either to pledge allegiance to the Bolsheviks or be relieved from their duties.²⁹ It was a similar story with the French revolution, when Charles Delacroix was selected as minister of foreign affairs because he had no diplomatic background!³⁰

An FCO report was now compiled to discuss the size of the Iranian mission in London, where the recommendation was made not to ask the embassy to reduce its staff. This was despite a decision on 22 April, by EC Foreign Ministers in Luxembourg, to reduce the size of missions in Iran and Iranian missions in EC countries. The initial plan had been to ask the Iranians to reduce staff to fourteen in London. But this was disrupted by the seizure of the embassy. It was impractical to ask for staff reduction immediately following the termination of the siege, as this would most certainly have antagonised the Iranians. Moreover, EC counterparts had made no discernible attempts to reduce sizes of their Iranian missions. Thus any British action would be seen as an isolated gesture that might produce retaliation against the Tehran embassy; it could also store up trouble for the future since, if the Iranians insisted on reciprocity, they could make difficulties over any future expansion of the embassy staff and over the replacement of Graham.³¹ This showed that, although there was a common desire amongst EC members to take action, there was also hesitation due to the wish to avoid angering the Iranians in a manner which would place economic interests in jeopardy.

Afrouz was replaced in the summer of 1980 as chargé d'affaires by Dr Seydollah Ehdaie.³² Almost immediately after the start of his tenure another unhelpful incident arose around the cultural counsellor at the embassy, Dr Abolfazl Ezzati, who on 11 January 1979 had been arrested and charged with offences under the Theft Act 1968 at the *Marks & Spencer's* branch in Kingston. On 16 April 1980 notification was received of Ezzati's appointment, effective from 21 March 1980 which meant he had now acquired immunity from court proceedings. However, given proceedings had already been instituted against him before he was entitled to immunity, it was requested his immunity be waived so these proceedings might be concluded.³³ This incident showed the degree of flexibility required when dealing with revolutionary regimes. Ordinarily criminal acts committed by foreign nationals of a stable country can be dealt with in a straightforward manner, as they will not ordinarily receive the support of the foreign national's home

²⁹ Senn, Alfred, *Diplomacy and Revolution: The Soviet Mission to Switzerland- 1918*, (London, 1974), 11.

³⁰ Frey, Linda, and Frey, Marsha, "The Reign of the Charlatans Is Over": The French Revolutionary Attack on Diplomatic Practice in *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Dec 1993), 725.

³¹ FCO8/3661, Miers to Moberly (18 July 1980).

³² FCO8/3662, Diplomatic Personnel List for Iranian Embassy (28 July 1980).

³³ FCO8/3661, du Boulay to Ehdaie (23 July 1980).

country. However, this was not the case in this instance, as evidenced by the fact that the Iranian authorities did not remove Ezzati when details emerged of his alleged indiscretion. At a time when Britain was looking to protect its interests in Iran, pressing the Iranians over the matter had the potential to create a diplomatic incident between the respective states thereby damaging British interests. As such, it was decided not to make this issue a source of contention in relations and it was not raised again.

Student arrests in London

Upon the long-expected death of the Shah on 27 July, messages of condolences were sent from the Prime Minister, Carrington and the Queen.³⁴ The Iranians duly sent a protest note, expressing dissatisfaction with the British sentiment of sympathy over the death of the Shah; sympathy which was issued in the 'present sensitive conditions of relations between the two countries, without giving thought to the Iranian nation's feeling of hatred towards a person who had ruled it oppressively for years'.³⁵

Then, on 4 August, events unfolded which would ultimately lead to Britain closing its embassy a month later. A number of Iranian students were arrested in London after being involved in protests. 24 police officers were injured, 72 students were charged with 87 offences including assault, obstructing the police and threatening behaviour. The arrests became big news in Iran, arousing anger, with protests carried out on 5 August against Britain. Iranian fury escalated when all but six of those arrested initially refused to give their names and most went on hunger strike. Medical treatment was provided for an epileptic girl who refused food. Arrangements were also made for those not on hunger strike but observing Ramadan. The prisoners were warned, through Ehdai, that if they continued on hunger strike and refused to cooperate then they faced the prospect of being deported.³⁶

Wyatt reported that the arrests had immediately heightened the risk to the expatriate community; thus he spoke several times with the Islamic Republic News Agency (which had up to the revolution been known as the PARs agency) on 5 August to discourage them from producing sensationalist reports of the situation.³⁷ He warned further, on 7 August, although no demonstrations had taken place since 5 August, the usual hoax bomb threats were received by the embassy, and the longer the hunger strike went on,

³⁴ FCO8/3644 (27 July 1980).

³⁵ PREM19/496, TELNO678, (4 August 1980).

³⁶ PREM19/496, TELNO402 (7 August 1980).

³⁷ PREM19/496, TELNO687 (6 August 1980).

the more adversely it would affect the embassy, which was why he would be meeting the new Director General for Political Affairs at the MFA.³⁸ Ehdaie visited the five remaining students held at Ashford prison on 7 August; all were on hunger strike and complained of maltreatment. Graham also met the chargé on the same day and informed him that a lack of cooperation from the students would prolong their detention.³⁹

Wyatt met with Lavasani, the new Director General for Political Affairs at the MFA on 9 and 10 August. During the second meeting Wyatt raised concerns over security in the wake of Ehdaie's comments to the Islamic Republic News Agency, in which he had said 'no government official can control the surge of fury in the people of Iran, which is a natural response to the arrest of their sons by English officials who are definitely aware of this'. He pointed out this was tantamount to an admission that, if a mob attack was carried out against the embassy, then the Iranian authorities could not control the situation. Lavasani dismissed Ehdaie's remarks as coming from unreliable press reports and made assurances the MFA would take the adequate precautions to ensure the safety of the embassy. Lavasani also inferred the British police were in part culpable for letting the situation get out of hand and expressed his suspicion Britain was becoming less friendly. Wyatt replied there was no basis for this claim and re-iterated the desire 'to have close and mutually beneficial relations' with the only real problem hampering Anglo-Iranian relations being the continued and illegal detention of the hostages, but that problem had nothing to do with the students.⁴⁰

The potential for a volatile reaction against the embassy forced Wyatt to think about evacuation measures at short notice.⁴¹ The visa staff would be the first to go. The authorities would be told only visa applications from diplomatic personnel would be dealt with and all other visa enquiries would be sent by post. The problem was that it might cause the regime to say the embassy should close, since its one useful function (issuing visas) was no longer in operation. On 11 August a small demonstration was held outside the embassy by families of the detained students.⁴²

Straining the Anglo-Iranian relationship even further was the detention of Anglican Canon Dr John Coleman and his wife Audrey (who resided in Yazd) in addition to Jean

³⁸ PREM19/496, TELNO689 (7 August 1980).

³⁹ PREM19/496, TELNO402 (7 August 1980).

⁴⁰ FCO8/4098, TELNO695 (10 August 1980).

⁴¹ PREM19/496, TELNO696 (10 August 1980).

⁴² FCO8/3572, TELNO701 (11 August 1980).

Waddell, secretary of the Bishop of Isfahan, who was detained by the Isfahan revolutionary prosecutor's office on 6 August for alleged espionage. The embassy requested the MFA help locate Waddell and also sent a note to the MFA requesting access to Waddell and protesting at the allegations made by the Islamic Revolutionary guards.

The dangers of living in a revolutionary state were far from new. In Revolutionary France, during 1793 alone, at the height of the Terror, 1.3 million livres was spent on spies, with special attention paid to foreigners resident in France who were believed to be enemies of liberty or engaged in plotting against the regime. U.S. envoy Gouverneur Morris was identified as the greatest enemy of liberty as he was critical of the public execution of aristocrats.⁴³ He was arrested more than once, and his house was entered several times, with his letters being opened regularly and sometimes seized.⁴⁴

Reddaway expresses his frustrations

The hostile atmosphere forced one member of the British embassy, David Reddaway, (who would later enjoy a distinguished diplomatic career as ambassador to Ireland and Turkey), to write an impassioned tele-letter⁴⁵ to Stephen Lamport (who had previously served in Tehran but was now a first secretary at the FCO). The document is revealing of the predicament now faced by British diplomats in Tehran. Reddaway felt it was pointless 'continuing to deal with the present regime as though it was a 'normal' government'. He advocated stripping down the mission to a minimum level, stopping short of a complete break. This was because he believed 'that in the immediate future Iran will pursue policies, both internal and external, that are utterly abhorrent to us' as the influence of the liberals continued to wane – particularly as liberals were engaging with Britain. It did not help that 'the memory of our policies in the last century and at the start of this are totally abhorrent to Iranians today'. Ultimately, 'for the short term at least Iran is not a place for diplomats: the Iranians flaunt their disregard for the rules of the game we are playing'.

Reddaway's letter highlights the difficult challenge presented to British diplomats operating in a revolutionary state where chaos and hostility reigned, and engagement was almost impossible with a regime which was openly dismissive of foreign powers.

⁴³ Calvert, Peter, *Revolution and International Politics*, (London, 1984), 128.

⁴⁴ Miller, Melanie Randolph, *Envoy to the Terror: Gouverneur Morris & the French Revolution*, (Dulles; Virginia, 2005), 167.

⁴⁵ FCO8/3658, Reddaway to Lamport (13 August 1980; received 18 August 1980).

Although Graham had shown himself to be a patient individual, seeking engagement until the very end of his tenure, this did not mean other members of the mission necessarily shared his approach. Reddaway was expressing his frustrations at the utter desolation of a situation in which, no matter what the mission did, it could achieve no real progress in terms of successful engagement with the regime. In such a situation, the toughest of diplomatic options had to be considered, namely the withdrawal of the mission.

Reddaway's views won Lamport's support. He forwarded the concerns to others in the FCO, including Graham, and argued that they needed to be given serious consideration.⁴⁶ But others took a different view. Although Veronica Beckett, the assistant head of the Middle Eastern Department, agreed with some of the points made she felt complete withdrawal would be a mistake. In the short term, she felt a small presence must be maintained as long as British subjects were in detention there. In the long term she felt it imperative to maintain a small mission to look after subjects and property, also because of 'the need to maintain some sort of contact, however tenuous, with developments in a country of crucial importance to world peace' even if the mission was small in number and members of the mission did not stay for long.⁴⁷

Miers thought along the same lines as Beckett and felt Reddaway, though raising pertinent points, did not present a solid enough argument for withdrawal as

'the impossibility of a fruitful relationship with the present regime is not a sufficient reason for withdrawing our mission... To my mind, it is wholly contrary to our concept of diplomacy to withdraw our mission from a country of great geographical, strategic and (potential) economic importance, in which there is great public interest, because we cannot develop a satisfactory relationship with the present (perhaps ephemeral) regime... In addition... I see the following strong particular reasons for maintaining our presence unless and until the danger to individual members of the staff is judged unacceptable:

- (a) the protection of British subjects;
- (b) continuance of political and economic reporting;
- (c) maintenance of a facility to counter-or at least monitor-the spread of Russian influence (actual or eventual);
- (d) continuity in keeping a cadre of DS officers with experience of Iran (and contacts there);

⁴⁶ FCO8/3658, Lamport to Beckett, Miers and Graham (1 September 1980).

⁴⁷ FCO8/3658, Beckett to Miers and Graham (2 September 1980).

- (e) protection of British property (not least our valuable compounds) and pursuit of our claim for debts, nationalisation, etc;
- (f) support for commercial activity (which has continued surprisingly well and could blossom suddenly...);
- (g) maintenance of a foot in the door (since for reasons of history and our unique vulnerability would find it hard to get back once we withdrew).⁴⁸

This was a forceful statement of the practical value of maintaining an embassy, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

No sign of improvement

Demonstrations against the embassy continued, leading Carrington to once again moot Australia as a potential protecting power.⁴⁹ On 15 August Wyatt was summoned by Ghotbzadeh, who said the situation with the Iranian students must be resolved quickly. Ghotbzadeh explained he had been under tremendous pressure to take action against the embassy; the reason why there had been no attacks on it was because he had worked to calm down the Majlis and curb inflammatory broadcasts on local radio and TV. However, he could not contain the situation for much longer. Wyatt thanked him for the warning but noted the situation could have been eased if the students had given their names, in which case most would have either been handed over or released on bail. Ghotbzadeh replied he was not concerned with the legal aspects, as there were many ill-intentioned people who were ready to exploit this situation to harm Iran's relations with the West.⁵⁰

Carrington judged that Ghotbzadeh's warning must be taken at face value, particularly as there had been a further large demonstration on 15 August. He was, however, reluctant to take up the option of withdrawing the mission completely, as he hoped for an improvement in the situation and also because withdrawal would attract criticism for abandoning the expatriate community and in particular the imprisoned Jean Waddell. Instead, he felt it prudent to reduce the size of the embassy and put most staff on standby to leave. This would involve closing the visa section which could create difficulties, but was preferable to violence by the mob. The closure would be presented in Iran as a temporary one at a time of tension, whilst the line to be taken with the press in

⁴⁸ FCO8/3658, Note by HDAC Miers (3 September 1980).

⁴⁹ FCO8/3658, TELNO388 (13 August 1980).

⁵⁰ FCO8/4098, TELNO714 (15 August 1980).

London was that the embassy remained open to provide such consular protection as circumstances allowed.⁵¹

Wyatt met Ghotbzadeh again on the morning of 16 August to say he had been instructed to reduce the embassy staff. The Foreign Minister expressed mild disappointment that the student issue had not been resolved, but was reassured London was handling the matter with urgency.⁵² Unrest remained however, with Wyatt reporting on 19 August, that demonstrations were continuing outside the embassy.⁵³

The tension was prolonged by a lack of clarity from the Home Office on what was being done and planned to be done about the students, which Wyatt felt was of no help to the embassy or British interests. Adding to the delay was the fact some of the police officers involved in the case were on leave of absence. Wyatt emphasised that failure to resolve the affair would lead to action against the embassy, with the MFA potentially expelling the four remaining staff.⁵⁴

Graham also expressed worry over the situation. He believed the delay in deporting students until the middle of September at the earliest was only likely to antagonise Tehran further. Iranians did not understand the reasons for the delay and were incensed after hearing reports of maltreatment of the students. The difficulty was in persuading the Home Office that the risks to British subjects and the embassy from prolonging the detention of Iranian students were greater than the embarrassment which might be suffered if deportation orders were contested. The best course of action advocated to bring a swift resolution to the affair was deportation, the aim being to have the students out of Britain before the missionaries held by the Iranians were brought to trial.⁵⁵

On the continued detention of Waddell, and in advance of Graham's meeting with Ehdaie, an FCO report recommended that, if she were imprisoned, some members of the Iranian embassy should be deported. The Iranians should also be informed the separate premises of the education section could no longer be treated as part of the premises of the embassy and in consequence would no longer enjoy diplomatic protection.⁵⁶ If Waddell was executed then it was recommended that, in addition to the above actions,

⁵¹ FCO8/4098, TELNO424 (15 August 1980).

⁵² FCO8/4098, TELNO718 (16 August 1980).

⁵³ PREM19/496, TELNO733 (19 August 1980).

⁵⁴ PREM19/496, TELNO746 (22 August 1980).

⁵⁵ PREM19/496, Graham to Carrington (22 August 1980).

⁵⁶ FCO8/3639, Beckett to Graham (22 August 1980).

the British mission should be withdrawn, with only one member of staff remaining to operate under a protecting power. At the same time all except one member of the diplomatic staff at the embassy in London should be declared *persona non grata*. On 22 August Graham met Ehdaie and reminded him that detention of British citizens contravened the Vienna Conventions. Should such contraventions continue then this would have a grave effect on Anglo-Iranian relations. Graham also asked Ehdaie for a list of the embassy staff in London. Such a request had first been made in May but only a partial list was sent while, at the same time, a similar request had been made to the British embassy in Tehran and the full list was duly delivered.⁵⁷

The embassy continued to press for access to the detained British subjects but did not achieve any progress. On 25 August, Wyatt sent a strongly-worded note to the MFA saying denial of access to the detainees contravened the Vienna Convention and the Iranian constitution.⁵⁸ The demonstrators outside the embassy had by 25 August disappeared, at least for the time being and, even though it could not be said for certain why they had gone, Wyatt felt the evacuation and closure of the visa section, coupled with an empty out of hours compound and less active compound in general, all added up to making the embassy less of an attractive target. In spite of this, it was important to resolve the situation of the students as soon as possible. Ominously, Parvaresh, the deputy speaker of the Majlis, had told a local newspaper reporter that a break of diplomatic relations with Britain was 'very possible'.⁵⁹

Against the backdrop of the detention of the Iranian students and the British citizens, an FCO report was prepared to look at further changes to the British embassy, the recommendation being that at least one member of the embassy staff who was most at risk (Reddaway, who was the only Persian speaker and had been most active in trying to gain access to Waddell) be withdrawn and that the possibility of withdrawing other staff be kept under constant review. Whilst British citizens continued to be held, it was indefensible to carry out a complete withdrawal of staff. But if the threat to the embassy remained, it would be best to withdraw all except one member of staff, who could maintain a presence beneath the umbrella of a protecting power, probably Sweden, maintain a consular link with detained subjects and administer the two mission compounds.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ PREM19/496, TELNO441 (22 August 1980).

⁵⁸ PREM19/496, TELNO441 (25 August 1980).

⁵⁹ PREM19/496, TELNO756 (25 August 1980).

⁶⁰ FCO8/3658, Lamport to Graham, (28 August 1980).

Added to the list of British detainees was businessman, Andrew Pyke, whose arrest underlined for Carrington the increased insecurity of the expatriate community. He believed they should be encouraged to leave, especially as the embassy could no longer protect them.⁶¹ The threat to the community loomed large against the backdrop of the internecine conflict amongst the Iranians. Wyatt reported that, though there was less publicity on the students, Britain was now accused of being part of an Anglican espionage plot, while Graham was suspected of delivering munitions to anti-regime plotters.⁶²

Of the 72 students charged for the demonstrations of 4 August, 48 were still in custody near the end of the month.⁶³ Carrington was worried by the vitriolic campaign against Britain, amidst accusations of plotting against the regime, but he was opposed to a complete diplomatic withdrawal, favouring instead one member of staff remaining under a protecting power. He recognised the greatest personal risk was presented to Reddaway, due to him being a Persian speaker active in making links with people who were out of favour with the regime.⁶⁴ Wyatt agreed with Carrington, so Reddaway was recalled to Britain on 5 September.⁶⁵

Carrington takes decisive action

As for the future of British citizens and the mission in Iran, the situation had by 5 September become almost untenable. Carrington decided the risks of keeping the embassy operational was unacceptable and instructed that the staff should return to Britain as soon as possible, leaving only Stephen (Ned) Barrett to function as the head of a British interests section, housed in the Swedish embassy.⁶⁶ The Foreign Secretary told Wyatt immediately to contact the Swedes to put into effect the necessary arrangements and also send a note to the MFA, at the same time as a similarly worded Swedish note, informing the MFA that the Swedish embassy would contain a British interests section headed by Barrett, first secretary and consul. On the question of the timing of the delivery of these two notes, Carrington left this to the judgement of Wyatt, but counselled the Iranians should not be given long notice in a manner which would put Wyatt's departure at risk. If the Swedes and Wyatt felt it prudent to deliver these notes

⁶¹ PREM19/496, TELNO450 (28 August 1980).

⁶² PREM19/496, TELNO773 (28 August 1980).

⁶³ PREM19/496, Iranian Students: Situation Report (29 August 1980).

⁶⁴ PREM19/496, TELNO453 (29 August 1980).

⁶⁵ PREM19/496, TELNO776 (1 September 1980).

⁶⁶ FCO8/3658, TELNO466 (5 September 1980).

to the Iranian embassy in London, rather than the MFA in Tehran, then Carrington would agree with this, but the most important factor in all of this was that Barrett was not left without either Swedish or British cover. As for the press, Carrington felt it best not to say anything until formal agreement by the Swedes, with the announcement of Wyatt's departure to be made when he had left for London, after which the following line should be taken:

'We have considered it advisable to withdraw our representation in Tehran during the present difficult and unpredictable period in our relations with Iran. This is not (not) a break in diplomatic relations. We hope that our staff will be able to return to Tehran when possible. Meanwhile British interests in Iran including particularly our consular responsibilities will be looked after by the Swedish embassy there'.⁶⁷

With events moving fast, British ambassador to Sweden, Sir Donald Murray, reported that the head of the Swedish chancery had spoken to the political director of the MFA and confirmed their willingness to act as a protecting power.⁶⁸ That the Swedes agreed to act as a protecting power with no qualms was a relief for London and helped enable the process of swiftly opening up the interests section.

Ever since the takeover of the U.S. embassy, Britain was under pressure to break off relations with Iran but chose not to. Why Carrington now took the decision to close the embassy, but not institute a break in relations is best explained by the pitfalls of breaks in relations, as analysed in the previous chapter. Furthermore, issues of prestige arise after a break if one government proposes a restoration of relations and the other refuses it.⁶⁹ The Foreign Secretary made an emergency response to a crisis, which he hoped would be temporary and not an impediment to long term friendly relations with the Iranian government. This approach is in line with that of Satow's observation whereby 'normally it is hoped that a permanent diplomatic mission may be re-established under more favourable circumstances, and this is more straightforward when no formal breach of relations has taken place'.⁷⁰ The decision to close the embassy, but without a formal break in diplomatic relations, also lends an insight into how the machinery of British diplomacy works. The fact that Carrington took the decision to close the embassy only after considerable debate, following several earlier recommendations to do so, shows

⁶⁷ FCO8/3658, TELNO468 (5 September 1980).

⁶⁸ FCO8/3658, TELNO164 (5 September 1980).

⁶⁹ Roberts, Ivor (ed), *Satow's Guide to Diplomatic Practice* (6th edition), (Oxford, 2009), 215.

⁷⁰ Trevelyan, Humphrey, *Diplomatic channels*, (London, 1973), 18.

how though diplomats within the FCO and embassies abroad may have an input into policy, the Foreign Secretary is the ultimate arbiter.

Avoiding breaks with revolutionary regimes was a policy which had previously been implemented in the case of the Bolsheviks. Despite the latent antipathy toward them, Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, although advised by colleagues to effect a break, thought Britain should 'avoid, as long as possible, an open breach with this crazy system'⁷¹ as it would endanger British subjects in Russia, and could potentially drive Russia into the hands of Germany.⁷² The policy of avoiding breaks in relations continued into the 1960s. A Foreign Office memorandum⁷³ of November 1967 noted that:

'it is not our policy to make good or bad behaviour towards us a criteria [sic] for the maintenance or establishment of diplomatic relations with any country. Indeed, we maintain that when there are problems between countries there is all the more reason to have diplomatic relations so that the problems could be discussed and resolved.'

Generally, Britain tried to avoid breaks in diplomatic relations, as restoring relations was a process fraught with difficulty and there was no desire to leave interests and citizens unprotected.⁷⁴ Although several states chose to break off relations with Britain in the post-war decades, no diplomatic break was initiated by Britain against any state between 1946 (when relations were severed with Communist Albania) and 1976 (when relations were severed with Idi Amin's Uganda). In the case of Chile, in December 1975, representation was reduced from ambassadorial level to *chargé d'affaires*, in protest at the torture of a British citizen, Sheila Cassidy.⁷⁵

The decision not to break relations with Iran was thus consistent with a general British position, in which severance of relations with difficult states was avoided as much as possible. The reasons for maintaining relations were the same as those which were applied in previous situations, namely the desire to continue to protect interests and citizens. In closing the embassy whilst still maintaining relations, Carrington was pursuing a solution of compromise to a difficult situation. He hoped his decision would not antagonise the Iranians, as he thought they would understand that such a move had

⁷¹ Ullman, Richard, *Anglo-Soviet relations, 1917-1921. vol.1, Intervention and the War*, (Princeton, 1961), 31.

⁷² Ibid, 32.

⁷³ Young, John, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy: A Case Study of British Practice, 1963-1976*, (Cambridge, 2008), 223.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 224.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 224.

been taken to protect British diplomatic staff; the fact a break had not occurred ought to have signalled the desire to get back to normal relations with a full embassy as soon as possible.

However, as we shall see in later chapters, such hopes of reopening the embassy proved to be misplaced. If Carrington had known the embassy would not be reopened at an early date, would he still have closed the embassy? Such a question is difficult to answer with certainty. The Foreign Secretary took his decision because he felt British diplomatic personnel were at serious risk of physical harm. Had the decision been taken not to close the embassy and British officials had been harmed, then this would have created a difficult situation – and a break of relations would almost certainly have followed. Nevertheless, in making the basic assumption that the Iranians would not have any objections to the reopening of the embassy, Carrington had erred: he simply did not take into consideration the level of hostility toward Britain from certain elements of the revolutionary hierarchy.

With Anglo-Iranian relations in such a precarious position, the Iranian request to move its embassy to new premises in the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) buildings was considered. This became another vexatious issue in Anglo-Iranian relations, one surrounded by complex legal and diplomatic considerations. The building had been erected for the NIOC with the Iranian government owning the lease and Ehdaie was determined to press ahead with a move. But the British felt the building stood in a sensitive area, close to their own government buildings. Having a hostile government in the area over the long term would have serious implications in terms of surveillance, which would be more pronounced if the Soviets increased their influence over Iran. News of the Iranian embassy's intentions had also provoked public hostility, but there were no domestic legal powers to prevent a country from setting up its embassy in a particular part of the capital, other than the limited control which could be exercised under town planning legislation.

It was precarious in diplomatic law to refuse to treat the building as an embassy and therefore refuse to accord it inviolability while it was actually being used for diplomatic purposes. Any such action would be unprecedented and would leave Britain without ground for argument, if other countries were to inform Britain that its own embassy was not in a suitable location and could not therefore be accorded inviolability. The only recourse, if the Iranians insisted on using the buildings as an embassy, would be to declare the accredited diplomats *personae non gratae* and, if they refused to leave, deport them. In the last resort diplomatic relations could also be broken off. But both of

these were extreme actions. The denial of the Iranian request was likely to be seen as a hostile political action and could prompt retaliation in the form of a takeover of both mission compounds in Tehran on the grounds they were not suitable as embassy premises. Nonetheless, it was recommended the move be prevented by summoning Ehdai on 8 September and informing him Britain was not prepared to allow an embassy to occupy a site so close to a key government area.⁷⁶

Becoming an interests section

The decision was taken for Wyatt and other staff to leave Iran on 9 September. Wyatt met with Barrett and Goran Bundy, the Swedish ambassador, on 6 September to discuss the Swedish approach to the Iranians, with Bundy trying to organise a meeting on 8 September at the MFA with Ghotbzadeh to deliver his note.⁷⁷ On 7 September, Wyatt met with the community during which he recalled the previous warnings he had issued regarding the dangers of staying; these dangers had since been compounded by a failure to obtain access to any of the British detainees and the subsequent deterioration in relations with Iran. Stopping short of formally advising subjects to leave, Wyatt would 'recommend that each of them should consider most carefully his own position and should only decide to remain if convinced that the case for doing so is absolutely over-riding'.⁷⁸

Bundy met Ghotbzadeh on 7 September to deliver the Swedish note. The Iranian raised no objection to Sweden acting as a protecting power and said the MFA would 'facilitate things for you'. After being reassured this was *not* a break in diplomatic relations, Ghotbzadeh said that, if it was, then the Iranians would break off relations too. The ambassador also raised the point the British government wanted to avoid publicity over the event until after the departure of embassy staff. Ghotbzadeh gave Bundy the impression he was saddened by the British decision and there were no signs of animosity on his part. Wyatt found Bundy 'wonderfully helpful and co-operative throughout' and Bundy would now consult Stockholm on sending the MFA a note following the mission's departure.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, in spite of what appeared to be an element of understanding on the part of Ghotbzadeh, this did not stop him from expressing dismay, in an interview with the AFP on 7 September, at the alleged mistreatment of Iranian students - even

⁷⁶ FCO8/3666, Beckett to Miers and Graham (5 September 1980).

⁷⁷ FCO8/3658, TELNO794 (6 September 1980).

⁷⁸ FCO8/3642, TELNO800 (7 September 1980).

⁷⁹ PREM19/496, TELNO801 (7 September 1980).

calling the British 'barbarians'.⁸⁰ Since Britain had already reduced diplomatic representation, the next step according to Ghotbzadeh would be a complete break in relations. He then declared, 'I do not know whether this will be done but, if it must, it must'. In any event, with the impending departure of staff on 9 September the communications of the embassy were dismantled, with the interests section within the Swedish embassy to operate from 9 September itself, although it would not open for business until the following day.⁸¹

Summary

Since the U.S. embassy hostage crisis started in November 1979, Britain had experienced great difficulties in operating its mission. These were exacerbated in the mid-1980, culminating in the September decision to withdraw all but one member of staff and operate the mission as an interests section under Swedish protection. The Iranian embassy siege, in April, had served as a portent of things to come as a catalogue of issues caused the Anglo-Iranian relationship almost to reach breaking point. The post-revolutionary turbulence meant that the liberals in Tehran were becoming almost irrelevant. At the same time, Khomeini and the Mullahs strengthened their position, leading not only to the increased Islamicisation of Iran but also making foreign engagement with the regime more difficult. That Graham, an experienced and cool-headed diplomat, ended his tenure only made worse the difficulties of engagement with the regime, particularly as no direct replacement was appointed.

In terms of overall staffing, right up to the point it was decided to close the embassy, it was operating with limited numbers in the single figures which limited the work it was able to do. Emphasis continued to be placed on providing consular assistance to the small expatriate community and commercial work. With the Iranian regime becoming more belligerent toward foreign powers, it was difficult to build normal diplomatic relations. That the Iranians continued to purge their diplomatic apparatus, employing new, inexperienced and hostile individuals, also made engagement difficult. In spite of this, throughout a period of divisive issues - including the Iranian embassy siege, the student arrests in London and the detention of British citizens in Iran - there was some engagement between the two states. There was also a desire on London's part to maintain relations, even if the Iranians were antipathetic. As evidenced by Washington's approach to Carrington for Graham to make representations on their behalf, the

⁸⁰ PREM19/496, TELNO810 (8 September 1980).

⁸¹ FCO8/3659, TELNO804 (8 September 1980).

ambassador had developed links where possible with the Iranian regime which allowed the prospect of dialogue. Thus, despite having to operate in a difficult environment, the embassy may be said to have carried out its duties with some success.

Nonetheless, the arrest of the Iranian students in London, in August, created a highly charged atmosphere of hostility towards Britain. The detention of citizens such as the Colemans, Waddell and Pyke exemplified the dangers for Britons wishing to remain in Iran. It was against this backdrop that Reddaway made a powerful case for a deliberate cooling of Anglo-Iranian relations. His arguments were rejected on the grounds that withdrawal would not only create problems in the present, for the safety of citizens and the protection of British interests, but also, in the long term, prove an impediment to improving Anglo-Iranian relations. Despite this, Carrington eventually decided the risks to the embassy and British citizens were too grave to risk and he took the decision to withdraw the bulk of the mission. This did not constitute a complete break in relations but, for those who did not understand the finer details of diplomatic protocol, the action taken by Britain suggested grave dissatisfaction with the Iranians. British diplomats in Tehran would now have to meet the many challenges presented by the Iranian revolution as members of a mere interests section, with much diminished resources.

Chapter 9. No early return for the British embassy: the interests section and the revolution, 1980-81.

'In today's volatile world, the possibilities of breaks between nations will always be present. Even in such cases... Nations need to continue to communicate. The tradition of the protecting power provides the opportunity for such communication'.¹

Interests sections

Berridge and James define interests sections as 'a small group of diplomats of one state working under the flag of a second on the territory of a third...designed to maintain communication in the absence of diplomatic relations'.² The opening of interests sections is normally necessitated when diplomatic relations between two states have been broken and an alternative conduit is required to facilitate communication in the absence of a fully-fledged diplomatic mission. Thus, 'the interests section became a means of continuing virtually relations between countries while avoiding the political symbolism that became attached to a resumption of relations'.³ However, it must be noted that interests sections can also be established in instances where diplomatic relations between two states have not been broken, but have been severely strained almost to breaking point – as happened in the case of Britain and Iran in 1980 – though such instances are rare.

Interests sections are relatively recent phenomena, the earliest example usually being said to involve Egypt and West Germany after May 1965, when Cairo broke diplomatic relations because Bonn had recognised Israel. Britain had some experience of establishing interests sections in the later 1960s and the 1970s (with the first being set up in Cairo, in December 1965, after Egypt broke off diplomatic relations over the Rhodesia problem). One was established in Baghdad after Iraq broke relations with London in December 1971, accusing it of colluding in Iran's seizure of disputed islands in the Persian Gulf.⁴ According to Berridge⁵,

¹ Blake, James, "Pragmatic Diplomacy: the Origins and Use of the Protecting Power" in Newsom, David (ed), *Diplomacy Under A Foreign Flag*, (Washington DC, 1990), 4.

² Berridge and James, *A Dictionary of Diplomacy*, 138.

³ Blake, "Pragmatic Diplomacy", 63.

⁴ Young, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy*, 217-222.

⁵ Berridge, Geoff, *The British Interests Section in Kampala 1976-7*, (2012), 2. Accessed 26 December 2015. <http://grberridge.diplomacy.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/BIS-Kampala-Essay-38.pdf>

'preserving diplomatic relations in all conditions short of war was a traditional British reflex; Britain was a trading nation and could not afford to be choosy about those with whom it dealt; the existence of diplomatic relations did not signify approval of a regime; breaking relations was easy but restoring them was not; besides, when things were bad that was just the time when diplomatic relations were needed most. The Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) had been preaching versions of this doctrine to new Commonwealth states in Africa and elsewhere for some years'.

As Berridge, in his study of how states without diplomatic relations communicate, says, 'the members of all interests sections - unless stated to the contrary under the agreement under which they are established - are entitled to all of the privileges and immunities provided to the staff of resident missions under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, 1961'.⁶ But Berridge notes that there are several key deficiencies associated with interests sections, including the small staff size and the absence of specialist personnel.⁷ Young adds other potential problems, in that the circumstances under which interests sections are established can induce hostility from the host state with 'public nature of breach, ill feeling generated and also relations suffering from a reduced level of diplomatic contact...all detrimental knock on effects'.⁸

In order to create such entities, the agreement is required of another state to act as a protecting power, in whose own embassy the interests section will officially be based. Berridge points out that 'a protecting power, especially in peacetime, might be strikingly generous in the assistance it gives to a protected state, despite the risks which this runs of courting the animosity of the receiving state'.⁹ As Young notes, 'neutral states, like Switzerland and Sweden, are often seen as suitable protecting powers because of their supposed impartiality, their determination to avoid involvement in armed conflict and their willingness to take on such tasks'.¹⁰ For Blake, protecting powers are not free from limitations since,

'The range of subjects a protecting power may raise with a host government on behalf of a third country for which it is acting is necessarily limited by the context in which it must operate, by its own interests, by diplomatic convention, and by

⁶ Berridge, *Talking to the Enemy*, 39.

⁷ Ibid, 41-42.

⁸ Young, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy*, 219.

⁹ Berridge, *The British Interests Section in Kampala 1976-7*, 18.

¹⁰ Ibid, 217.

the willingness of the host government to entertain certain subjects brought to its attention'.¹¹

Some states are concerned that interests sections must not effectively become 'embassies in all but name'. In the Anglo-Tanzanian case between 1965-1968, an active push was made by the Tanzanians to reduce the size of the British interests section, as it was felt staffing levels were at an inappropriate level for an institution which was not an embassy.¹² For those who believe interests sections *are* embassies in all but name, Berridge¹³ provides the example of Uganda in the mid-1970s to show this is not the case. The hostile circumstances which give birth to interests sections in general mean they have to operate under greater constraints than embassies; they serve smaller communities (as citizens are normally recommended to leave a troubled state where their personal safety may be at risk) and they do not enjoy cordial relations with the host state. In Kampala, the main entrance to the former high commission building remained locked and shuttered and the British Council library also remained closed. Because the security of the building remained poor and because there was no routine access to the buildings and strong room, all confidential work had to be done in the French embassy. It was also difficult to find a suitable confidential secretary, so the two staff members of the section had to do their own typing, which took them away from other tasks.

Nevertheless, in withdrawing its staff from Iran in September 1980, Britain had chosen a course of action which, despite its associated pitfalls, was viewed as a better alternative either to retaining an embassy in Tehran or a complete break in relations. The problem was that, in closing its embassy, Britain was seen by the Iranians to be effectively breaking relations, because (while states had sometimes closed down embassies and left their interests in the hands of a protecting power) interests sections had, up to that point, only been established when relations between states had been broken. Significantly, this had been the case when the Americans broke off relations and opened an interests section housed within the Swiss embassy.¹⁴ One challenge for London, as will become apparent, was that, while the situation seemed clear to them, it was not necessarily so for an Iranian regime which was not well versed in diplomatic protocol. Indeed, there are very few studies of interests sections being set up in such circumstances. Even Berridge, in discussing interests sections, focuses on those set up

¹¹ Blake, 'Pragmatic Diplomacy: the Origins and Use of the Protecting Power', in Newsom (ed.), *Diplomacy Under A Foreign Flag*, 16-17.

¹² Ibid, 221.

¹³ Berridge, *The British Interests Section in Kampala 1976-7*, 8-9. Accessed 26 December 2015.

¹⁴ See Newsom (ed.), *Foreign Flag*, Introduction.

after a break in relations and makes no mention of those used as a last gasp measure short of a full break, such as the British in Iran.¹⁵

A new reality for Britain in Iran

On 9 September, Graham met Iranian chargé d'affaires Ehdaie in London and handed him a note to notify his government that, due to concern over the safety of British diplomatic personnel, all but one member of staff were being removed and affairs were being left in the hands of the Swedish government, with Stephen 'Ned' Barrett heading an interests section in the Swedish embassy. He emphasised this did not represent a break in relations; the actions were not being publicised; and that Britain hoped to resume normal relations as soon as possible. Frustration was also expressed over not being able to have access to the four imprisoned Britons. In addition, Ehdaie was informed that London had considered the Iranian request to move its embassy to Victoria Street and this had been rejected because the new premises were too close to government offices (but, since such a request would have been rejected from any government, Iran was not being singled out for special treatment).¹⁶

To help Ned Barrett operate effectively, Carrington issued special instructions. He was advised, if possible, to continue to work in the Ferdowsi offices and live in the Gulhak compound, which had the advantage of an additional direct telephone link through the embassy switchboard. In a sign that Britain wanted to return soon, it was ordered both compounds, along with the buildings and services within them, were to be kept in as good order as possible. Thus, while officially being part of the Swedish embassy staff, Barrett would actually continue to operate from British premises. Carrington told Barrett that consular work was to be his most important task and he should continue in cooperation with the Swedish embassy to press for access to British subjects in prison. There was also an expectation that Barrett would remain in close touch with other resident EC ambassadors in Tehran, whilst no longer taking responsibility for other Commonwealth countries (who had previously relied on Britain to assist with certain aspects of consular work). On visas, Barrett was instructed to deal only with those holding diplomatic and service passports; he should not issue visas in compassionate cases as, if he began doing so, he might become inundated with requests.

Regarding political reporting, Barrett was not expected to undertake this, but he should continue present arrangements for the despatch of local newspapers to the FCO and also

¹⁵ Berridge, Geoff, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice (5th edition)*, (Basingstoke and New York, 2015), 230-235.

¹⁶ FCO8/3595, TELNO157 (9 September 1980).

explore possibilities for one of the embassy translators to provide regular translations from the local Persian press of any articles of interest. No initiative should be taken with the Department of Trade and Industry to tell exporters that assistance was now unavailable; instead, Barrett should deal with enquiries as necessary and give whatever background guidance he could to any callers on this issue. It was also the intention to reduce locally-engaged staff further, but Barrett's own recommendations would be sought before any final decisions were taken.¹⁷

These instructions are significant for underlining the importance of the consular function in the work of diplomatic missions. Consular work is another of those aspects of overseas representation that has been relatively neglected by academic studies. But support for exporters, expatriate citizens and detainees is a key challenge for all governments – and one that is not easily met should diplomatic and consular relations be completely broken.¹⁸ In a similar vein, when Britain operated its interests section in Uganda from 1976 to 1977, consular work was the 'absolute priority'.¹⁹

Initially, the interests section worked the same hours as those of the Swedish embassy.²⁰ Although the Iranians, in line with the Vienna Conventions, sent the Swedish embassy written confirmation of the agreement for the Swedes to protect British interests, the subject of communications had not so far been raised. There was thus concern about the inevitable embarrassment if the mob were to break in and discover the Swedes had been handling confidential communications on Britain's behalf, without official Iranian sanction.²¹ As such, Murray wrote to Sweden's ambassador to London, Bengt Akkeren, to place on record the understanding of arrangements for diplomatic bags. There would be a return weekly confidential bags service between the FCO in London and Tehran, routed via Stockholm. Stockholm agreed its authorities would not inspect or monitor communications. This was on the understanding the content was commercial/economic, administrative, consul or cultural. Barrett would give Goran Bundy, the Swedish ambassador to Tehran, a general account of the contents at the time of receipt and despatch; it had also been agreed Barrett would not retain more material of any sort than was absolutely necessary. Thus Sweden was acting effectively as an intermediary point for all diplomatic bags going to and from Iran.²²

¹⁷ FCO8/3659, TELNO159 (11 September 1980).

¹⁸ Serious works on the contemporary situation are: Melissen, Jan, and Fernandez, Ana Mar (eds.), *Consular Affairs and Diplomacy* (Leiden, 2011); and Dickie, John, *The British Consul* (London, 2007).

¹⁹ Berridge, *The British Interests Section in Kampala 1976-7*, 11. Accessed 26 December 2015.

²⁰ FCO8/3572, Memo by Lamport (FCO): "Situation in Tehran" (30 September 1980).

²¹ FCO8/3659, TELNO175 (24 September 1980).

²² FCO8/3659, Murray to Akkeren (2 October 1980).

It was soon evident that the Iranians were not greatly pleased by London's decision to scale down its operations. On 12 September, the ambassador to Moscow Sir Curtis Keeble, reported he had been confronted by his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Mokri, at a reception. Mokri stated he did not understand how Anglo-Iranian relations had plummeted to such depths. Keeble replied that a number of factors had played a part in the decision including menacing statements made against Britain, but relations had not been broken and there was the possibility staff would return should relations improve.²³

Despite the frostiness of Anglo-Iranian relations, a note of congratulations was sent to Mohammad Ali Rajai upon his appointment as the new Prime Minister. Rajai's response to the message however encapsulated the bitterness felt by the Iranians:

'The people of Iran demand a revision in the British government's standpoint towards the essence of the Islamic revolution of Iran and an immediate end to partial provocations against the Islamic Republic of Iran... if the British government, without taking the realities of the Islamic revolution into consideration continues her hostile ways my government without any hesitation will react accordingly'.²⁴

The Iran-Iraq War

The Iran-Iraq War caused further concern at this point. It began when Iraq invaded Iran via air and land on 22 September 1980 after a series of border skirmishes which involved tit-for-tat shelling and border incursions. The war came about after a long history of border disputes between both states and was motivated by Iraqi fears the Iranian revolution would rouse Iraq's long-suppressed Shi'ite majority into trying to overthrow the Ba'athist Sunni regime led by Saddam Hussain.²⁵ In response to a letter from Jimmy Carter on the war, Thatcher expressed her hope the fighting end soon and all help should be offered to end hostilities. She also affirmed her agreement with him on the issue of the war causing a threat to international shipping, especially in the Persian Gulf. As there were no Royal Navy ships in the Gulf at present, she had decided to re-deploy two ships from Hong Kong, which would arrive in the region on 7 October at the earliest.²⁶

²³ FCO8/3595, Keeble to Graham (12 September 1980).

²⁴ FCO8/3595, Rajai to British interests section (14 September 1980).

²⁵ CAB128/68, CM(80)34th (2 October 1980).

²⁶ THCR3/1/10 f35 (T187/80) (26 September 1980).

Another issue was the request from Iraq for defence-related communications equipment. Carrington's initial reaction was the request be approved in principle, but should be examined in the EC as part of an arms embargo on both belligerents. The legal position was that, in order to maintain Britain's position of neutrality, arms or other military provisions to Iraq could not be supplied while at the same time denying them to Iran. In any case arms to Iran could not be supplied without breaching the EC arms embargo, imposed in April.²⁷ The general position on the war was summed up in a telegram by Carrington on 9 October: to prevent a spread of the conflict; encourage attempts at mediation by those in a position to influence the parties; wait for the parties to realise that no settlement was possible if each maintained its present attitude; and refrain from any specifically British initiatives which could serve to damage British interests, while working for a collective western or European response to the crisis.²⁸

The need to win support in the war against Iraq did not seem to influence the Iranians when it came to dealing with Britain. Instead, in a worrying potential escalation of the detainees' case, on 29 October Barrett reported that an MFA official, whom Bundy had recently lunched with, told the Swede that the four were being kept as 'hostages'. Equally disturbing, Bundy was informed that, even though the MFA were continuing their attempts to find out where the four were being held, they had failed to uncover any further information.²⁹

Reinforcing the interests section

During the same conversation with Bundy, Barrett, on instructions from London, also sounded him about sending a second UK-based officer to Iran.³⁰ The issue of reinforcing the interests section was also brought up in dialogue between Graham and Swedish ambassador Akkeren and showed that the British had underestimated the volume of work the interests section might face. Akkeren wanted to consider the question of timing and would seek the views of Bundy.³¹ Any such increase in numbers would need Iranian concurrence as well but, given their embassy in London was operating normally, it was envisaged this would not present too much of a problem. As a result of these discussions

²⁷ FCO8/3693, TELNO400 (8 October 1980).

²⁸ FCO8/3693, TELNO246 (9 October 1980).

²⁹ FCO8/3640, Lamport to Graham (29 October 1980).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ FCO8/3659, TELNO180 (31 October 1980).

an FCO report proposed a grade 9 UK-based officer should be sent out to provide additional help.³²

In advising Thatcher of the situation, Carrington stated the release of the U.S. hostages would provide an opportunity to strengthen the interests section. If the situation became less threatening and more stable, Britain could appoint a chargé and, later, an ambassador. In the meantime, as far as Anglo-Iranian relations were concerned, Britain should deny arms and munitions to both Iran and Iraq in an effort to remain neutral and maintain the visa requirement for Iranians visiting Britain.³³

Having an interests sections was still, perhaps, the best solution to Britain maintaining a presence in Iran. However, it was already apparent that staffing was a barrier to its effective operation. When consulted, the Swedes were against the proposed increase as they believed the security situation had not really improved since early September. With economic sanctions still being applied, new Anglo-Saxon faces were unlikely to be welcomed in Tehran. Careful consideration would also have to be placed on constricting the tasks of the new officers, so they did not engage in activities which would attract the ire of the Iranians. The Swedes also wanted to know whether it would be necessary to bring in bulky equipment alongside new staff. In any event the Iranians would have to be notified.³⁴ Such Swedish concerns illustrate what Blake sees as one of the main problems of being under a protecting power.³⁵ While the Swedes were generally helpful, they did not want to be seen to be aiding Britain in any activities which risked attracting Iranian wrath and in doing so compromising Sweden's relations with Iran.

Although Carrington advocated the expansion of the interests section, Graham was concerned unfavourable developments over the detainees in Iran could create a situation in which it would be difficult to have an independent embassy functioning in Tehran. He reasoned that Anglo-Iranian relations would not be helped, nor would it be administratively convenient, to reopen the embassy only to close it again shortly after. A cautious approach should therefore be adopted, whereby the agreement of the Swedish government was first gained before any measures were taken.

But the Minister of State, Douglas Hurd, felt that it was a handicap not to have an embassy and that plans should be put in place for a return at the end of February

³² FCO8/3659, Lamport to Beckett (31 October 1980).

³³ TNA PREM19/496, Carrington to Thatcher (7 November 1980).

³⁴ FCO8/3659, Goring-Morris to Palmer (11 December 1980).

³⁵ Blake, 'Pragmatic Diplomacy', 16-17.

1981.³⁶ FCO ministers believed the security dangers in Iran had receded and there was a need for more detailed reporting on political developments in Iran, so that Chris Rundle should be sent early in the new year, to send home reports on political developments and re-establish links with the embassy's old contacts in Tehran. Rundle should be accompanied by a DWS officer, to ensure his reports could be speedily received in London.³⁷ The primary role of the DWS was to manage communications between British embassies and the UK, but it also maintained transmitters on behalf of the FCO for BBC broadcasting.

However, Iranian views also had to be considered in all this and they did not look favourable. When Dr Sanjabi, Bani-Sadr's personal adviser, was informed of the British desire to increase staffing, he objected on the grounds that Britain had engaged in breaches of diplomatic conventions (without specifying what these were) and queried whether the increase was the first step towards a normalisation of relations – to which the reply was the initial withdrawal of staff had always been described as temporary.³⁸ Worryingly, this meeting confirmed that the Iranians unhappy over the creation of the interests section, interpreted it as an unfriendly act. Indeed, the desire to slowly normalise relations through the slow build up of staff was not welcomed by the Iranians, who raised objections whenever the question was posed.

A desire to normalise relations

The issue of a normalisation of Anglo-Iranian relations was given fresh impetus with the announcement the U.S. hostages would finally be released on 20 January 1981. The hostage crisis had emotionally taxed the Americans and claimed Jimmy Carter as a casualty, the release coinciding with him handing over the presidency to Ronald Reagan. The Iranians were finally compelled to compromise, as they could no longer shoulder the impact of crippling sanctions whilst at war with Iraq. A decision now had to be made on the lifting of sanctions, which was not an easy task for London, given Iran continued to detain four British citizens. However, it seemed pointless to maintain sanctions in isolation, as British sanctions alone would not hurt the Iranians and would not influence their attitude to the release of the four detainees.³⁹

³⁶ FCO8/3659, Minute by Moberly: Staffing of Embassy in Tehran (15 December 1980).

³⁷ FCO8/3659, TELNO198 (17 December 1980).

³⁸ FCO8/4096, TELNO9 (8 January 1981).

³⁹ PREM19/496, The Lord Privy Seal to Thatcher (16 January 1981).

The future of the mission in Iran was scrutinised in a report by Miers, who advocated a gradual return of staff in stages (or waves) and advised that, if the decision was made to reopen the embassy, an interim chargé d'affaires be required before the arrival of a new ambassador, who should be a Grade 3 officer. This was a significant decision: the post of ambassador to Iran had always been assigned to high-ranking diplomats but, such was the current state of relations that a lower appointee could fill the role. The officer should be available at short notice but an agrément⁴⁰ from the Iranians for him was needed first.⁴¹

Graham, however, remained apprehensive about the prospect of increasing the size of the interests section. He reasoned that any decisions had to be cleared with the Swedes. They were clearly doing Britain a favour, 'but the more we build up the interests section so that it is able to operate in effect as an embassy within an embassy, the more restive they are likely to become, since they will be carrying the outward responsibility, but with diminished control'. The importance for Graham was to have a reasonable assurance a slow build up of staff in the interests section would preclude a change to an independent embassy no longer under the Swedes.⁴²

The point raised by Graham is an interesting one. When a state operates its mission as an interests section, at what point in terms of staffing does it start to serve as an embassy in everything but name? By mid-February the interests section was comprised of 4 UK based staff in Tehran (2 diplomatic staff, 1 language student and 1 communicator) and 24 locally engaged staff. The danger was that the interests section could outgrow the Swedish embassy in terms of staffing size and even house more staff than certain other embassies in Tehran. In such a situation the Swedes could raise objections and the Iranians could obstruct plans to re-open the embassy, on the grounds that Britain had more than enough staff to carry out its mission as an interests section.

Miers sent a tele-letter to British heads of chancery in various countries, on 13 February, advising them that thought was being given to the re-establishment of full Anglo-Iranian relations which would encompass the reopening of the embassy, restoring it to 'normal' size and appointing a new ambassador.⁴³ Subsequently Barrett advised that, if relations proceeded smoothly after the release of the four detainees, then agreement could be obtained for having a new ambassador in the second half of the year, but this should not

⁴⁰ This is the formal agreement by a receiving state to accept someone as head of a diplomatic mission. Berridge and James (eds), *A Dictionary of Diplomacy* (2nd ed), 6.

⁴¹ FCO8/4096, Miers FAO Graham, PS/PUS and PS/Mr Hurd (29 January 1981).

⁴² FCO8/4096, Graham FAO PS/PUS and PS/Mr Hurd (30 January 1981).

⁴³ FCO8/4096, Miers FAO Heads of Chancery in Various Countries (13 February 1981).

be contemplated before resolution of the remaining problems, including the trial of the two Iranian students, due in May. Recently the Netherlands ambassador to Iran presented his credentials only after a three month wait, due to the Dutch being slow in giving their agreement for a similar Iranian appointment in the Netherlands. The British 'case would obviously not be similar. I doubt if the Iranians would refuse agrément on the grounds solely that they themselves have only a chargé in London, as this arises from strained relations after the revolution, which we are now trying to bring to an end, and moreover is to some extent typical of the Iranians and difficulties in deciding how to run their embassies and find candidates for posts. But this is of course a card they could play if they wanted to'.⁴⁴

For his part, Foreign Secretary Carrington was keen to see further increases in staff, via the addition of a counsellor (who could subsequently be designated chargé) plus two other members of staff, all at the beginning of March, regardless of whether the British detainees were released in the immediate future or not. If this went well, then Carrington envisaged adding a further four staff two-to-three weeks later, with the resumption of normalised relations at the same time. Carrington asked that the Swedes be asked for their approval, whilst remaining very conscious of the need not to ask them to continue to provide an umbrella for a mission which would be seriously disproportionate in size to their own.⁴⁵

Ambassador Murray was summoned to the Swedish MFA on 25 February to receive Bundy's reaction to Miers' suggestions for increases to staff in Tehran. The MFA were content for stage one to commence around the beginning of March, but careful consideration should be given to the risk which might arise if the date of eventual normalisation was too close to the date of the trial of the two Iranians held in London. In any case, it was essential to tell the Iranians in advance about the proposed increases of staff, the advice from the Swedes being 'to leave a good interval between notification and the date of arrivals in Tehran, to allow the news to sink in'.

As the Swedes had now agreed to proposals to increase the size of the interests section, Lamport recommended that Stephen (Jeremy) Barrett, currently posted to Ankara, be instructed to return to the UK to prepare for a temporary transfer to Tehran and that the Iranians be notified of British intentions. A plan for phased reinforcement had been created and it was envisaged the first group of three, including a counsellor who would in due course be the chargé d'affaires, should leave 14 days or so after the receipt of

⁴⁴ FCO8/4096, Barrett FAO Miers (22 February 1981).

⁴⁵ FCO8/4096, TELNO32 (16 February 1981).

Swedish agreement. In a significant step, that created an optimistic atmosphere, Jean Waddell and the Colemans were finally released on 27 February and it was felt that the continued detention of Pyke did not constitute any reason for changing these plans for a normalisation of relations.⁴⁶

Stephen Jeremy Barret replaces Stephen (Ned) Barrett

On 18 March 1981, Stephen Jeremy Barrett arrived in Tehran to take over as the new head of the interests section and, within hours, met Bundy, with whom he was favourably impressed.⁴⁷ With ministers having agreed in principle about moving cautiously towards a more normal relationship before the students' trial began on 5 May, Carrington sought the views of the recently-arrived Barrett, who had been reflecting on the best time to withdraw from Swedish protection and reopen the embassy. He had discussed these issues with the Swedish embassy and sounded out some of the other European Community embassies. The conclusion was that, though it would be best to restore normal relations as soon as possible, the continued security concerns as well as the potential negative fallout from the trial of the two students, made moving forward in a cautious manner the most sensible option.⁴⁸

Opening the embassy would be a clear demonstration Britain bore no ill-will towards the Iranians and could also progress Pyke's case as well as improve prospects for exports.⁴⁹ On the conduct of relations with Iran, Barrett advised it was important to monitor Pyke's case especially, as the possibility existed he may be tried as an act of retaliation over the trial of the two Iranian students in London. The reporting of the trial should be handled as gently as possible and with the BBC Persian Service playing a crucial role. Barrett also felt London should consider the Iranian wish to discuss the resumption of the supply of military equipment.⁵⁰

In response to Barrett's recommendations, Stephen Lamport prepared a report in which he recommended Britain postpone a decision on reopening the embassy until after the trial in May; but some additional staff should go to Tehran in mid April.⁵¹ But Sir John Graham disagreed:

⁴⁶ FCO8/4096, Lamport FAO Miers and Graham (26 February 1981).

⁴⁷ FCO8/4096, Barrett FAO Miers (19 March 1981).

⁴⁸ FCO8/4025, TELNO60 (27 March 1981).

⁴⁹ FCO8/4096, TELNO94 (30 March 1981).

⁵⁰ FCO8/4025, TELNO96 (30 March 1981).

⁵¹ FCO8/4096, Lamport FAO Wogan and Graham (1 April 1981).

'Personally, I should prefer to get the hauling up of our own flag over and done with before the trial, since we have never thought it a correct policy to link the level of our diplomatic representation in Iran to substantive points in our relationship and I fear that the longer we leave our mission closed the more we risk this situation becoming permanent...'⁵²

Graham raises here a most pertinent point about interests sections. In this case, one was established with good intentions, as a measure preferable to a break in relations. However, as the situation dragged on and the Iranians were disappointed by British behaviour, the prospect of re-opening the embassy seemed increasingly slimmer. For states wishing to operate an interests section temporarily, this case should be taken into account, showing that the desire to re-establish an embassy is also subject to the approval of the host state; approval which may not be forthcoming.

On 31 March, Minister of State Hurd, Graham and two other officials met with an Iranian delegation including Dr Taghizadeh, an adviser to President Bani-Sadr, who said he had been sent to discuss the prospects for opening a dialogue, including bilateral trade relations, but was personally surprised Britain had remained silent while Iran had been attacked by Iraq. Hurd replied that Britain, too, wanted to rebuild normal relations as there was no quarrel with the revolution. But the Iran-Iraq war had an impact on arms supplies and the Pyke case was another impediment to better relations. Hurd expressed a desire to re-open a full embassy and, as a step forward, it was agreed they might send a technical team to examine the Kharg, which they still wanted.⁵³ This talk of reopening the embassy suggested a serious desire to normalise relations.

Barrett's meetings with the Iranians

There were other positive signs at this time. Along with Rundle, Barrett met with Dr Mansur Farhang, who worked in the President's office as the principal adviser on foreign affairs. He was previously Iran's representative at the UN, but had resigned because of his opposition to the taking of the American hostages. Farhang expressed the Iranian desire for a normalisation of relations 'as part of a general policy of cooperation with Western Europe and Japan which would prevent either of the two superpowers gaining too much influence'. On the subject of Pyke, Farhang commented that, 'the President's office were powerless and in present circumstances the intervention could be counter-productive', but he suggested that a call on acting Foreign Minister Mohammad Ali Rajai

⁵² FCO8/4096, Lamport FAO Wogan and Graham (1 April 1981).

⁵³ FCO8/4025, Record of a Meeting between Minister of State and Iranian Delegation (31 March 1981).

(who was also concurrently serving as Prime Minister) and the speaker of the Majlis, Rafsanjani, might bear more fruit as they were in a position to achieve results.⁵⁴

The meeting with Farhang was followed up by Barrett being summoned by Taghavi on 8 April. Here the issue of Pyke was again discussed with Taghavi commenting that a positive move by Britain over defence sales would lead to a corresponding positive step on the Iranian side.⁵⁵ Barrett followed up the suggestion made by Farhang by calling on Rafsanjani himself, on 25 April. Rafsanjani said the Iranian people believed Britain had shown an unfriendly attitude during the period of the American hostage crisis, to which Barrett emphasised the importance of looking to the future and not the past.⁵⁶

But the period of détente soon ended. On 28 April, Barrett called on Hassemi, the Prime Minister's deputy and adviser for political affairs, who also happened to be Rafsanjani's brother. But the discussions proved tougher than those with Rafsanjani himself. Hassemi brought into conversation a range of grievances, including the absence of trust in British intentions, British arms supplies to Jordan (a friend of Iraq), biased coverage of Iran by UK media and Britain's attitude during the hostage crisis.⁵⁷ It was Barrett's belief the discussion was taped as a radio report subsequently relayed, almost verbatim, the discussions which were held.⁵⁸

At the end of April 1981 Barrett reported to Miers that the revolution had been given renewed fervour by the war with Iraq. Britain was still regarded as a suspect country:

'at best we are expected to have to pass a stiff examination before we can be adjudged even neutral. Iranians know too that in a revolutionary situation there are no medals to be won by arguing the case for closer relations with Britain. This outlook is the more pervasive because there is nothing which can be identified as foreign policy and many MFA officials confessed their powerlessness to influence the formulation and execution of foreign policy.'

In spite of this, Barrett felt it must remain an important British and Western objective to work for a closer relationship with a country as important as Iran and there was scope for building broader commercial relations, as demonstrated by the activities of Britain's

⁵⁴ FCO8/4025, TELNO116 (7 April 1981).

⁵⁵ FCO8/4025, Sales-Iran by S Barrett (9 April 1981).

⁵⁶ FCO8/4025, TELNO143 (27 April 1981).

⁵⁷ FCO8/4025, TELNO148 (28 April 1981).

⁵⁸ FCO8/4025, TELNO150 (29 April 1981).

competitors. The next month presented an opportunity by way of defence sales whilst the upcoming trial of the two Iranians presented a challenge.⁵⁹

At this point, too, relations became strained with the Swedes. In London, ambassador Akerren telephoned Murray on 7 May to inform him he had received an unhappy telegram from Bundy, in Tehran, about Barrett's recent high-level meetings with Iranian officials. These had in some cases been held without Bundy's foreknowledge. The question now being asked by the Iranian MFA was, if Barrett was acting as if he was officially the *chargé d'affaires*, then why did Britain not re-open the embassy? Akerren feared Barrett's actions went beyond those normally carried out by the head of an interests section acting under the protection of another power. It was felt that routine exchanges up to a certain, middle level with MFA officials was not a concern, but higher-level MFA meetings, and political exchanges with other leading personalities, ought to be arranged through Bundy and carried out with a Swedish presence. More positively, Akerren was full of praise for Barrett's diligence and stressed that personal relations between him and Bundy were very good, but matters had come to a crisis thanks to the Iranian MFA voicing their concerns.⁶⁰

Bundy relayed the MFA's complaints to Barrett, who was distressed if the Swedish government felt in any way embarrassed; the meetings he had held were made at the suggestion of, and through the Protocol Department of, the MFA and he had on each occasion been scrupulous in describing himself as the counsellor of the British interests section of the Swedish embassy. The description of Barrett as a *chargé* in Iranian press releases was an Iranian decision. Nevertheless, until the embassy was reopened it was important to comply with the Iranian wish that Britain function more obviously under Swedish auspices.⁶¹

As Hughes points out, with regard to earlier British experiences in Russia, 'when relations between two governments are good, foreign representatives are usually able to go about their work confident that their hosts will not look askance at their activities. When relations are bad, even the most innocent contact or activity can easily be construed as evidence of hostility'.⁶² The objections raised by the MFA were a clear indication of continued Iranian dissatisfaction with Britain. The decision to close the embassy was seen at the time as a temporary measure with the intention to re-open

⁵⁹ FCO8/4025, Barrett FAO Miers (29 April 1981).

⁶⁰ FCO8/4096, TELNO123 (8 May 1981).

⁶¹ FCO8/4096, TELNO170 (11 May 1981).

⁶² Hughes, Michael, *Inside the Enigma: British Officials in Russia 1900-1939*, (London, 1997), vii.

when the situation around the detention of the students had died down. However, what was not foreseen – apparently by anyone on the British side - was the way the embassy closure would be perceived as a hostile act by Iran, tantamount to a break. It was apparent that the British desire to normalise relations by reopening its embassy might now be used as a lever to pressurise Britain to respond positively in favour of Tehran over other issues, including arms supplies and the release of the Kharg.

Neither did other developments improve relations. On 8 May the FCO told the Iranians that, as the latter intended to use the Kharg to engage in hostile operations against Iraq, the ship could not be released to them. It was added that Britain accepted no responsibility for costs arising from maintaining the vessel or in any way making it seaworthy.⁶³ Matters were not helped either by the death of a member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and recently-elected MP, Bobby Sands, after a hunger strike while imprisoned at the Maze prison, on 5 May. His death set off an anti-British propaganda campaign in the Iranian media and many prominent leaders, including Bani-Sadr, sent messages of support to the IRA in their attempts to eject the British from Northern Ireland, whilst the street on the west side of the British embassy compound was renamed 'Bobby Sands Street'. There were warnings of potential anti-British demonstrations outside the embassy leading police to be stationed to disperse any potential demonstrators. Barrett was concerned tensions could arise again over the outcome of the delayed forthcoming trial of the two Iranians in London.⁶⁴

The abortive reopening

Yet, despite all the negative signs, London continued to hope for an improvement in relations. On 11 May Miers appointed Jennifer Margaret Taylor as acting British consul at Tehran.⁶⁵ This was a significant step, as an appointment had been made to a position which had remained vacant since September 1980. A few days later, Patrick Wogan of the FCO's Middle East Department, prepared a report looking at whether the embassy should be re-opened on 2 June, as per recommendations from Barrett and Bundy. Wogan recommended the proposal be agreed. After all, with the agreement of the Swedes, the number of staff in the interests section had already gradually increased.⁶⁶ Graham agreed with the proposal arguing, 'it is not strictly for the Iranians to object to this. If they do, formally, they would be in effect saying that they do not want relations

⁶³ FC08/4025, FCO Note on the Kharg to the Iranian Government (8 May 1981).

⁶⁴ FC08/4025, Barrett FAO Wogan (10 May 1981).

⁶⁵ FC08/4096 (11 May 1981).

⁶⁶ FC08/4098, Submission by Hogan FAO Miers and Graham (19 May 1981).

with us and the corollary would be the closure of their embassy in London and the placing of their interests under a protecting power. We need not put it so bluntly, but our note should notify, not ask permission'.⁶⁷

Following on from this, Lord Carrington was keen that the note for handing over to Rajai should be drafted to avoid formally asking the Iranians their permission to reopen the embassy. The purpose of the note was simply to inform the Iranian authorities of a change in the practical arrangements for British representation. As such, Bundy was to be advised that during his planned meeting with Rajai on 24 May, it must be made clear there had been no formal break in relations and therefore there was no question of seeking a formal resumption, especially since the Iranians had continued to operate a full embassy in London throughout the period.⁶⁸

Unfortunately, the Iranians were not prepared to welcome the proposed changes in British diplomatic representation so easily. Bundy was unable to get an appointment with either Rajai or his political adviser and so asked to see Shaikholeslam, one of the four new undersecretaries at the MFA appointed by Rajai on 25 May. The note was delivered and Shaikholeslam replied immediately these matters would need to be evaluated by the Iranian side, as they had never understood why the embassy had closed. Though the decision was accepted at the time, Shaikholeslam explained, it was not the Iranian wish and the closure had prevented them from being able to deal with Britain over the case of the students. Bundy pointed out that the embassy had closed because of security concerns at the time, which had now greatly diminished, and Britain wanted good relations with Iran. There had been a build up staff over the last few months to the point where it would be natural to reopen the embassy. In spite of this, Shaikholeslam said the Swedes should continue to protect British interests while the Iranians considered the matter. He also, at one point, suggested the present size of staff was adequate in relation to the work of an interests section and hinted there might be objections if staff increased, particularly given the size of the diplomatic staff of the Iranian embassy in London.⁶⁹

Barrett was understandably disappointed with Shaikholeslam's response, but agreed with Bundy that there was no alternative but to remain under the Swedish flag.⁷⁰ Carrington could only agree, feeling it prudent to not overreact to the obstructions placed by

⁶⁷ FCO8/4098, Submission by Hogan FAO Miers and Graham (19 May 1981).

⁶⁸ FCO8/4098, TELNO113 (21 May 1981).

⁶⁹ FCO8/4098, TELNO198 (25 May 1981).

⁷⁰ FCO8/4098, TELNO199 (25 May 1981).

Shaikholeslam, as it was possible (given earlier experiences) that he may have only been speaking for himself. Indeed, Carrington advised Barrett that he and Bundy should see either Rajai or his political adviser, sandwiching talk of reopening the embassy with other subjects so as not to appear to be going over Shaikholeslam's head, whilst the approach in London would be to talk to Tabataba'i who had a direct link to Bani-Sadr.⁷¹

Meanwhile in London, the tetchiness in bilateral relations was seen once more when Miers called on Iranian chargé d'affaires Ehdaie to express concern over Iranian behaviour relating to Bobby Sands. Ehdaie said it was the duty of the Iranian government to support freedom fighters and asked in turn why Britain had sent their chargé in Cairo to the Shah's funeral. Miers replied the Shah had been personally known to the Queen and asked, if indeed the Iranian government supported freedom fighters, then what about support for freedom fighters in Kurdistan? To this Ehdaie explained it was necessary to distinguish between freedom fighters and disaffected elements incited by external forces. Ehdaie also stated his astonishment at receiving the FCO note against the release of the Kharg. Miers reminded Ehdaie the Iranians had paid the last instalment on the vessel after they knew an export licence would be refused.⁷²

Reacting to the Iranian rebuttal

Bundy advised the Swedish MFA that Britain should remain calm over the reopening of the embassy and await the Iranian response.⁷³ Though the Iranian reaction to the British proposal was unwarranted, Barrett and Bundy believed that to retaliate by, for example, not accepting the new Iranian chargé d'affaires who was due to arrive in London, or postponing defence sales talks, might make things more difficult for the interests section. Barrett thus advised no reinforcement staff should arrive for the time being; Shaikholeslam, of course, had said staffing in the interests sections was too large.⁷⁴

In spite of Barrett's recommendation, when a report was prepared by Lamport, looking at the appointment of a new Iranian chargé to London (Ali Reza Farrokhrouz had been chosen to replace Dr Ehdaie), he recommended the appointment not be accepted; the Iranian MFA should be notified that a decision on whether the nominee was acceptable had not yet been made. The refusal of Farrokhrouz's appointment did not contravene the Vienna Convention and could bring pressure upon the Iranians to help facilitate the

⁷¹ FCO8/4098, TELNO119 (26 May 1981).

⁷² FCO8/4025, Miers FAO Barrett (26 May 1981).

⁷³ FCO8/4098, TELNO203 (28 May 1981).

⁷⁴ FCO8/4098, TELNO204 (28 May 1981).

reopening of the British embassy. However, it should still be emphasised to the Iranians, in order to avoid a bitter reaction on their part, that Farrokhrouz's appointment had not been finally rejected, but had merely not been accepted yet. It was suggested communicating this message could be done by avoiding sending a formal note and instead having Barrett send the MFA an 'aide-mémoire' followed by a verbal explanation. Lamport's recommendation was agreed upon by Graham and Miers.⁷⁵

With its proposal for limited action against Iran, Lamport's report was in line with previous FCO attitudes over the past few years, intended to make a measured but firm response to Iranian behaviour. However, the problem was that the solutions posited in these reports, though apparently sensible and reasonable to British eyes, risked attracting the further fury of the Iranians and actually presented a serious threat to the improved bilateral relations that London wanted. In this case, the points raised by Lamport were logical and valid, in that Britain was well within its rights to reject the appointment of the new chargé in the face of Iran putting obstacles to the normalisation of relations. However, to take such an action would most likely have provoked a furore, with the Iranians likely to take some further retaliatory action. Given this dilemma, it is not surprising that the appointment of the new chargé was actually accepted.

Despite Shaikholeslam's attempts to create an impediment to the normalisation of bilateral relations, London still discussed how progress might be achieved. An FCO brief for a ministerial meeting on Iran recommended measures to improve relations should include negotiations for the release of the Kharg on condition the ship not be used for hostilities with Iraq. It was also advised to enter talks over blocked contracts for defence equipment and Iranian debts should commence. Britain's overall objective should be to reduce Iran's self-inflicted isolation which made it vulnerable to Soviet influence, whilst also ensuring any improvement in relations did not adversely affect relations with neighbours, particularly Iraq. In order to facilitate this it was judged appropriate for Graham to receive an Iranian delegation led by Dr Merhan, Deputy Minister of Defence at the MFA. This would also be a good opportunity to discuss the case of Pyke and emphasise London's neutrality regarding the war. After this initial meeting, the Ministry of Defence would coordinate discussions with the other interested British parties and a second round of talks might follow.⁷⁶

Regarding the old issue of visas, in a tele-letter to the FCO on 29 June, Barrett advised the visa weapon should not be used, as it would be an illusion to think delaying the issue

⁷⁵ FCO8/4100, Lamport FAO Miers and Graham (28 May 1981).

⁷⁶ FCO8/4025, FCO Brief on Meeting Held by Ministers on Iran (17 June 1981).

of official visas to Iranians travelling to the UK would have any effect at the decision-making level in Tehran. In addition, only a small proportion of the official visas issued was for applicants going to the Iranian embassy in London. Of 140 official visas issued in the three months from 1 April, only 8 were for MFA personnel. The Iranians in turn were not holding up visas for replacement staff coming to the interests section. Barrett recommended delays should not be imposed until the coming phase of staff replacements was successfully completed; but by the end of August or September, London would be able to take a further look at the possibility of slowing down visa procedures for official Iranian applicants.⁷⁷

Barrett sent another tele-letter, on 30 June, in which he said the last few weeks had been a difficult and frustrating time for the staff of the interests section. Bani-Sadr had been deposed on 21 June after clashing with Khomeini. Before his deposition, Carrington, in a Cabinet meeting, lamented the potential loss of Bani-Sadr, 'who for all his faults was a comparatively moderate man'.⁷⁸ Whilst not creating a civil war, a form of 'urban terrorism' now erupted in Iran, with the government blaming terrorist actions on counterrevolutionary agents of the United States, Iraq and Israel. In such a situation Barrett saw little scope for work intended to 'win friends' by the interests section. Meanwhile, Pyke's case was no closer to a resolution.⁷⁹

The departure of Bani-Sadr, following the departure of Bazargan in November 1979, showed that those liberals who had attached themselves to Khomeini whilst he was in exile, and who had assumed positions of power after the revolution, were ultimately powerless. Unable to engage with the religious elements of the new regime, Britain had regularly sought to engage with the liberals, but their last major representative had gone with the ousting of Bani-Sadr. This further restricted engagement with the regime. It was difficult to see how Britain could ever enter into truly friendly relations with the fundamentalists within the regime, who were so opposed to the West and its values.

Barrett to step down

At this time, the decision was taken to replace Barrett with Nicholas Barrington as the head of the interests section. Barrett, though an experienced diplomat, had been asked to operate in a high pressure position above his pay grade, whilst an adequate replacement was sought. In fact, Barrington had already been to Sweden in March to

⁷⁷ FCO8/4098, Barrett FAO Hogan (29 June 1981).

⁷⁸ CAB128/71, CC(81)24th (18 June 1981).

⁷⁹ FCO8/4025, Barrett FAO Miers (30 June 1981).

meet with the MFA there.⁸⁰ Barrington was set to take over at a time when ill-feeling toward Britain was still harboured in Iranian circles. In a press conference given to internal Iranian press on 14 July, Ayatollah Moussavi declared the policies of Western countries generally had a racist aspect. In Britain a recent spate of riots in major cities, he reasoned, could be put down to the burden of inflation and unemployment which had been placed on the non-White population.⁸¹

Before leaving Iran, Barrett prepared a valedictory report of sorts, in a tele-letter to Miers. Despite the troubled Anglo-Iranian relationship, he cautioned against cutting ties, as the Soviet threat lingered and could not be ignored. He added, 'in its external relations, this remains a revolutionary regime committed to viewing the world through the distorting prism of ideology. Foreign policy and diplomacy are virtually non-existent: practically the only achievement to date has been the improbable one of bringing Iraq and the conservative Gulf states together in an understanding to oppose the export of the Islamic revolution'. In the absence of an embassy, it was thus best to continue to operate as an interests section and work on maintaining commercial ties.⁸²

In an interesting aside, on 16 July, Miers met with the new Iranian chargé Ali Reza Farookhrouz and his protocol officer, Mr Saiedy. The latter asked whether local employees were entitled to diplomatic immunity! It was a surprising question from a protocol officer. Miers replied the diplomatic staff of any embassy received both immunity and privileges. Non-diplomats would enjoy a certain amount of immunity agreed bilaterally between the states under the Vienna convention.⁸³ The exchange highlighted the continuing difficulties of dealing with a regime which employed diplomatic staff who lacked knowledge of the most basic questions of protocol.

Barrington arrives in Iran

Nicholas Barrington took over as the head of the interests section on 1 August. He was asked by Carrington to convey the following message: 'HMG will naturally afford Mr Farroukhrouz every normal courtesy and assistance as chargé d'affaires of the Islamic Republic of Iran. I trust that after the re-establishment of the British embassy in Tehran, which I hope will take place in the near future, the same courtesies and assistance will

⁸⁰ FCO8/4098, Coates FAO Miers (7 July 1981).

⁸¹ FCO8/4025, TELNO297 (15 July 1981).

⁸² FCO8/4025, Barrett FAO Miers (15 July 1981).

⁸³ FCO8/4025, Record of a meeting between Miers and the Iranian chargé d'affaires Farookhrouz and his Protocol Officer Mr Saiedy (16 July 1981).

be afforded to the new British chargé d'affaires'.⁸⁴ Therefore, the British aim was still to re-establish the embassy at an early date and they hoped that the Iranians would treat them on a reciprocal basis. To foster a positive response, Barrington suggested a message of congratulation be sent from Thatcher to Rajai on his election as President of Iran.⁸⁵

In his memoirs, Barrington provides a fascinating insight into the work of the interests section where his 'main task was to restore normal working relations as far as possible with the Islamic regime, whose policies were still unclear'.⁸⁶ He maintained the stock British position since the revolution, declaring Britain had no wish to interfere in Iran's internal affairs but hoped to continue trade for mutual benefit.⁸⁷ In spite of the absence of normal relations there was still a desire to do business with Iran, which represented a large and potentially lucrative market. An article in the Guardian on 10 December 1981 reported on Talbot sending a team of executives to Iran to finalise a new £1 billion export contract.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, commercial work was not without its problems⁸⁹:

'There are also an increasing number of stories circulating amongst importers that permission to import some sorts of goods from UK is being refused by the procurement and distribution centres on political grounds... it is a worrying trend and, combined with our lack of any agreement on mutual trade, may lead to further erosion of our share of the market'.

Though commercial work continued with a certain degree of success, 'reporting to London on political developments was not easy. Local press was no help. Television showed endless propaganda...We had to assume that our premises were bugged and that our excellent servants, however loyal they wanted to be, were likely to be under pressure to inform on who visited the embassy'.⁹⁰

Immediately after Barrington's arrival, another communication problem with Swedish ambassador Bundy arose. Barrington wrote to Graham to say he had been caused 'embarrassment' by Bundy being sent, via Stockholm, more of the original text of a recent FCO telegram than the ambassador had been shown by Barrington. Barrington

⁸⁴ FCO8/4025, TELNO257 (4 August 1981).

⁸⁵ FCO8/4025, Gomersall to Alexander (4 August 1981).

⁸⁶ Barrington, Nicholas, *Envoy: A Diplomatic Journey*, (London, 2014), 219.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 221.

⁸⁸ TNA. BT241/2846.

⁸⁹ TNA. BT241/2846, TELNO53, (10 December 1981).

⁹⁰ Barrington, *Envoy*, 229.

felt that, 'From the point of view of good relations and efficient operations here it would be much better if Bundy were to get FCO views through me rather than second hand through Stockholm'.⁹¹ But, responding to Barrington, Graham stated, 'We understand your difficulties but formally, all instructions should reach you by the Swedes... As you know the Swedes are touchy about procedure and have complained in the past about your predecessors acting independently of Bundy'.⁹²

This exchange highlights just one of the problems that can arise for interests sections in being part of another state's embassy. The Swedes, as the protecting power, had to be kept informed particularly since they needed to know of any problematic developments, such as the Iranian MFA's earlier dissatisfaction over Stephen (Jeremy) Barrett's meetings with Iranian officials. Nonetheless, reflecting back on events Barrington⁹³ felt that 'I was my own master. I probably did not consult Goran Bundy, the Swedish ambassador, my senior in age and experience, as much as he would have liked. He was a man of warmth and old fashioned courtesy who could occasionally be over sensitive. But he did not interfere in the work of our mission and was often helpful in approaching the authorities'.

Fresh faces, same issues

With a new face in charge of the interests section, the question of re-opening the embassy was again raised. When Bundy met Shaikholeslam and the new Iranian Foreign Minister, Mir-Hossein Musavi, on 11 August, the meeting proved friendly enough. Musavi thanked Carrington for his readiness to accord the Iranian chargé in London 'normal courtesy and assistance'. The Foreign Minister also expressed his hope 'that the nations of Iran and Britain will witness the commencement of a new era in the history of relations between the two countries'.⁹⁴ But it was soon evident that no rapid improvement in Anglo-Iranian relations could be expected. When Bundy asked Shaikholeslam whether Musavi's response was an indication of progress being made in Anglo-Iranian relations since the meeting on 25 May, the Iranian said nothing had really changed; relations had perhaps even deteriorated in the past two months. Bani-Sadr's departure had removed the internal Iranian differences over foreign policy and at present 'the will of the people' did not want a normalisation of relations.⁹⁵

⁹¹ FCO8/4025, TELNO334 (11 August 1981).

⁹² FCO8/4025, TELNO206 (13 August 1981).

⁹³ Barrington, *Envoy*, 214.

⁹⁴ FCO8/4025, TELNO332 (10 August 1981).

⁹⁵ FCO8/4025, Translation of Bundy's meeting with new Iranian Foreign Minister Musavi (13 August 1981).

After this disheartening meeting, Barrington reported, 'You will have heard that the chance of turning ourselves into a proper embassy seems slight in the next few months at least, and this means also that we should not attempt to increase our staff, which is already quite large by Tehran standards'.⁹⁶ On 17 August, he accompanied Bundy on a visit to the acting head of the West European Department at the MFA, Mustafavi. After speaking about Pyke, the conversation moved to general Anglo-Iranian relations. Both sides reiterated their commitment to good relations with one another but, on the subject of the re-opening of the embassy, Mustafavi personally thought it might be affected by the British treatment of the imprisoned student Nouripur. But Mustafavi also provided the standard Iranian reassurance over the protection of diplomats and foreign nationals.⁹⁷ Barrington, in effect, was trying to progress matters in the same manner as his immediate predecessor Barrett had done but, just like Barrett, did not enjoy much success.

Such exchanges led Carrington to remark that Britain's 'wish gradually to construct a more normal and less suspicious relationship is obstructed by the obsessions of extremists like Shaikholeslam, the uncertain durability of ministers and the distractions surrounding them. Nevertheless we must work towards a realisation by the Iranians that there are fields in which it is in both our interests to cooperate, and seek points where discreetly applied pressure can promote progress.'⁹⁸

The problem, as ever, was that any pressure on Iran simply risked making matters worse. Normalisation of relations would then be more difficult to achieve. Furthermore, Britain could not risk ceding any influence to the Soviets by departing from Iran. The need not to antagonise Tehran was given added significance when Khomeini accused Iranian missions worldwide of not sufficiently proselytising the revolution.⁹⁹ It was thus apparent that a pragmatic 'wait and see' approach remained the best British policy, especially since there was no guarantee that those currently in positions of power would survive. The internecine battles, which had kept the Iranian political scene in constant flux from the onset of the revolution, boiled over in extreme fashion on 30 August 1981, when President Rajai was killed by a bomb attack during a meeting of Iran's Supreme Defence Council, along with the Prime Minister Mohammad Javad Bahonar and three others. In a letter to the FCO, Chris Rundle, the political officer in Tehran, pointed out that 'less than half the leading figures of the beginning of the revolution have survived

⁹⁶ FCO8/4098, Barrington to Brighty (17 August 1981).

⁹⁷ FCO8/4025, TELNO355 (17 August 1981).

⁹⁸ FCO8/4025, TELNO222 (26 August 1981).

⁹⁹ FCO8/4100, Barrington FAO Miers (30 August 1981).

till today' and that the regime was fast running short of experienced and well-known figures.¹⁰⁰

The Interests Section in Autumn 1981

As of September 1981 there were only 45 British citizens in Iran, 32 in Tehran.¹⁰¹ There were eleven British staff in Iran, compared to six diplomatic staff at the Iranian embassy in London.¹⁰² Partly in light of such figures, Barrington's preference was that the size of the interests section should not be increased in the foreseeable future; under the present conditions, it was better to have a compact team of good staff who were fully occupied. Barrington was also against opening a fully fledged visa section, separately housed as it was in the past. But, this did not mean that he had given up hope of re-opening the embassy. Far from it. By not increasing staff at that moment in time, he reasoned, the argument could be put to the Iranians that one of the benefits to them of allowing the embassy to reopen would be a more efficient visa operation.¹⁰³ Barrington¹⁰⁴ was of the view that 'on visas we had something that the Iranians wanted' which explains why despite not allowing the embassy to re-open the Iranians did not impede the interests section from carrying out its work.

But Barrington was well aware of the scale of problems in dealing with Iran. At the end of October, he reported on Khomeini that there was 'no perceptible softening in the old man's political attitudes. He looks increasingly like a latter-day Mao, determined to preserve the virility and purity of the Islamic revolution against the pragmatists and creeping westernisation'. The Ayatollah had been encouraging revolution in other Islamic countries, especially Egypt and Iraq, as well as criticising both Superpowers. In turn 'there are in fact few countries who do not experience difficulties in their relations with Iran'.¹⁰⁵ In such a situation, there was little interest in prioritising normal diplomatic relations with Britain.

On a more positive note, Barrington believed he had excellent relations with other heads of mission in Tehran:

¹⁰⁰ FCO8/4004, Rundle to Coates (16 September 1981).

¹⁰¹ FCO8/4026, British subjects in Iran at September 1981.

¹⁰² FCO8/4026 – Iran.

¹⁰³ FCO8/4099, Barrington FAO Dalton (30 September 1981).

¹⁰⁴ Barrington, *Envoy*, 218.

¹⁰⁵ FCO8/4004, TELNO539 (29 October 1981).

'I am in fact treated here like a head of mission by them. We are far from being social recluses, indeed rather the reverse since, although we keep a lowish profile, other diplomats value talking to the only mission, with the exception of the Russians, that can boast Persian speakers. As you know, we have five...'.¹⁰⁶

As staffing levels increased to the extent that the interests section became larger than most embassies operating in Tehran, the British interests section was carrying out the same level of work as an embassy would have done. Before the closure of the embassy there had already been a significant reduction in staff, in view of the smaller size of the expatriate community and shrinking interests. Although there was a desire to re-open the embassy as a statement of normal Anglo-Iranian relations, the absence of an embassy did not impede Britain from fulfilling its now more limited aims of consular work and the protection of commercial deals. This is in line with Young's observation that in several instances 'where interests sections were created, diplomats seem to have been able to carry out their duties quite effectively, even in the absence of an ambassador'.¹⁰⁷ Barrington felt he 'was treated in all respects, except protocol, as an ambassador'.¹⁰⁸

Barrington¹⁰⁹ wrote a three-month progress report in early November, in which he hoped that the fanaticism of the regime was only a passing one which should 'mellow over the years, softened by pragmatism and the more traditional Iranian attributes'. As for the question of power, it was divided between various factions, but Khomeini remained as the arbiter and father figure, 'a vindictive and blinkered old man who appears to care nothing for the suffering of his people, so long as they are fulfilling his scheme of things'. The report noted that London was still considered by many Iranians 'to be a powerful and nefarious influence' and suffered from its association with the USA; one possible reason behind the regime's decision not to re-open the embassy was because it did not want to be seen to be colluding with London. However, in spite of these frosty relations there was 'a readiness to trade and do business at working level.' It was imperative Britain must always be 'correct' in its dealings, emphasising that only if bilateral problems, such as Pyke's imprisonment, were resolved could help be given on issues where Iran needed Britain. It was also crucial to defend economic interests, as exports to Iran were still worth around £400 million a year.

¹⁰⁶ FCO8/4027, Barrington FAO Miers (8 November 1981).

¹⁰⁷ Young, John, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy: A Case Study of British Practice, 1963-1976*, (Cambridge, 2008), 224.

¹⁰⁸ Barrington, Nicholas, *Nicholas Meets Barrington*, (London, 2014), 131.

¹⁰⁹ FCO8/4027, Barrington FAO Miers (9 November 1981).

No early re-opening of the embassy

At this same time, in order to persuade the Iranians to allow the re-opening of the embassy, Barrington developed an unusual ruse with the Swedes whereby they would say they wanted to rid themselves of the wretched British, who were a burden. A Swedish embassy member, Arne Kjellstrand, took this line in a conversation with Mustafavi and also made some disparaging remarks about London's past role in Iran. Surprisingly, Mustafavi spoke in Britain's defence saying it, like France, could not be compared with the superpowers, as its policies basically presented no threat to Iran and Britain indeed had a positive standing amongst Iranian people. Kjellstrand asked why, if that was the case, relations were not put on a friendly basis? Mustafavi replied that there were a number of issues, such as the attack on the Iranian embassy and problems for Iranians visiting Britain in being held up for long periods at immigration, for which Iran had sought an explanation but had not received any.¹¹⁰ There was an abiding sense, by now, of Iran toying with Britain, by hinting that relations could be improved but never actually working towards this. This was seen again at a reception on 6 December, where Bundy yet again asked Mustafavi about reopening the embassy. Mustafavi replied that Sadr would be talking to Barrington soon and, if the answers he brought from the meeting were satisfactory, then there should be no problem.¹¹¹ However, by the end of 1981 the embassy was yet to reopen.

In fact, looked at in retrospect, Anglo-Iranian relations were in a pattern from which they could not easily escape. Pyke was eventually released on 28 January 1982, after being held without charge for 17 months. As for the Kharg, it was finally delivered to Iran in 1984. The embassy would not reopen for many years, during which time there were fresh issues which strained relations. In May 1986 Britain refused to accept Hussein Malouk, as Iranian chargé d'affaires in London, on the grounds he had taken part in the seizure of the U.S. embassy. Iran reciprocated by blocking the appointment of Hugh James Arbuthnott as head of the interests section. Subsequently in May 1987, Britain's number two at the Iranian embassy Edward Chaplin was kidnapped leading to the foreign office withdrawing its entire embassy staff of 19 diplomats from Iran and leaving the Iranians with one solitary diplomat in London.¹¹² In 1989-90 relations became even worse: Britain had no representation whatsoever due to the fatwa issued against the author Salman Rushdie, for the publication of his book *The Satanic Verses*, which drew widespread protests from Muslims around the world.

¹¹⁰ FCO8/4027, TELNO560 (10 November 1981).

¹¹¹ FCO8/4027, TELNO616 (7 December 1981).

¹¹² Dickie, John, *Inside the Foreign Office*, (London, 1992), 163.

The embassy only eventually reopened in 1990, and even then it was at chargé d'affaires level, with the appointment of David Reddaway. It was not until 1997 that Britain was again able to have an ambassador to Iran in Sir Nicholas Browne who, fittingly perhaps, had previously authored the report on the embassy's failure to predict the revolution. However, it was not long before relations again became strained. The embassy was again closed following an attack on it on 29 November 2011 (after which an interests section was again set up within the Swedish embassy) but reopened in August 2015.

Summary

Interests sections are normally created when there is a break in diplomatic relations. But, unusually, in the Anglo-Iranian case in 1980 it was used as an emergency measure to prevent a complete break and the British hoped to move towards a normalisation of relations as soon as possible. The Swedes as a protecting power generally proved themselves to be helpful, most notably in attempts to secure the release of British detainees, but they were also sensitive to the need not to upset the Iranian government. The main problem, however, was that many Iranians in positions of power did not understand the nuances of Britain operating its mission as an interests section; they mistakenly believed the withdrawal in September constituted a break in relations when in fact it did not. Even the end of the U.S. hostage crisis and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war (which ought to have made Tehran look for friends abroad) failed to bring a major improvement in relations. Nevertheless, the experience of being unable to re-open the embassy showed that Carrington had erred when taking the decision to close it. He had done so on the grounds that re-opening would not present a serious challenge, as no break in diplomatic relations had taken place. Such a view miscalculated not only the level of hostility from some Iranians, but also how denying reopening was a tactic which could be employed by their government as a bargaining chip.

Though the Swedes were happy with British heads of the interests section, they did not necessarily agree with British plans for the increase of the numbers of staff for a number of reasons. These included the potential security threat against Britain and the danger of the interests section growing to the extent that it would surpass the size of the Swedish mission. Nevertheless, British pressure for increasing the staff size of the interests section saw reinforcements arrive. There was also a continuing push from London for normalisation of relations but, while some Iranians seemed ready to work for an improvement, many were not. The Iranian MFA's objections to Barrett meeting them was indicative of a wider antipathy toward Britain within the regime, a situation that only

grew worse as liberals like Bani-Sadr lost power in the ongoing internecine conflict. Retaliatory actions were discussed in response to Shaikholeslam's rebuttal of a reopening of the embassy, but none of these were followed for fear of further infuriating the Iranians even more. Iran was still a country which was important to British interests, not least because of the commercial opportunities it offered, its strategic position in the Middle East and the need to prevent it from veering towards the Soviet bloc.

Nicholas Barrington took over as the head of an interests section which was, though much smaller than the pre-revolutionary mission, still larger than many fully-fledged embassies operating in Tehran. It again had a political reporting capacity, as well as consular duties. Under Barrington the interests section continued its scaled-down activities but Britain grew no closer to re-opening its embassy. At the end of 1981 London had a working relationship with Iran, due to some mutual trading interests and individuals travelling between the two; links that demanded consular assistance, but not much more. The relationship would trudge along at this reduced level for years, with Britain denied in its hopes of reopening the embassy and forced to continue its operation as an interests section under Swedish protection.

Conclusion

The British experience of carrying on diplomacy with Iran through a period of revolution, illustrates the challenge faced by governments when they are forced to adapt to hostile regimes in states with whom there had previously been friendly relations. Iran mattered a great deal to London from the late eighteenth century onwards, as reflected by repeated British attempts to influence the country down to the mid-twentieth century, when there was even a joint Anglo-Soviet occupation. While maintaining an active presence was no longer possible in the following decades, as Britain retreated from its world role, commercial relations grew substantially, especially during the 1970s, to the point where the Tehran embassy was primarily engaged in supporting trade. In the British embassy, Chancery-led political activities became a sideline in terms of the resources dedicated to them. With the West engulfed in an economic crisis, partly thanks to oil price rises in 1973-74 that Tehran had helped inspire, Iran became more important as a trading partner than ever, so that London was prepared to bite its tongue as the Shah carried out human rights violations against his own people; using the army and the secret police, SAVAK, to crush all opposition in order to consolidate his repressive autocracy. However, the protests against his regime in 1978 were so vociferous and strong that he could do nothing to quell unrest and even his armed forces abandoned him, leading to his dethronement in January 1979.

Failing to predict the revolution

The fall of the Shah came as genuine surprise to London, especially as he was succeeded by a radical Islamic republic headed by the Ayatollah Khomeini; these developments were not predicted by either the embassy or the FCO. Until the very end of 1978, ambassador Anthony Parsons was unshakeable in his belief the emperor would ride out the crisis, dire as it was, because he had ridden out previous crises and still enjoyed the support of the armed forces. The ambassador was not alone in his views; the Americans also felt the Shah would survive the armed insurrection and Western observers generally underestimated the potential power of the mullahs. The failure to predict the revolution brought about much soul-searching in diplomatic circles and prompted the Foreign Secretary, David Owen, to commission the Browne Report, which concluded that the embassy was too focused on commercial activities to the detriment of political reporting, meaning that the influence of opposition elements was not accurately gauged.

But, arguably, there were understandable reasons why the embassy had behaved as it had. Though unusual for placing such an overwhelming emphasis on commercial

activities compared to other British missions, it had been asked to do this because Iran mattered such a great deal in economic terms. In any case, the importance of trade promotion for diplomats had been emphasised over the years by British governments, in line with the 1969 Duncan Report and other studies, and Britain was in a particularly weak economic state in the 1970s, where trade with Iran seemed particularly valuable. Moreover, during the Cold War, the Shah had acted as an effective foil to Soviet attempts to gain a foothold within the country (Communism seeming a much greater threat to the west at this point than did radical Islam). Had a radical change of policy taken place, whereby the Shah was abandoned when he faced strong internal opposition, this carried with it a great deal of uncertainty for Western interests. There was no absolute guarantee he would be overthrown; had he clung onto power, the impact on Anglo-Iranian relations could have been devastating, with retaliatory actions that would have adversely affected Britain's economic interests and potentially thrown Iran into the arms of the Soviets. For embassy staff to approach opposition elements was in itself problematic, as there was a plurality of opponents with no one dominant element. Moreover, there were no guarantees that opposition elements would welcome overtures from Britain.

Put simply, London felt it could not afford to 'hedge its bets', as it was dangerous to work against the status quo and upset the 'momentum syndrome'¹ at a time when Britain was struggling to improve its balance of payments and the Shah was apparently such a strong and reliable partner. Though the beleaguered autocrat was terminally ill, this was not known at the time; instead, he exuded the air of confidence he had always done and claimed to be in complete control of the situation. There may have been an element of wishful thinking in the British outlook, but it is possible to sympathise with the position of Parsons and his embassy as they recommended that support for the regime should continue. This seemed the best option to enable Britain to achieve its economic aims, as well as to limit Soviet ambitions, at a time when détente was evidently coming to an end.

Challenges of engaging the revolutionary regime

With the fall of the Shah, Britain was left to conduct business with an Islamic Republic which was at best lukewarm to its advances and whose belief system was alien to the West. Following Khomeini's return to Iran in February 1979, there was turmoil, marked by a purge of the old regime, internecine conflict between competing factions and civil conflict with minorities such as the Kurds. This continued to 1981, when the President

¹ Interview with Munro (13 February 2012).

and premier were both killed in a bomb attack. Liberals, such as Bazargan and Bani-Sadr, were constantly undermined by the Revolutionary Council. Khomeini complicated matters by disclaiming any official titles, choosing instead to control events from afar in Qom. Chaos reigned with the Komitehs acting as vigilante organisations, complicating a power structure which was already inchoate.

In dealing with this complex situation, other governments faced unusual challenges on the diplomatic front. Initially there was the problem for London of deciding which Prime Minister to recognise, with both Bazargan and Bakhtiar in post simultaneously, the former chosen by Khomeini, the latter by the Shah. There was also the problem of deciding whether recognition was *de facto* or *de jure*, as the Shah had not officially abdicated his throne and no head of state had been appointed by the new government. The difficulty was compounded by the fact there was no constitution, which clarified the structure of governance, until October 1979. The issue of recognition also brought with it other concerns in terms of diplomatic practice, such as from whom exactly agreement should be sought for the appointment of Sir John Graham as the new ambassador and to whom Graham was to present his credentials.

In such a difficult atmosphere, the embassy did its best to preserve economic and other interests. That Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government did not radically alter the position from that of James Callaghan showed how important Iran remained. Khomeini was impossible to talk to, he showed no interest in engaging with most western states (or, fortunately, the Soviets given his 'neither East nor West' philosophy) and so there were no real attempts to communicate with him. The Revolutionary Council was similarly difficult to engage with. It did not help that Britain was heavily weighed down by its history of internal interference, which was exploited by some influential Iranians, making successful engagement that much harder to achieve. Contact was established with some liberals in senior positions and it is understandable why, in the absence of alternatives, this option was pursued by the embassy. However, the liberals could not take decisive action, because Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council undermined them.

With uncertainty becoming the norm, it was not easy to carry out long-term planning. A pragmatic attitude was thus employed throughout the period from 1978-81 where thinking was very much reactive in nature, concentrating on immediate issues at hand whilst waiting for the post-revolutionary turmoil to settle down. The embassy was therefore in effect a 'holding mission'² and 'salvage operation'³, seeking to consolidate

² Interview with Graham (28 May 2013).

³ Interview with Munro (13 February 2012).

existing commercial interests, whilst there was a steady reduction in staffing numbers down to November 1979. The decision to reduce numbers reflected an acceptance that the relationship with Iran had become less fruitful, that trade had lessened and other ties were being broken. The British community significantly dwindled in numbers as many chose to quit a volatile country, which had seen the embassy itself attacked in both November 1978 and November 1979.

The situation was not helped by constant changes of personnel, creating a situation where new working relationships had to be constantly recreated as old ones were broken. The majority of these individuals representing the regime were dogmatic, inflexible and, so far as diplomacy was concerned, inexperienced and thus displayed a lack of awareness of diplomatic practice or nomenclature. This was reflected by the disregard for the Vienna Conventions in several instances including the U.S. embassy hostage crisis, attacks and threats against the British embassy, the opening of diplomatic bags and detainment of British citizens. In reaction to these and other challenges there was constant contingency planning within the embassy and FCO. A number of options were considered for retaliating against the Iranians, but most were not pursued as they would only make matters worse, affecting bilateral relations detrimentally and putting economic interests at risk.

There was also the process of engaging with the Iranian embassy in London, which now acted as a zealous representative of the regime it served, ousting most of the staff who had served the old regime and even demanding that any of the Shah's officials who still resided in Britain should be sent to Iran to face summary justice. The embassy, under successive chargé d'affaires, dealt with a series of issues including: the U.S. embassy hostage crisis; the holding of the Kharg; the detention of the Iranian students; Iranian support for Bobby Sands and the IRA; and the Iranian request to move its embassy premises. In these exchanges, the FCO were represented by seasoned diplomats such as Miers, Lamport and Moberly whilst the embassy personnel were inexperienced, showing a lack of understanding of issues and a dogmatic approach to communication, as when they reasoned that they were merely espousing the virtues of the revolution by supporting Bobby Sands.

Response to US embassy hostage crisis

After he fled Iran, the Shah's desire to move to Britain was quashed because it was realised how much of a backlash this would create. But the U.S. took a different approach and the result was the sudden occupation of their embassy in Tehran on 4

November 1979. Rather than help secure the release of the hostages, Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council proclaimed their inability to force the students to release them.

As Sir John Graham has noted, the taking of the embassy was a significant turning point for Britain's own relationship with Iran. Iran's refusal to release the hostages for 444 days made establishing good relations with the new regime extremely hard. With such a grave violation of the Vienna Convention having taken place, and given previous, albeit less serious violations, it seemed there was no guarantee that the British might not face a similar attack. The hostage crisis forced the British embassy to scale down operations even further with more reductions of staff and serious discussions taking place on closing the embassy altogether.

London was also asked to take decisive action by its principal ally, Washington, including sanctions in protest over the hostage crisis. However, this was not desirable as long as Iran remained so important in economic terms, even in a situation where trade had declined since the Shah's day. Neither were other European Community (EC) countries keen on taking strong actions against Tehran. Thus Britain faced a difficult balancing act between maintaining interests in Iran and showing support for the Americans. The actions agreed in May 1980 by the EC were not as far-reaching as the ones suggested by the Americans and allowed London to adopt a position whereby it took some action but not ones likely to hurt relations with Iran much. Alongside this collective action by EC members, there were quite frequent meetings between Community heads of mission in Tehran, and sometimes of the wider diplomatic corps, which allowed members to discuss their concerns and act as a kind of mutual support group.

Creating an interests section

The situation became even worse as Khomeini and the religious factions started to exert total control. When this happened the regime became more hostile than ever toward Britain. Reddaway's letter to Lamport in August 1980 clearly details just how intolerable the situation was. The detention of Waddell, the Colemans and Pyke showed how great a threat there was to the safety of British citizens. For Thatcher's Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, the threats made against the Tehran embassy after the arrest of Iranian demonstrators in London in August 1980, were serious enough to warrant a closure. The mission would henceforth operate as an interests section, with Sweden as a protecting power. The Swedes were chosen for their neutral stance, experience and desire to help. Despite some problems with passing on messages and some disagreements about how best to deal with the Iranian government, the Swedes proved to be effective partners,

often meeting with the Iranians to represent British interests, whilst remaining sensitive to the need not to upset the Tehran government.

Instead of opening an interests section, an alternative option would have been a complete break of diplomatic relations, but this was not pursued for a number of reasons. Existing and future British economic interests would most probably have been harmed, there was a real fear of the Soviets stepping into the void and the act of breaking relations is such a powerful statement of a breakdown in communication that it is only considered as a last resort, when all other possible avenues have been exhausted. When relations are broken it is a challenge to re-establish them at a later date because of lingering ill feeling that makes the process akin to 'painting on a dirty canvas'.⁴

What was unusual about the Tehran case was the fact that interests sections are normally opened when a break of relations has occurred, yet in this instance one was opened as a means of continuing relations in a manner which reduced the risk of revolutionary violence against embassy staff. However, to British dismay, the decision to close the embassy was treated by most Iranians, who did not possess a deep knowledge of diplomatic practice, as a break in relations – and they took the decision badly. This meant that, when a desire was expressed to reopen the embassy on the grounds the threat to British citizens had dissipated, it was turned down by individuals such as Shaikholeslam. Iran persistently obstructed the reopening for several reasons, including as a protest against London's decision not to release the Kharg and because of the decision to not supply arms after it became engaged in war with Iraq. Under the two Barretts, the British entertained hopes of an early re-opening but, by the end of 1981 it was clear that, despite the odd positive signal from Tehran, this was unlikely to occur. The British embassy did not open again until 1990.

The interests section initially consisted of one diplomat, plus some locally-engaged support staff, and was thus extremely limited in its activities. This quickly led to a push to increase staffing. It prioritised consular work where previously the embassy in its heyday under Parsons was primarily engaged in commercial activities. The Swedes did not necessarily agree with plans for the increase of the numbers of staff, as they still felt there was a security threat against Britain and also the danger of the interests section growing, to the extent it would surpass in size the Swedish mission as the protecting

⁴ Warren Christopher, "Normalisation of Diplomatic Relations" in Elmer Plischke (ed), (1979), *Modern Diplomacy: The Art and The Artisans*, (Washington, 1979), 39.

power and in effect operate as an embassy whilst still being called an interests section. It continued to grow in size throughout 1981 to the extent that it was larger than most fully operational missions in Tehran and sufficient for Britain to carry out its aims, including a revival of the political reporting role, so that London could keep abreast of developments in Iran. But, the lack of a full embassy was a visible reflection of the continuing poor relations between London and the Islamic Republic.

Lessons from the case study

Assessing the performance of the British diplomatic apparatus and the Tehran embassy in particular between 1978 and 1981 is far from straightforward. In places such as Washington where relations with the host state, though strained at times, never come close to a breaking point, it is easier to compare the tenure of ambassadors operating in a friendly environment with varying degrees of success.⁵ It is very different to face the challenge of operating in a politically unstable country where there is hostility and even the threat of violence against the mission. The Tehran embassy, in the period of this study, operated in wildly contrasting conditions. What was first a proactive mission very soon became a reactive one, as the emphasis shifted from growing interests to salvaging existing ones. The performance of the British diplomatic apparatus must be measured within the context of the unusual and difficult challenges with which it had to deal. Set in this context, British diplomatic engagement with Iran, delivered primarily through the Tehran mission, was as effective as could be expected. At the start of 1978 the strong commercial performance of Britain in Iran can partly be attributed to the efforts of a mission which worked incessantly to aid growth by fostering close relations with the Shah and his regime. After the revolution, these economic interests undoubtedly decreased, but the Tehran mission still sought to engage with the new revolutionary regime whenever possible. The mission also successfully dealt with significant organisational changes, not least a shrinking staff, shifting its focus increasingly upon consular activities in a low key manner which on the whole avoided negative attention from the Iranians, at least until the catalytic arrest of Iranian students in London in August 1980.

Between 1978 and the end of 1981, Iran posed a series of diplomatic challenges to the United Kingdom. Dealing with the Shah had been sensitive enough, but the Islamic revolutionary regime was extremely dogmatic and engagement with it required a great

⁵ Hopkins, Michael F et al (eds), *The Washington Embassy: British Ambassadors to the United States 1939-1977*, (Basingstoke, 2009).

deal of patience. Britain exhibited this patience to a large extent, dealing with various crises in the period, including blatant acts of hostility and breaches in diplomatic law by the Iranians, without resorting to breaking relations. The Iranians much like their French and Bolshevik predecessors, initially rejected diplomacy on the grounds that it was a tool of the oppressor states. But the revolutionaries soon learned they could not afford to ignore diplomacy, as they had economic and strategic aims which could not be fulfilled without engagement. Thus relations continued with states such as Britain but at a more diminished level, surrounded by distrust and misunderstanding.

The British experience of dealing with this particular revolutionary regime suggests that, no matter how hard it is to communicate, it is crucial to maintain relations at some level. This will not only allow interests to be served in such mundane fields as consular and commercial affairs, but also ensure that fruitful long-term relations are not completely jeopardised by adopting an aggressive stance. This includes avoiding breaking relations even when it is tempting to do so (which was the case after the Tehran embassy was attacked twice) as re-establishing relations in the future can be slow and difficult. Though the situation was far from ideal after the closure of the embassy, by not breaking relations off Britain was still able to pursue its economic interests and have reduced relations and eventually reopen the embassy in 1990. In stark contrast, the Americans, though admittedly forced to break relations in extreme circumstances in April 1980, have at the time of writing yet to reopen their embassy.

One of the main issues that arises when addressing the issue of engagement with new regimes is that of recognition. States have to make decisions on whether to grant recognition and also decide whether recognition is informally *de facto* or more formally *de jure*. In making such decisions states have to assess the positives of having relations with new regimes and whether these positives outweigh the negatives. Conversely, if a state chooses not to recognise a revolutionary regime, for whatever reason including disagreeing with the ideological foundations of the revolution, then they must be fully aware of the repercussions of non-recognition which include the likelihood of a break in relations and general mutual animosity. It was always quite clear that, due to the important economic interests Britain held in Iran, recognition needed to be conferred.

The British experience correlates with Calvert's view that revolutionaries frequently reject traditional diplomatic methods and techniques.⁶ This can be seen in the difficulties which arose in seeking to engage with the new regime as well as in the many breaches

⁶ Peter Calvert, *Revolution and International Politics*, (London, 1984), 152.

of the Vienna Conventions. These breaches were committed without any Iranian acknowledgement that they clearly contravened long established diplomatic ideals; ideals which the majority of the international community, including Iran, was party to. In treating other states in a tentative and cold manner, the diplomats of the new revolutionary regime were conforming to Armstrong's view that revolutionaries view diplomacy with suspicion.⁷ In the numerous meetings the Tehran embassy and the FCO held with representatives of the new regime, discussions were often terse, with no real desire from the Iranians to build strong relations with Britain. During the post-revolutionary period there were also frequent allusions to the role played by Britain in the past in propping up the Shah's regime, by giving him almost unconditional support whilst flagrant human rights abuses were committed. The way in which the attempt to reopen the Tehran embassy was persistently obstructed is an example of how the new regime did not really care much for normalisation of relations; it preferred instead to maintain relations at a reduced level. Objecting to the reopening of the embassy represented for the Iranians an exertion of their power over Britain.

However, the aggression displayed toward Britain by the Iranians is not necessarily an indication that revolutionary regimes are hostile toward all whom they encounter. Rajai's division of the countries of the world included fraternal countries, that is those accepting the Islamic Revolution completely and behaving accordingly (Syria, Libya); friendly Islamic countries where the government was not yet fully in conformity with the revolution; and neutral countries aiming to keep apart from the hegemony of either East or West (the rest of the Third World, including countries such as India and Yugoslavia).⁸ Weighed down by its history of intervention in Iranian affairs, Britain, along with the USA, experienced the greatest difficulty in its attempts to build relations with the new regime. Therefore it is fair to say that when engaging with revolutionary states, past relations, whether positive or negative, are likely to have an impact upon whether future relations are successful or not.

This study has also confirmed the validity of Craig's assertion that the problem with revolutionary states is that they lack the experience, assurance and, in some cases, even the trained public servants needed to conduct foreign relations.⁹ As part of the post-revolutionary purge many experienced diplomats who had served under the old regime were removed. In their place came in individuals who, in most instances, had never served in diplomatic posts and as such displayed a bullish and dogmatic stance, which

⁷ David Armstrong, 'The Diplomacy of Revolutionary States' in Jan Melissen (ed), *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice*, (Basingstoke, 1999), 44.

⁸ FCO8/4025, Barrett FAO Miers (28 May 1981).

⁹ Gordon Craig, *War, Politics and Diplomacy: Selected Essays*, (London, 1966), 251.

often also showed a lack of understanding of diplomatic practice, as evidenced by the failure to see wrong in actions such as the taking of the U.S. embassy. For states wishing to engage with revolutionary states it is thus important to be aware that representatives of these new regimes may be dogmatic and not well versed in diplomatic procedures; they must adapt to these individuals accordingly. In such difficult conditions the diplomatic corps can prove to be an invaluable institution. It can be gauged from the Iranian example (with EC resident ambassadors in Tehran at one time, in December 1979, meeting daily, sometimes even twice a day) that the diplomatic corps can give diplomats the chance to collaborate and develop strategies, in conditions where the usual forms of political reporting diminish, as missions reduce in size. The corps serves as a kind of mutual support system.

This study brings into sharp focus the question of what exactly the primary function of embassies should be. The Tehran embassy was criticised for focusing too much on commercial work as part of the fallout of the overall failure to predict the revolution would occur. There are those such as Edwards who see the primary job of Foreign Office staff as the collection and analysis of political information with all other activities secondary.¹⁰ In stark contrast, Owen's view is that the political work of an embassy cannot be divorced from its other roles - its economic work, or from export promotion, aid administration or cultural activities.¹¹ In answering the question of an embassy's primary function as it related to the Iranian case, then, it can be seen that the embassy was merely doing what it was asked to do by superiors in London. The decision to focus primarily on commercial activities before the revolution, though informed by the embassy, was primarily taken in London by government. In turn, the increased focus on consular activities after the revolution was taken by London in reaction to diminishing commercial relations and a reduction of staff who had previously been employed to carry out commercial work. Thus diplomatic missions are flexible institutions, which can fulfil different roles, and they merely act upon what is decided by their respective governments. This was also highlighted by the way in which Iranian plenipotentiaries were told their primary task was to export the revolution to the countries to which they were posted.

Having studied London's diplomatic relationship with Tehran in a time of revolution, it can be seen that the ability of the British mission to fulfil its functions, as set out by the Vienna Convention and analysed by Berridge in his *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, were seriously damaged, especially after the creation of an interests section. As the size

¹⁰ Ruth Edwards, *True Brits: Inside the Foreign Office*, (London, 1994), 199.

¹¹ TNA CAB129/202/2, CP(78)72 (7 July 1978).

of the community dwindled, Britain continued to be represented in Iran, but at a reduced level: they had to conduct high-level business via the Swedes, no longer had an ambassador of their own to attend functions and no longer flew the Union Jack. The interests section could only interact with the Iranian MFA at a low-to-middle level and when Stephen Jeremy Barrett tried to engage in higher level meetings the MFA soon complained to the Swedes. The processes of lobbying, for example on reopening the embassy, or negotiating agreements, such as defence sales, became much more difficult. The promotion of 'friendly relations' became virtually impossible, especially as liberals lost influence in Tehran; it would have been unwise for London to do much by way of 'public diplomacy' (and in any case the British Council office, which engaged in cultural diplomacy was closed); and the mission was not able to clarify British intentions very successfully because it was so distrusted by many Iranians. As the interests section grew in size it was possible to do more in terms of political reporting and providing consular services, including help for businesses, but at a reduced level compared to pre-revolutionary times. Indeed, the only one of Berridge's roles that seems to have survived in a healthy state was the provision of policy advice to the home government in London, where the views of the Tehran mission do consistently seem to have been listened to, even if they were not always followed.

Though there is a clear distinction in the British diplomatic apparatus between those who decide policy (the Foreign Secretary, Prime Minister and Cabinet) and those who implement policy (the FCO and its missions abroad), the lines became blurred at times, as the Tehran embassy became heavily involved in advising on policy making. Owing to the economic importance of Iran, the mission there was held in high regard in London, a fact underlined not only by the lack of serious criticism of it from London throughout the period of study, but also by the manner in which it was consulted on a range of issues. Most notably, perhaps, Parsons was able to intervene at Cabinet level to ensure Chrysler benefitted from government aid. Although general policy was firmly geared toward exploiting economic opportunities in Iran, Parsons was instrumental in pushing for the even greater commercial focus of the embassy to the detriment of political activities. The same can be said in the case of Parsons' continued push to support the Shah throughout 1978, where his persistent emphasis that the autocrat would not fall helped deepen British support for the beleaguered ruler. However, Parsons was not always successful in his attempts to shape policy. His decision to side with the Shah and push for greater censorship of the BBC Persian Service was met with stiff resistance. After Parsons' departure, Graham, as an experienced and seasoned veteran, was consulted by the government and his views on recognising the new regime, not severing relations after the American embassy takeover and not acceding to American desires for the imposition

of harsh sanctions were all taken on board. Thus the Tehran mission was one which clearly had an input in the policy making process during the period of study.

Nonetheless, criticisms can certainly be made of British diplomacy during the period. The decision to close the embassy and open an interests section was taken on the understanding that the embassy would be reopened again soon with very little problems. But in making such an assumption London erred. With the influence of the liberals dramatically on the wane and the hardliners tightening their grip, there had already been an experience of increasingly difficult relations. This is something that should have been factored in by Carrington and others. The Iranians, dogmatic as they were, also had a poor understanding of diplomatic procedures and thus interpreted the closure as a hostile act; partly because of this they later objected to the reopening of the embassy. The depths of a revolution were not, therefore, the ideal time for London to experiment with the novelty of opening an interests section without breaking diplomatic relations.

In line with the findings of Beck¹² who has found an endemic failure to 'learn from history' in shaping policy within the FCO, Britain was also guilty of not using historical experience of earlier revolutions to inform policy in Iran, choosing instead to reach decisions after an assessment of the contemporary situation. One reads through FCO files in vain to find any meaningful references to earlier revolutions. Yet, by looking at the example of the PRC for example London could have learnt that conferring recognition upon a new revolutionary regime of pivotal economic importance does not mean that normal relations will ensue. General studies of revolutionary regimes could have brought to the fore the particular difficulties of engaging with revolutionaries who tend to reject the conventions of traditional diplomacy, which could have in turn prepared Britain for the particular challenges of dealing with the antipathetic Iranian post-revolutionary regime. Moreover, by not looking at the experiences of other British interests sections such as the one in Kampala in 1976, lessons were not learnt on the difficulties which can arise for interests sections, particularly in relation to staffing and the carrying out of administrative tasks. Had historical experience been used at various junctures then this might have helped create better policy decisions. The use of history may not necessarily have improved policy, but neither was it likely to have had a detrimental impact.

Whilst the work of Armstrong, Calvert and Craig make references to the conduct of diplomacy of revolutionary regimes as part of a wider analysis of their foreign policy, hardly any detailed studies exist on the specific issue of how revolutionary regimes

¹² Beck, Peter, *Using History, Making British Policy: The Treasury and the Foreign Office, 1950-76*, (Basingstoke, 2006).

engage in diplomatic conduct. As such there is scope for further studies on this subject, looking at various revolutionary regimes – including the French, Bolsheviks and Chinese. Within such studies specific questions on how these regimes tackle issues like recognition, breaks in relations, engagement with the diplomatic corps and respect for prevailing diplomatic norms can be addressed. Moreover, there is also plenty of scope for studies on how both states friendly and hostile towards revolutionary regimes adapt and choose to engage with these regimes. With regards to interests sections, further studies might compare the example of the Tehran interests sections with either other British interests sections or interests sections created by other states. In terms of the question of whether Britain was caught by surprise by the turn of events in Iran, this study has argued that London was not alone in failing to predict the revolution; indeed, no other states predicted the Shah would fall. The events in Iran are part of a broader question of how to predict revolutions which, rather like earthquakes, usually take the world by surprise. Whether the failure to predict the revolution was part of wider failings in British intelligence during the period is something which requires further depth comparative studies and better access to the relevant government files, which have not yet been released.

Finally, it is important to emphasise the value of looking at bilateral relationships, not merely at the 'higher' levels of heads of government, foreign ministers and their departments, but at the lower level ('on the ground' so to speak) of the day-to-day work of ambassadors and their embassies. The example of British diplomacy and revolutionary Iran shows that the *means* of diplomacy are crucial to understanding many developments in international relations. Events may be significantly influenced by the actions of those working at an administrative level, a world where such issues as interactions with the diplomatic corps, face-to-face encounters with a host state's foreign ministry, or relations with a protecting power may all come into focus. The Tehran embassy played a pivotal role in informing general governmental policy toward Iran both in the pre- and post-revolutionary phases with successive ambassadors including Wright, Ramsbotham, Parsons and Graham all playing a key role in maintaining relations with a state which was highly important to British commercial and political interests. It is impossible to properly understand the British experience without seeing it through the lens of the mission in Iran and the practical challenges it faced as a revolution took place around it. Dealing with revolutionary regimes is a difficult challenge, but if we learn from the experiences of those diplomats charged with engaging with such regimes, we may draw some lessons on how best to go about the process. The British experience in Iran underlines how, through both friendly and hostile relations alike, states need to talk to one another.

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CAB148 Overseas Policy and Defence Committee

DEFE13 Ministry of Defence, Private Office Registered Files

FCO8 Foreign and Commonwealth Series, Arabian Department and Middle East Department

PREM16 Prime Ministers papers, 1974-79

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