

Event: 'Should Iran Be Bombed?'

**SPEECH BY LORD LAMONT TO THE DEFENCE SECURITY FORUM
24TH JANUARY 2012**

Relations between Iran and the West have recently entered a new highly dangerous phase with Iranian talk of blocking the Straits of Hormuz. This comes after the ransacking of the British Embassy and Iranian tests of new missiles. The Iranian regime has also become increasingly repressive; more political prisoners, executions and show-trials. Many people will conclude it is hopeless trying to negotiate with Iran. But is that a correct analysis?

A military attack on Iran would simply indicate that we had learned nothing from the blunders of Iraq and Afghanistan and such a step could set the whole Middle East on fire. It would be foolhardy considering there is no firm evidence the Iranians are developing a nuclear weapon. It would be illegal unless accompanied by a Security Council resolution. Israel would suffer as Iran would certainly retaliate through Hezbollah and Hamas would retaliate through Iran.

If the Iranians were minded to develop a nuclear weapon, a military attack would merely delay or even accelerate that step rather than prevent it. Almost certainly domestic support would rally behind the regime.

If press reports are to be believed, the US military are advising against a strike. Even if Iran were to develop nuclear weapons, the question still remains why can the West not rely on the doctrine of deterrence as it did with the Soviet Union and China? The latter two countries had the capability of doing infinitely more damage to the West than Iran could ever do but we were content to rely on deterrence.

The latest spat has been caused by the threat to impose Sanctions on Iran's Central Bank. Britain and the USA have already done this and France is urging the EU to follow. This will make it more difficult for Iran to receive payment for its oil exports. Given the massive dependency of Iran on oil, this sanction has been regarded by the Islamic Republic as an attempt to bring the economy and country to complete collapse. It is difficult to argue that sanctioning the Central Bank is a targeted measure which will have no effect on the general population.

The new sanctions followed the IAEA report on Iran's nuclear programme which voiced "increasing concern" and highlighted possible areas of weapons related work. But reaction to the report was not unanimous and divided along predictable lines with support from those already wanting more sanctions and scepticism expressed by others as to whether the report contained anything new.

There are some points that seem to get forgotten. Firstly the National Intelligence Estimate of sixteen intelligence agencies in the United States in 2011 concluded that Iran might have had a nuclear weaponisation programme but it had discontinued that after 2003. The latest IAEA report is not inconsistent with the NIE report. The IAEA report covers a lot of ground and there are many references to possible weaponisation. But of the sixty five references in the report to a possible military dimension to the nuclear programme, only four references in that report refer to the period after 2003. The report does not produce “a smoking gun”.

Enriching Uranium, by itself is not an illegal process under the NPT. Iran's stocks of enriched Uranium are not in themselves a proliferation threat as they are under IAEA safeguards and any attempt to draw on them for a secret programme would be quickly detected. The same applies to enriching Uranium to 20%. Not only is that not illegal under the NPT, it has a purpose unrelated to any military programme in that enriching Uranium is required for production of radioisotopes for the treatment of cancer. Were the stocks of 20% LEU to go above the level needed for medical purposes, that might be a cause for suspicion.

Many people think the objective of Iran's nuclear activity is to get to the threshold at which they would be capable of developing a nuclear weapon without actually having a firm intent to do so. It should be pointed out that this “nuclear pregnancy” is not illegal under the NPT.

ElBaradei, the former director of the International Atomic Energy Authorities (IAEA) has said he did not “believe the Iranians had made a decision to go for a nuclear weapon, but they are absolutely determined to have the technology because they believe it brings you power, prestige and an insurance policy”.

Behind the nuclear issue lies the fear of Israel, alarmed by the rhetoric of President Ahmadinejad. But Ehud Barak, the former Prime Minister and Meir Dagan, the former head of Mossad, have said that Iran does not necessarily pose an “existential threat” to Israel. What a nuclear Iran could do is seriously curtail Israel's ability to take military action against its Arab neighbours.

The danger of the present situation can hardly be overstated. There seems little reason for optimism without a sharp change in direction by either or both sides. The European Union, with Britain in the lead, has followed the United States in a policy which seems unlikely to produce the desired results. The carrot and stick approach has been tried so often before with Iran and it has repeatedly failed. Why should it be any different this time?

This is not to say that sanctions have had no effect. The Rial has collapsed, there are deep problems in the banking system, businessmen cannot get imports, inflation

is much higher than officially stated, and unemployment, particularly among the young is rising. Much of this is due to mismanagement of the economy. Sanctions undoubtedly have had an effect but that is different from bringing about the desired political change.

Sanctions are creating a freak economy with ever more state control. They hit the private sector rather than the public, and small firms rather than large. Many firms are driven into bankruptcy or the arms of para-State organisations. Short of supplies, firms ally themselves with those who can smuggle goods, usually the Revolutionary Guards. The regime promotes tortuous measures of import substitution and is happy to preach “self-sufficiency” recalling as it does, the glory days of siege during the Iraq War.

Iran is not North Korea. It is a lively cosmopolitan country where people travel in and out. The policy of the West increasingly seems to cut Iran off from contact with the outside world to make it into a greater Gaza. But, of course, Iran is far too big a country to be locked up in a cupboard. What purpose is served by refusing a leading Iranian film maker a visa to come to the UK or refusing airlines, travelling legally to Iran, permission to refuel at Heathrow? The regime may be unattractive but it only helps them to cut off contact with abroad.

Sanctions are completely counter-productive. We would probably be more likely to have success with the Iranians if we had pursued exactly the opposite policy, embraced Iran and encouraged the maximum trade and investment.

Iran will use sanctions and threats from abroad as an excuse to increase repression, just as, with greater reason, it used the invasion by Iraq as a reason to clamp down. Some people doubt if the Islamic Republic would have survived if it had not been for the war. Similarly, any military attack on Iran would help the Islamic leadership regain its lost legitimacy and might not be entirely unwelcome.

In the UK, we have learned over a long period of time that the “Irish problem” was deeply rooted in history and we decided to negotiate with people we regarded as extremists. The West seems unable to see that the problem between Iran and the West goes back a long way. The United States is “The Great Satan” but Britain, the oldest enemy. Iran made several attempts at democracy which were snuffed out by Britain and the US: - the 1906 revolution and the 1953 coup against Mossadegh. There are most of all, bitter memories of the West’s support for Saddam Hussein during the national trauma of the Iraq war which led to up to one million dead and half of them Iranians. When Iran tried to draw the world’s attention to Saddam’s use of WMD (chemical weapons), the West and the UN turned a blind eye.

America has a tendency to see the hand of Iran everywhere. When Saddam Hussein gassed the Kurds at Halabja, the first reaction of the State Department was

to blame Iran. America blamed Iran for the unrest in Bahrain in 2011 even though no evidence has ever been produced.

The Islamic Republic may be theocratic domestically but in its foreign policy it has been motivated more by national interest rather than religion. Iran extradites Chechin Muslim fighters back to Russia. Iran has a close partnership with neighbouring Christian Armenia. There is no evidence that Iran has territorial designs on any country in the Middle East, and it has repeatedly rejected accusations it has one on Bahrain. Most strikingly, Iran gave significant assistance to America when it invaded Afghanistan, once offered to help with both the invasion and the post war reconstruction of Iraq. But its only reward was to be dubbed the "Axis of Evil".

Iran has plenty of reasons to feel nervous about its own security with American troops until recently in two of its neighbours and a continual strong US naval presence off its coast. Iranian paranoia is fed by politicians like Newt Gingrich, calling for "deniable covert operations" in Iran combined with "targeted assassinations". To the Iranians, that must already seem to be happening, with nuclear scientists mysteriously murdered in the street.

The West is pressing Iran on the one issue that unites much Iranian public opinion. If Iran is to be coaxed towards more co-operation with the IAEA and abandoning any nuclear weapons research, it will only be on the basis of wider negotiations, not aimed only at the nuclear issue. These will have to take account of Iran's own security concerns and what it sees as its rightful place in the region. The leadership of Iran may be increasingly repressive but that does not mean we could not negotiate with them just as the US did with China, despite its human rights record. The West may find it needs to try a new approach.

(Lord Lamont is Chairman of the British Iranian Chamber of Commerce and is a former Chancellor of the Exchequer).