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[Maysam Behravesht](#) [1] 1 December 2013

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The reconciliation with Britain as part of a broader policy of détente has paid off more quickly than expected during the second round of nuclear negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran in Geneva.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's relations with the United Kingdom have ever since the 1979 revolution - which toppled the western-backed monarch Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and threw Iranians into an entirely different mould of relationship with the outside world - witnessed a set of mostly contentious twists and turns, rendering them more complicated than those between Tehran and any other European nation.

The first rupture in the relationship occurred in 1980 when the Tory government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher closed its Tehran embassy following a series of hostile incidents. The American hostage crisis of November 1979, the forceful occupation of the Iranian embassy in London by a group of pan-Arabist gunmen, detention of Iranian students protesting the US administration in Britain, and the arrest of British missionaries in Iran were among the occurrences that induced Britain to shut its embassy in Tehran in August 1980. Bilateral ties were formally reduced to the level of holding an interests section in each capital a month later, in September 1980.

The second diplomatic cleft came after late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a religious decree (*fatwa*) in February 1989 against Salman Rushdie - a British author born to a Muslim family in India - for the authorship of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a novel that was construed by many Islamic authorities, not least the Iranian revolutionary leaders, as a grave affront to the *Quran* and Islam as a whole, hence blasphemous. Given the death sentence was meant to have a global applicability, the 12 European Community member states joined Britain in summoning their ambassadors when the Thatcher government withdrew its entire diplomatic mission from Tehran on 20 February 1989. In reaction, Iran similarly summoned all its diplomats from EC capitals the next day, culminating in the severance of diplomatic ties between Tehran and London on 7 March 1989.

With the May 2010 election of Prime Minister David Cameron and the ascent to predominance of Tories in Britain, Tehran-London relations might have been predicted to be entering a chill phase as the historical pattern of this relationship in the post-revolutionary era suggested. While many in Iranian decision-making quarters harboured revived suspicions, the new British leaders were set to uphold the Labour line in concert with their American and European allies to curb the Islamic Republic's nuclear aspirations. "Nothing has changed under David Cameron. Policy towards Iran has cross-party support in the UK, generally speaking, and there is more consensus among policymakers and politicians in the UK than in the US, for example", Richard Ottaway, a Tory parliamentarian and Chairman of Foreign Affairs Select Committee, claimed. London would persist with its leading role in the collective endeavour against Tehran's nuclear venture: "The EU3+3 [Britain, France and

Germany plus the United States, Russia and China] talks with Iran on its nuclear programme have continued although the UK - as part of the EU - has imposed tough economic sanctions on Iran and that has been supported by the Labour Party”.

And then came the UK embassy storming in Tehran by a crowd of hardline protesters on 29 November 2011, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was at the helm of the executive, still struggling with the ramifications of the June 2009 electoral crisis. The legation takeover followed a majority vote in the Iranian parliament to reduce diplomatic ties with Britain to the level of chargé d'affaires. Having been prompted by the perceived involvement of London in the 2009 post-election protests across Iran, the *Majlis* decision was specifically adopted in response to the British government's move on 21 November to prohibit all UK credit and financial institutions from doing transactions with Iranian banks, including the Central Bank of Iran (CBI). Citing “international evidence” of Iran's banking system helping to fund its “weaponized” nuclear programme, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne [underscored](#) [8] that “we're doing this to improve the security not just of the whole world, but the national security of the United Kingdom.”

The immediate consequence of this seizure was London's decision to close its diplomatic offices in Tehran, recall its freshly appointed ambassador Dominick J. Chilcott, and finally expel the Iranian delegation from Britain. “Diplomatic relations were suspended not because of Iranian policy towards Israel or even because of the nuclear programme, but because Iran failed to protect the British embassy as it was required to do under the Vienna Convention”, Ottaway said.

A momentum for moderation

But almost two years into this diplomatic crisis in Iranian-British ties, the collision course has already started to reverse thanks in important part to the election of centrist President Hassan Rouhani and his government's determination to mend fences with the west through pursuing a moderate agenda. The attempt at rapprochement came after a 23 September 2013 visit between the new Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his British counterpart William Hague on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly gathering. “It is clear that the new president and ministers in Iran are presenting themselves and their country in a much more positive way than in the recent past”, Hague [told](#) [9] the House of Commons later. To consolidate the progress in practice, both sides moved on 8 October to appoint non-resident chargé d'affaires, who will take care of further ameliorating the relationship into full normalization.

Rouhani and his sophisticated foreign policy team with Zarif at its epicenter proved their moderate credentials in early-stage nuclear talks with the EU3 from October 2003 to August 2005, which culminated in Iran voluntarily signing the Additional Protocol of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and suspending uranium enrichment as a confidence-building measure. The policy, according to his memoir, *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy* [10] (2011) enabled Iran to avert imminent war. This inherent pragmatic tendency towards moderation aside, the thaw in Tehran-London relations needs to be seen in the broader context of negotiations with world powers over its atomic programme, Iran's economic woes as a result of stringent international sanctions, the prospects of revamping ties with the European Union, and perhaps most significantly of initiating a new chapter of interaction with the United States. As Ottaway puts it, “we should make it quite clear that if President Rouhani complies with the requirements of the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency], then we will lift economic sanctions. Iran should not doubt our resolve to prevent nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East, in accordance with our obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and to increase pressure through international sanctions if it fails to take that path”.

The reconciliation with Britain as part of a broader policy of détente paid off more quickly than expected, during the second round of nuclear negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran in Geneva. Though it had taken the leading role in Europe over the past two years to mobilize financial penalties against Iran, London conducted itself in a relatively conciliatory fashion - to the astonishment of Iranian leaders - with foreign secretary Hague [demanding](#) [11] that the “momentum” be maintained as “a deal is on the table and it can be done.” And the historic accord was finally clinched between during the third round on 24 November, setting the stage for a war-averting “Grand Bargain”.

Some in Tehran consider London as Iran's principal gateway to Europe. This perspective maintains that if the UK rejected rapprochement, the EU as a whole would be hard to win, not only on the diplomatic front, but also when it comes to economic maneuverability at a time when lack of access to the international financial markets and institutions are threatening to suffocate the entire Iranian economy.

Notably, even during the eight-year war with Iraq (1980-1988) and amid splendid isolation, the Iranian government relied rather heavily on its London offices for exigent arms purchases to feed the war effort. The UK government, along parallel lines, stands to benefit from such a collaborative scheme as it has placed expansion of foreign trade high on the agenda as a strategy to alleviate the pressure of sharp budget cuts and austerity measures at home.

While generally appearing to toe the American line in their approach towards the Islamic Republic, the Tory administration in the UK also has an eye on its narrower interests in the west and South Asia, given the enduring civil war in Syria, the growing militant insurgency in Pakistan, and the anticipated withdrawal of US-led forces from Afghanistan in 2014. To be sure, a less hostile Iran can make a big difference in facilitating western endeavors to cope with these challenges.

All told, there remain a number of sticking points that need to be tackled. "Issues pertaining to the historical Iranian perception of the UK and its role in Iran, disagreements between the two countries on the nuclear issue, human rights and the Middle East are among points that Iran will discuss with the UK in their future talks," [said](#) [12] the Iranian foreign ministry spokeswoman Marzieh Afkham recently. Considering the intensified activism of Israel and pro-Israel lobbies against a deal that recognizes certain components of Tehran's atomic programme, much depends on how the nuclear negotiations will fare at the end. Yet, for the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee in the British House of Commons, "right now, the ball is firmly in the Iranians' court. We welcome the change in tone that President Rouhani seems to have brought to Iran's relations with the West, but we will judge him by his actions, not by his words"; actions that now under way, can only be expected to reach fruition in reciprocity.

Country or region: Iran

UK

Topics: Conflict

International politics

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 About the author

Maysam Behravesh is a doctoral candidate in political science at Lund University, Sweden, a senior editor of *Asian Politics & Policy* (Wiley), and the Editorial Assistant of *Cooperation and Conflict* (Sage). His research centers broadly around Middle Eastern and South Asian politics, with special emphasis on Iran and Pakistan.



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