Iran: from prince to pariah

Iran and the West have been sworn enemies since the Islamic Republic came to power in 1979. Now, the focus on Iran's suspected nuclear ambitions means that tensions have never been higher. Are the two sides irreconcilable, and could the escalation prove disastrous?

REBECCA LOWE

Howard Baskerville was no Islamic revolutionary. Yet, he is revered in Iran. Schools and buildings are named after him. Fresh flowers are found permanently on his grave. A bronze bust of him stands in the Constitution House of Tabriz, bearing the plaque: 'Howard C Baskerville – Patriot and Maker of History'.

The American missionary from Princeton University travelled to Tabriz to teach in 1907, but instead found himself leading a group of 150 nationalist fighters against the despotic Shah. Celebrated as a defender of democracy and civil rights, the young soldier was killed by a sniper eight days after his 24th birthday.

'The only difference between me and these people,' Baskerville is reported to have said, 'is my place of birth, and that is not a big difference.'

It is sometimes easy in the West to forget that the current diplomatic impasse with Iran is a very modern phenomenon. Since being cast dismissively into a tyrannical triumvirate with North Korea and Iraq in George W Bush's notorious 2002 'axis of evil' speech, the country has been reduced to a series of incendiary tabloid bullet points. Yet the US and Iran are far from natural antagonists. Beyond present-day hostilities lies a rich tradition of political and cultural ties, where democratic and Enlightenment ideals, reform and revolution, have flourished.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has changed significantly. Ideological and political tensions have wrecked old alliances and entrenched differences. Yet despite its easy labels, Iran remains far from homogenous. It is, rather, a culture of contradictions, where modernity competes with conservatism, and theocracy with limited democracy. It is a society seemingly alien to the West – yet one that must finally be embraced if three decades of failed policy are to be overcome and the current nuclear stand-off resolved without a repeat of the disastrous misadventures in Iraq.

Blood and oil

The current gridlock in relations can be traced back to 1953: the year the US and British intelligence agencies orchestrated the overthrow of the democratically elected Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, following his nationalisation of the oil industry. An intervention of gross arrogance and imperialism, it was an act Iran has never forgotten, nor forgiven – and the perfect act to precipitate revolution. Nationalist sentiment quickly rallied against the authoritarian Western puppet Mohammad-Rezā Shāh Pahlavi, and in 1979 he was ousted from government by the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, who heralded an end to corruption, sleaze and foreign interference.

From that day, the battle lines were drawn – quite literally. The following year Iran was invaded by Iraq, with US assistance, and forced into a long and costly war. Complaints to the Western-dominated UN Security Council achieved a muted response, and its illegal use of chemical weapons, which killed around 100,000 Iranian soldiers, was only condemned in 1988. It was not until 1991, three years after the end of the war, that Iraq was officially held responsible for the conflict.

Given this history, it is understandable that Iran's rulers have been reluctant to ally with the West. Yet why the West has remained so intransigent is a greater mystery. The Shia-dominated country shares many of the West's security concerns, harbouring a strong desire to defeat Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and the people remain some of the most pro-Western in the region. After 9/11, Iran was one of the few Middle Eastern countries to express its solidarity with American victims, with thousands taking to the streets in candlelit vigils.

This was perhaps Washington's greatest opportunity to revive relations with Tehran, then led by reformist cleric Sayyid Mohammad Khātamī.

Instead, the US appeared to fashion a nemesis for itself; a Hollywood villain to demonise; a 'rogue state' of 'evil' against which the enlightened ideals of the West could be compared and found superior.

It was not a new idea, of course; Khomeini referred to the US as the 'Great Satan' in 1979. Yet the Islamic Republic, one could argue, had some historical basis for its loathing and mistrust, and such an enemy served its political purposes well. 'The regime has fine-tuned its level of enmity with the US very precisely over the past three decades,' says Ali Vaez, director of the Iran Project at the Federation of American Scientists. 'There is enough to serve as the ideological glue that keeps the system together, but not enough to threaten its survival.'

What is clear is that isolation and antipathy have hardened the Republic's resolve. Since 1979, repression in the Islamic state has increased, with civil and political rights pushed into the shadows. Opposition to the state has been criminalised, while freedom of speech is severely restricted. The regime has become renowned for state terrorism, financing both Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, while President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who came to power in 2005, has declared he wants Israel 'wiped off the face of the map'.

To make matters worse, Iran may be able to build a nuclear bomb – a red line the West is not prepared to cross.

Nuclear narrative

Where nuclear weapons are concerned, intelligence agencies in the US, Israel and Europe seem agreed: Iran does not have a bomb, is not making a bomb and has not yet decided if it wants to make bomb. Many believe, however, that it has taken steps towards having the capacity to build one.

The current hysteria over Iran's nuclear ambitions could be deemed excessive. Tensions have arisen over Iran's refusal to cease uranium enrichment in line with a 2006 UN Security Council resolution (see box). The UN was called to act by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) after Iran failed to report two nuclear sites, Arak and Natanz, in the required time-frame in 2003 – a charge Iran refutes.

At first, the Iranian government agreed a deal with the EU-3 (the UK, France and Germany) whereby it would temporarily suspend enrichment and provide greater access to nuclear sites. Yet in February 2006, nine months after Ahmadinejad came to power, Iran withdrew from the agreement, due in part to frustration at American demands that it give up its legal right to enrich on a permanent basis.

Nuclear experts disagree over how obstructive Iran has been since this time. According to the November 2011 and February 2012 IAEA reports, the Agency 'continues to have serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme', after it uncovered evidence that Iran had carried out activities 'relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device'. Iran has regularly denied access to its Parchin military site, it says, and has refused to discuss incriminating Agency intelligence.

Yet former UN weapons inspector Hans Blix, who led the IAEA from 1981 to 1997, believes that Iran has not been overly obstructive towards the IAEA, and has in fact gone 'far beyond' the duties of inspection owed under its IAEA safeguards regime. 'They did violate some safeguards, and should have reported things sooner,' he says, speaking exclusively to *IBA Global Insight*. 'But one must bear in mind that there is tremendous activity of sabotage by the US and Israel, and it is possible they were thinking that earlier reporting could have provoked such sabotage.'

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> Hans Blix
> *Former UN weapons inspector and head of the IAEA, 1981 to 1997*

Blix warns the IAEA to be wary of over-reliance on intelligence. 'There is as much misinformation around as there is information. The IAEA has said there is overall "credibility", but that is putting a bit of a stamp of approval on it [...]. I think if I was

Timeline of tensions

1951	1953	1970	1979	1980
Mohammad Mossadeq nationalises the oil industry, which is dominated by the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Britain imposes oil embargo.	The British and American intelligence services engineer a coup to overthrow Mossadeq. Authoritarian monarch Mohammad-Rezā Shāh Pahlavi takes over.	The US provides assistance and support for the Shah's nuclear energy programme.	The Shah is overthrown and Ayatollah Khomeini becomes the first Supreme Leader of Iran. Islamic militants take 52 Americans hostage inside the US embassy in Tehran in response to the US offering sanctuary to the Shah. The US imposes sanctions until the hostages are released.	Start of the Iran-Iraq war, which lasts for eight years.

doubtful, I would tell the countries themselves to place the evidence before the Board of Governors.'

Under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), ratified by Iran in 1970, members have the right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. A nuclear power plant needs around three per cent enriched uranium, a research facility around 20 per cent. Most of Iran's stockpile is below five per cent, but it recently tripled its monthly production of 20 per cent uranium at its two enrichment sites, Natanz and Fordow, the latter of which Iran again failed to report to the IAEA in 2009.

From 20 per cent, it is just a short leap to the 90 per cent needed for weapons grade uranium, as most of the work has already been done.

At first, Tehran said Fordow would be used for the production of 3.75 per cent enriched uranium, but later it announced that the plant would be used for research. Then, in 2011, it said that it would use Fordow to produce uranium enriched to 20 per cent. In a February 2012 report, the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security wrote: 'That Iran was caught building the Fordow plant in secret, and since Iran has subsequently changed the DIQ [Design Information Questionnaire] for this facility three times, raises concerns that the plant was built in order to provide Iran with the ability to quickly and securely make highly enriched uranium in the event of a breakout to make nuclear weapons.'

David Albright, founder of the Institute for Science and International Security, was the first non-governmental inspector of Iraq's nuclear programme in 1992. He is convinced that Iran has a weapons programme due to evidence he has seen relating to the 1990s and 2000s. For him, former IAEA director-general Mohamed ElBaradei – who has spoken of 'six years of failed policy' over Tehran and refused to condemn the regime during his tenure – was too cautious in exposing all the evidence against Iran due to fears of provoking another war.

'It was an understandable concern, but that was a critical mistake that ElBaradei made, to link Iraq and Iran too much,' says Albright. 'He should have trusted the international process to use the information in a way that didn't lead to war. He had a technical mandate, and he should have just done his job.' Now, Albright says, the IAEA is doing the job ElBaradei 'should have done', by publishing its concerns.

'I wish this information had come out in 2009,' he adds. 'It would have been easier to deal with it, and Iran would have been much further back with its centrifuge programme.'

Wyn Bowen, Director of the Centre for Science & Security Studies, in the Department of War Studies at King's College London, served as a weapons inspector on several UN ballistic missile inspection teams in Iraq in 1997–98. He believes Iran is engaged in a 'hedging strategy': attempting to get the capability for manufacturing a weapon, but stopping short of actually making a weapon itself. This is why it has successively opted in and out of agreements over the past ten years: first in 2003 with the EU-3, then again in 2009, regarding sending uranium out of the country to be enriched for a research reactor. 'The Iranians are playing a canny game,' he says. 'I believe Iran is more than likely to be engaged in nuclear military activities that no-one knows about yet because they are keeping them deeply buried.'

Bowen's suspicions are shared by much of the Western intelligence community. Greg Thielmann, senior fellow at the Arms Control Association. served as a top intelligence official at the US State Department until retiring shortly before the Iraq War over accusations the US had cooked its intelligence. According to him, the US believes that Iran had a weapons programme even prior to 1979, which was allegedly halted by Khomeini when he became Supreme Leader, and then restarted after the Iran-Iraq war. It was later revealed in a 2007 report, based on intercepted phone communications, that the programme had again been stopped in 2003, seemingly due to fears that Iran would be the next Iraq. 'This was very big news, as we had recently said that Iran had an ongoing nuclear weapons programme,' says Thielmann. 'And then this intelligence report came out basically saying Iran had stopped the programme, which I believe actually averted war with Iran in the latter years of the Bush administration.'

For Thielmann, however, the key issue was less that the Iranians had halted the weapons programme in 2003, and more the fact that they had had a secret programme in the first place. 'The Iranians took the headline and ran with it, ignoring the sub-headline, which was that they had lied to the IAEA for 18 years. In the meantime, they had worked hard at doing the

1984	1988	1989	1990	1995	1997
The US adds Iran to its list of countries that support terrorism (namely, Hezbollah), banning US foreign aid to Tehran and imposing export controls.	Iran accepts a UN-brokered ceasefire agreement with Iraq.	Ayatollah Khomeini dies. President Khamenei is appointed new Supreme Leader.	Iran and Iraq resume diplomatic ties.	US imposes comprehensive sanctions on Iran over its alleged terrorism and nuclear activities, banning nearly all business between the two countries.	Mohammad Khatami wins the presidential election with 70 per cent of the vote, beating the conservative candidate endorsed by Khamenei.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visits nuclear installations in Natanz, 322km south of Tehran.

one most demanding thing in developing nuclear weapons, which is to develop the infrastructure to come up with fissile material for a bomb.'

Nuclear apartheid

Iran may be engaging in a 'hedging strategy', but it is some relief that it is beholden to the terms of the NPT. The treaty, which entered into force in 1970, gave all states the right to a civil nuclear programme, banned non-nuclear states from building weapons and committed nuclear states to making efforts 'in good faith' to disarm. Today, 190 countries are signatories; Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea, however, are not – North Korea having withdrawn in 2003 – due to their belief that the treaty unfairly polarises the world and enshrines a system of global 'nuclear apartheid'.

The accusation is not without merit. For many, nuclear weapons are little more than a metaphor, significant only for what they symbolise: power, sovereignty, self-determination. To have a nuclear weapon is to have a golden ticket to the top table, and few want the nouveau riche crashing the party.

The West has successfully perpetuated the view that the world would be in mortal danger should certain countries get nuclear weapons, while such weapons are perfectly safe in their own hands. Despite the US being the only country to have launched a bomb, against Japan in 1945, it commonly adopts a scaremongering attitude, whereby less developed nations are depicted as unruly children who lack the requisite morals and responsibility to have nuclear weapons of their own. 'In any contest in which one side is bound by the norms of civilised behaviour and the other is not, history is, alas, on the side of the barbarians,' said defence policy officer Richard Perle when speaking about the prospect of Iraq getting WMD in 1990. Similarly, Kenneth Adelman, a senior official in the Reagan administration, believed 'the real danger comes from some miserable Third World country which decides to use these weapons either out of desperation or incivility'.

Read Western media coverage and you would be excused for believing that Iran is run by such uncivil barbarians: megalomaniacal, unstable fiends who could easily allow a bomb to slip into the hands of Hezbollah, or fall on Tel Aviv. Yet the Iranian regime can be accused of many things – fundamentalism, oppression, despotism – but irrationality is not one of them. Both acts would entail such destructive retaliation that it would almost certainly spell the end of the Republic. Vaez puts it succinctly: 'The regime may be homicidal to its own population, but it is not suicidal.'

For David Rodin, co-director of the Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict, a key mistake by the West has been the message it has conveyed to the world about nuclear weapons. 'After Iraq, the message pretty clearly was that if you want to be free from intervention, what you ought to do is get nuclear weapons. And at the same time, the major states were signalling, as the UK did in its failure to give up Trident, that nuclear weapons give prestige, give you a voice.'

2002	2003	2004	2005
US President George W Bush describes Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an 'axis of evil', causing outrage in Iran. Russia begins construction of Iran's first nuclear reactor at Bushehr. An Iranian dissident group discloses the existence of two hidden nuclear sites, Natanz and Arak.	Thousands of students take to the streets in Tehran to protest against the conservative clergy. The IAEA gives Iran weeks to prove it is not pursuing an atomic weapons programme. Iranian human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi becomes Iran's first Nobel Peace Prize winner. Iran says it is suspending its uranium enrichment programme and will allow tougher UN inspections of its nuclear facilities. The IAEA concludes there is no evidence of a weapons programme.	Iran signs a deal with the EU-3 to suspend enrichment and open its sites to full inspection.	Conservative presidential candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wins the election. The IAEA finds Iran in violation of its safeguards agreements under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

According to Blix, the aggressive rhetoric by the US, UK, France and Germany towards Iran has been unhelpfully 'supercilious' and 'contemptuous'. To set an example and deflect accusations of hypocrisy, he says, nuclear states should be focusing their attentions on speeding up the disarmament process. Though the US and Russia have cut their warhead stockpiles by tens of thousands since 1945, they still have around 5,000 operational warheads each.

The US should also ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, Blix stresses: a treaty ratified by neither Israel nor Iran.

The West's failure to abide by its disarmament commitments, outlined in the NPT and clarified in a 1996 International Court of Justice (ICJ) decision, is a 'major problem', according to Peter Weiss, president of the Lawyers' Committee on Nuclear Policy. 'It is now 13 years since the ICJ decision came down in The Hague, and it is perfectly clear to me and most of my colleagues that at the moment there is no serious intention on the part of the nuclear powers to comply with that obligation.'

'It is exceedingly rare to hear anyone question the underlying policy towards Iran. There is a very broad consensus politically on the sanctions' policy remit'

Bill McGlone
Sanctions expert, Latham & Watkins

For Weiss, there is no point proposing a nuclear free zone in the Middle East – due to be discussed in Helsinki later this year – until the nuclear powers show themselves willing to comply with the law. 'If I was Iran, I would say, look at what you are doing with international law obligations. What do you want from us?'

If one was Iran, one may also point the finger at Israel and Pakistan: two aggressive nuclear states outside the NPT, but which, as allies of the West, cause little global concern. 'Compared to Pakistan, any reasonable anxieties about Iran have to be a lot less,' says Thielmann. 'Pakistan is where many of the terrorist attacks originate, and Pakistan is not even able to maintain sovereignty in its territorial areas bordering Afghanistan and Iran.'

Unless the West addresses its perceived double-standards, mutual trust will surely prove elusive. Hypocrisy begets intransigence, and since 1979 has led to nothing but brick walls and bombast. 'We need to be open-eyed about our own responsibilities from the past,' stresses Rodin. 'This does in no way vindicate some of the really morally pernicious things the Iranian regime has done, but when we look for solutions, we must be aware of the nuances too.'

Illegal warfare

Western hypocrisy is perhaps at its most acute when riding roughshod over the rule of law for the sake of political expediency – and, in recent discussions over whether to launch a military attack on Iran, 'an important legal discussion has been missing', says Blix. 'People only say, is it sensible to attack Iran or not? And most people say it is not. But for us lawyers, it is significant that actually this would be a terrible setback for the interpretation of the UN Charter and the growing legal inhibitions against the use of armed force.'

Under the UN Charter, there are only two circumstances in which the use of force is permissible: in collective or individual self-defence against an actual or imminent armed attack; and when the Security Council has authorised the use of force to restore international peace and security. There is no basis in international law for expanding the concept of self-defence, as advocated by the Bush administration in 2002, to authorise 'pre-emptive' strikes against states based on potential threats from WMD – a doctrine yet to be squarely renounced by the Obama administration.

Policy-makers should also be aware of Article 56 of the 1977 amendment protocol of the Geneva Convention, says Blix, which outlaws destructive attacks on nuclear generating stations due to the risk of releasing dangerous radioactive material. Though the US, Israel and Iran have failed to ratify the protocol, some believe its provisions are recognised as customary international law.

'They attacked Iraq because they thought they might have had WMD and now they are talking of

2006	2007	2008	2009
The IAEA reports Iran to the UN Security Council over its nuclear activities. Iran resumes enrichment at Natanz. The Security Council votes to impose sanctions on Iran's trade in sensitive nuclear materials and technology.	The US announces tough new sanctions against Iran. A new US intelligence report claims Iran stopped its nuclear weapons programme in 2003.	Conservatives win over two-thirds of parliamentary seats in elections, but many reformist candidates are banned from standing. The Security Council tightens sanctions. The IAEA says Iran is still withholding information on its nuclear programme.	Ahmadinejad says he would welcome talks with the US as long as they are based on 'mutual respect'. Khamenei tells anti-Israel rally that US President Barack Obama is following the 'same misguided track' in the Middle East as President Bush. Ahmadinejad wins the 12 June presidential election. Thousands take to the streets to protest about alleged vote-rigging, and at least 30 people are killed. Another uranium enrichment plant is revealed in Fordow, near Qom, and the IAEA passes a resolution condemning Iran for developing the site in secret.

attacking Iran because they think they might have bad intentions,' Blix says. 'It is a new category, but not one that exists under the UN Charter.'

There are also legal concerns surrounding nuclear weapons themselves. In its 1996 ruling, the ICJ found that 'the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law' – though it stopped short of saying nuclear weapons were illegal in every circumstance.

UK barrister Philippe Sands QC, however, believes it would be hard to make a legal case. During the ICJ hearing in 1995, he said of France, Britain, Russia and the US: 'These are the same states that pride themselves – with some justification – on their role in promulgating the rule of law, promoting human rights and preserving the environment. Yet when it comes to those very WMD that pose a greater threat to human rights and the environment than anything else imaginable, these states ask you to set aside that body of principles and rules so carefully put in place over the past 50 years.'

The Vancouver Declaration, signed by eminent experts in international law and diplomacy in March 2011, is in line with Sands' analysis, and urges states to accelerate moves towards non-proliferation. It states: 'It cannot be lawful to continue indefinitely to possess weapons which are unlawful to use or threaten to use, are already banned for most states, and are subject to an obligation of elimination.'

Collective punishment

If military action would be both illegal and politically unsound, what about sanctions? The US first imposed sanctions after the 1979 hostage crisis, but lifted them once the hostages were released. In the 1980s, Reagan declared Iran a state sponsor of terrorism, opposing international loans and signing a new embargo against Iranian imports. Comprehensive sanctions were imposed in 1995, both due to Iran's alleged nuclear programme and state sponsorship of terrorism, which restricted virtually all commercial trade.

Recently, the sanctions have ratcheted up: in 2010, Congress passed the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), which expanded the categories of activities that could subject non-US firms to sanctions, and which can prohibit foreign entities from using American banks if they do business with Iran. President Obama also issued an executive order in November 2011 that prevents foreign financial institutions from conducting oil transactions with Iran's central bank, which handles most of the country's oil payments.

In January, the EU strengthened previous sanctions by banning Iranian exports of crude oil and trade in gold, and placing sanctions on its central bank. Both the US and EU sanctions regimes come on top of a series of UN Security Council resolutions, imposed since 2006, which target Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

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> Shirin Ebadi
> *Nobel Peace Prize winner and Iranian human rights lawyer*

Taken together, it is perhaps the most stringent sanctions regime ever imposed on a country, and the extraterritorial scope of the US programme is unprecedented. 'It is my understanding that Iran is finding it very hard to do international financial operations of a normal kind,' says O'Melveny & Myers partner and sanctions expert Greta Lichtenbaum. 'There are now so many banks that don't want anything to do with them, due to reputational concerns or because they are concerned they will do something to benefit the nuclear industry there.'

The UN and EU sanctions imposed in 2010 were 'the most extensive and complex' that European businesses have ever had to comply with, according to Freshfields partner Sarah Parkes, who specialises in financial regulation. Though nominally targeted, so as not to harm businesses unnecessarily, their breadth and confusing overlap with US measures made due diligence arduous and expensive – resulting in many companies withdrawing from Iran altogether.

2010	2011	2012
Iran says it is will send enriched uranium abroad for further enrichment under a deal agreed with the West, later reneging on the agreement. The Security Council imposes a fourth round of sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programme, including an expanded arms embargo. The US imposes unprecedented sanctions against eight senior Iranian officials for human rights violations.	Mass opposition demonstrations take place amid a wave of unrest across the Arab region. Iran announces the Bushehr nuclear power station has been connected to the national grid. The UN, US and EU impose tighter sanctions. The IAEA says it has uncovered evidence that Iran has carried out activities 'relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device', but Iran denies the charges.	US imposes sanctions on Iran's Central Bank. Iran threatens to block the transport of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. Iran begins enriching uranium at its Fordow plant. The EU imposes an oil embargo on Iran. IAEA inspectors leave Iran after being denied access to the Parchin military complex. Iran and the permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany meet for nuclear talks in Istanbul, heralded as 'constructive'.

'That raised an interesting conundrum,' says Parkes. 'The EU and UN introduced targeted sanctions, but businesses themselves have tended to impose more of a blanket ban. That may be consistent with UK and US foreign policy aims, but not necessarily with everyone in the UN and EU – and it could also have an impact on humanitarian aid.'

Despite the severity of the measures, there is yet to be any blocking legislation imposed by countries disinclined to fall under America's ever-expanding jurisdiction. Unlike with Cuba, Iran, it seems, is expendable. 'It is exceedingly rare to hear anyone question the underlying policy towards Iran,' says Latham & Watkins partner and sanctions expert Bill McGlone. 'There is a very broad consensus politically on the sanctions' policy remit.'

The sanctions are evidently having an effect. Inflation in the country is now at 20 per cent and unemployment is soaring. Queuing at petrol pumps can sometimes take five hours. Indeed, the Iranians made clear at recent nuclear talks in Istanbul and Baghdad that the sanctions had impacted their decision to open discussions once more.

Yet for some the cost is too high. 'Targeted sanctions are very useful, but when you have comprehensive sanctions, these become tools of collective punishment and I think they are actually counterproductive,' says Vaez. 'More than anyone else, they will hit the middle class in Iran, the ones demanding a better democratic system, while the Revolutionary Guards benefit from smuggling activities.'

Nobel Peace Prize winner and human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi agrees. Having left Iran in 2009, she is now living in exile due to fear of arrest if she returns. 'Targeted sanctions that weaken the government are good,' she says, speaking exclusively to *IBA Global Insight*, via a Farsi interpreter. 'But any sanctions that are detrimental to the people should be avoided.' For example, she says, the West could target Iran's 13 foreign language channels, which 'broadcast its lies around the world'.

The nuclear programme, Ebadi stresses, is merely the product of the political ambitions of the regime; the people are generally opposed to it. 'At the outset of the Islamic Revolution, the regime had one intention: to export the Islamic Revolution. That is why they created Hezbollah in Lebanon and started to influence the youth in the region. They want to become a role model for all the other Islamic states.'

For Ebadi, any nuclear talks must act as a stepping stone to address more urgent issues, such as civil and political rights. The situation, she stresses, is getting worse. There are now around 1,000 political prisoners, she estimates, and the Iranian government has not permitted visits by the UN Human Rights Council since 2005. In October 2011 the special rapporteur presented 58 cases of human rights violations in his interim report, including provisions within the Islamic Penal Code that limit freedom of expression, criminalise opposition to the Islamic state, and discriminate against women, ethnic minorities and homosexuals.

'The West is only focusing on the nuclear problem and neglecting human rights,' Ebadi says. 'I believe that in the next round of talks, they should demand that Iran cooperates with the UN and allows the special rapporteur on human rights to visit Iran, and make that conditional for removing the sanctions.'

With a weakening regime, beleaguered economy and ever-emboldening population of 30-somethings, the situation sounds hauntingly familiar. The Green Movement that drew millions onto the streets after Ahmadinejad's 2009 re-election may have dwindled following a brutal crackdown – but who is to say that, buoyed by the success of its Arab neighbours, and fired by a legacy of protest and revolution, the nation could not rise again?

From diktat to debate

In March 2009, US President Barack Obama marked the Persian New Year festival of Nowruz with a message to the Iranian people. The US would refrain from 'threats' against the country, he said, and instead engage in discussion which was 'honest and grounded in mutual respect'. It was a speech demonstrating political and cultural sensitivity, and marked a welcome end to the cocksure hyperbole of his predecessor.

Frustratingly little progress has been made since then. However, recent nuclear talks in Istanbul, between Iran and the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany – the first for 15 months – were heralded as 'constructive and useful', and perhaps provide some hope. The West has now declared itself willing to concede Iran's legal right to uranium enrichment, while Iran seems open to greater transparency.

Whatever the future holds – bomb or no bomb, reform or regression – it is clear that a new policy towards Iran is needed if hostilities are to be overcome. And for some, the current round of negotiations is a welcome first step.

'I think both sides have realised that for the diplomatic process to be successful, it needs to be give and take, and both sides need to compromise,' says Vaez. 'It took us a long time to get to this stage, but I think we have finally arrived.'

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