

IRAN VS TALIBAN & AL-QA'EDA

Miliband complained that the Iranian regime “isolates itself from international cooperation on Afghanistan”. Contradicting his boss, Sheinwald points out that: “There have been issues on which we have been able to work constructively with Iran, notably earlier this decade over Afghanistan.”

James Dobbins, US special envoy to Afghanistan, wrote later that at the 2001 Bonn conference on reconstructing Afghanistan, while the Iranian, Russian and Indian delegations were all helpful: “None was more so than the Iranians.” When the Iranians offered to quarter, clothe and train as many as 20,000 recruits for the new Afghan force, Dobbins expressed reservations to the Iranian general making the offer. “ ‘Well,’ my interlocutor responded, “we trained, equipped and continue to pay the troops with which you toppled the Taliban and are now rooting out al Qaeda. Are you encountering any problems with their loyalty?” I had to admit that we were not.’

(*Washington Post*, 6 May 2004)

(Former US National Security Council officers Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann described some of this co-operation over Afghanistan and al-Qa'eda in an op-ed in the *New York Times*, 22 Dec. 2006, which was censored by the White House after being passed by the CIA's Publication Review Board.)

NUCLEAR NATIONALISM

The point of Miliband's “two nation” depiction of Iran is to portray the regime as totally isolated from the Iranian people. In contrast, Sheinwald acknowledges the basic truths that: “Iran's own recent history, particularly the 8 year Iran-Iraq war, in which Iran was subject to chemical and ballistic missile attack, left many Iranians feeling that they needed their own deterrent. **The nuclear issue is a nationalist issue inside Iran.**”

A Sept. 2009 poll in Iran found that 55% of Iranians wanted to develop civilian nuclear power only; 38% wanted to develop both atomic bombs and nuclear power; only 3% wanted to have no nuclear programs. 54% opposed the idea of lifting sanctions in return for Iran agreeing not to enrich uranium. (WorldPublicOpinion, 3 Feb. 2010)

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MILIBAND VS. — IRAN —

Foreign Secretary Undermined By His Ambassador

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HOW MUCH TIME? TRACKING THE FOREIGN OFFICE LINE(S)

On 27 Mar., British Foreign Secretary David Miliband wrote a fierce attack on Iran in the *International Herald Tribune*, in which he repeated many standard propaganda claims. Amusingly, many of these claims were undermined if not contradicted by a speech five days earlier by the British Ambassador to the US, Nigel Sheinwald, made to The American Jewish Committee of Miami/Broward County, Florida. (Web links on j-n-v.org)

Miliband began with a sense of urgency, writing about the Iranian nuclear programme: “I am concerned that in too many countries, the dangers are seen as theoretical, **the time frame leisurely.**”

Sheinwald, on the other hand, told his audience: “in international relations there are rarely overnight solutions to complex problems, and **patience is usually a virtue.** Our long term strategy of trying to fundamentally alter the cost-benefit equation for Iran remains right. **We still have some time.**”

He made the same point twice in his speech: “the IAEA report [on Iran's uranium enrichment programme] also highlighted continuing technical difficulties. We do not comment publicly on intelligence assessments, but most countries agree that Iran is still some way from being able to produce a weapon or having a meaningful break-out capability [to develop a military nuclear programme from its civilian one]. **There is still time for diplomacy and political pressure to work.**”

THE “OPEN HAND” PLOY

Miliband (writing in a US publication) praised President Barack Obama, and condemned Iranian policy towards him: “President Obama reaches out to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and his offer is dismissed



either as a PR stunt or part of a crafty plot—and certainly not seen for what it was, a ground-breaking offer to change US-Iran relations.”

Ambassador Sheinwald is an interesting person to comment on this, as he was quoted to embarrassing effect during the US presidential campaign. Today he says to Miami/Broward: “President Obama’s offer of a dialogue with Iran... was an approach my own government **strongly supported.**”

Back in 2008, Sheinwald wrote (in a secret memo sent to London): “If Obama wins, **we will need to consider with him the articulation between** (a) his desire for ‘unconditional’ dialogue with Iran and (b) our and the [United Nations Security Council]’s requirement of prior suspension of [uranium] enrichment before the nuclear negotiations proper can begin.” (*Telegraph*, 2 Oct. 2008)

In early 2008, Democratic Presidential nominee Obama fought bitter battles with his Republican opponent John McCain over Obama’s startling (and enormously popular—within the Democratic grassroots) proposal to hold unconditional talks with Iran.

In May 2008, Obama invoked John F Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, who were willing to hold talks with the Soviet Union during the Cold War: “Why shouldn’t we have the same courage and confidence to talk to our enemies? That’s what strong countries do. That’s what strong presidents do. One of the things you have to ask yourself: What are George Bush and John McCain afraid of [in] demanding a country meets all of your conditions before you meet with them?” (CNN, 18 May 2008)

Obama had set out his position a year earlier. Obama was asked: “would you be willing to meet separately, without precondition, during the first year of your administration, in Washington or anywhere else, with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea, in order to bridge the gap that divides our countries?” (CNN/YouTube debate, 23 July 2007)

He said: “I would. And the reason is this, that the notion that somehow not talking to countries is punishment to them—which has been the guiding diplomatic principle of this administration—is ridiculous. (APPLAUSE) ... I think that it is a disgrace that we have not spoken to them.” His opponent Hillary Clinton described this position as “irresponsible and frankly naive”. (*Guardian*, 25 July 2007)

Ambassador Sheinwald and the British government apparently agreed.

Once in office, Obama did not hold to his promise, but on 20 Mar. 2009, he did make a personal appeal to Iran, via the internet. (BBC)

Miliband condemns Iran for seeing this as a “**crafty plot**”. Sheinwald praises the move for its craftiness: “there were also **good tactical reasons** for the US to hold out what President Obama described as an ‘extended palm’. The offer of dialogue by what the Iranians refer to as the Great Satan presented the regime with **some profound political dilemmas**. More importantly, the US offer of dialogue has **strengthened the case for sanctions** internationally. A year ago, regrettably, too many members of the international community contended that the problem was that the US would not talk to Iran, rather than Iran’s nuclear ambition.”

Now, with the Obama video appeal, Iran could be portrayed as the uncooperative one—despite the response of Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei: “You change, and our behaviour will change.” (*Independent on Sunday*, 22 Mar. 2009)

MANY IRANS

Miliband’s main move was to contrast the Iranian ruling establishment with Iranian civil society; one is bad, the other is good. Thus he said: “there are many Irans”, one “a highly educated, entrepreneurial people, with a celebrated culture and civilization”—“Then there is an Iran whose economy is a mess.” Now, how did that happen?

Sheinwald told his audience: “The sort of financial sanctions pioneered by the US Treasury, and built on by other Western countries and UN are **causing real pain**.... The outgoing Iranian finance minister last year referred to international financial measures as **a form of economic warfare.**” He quotes the Iran Chamber of Commerce estimate that the cost of sanctions and financial restrictions had raised the costs of imports by **20-25%**.

Sheinwald observes: “economic pressures are increasing, as a result of years of mismanagement, **the impact of UN and EU sanctions and the impact of what I call de facto sanctions**.... We estimate that inflation is running at close to 20%. De facto sanctions are affecting the oil and gas industry, which Iran depends on for 80% of its exports and **50% of government revenues**. Struggling to maintain investment and procure technical equipment **as a result of sanctions**, Iran’s oil production and exports both **fell by 10%** last year.” Iran’s economic future, Sheinwald comments, “largely depends on its development of its huge, essentially virgin gas reserves”, which requires “huge investment” from outside—investments that are not coming because of US-led financial sanctions.