



By: *Harvey Morris*

UK-Iran: Can the 'Little Satan' help defuse the latest crisis in the Middle East?



Deeply ingrained in the Iranian psyche is an unshakeable belief that the hidden hand of Britain is invariably behind the history-changing events that have determined the nation's fate.

From the rise and fall of shahs to wars and even the triumph of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranians of varying persuasions have been prone to **detect** the shadowy influence of the country the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini dubbed the 'Little Satan'.

The prejudice is not confined to the Shia faithful. According to an old half-joke, revived at the time of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the reason the Iranian clergy wear beards is to hide the words tattooed on their chins: Made in England.

While much of this anti-British paranoia is based on a history of involvement dating back centuries, it will surely be sorely tested by current events in which the UK, along with European partners, has essentially been sidelined.

Not a reliable partner

Even the most conspiratorial Iranian would be hard-pressed to identify the malign influence of the British in Benjamin Netanyahu's current unilateral venture to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities and potentially to unseat its clerical-led regime.

The UK government was **kept out** of the loop about Israel's intentions and was quick to assert that it played no role in the initial strikes and had not provided air support, as it has in the past, to help protect it from Iranian retaliation.

At a time of strained relations with the Israelis linked to the ongoing trauma in Gaza, a senior UK government source told The Times: "They've clearly made the calculation we are not a reliable partner."

The Israelis had been irked just days earlier by a British decision to sanction two far-right

members of Netanyahu's cabinet for "repeated incitements of violence against Palestinian communities".

British forces could become unintentionally embroiled in a prolonged conflict between Israel and Iran

However, it is not the state of bilateral relations with Israel that most alarms the UK when it comes to confronting the present crisis.

A major concern will be that British forces could become unintentionally embroiled in a prolonged conflict between Israel and Iran, in which the UK has little influence or control.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer said at the weekend that additional Royal Air Force jets were being **dispatched** to the Middle East as a contingency. But he refused to be drawn on whether or not they might be deployed in Israel's defence.

Iran has **warned** the UK, France and the US that it would target their vessels and bases in the region if they chose to give active support to Israel.

Bringing Russia back into the international fold

Starmer's remarks came in the context of UK appeals for a de-escalation of the conflict. He and his ministers are so far cleaving to the long-established line that the UK recognises Israel's right to self-defence while remaining highly concerned about Iran's nuclear ambitions.

In what might be read as a tacit rebuke of the Israeli military action, a Starmer spokesman said the government was **prepared** to take every "diplomatic" step to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Russia is ready to act as a mediator

However, President Trump has **signalled** that he might be ready to hand responsibility for such a peaceful resolution to Russia, Britain's historic rival in Iran, suggesting at the weekend that it could act as a mediator.

The Kremlin **responded** by saying Russia was ready to play such a role, renewing an offer to remove highly enriched uranium from Iran and convert it into civilian reactor fuel.

The UK and other Europeans are wary that Trump's suggestion amounts to a further initiative by the US president that risks bringing the unrepentant invader of Ukraine back into the international fold.

No day-after plan

A further British concern, amid the continuing strikes and counter-strikes between Israel and Iran, is that Netanyahu's ultimate goal is regime change in Tehran. He has **urged** the Iranian people to rise up against their oppressors.

The UK holds no brief for the current regime in Iran. But, given its own experience of the aftermath of toppling dictators in Iraq and Libya, it may seek to remind its American ally of the unknown consequences of forcing regime change, particularly if there is no day-after plan.

If Trump were tempted to embrace Netanyahu's goal, the UK could try to exercise whatever influence it has with the White House to urge restraint.

There has been a growing discordance between the poor and repressed masses and the cosseted elites

Iranians have become increasingly

disillusioned with the stultifying persistence of supreme leader Ali Khamenei's regime, a partnership between the clergy and the new aristocracy of the Revolutionary Guard.

There has been a growing discordance between the poor and repressed masses and the cosseted elites who enjoy luxury lifestyles in the tree-lined boulevards of north Tehran.

Although periodic revolts against fake elections and the suppression of women's rights **failed** to shake the regime, there has been a growing sentiment among Iranians that its autocratic rule might eventually fade away.

As they cower from Israel's barrage of missiles and bombs, there are indications of a shift among the fiercely nationalistic Iranians that could favour the regime. One Tehrani, no friend of the regime, suggested Iran's retaliation at least meant Israel was tasting some of the same bitter medicine it had **handed out** to Gaza.

Could Iran emerge transformed?

It might be over-optimistic to imagine that, with a restoration of peace and a negotiated settlement of the nuclear question, Iran could emerge transformed or, at least, reformed.

The UK was at the forefront of entertaining similar hopes during the leadership of Mohammad Khatami, the liberalising cleric who was president from 1997 to 2005.



As foreign secretary in 2001, Jack Straw (middle) became the first senior UK minister to visit Iran since the 1979 revolution

In ministerial office throughout that time was Labour's Jack Straw. As foreign secretary in 2001, he became the first senior UK minister to visit Iran since the 1979 revolution.

He reminded readers of The Observer at the weekend that Israel had once acted as an ally of convenience to revolutionary Iran by supplying material and exchanging intelligence during Tehran's eight-year war with Iraq. That honeymoon had been replaced by the current stance of outright hostility.

From his long experience of watching developments in Iran, Straw last year argued that its rulers had lost even the sullen consent of the majority and that some day the regime would "go belly-up."

Earlier still, Straw **wrote** 'The English Job: Understanding Iran and Why It Distrusts Britain', published in 2019. He outlines the ways in which Britain overtly and covertly determined the fate of Iran and how that has moulded Iranian attitudes.

The UK's current leaders and its elder statesmen could have a role to play in influencing the US stance to the benefit of Israel and Iran and wider regional peace.

Inevitably, whatever the Little Satan says, Iranians are sure to smell a rat.