

## **Theoretical and Practical Approach in Britain's Foreign Policy on Iran<sup>I</sup>**

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**Abstract:** The foreign policymaking process of countries, especially the influential powers in international politics, has always attracted the attention of researchers and enthusiasts in international studies. One such process pertains to Britain, because of its international status and clout in the region surrounding the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite the research interest of many experts and scholars in Iran on Britain's foreign policy, compared with that of the United States, few have bothered to carry out scientific studies on its foreign policymaking process.

Nevertheless, the main question is what factors and variables of British foreign policy have had the greatest weight on Iran in recent years? And the next question is what are the British foreign policy directions regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran? Clearly, if the effective variables are correctly identified, on the one hand, it will proportionately strengthen our ability to predict that country's foreign policy moves and, on the other, increase our capacity to possibly impact this process.

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<sup>I</sup> Views expressed in this paper are of the author, without any indication or implication for the current policy positions of the Foreign Ministry of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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### **Introduction: Foreign Policymaking Process in Britain**

Just like other world powers, Britain's foreign policy is not formulated in a political vacuum. Rather, it is shaped by domestic variables (such as public opinion), globalization pressures (such as information technology), convergence tendencies (especially within the European Union) and multinational forces (such as non-governmental organizations). (Coles, 2000: 92) However, the underlying structure and logic of decision-making process in British foreign policy, including organizations and the way decisions are made, have relatively remained intact over the past century.

Theoretically, during this process, ministers and officials, on the one hand, and independent groups and individuals specializing in foreign policy, on the other, hold debates and discussions concerning foreign policy options. Thereupon, the decisions are made after examining the options and historical perspective of the issues, the legality of proposals and finally the stance of concerned bodies like the national security organizations. (Williams, 2004: 25)

Once a foreign policy has been laid out, it will be appraised and implemented by officials in charge to fulfill the defined objective. In addition, the adopted policy through the three mentioned stages would have to be offered or "sold" to different parties inside and outside the country. Consequently, foreign policymaking in Britain involves the three stages of interpretation, implementation and presentation—though in reality it is difficult to state which one ends before the next one begins. (Williams, 2004: 25)

The way a role is played and the configuration of players, official bodies and foreign pressures involved in this process depend largely on the importance and nature of the issue. Given the secretive nature of British foreign policy, the question remains to be answered on where the foreign policy is devised in the Britain? The point is that it is not just the British public opinion that is unable to understand the rationality basis of foreign policy decisions or where and when they are made, even the British Parliament (in response to its written inquiry) has only been able to get a brief report from the attorney-general in the House of

Lords on important issues such as the legality and legitimacy of invading Iraq in 2003. (Byrne & Weir, 2004: 456)

Just like other countries, Britain faces the ongoing tensions between the executive body, which seeks to lead, coordinate and centralize the process of foreign policymaking, and the foreign secretary who seeks independence for his office. Obviously, in theory, no one denies the need to have a central coordinator in the foreign policymaking process, but in reality, no one likes to be “coordinated”. For this reason, there are regular tensions and rivalries among all institutions involved. All these traits and tensions, more or less, exist in the foreign policy of the “New Labor Party” that came to power in Britain in 1997. Hence, it would be odd to assume that Britain’s foreign policymaking is unique. This is because the government pursues multi-faceted foreign policies in different combinations of parties and foreign pressures, depending on the agenda.

Under normal circumstances, British national security organizations such as Foreign Office, Defense Office, National Intelligence Council (including JIC, MI5 and MI6), and Prime Minister’s Office, are among the main decision-makers in the foreign policy process. However, in certain cases, the British Parliament, think tanks, pressure groups and foreign players such as the European Union and the United States could also play a significant role. Irrespective of some extra-sensitive issues -like the British-Argentina War of 1982 over the Malvinas Islands- in which a number of coordinated measures approved by all parties might be taken, it is naive to assume that there is a coordinated foreign policy process in Britain on all issues based on consensus among all domestic players.

Whether Robin Cook oversaw the Foreign Office based on “Ethical Foreign Policy” or Jack Straw directed it in the name of “Realistic and Ethical Foreign Policy”, the Labor Party was facing growing difficulties in its efforts to put behind the traditional British pattern in order to develop a logical and conceptual framework that could help lay down a strong foundation for a common foreign policy. Despite continuous and extensive efforts -during the ten years of Tony Blair's term in office- trying to centralize foreign policy, the British foreign policy in practice relied on relatively traditional methods based on commitments

that contradicted multilateralism, Atlanticism and neo-liberalism. (Coles, 2000:47)

The relatively long premiership of Blair (1997-2007) could be named as "the years of secretive influence and dominance of the prime minister" in the decision-making process to quote Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon. (Kavanagh & Seldon, 1999)

Blair's influence and role was so strong and noticeable that many critics said not only he outdid former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), but also believed that the British political system had turned into a presidential system of leadership prevailing in the United States. (Kavanagh & Seldon, 1999: 145-176)<sup>1</sup> For instance, the prime minister still has to approve the dispatch of troops to a war, including covert operations such as the SAS Rescue Mission in Sierra Leone in September 2000. Once options for taking decisions on important issues such as military interference were laid out, instead of the Cabinet, Blair just like his predecessors would hand over the task to ad hoc and small committees that comprised highly trusted non-military personnel, advisors and consultants. Anthony Seldon named Blair's trusted group "Denocracy", as they used to meet in Blair's office known as "The Den". (Kavanagh & Seldon, 1999: 145-176)

After the September 11 2001, Blair's circle of strategic decision-makers expanded to include a range of special advisors (such as David Manning, Jonathan Powell and Alistair Campbell), Straw, Cabinet Secretary Richard Wilson, Secretary of Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) John Scarlett, MI6 Chief Richard Dearlove, and MI5 Chief Stephen Lander. However, sometime later after the 9/11 attacks, serious changes and developments took place in the process which restricted the power of his insider group. (Hill, 1991: 238)<sup>2</sup>

In a bid to ease concerns in the press and the Labor Party over his ambitious rule, Blair formed a War Cabinet, besides his small trusted circle that comprised seven secretaries, to coordinate and direct military operations in Afghanistan. The same happened during Operation Desert Fox and the Kosovo War. As for the Iraq war, however, Blair explicitly preferred to take decisions within the selected insider group, which included Manning, Powell, Campbell, Scarlett, Dearlove, his Political Secretary Sally Morgan

and Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, the chief of Defense Staff. (Williams, 2004: 28)

Such a working method and decision-making process in foreign policy drew harsh criticisms, as many believed that the 'Blairite' foreign policymaking was extremely secretive, provisional, unofficial and sensitive—and faced off think-tanks and study/research groups. However, it seems that significant foreign policy issues during this period were handled by the prime minister and his trusted circle. In fact, they were the ones that played the central role in making decisions on all foreign policy issues.<sup>3</sup>

This became especially evident after September 11, 2001, when the United States and its allies embarked the so-called strategy of war on terrorism. Prior to this, all decisions regarding the wars in Afghanistan (2002) and Iraq (2003) used to come from within the close circle of Blair and even himself. (Williams, 2004: 27)

Because of such a pattern in making important foreign policy decisions, Blair was greatly criticized by intellectuals and political groups. This consequently led to the resignation of a number of Cabinet members, including Cook and Foreign Trade Secretary Claire Short – prior to the Iraq war in March 2003.

The radical political mood in Britain after September 11, 2001, and Blair's personal relationship with former US President George W. Bush had a huge impact on Britain's Middle East policy, including its policy concerning the Islamic Republic of Iran. Perhaps, this historical period could be viewed as the beginning of significant developments in Iran-Britain relations. Bilateral relations showed a declining trend after the initiatives and efforts of Straw (2003-6) to resolve Iran's nuclear dispute and repair ties failed.

Within the framework of rising role for prime minister and his advisers in taking strategic and important decisions in the past few years, it is worth mentioning that the same circle of elites and decision-makers, with slight differences, has maintained its influence during the premiership of Gordon Brown.

Based on introductory part of the article, we will try to provide a much more tangible view on British political system and its foreign policymaking process and a more precise analysis of

the trend and future outlook of ties between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Britain.

### **Iran-Britain Relations: Turbulent Trend**

The nature of British relations with the Middle East, particularly Iran-Britain ties, in the past few decades have had special characteristics. All British governments in power, irrespective of their political affiliations, have been aware of Iran's role and strategic position in the region towards which they have more or less adopted a similar strategy but different tactics. Perhaps, the general trend of bilateral relations during the past 50 years could be appropriately explained under a "benign-malign enmity" pattern. The same attributes can be seen both in the Labor and Tory governments' foreign policies on Iran.

A glance at the past three decades of ties between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Britain indicates that this general interpretation about bilateral relations remains valid in post-Islamic Revolution Iran. However, under different circumstances, there have been ups and downs in the so-called "benign-malign" character of enmity in their relationship which in turn reflect their foreign policy interests and objectives, and originate of interactions among different factors and variables. Apparently, the current British foreign policy on Iran is based on four variables.

1. Domestic policies of Iran and Britain;
2. Britain-European Union relations;
3. Special US-Britain ties; and
4. Conflict or congruity in the interests of Iran's and British governments.

An examination of these variables could help highlight the darker sides of British foreign policy pursued by the Labor Party towards Iran.

#### **1-Domestic Policies of Iran and Britain**

Since the relationship between countries is not a one-way street, actions and reactions could become ever more significant, changes in administrations and policies are affecting the interactions between the two sides. Within this framework,

*The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* Vol. XXI, No.1-2. Winter-Spring 2008-09

general elections in Britain and Iran, and their results, are of great importance. For instance, winning of the Labor Party headed by Blair in the 1997 general elections of Britain and victory of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the same year brought developments in bilateral relations.

On the other hand, the Labor Party, which advocates liberalism and human rights, has always continued to use international tools to put pressure on the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, the Conservative Party has used different tools to keep Iran's foreign policy in check, considering Iran's geostrategic position and its rich oil resources, so, domestic developments in Iran and Britain are considered important and decisive in Britain's foreign policy on Iran. In other words, domestic politics in Iran and Britain are mutually influential.

## **2-Britain-European Union Relations**

Britain is one of the main and influential members of the European Union. It has a set of commitments, limitations, procedures and norms in decision-making within the EU, which cannot be overlooked when dealing with other nations, including Iran. For instance, it is important for Britain to support causes such as human rights under the EU legislation.

During official meetings, London has always expressed its concern over Iran's human rights record and used it as a foreign policy tool within the EU framework.<sup>4</sup> For the same reason, negotiations over human rights between Iran and the EU, as well as trade relations which came to a halt after initiation of nuclear talks in 2003, are significant and the British government cannot afford to ignore them. The EU's present policy on Iran's peaceful nuclear activities has laid down a framework, which the British government cannot transcend. It has no choice but to respect and toe the EU line pursued by Javier Solana as its foreign policy chief during talks with Tehran over its civilian nuclear program.

## **3-Special US-Britain Ties**

Britain's special ties with the United States<sup>5</sup> are one of the most important and decisive variables that impact its relations

with Iran. (CRS Report, 2007: 25)<sup>6</sup> These special ties have imposed certain restrictions on British foreign policy concerning Iran, which are dictated by the traditional and historical ties between leftist and rightist groups of the two countries as well as the mutual commitments and strategic ties between their governments.

To be more specific, despite special circumstances and different administrations and political leaders/parties, their special ties have always been important for them. For instance, Blair of the Labor Party and Bush of the Republican Party had very close ties, which would continue to be the case even if they were from parties with deep-seated and traditional ties (such as Labor and Democrats).

During the tenures of Blair and Bush, especially after September 11, 2001, the US-Britain ties entered a new phase, and came to be known as "Shoulder to Shoulder Alliance."<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, the Democrats and the Labor have always worked together when they were in power on the two sides of the Atlantic. And when the Republicans and the Conservatives were in office, the two countries approached each other from a different angle.

These special ties, given the global dominance and influence of the United States, have led the British leaders after the Second World War to define their national interests in a way that is attainable when it toes Washington's policies. Moreover, the two countries have made deals and commitments, including with regard to the war on terrorism, which makes the British government far more dependent on the US. It should also be stated that Iran's hostile ties with the US and its not so amicable relationship with Britain have helped increase Washington's influence on London's Iran policy.

In this respect, Rosemary Hollis, an expert on the Middle East and Iran at the Royal Institute of International Relations known as "Chatham House", made an interesting point. She said, "If Washington decides to attack Iran, and even if Britain does not back the US, it will not denounce the attack." (Chatham House ME Report, 2005: 42) This clearly shows that the variable of US influence on British foreign policy on Iran cannot be ignored.

#### **4- Conflict or Congruity in the Interests of Iran's and British Governments**

After taking into consideration each one of the factors and variables discussed above, the impact of national interests on bilateral ties and political/economic cooperation becomes more evident. In this context, Iran's strategic position, enormous market and growing power in the region could be viewed as influential factors. (Foreign Policy Centre Report, 2006: 46)

Britons have historical and extensive knowledge about the Middle East and they are well aware of Iran's dynamic role in politics of the region. They use this knowledge to their advantage in the crisis-ridden spots and countries that encircle Iran (such as Afghanistan and Iraq). Also, Iran's huge market economy offers great investment opportunities for Britain that cannot be ignored in the political and economic circles.

In view of the above, Britain's foreign policy on Iran has been formed on the basis of interactions between these factors and variables. This has particularly been the case in the Labor Party's foreign policy under the leadership of Blair and Brown.

In response, while acknowledging Britain's role and status in the international scene plus its economic facilities, the Islamic Republic of Iran has endeavored to take advantage of it and at times oppose London's arrogant policies in the region. Clearly, the two countries know that "neither Britain is the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century empire nor Iran is an underdeveloped and backward nation of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries." While acknowledging their strategic positions, both sides have a common sense of making strides to uphold bilateral relations and not let fleeting political events damage and dim the future prospects of bilateral ties.

#### **Iran-Britain Relations: Ups and Downs (1978-2008)**

After the victory of Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the developments that followed, the British government took hostile measures against Iranian nationals, especially students, in Britain. The harsh treatment exacerbated tensions between the two countries and led to the first anti-Britain rallies in Tehran the same year. A number of Iranian students were deported from Britain

and several others were arrested during rallies in front of the US Embassy in London in protest to the detention of their peers by the American police while staging protests in front of the White House in Washington. The Iranian government lodged a protest and warned that the situation could deteriorate bilateral relations. In 1980 and amid rising tensions, Britain's Foreign Office summoned its diplomats from the British Embassy in Tehran, except one, and then closed it.

In November 1980, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said, "For a few months, a number of British nationals have been under arrested in Iran. As long as they are not released, the British government will not resume diplomatic ties with the Iranian government." The situation continued until 1986 when Mrs. Thatcher revised her country's policy and called for improved relations with Tehran. She announced that Britain and the US believe there should be better relations between Iran and the West. (The Green Book, 1992: 103-125) It goes without saying that such a shift in Western policy was a consequence of major victories by Iran during the Iraq-imposed war in the 1980s. In 1986, Iran and Britain appointed persons to their interests sections and agreed to improve ties. However, tensions once again arose in 1987 when Roger Cooper was arrested in Iran for spying activities and an Iranian diplomat was detained in Manchester. Consequently, the directors of the interests sections were denied visas to Tehran and London.

In 1988, the two sides once again sat at the negotiating tables to explore avenues for improving ties. They decided to exchange diplomatic delegations. In November 1988, the British Embassy reopened in Tehran and foreign ministers of the two countries met in the two capitals.

The publication of the blasphemous book "Satanic Verses" in 1988 caused the severance of London-Tehran ties. London took the initial step toward exacerbating tensions by summoning its diplomats from Tehran. Likewise, in March 1988, the Iranian Parliament ratified a law to sever diplomatic ties with Britain.

However, in the summer of 1990, the British government commended Iran and Syria for helping secure the release of Brian Conrad, an Irish citizen, abducted in Lebanon. Also, on September 7, 1990, then Foreign Secretary Douglas Herd announced that London seeks resumption of ties with Tehran. Finally, in *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* Vol. XXI, No.1-2. Winter-Spring 2008-09

September 28 of the same year, the two sides resumed their diplomatic relations. In 1992, the two governments took part in negotiations aimed at boosting ties to the level of ambassadors. However, relations remained at the charge d'affaires level until April 1999.

In 1997, when the Labor government of Blair came to power and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was Iran's incumbent president, bilateral relations improved. When Seyyed Mohammad Khatami was elected as president in 1997, the Iranian and British foreign ministers, Kamal Kharrazi and Robin Cook respectively, advanced relations to the ambassadorial levels in the summer of 1999 and exchanged ambassadors.<sup>8</sup> The situation continued to improve during 2001-6 when Jack Straw was still foreign secretary. He visited Tehran five times for talks on Iran's nuclear program.<sup>9</sup> In return, Iran's foreign minister visited London three times. The arrest of Hadi Soleimanpour, the former Iranian ambassador to Argentina, made bilateral relations tense, which ultimately forced the British government and the judiciary to call off his arrest warrant.

The US unilateral invasion of Iraq in 2003 and London's unconditional support for Washington's warmongering resulted in fresh tensions between Iran and Britain. The presence of British forces near Iran's southern borders became a national security issue for Tehran.

Talks on Iran's civilian nuclear program between Tehran and the European troika of Britain, France and Germany marked another important development in 2003. These talks continued under the name of G5+1 after Russia and China joined the group. The talks were initially aimed at building confidence and the negotiating parties finally reached a number of agreements. However, the progress was short-lived, as the European side tried to stop Iran from mastering the uranium enrichment technology and/or producing nuclear fuel for civilian use.

Although Iran and Britain retained their diplomatic course at ambassadorial levels after July 2005 when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took office, relations have been strained since London and Washington imposed sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council in a bid to force it to give up its inalienable right to peaceful nuclear technology allowed under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, to which Iran is a signatory. This, plus other

events, such as the arrest of Nosratollah Tajik, the former Iranian ambassador to Jordan in November 2005 by the British government and the US request to extradite him for alleged illegal trading, taking the terrorist Mujahideen Khalq Organization (MKO) off the UK's terror list, and imposing sanctions and financial restrictions on Iranian banks such as Bank Melli in London, deteriorated bilateral relations.

Although parliamentarian groups have continued to meet, especially members of the inter-parliamentary groups and members of foreign policy commissions of the two countries, these hostile measures prevented Tehran and London from having broader ties.

These recent developments should be considered within the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the British foreign policy on Iran, especially after the Labor Party took power under the leadership of Blair and Brown. In other words, Britain's foreign policy on Iran has theoretical foundations and its actions make sense only within this structure.

### **British Foreign Policy on Iran: Discussion**

Given the process of foreign policymaking in Britain and the mutual influence of key variables related to British policies on Iran, it might be possible to understand British foreign policy on Iran and clarify all aspects by examining the comments and public statements made by Blair, Straw and other officials as well as moves made within this framework. To better understand the issue, British foreign policy has to be divided into two periods since the Labor Party has been in power.

#### **-May 1997-2006**

This covers the period during which the Labor Party came to power after winning the general elections and the tenure of Mr. Hashemi Rafsanjani until June 1997. It then covers the period when Mohammad Khatami was elected president, until the dismissal of Straw and Mr. Ahmadinejad's victory in the presidential elections.

**-May 2006 to Present Time:**

This period covers the general elections of 2006 in Britain and Straw's dismissal as foreign secretary until the present time.

**1-May 1997-2006:**

In May 1997, the Labor Party under the leadership of Blair beat John Major's Conservative Party in the general elections. Inspired by the leftist and liberal ideals of the Labor Party, Blair tried to adopt a policy on the Islamic Republic of Iran that taking into consideration Britain's historical experience in the Middle East and Iran's regional importance. The Labor Party had to strike a balance between the EU's policy of "critical dialogue" and the Clinton administration's "dual containment". To this end, the British policy was based on a soft and quiet approach of willingness to improve ties toward ambassadorial level. This period that was prior to the exchange of ambassadors and coincided with the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani and premiership of Blair, could be defined as the era of the desire to have "limited détente" between the British and Iranian governments.

When the government of Khatami came to power shortly after Blair, the two sides exchanged ambassadors. In September 1999, bilateral relations entered a new phase under the new policy of "détente" about which the two administrations appeared to be serious. This was due to a number of variables and factors, the most important being positive international opinion regarding the new government in Iran, mainly the policy shift of the Clinton administration. The new policy adopted by London had two objectives:

First, strengthening and developing bilateral ties with Tehran;

Second, resolving the nuclear and regional disputes by strengthening relations with Iran;

The person who introduced this policy during Blair's premiership was former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook. He pursued the strategy of "Ethical Foreign Policy" during his tenure in the British Foreign Office (1997-2001). Cook was of the opinion that inflexible bureaucratic ties and structures in the Foreign

Office and the British Commonwealth were no longer practical and the new conditions and era require new plans and programs. Such a policy also came to the fore as a consequence of developments in international politics, especially after the collapse of former Soviet Union that ended the Cold War. This policy was pursued later by Straw who replaced Cook after his resignation. Straw pursued Cook's policy while he had a special interest in the Iranian history and culture. Close relations with his Iranian counterpart led to the belief that it would be possible to resolve the dispute over Iran's nuclear program and other regional issues by improving bilateral ties.<sup>10</sup> This also laid the foundation for Britain's new foreign policy on Iran.

An important point during the tenure of Straw was the dramatic change in the US influence on Britain's policy regarding Iran, especially after the resumption of nuclear negotiations between Iran and the European troika of Britain, France and Germany in 2003. (CRS Report, 2007: 25)

As a country seriously concerned about Iran's nuclear activities, especially after the Iraq war and the swift victory of allied forces in April 2003, the United States opposed any type of negotiations with Iran. It believed that Iran's failure to cooperate would cause negotiations to fail and the case should be referred to the UN Security Council for further imposition of sanctions and ultimately a possible military strike.

In the US, the neoconservatives dominated the Defense Department, National Security Council, Vice President Office, and even in parts of the State Department during the time of former Secretary of State Collin Powell. That explains why there was serious support for military confrontation with Iran. But this was something Straw was not interested in. He made it clear that "a military strike on Iran would be unimaginable".<sup>11</sup> These circumstances, along with US pressures, forced Straw to convince Blair to make a deal with the Americans as a representative of the European troika. The idea was that the Americans would initially approve talks between the three European states and Iran, and if the negotiations failed, the European three would support the US policy of stepping up pressures on Iran and sending its nuclear case to the UN Security Council. However, after their failure, Britain was not only forced to back the US policy of referring Iran's nuclear case to the UN Security Council, but also changed

*The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* Vol. XXI, No.1-2. Winter-Spring 2008-09

its strategic foreign policy on Iran due to the personal relationship between Blair and Bush. Consequently, it had to join the campaign for a policy of “pushing for political change in Iran”.

In 2004, nuclear talks collapsed and Straw (and his European counterparts) came under immense pressure. A policy shift gathered speed after Iran ended its voluntary suspension of uranium enrichment (and began enrichment activities in Isfahan’s UF6 and Natanz), in particular, after the 2006 presidential elections which put Ahmadinejad in office as the new president. Because of the new circumstances, Straw was forced to resign in May 2006 as Blair was under immense pressures from the neoconservatives and the Bush administration—although Straw categorically dismissed the claims in an interview. ([www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk))

The year 2004 was the beginning of the new British foreign policy of distancing itself from Iran and stepping up confrontations and tensions. This created a shift in its approach that has presumably continued till this day.

### **2-May 2006 -Present:**

After Straw, the shift in British policy on Iran became definite and was consolidated. Perhaps one of the reasons for his forced resignation (or as quoted by him as “voluntary resignation”) from the Foreign Office was his opposition to this particular policy shift. On the other hand, the radicalization of British domestic and foreign policies over the past few years (from the final days of Blair’s second term and during his third term in office) that had been greatly affected by international developments after the September 11 attacks on US soil in 2001 dealt a major blow to Iran-Britain relations.

Britain’s interferences in Iraq and Afghanistan, Blair’s harsh position on the 33-day war of Lebanon in 2006, the Zionist regime’s invasion of Gaza, plus the bureaucratic rules and harsher policies adopted within Britain and even the Terrorism Act, changed and radicalized domestic policies with huge implications. This phenomenon, plus the growing decision-making power of the prime minister and his advisors that came to be known as the centralization of power in No. 10 Downing Street, gave rise to

news about differences between the Foreign Office and Blair's advisors, particularly on how to confront Iran.

However, in the end, it was Iran's nuclear activities as well as its rising regional clout that became one of the main challenges of Blair's foreign policy. Blair decided to find ways of confronting Iran on different issues, both through his own office and within the framework of a crisis body known as "The Grand Committee". So, the issue was no longer under the complete control of the British National Security Council or the foreign secretary.

Another important issue to be pointed out is on the dual tendencies of the British foreign policy in post- Second World War era: The first advocated a closer alliance with the United States and using its clout and leadership in international affairs (referred to as "free rider" approach); and the second one was calling for a balancing trans-Atlantic relations (between the US and Europe) so that British independence and international prestige would not be tarnished. (Coles, 2000: 5)

In the decades that followed the Second World War, the British policy became a battleground between these two different ideas. Blair's Labor Party had greater inclination toward the first policy in the final years of his political career. This reminded the world of the 1980s when Thatcher and Reagan united against the former Soviet Union<sup>12</sup> In fact, this toeing of US policy also earned criticism for Blair and his policies.

The important point in this discussion is that the domination of extremism in British foreign policy had serious repercussions on its Iran policy. Like any other political phenomena, it might not be possible to exactly specify the origin of this radical trend in British foreign policy, but it seems to stem from September 11, 2001.

With the coming to power of those in favor of seeking US alliance, the British foreign policy pursued the US foreign policy more vigorously in international affairs in general and in relation to Iran in particular. As mentioned earlier, Blair and Bush personal and special relationship built in the post-September 11, 2001 era during which, Blair's unconditional support for Bush's policies in the international arena became known as the "Shoulder to Shoulder Alliance". It was taken from a speech given by Blair immediately after the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

*The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* Vol. XXI, No.1-2. Winter-Spring 2008-09

All these variables, including US pressures, political radicalism during the Blair era, centralization of power at No. 10 Downing Street, personal relationship between Blair and Bush, their undisclosed and public deals,<sup>13</sup> as well as uncertainty in Iran's nuclear talks, gradually led British foreign policy on Iran away from detente and closer to US foreign policy.

Although this trend developed gradually, it accelerated after the invasion of Iraq and Straw's failure to reach agreement with Iran during the nuclear talks. Under the new circumstances, the British approach toward the Iranian nuclear activities was almost the same as the one advocated by Bush and his neoconservative administration, i.e. "stopping Iran from gaining access to nuclear fuel production technology".

Britain's foreign policy changed seriously after the 2005 presidential elections in Iran, which was accompanied by an extremist approach in the British foreign policy on Iran. Perhaps, this can be translated into "seeking change in Iran's political behavior through political change inside Iran,"—the same notorious strategy (of 'regime change') pursued by the US foreign policy. However, British officials, particularly Blair, referred to it as "pushing for democratic change in Iran". But, as quoted by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the comments made by Blair and US officials about democratic change are a softer reference to regime change in Iran. (BBC Channel 4, 2006)

The Straw's speech on March 13, 2006, at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) as well as Blair's statements at Georgetown University in Washington on May 26, 2006 were the prologue of the new phase in British foreign policy on Iran. The shift was adopted immediately as an outcome of several meetings among a number of high-level diplomatic between the present and former American and European officials and experts on the Middle East and Iran. These meetings aimed to find a new approach toward Iran. (Financial Times, February 19, 2006) They also helped Washington successfully fine-tune its inconsistent foreign policy on Iran.

During his very important speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Straw laid the foundation for the new policy of Britain by stating: "We will not take sides in Iran's internal political debates—these are for the Iranians to resolve and they are perfectly capable of doing so themselves. Given their

history, Iranians are understandably sensitive about any hint of outside interference. But this does not mean that we should stop standing up for principles of human rights and fundamental freedoms which we hold dear and which so many Iranians aspire to: freedom of speech; transparent, genuinely democratic and accountable government; respect for the rights of minorities and women; an independent judiciary ... And we should help Iranians make informed choices for themselves by helping improve the flow of information into the country. So we in Europe need to communicate better with the Iranian people. And I urge my European colleagues to take the time to talk to Iranian journalists or to news services that broadcast to Iran."

At the end of his speech, Straw said, "President Ahmadinejad once said that "the Iranian nation is a learned nation. It is a civilized nation. It is a history-making nation". I agree. But words are not enough. It's time the Iranian people show the world that they are such a nation."<sup>14</sup>

Blair, during the third most important speech of his time in office on his country's foreign policy on Iran at Georgetown University in May 26, 2006 said: "Earlier I described the fledgling movement toward democracy across the Middle East. As I said, I believe success in Iraq has an importance far beyond the borders of Iraq. But I would put it higher than this. I now think that we need a far more concerted and stronger strategy across the whole region. The United States rightly began this with its Greater Middle East initiative. However, the more I examine this issue, the more convinced I am that to protect our future, we need to help them to protect theirs. For example, I don't believe we will be secure unless Iran changes. I emphasize that I'm not saying we should impose change. I'm simply saying the greater freedom and democracy which I have no doubt, most Iranians want, is something we need. This cannot and should not be the responsibility of the United States alone. The EU, in particular, needs to be fully engaged." (Blair, 2006)

These two separate speeches by top British officials marked the beginning of a stage that shows the Labor government has finally distanced itself from constructive dialogue or even critical dialogue with the Iranian government and is now closer to the US foreign policy. This could mean that bringing about political change in Iran and making efforts to contain Iran's

*The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* Vol. XXI, No.1-2. Winter-Spring 2008-09

foreign policy conduct have become the official policies of the British and American governments. In other words, the name of such a new approach could be “regime or behavior change” without using such terms. However, this strategy has no bright future, as there are still disputes and debates in the US and the UK about the implementation methods and tools with little or no hope of success. Perhaps this could be one of the reasons that explain why the British officials are afraid to openly talk about it as a formal government policy.

At the same time and due to these criticisms, doubts and uncertainties about such a neoconservative approach, the British government is taking advantage of its diplomatic presence in Tehran to simultaneously keep its formal communication channels and contacts open by sending diplomatic and parliamentary delegations to Tehran.

In Gordon Brown's term, who came to power in July 2007 and extensively reshuffled Blair's Cabinet, the changes were largely about faces rather than approaches.<sup>15</sup> There were little or no changes in the objectives of the Labor Party's foreign policy. The new gang included the very same people that had worked with Blair in the previous administration. Perhaps it could be concluded that no fundamental change took place to raise expectations about any fundamental changes in British foreign policy during the Labor Party's third term in office. Therefore, the element of continuity still outmaneuvers the elements of change and development.

With regard to Britain's foreign policy on Iran, the new Foreign Secretary David Miliband said in an interview with BBC's Channel 4 on September 2, 2007, that it is important for Britain to commit itself to diplomacy and dialogue when dealing with Iran's nuclear activities. “Iran is an important country and we highly respect the Iranian people's culture and civilization ... Nobody knows what will happen in Iran after ten years. Perhaps there would be changes in Iran which could bring to power a democratic government just as the way people want; a government that will be both a partner and an important member of the international community,” he said.

The comments made by the new foreign secretary shows that the policy approach of Brown—seeking to change Iran's behavior through internal democratic changes—is not different

from that of Blair. This has remained a British foreign policy constant. So, the main basis in British foreign policy cannot be serious cooperation with the government of Iran. The volume of bilateral economic and trade cooperation has declined significantly, although the two sides continue to maintain diplomatic contacts. Such a new approach has also been linked to the dispute over Iran's nuclear program, since British officials have on several occasions stated that there will be no expansion of ties with Tehran as long as the nuclear dispute remains unsolved.

Here, British policy pertaining to Iran can be classified as follows:

- 1- Trying to bring about political changes in Iran by using various tools in the form of a long-term strategy;
- 2- Seeking US assistance to facilitate their desired internal change in Iran;
- 3- Conducting soft power operations (political, cultural, media) and making targeted misinformation as a source of reference for the Iranian people;
- 4- Forging direct or indirect contacts with anti-government groups and militia, and strengthening them to exert pressure for changing Iran's foreign policy behavior and pursuing the project of political change (an example could be a meeting attended by Blair and Bush with a number of Iranians during Blair's May 2006 trip to the US); (Financial Times, February 19, 2006)
- 5- Containing the alleged "threatening" behaviors in Iran's foreign policy with regard to the West, particularly its nuclear issue, Iran's support for Islamic resistance and Iranian leadership of political developments in the Middle East;
- 6- Maintaining cooperation and ties with Iranian government to capitalize on Iran's geopolitical incentives and regional influence aimed at regional conflict resolution—something that the US government does not possess. However, the British government has expressed its willingness to cooperate with Iran vis-à-vis Iraq and Afghanistan;
- 7- Maintaining bilateral ties in order to criticize Iran over its foreign policy, human rights issues and the fight against terrorism. Limited and goal-oriented bilateral ties with Iran are still recommended;
- 8- It is even presumed that a would-be Iran's positive response to the Western package of nuclear incentives and proposed cooperation will not end the long-term strategy of enforcing

political changes in the country. This is because they are following both short-term and long-term objectives in Iran.

### **Britain's Foreign Policy on Iran: Proofs**

In addition to the statements of British officials<sup>16</sup> underscoring the foreign policy shift, there are similarly evident and practical proofs that are briefly presented below:

#### **1-MKO:**

The process of taking the terrorist Mujahideen Khalq Organization (MKO) off the list of terror groups began in 2007 when the terrorist group filed a complaint at the Proscribed Organizations Appeal Committee (POAC).<sup>17</sup> This was at a time when tensions between Tehran and London over the former's nuclear program were running high and the British leading efforts to intensify anti-Iran sanctions. In fact, during this period, Anglo-American policies on Iran were in perfect alignment.

Despite the apparent British government's efforts to reject the request of this terrorist group and its supporters in the British Parliament by presenting documents to POAC for proving the terrorist nature of MKO and that it has been on the terror list since 2000 (when Straw was foreign secretary), it failed and was forced to pass a bill for taking MKO off the terror list. In June 2008, the group was finally removed from the list. After the vote, Miliband made a strong statement against the MKO and announced that given the MKO's past terrorist activities, the British government will distance itself from the group. ([www.fco.gov.uk/news/hlm](http://www.fco.gov.uk/news/hlm)) However, the measure taken by the British government does in no way mean that Britain has rescinded its new policy to exert pressure on Iran to bring about political changes in the country. The MKO is now free to operate in Britain--although even prior to that, the group had been active in the British Parliament for about two years without facing any serious objections from the British government.

### **2-Nosratollah Tajik:**

Former Iranian Ambassador to Jordan, Nosratollah Tajik was arrested while he was studying at a university in London. The incident cast a heavy shadow on Iran-Britain relations.

Tajik was arrested by the police at his home in Durham on November 26, 2006. The arrest took place upon a request made by the US government for allegedly purchasing infrared cameras. Contrary to the case of Hadi Soleimanpour, the former Iranian ambassador to Argentina in 2002 -when, was arrested, but was released because of favorable diplomatic ties between Tehran and London - Tajik's arrest took place in the worst possible conditions in relations between Iran and Britain. He is still under house arrest.

Even if it is presumed that the US government may have conspired in advance without coordinating with the British government, but to say that the British officials or heads of security services were not intentionally or unintentionally involved is improbable. The British authorities did not cooperate with the Iranian side on this issue, which means that they are inclined to use such tools for exerting pressure on Iran for political gains. At any rate, the Iranian government has been seriously following the case—although there is little hope for a breakthrough, given the delicate nature of political relations.

### **3-Iraq:**

Britain also emulates the US military commanders and government officials in accusing Iran of interfering in Iraq's internal affairs. It has even accused Iran of sending weapons to Iraq or planting bombs to kill their forces. These accusations were similarly made amid tense relations between Tehran and London. In the past, British officials always tried to distance themselves from repeating such accusations made by the Americans. But they have gradually intensified their statements. For instance, on April 5, 2007 Iran released a number of Royal Navy personnel arrested in Iranian waters in the Persian Gulf. On the same day, it was confirmed that four British troops had been killed by a roadside bomb in Basra. Speaking to reporters on the same day, Blair lashed out at Tehran by saying:

*The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* Vol. XXI, No.1-2. Winter-Spring 2008-09

“Now it is far too early to say that the particular terrorist act that killed our forces was an act committed by terrorists that were backed by elements of the Iranian government, so I make no allegation in respect of that particular incident. But the general picture, as I have said before, is that there are elements within the Iranian regime that are involved in Iraq. Iran can only choose one of these options. It can either choose the option of supporting terrorists and international isolation, or being a member of the international community and taking advantage of its benefits.” (Guardian, April 5, 2007)

In 2008, the British troops left Basra and only a small group remains there. Consequently, the British officials are now less talking about Iranian “meddling” in Iraq. However, the main agenda has refused to go away.

#### **4-Afghanistan:**

Following in the footsteps of their American allies, British officials are also accusing Iran of interfering in Afghanistan’s internal affairs and supporting the Taliban. In some cases, they even alleged that Iran was sending weapons to the Taliban insurgents in the fight against western troops, including the US and Britain. These allegations were being made to exert pressure on Tehran. Afghan government officials have on several occasions dismissed these allegations.

#### **5-Bombing inside Iran:**

In an effort to create turmoil and disorder in Iran, the British government officials have taken measures, including support for a terrorist named Manouchehr Fouladvand who is linked with pro-monarchy groups. He set up a satellite TV channel under the name of Your TV. He then ran a show in which he taught terrorist groups how to make bombs, terrorize and stir religious violence.

According to documents published by the ministries of interior and intelligence,<sup>18</sup> this terror cell carried out a number of bombings inside Iran. The terrorist plots of the group were designed in Britain and broadcast via the United States.

Seymour Hersh, the eminent columnist at the *New Yorker*, wrote in the weekly's June 2008 (fourth week) edition that the US government secretly allocated \$400 million to fund terrorist activities in Iran. It can be concluded that such measures are aimed at creating political changes from within Iran and/or forcing the country to accept Western proposals during negotiations over its nuclear program.

### **Conclusion**

Britain's foreign policy on Iran changed fundamentally after July 2006—when Jack Straw was forced to resign and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected as the new Iranian president. The policy has been radicalized to pursue the long-term plan of enforcing political changes inside Iran. Such an approach is rooted in the ideals of European (British) liberalism and radicalism of US neoconservatives— who were considered Blair's close friends.

Since the time the question of Iran was raised by Lord George Curzon in 1869 until the time the plan for bringing about political change in Iran was devised by Blair, only one thing stands out: the inability of the British government—having its presence and influence in the region—to coexist with Iran.

The question of how long this policy could last will largely depend on the circumstances and directions in Iran. Just as importantly, domestic politics is about to usher new developments in Britain—all because of the uncertain position of Brown and the leadership crisis in the Labor Party which could lead to adjustments in this approach.

The Islamic Republic of Iran should focus its efforts on exposing and criticizing this approach in the British foreign policy. Diplomatic relations with the British government are the single most important and effective means and/or incentives that the Islamic Republic of Iran could utilize to influence this approach and defuse it.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Although the time of this discussion on whether the Prime Minister's office has become dictatorial and authoritarian dates back to the premiership of Lord Gladstone, written materials related on it are plenty and hence difficult to conclude. This is because all British prime ministers have somehow tried to promote inter-agency cooperation and prevent centralization.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hill believes that the executive body could have the upper hand in the government Cabinet probably when circumstances require policies that are in alignment with regular methods and plans, and the Cabinet members are not able to adjust themselves with the prime minister by implementing them.

The time after September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks is most probably one of these periods, because the government of Blair had been in need of

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new policies that could address modern and strategic international developments. These conditions came as a result of changes in the foreign policy of Bush administration and the greater emphasis on strategies such as “preemption” over “deterrence”.

<sup>3</sup> I lived in Britain for four years. I was present in important meetings with British officials at different levels during the arrest of Royal Navy personnel by Iran (2004-2007), as well as negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program. I personally noticed that British negotiators and bodies such as Foreign Office, Defense Office and the Parliament played little or no role in the British foreign policy on Iran. The decisive factor was the role of the prime minister and his personal relationship with White House officials, including Bush.

<sup>4</sup> With regards to i.e. Britain’s concerns over human rights and their connection to the European Union policies refer to: statements made by government officials or the questions asked by members of the British Parliament as well as the answers provided by deputies and top officials of the British Foreign Office at the parliament’s website: [www.Parliament.gov.uk/hansord](http://www.Parliament.gov.uk/hansord)

<sup>5</sup> The special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom was first used by former Prime Minister Chamberlin during World War II. It is still being used to explain the proximity and importance of American-British relations. The relationship refers to the ideological, historical, cultural and strategic commonalities between the two countries. Despite their differences, the special relationship helped London and Washington preserve their ties during the Second World War. Such a general framework plus the personal relationships between their leaders play an integral and important role in uniting the two countries when facing important international challenges.

<sup>6</sup> This report indicates of the importance of the Iranian issue in the US-UK relations.

<sup>7</sup> Shoulder to Shoulder Alliance was used for the first time in Blair’s speech after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. He condemned the attacks and announced his country’s readiness to join forces with the United States shoulder to shoulder in fighting terrorism.

<sup>8</sup> The reason these sections and others were quoted is either because I was present in these developments or was involved in following them up at the Foreign Office directly or indirectly.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to five visits to Tehran for nuclear talks, Straw travelled two more times to Iran within the framework of bilateral relations. (See the interview of British Ambassador Jeffrey Adams in Tehran by the Persian daily Kargozaran on July 30, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Kargozaran’s interview with British Ambassador in Tehran Jeffrey Adams on July 30, 2008.

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<sup>11</sup> See: Straw's interview with BBC's Channel 4 News on September 26, 2004, and his later interview with Persian BBC and other media outlets at the archives of the British Foreign Office at: [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk).

<sup>12</sup> A serious criticism of Blair in Britain was his so-called "unconditional following" of Bush's policies. Sir Malcolm Rifkind, the former Conservative defense and foreign secretary during the premiership of Thatcher, said in an interview with me: "Britain has never unconditionally followed the United States, even during the time of Thatcher. However, the situation changed during the Blair era, making it difficult to differentiate between the interests of the United Kingdom and those of the United States. The Tories oppose this strongly." The interesting point is that the Tories, compared to the Labor Party and Liberal Democrat Party, are more inclined toward the United States. Yet, they strongly objected to Blair's policies in this respect.

<sup>13</sup> The memoirs of Sir Christopher Mayer, the former British ambassador to the US, are a valuable source of information regarding the personal relationship between Blair and Bush prior to the Iraq war and their covert and overt deals.

<sup>14</sup> See the transcript of Straw's speech on March 13, 2006, at the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) in London, which is available at the institute's website: [www.iiss.org.uk](http://www.iiss.org.uk)

<sup>15</sup> The phrase "Change of Faces, Not Change of Faiths" was used by Baroness Symmons, former British deputy foreign secretary for Middle East affairs during the Blair administration. She is now a member of the House of Lords and used the phrase during an interview with me.

<sup>16</sup> To learn more about the harsh and radical comments and positions of British officials at the Foreign Office, Defense Office, Home Office and prime minister's office regarding Iran, visit the website of the British Parliament and see the daily debates sections at: [www.parliament.gov.uk](http://www.parliament.gov.uk)

<sup>17</sup> Proscribed Organizations Appeal Committee (POAC).

<sup>18</sup> Refer to the comments and interviews of the deputy interior minister for security affairs and Mohseni Ejei, the intelligence minister, made after the terrorist bombings on Ahvaz streets and Rahian-e Noor Mosque of Shiraz (February 2005 and March 2007), and published in the Iranian mass-circulation newspapers.