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Westminster Hall

Tuesday 11 October 2005

[Sir Nicholas Winterton in the Chair]

UK Relations With Iran

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[Gillian Merron.]

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I hope that all hon. Members had a restful and peaceful recess, and that you have all come back duly reinvigorated for the constructive debate that will take place in this House in the coming weeks.

9.30 am

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to initiate the debate. Before I get into my speech, I must declare the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Binley) and I visited New York in September, where we jointly addressed a rally of 20,000 people outside the United Nations building in support of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, and that the visit was paid for entirely by that organisation.

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I intended to speak for 20 minutes, but I am now slightly worried about doing so because of the large number of colleagues who seek to speak in the debate. I shall do my best to speak quickly.

The Iranian regime's lethal cocktail of barbaric oppression at home, export of Islamic fundamentalism, sponsorship of terrorism, widespread interference in the internal affairs of Iraq and unwavering pursuit of nuclear weapons is a real and present threat to the Iranian and Iraqi peoples and to peace and stability in the middle east and the wider world.

As Members will know, for years our Government and those of our European partners favoured rapprochement with Tehran, and told us that their policy toward Iran, which was described as "constructive engagement" or "critical dialogue", would strengthen those elements in the Iranian regime whom our Government described as moderates or reformers. Regrettably, events have proved them wrong on both counts: not even the mullahs now describe any element of their regime as moderate, and our Government's policy has resulted only in allowing the most radical elements to cement control over every lever of power in Iran.

In the Iranian regime's recent presidential elections, the Guardian Council, a watchdog vetting body of 12 unelected clerics and jurists, approved only eight candidates out of 1,019 to stand for election, including two clerics, four former Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps commanders, a former Minister and a former low-ranking official. Of course, no women or opposition candidates were allowed to stand, as the Guardian Council vetted all prospective candidates to ensure their full allegiance to the supreme leader.

By any standard, the presidential election was neither free nor fair. After the first and second rounds of the elections, even the losing candidates, including the cleric Mehdi Karubi, a former Speaker in Parliament, and

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Rafsanjani, the former President of Iran and a pillar of the Iranian regime for the past 25 years, alleged that they had lost due to widespread vote-rigging in favour of the ultimate winner, Ahmadinejad. I apologise to the Chamber for my mispronunciation of those names, which does not come to me easily. Further, most independent observers, and Iran's main opposition, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, claimed that the election had been widely boycotted by the Iranian people, who sought fundamental change.

However, despite all its shortcomings, the recent presidential election was very important. By propelling Ahmadinejad to victory, the supreme leader completed his absolute control over the executive, judiciary and legislature. The plan began a few years earlier with the elections of the municipal council for Tehran, which left hard-liners in control. It then moved on to the parliamentary elections in February last year, in which

the hard-liners, including 70 Revolutionary Guards commanders, secured an overwhelming majority. Ahmadinejad's election was the final step. I believe that that strategic decision marks a new era in Iran's political landscape. Ahmadinejad's ascension undercut the view in the west that the so-called moderates in Iran were gaining strength; it lifted the veil of moderation, and showed the ruling theocracy's true colours.

So who is this new President? In an article in *The Scotsman*, Mrs. Maryam Rajavi—a wonderful lady—who is president-elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, described Ahmadinejad as a

"hostage taker, murderer and terrorist."

Ahmadinejad was a ringleader of the takeover of the United States embassy in Tehran just after the 1979 revolution. He is accused of plotting to murder Salman Rushdie, of interrogating, torturing and executing Iranian dissidents during his time with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards' internal security brigade, and of terrorist assassinations around the world when he was a key figure in the formation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards' Jerusalem force. Moreover, in early July, Reuters reported that Austrian prosecutors were investigating whether Ahmadinejad was involved in the 1989 assassination of the Iranian Kurdish leader in Vienna.

Soon after his election, Ahmadinejad appointed a Cabinet filled with hard-liners, composed, on the whole, of former Revolutionary Guards commanders and/or individuals who formerly worked in Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security. The Cabinet is truly the "Who's Who" of terrorism. Iran's new Foreign Minister was forced to leave Turkey because of his role in kidnappings and assassinations of Iranian dissidents and secular Turkish intellectuals. Iran's Defence Minister is directly linked to the suicide bombing of the United States Marines' barracks in Beirut in 1983, which killed 241 United States Marines.

What should be of most concern to the international community is that, as a consequence of Ahmadinejad's presidency and the appointment of his Cabinet, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps has emerged as the main pillar of the Iranian regime. The Revolutionary Guards Corps is one of the most repressive pieces of apparatus of the Iranian regime, and it was the main organ involved in the arrest, torture and execution of tens of thousands of the regime's political opponents.

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Since Ahmadinejad's election, the Revolutionary Guards Corps has stepped up its internal repression. Human rights abuses in Iran continue to increase drastically. Summary arrests, tortures, public lashings and hangings, and stoning to death remain everyday occurrences in Iran. It is reported that, in the past few months alone, more than 70 Iranians have been executed in public, a large number of whom were young or minors.

Women and religious minorities, including the Jewish, Christian and Baha'i communities, have also borne the brunt of that repression.

At the same time, the Revolutionary Guards' Jerusalem force, which is responsible for extraterritorial activities, has been much involved in Lebanon with Hezbollah and been very active in Iraq over the past three years, and is now in direct control of Iran's nuclear weapons programme. Ahmadinejad's presidency, therefore, has already had major internal and foreign policy implications. After he became President, the French news agency reported him—what a cheek this is—as declaring:

"Thanks to the blood of the martyrs, a new Islamic revolution has arisen and the Islamic revolution of 1384 will, God willing, cut off the roots of injustice in the world."

He added:

"The wave of the Islamic revolution will soon reach the entire world."

God help us all.

Iran's nuclear programme is a prime example of such implications and is one of the most pressing issues for the international community. The Iranian regime's claims that its nuclear projects are for civilian purposes are absolute nonsense.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I do not know whether he is aware of this, but I visited Iraq a few weeks ago, and senior politicians there are deeply concerned about Iran's wish to stop democracy and stability developing in Iraq and particularly in Kurdistan, where excellent progress has been made since the war. Senior Iraqi politicians told me that they believe sincerely that Iran's nuclear programme is continuing and most certainly with a military objective.

Mr. Amess : I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for walking the walk on this issue. I read about his visit in our local newspaper and I thank him for underlining the fact that without doubt Iran has the capability to deploy nuclear weapons and that that is the real target, not Iraq.

Until August 2002, when the National Council of Resistance of Iran revealed the Iranian regime's secret uranium-enrichment site in Natanz, the regime was vehemently denying involvement in such projects. The NCRI also revealed a heavy water plant at Arak that is used to produce plutonium. The international community owes the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran an immense debt of gratitude. One can only imagine with horror when the international community might have learned of the Iranian regime's nuclear weapons programme—which my hon. Friend just mentioned—without the revelations made by that organisation in 2002 and since.

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There can be no doubt that the Iranian regime is pursuing a nuclear programme for military purposes, as it considers nuclear weapons to be a guarantee of its survival and a tool that, when at its disposal, will give it leverage to hold the world to ransom. The experience of the past two years has shown that Iran has played a devastating role in the members of the European Union being taken for absolute fools. Iran breached agreements with the EU 3 in November 2003 and again in November 2004. It did so most recently with the breaking of United Nations seals and the resumption of work at its nuclear facility in Isfahan.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Is there not a greater danger than a nuclear Iran, which might be deterred from taking action in its own name, in that it could supply nuclear weapons, once it acquired them, to other forces—to non-state actors that would have no hesitation about using them for terrorist purposes?

Mr. Amess : My hon. Friend is right and I agree with him, but that will not diminish the point I will make in my peroration that in respect of the conflict with Iraq, we got the wrong target.

Iran's then top nuclear negotiator told a leading Iranian newspaper that Tehran had benefited greatly from the talks with the EU 3 in advancing its nuclear programme:

"In the past 21 months, the Islamic Republic has achieved brilliant results in technical, legal, political, propaganda and national security spheres. Today, we have started up, tested the facility in Isfahan at the industrial level, and produced several tons of UF₆. Today, there are a significant number of manufactured centrifuges ready for use. It may seem on the surface that we have accepted the suspension. But in reality, we have used the time to alleviate many of our shortcomings. We continued building centrifuges until the Paris Accord. After June, we doubled our efforts to make up for the suspension. We have not suspended work in Isfahan, even for a second. Arak has not been suspended at any time."

That is further evidence of exactly what Iran is up to. For that reason, although I welcome the resolution passed by the International Atomic Energy Agency on 24 September requiring Iran to be reported to the Security Council over a failure to convince the agency that its nuclear programme was entirely peaceful, I feel that that step was taken two years later than it ought to have been. Without question, Ahmadinejad's defiant tone and vigorous defence of Iran's nuclear weapons programme in his address to the United Nations General Assembly made it amply clear that Tehran was determined to continue its breach of international demands to suspend its nuclear activity.

Hon. Members need not panic. I have been speaking for 15 minutes, but I shall dump half of my speech and I hope that allowing a couple of interventions helps.

In a thinly veiled threat, Ahmadinejad told the General Assembly that

"we will reconsider our entire approach to the nuclear issue"

if Iran is not left to its own devices to move forward with its nuclear programme. Ahmadinejad's diatribe was not as surprising as the push by some countries for more time to be given to Tehran to rethink its hard-line position. After almost two years of futile talks with Tehran, that suggestion, far from being naive, is utterly reckless. Time is what the free world does not have and

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what the clerical regime seeks. The ball is now in Tehran's courtyard. Iran should be under no illusion: it cannot proceed with its game of cat and mouse with the international community. The world is becoming impatient.

The prospect of an Islamic fundamentalist Iranian regime possessing nuclear weapons is made even more terrifying by its undoubted sponsorship and involvement in terrorism. Even as recently as April this year, the Iranian regime was recognised by the United States annual report on terrorism as

"the most active state sponsoring terrorism."

Our Prime Minister told the House of Commons Liaison Committee in February that the Iranian regime

"certainly does sponsor terrorism, there is no doubt about that at all".

That is why I cannot understand why our Foreign Secretary has graced that country on three or four occasions. I would have thought that that was merely giving credibility to a thoroughly discredited regime.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is about time that the Government made plain their intention in principle and in practice to make clearer the announcements on a replacement for Trident, given the threats from places such as Iran?

Mr. Amess : My hon. Friend is on to a clever point. I know that the Minister is listening carefully to the debate and I am sure that we will give him enough time to reply. By the time that he comes to reply he may wish to comment on my hon. Friend's point.

Over the past 25 years, the Iranian regime has been responsible for more than 450 terrorist attacks throughout the world. Terrorism is also closely linked to the Iranian regime's efforts to spread its brand of Islamic fundamentalism to the rest of the middle east and the wider world. As Ahmadinejad stated after his election victory, he hoped that a wave of Islamic revolution would soon reach the whole world. The clerical rulers use

the powers, resources and facilities of a state to achieve their regional and global expansionist ambitions, regardless of differences among fundamentalist groups so long as the Iranian regime remains in power. Tehran continues to act as the heartland of the extremist Islamic fundamentalist movement around the world.

I urge the Government to take immediate steps to deal with the PMOI and remove all restrictions on its activities. By taking such steps, apart from supporting the Iranian people in their quest for freedom and democracy, our Government will be acting in their own interest by defeating the scourge of Islamic fundamentalism and the terrorism emanating from it. At the same time, the Government should abandon their policy of engagement vis-à-vis the Iranian regime. Instead, they should adopt a firm policy towards the mullahs, beginning with an active involvement in referring the Iranian regime's nuclear file to the United Nations Security Council without delay. In that way, they can show that they stand with the Iranian people in their struggle for freedom and democracy, and not with the mullahs who oppress them.

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I have never pretended to be a foreign affairs or defence expert—I leave such subjects to my colleagues, who know far more about them than I do. Like many other hon. Members, however, I voted for the engagement in Iraq for what I believed were the right reasons. I now regret that decision. As we now know, there were no weapons of mass destruction, and Iraq did not have the capability to deploy nuclear weapons. Even someone such as me, who does not pretend to be a foreign affairs or defence expert, can see, therefore, that we got the wrong target.

However, now that we understand that we should be dealing with Iran rather than Iraq, the last thing that we want is for the United States of America and Britain to interfere again and make a mess of the situation, with no idea of how to leave the country and no prospect of doing so. I simply hope that once the Minister has had time to reflect on the matter, he will encourage the Foreign Secretary to be not quite as supportive of the Iranian regime as he seems to be, because I, like colleagues in all parts of the House, want peaceful regime change.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I should point out that, as the hon. Member for Southend, West said, this is clearly a popular debate and many Members wish to speak. I therefore hope that brevity, self-discipline and courtesy will be the hallmarks of the debate.

9.51 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Nicholas. I note that you always say that just before I start to speak.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on securing the debate, not least because it is of significant interest to many people in the Commons and across the nation. I shall restrict myself, however, to a narrow issue of concern.

On 19 July, two young men were publicly executed in Edalat square in Mashad in north-east Iran. We do not know their full names—as far as we have been able to ascertain, nobody has been able to work them out—but they are known as MA and AM. One was 18 when he was killed; the other was 17. Before their execution, both were held in prison for 14 months, and it is likely that they suffered considerable torture during that time. As we know from the court judgment, they received 228 lashes between them—in most cases, anything beyond 20 lashes leads to somebody collapsing. Their ages at the time that they were arrested, let alone the time of the alleged incident, would have been 16, 17 or perhaps younger.

Allegations of rape and theft were made in the court. Although we cannot be entirely sure, it is almost certain that those allegations were untrue. If they had been true, the person who was raped would, under sharia law, also have received a penalty of lashing. It is pretty unlikely, therefore, that the allegations were true.

Many Members might have seen the photographs of the execution, which was filmed by Iranian television. It is distressing to see the boys crying on the back of a lorry on their way to the execution on the gallows in the square. We see the hangmen in their balaclavas checking four times that the nooses are tight before driving away.

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The rudimentary scaffolding is just like that we see outside any building where work is being done. Clearly, it has been thrown up in just half an hour—it is pretty easy to execute people. It all seems a long way from our experience of life in this country, but such things are a fairly regular occurrence in Iran.

The most distressing moment is when the lorry simply drives away; there were two lads with their feet on the back of the lorry and suddenly there is no support and they are dead. What is most striking is that the word Edalat means justice. Few people in this country or around the world would consider what happened to be a form of justice.

I raise this matter for two reasons: first, because it is about the treatment of minors. The convention on the rights of the child and the international covenant on civil and political rights prohibit the death penalty for anyone under the age of 18. I presumed that Iran would not have ratified those conventions, but it has; it subscribes to them and maintains that it does so, yet, in 2004, four juvenile offenders were executed. Thirty juvenile offenders are currently on death row in Iran. They include Milad Bakhtiari, who is 17 years old, Hussein Haghi, aged 16, Hussein Taranj, 17, Farshad Saeedi, 17, and Saeed Khorrami, 16, who were all considerably younger when the alleged incidents occurred.

Only five countries—Iran, China, the Congo, Pakistan and, of course, the United States of America—have used the death penalty for juveniles since 2000. Interestingly, the Supreme Court in the United States declared in March that using the death penalty for minors is unconstitutional.

I may not be able to carry the House in saying that I do not believe in the death penalty for anything, but I think that I do carry the House in saying that the death penalty for minors under the age of 18 is wholly reprehensible, does not meet with our understanding of justice and must be immoral and wrong.

The second reason is the treatment of homosexuals in Iran. I draw the Chamber's attention to the case of Amir, from Shiraz—a name more familiar to most of us when used in relation to wine. Amir is a 22-year-old who is now in Turkey seeking asylum. His experience of his homosexuality—the words that he uses—is no different from that of many young homosexuals in this country. He said:

"I have known I was gay since I was about five or six; I always preferred to play with girls. I had my first sexual experience with a man when I was 13 but nobody in my family knew I was gay."

Many homosexuals in this country would say exactly the same.

Amir was first arrested two years ago at a party; nothing was happening at that party, he just happened to be there with other homosexuals. At the time, he was fined 100,000 tomens, which is about \$120—a considerable sum in Iran today. Since then he has been pursued by Colonel Safaniya who runs Shiraz's Office for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prohibition of Vice. He was arrested a second time a year ago when he was caught in a campaign of gay entrapment by the paramilitary group the Basiji, which works unofficially under the hard-line Pasdaran or revolutionary guards.

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With your permission, Sir Nicholas, I shall read from his account of what happened when he was arrested. He said:

"There was a metal chair in the middle of the room. They put a gas flame under the chair and made me sit on it as the metal seat got hotter and hotter. They threatened to send me to an army barracks where all the soldiers were going to rape me. There was a soft drink bottle sitting on a table. Ali Panahi told one of the other *basiji* to take the bottle and shove it up my ass, screaming, 'This will teach you not to want any more cock!' I was so afraid of sitting in that metal chair as it got hotter and hotter that I confessed. Then they brought out my file and told me that I was a 'famous faggot' in Shiraz. They beat me up so badly that I passed out and was thrown, unconscious, into a holding cell. When I came to, I saw there were several dozen other gay guys in the cell with me."

Following that, he received 100 lashes. He says that subsequent to the events in Mashad earlier this year to which I referred the situation has considerably worsened. He continued:

"After the Mashad incident, visits from the authorities would become an almost daily occurrence. They would come to my house and threaten me. They knew everything about everything I did, about everywhere I went. They would tell me exactly what I had done each and every time I had left the house. It had gotten to the point where I was starting to suspect my own friends of spying on me . . . In one of these arrests the Colonel told me that if they catch me again I would be put to death 'just like the boys in Mashad'. He said it just like that, very simply, very explicitly. He didn't mince his words. We all know that the boys who were hanged in Mashad were gay—the rape charges against them were trumped up, just like the charges of theft . . . When you get arrested, you are forced by beatings, torture, and threats to confess to crimes you didn't commit. It happens all the time, it happened to friends of mine."

Why do I raise this issue? What has it got to do with us in the United Kingdom? For a start,

"Any man's death diminishes me",

as John Donne said many centuries ago. Also, we still send gay Iranians back to Iran and refuse to grant them asylum. In June 2004, Hussein Nasser, a 26-year-old Iranian, killed himself in his car in Eastbourne. He shot himself between the eyes with a shotgun on being told that he had been refused asylum. I do not believe that this country should be sending gays back to torture, fear, oppression and—potentially—hanging or stoning.

Secondly, nobody has yet raised Iran's human rights record at the United Nations, despite the fact that in 2001, 12 gay men aged between 14 and 57 were stoned in Iran. In 2000, 16 were killed; in 1999, 10 were killed, and it still goes on. I do not share the views of the hon. Member for Southend, West on our policy of engagement: on the whole I believe that that policy has been particularly astute. The Foreign Secretary has been one of the most able in trying to maintain a strong relationship with Iran, which might tease them into a better understanding of the world. However, we must engage in discussions on human rights, if necessary in strong terms. Otherwise, young people in Iran will continue to be killed. Young women will continue to be executed and young men will continue to live in terror. Engagement with Iran cannot mean ignoring human rights abuses.

10.2 am

Mr. Brian Binley (Northampton, South) (Con): As you requested, Sir Nicholas, I shall reduce my speech by half. I hope that that will please you for future occasions.

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I pay tribute to Chris Bryant, the hon. Member for Rhondda. I found his words most disturbing and moving. I had not known of those sorts of activities. He does a great favour to the world in bringing them to our attention in this debate and I thank him.

You will know, Sir Nicholas, from my colleague, Mr. David Amess—

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): Order. Would Members please remember that we refer to people by their constituency, not their name?

Mr. Binley : I am very sorry and thank you for that guidance, Sir Nicholas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess), who went with me to New York and wowed a crowd of 20,000 people with his speech, astounded me on that occasion and has done so again. I was lucky to accompany him and I spent four days with the organisers of that rally and with many of their supporters. I got to know them pretty well. I learned at first hand of the devastation created by the Islamic fundamentalist mullahs over the past 25 years in Iran. I learned that Iran was by any measure of decency and freedom an uncivilised and brutal regime. How does that impact on this country? If it impacts on us in a serious way, how do we deal with it?

Only last week the Foreign Office officially confirmed that Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps was behind the deadly attacks that recently claimed the lives of eight British soldiers. The regime does impact on us. Also last week a member of the British diplomatic service said that the Iranians were colluding with the Sunni Muslim insurgent groups in southern Iraq and were providing them with the deadly terrorist technology perfected by Iranian-funded Hezbollah militia in southern Lebanon. This does impact on us.

Only five weeks ago, Dr. Pierre Goldschmidt, a Belgian nuclear scientist and former head of the United Nations team investigating Iran's nuclear programme, called on the Security Council to give that inspection team greater powers to determine whether Iran was trying to build an atomic bomb. He said:

"It is reaching the point where it is beyond critical. As things stand, we cannot prove that Iran has a military programme, but we do have indications that this is the case . . . This is the question that everyone should be asking."

If Iran is in the process of building an atomic bomb, that clearly has an impact on every one of us and on every one of our constituents.

I visited Israel a week after I visited New York, and I was privileged to meet some of the most senior figures in its Government, Opposition and intelligence service. I questioned them intently about their understanding of the Iranian atomic threat. Their answers were both unequivocal and deeply disturbing. First, they maintained that there is no doubt that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. Secondly, they believed that the pace of development has quickened in recent months. Thirdly, they estimated that the Iranians are

within two years of being able to produce a nuclear weapon. Finally, and equally disturbingly, they also maintained that the Shihab 5 delivery vehicle will be ready and

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capable, within the next two years, of delivering its weapons to the heart of Europe and Russia, to say little of Israel.

Dr. Julian Lewis : Is my hon. Friend aware of a recent report that some EU ambassadors felt it necessary to withdraw from a parade that they were attending in Iran when they saw the slogans that were displayed, one of which read:

"Israel will be wiped from the face of the earth"?

Mr. Binley : I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that to my attention. I did not know of that particular incident, but it is in keeping with many of the slogans being paraded throughout Iran, and we should take note of the intent behind them.

Let me return to the point that I was making; Israel considered the Iranian situation to be the doomsday scenario.

What do the American intelligence people think about Iran's intentions? Only last week, an American intelligence officer said:

"This is not like the pre-war debate about whether Iraq was working on weapons of mass destruction. Iran has a nuclear weapons programme. There are no doubts."

Finally, the National Council of Resistance of Iran—the organisation that first alerted the world to Iran's nuclear programme in 2002—has produced an in-depth report into Iran's nuclear weapons programme, which leaves us in no doubt. I assume that the Government have a copy—I assume that the Minister, certainly, has a copy—because it is required reading for any Foreign Office Minister. If the Minister does not have a copy, I would be happy to ensure that he has one, because this is a frightening document that should disturb us all.

The situation is clear: here is a state, organised along the lines of a mediaeval theocracy, which will soon be capable of delivering a nuclear weapon with a range of 5,000 km. Here is a society that makes heroes of suicide bombers. Could a more serious problem be facing us now, and could there be a greater threat to the security and well-being of all the people whom we represent?

What can we do about the problem? We could continue with our current policy of appeasement, which the EU and Britain have pursued for several years without any discernible success. I do not believe that that is the way to go now, because it is apparent

that the mulians have taken little notice of that policy; to my mind, it has become totally discredited. I shall therefore ask the Minister several questions.

In the light of recent events, will he confirm that our whole approach to the Iranian situation is being reviewed and revised? Does he recognise that our attitude to those who seek an internal regime change in Iran must also change, not least to ensure that a new and more robust message is sent to the present Iranian regime? Is it not time to recognise the right of the Iranian people to resist the present regime, and to do all that they can to bring about democratic change in that country? Is it not time to remove the PMOI from the US State Department's list of debarred organisations and from the European Union's list? Is it not time to call on the Security Council to give greater power to the UN's investigation team to determine whether the Iranians are trying to build an atomic bomb, as I, and many other

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people, believe they are, and as the document proves? Is it not time to impose a full technical embargo on the regime to attempt to halt its progress in that regard?

As the Israelis said, the present situation has the potential to produce a doomsday scenario. The Minister has the potential to do something about it and his response will tell the British people whether he and the Government are capable of facing the challenge. I believe that they are.

10.10 am

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on securing the debate, because its subject is crucial and the timing is opportune. However, I totally dissociate myself from the commendation that he and his hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Binley) gave to the National Council of Resistance of Iran—an organisation that almost totally lacks credibility. It is a sect, not a political party, and has virtually no support in Iran. It is a diversion from the real issues, and I do not want to give it any more attention in my remarks.

Iran is an important regional player in a highly unstable region. As everyone knows, relations between the US and Iran are particularly fraught. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) in strongly commending the role that the UK Government have played, together with our partners in the European Union, in trying to reach a negotiated resolution of the nuclear issue; we need to continue in that role.

The nuclear issue is important, not only in relation to Iran but in the context of controlling nuclear proliferation in general and in asserting the role of the International Atomic Energy Agency in overseeing international agreement on, and carrying through, the framework for dealing with nuclear proliferation. However, I fear that we are at a tipping point, from which we could easily slide into the sort of confrontation that Conservative Members appear to seek, instead of achieving a resolution.

The UK and the EU have a key role in helping to find a negotiated solution to the nuclear issue, but we need to remind ourselves of our history in relation to the region, because people in the region know the history and tend to see the current action of the UK, France and the US through the historical prism of our past behaviour in the region.

In the early years of the 20th century, Britain and the Russians agreed to divide Iran into spheres of influence. In 1919 Iran had a trade agreement with Great Britain in which, although Britain formally reaffirmed Iran's independence, it attempted to establish a complete protectorate over it. I imagine that everyone is aware that Iran's Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadeq—he was elected to the Iranian Parliament in 1923 and again in 1944 and became Prime Minister in 1951—was removed from power in 1953 in a complex plot orchestrated by the British and US intelligence agencies. The present Government do not need to apologise for our past behaviour; however, we need to be aware of it, as the Iranians have historical reasons for not regarding

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all that we and the US do as being totally above board or without some ulterior motive. That is why we should be careful.

Mark Pritchard : Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr. Starkey : No; there is very little time, and the alternative point of view has had enormous coverage.

We need to be careful in how we engage with Iran. That is not to say that we should not criticise Iran for a variety of reasons, but I shall deal with that in a moment. Nevertheless, we need to be aware of how what we and the US say is perceived not only by the Iranian Government but by the public at large.

The hon. Members for Southend, West and for Northampton, South, whose speeches seem to have been based on what the NCRI has told them, should understand that Iran is a deeply devout Muslim country. It is also socially very conservative. The Iranian Government may well be responsible for policies that many of us would find abhorrent, but regrettably those policies are often quite popular with large slabs of the Iranian population. We need to understand that, and not do as the NCRI does and pretend that if we can get rid of a few mullahs everything will be sweetness and light—far from it.

We need to be careful. The UK Government should be clear, consistent and transparent, and engage in dialogue not only with the Iranian Government but directly with the Iranian public.

Mark Pritchard : On that point, will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr. Starkey : No, I am not going to give way.

I know that others want to speak. so I shall touch only briefly on three other matters: the nuclear issue, human rights and the recent attacks in southern Iraq.

We should remember that Iran's nuclear programme started under the Shah's regime. It is an Iranian issue, and it can easily be presented as an Iranian nationalist issue. Another difficulty is the asymmetry of the non-proliferation treaty—an asymmetry with which I agree—which gives those with nuclear weapons different obligations to states without such weapons. That can be seen as the west saying, "It is all right for us to have nuclear weapons, because we are responsible and will not do dreadful things with them, but it is not okay for other countries to have them."

We also have to deal with the fact that we are not consistent across the piece. Everyone in the region knows that Israel already has a nuclear capability. It is rather like the elephant in the corner: no one speaks of it. There is a deliberate diplomatic ambiguity about Israel's nuclear potential, but the other countries in the region know about it and feel that it is not consistent for us to focus only on their potential for nuclear weapons and ignore the fact that one country already has such a potential—a country that has in the past not been averse to attacking others. We need to take those factors into account.

The Government have been pursuing the right line on the nuclear question, and we need to persist, but we must be clear and consistent in putting pressure on Iran to

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comply with the IAEA. We must also be extremely careful not to use language that allows our stance to be projected as yet another example of the US and the UK's attempting to control Iran or impose their will on the country. We should recognise Iran's right to have access to a civil nuclear programme, but like everyone else Iran must comply with the IAEA.

As for public diplomacy, we should tell the Iranian people directly that countries such as Belgium that rely heavily on nuclear energy have to import all their fuel, as we are asking the Iranians to do. Enriching the fuel themselves would be economically in-viable for the Belgians, as it would be for the Iranians. If we can get those ideas across, we should persist in our line on nuclear power.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda has highlighted a specific aspect of Iran's poor record on human rights, and many hon. Members can cite other issues in that regard. We need to be clear and firm in our stance on human rights. In that respect, members of the European Union have greater credibility than the United States, because unlike the United States we are opposed to the death penalty—full stop. We need to be consistent and credible, and to back credible human rights campaigners in Iran such as the Nobel peace prize winner Shirin Ebadi.

Also in respect of human rights and democracy, we should have been more assertive in pointing out the way in which the Guardian Council ruled out a great many people who

should have been able to stand in the elections, thus giving the electorate a very poor range of candidates from which to choose. We also need to assert that the human rights of all ethnic and religious groups in Iran should be protected.

We should ensure that Iran's human rights commission deals with the complaints that are brought to it. However, we must avoid at all costs the lunatic strategy that a variety of neo-Conservatives in the United States appear to be parading: to suggest that one way to bring down the regime in Iran is to stir up conflict between all the ethnic groups there, in order to achieve fragmentation. That appears to be giving an immense puff to a number of rather spurious groups in the United States that claim to represent different ethnic groups in Iran.

Finally, if the British Government have clear information about Iranian involvement in the bombings in southern Iraq, it needs to be brought forward. Otherwise, we must be careful to stick to what we know: the explosive devices used were similar to those used by Hezbollah in Lebanon, suggesting that they might have been of Iranian provenance, and that the Revolutionary Guards might have been involved in smuggling them. We should pursue that with the Iranian Government.

It is obvious to everybody who knows about Iran that there are a great many groupings within its power structure, some of them tolerated by the Government, and some operating off their own bats. We need to stick to the facts, and not to indulge in hyperbole which will only further alienate members of the Iranian Government rather than holding them to account and making sure that they move in the direction in which we would wish them to move.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I would like the Front Benchers to start summing up just after half-past

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10, and I hope that Opposition spokesmen will be as brief as possible so that the Minister may respond fully to this important debate. We have seven minutes for two prior contributions.

10.23 am

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): I am chair of the all-party friends of the Baha'i group. I am not a Baha'i, but I have never come across a more peace-loving and gentle religion. I rise to ask the Minister to assure us that the Government's connections with the Iranian Government will be used to try to secure the interests of the persecuted Baha'i community.

For 17 years, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights has passed resolutions on human rights in Iran, often referring specifically to the plight of the Baha'i. In addition, the commission's special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief reported in March 2005 on several aspects of the persecution of the Baha'i, including destruction of

sites of historic significance, access of Baha'i youth to education, and blood money legislation as it relates to the Baha'i and other minorities, and in February 2003 the working group on arbitrary detention reported severe human rights violations in respect of Baha'i. The list goes on. There is no question but that the Baha'i are persecuted in Iran. Will the Minister provide us with an assurance that he will use this Government's connections to ask the difficult questions that must be raised with the Iranian Government in order to understand why those activities take place?

The different international mechanisms have all found various evidence of the continuing persecution of the Baha'i in Iran. By necessity of mandate, each report can provide only a comparatively limited analysis of the human rights situation in Iran, and of a specific situation such as that of the Baha'i. That highlights the need for the restitution of a UN special representative to Iran, who would be mandated to provide an in-depth report about each aspect of the human rights situation in Iran, including that of the Baha'i.

I am an optimist; I still feel that there is a case for attempting some form of dialogue with the Iranian authorities. The hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) and I have had useful conversations with representatives at the Iranian embassy about this matter in the past. I recognise that some people are more sceptical about the case and about having more dialogue, but it would be remiss of us not to turn every stone in seeking the solution to the persecution that the Baha'i and other groups feel.

I should like to make an offer to the officials who represent Iran in this country. I and other representatives of the all-party friends of the Baha'i group seek a non-confrontational dialogue to understand how the Iranians see their treatment of the Baha'i community, and to explore whether there is something we can do to persuade the Iranians to see the Baha'i in another way.

I ask the British Government to provide an assurance that they will use their contacts and dialogue with the Iranian authorities to apply pressure to ensure that the Baha'i and other religious sects, who represent no threat whatever to Iran's integrity, are afforded the opportunity to live freely and without persecution.

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Although there may be a case for dialogue, there is no alternative to action. I hope for and seek any dialogue that the Government can generate with the Iranians, and any dialogue that the Iranians can provide for me and other representatives of the all-party group.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his brevity.

10.27 am

Ian Stewart (Eccles) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on securing this important and timely debate.

I rise as vice-chairman of the all-party friends of the Baha'i group, which the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik) chairs. We have heard recently of many instances of human rights abuse, and particularly of those against the Baha'i in Iran. Up to 1998 there had been 200-odd Baha'i deaths, many at the behest of the Iranian Government. That activity has waned since 1998; however, the persecution of and violence against the Baha'i continues. Since 1998, seven Baha'i have been on death row, which caused an international outcry. Members in both Houses of this Parliament spoke out in defence of those Baha'i, and none were executed. That shows that the views of this House and of other bodies can impact on countries such as Iran.

I hope that the Minister continues the pressure on the issue of human rights for the Baha'i. I am with the group that supports the Government's strategy of engagement through dialogue with Iran, but I hope that the Iranian Government have ears to hear, because we in that group are finding it more and more difficult to sustain that strategy. I shall argue strongly with others that it should be sustained, but I hope that our Government will put continued pressure on the Iranian Government, and that the Iranian Government will act accordingly.

10.29 am

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on securing this debate. It is particularly timely given the events of the past few weeks and during the summer recess, which underpin the volatility of relations between the United Kingdom and Iran.

Everything that has been said during this debate has reinforced the difficulty of being optimistic about the state and prospects of UK-Iranian relations. The nascent move towards political reform in Iran seems to have been displaced by the election of a President on an explicitly populist and nationalist ticket who once famously said that Iran

"did not have a revolution in order to have a democracy."

As we heard in eloquent testimony from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and others, human rights abuses continue unchecked. Iranian influence in Iraq seems to be growing day by day, as does the threat of escalating nuclear proliferation in Iran and, therefore, the region as a whole. What can we do about that? There seem to be two options. The first, which I

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have always endorsed, is the European Union approach of critical, firm engagement. The other is a harder threat of military action.

The reality is that both options are becoming increasingly implausible and incredible. That is the dilemma facing us. The policy of engagement has not led to the benefits that those of us who supported it thought it would. The EU 3 dialogue on the nuclear issue is heading into the cul-de-sac of the UN Security Council; the EU-Iranian trade and co-

operation agreement was still-born; and the undesirable alternative of deploying some military threat is logistically impossible given the military quagmire in Iraq and, as the Foreign Secretary recently informed us on the "Today" programme, is inconceivable. That suggests that the Iranian Government can sit pretty because they believe that there is no meaningful leverage on what they do. We are bereft of the instruments to effect change in Iran, because the leverage that we would like to exercise does not exist.

Two issues loom over that and make the absence of leverage all the more acute. The first is the military quagmire in Iraq. Regardless of all the reasons why the invasion of Iraq was misguided and unlawful, one striking effect appears to have been to allow Iran to exercise influence in a part of the world for which there has been a long-standing Persian ambition. Western foreign policy used to be built on the premise of preventing Iran from doing precisely what it is now doing: mobilising the Shi'a majority in Iraq to exercise Iranian influence. It is extraordinary that one of the after-shocks and after-effects of the UK-US invasion of Iraq has been precisely to grant Iran that influence which had previously been denied to it.

Secondly, Iran seems to be proceeding with an explicit policy of re-orientation towards what is loosely called the east. The way in which the Iranian Government are actively pursuing links with China and Russia is an important factor that has not yet been mentioned. It is an easy relationship to establish. The Chinese and Russians have every incentive to exploit US and UK discomfort by tacitly aiding Iran in return for much-needed oil and gas reserves. As the Russian-Chinese-Iranian relationship deepens, our meagre leverage over Iran continues to weaken. One flows from the other.

I have two questions for the Minister. First, the policy of engagement is only credible if it is wedded to a threat of sanction should the policy not be reciprocated by the Iranian Government. However, if a referral to the UN Security Council were to take place, Chinese and Russian resistance makes it most unlikely that UN sanctions would be agreed to. Will the British Government, either on their own or through the European Union, take steps to impose UK or EU sanctions in the absence of a multilateral route when and if the policy of engagement has been fully frustrated?

Secondly, what steps are the Government taking to persuade Russia and China in order to avert a crisis in relations between Iran, the EU and the US? I suspect that the route to a lasting solution to the fraught and volatile nature of our current relations with Iran passes through Moscow and Beijing as much as it does through London, Washington, Tehran or Brussels.

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10.35 am

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk) (Con): This has been an excellent debate, and I am sorry that certain colleagues were unable to speak. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on speaking with such emotion—putting the

case for the prosecution, as it were. Five other colleagues also spoke on the subject. In the few minutes available to me I shall follow the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Clegg) in homing in on the core issue of what is to be done. That is the crucial matter.

The Government's policy towards Iran, as many hon. Members have said, is one of constructive but critical engagement. The touchstone areas in our relationship—putting aside the important matter of trade where the deficit is largely on our side—are human rights, which have been well aired, Iran's development of a nuclear programme, and its support for terrorist groups throughout the middle east—specifically, however much we dress it up, in Iraq. We have debated whether the Government are right to pursue their policy of constructive engagement, but events of the past six months have rather sadly proved that it is now insufficient. By every criteria, including the evidence produced by colleagues today and by others, it seems that the influence of the British, the Europeans and others on the Iranian Government is pretty limited. The Foreign Office's own report on human rights has said that

"There has been no significant progress in Iran since our last Annual Report".

That has been graphically demonstrated today. Will the Minister tell us whether we have managed to have any influence on the human rights aspect since that report?

The Government have worked incredibly hard within the EU 3 to try, through a combination of pressure, influence and threat, to persuade the Iranians not to go ahead with the development of their nuclear programme, but sadly that has failed. The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) is quite right: for the current Iranian President and groups in Iran it is a national objective to acquire nuclear weapons. The process of persuasion has failed, so what is the alternative? The Foreign Secretary has said that it is incredible that military action would be taken against Iran. It might be incredible, but I can imagine at least one regional power carrying out what many would regard as incredible if it thought that its existence as a nation was at stake.

Two other specific irritants in our relationship with Iran put pressure on the policy of constructive but critical engagement. First, we have forgotten that over a year ago the Iranians seized three Royal Navy patrol boats and arrested eight Navy personnel—an illegal act on any criteria. The personnel have been returned but the patrol boats have not. Is there any hope of those patrol boats being returned as a result of constructive engagement?

Secondly, there is the question of the immediate impact. We know the complexities: the Iranian regime might well decide to put pressure on the British Government because of our attempts to put pressure on them in relation to the nuclear programme. The question has been raised of whether the Iranians are providing military logistics, munitions and a safe haven

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for militia groups in south and north Iraq to carry out attacks against the Iraqi security forces and the coalition forces. The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West raised that point and perhaps fairly tried to say that the case was not yet proven. Any fair-minded person might draw a conclusion from statements ranging from that made by the unknown Foreign Office representative, who more than a week ago seemed to state pretty categorically that the evidence existed, to the Prime Minister's, who massaged that slightly, to that of the Secretary of State for Defence yesterday, who basically said that there was such evidence but that we were probably talking about the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Perhaps we need clarification from the Minister. Today is the perfect opportunity to put the question to bed once and for all.

This has been an important debate. The Government's policy of attempting constructive engagement was motivated by a desire for the best possible outcome, but the historian within me tells me that we have been round this buoy before in the 1920s and 1930s with the Soviet regime, and then with Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. We also went round it in the 1960s and 1970s with China. The problem is that if a regime is not prepared to go through any form of constructive dialogue, and indeed regards it as a form of weakness, what, as the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam said, is the alternative? The alternative might well be that a regional power decides to do the inconceivable and take military action. The Government are now in a position where they must reconsider their current policy of constructive engagement. It has not failed completely, but it has come to the end of its usefulness for policy making as far as Iran is concerned.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I am grateful to the two Opposition spokesmen for their brevity in winding up. I call the Minister to reply.

10.42 am

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr. Kim Howells) : I congratulate the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) on securing the debate. I know that he is passionate about the subject, and he gave an eloquent performance. We share many of the concerns and fears that he and many other hon. Members expressed, and I will try to deal with them one by one.

The debate has been remarkably constructive. We heard eloquent and passionate pleas about issues that affect us all, such as the dangers of nuclear proliferation, on which we heard from the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Clegg) and others. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) described the barbarity of practices that should have no part in any country in the 21st century. I hope that that message and his eloquence reach beyond this Room. They have certainly had an impact on the Government.

Everything that we heard this morning highlights the great contradiction that Iran represents. It is a very important country. It is big and has a young population. It has the potential to be a great player on the world scene. It grieves me all the more, therefore, that because of the actions of its regime, our discussions about Iran are almost always couched in negative terms. We want

Iran to be a great country. It has a wonderfully rich history, as everybody who goes to the British Museum can see for themselves. It has enormous potential. It has natural resources that we would all like to have. However, as we heard this morning, some pretty terrible things are occurring, and there are great dangers for the whole world.

We have much on which to co-operate with Iran. One part of my job is counter-narcotics. Some 95 per cent. of the heroin coming into this country and Europe comes from Afghanistan, and most of it finds passage through Iran. The Iranians have lost a lot of soldiers and policemen on the eastern borders trying to prevent heroin and opium from coming in, and Iran has at least 2 million opium addicts of its own. I do not want to lose the contacts that we have with the Iranians. It is very important that we co-operate with them, and I want everyone to know that. On the eastern border we are helping to teach them how to handle customs and working with them to tighten the border. They have a very difficult task, but if they fail, we shall all suffer. The children on our streets will suffer as a consequence of more heroin coming in. We ought to remember that.

As hon. Members have pointed out, it is not enough simply to point to the constructive elements of our relationship. We must take seriously the matters raised today. Let me start with Iran's nuclear programme, about which I feel very strongly. Iran's actions in the past and present do not inspire confidence that its programme is, as it claims, solely for peaceful purposes. Anyone who, before the Iranian presidential elections in the summer, saw former President Rafsanjani tell the entire world, in his interview with Gavin Esler, that Iran had told lies and conducted deceptions, and that it was, of course, interested in arming itself, should learn the lesson that we must take what Iran says on that very serious issue with a sackful of salt. Along with France and Germany, and with the support of Javier Solana, we have pursued a policy of constructive engagement, as the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson), who speaks for the Conservatives, termed it. We felt that that was the proper way forward.

It is all the more hurtful, in a way, that Iran chooses to snub our approach when we have kept the country, for at least the last two years, from having to face an immediate referral to the United Nations Security Council. It is foolish for Iran to do that. The Iranians—somebody referred to them earlier as the Persians, as they are indeed known in the area—are very skilled diplomats. That skill is acknowledged across the world. For them to do that is extremely worrying and a backward step. The help and good will that existed to try to get them to understand what the world feels about their nuclear programme is a lesson that seems to have been lost on them.

I agree entirely with what has been said in this Chamber. There is absolutely no explanation for Iran's programme of nuclear conversion and nuclear enrichment, other than that they are building a nuclear bomb. Iran does not have a working reactor. The Russians are constructing one at present—at least, they were. We are not quite sure whether the work is going ahead, but we know that very worrying things are happening in

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which look as if they could be designed to store nuclear technology or nuclear production facilities. Since they have no nuclear reactor, there would be absolutely no need for them to conduct that enrichment exercise. The Russians have already told the Iranians that they can supply enough nuclear fuel, specially designed for that reactor, to last over the coming decades, even if Iran expanded its nuclear reactor programme. Remember, it does not have a nuclear reactor that works at present.

So what do we do? That is the big question. The widely respected International Atomic Energy Agency is the only multilateral organisation that looks at such matters, and, indeed, it was awarded the Nobel peace prize last week. The agency has tried hard to persuade the Iranians that there is a better way forward than the one that they have chosen. The Iranians for a while abided by what the IAEA suggested—we were the conduit for those ideas—but have now rejected those suggestions. The board of the IAEA has by majority vote now decided to refer Iran to the United Nations Security Council.

What worries me is this, and it is a big worry: I had the privilege on behalf of the European Union and, of course, of this country to chair our meeting at the UN with the non-aligned members, where we discussed the nuclear issue, among other matters. I heard from those who spoke on behalf of the non-aligned nations a version of the past two and a half or three years that was pure fantasy. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) in a way put her finger on the point when she said that a feeling exists of, "Why should Iran not have a bomb?". I am not sure that people around the world understand the centrality of the issue to the future of world peace. It is no good saying that things might have been different if we didn't start from here, if the second world war hadn't taken place, if America hadn't developed the bomb, or if Russia hadn't developed the bomb. That is, of course, nonsense.

I would apply the same conditions to Israel as to Iran. We continually ask Israel to abide by the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. We always have done, and we shall continue to do so. We do not attempt to hide that at all. To argue that the number of countries that can own and can use a nuclear bomb should be extended seems to me to be a criminal analysis of a situation that is already serious enough. We must be very clear. The greatest thing that we can do is to be completely transparent and honest in dialogue at the United Nations and elsewhere about this very important issue. We know that delivery systems are available that countries such as North Korea, among others, are selling and that can lob a nuclear weapon a very long way. I have even heard reports that Europe would be within the range of some nuclear weapons.

The hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) asked whether we would replace Trident. I laughed at the very idea that I would say such a thing in this Room. If, Iran did develop a nuclear weapon, however, it would throw the whole issue of how we get rid of

our nuclear stocks—how we demilitarise—back into the melting pot. The issue poses enormous challenges to everyone.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): I hope you will forgive me, Sir Nicholas, for intervening on the Minister but I did not get a bite of the cherry earlier. I do not want

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to complain about that, other than to ask whether you could use your good offices to provide some clarity on whether there is any point writing in to request to speak. I wrote in July to the Speaker's Office to indicate that I would like to catch your eye during this debate. I realise that letters do not necessarily mean that one gets to speak, but on my most recent visit to Westminster Hall, the Clerk, acting on the Deputy Speaker's instructions, rushed down to say that I had not written in.

Will the Minister speak, or give us the brief that he no doubt has in that big bundle, about the people at Camp Ashraf? The Secretary of State for Defence refreshingly admitted yesterday that he did not have the foggiest idea about the position on that matter, but he did mutter something to the Minister. We need some clarity on the Government's view, and reassurance that the people at Camp Ashraf continue to have protected person status.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): Order. Before the Minister replies, I am glad that I used my discretion in allowing that intervention. I am pleased to be able to tell the hon. Gentleman that I have not been advised—I normally am—that any hon. Member had written in requesting to speak. I assure him that the matter will be raised. I trust him exactly on what he said about writing in July and hope that the Minister will get around to replying to his important intervention.

Dr. Howells : I did mutter a few words of advice to the Defence Secretary yesterday. I have asked about the matter and, as far as I know, Camp Ashraf is guarded by Iraqi and American forces, and the safety of the camp has been guaranteed. I believe that the Defence Secretary said that yesterday.

Dr. Lewis : Before the Minister returns to his main speech, will he tell us why the Foreign Secretary is so certain that there is no prospect of military action when the Prime Minister, in the run-up to the war in Iraq, gave as a *casus belli* the possibility of the Iraqi regime producing nuclear material that could be given to terrorists? There is a contradiction there.

Dr. Howells : I have not got round to many of the issues that have been raised in the debate. However, we do not believe that the Iranians will be able to produce nuclear devices of any description for some time to come. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will bear with me when I say that the world of diplomacy requires one to choose language very carefully. My right hon. Friend

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the Foreign Secretary said that he could not envisage any circumstances in which there would be some sort of armed response to the problem of nuclear proliferation. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand what I am saying.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda highlighted one group but could have highlighted many. He described a savage act that did nothing to enhance Iran's reputation worldwide, and I hope that news of his eloquence will get back to that country. He could have talked about Christians, Jews and many others who have been persecuted inside Iran. We should be concerned about such persecution, which certainly sends out messages to the rest of the world that do nothing to enhance our cause of constructive engagement.

I note the example of the inspirational investigative journalist, human rights defender and now political prisoner, Akbar Ganji, who remains in jail, where he has been for most of the past five years. Such people believe that Iran should be speaking to the rest of the world about a range of issues, not least a subject that I hope to cover in this last minute.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West and other Members asked about the involvement of Iran in southern Iraq. I was in Iraq recently, and there is no question that there has been at least Revolutionary Guard involvement there. It has been suggested over the past week that some of the bomb-making technology may well have come from Hezbollah. I have no doubt about that. The technology and the way that it is being used bear all the marks of Hezbollah.

If Iran thinks that it can somehow stymie the efforts of the people of Iraq to create a democracy, it should think again. The world is watching and wants Iran to play a role that is constructive, not destructive.

We have something very special to think about because we have lost eight soldiers as a consequence of bombs. We should never put the enemy on a pedestal, and I am certain that our forces in the south of Iraq will overcome that bomb-making technology, as they have done in many similar campaigns. The enemy may initiate a new technology, but our soldiers will find a way of overcoming it.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I congratulate all Members on their contributions to an important debate.

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