



Editorial

Syria and Iran

‘Will Iran be next?’ Ken Coates posed this question, back in 2003, to the European Network for Peace and Human Rights at a meeting in the European Parliament in Brussels (see *Spokesman* 79). He was concerned to explore whether the ‘prospectus of the axis of evil implies a succession of future wars’, remarking that:

‘Today, as occupiers of Iraq, the USA adjoins both Iran and Syria. Given the public warnings, and the new opportunities, must we expect a military attack on Iran?’

Nine years on, although Iran might not have been the ‘next’ country for regime change after Iraq, it now seems to be moving towards the front of the queue again, on the claim, which Tehran denies, that it is developing nuclear weapons.

After the recent war on Libya, Syria is currently in the frontline. The insurgency there is meeting a tough government response, whilst attracting diverse international engagement. Libyan fighters are active, as Aisling Byrne spells out in this issue. And the ‘great game’ in Syria, as Alastair Crooke described it in *Spokesman* 114, is very much about Iran. ‘Nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria,’ a senior Saudi official told Dick Cheney’s former chief-of-staff in summer 2011. Of course, the Saudi royal house perceives the removal and replacement of Assad’s regime in Syria as very much in its interests.

Not that removing the Assad regime is proving at all straightforward. The reported daily death toll seems horrendous, but its accuracy is open to question. The Arab League intervention, under Qatari leadership, has been widely criticised. Meanwhile, Turkey’s possible role as NATO’s ‘corridor’ into Syria from the north, according to Crooke, is proving controversial and divisive within the country’s extensive ‘security’ apparatus. (Widespread internal repression of Kurds and their supporters in Turkey also complicates the picture in that country, as Ayşe Berktaş’s prison testimony in this issue indicates.)

Towards the end of 2011, the Israeli government engaged in a very public debate about whether it would attack Iran. On 2 November, the headline in the *Haaretz* newspaper was ‘Netanyahu trying to persuade cabinet to support attack on Iran’. The gist of the story was that Israeli Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, who had, reportedly, previously

opposed attacking Iran, had now been persuaded by Netanyahu and Defence Minister Barak to support such a move. Why were they publicly discussing the possibility of an imminent attack on Iran? Of course, the US Presidential elections are approaching. Could there be a connection? Early in 2012, we were told that the United States was preparing to send thousands of US troops, along with US Navy anti-missile ships and accompanying support personnel to Israel.

Meanwhile, another Iranian scientist, this time a chemist working on the country's nuclear programme, was murdered on his way to work in Tehran. Externally, the European Union hastened fairly slowly, apparently to the annoyance of the Israelis, to impose even more sanctions on Iran, in this case restricting purchases of oil. In retaliation, the Iranians threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, a 'choke' point between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, through which passes much of the world's oil, as well as the US 5th Fleet, based at Bahrain. French and British ships have duly been sent to join them in the area. This threat, it seems, crossed one of President Obama's 'red lines', who wrote to the Iranians to tell them so.

All this military and covert activity is extremely dangerous, by general agreement. The possibility of a fatal error triggering a wider conflict is widely acknowledged. Yet the tension is inexorably ratcheted upwards. Certainly, Iran misled the International Atomic Energy Authority for several years about the nature of its nuclear programme. Under Mohamed ElBaradei's cautious stewardship of that organisation, some positive steps were made towards restoring Iran's compliance with the requirements of the Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Now, with his replacement by Yukiya Amano, the US's 'prime candidate' for the job (see *Spokesman 113*), the IAEA has become something of an 'agent provocateur' on Iran. In November 2011, it issued a 'safeguards report' on the country which contained little that was actually new but put a very negative construction on Iranian actions. (Israel, which has some 300 nuclear weapons, including hydrogen bombs, is not a signatory to the NPT, and its nuclear installations are not, therefore, routinely subject to IAEA scrutiny in accordance with the Treaty.)

Will the world descend into war against Iran? Have none of the lessons of Iraq been learned? Certainly, Tony Blair was keen to use his appearances at the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War to beat the drum against Iran, as Brian Jones reminds us in this issue. Dr Jones also highlights the very real worries about Iran's chemical and biological weapons.

Fifty years on from the Cuban Missile Crisis, could it be that, once again, the world risks a dreadful conflagration?

Tony Simpson