



The Rt Hon Dr Andrew Murrison MP  
Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa

8 October 2019

Dear Dr Murrison,

Since the House of Lords International Relations Committee was established in 2016 it has taken a keen interest in Iran and the wider Middle East. In 2019 the Committee has been deeply troubled by rising regional tensions, and has closely watched developments concerning the Iran nuclear deal.

### Rising regional tensions

The 14 September attacks on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities were an unjustifiable attack against a sovereign state, a threat to regional stability and an attempt to disrupt international energy supplies. The Government, along with its partners in Berlin and Paris, was right to condemn the attacks in "the strongest possible terms" and express solidarity with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We note that the Government's view is that it "is clear" that "Iran bears responsibility for this attack", stating that there "is no other plausible explanation."<sup>1</sup>

On 4 September we took evidence on Iran-Saudi Arabia relations and wider Gulf tensions. This followed our 2017 report, *The Middle East: time for new realism* in which the Committee's concluded that "The interests of the international community are ill-served by [the Saudi-Iranian] rivalry."<sup>2</sup> Lord Lamont of Lerwick agreed that it was "not in the international community's interests" to have tension and competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>3</sup>

Giving evidence ten days before the 14 September attacks on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities, Alistair Burt MP told us there was "no doubt about the opportunities for flashpoints right across the Gulf and the region, involving Iran and its proxies ... something could go absolutely wrong. Somebody could miscalculate and it could happen at any moment".<sup>4</sup> Lord Lamont described a "very high-risk situation." He said "To outsiders, Iran might appear to be lashing out in its response to what has happened, but ... its response has been very carefully calibrated and calculated on its withdrawal, inch by inch, from the nuclear agreement. It has been doing this gradually; it has indicated where it is going if sanctions are not lifted against

<sup>1</sup> Joint statement by the heads of state and government of France, Germany and the United Kingdom, 23 September 2019: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-by-the-heads-of-state-and-government-of-france-germany-and-the-united-kingdom>

<sup>2</sup> International Relations Committee, *The Middle East: time for new realism* (2nd Report of Session 2016-17, HL Paper 159)

<sup>3</sup> [O5](#), Oral evidence to the House of Lords International Relations Committee, 4 September 2019

<sup>4</sup> [O1](#), Oral evidence to the House of Lords International Relations Committee, 4 September 2019

it, and it has emphasised at each stage that what it is doing is reversible if the sanctions against it are lifted.”<sup>5</sup>

Regarding tensions, Dr Sanam Vakil, Senior Research Fellow, Chatham House, told us “there has ... been a respect for red lines ... on the part of Tehran and Washington.” She believed Iran had “been very clear that their reading of the Trump Administration’s policy right now is that the US does not seek direct military engagement with Iran.”<sup>6</sup> Lord Lamont said “Neither of the two sides wants war, and [each side knows] that the other side does not want war” but it was “a very dangerous situation that might lead to a mistake.”<sup>7</sup> Professor Ali Ansari, Professor, University of St Andrews, agreed there was an “awareness” of red lines, but also expressed concern that there was “a lack of clarity” as to what they were.<sup>8</sup>

We are grateful to the four witnesses who gave evidence to the Committee, and we urge the Government to take note of their comments and draw from their insights.

### The Iran nuclear deal

This Committee has consistently supported both the Iran nuclear deal and the Government’s efforts to sustain it. In the report *UK foreign policy in a shifting world order*, the Committee concluded that the US decision to withdraw from the deal was “contrary to the interests of the United Kingdom”.<sup>9</sup> In the report *Rising nuclear risk, disarmament and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty*, the Committee concluded that “The Government has been right to defend the deal; we welcome its co-operation with European partners to find ways to preserve it. The Government should consult its partners in the Iran nuclear deal about how best to ensure that the gains to the non-proliferation regime delivered by the constraints on Iran’s nuclear programme set out in the deal are not put in jeopardy when its time-limited provisions come to an end.”<sup>10</sup>

Alistair Burt MP noted what he saw as recent attempts by figures in the US Administration to “make a case for US policy [vis-à-vis Iran] and pull the UK in that direction”, something which Mr Burt hoped the Government would be “resistant to”. We welcome the joint statement on 23 September by the Prime Minister, the President of France and the Chancellor of Germany which expressed “continued commitment to the [Iran nuclear deal]” and urged “Iran once again to reverse its decisions to reduce compliance with the deal”.<sup>11</sup> We believe these three governments have an important and constructive role to play, through their contacts with Iran and the United States, in de-escalating tensions and in establishing the terms on which the full implementation of the Iran nuclear deal could be achieved.

We were concerned by the comments of the Prime Minister, also on 23 September, who told NBC News that he agreed with President Trump that the Iran nuclear deal was “a bad deal” and that he accepted it had “many, many defects”. The Prime Minister also told NBC News that “There’s one guy who can do a better deal and one guy who understands how to

<sup>5</sup> [Q1](#), Oral evidence to the House of Lords International Relations Committee, 4 September 2019

<sup>6</sup> [Q11](#), Oral evidence to the House of Lords International Relations Committee, 4 September 2019

<sup>7</sup> [Q5](#), Oral evidence to the House of Lords International Relations Committee, 4 September 2019

<sup>8</sup> [Q11](#), Oral evidence to the House of Lords International Relations Committee, 4 September 2019

<sup>9</sup> International Relations Committee, *UK foreign policy in a shifting world order* (5th Report of Session 2017-19, HL Paper 250)

<sup>10</sup> International Relations Committee, *Rising nuclear risk, disarmament and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty* (7th Report of Session 2017-19, HL Paper 338)

<sup>11</sup> Joint statement by the heads of state and government of France, Germany and the United Kingdom, 23 September 2019:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-by-the-heads-of-state-and-government-of-france-germany-and-the-united-kingdom>

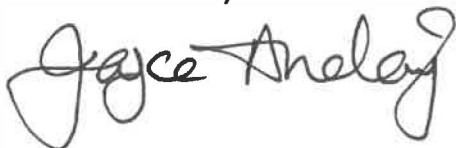
get a difficult partner like Iran over the line and that is the President of the United States” and that he hoped “that there will be a Trump deal”.<sup>12</sup> These comments were not consistent with the UK’s position to date, or the joint statement issued that day.

In the context of continued tensions in the Gulf and the Government’s seemingly shifting position on both the merits of the Iran nuclear deal and the ability to defend it, we had hoped to take evidence from a witness from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 9 October, but this session will not be possible due to the planned prorogation of Parliament. The Committee would therefore be grateful if you could provide answers to the following questions in writing.

1. On what evidence is Her Majesty’s Government’s assessment that Iran carried out the 14 September attacks against Saudi Arabian oil facilities based?
2. In Her Majesty’s Government’s assessment, what factors led Iran to launch the 14 September attacks?
3. What action is being taken by Her Majesty’s Government’s to de-escalate (1) Iran-Saudi Arabia and (2) wider regional tensions?
4. What efforts are being made by Her Majesty’s Government to protect maritime security in the Gulf? Why did the Government choose to join the US-led international maritime security mission in the Gulf in August, when it had previously called for a European-led mission?
5. What is Her Majesty’s Government’s assessment of the efficacy of the United States’ policy towards Iran, including its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and its imposition of sanctions?
6. The Prime Minister has expressed hope that there will be a “Trump deal” to succeed the Iran nuclear deal, which he accepted had “many, many defects”. Does this represent a change in the UK’s position? What additional provisions does Her Majesty’s Government want included in any expanded ‘successor’ deal, and what efforts are being undertaken by Her Majesty’s Government to achieve such a deal?
7. What discussions has the Government been having with its European partners regarding these issues?

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,



Baroness Anelay of St Johns  
Chair, International Relations Committee

<sup>12</sup> NBC News, ‘Boris Johnson calls for new Iran nuclear deal, says Trump is the ‘one guy’ to get it done’:  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/boris-johnson-calls-new-iran-nuclear-deal-says-trump-one-n1057541>