

Transcript of interview with Foreign Secretary Jack Straw conducted by Sadeq Saba in London for the BBC World Service Persian and Pashto Service.

May I just start by asking you whether you were surprised at Iran's defiant reaction to the IAEA decision?

JACK STRAW

I wasn't surprised, given the position of President Ahmadinejad has taken since assuming office. I'm sorry that they took this position, and I think that it won't serve Iran in the medium and long term. But it's consistent with the very aggressive and very negative stance that President Ahmadinejad has been taking on a wide range of issues.

Reporter:

But didn't you know that, if you take this route and try to report Iran to the IAEA, in fact you drive Iran, you drive President Ahmadinejad towards this hardline policy, towards enriching uranium, as he is saying he is going to do?

JACK STRAW

I don't accept that for a second. We have had so many private conversations with the Iranians. We have sought to get them off this hook in a way that is not humiliating at all. And indeed, Mr Larijani told the Russians, who then told us, that they would not go down the route of breaking the seals and starting full-scale enrichment. He did that in December. And then in January, for no good reason whatever, they break the seals. Even so, we have not reported Iran immediately to the Security Council. We have provided an important opportunity for Iran to shift to come into compliance. And I hope they take it. And let me just say this. I've sought, over these last three years, to gain as much understanding of Iranian history, culture and society and the national psyche as I can. I understand how Iranians - not just those who support President Ahmadinejad - across the board feel about the historic humiliation that they've suffered over a century, from Britain - yes - from Britain and the Soviet Union in the war, from the United States. I understand that. I understand Iran's sense of isolation and of profound hurt because of the Iran-Iraq war. And I also, I think, appreciate this wonderful history, this very fine history that Iran has. And above all, I understand this very strong sense of national identity and of national dignity. And at every step, we in the European Three have sought to take account of this national dimension of Iran - the importance of honouring Iran, of not humiliating. And we are still trying to do so. But Iran does have to help itself too.

REP

You talked about the Iranian people. I was in Iran recently. I would say most Iranians are supporting the country's nuclear programme - even those who may not support the regime. Even monarchists outside Iran are supporting it, because they say it is Iran's right.

JACK STRAW

Yes, of course.

REP

What do you say to these people? Because even the people who don't support Ahmadinejad are supporting the country's right to a peaceful nuclear programme. And they say you, the West, are denying Iran's capability.

JACK STRAW

What I say is: I support Iran's civil nuclear programme too. There's been a lot of very false propaganda, by some elements in the regime, suggesting that what we in the European Three are trying to do is to deny Iran a civil nuclear power programme. That is completely untrue. Iran has a right to a civil nuclear power programme. It always has had (a right) - I hope it always will. The issue is not its civil nuclear programme. The issue is Iran's behaviour - which has led to a high level of suspicion that, alongside a civil nuclear power programme, to make electricity, it is also running a secret programme to make a nuclear bomb. I can go through the history of this. We don't know for certain. But it's 20 years of secrecy; it's the fact that Iran has been working on plutonium and polonium; the fact that Iran is trying to produce much, much more fuel than can be justified by their apparent programme of nuclear power stations.

REP

So do you mean you have suspicions? You don't have any proof? Is suspicion enough to take a country to the United Nations Security Council?

JACK STRAW

Because Iran has been in breach of its obligations, the suspicions are high. It's not conclusive proof. I've never suggested that it was. The reason we got into these negotiations was to provide Iran with a route to compliance which would honour its right to run a civil nuclear power programme - like Brazil, like other countries - but which would provide objective guarantees that none of this programme was being diverted for military purposes. That is still the purpose of what we are doing. The heart of it is going to be an argument about the fuel cycle. Because the fuel cycle is common both to electricity generation and to nuclear weapons production. That's the problem. And what we've said there is: we wanted this suspension; we wanted it for quite a long time, whilst the rest of the world - and it's not just the West these days - is reassured. Iran's problem is that it feels very confident, because the oil price has doubled. Okay, I understand that. But you can overreach yourself. And I think Iran will do it. But alongside Iran feeling very confident - maybe over-confident - Iran has mishandled this issue - not Iranians generally but the regime - so that, in place of this being an issue about Europe and the West, it's an issue about the whole of the international community. And Russia, China, India, Brazil, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Egypt, all voted for the same resolution as the Europeans and the United States.

REP

Can you see any circumstances in which Iran can enrich uranium?

STRAW

Yes. We've never said there are no circumstances in which they could do this. Other countries are running a civil nuclear programme, and doing so with enrichment of their own fuel. But increasingly, most countries are saying that they recognise the dangers for themselves, as well as for others, if they set up their own fuel cycles; so they want international guarantees about the provision of fuel. But we have said - we've said in the Paris Agreement - that what we are seeking from Iran is objective guarantees; that it would take some years, many years, to get to a point where the rest of the world could be absolutely satisfied that Iran's programme is not going to be used for military purposes. But we've never said that there are no circumstances in which Iran would be able to run a fuel cycle. And we've always said that right now we believe that Iran has the right to run its own civil nuclear programme.

REP

Enrichment?

STRAW

No, not enrichment for the time being, but to have access to fuel. Which is why the Russians came along with this very imaginative proposal for providing fuel from converted yellow-cake, which Iran would produce, to enrich uranium, which the Russians would produce on behalf of Iran - and that could be done under international supervision. Because again I understand that the Iranian people feel quite isolated because of their history - they feel that they haven't got any natural allies. I understand that. I understand the profound hurt and anger produced by the Iran-Iraq war, which was a war which was provoked for no reason at all by the Iraqis. And I understand too the concerns about ambiguity from the West. But this is a route through - the Russian offer. Again, we thought the government was willing to negotiate on this - and then suddenly the rules changed. But can I just say this: all the Iranians I've met I love. Okay? I want to have good relations with Iranians. But it is a national characteristic of Iran that everything is ambiguous. And Iranians need to think sometimes about why it is they end up without natural allies. And Iranians are very difficult to negotiate with. Now, it's a strength in some ways, but it's also a weakness. (laughs)

REP

Now, when you ask Iran to stop enriching uranium, is this only a temporary measure? For a few years? Until when?

STRAW

Well, as many years as it takes. The period that was being talked about, when Dr Rahani was there, was between five and ten years. All right? Because there are countries - and Brazil is one - which have their own fuel cycles and produce nuclear power.

REP

Maybe you regard the Brazilian government as a friendly government and the Iranian government as a hostile government? Maybe the problem is with the Iranian government? Is this true?

STRAW

No, it isn't. Because this was a problem with President Khatami, whom we regarded as entirely friendly. And don't forget these negotiations started under President Khatami. Brazil is a very independent nation. For the Lord's sake, it doesn't just do what the West says. It's a very large, very independent country. But it poses no threat - there are no suspicions. For example, I think it is quite reasonable for us to have suspicions when one of the documents that was found by the IAEA inspectors, when they went to inspect sites in Iran, was a manual about how to make a depleted uranium hemisphere, produced by A. Q. Khan, the nuclear weapons expert, the renegade expert from Pakistan. Now A. Q. Khan has no expertise whatsoever in how to produce electricity for nuclear power. But he's brilliant if you want to make a nuclear bomb. So the question the Iranian government has got to answer, to the whole international community, is: what the devil were they doing, getting this kind of advice from A. Q. Khan?

REP

But do you honestly think that Iran is secretly developing a weapons programme, pursuing a weapons programme?

STRAW

Well, that is the suspicion. All right?

REP

It is only a suspicion. There is no proof.

STRAW

But let me say again that there's a high level of suspicion about this, based on Iran's behaviour. Okay? Let me go through why there is that suspicion - which is not to do with intelligence; it's all to do with facts. Fact one: Iran covered up, kept secret, its nuclear fuel cycle programme for 20 years; and it only came out when one of the dissident groups abroad blew the whistle - there was a leak of what was going on. That's when we started these negotiations. It's a programme to produce fuel, far greater than is needed for any known nuclear power generation programme by Iran. So the question is: why do they want to produce so much fuel? Part of the programme would involve a heavy water reactor, which can produce plutonium. It's not economic to have a heavy water reactor. We've suggested having a light water reactor. But plutonium is necessary if you're going to make a big hydrogen bomb. Part of it's for polonium. Also they've got these depleted uranium hemispheres. And you've got the other behaviour of Iran - which, rather than reducing these suspicions, heightens them. And it's not just me who's got these suspicions. It's the Russians, the Chinese, the Egyptians, the Brazilians, the Yemenis. So Iranians, I think, need to think about this. Now, let me just say this. Somebody who's by no means a supporter of the present (Iranian) government - he's an opponent of the present government - said to me: "look, my brother was killed as a martyr" - as he put it - "in the Iran-Iraq war. My mother is a simple person, but she says: 'why shouldn't we have a bomb? If we had had a bomb, Saddam probably wouldn't have attacked us in the first place; and my son, your brother, would have been saved'". So I understand that too, and the emotion behind it. But I also say that Iran has signed up to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, as a non nuclear weapons state, and has agreed not to do anything to create a capability for nuclear weapons.

Secondly, whatever the superficial attractions for Iran of gaining a nuclear weapons capability, if Iran were to do so, the whole of that region would become more dangerous. Why? Because other countries, countries in the Arab world, would almost certainly feel provoked into gaining nuclear weapons capability - maybe Saudi Arabia, maybe Egypt - both of them together. They're not natural allies of the Iranians - never have been. And you would then find that the pressure that I would like to be able to place on Israel, to be the final move to creating a nuclear-free Middle East, which is what we want to see, would be removed. Instead, you'd have an arms race in that area. So it would be very dangerous for Iran. It would not make Iran safer; it would make it less safe.

REP

I'm glad you mentioned Israel. Because again the Iranians, all the Iranians, say: "the West has a doubled standard in its foreign policy. They say nothing to Israel about its nuclear arsenal. They're putting pressure on Iran, because Iran is doing something suspicious. But Israel has the weapons. You say nothing to them, but you're putting pressure on us. Why?" They want an explanation of why there is this double standard.

STRAW

Well, there isn't a double standard. But I understand why (they say this). But let me just say this. Israel is not threatening Iran. Israel has not said that Iran should be wiped.....

REP

They're threatening every day. They say: "we'll take military action against Iran."

STRAW

Just hang on a second. Israel has never said: "we want to see Iran wiped off the face of the map". It has never said Iran should be obliterated. Israelis have never said the people who died in the Iran-Iraq war on the Iranian side, the millions of people who suffered, did not die - that that's a story that's been made up. I'm afraid to say, however, that the President of Iran has said that Israel should be wiped off the face of the map - and that the fact that six million Jews lost their lives under Hitler was a story that may be questionable. So you've got to understand that it is Iran which is threatening Israel. However, what we want to see is no double standards - a single standard. We want to see what we voted for in the United Nations: a nuclear-free Middle East. We've also taken steps to achieve that. Iraq, which so grievously threatened (Iran) and from which Iran has so grievously suffered over decades, used to have a nuclear weapons programme. That's gone. Libya, (as a result of) very careful and secret diplomacy between the US and the UK - we did a lot of this - has abandoned its nuclear weapons programme. So that's two out of the four. The next is: we want to have certainty (about Iran). It's not just that we're suspicious, which is different in English from "having a high level of suspicion" - we have a high level of suspicion. Iran has to satisfy the international community. It's not going down that route. And then, we can be in a position, a far better position, to put pressure on Israel. I can tell you: every time I see an Israeli foreign minister, I raise the issue of their nuclear weapons programme. They happen not to be signatories of the Non-Proliferation Treaty - but in my view, it is very important that we stabilise the whole of the region and, over time, get into the situation where Israel has no need of a nuclear weapon at all. But the current government in Iran has got to understand that it has made Israel more fearful, rather than less. Israel is five million people - Iran is 70 million. Israel, as I say, has never issued threats against Iran or the Iranian people. Iran has done it the other way. And Iran needs to think about that.

REP

May I just ask a few more questions?

STRAW

Just a couple, and then I've got to stop.

REP

What is the next stage? What's the next step? Because if Iran continues its defiance - as it says it's going to do - what is going to happen?

STRAW

Well, I can't say exactly what's going to happen, because that depends on decisions made in the Security Council. But what I hope will happen is that Iran will realise the extent of international concern about it, will realise that it's in the interests of Iranians that Iran comes back into the international fold. Now, look. Let me just one issue: plane crashes in Iran. The safety record of Iranian aeroplanes is terrible. Why? Partly because Iran cannot get hold of spare parts for these aging Boeings. I want Iran to get hold of spare parts for its aging Boeings. I almost succeeded in May last year. Dr Rahani negotiated a good interim agreement. Condoleeza Rice agreed that these spare parts should be provided. But if you want that, if you want access to American technology, the Iranian government's got to take account of the political problem for any US administration, just as I say to my American friends: "take account of the history and culture of Iran." Those are other things that will benefit Iranians and Iranian society, which we would like to provide, for various reasons, but are unable to do so at the moment. We'd like to have greater cultural, educational, social, economic interchange with Iran. But it's Iran which is detaching itself from the rest of the world. There's a big prize here, even for this government, if it can come into the fold. If it doesn't - well, we'll go to the Security Council, and we'll see.

REP

If you go to the Security Council, sanctions are going to be applied?

STRAW

Not necessarily. That's a matter for the Security Council. Everybody knows what is in Article 41, which is in the Charter. But we have a hymn in my church: "one step at a time, O Lord".

REP

Yes.

STRAW

So I'm following that injunction.

REP

But when I talk to Iranians, ordinary Iranians, they are very concerned about sanctions. They say: "if sanctions are applied ordinary people are going to suffer, and not the government."

STRAW

I understand that argument. Okay. I fully understand that argument. That's one of the reasons for being very careful about this. But also what I hope may happen is that ordinary Iranians start to think about this. Although Iran is neither a dictatorship nor a democracy - it's been described as a "pluralistic theocracy", very complicated, very complicated indeed and ambiguous - there are ways in which the street, the Iranian people, the Iranian intellectual elite, can influence even this government. And I think it's very important that they should try to do so. And I say that as a friend of Iran, who has devoted a significant part of the last five years as Foreign Minister, to try to improve relations with Iran and to better understanding with Iran.

REP

But apparently it hasn't worked. And now sanctions are real. And there is even a threat of military action.

STRAW

Well, you know what I've said about that. And I don't think it's on the agenda. Sanctions are a possibility, but we're not there yet.

REP

Just one more question. How hopeful are you of finding a peaceful solution to this crisis?

STRAW

I'm very hopeful about a peaceful solution. I just hope that we can do it in the short term rather than the long term.

REP

Thanks very much.

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