Reopening the Canadian Embassy in Iran

Mariam Ali, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Jérémie Cornut's Political Science 347 course *Politique étrangère du Canada/Canadian Foreign Policy*. In this essay the author is pretending to be the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs and is arguing for the re-opening of the embassy in Tehran (which was closed in 2012 by the Conservative government in Canada). The purpose of this essay is to adopt the point of view of a political actor in responding to a foreign policy question. Students in the class then had to engage in an in-class debate as the actors they were playing, debating whether to re-open the embassy or not. This document is translated from French and uses APA citation style.

The Islamic Republic of Iran plays a large role in international affairs today, particularly in the Middle-East and thus I believe that it's time for Canada to reopen its embassy in Tehran. This is the reason I contacted my Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif and sent Canadian authorities to the country in May of this year (Ayed 2017, 9). In 2012, the Conservative government announced the closure of the Canadian embassy in Iran and the expulsion of Iranian diplomats, cutting an important source of influence and intelligence in this country and an important means of communication with its regime (Payton 2012, 8). As the Minister of Foreign Affairs, I want to reopen our nation's embassy in Iran for three reasons: to help Canadians in Iran, to increase dialogue with an important regional power, and to assure that it opens itself to the world.

First of all, Canada needs to reopen its embassy in Iran in order to better serve and protect its citizens in this country. According to the 2011 Census, around 160,000 Iranians live in Canada, forming one of the largest Iranian

diasporas in the world (Rahnema 2011, 5). Iranians started immigrating to Canada in large numbers after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, coming to find better opportunities and oftentimes to flee political and religious persecution (Rahnema 2011, 4). This community is very mobile, returning often to Iran for professional reasons or to visit family, nourishing personal and economic ties between the two countries.

Unfortunately, many of these citizens have been imprisoned by the Iranian government, often for political reasons. I can't clarify the exact number of Canadians detained in Iran for reasons of confidentiality; if they were identified, it would become more difficult for our government to free them (Cullen 2016, 6-8). I can say that one Canadian prisoner, the professor Homa Hoodfar, has been freed a few months ago thanks to a meeting between Javad Zarif and my predecessor, Stéphane Dion (Ayed 2017, 10). This example shows the necessity of communication between our two countries, especially to help our citizens in Iran but also to facilitate ties between our countries to our mutual benefit.

Canada also has geopolitical reasons for reopening its embassy in Tehran. Iran is an important regional power and for much of its history it has been at the head of multiple empires (BBC 2017, 1-25). Iran's geography puts it between Arab, Turkic, Indian, and Russian cultural spheres and between the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean (Geolinks 2015, 2). In addition, it's one of only a few stable countries in the Middle-East that is not experiencing major internal conflicts like those in Syria and in Iraq (Geolinks 2015, 4). These factors allow Iran to play a large role in the region, supporting repressive regimes and militant groups in Arab countries with important Shia communities, like in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen (Karagiannis 2016, 4-7).

These actions have contributed to instability in the Middle-East, but at the same time Iran has shown willingness to work with the West to stabilize the region. This country is located between two countries where Western forces have intervened militarily to overthrow repressive regimes, Afghanistan and Iraq. In Afghanistan, Iran and NATO had a common interest, which was to depose the Taliban, and both groups cooperated to combat insurgents in the country (Stratfor 2009, 1-2). In Iraq, Iran and the Western coalition had a common enemy, Saddam Hussein, and more recently ISIS, also known as Daesh (Stratfor

2009, 1-2). In short, Iranian power has contributed to chaos and stability in the Middle-East at the same time; Canada needs to cooperate with its allies to influence its behaviour.

In addition, as a promoter of the liberal world order, Canada needs to cooperate with its allies to ensure that Iran opens itself to the international community. The best example of this greater openness is the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, which removed economic sanctions on Iran in return for a drastic reduction of its nuclear program (Geolinks 2015, 44-45). This plan was incredibly popular with the Iranian population and it shows their desire to be part of the larger international community (GeoLinks 2015, 45). Iranians, especially the youth, want to open their country to the world so that it will become more democratic and secular (Khosrokhavar 2001, 294-298). It's important to ensure Iran's integration in the international system in order to force its leaders to respect its norms and eventually allow the country to become a full democracy.

The international community also needs to link the Iranian market to the international economy to reduce its isolation. Economic sanctions have weakened the Iranian middle class while those in power benefit from illicit economic activities, which only reinforce the power of the Iranian regime (Coville 2015, 158). Integrating the Iranian economy to the world market is the best way to enforce regime change because it would reinforce the position of President Hassan Rouhani, a reformist, and allow him to diminish the influence of Islamist and anti-Western politicians in his country (Coville 2015, 158). Canada, as a commercial country, can benefit from its greater economic openness, gaining access to one of the Middle-East's largest markets. Reopening the Canadian embassy in Tehran would better facilitate economic activities between the two countries.

Having said that, I have no illusions about the brutality of the Iranian regime, especially since our two countries have often had a difficult history. During the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979, it was a Canadian diplomat who shielded American embassy staff and helped them flee the country; Canada had to close its embassy for eight years after these events (Radio-Canada 2015, 5). Canada re-established ties with Iran during the 90's, increasing its trade with the

country, but relations froze again after the death of the Canadian photographer Zahra Kazemi (Payton 2012, 4). Our government believes she was tortured, raped and ultimately killed in the notorious Evin prison (Payton 2012, 4). In 2012, the Conservative government closed the Canadian embassy in Iran due to concerns for security and the state of human rights in the country (Payton 2012, 8-12). Today, Iran continues to disrespect the human rights of its citizens, particularly women, homosexuals, religious minorities, and prisoners (Amnesty International, 241-246).

Thankfully, the situation has changed dramatically since the closure of our embassy in Tehran. Hasan Rouhani, who was elected in 2013, and re-elected this year, is more willing to compromise with the West and the nuclear deal attests to this. During our electoral campaign in 2015, the Liberals promised to reopen our embassy in Iran (Ayed 2017, 6). The nuclear deal has given a new boost to the normalisation of relations between Iran and the rest of the world and Iran has followed all the rules regarding the surveillance and limitations of its nuclear program (CBC News 2017, 1). The Canadian government wants to follow the example of its allies and normalise relations with Iran.

In conclusion, reopening our embassy in Iran will allow Canada to better influence Iran, to pressure it to improve its human rights record and to encourage its democratisation. Iran had already been on the path to democracy under its Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh, but he was deposed in 1956 by a coup organised by the CIA to maintain access to the country's oil reserves (Allen-Ebrahimian 2017, 1-19). This event had the end result of increasing anti-Western feelings that culminated in the Islamic Revolution (Allen-Ebrahimian 2017, 1-19). Today, Canada and its allies have a historic opportunity to restore relations with Iran and to encourage its transformation into a secular and democratic state. Given the current international context, we cannot afford to waste this chance.

Bibliography

Allen-Ebrahimian, B. (2017, June 20). 64 Years Later, CIA Finally Releases
        Details of Iranian Coup. Retrieved October 29, 2017, from
        http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/20/64-years-later-cia-finally-releases-
        details-of-iranian-coup-iran-tehran-oil/

Amnesty International (2016-2017). Amnesty International Rapport 2016/2017 :
        La situation des droits humain dans le monde. Retrieved October 30,
        2017, from
        https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-
        africa/iran/report-iran/

Ayed, N. (2017, May 9). Canadian officials make 1st visit to Tehran since
        embassy closed in 2012. Retrieved October 26, 2017, from
        http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadian-officials-first-visit-iran-
        1.4105811

BBC News (2017, June 8). Iran profile - timeline. Retrieved October 29, 2017,
        from http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14542438

CBC News (2017, April 9). Iran complying with nuclear deal terms, U.S. says.
        Retrieved October 30, 2017, from
        http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/iran-nuclear-deal-us-review-1.4075113

Coville, T. (2015). Les sanctions contre l'Iran, le choix d'une punition collective
        contre la société iranienne ?. Revue internationale et stratégique, 97,(1),
        149-158.

Cullen, C. (2016, July 13). How many Canadians are jailed in Iran? The
        government won't say. Retrieved October 28, 2017, from
        http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadians-jailed-iran-number-1.3675175

Geolinks (2014, September 4). L'Iran d'aujourd'hui : puissance et identité.
Retrived from
www.geolinks.fr/geopolitique/liran-daujourdhui-puissance-et-identite/

Karagiannis, E. (2016, February 24) The rise of Iran as a regional power: Shia
empowerment and its limits. Retrieved October 29, 2017, from
https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/iran-regional-
power-tehran-islamic/EN/index.htm

Khosrokhavar, F. (2001). L'Iran, la démocratie et la nouvelle citoyenneté. Cahiers
internationaux de sociologie, 111,(2), 291-317.

Payton, L. (2012, September 7). Canada closes embassy in Iran, expels Iranian
diplomats. Retrieved October 26, 2017, from
http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-closes-embassy-in-iran-expels-
iranian-diplomats-1.1166509

Radio-Canada (2015, October 15). Ken Taylor, l'ancien ambassadeur canadien en
Iran, est décédé. Retrieved October 29, 2017, from
http://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/744503/ken-taylor-ambassadeur-iran

Rahnema, S. (2011) Iranian Canadians. In Canadian Encyclopedia. Retrieved
from
http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/iranians/#top

Stratfor (2009, January 7). Iran, NATO: Afghanistan and the Potential for
Cooperation. Retrieved October 29, 2017, from
https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/iran-nato-afghanistan-and-potential-
cooperation

Available from: https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/slc-uwc

SFU LIBRARY DIGITAL PUBLISHING