

Strengthening Academic Collaboration Between the UK and Iran

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This briefing paper has been produced by members of a working group comprising Fellows of the British Academy, representatives of the British Institute of Persian Studies and other leading experts on Iran, including Professor Ali Ansari (British Institute of Persian Studies), Professor Charles Tripp FBA (SOAS University of London), Professor Robert Hillenbrand FBA (University of St Andrews), Professor Roger Matthews (University of Reading) and Dr Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis (British Museum and British Institute of Persian Studies). The members of the working group share extensive experience in pursuing academic research and collaboration with Iran, as well as in-depth knowledge and understanding of UK-Iran relations.

The briefing paper has benefited from consultations with members of the wider UK and Iranian academic communities, and has been externally peer reviewed. The views expressed in it are those of the working group and do not necessarily reflect the position of each individual British Academy Fellow or British Institute of Persian Studies member, but are commended as contributing to public debate.

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Strengthening Academic Collaboration Between the UK and Iran

Executive Summary

UK-Iran relations are at a pivotal stage. Both countries have taken steps towards mending bilateral links, including the re-establishment of direct diplomatic contacts in 2014. More recently, important advances have been made in negotiations on Iran's nuclear deal framework and, in this connection, the lifting of decades-long sanctions. Positive changes in political affairs present a unique opportunity to strengthen academic collaboration between the UK and Iran as well as bolster bilateral relations in an open and constructive manner. The **benefits** of enhanced scholarly collaboration likely to accrue to the UK and Iran are manifold, including a stronger research base domestically and internationally; increased competitiveness of the domestic research systems; greater capacity to address shared or global challenges; and enhanced economic prosperity.

The UK and Iran share a rich history of academic relations stretching back over two centuries. Scholarly mobility and research collaboration have taken place in a range of disciplines from the social sciences and the humanities, to the natural and medical sciences. In the past decade Iran's scientific output, citation ranking and global visibility have increased exponentially. There is now a significant critical mass likely to support a growing number of exchange and collaboration opportunities in the future. Academic relations and the prospects for their further development are, however, constrained by various practical **obstacles**. The most pressing of these obstacles relate to the visa restrictions in place in the UK and Iran, and the application of the existing sanctions regime by UK financial institutions, which hinder the ability of UK and Iranian universities, museums and other research-active organisations to form partnerships and provide academic services.

Whilst these obstacles are related to the overall political context, they can – and should – be tackled as technical issues which have an adverse impact on bilateral academic relations, to the detriment of scholars and societies in both the UK and Iran, and for little advantage to broader questions of political strategy. This briefing paper outlines

some of the foremost practical impediments which currently stand in the way of UK-Iran academic collaboration and exchange, and puts forward a set of **recommendations** as to how the existing obstacles can be addressed with a view to creating a base for a stronger UK-Iran relationship for the future.

To facilitate the strengthening of UK-Iran academic relations, it is suggested that the UK government take a number of steps, including:

- Put in place an institutional academic waiver system by which Iranian scholars visiting recognised UK higher education institutions, research-active organisations and associated entities are able to have visas processed more swiftly.
- Introduce an online visa application system and allow for the collection of visas en route to the UK.
- Issue detailed guidance for UK financial and banking institutions, as well as UK universities and other research-active organisations, clarifying the application of the existing sanctions regime to academic and related administrative transactions.
- Negotiate an agreement with UK banking institutions whereby Iranian scholars hosted by UK universities, museums and other research organisations are able to open bank accounts in the UK and receive payments from their UK hosts.
- Work with Iranian counterparts to reach a mutually beneficial agreement on the mitigation of visa restrictions for UK passport holders who wish to visit Iran for academic and research purposes.

UK-Iran Academic Relations: a Fluctuating Pattern

Academic relations between the UK and Iran in recent decades have reflected and often been the victim of fluctuations in broader political affairs. Yet, political frictions should not disguise the realities of cultural affinities and ideological sympathies between the two countries. For many Iranians there is little contradiction in criticising the UK for her policies while admiring her for her politics. Iranian intellectuals and political activists, while critical of the UK's official policies, have not shied away from forging in the private sphere powerful cultural and academic ties with British counterparts and engaging fully with Western scholarship. Those who have been able to pursue collaborative projects with UK scholars have been valuable partners in research and teaching, enhancing academic excellence

in the UK and helping to strengthen the international knowledge base. Interest in, and scholarship on, the Iranian world has a long and illustrious pedigree in British academia. For over two centuries, British and Iranian scholars in universities, museums and other research-active organisations across the UK have been contributing to our understanding of the history, heritage and culture of Iran as well as its relationship with the outside world. In difficult times they have often exemplified the value of science diplomacy and have provided an alternative means by which Iranian universities, research institutions and wider society could interact with, and gain a better understanding of, the West.

Academic exchange and collaboration between the UK and Iran since the Revolution of 1979, and in particular since the strengthening of sanctions in 2006, have been plagued by many difficulties. Whilst some UK and Iranian scholars have managed to establish and maintain research links despite the overall climate of political tensions, bilateral academic relations have generally been on the decline. Full-scale, sustained collaboration between UK and Iranian research-active institutions (e.g. universities, museums) has proved increasingly challenging due to the complexity in securing visas and the stringent, often disproportionate, application of the sanctions regime by financial institutions in the UK. In terms of student numbers, the UK is currently lagging behind Germany, Canada and Malaysia, with approximately 3,000 Iranian students enrolled at higher education institutions.¹ This is in stark contrast to the USA where the numbers of Iranian students have steadily risen over the past nine years, and presently stand at over 10,000, despite the stringency of its domestic visa system and applicable sanctions.² As for UK students pursuing degrees in Persian language or Iranian studies, opportunities to spend time in Iran – to take courses in Iranian universities and immerse themselves in the local language and culture – have become increasingly limited due to visa restrictions on the part of Iran and difficulties with securing travel insurance in the UK. As a result, some UK higher education institutions have either removed the study abroad component from their Iran-related programmes or allowed students to spend time at partner universities outside of Iran (e.g. Turkey, Tajikistan, USA, Canada).

The Benefits of Strengthened Academic Collaboration

The actual and potential benefits of scholarly mobility and research collaboration in general, and between the UK and Iran in particular,

are wide-ranging. Knowledge transfer through international cooperation in the context of higher education is a key driving force behind socio-economic development. It also enhances our ability to address shared societal challenges and serves to promote cultural understanding and the exchange of ideas regardless of national, ideological or religious backgrounds. Scholarly mobility and partnerships in research and higher education are, furthermore, essential to boosting research quality and reputation, and thus indispensable to academic excellence and leadership.

Both the UK and Iran have strong, distinct and complementary research bases, and are able to offer much to one another. In terms of international rankings, Iran has one of the world's fastest growth rates in scientific production, visibility and high impact publications.³ Together with Turkey and Israel, it is producing the bulk of research in the Middle East, in the arts and the humanities, as well as the social and natural sciences.⁴ At the same time, approximately 25% of Iranian publications are international co-authorships. The UK is among Iran's preferred academic collaborators and in the same group as the USA, Canada, Germany and France.⁵ The UK's research base is well-rounded, with activity and multidisciplinary competences across all major research fields.⁶ Existing evidence suggests that recent increases in UK research productivity have, at least to some extent, been driven by increases in international research collaboration, which is also associated with greater citation impact.⁷ Both the UK and Iran should capitalise on the available opportunities, also bearing in mind that English is the language of choice for international publications.

There is considerable interest on the part of the academic community on both sides in establishing stronger links, and the state of academic relations since 1979 is not a reflection of any widespread reluctance to cooperate with counterparts in the UK or in Iran. Iran is resource rich in archives, museum collections, standing monuments and untapped archaeological sites. In order to adequately access those resources, to harness this wealth of knowledge and to present it on the international stage, Iran needs partners who can invest in collaborative projects. At the same time, its rich history and culture, as well as its role in international affairs, are of interest to university scholars and museum curators across the UK who research a variety of disciplines including archaeology, anthropology, the study of religions, politics, economics, literature, music, film and arts.⁸ For UK students studying the Persian

language, opportunities to visit Iran and immerse themselves in Iranian culture and society are essential. The nuanced understanding that UK students will be able to gain as part of this experience will undoubtedly contribute to counteracting media misrepresentations and general misconceptions about Iran in the Western world. Similarly, attracting higher numbers of Iranian students to the UK is likely to generate economic benefits (directly to the UK but also indirectly to Iran through up-skilling and access to new networks) as well as promote trust and greater cultural understanding.

Time for Change: Why Now?

A recent visit by an Iranian parliamentary delegation to the UK in 2015⁹ focused discussions on the importance of creating a relationship for the future which transcends the political discourse and helps avoid the pitfalls of the past. Noting visa difficulties faced by UK students and scholars wishing to visit Iran, the delegation undertook to explore ways in which Tehran could ease the applicable visa regime and promote academic exchange visits. Both sides agreed that this would be a helpful step in the direction of strengthening bilateral relations. This is an opportune moment for the UK to look also into existing impediments on the UK side and consider how it can improve academic mobility and scholarly collaboration with Iran. Facilitating academic exchange and the establishment of new links between UK and Iranian universities and other research-active organisations would benefit not only those students and scholars who are currently affected by the existing visa- and sanctions-related practical barriers to mobility, research and cooperation, but also the next generation of scholars in whom both the UK and Iran are investing at the present time and who are likely to become the research leaders and collaborators of tomorrow.

The time is ripe to capitalise on recent political developments and the easing of tensions, and demonstrate to Iran a shared commitment to building an open and constructive relationship. Following the election of Hassan Rouhani, a pragmatic, centrist politician, Iran has indicated greater willingness to engage with the West. With the appointment of non-resident Chargés d’Affaires in 2013 and the expected re-opening of the UK Embassy in Tehran in 2015, bilateral relations are on an upward curve. The political rhetoric of positive re-engagement must now be underpinned by concrete, practical steps towards building stronger links, and in particular

links which have the propensity to bring people closer together, enhance cultural understanding and lay the groundwork for meaningful dialogue and joint initiatives. Supporting opportunities for academic exchange and collaboration between the UK and Iran is of crucial importance to the ability of societies in both countries to understand, to engage, and to make a positive difference.

Key Issues Facing Iranian Scholars

The most pressing obstacles facing Iranian researchers who wish to undertake joint projects with counterparts in the UK and build long-term partnerships, presently pertain to the existing visa system and to the available mechanisms for the payment of expenses and fees.

Iranian academic collaborators must secure a British visa from a third country, because the UK has taken steps to consolidate its visa services in fewer key locations. This change has been justified on financial grounds. In order to apply for a visa, Iranian scholars must travel to Turkey or the UAE. As the processing of passports can take from a few days to several weeks, applicants must either make arrangements for hotel accommodation or return to Iran and then travel again to Turkey or the UAE to collect their visas. This process can be prohibitive in terms of time and financial resources. It makes long-term collaboration between Iranian and UK scholars difficult and is an obstacle to smooth relations. Whilst sustained, fruitful scientific cooperation requires also shared interests and commitment on both sides, efforts to improve the existing system and assuage some of the visa application burden on Iranian nationals are a necessary first step in the direction of enabling the re-establishment of constructive links between the UK and Iran, and the gradual re-building of trust.

The existing sanctions regime also has important implications for UK-Iran academic relations. The current situation regarding the imposition of financial sanctions makes it almost impossible to transfer any form of payment for expenses or other costs to Iranian scholars who are not based in the UK and do not have an overseas bank account. This poses a formidable difficulty in situations where Iranian and UK scholars seek to undertake joint projects. UK banks have been reluctant to engage in transactions with Iranian financial institutions. Their interpretation of applicable EU and UK regulations has been excessively restrictive, as banks often choose to err on the side of caution so as to avert risk or

are generally unwilling to invest resources in undergoing the necessary licensing or authorisation processes under the sanctions regime. Fearing prosecution for violations of US sanctions, UK banks have effectively introduced an 'unofficial boycott' on dealing with Iranian counterparts. The situation is not any easier for Iranian scholars who are temporarily based in the UK (e.g. as visiting scholars). Their inability to open a bank account in the UK means that their host institutions are compelled to look for alternative methods of payment, which can be challenging.

Key Issues Facing UK Scholars and Institutions

Existing visa restrictions on the part of Iran are impeding many UK students from visiting the country for study purposes for any period longer than six weeks. Similarly, academic researchers face considerable difficulties in securing visas for more than one month. Moreover, the logistics of securing visas mirror those facing Iranian scholars wishing to visit the UK and applicants are required to travel to a third country (e.g. Ireland) which adds considerable costs to the application process. The processing of visas often takes over four weeks.

To secure a visa, UK passport holders are sometimes required to travel as part of an escorted tour group or have an 'official' guide during their stay in Iran. Also, they often encounter difficulties in securing insurance for travel to Iran, as financial institutions are reluctant to be involved in any transaction that concerns Iran. This means that at best UK students and researchers may only be able to secure short-term cover, and this of course restricts the amount of time they may stay in Iran (if they travel without insurance cover they will forfeit the support of their UK-based research institution). Although some UK scholars have resorted to signing a waiver, this approach is not recommended.

Regardless of whether Iranian scholars are involved, UK universities, museums and other research-active organisations involved in Iranian or Persian studies have been constrained in their ability to operate simply for their association with the subject. All wire transfers of funds that are routine in administrative contexts are affected by the existing sanctions regime. The British Institute of Persian Studies, for example, is unable to transfer funds to partner organisations overseas if, at any stage of the transaction, an American bank is involved. In circumstances where non US-based banks are involved, even the most modest transactions are

being held up for months while requisite checks are conducted between banks. UK higher education institutions and other research-oriented organisations seeking to transfer funds to Iranian universities or other overseas partners in connection with Iran-related projects also face considerable difficulties. UK banks are generally reluctant to make such transfers while processing time for accepted transactions tends to be excessive. Moreover, banking institutions often appear unclear on how payments can be processed for activities which are permitted under the sanctions regime (e.g. the purchase of books from Iran). Often cash transactions have to be organised and these are difficult to manage. In contrast to the current situation in the UK, the Office of Foreign Asset Control of the US Department of the Treasury has issued a general licence to facilitate transactions related to academic collaboration between the USA and Iran. The licence authorises accredited US higher education institutions to operate exchange agreements with Iranian universities and export certain educational services (including in connection with the making of payments to Iranian nationals).¹⁰

Recommendations

To facilitate the strengthening of UK-Iran academic relations, it is suggested that the UK government take a number of steps to remove, or at least alleviate, some of the practical barriers currently impeding mobility and collaborative research, with the following recommendations:

- Put in place an institutional academic waiver system by which Iranian scholars visiting recognised UK higher education institutions, other research-active organisations and associated entities are able to have visas processed more swiftly. This will help reduce travel time, lessen some of the financial burden and decrease uncertainty for both Iranian scholars and their UK host institutions. It will also help place the UK on an equal footing with US universities and research-oriented organisations where an institutional academic waiver system already exists.
- Introduce an online visa application system and allow for the collection of visas en route to the UK. This will serve to alleviate the need for Iranian applicants to make multiple trips to either Turkey or the UAE.
- Issue detailed guidance for UK financial and banking institutions, as well as UK universities and other research-active organisations,

clarifying the application of sanctions to academic and related administrative transactions, with a view to lifting the existing ‘unofficial boycott’ on transactions with Iran and facilitating payments which are not trade-related. Existing documentation is complex and replete with bureaucratic legalese, and is not specifically tailored to academic circumstances.

- Negotiate an agreement with UK banking institutions whereby Iranian scholars hosted by UK universities, museums and other research-oriented organisations for either short- or long-term visits are able to open bank accounts in the UK and receive payments from their UK hosts (e.g. fees, stipends, honoraria).
- Work with Iranian counterparts to reach a mutually beneficial agreement on the mitigation of visa restrictions for UK passport holders who wish to visit Iran for academic and research purposes.

The complexity and operation of the current visa and sanctions regimes are having highly detrimental effects on UK-Iran academic relations. They inflict considerable reputational damage on the UK and have the propensity to divert the attention of excellent Iranian scholars away from the UK to other countries. The UK must act swiftly to maximise benefits from the recent easing of political tensions and the advances made by Iran in research growth and standing. Enhancing scholarly mobility and research collaboration constitutes an initial, important step towards building more open, constructive relations between the UK and Iran for the future.

About the British Academy

The British Academy is the UK's independent national academy representing the humanities and social sciences. For over a century it has supported and celebrated the best in UK and international research and helped connect the expertise of those working in these disciplines with the wider public. The Academy supports innovative research and outstanding people, informs policy and seeks to raise the level of public engagement with some of the biggest issues of our time, through policy reports, publications and public events. The Academy also represents the UK's research excellence worldwide in a fast changing global environment. It promotes UK research in international arenas, fosters a global approach across UK research, and provides leadership in developing global links and expertise.

www.britishacademy.ac.uk

About the British Institute of Persian Studies

The British Institute of Persian Studies is the UK's foremost learned society dedicated to the study and research of Iran's heritage and culture, including its languages, literature, arts, peoples and archaeology. Sponsored by the British Academy, the Institute is a self-governing body of distinguished scholars drawn from all areas of the humanities and social sciences within Iranian studies. Since its foundation in 1961, the Institute has played an important role in sustaining the academic vitality of Iranian studies in the UK and in promoting greater public understanding and knowledge of Iran. The Institute provides a valuable resource base for foreign and local researchers in Iran. Its purpose-built premises in Tehran are open to students, scholars and Iranian readers, and house a hostel for visiting scholars as well as an extensive library.

www.bips.ac.uk

Notes

1. HESA Student Records 2012/2013. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics estimated that in 2012 there were approximately 3,000 Iranian students in the UK. For further details, see: www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx. Also, see TKDanesh data set presented at an ICEF workshop in 2014, available here: <http://monitor.icef.com/2014/08/from-the-field-iran-eases-restrictions-on-international-education/>.
2. In 2013–2014, over 10,000 Iranian students were studying in US higher education institutions (up 16% from the previous year). Institute of International Education, Open Doors Fact Sheet: Iran, available here: www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/Fact-Sheets-by-Country/2014.
3. Global Research Report Middle East, Thompson Reuters 2011. According to the latest French government report *L'Observatoire des sciences et des techniques*, Iran had the world's fastest growth rate in scientific production output in the period between 2002 and 2012. Iran ranks also first globally for having increased its share in the world's high impact publications between 2002 and 2012, and for having increased its share of international citations. In the social sciences, arts and humanities, in 2013 Iran was producing the bulk of research in the Middle East, together with Turkey and Israel (SCImago Journal & Country Rank Portal – www.scimagojr.com/countryrank.php). Although growth rates in the social sciences and humanities are not as high as in the natural sciences, they are nonetheless substantial. According to a report to the UK Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, Iran is in the top 1% by citation count, together with the BRICS countries (see Evidence Ltd, International Comparative Performance of the UK Research Base, 2009, available here: www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/migratedD/publications//ICPRUK09v1_4).
4. Global Research Report Middle East, Thompson Reuters, 2011. See also SCImago Journal & Country Rank Portal, available here: www.scimagojr.com/countryrank.php.
5. S&E Indicators 2010, Chapter 5. Academic Research and Development, National Science Foundation, available here: www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind10/pdf/c05.pdf.
6. International Comparative Performance of the UK Research Base – 2013, a report prepared by Elsevier for the UK Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, available here: http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/263729/bis-13-1297-international-comparative-performance-of-the-UK-research-base-2013.pdf.
7. See note 5 above.
8. This does not take into account the natural sciences, including theoretical physics, astronomy and stem cell biology, in which Iran is particularly strong.
9. British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union (BGIPU), in close collaboration with the Co-Chairs of the Iran All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), Rt Hon Jack Straw and Mr Richard Bacon MP hosted a parliamentary delegation from the Islamic Republic of Iran from 9 to 13 March 2015 in return for a successful visit undertaken by the APPG to Tehran with BGIPU support in January 2014.
10. For further details, see: www.treasury.gov/resourcecenter/sanctions/Programs/Documents/iran_glg.pdf.

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