

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

First Delegated Legislation Committee

IRAN (SANCTIONS) REGULATIONS 2023

Monday 22 January 2024

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: PETER DOWD

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| † Bailey, Shaun (<i>West Bromwich West</i>) (Con) | † Howell, Paul (<i>Sedgefield</i>) (Con) |
| † Blake, Olivia (<i>Sheffield, Hallam</i>) (Lab) | † Leadbeater, Kim (<i>Batley and Spen</i>) (Lab) |
| † Cameron, Dr Lisa (<i>East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow</i>) (Con) | Lewis, Clive (<i>Norwich South</i>) (Lab) |
| † David, Wayne (<i>Caerphilly</i>) (Lab) | † McDonald, Stewart Malcolm (<i>Glasgow South</i>) (SNP) |
| † Docherty, Leo (<i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs</i>) | † O'Brien, Neil (<i>Harborough</i>) (Con) |
| Greenwood, Margaret (<i>Wirral West</i>) (Lab) | † Spellar, John (<i>Warley</i>) (Lab) |
| † Hammond, Stephen (<i>Wimbledon</i>) (Con) | † Villiers, Theresa (<i>Chipping Barnet</i>) (Con) |
| † Harris, Rebecca (<i>Comptroller of His Majesty's Household</i>) | † Watling, Giles (<i>Clacton</i>) (Con) |
| † Holmes, Paul (<i>Eastleigh</i>) (Con) | Aaron Kulakiewicz, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| | † attended the Committee |

First Delegated Legislation Committee

Monday 22 January 2024

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

Iran (Sanctions) Regulations 2023

4.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the Iran (Sanctions) Regulations 2023 (S.I., 2023, No. 1314).

This statutory instrument contains measures to deter the Government of Iran, and groups backed by Iran, from conducting hostile activity against the UK and our partners. It was laid on 13 December 2023 under powers in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. The measures entered into force the following day. The instrument has been considered and not reported by the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments.

The Iranian regime poses a clear threat to the UK and our partners, with hostile acts ranging from assassination plots to significant support for armed groups. The new legislation provides sanctions powers to respond to that appalling behaviour. We can now introduce sanctions designations in relation to Iran's hostile actions in any country. This could potentially be used in response to Iranian support to Russia; destabilising conduct in the middle east; or hostile acts in a partner country. We can use these powers where acts are perpetrated by Iran or by armed groups backed by Iran. Since January 2022, the UK has identified at least 15 threats emanating from Iran towards the lives of UK-based individuals. That is of course totally unacceptable. It is not only that; Iran continues to destabilise the middle east through its development and use of weapons, along with support for groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis.

Our priority is the safety and security of the UK, the people who live here, and international partners. That is why we have taken action, using this legislation, to sanction the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, Esmail Qaani, and other senior IRGC figures involved in Iran's long-term support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The Minister mentions individuals with the revolutionary guard, but what about the revolutionary guard itself?

Leo Docherty: The right hon. Gentleman and colleagues will know, I hope, that the IRGC is sanctioned as an entity. There has been recent discussion about proscription, but that is different from sanctioning. Of course the IRGC, for very good reason, is sanctioned in its entirety.

We will not stop there.

John Spellar: But should we not be proscribing the IRGC, as in the end we had to with Hezbollah?

Leo Docherty: The right hon. Gentleman will know that that is a matter for the Home Secretary. It would be improper for a Foreign Office Minister to speculate or comment on it during this statutory instrument Committee.

For as long as Iran continues—

John Spellar: Will the Minister give way again?

Leo Docherty: I will indulge the right hon. Gentleman.

John Spellar: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much. Is there not an understanding that the Home Office and successive Home Secretaries have wanted to proscribe the IRGC against resistance from the Foreign Office?

Leo Docherty: It would be fruitless for this Foreign Office Minister to give any comment, against long-standing convention from the Dispatch Box, with regard to proscription or otherwise.

Of course, we will not stop there. For as long as Iran continues to threaten the UK, our interests and our partners, we will respond firmly and decisively. We will use this legislation as a key tool within a broader diplomatic approach aimed at deterring Iran. Sanctions are particularly effective when imposed alongside international partners and combined with other diplomatic tools. For example, following the murder of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman, we sought to expose the extent of Iran's abuses on the international stage, including at the UN Human Rights Council. That was accompanied by regular sanctions designations co-ordinated with partners including the EU, US and Canada. We delivered a clear message of international condemnation, while holding those responsible for rights abuses to account through sanctions.

I turn now to trade measures, because that is the other substantive addition made by this legislation. Iran continues to expand its drones programme and is sending drones to Russia to use against Ukraine. Using the existing Russia sanctions regime, we have already sanctioned a range of entities and individuals involved in the provision of Iranian drones to Russia. However, drones are also a feature of Iran's hostile activity beyond Ukraine.

This legislation imposes new restrictions on the Iranian regime's drone programme by targeting unmanned aerial vehicles and their components, which are crucial to the collaboration with Russia; and it draws on knowledge of the Iranian drones deployed in Ukraine and elsewhere. The trade restrictions strengthen our existing export controls on drone components, ensuring that no UK business or person, wherever they are in the world, can facilitate the trade of those items.

This legislation also maintains existing trade measures on goods and technology that might be used for internal repression, such as riot shields and water cannons, and on goods, technology and services that may be used for interception and monitoring. This will ensure that the UK plays no part in enabling the Iranian regime's trampling of human rights. We vehemently support the right of the Iranian people to freedom of expression and assembly, and the legislation maintains our unwavering support for human rights in Iran.

The Iranian regime continues to treat women and human rights defenders with contempt, executing eight people in 2023 for their participation in the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. The recent death of Armita Geravand, a 17-year-old Iranian girl, after an alleged assault by the morality police, shows the brutal reality of life for women and girls in Iran.

Since October 2022, we have sanctioned 95 individuals and entities responsible for violating human rights in Iran. The Iran (Sanctions) (Human Rights) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 have been revoked, and designations

made under those regulations are saved under the new regulations, allowing us to continue to hold the people and institutions responsible to account.

The new regulations demonstrate our determination to target those responsible for Iran's malign activity, and they maintain our commitment to international human rights law, allowing us to hold to account those in Iran who fail to uphold and respect human rights. We will continue to work with like-minded partners to disrupt, deter and respond to threats from the Iranian regime, and to co-ordinate sanctions action. The regulations send a clear message to the Government of Iran and those who seek to harm the UK and our partners. I commend them to the Committee.

4.37 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Dowd. We, on this side of the House, welcome this statutory instrument. It puts into practice the commitment made by the Foreign Secretary on 6 July to introduce such measures.

During the past 18 months or so, we have seen a significant increase in Iran's reprehensible behaviour at home and abroad. In Iran, the authorities have brutally suppressed the protests of women and young Iranians who have dared to demand freedom and a better future. In the past 18 months, the Iranian regime has probably executed more people than any other country in the world. Let us not forget that it continues, too, to detain UK-Iranian dual nationals.

Across the middle east, of course, we have seen an increase in Iranian-sponsored terrorism. We all understand that Iran has close links to Hamas, proxies in Yemen who are acting against international shipping, and close links to Hezbollah, which is a very real threat to the north of Israel; and, as we all know, Iran has been—and is—supplying drones to Russia for use in Ukraine.

It is because of the Iranian regime's internal repression and external aggression that we welcome these sanctions regulations. But there is another reason why we support the measures: in this country, almost a year ago, the security services indicated that they had foiled 15 plots against individuals. I suspect that the situation, if anything, has become worse. Let me be clear: we cannot and should not acquiesce to, or tolerate, individuals being harassed or silenced here for having the bravery to speak out against this despicable Iranian regime. I believe that that view is shared by all parts of the House and by members of the Iranian diaspora community in this country.

I will, however, ask the Government to explain in a little more detail how the measures will be implemented—in particular, if there are those who seek to evade the sanctions, can the Minister explain the severity of the consequences? Moreover, he mentioned that a significant thing about the regulations is that they take into account what is being done abroad. How exactly will the assessment be made before the sanctions are introduced in this country against Iranians?

Has the Minister given further consideration to proscribing the IRGC, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley mentioned? As he will be aware, Labour has promised and proposed a new mechanism for the proscription of foreign state-funded actors. I will be appreciative if the Minister has given that proposal due consideration and, if he has done so, if he could indicate his views. I understand that there is a collective

Government position, although, as my right hon. Friend suggested, there are differences within Government. What is the Government's position? I wonder if the Minister would be good enough to elucidate that for us.

We welcome the measures, but will the Minister at least give a commitment to monitor the situation and consider further action if the Government deem it necessary?

4.41 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Thank you, Mr Dowd, for allowing me to take up the Committee's time for just a few minutes to say why I believe strongly that we should back these measures. We can have a debate about the effectiveness of sanctions and the difference they make, but above all they show that we are trying to take a moral stand against the theocratic regime in Tehran. That regime is one of the cruellest and most oppressive in the world, as has been documented over and over again by campaign groups such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, and of course by media outlets like the BBC and AFP.

A recent Library briefing paper set out some chilling facts. Following on from the tragic death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, we saw protests for 100 days, nearly 20,000 people detained and more than 500 protesters killed. I was alarmed to learn from the briefing paper that the average age of those arrested was just 15.

The UN has repeatedly raised concerns about children being subject to force and adult forms of legal process, and in 2021 its human rights representative said that women were still very much “second class citizens” in Iran. Wives need permission to take a job, to obtain a passport and to travel; they have very few rights in divorce cases; and, of course, they do not have the freedom to choose what they wear. Even more repulsively, the legal age of marriage for girls and women in Iran is 13, but it can be even younger with the consent of the father of the girl in question and a court.

Iran is notorious as a jurisdiction that routinely executes children, and it executes more people overall per head than almost any other country. As we have heard, very serious threats to individuals living in the United Kingdom have also been reported, including to one of my constituents. International monitors have repeatedly reported on the flagrant violation of the joint comprehensive plan of action conditions by Iran when it comes to nuclear enrichment, and evidence of its hugely malevolent involvement in conflicts throughout the region is played out on our TV screens every evening.

We should all back the regulations. In fact, I think there is a case for the Government to go further and snap back some of the sanctions that were lifted as a result of signing the Iran nuclear deal. Like others, I reiterate the appeal that I have made in this House for several years now that we should also proscribe the IRGC. I believe strongly, and hope, that one day the people of Iran will be able to choose a better future, with a secular, democratic state granting them the rights, freedoms and equality that we here all take for granted.

John Spellar: The right hon. Member has rightly outlined the threat that the regime poses to its own citizens and to international security. Just in the last week, it has shown that it is a real threat not just to the areas that it has traditionally operated in; it has hit bases in Iraq, and into Pakistan.

Theresa Villiers: The right hon. Member is entirely correct that this week has reiterated once again the harm done in many parts of the world by the IRGC.

Although the regulations cannot change the future for Iran, at least we can impose sanctions. We can use what tools are available to us to demonstrate our revulsion for the Iranian regime and hope for a better future for the people of Iran.

4.45 pm

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for the contributions from across the Committee and for the warm support laid out by the hon. Member for Caerphilly; we welcome the support of His Majesty's Opposition for the regulations. The hon. Member asked very good questions about the risk of evasion and how we assess to whom the sanctions might be applicable. The answer is that we will use our active diplomacy and global intelligence networks, alongside our work with partners and friends around the world, to judge who might be subject to the new sanctions. Of course, we will continue our very close working relationship with our allies across the EU and the US, because we find great benefit in co-ordinating our approach.

We will ensure, particularly when it comes to evasion, that third countries are not exposed against their will to proper sanctions being applied. That is something that we will continue to review. I will not accept the hon. Member's invitation to speculate or comment on the subject of IRGC proscription because that is clearly out of scope in this debate, but, as he suggests, we will continue to review our approach because all our sanctions regimes are iterative. This SI strengthens the current regime, and the sanctions must respond to new intelligence and the new geopolitical reality as it becomes clear. This is the latest iteration, but we will keep it under review and give ourselves additional tools to ensure that our sanctions regime is comprehensive and robust.

John Spellar: Will the Government also take into account intelligence on the international criminal aspects? There is significant involvement of Hezbollah and other parts of the Iranian nexus in organised crime, particularly in South America, Africa and other areas.

Leo Docherty: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point and I can answer in the affirmative; we will take note of that as we review our sanctions approach.

The regulations will allow us to hold Iran to account for a broad range of malign activity, including the planning or conducting of attacks, assassinations, kidnap, sabotage of assets and attacks against shipping, of which we have seen a great deal in recent days and weeks. We have long condemned Iranian support for groups including Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Houthis. We are seeing again at the moment the way that such activity damages not just middle eastern security but global security and prosperity. We are therefore committed to using our sanctions to hold the Iranian regime to account for its malign activity in the UK and elsewhere.

We have so far sanctioned more than 400 Iranian individuals and entities using our other sanctions legislation in response to the regime's human rights violations, nuclear escalation and terrorism, including, of course, having sanctioned the IRGC in its entirety.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I feel that we are overlooking a story that has been active for some time, which is that Iran is hiring hitmen across the world to target individuals in foreign states, so it is more than just states that Iran is affecting with the Houthis in Yemen and Hamas in Gaza and elsewhere; we must take care to proscribe the individuals, too.

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend is right. I mentioned the assassinations in my previous peroration. That is something that is in our sights and on which we will continue to focus.

Our sanctions against Iran account for a significant proportion of our sanctions work. The measures introduced by these regulations will be a useful tool in deterring and responding to future hostile activity against the UK and our partners. I hope the Committee will support these important regulations.

Question put and agreed to.

4.50 pm

Committee rose.

