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Iran is a country firmly framed in Western perception as a state sponsor of terrorism, whose quest for a nuclear weapon is conceived for purposes of coercive regional diplomacy. Iranian President Ahmadinejad's regime drives this perception, and on the subject of Israel, his rhetoric stokes fears of a new war in the Middle East. This regime is the face of Iran that we in the Western world are presented with.

However, behind this is a far more complex and enigmatic nation. The 'real' Iran is clearly more than the 'Green Movement' of students and leftist intellectuals who were brutally suppressed in the wake of the country's presidential elections. The UK Defence Forum is commencing a new country series on Iran that will analyse all the country's history, society, economics and politics. This new series aims to comprehensively assess these wider aspects of Iran within and beyond the face of the regime.

The progress and extent of Iran's nuclear programme is reassessed continually as new intelligence enters into the public domain. Judgement as to the appropriate response oscillates between a pre-emptive military strike and continued diplomacy with sanctions. The conclusion seems to boil down to whether we choose to 'bomb Iran' or 'live with an Iranian bomb'.

Advocates for the military option have only to cite the indisputable failure of diplomacy to rein in Iran's nuclear ambitions. Economic sanctions have utterly failed to bring down the international support network available to Iran. Critically, the West has not been able to inflict the necessary pressure on Iran's energy sector, in great part due to the failure to secure the cooperation of other key states.

The military option is beset by concerns for the consequences. Airstrikes would end all diplomatic hopes, certainly for the near future. They would also put back any chance of eventual regime change, perhaps by decades, as Ahmadinejad's domestic propaganda would likely take an immovable hold. There is also the problem of Iran's capacity to retaliate. Iran is a country with varying degrees of influence beyond its borders into Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran, as a state sponsor of terror, also has channels into a network of armed group proxies. The significance of Iranian influence here remains unclear but is still a great concern.

At centre of the problem is the opaqueness against which all assessments must be made. Iran is very much a closed country, regime and society to the West and the limits of our own understanding prohibit formulation of deeper judgements as to where Iranian intent lies. Diplomacy has failed with the Iranian regime and until sanctions develop real teeth, which key world powers genuinely rally behind, it is likely that Iran's government will be inconsolable from their nuclear path.

Rather, it is the Iranian people who are central to any resolution of this crisis. Ahmadinejad's regime and its political course must be de-legitimatised in the eyes of the Iranian population who do not have access to a free media. Understanding all aspects of Iran's society is therefore a paramount requirement if the West is to more effectively engage with the Iranian people to help steer the country from its current confrontational path.