

## **Australia warming up to Tehran**

The Australian, April 23, 2015

Brendan Nicholson, Defence Editor, Canberra

Julie Bishop's trip to Iran was groundbreaking in several unexpected ways, and timely. When the Foreign Minister donned her headscarf to enter this Islamic theocracy, her expectations were not high. She hoped to persuade Tehran to take back hundreds of Iranian asylum-seekers from Australia and she wanted assurances that Australian troops in Iraq would not be targeted by Shia militias being trained and supported there by Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

Bishop also planned to talk further about suggestions that Iran and Australia could share intelligence about the region.

It seems likely now that much more could come out of her meetings with Iranian leaders than was anticipated, in large part because the Iranians see Australia as an influential US ally with which they can communicate.

Whether any of this progresses hangs on Iran's ability to convince the US, Israel and key allied nations such as Australia that it has permanently abandoned ambitions to build nuclear weapons. Any intelligence sharing with Iran would have been unthinkable before the abrupt rise of the terror group Islamic State and reflects a strong desire in Tehran to thaw relations with the West. Iran badly wants to throw off the sanctions that are limiting its growth.

Bishop says the emergence of Islamic State, known in the region by its Arabic acronym, Da'ish, has changed the geostrategic and political landscape in the Middle East in a way no one could have envisaged. "And now the conversation we are having about how to co-operate to defeat this common enemy is not a conversation I thought I would be having," she says.

Bishop says the Iranians have a very sophisticated understanding of who's who in the various conflicts around them. Despite some of the near-hysterical reaction to the possibility of Australia sharing intelligence with a pariah state with a bad human rights record, the reality is that no one is suggesting Australia is going to start feeding Iran off the top shelf with highly classified information from the Five Eye network it shares with the US, Britain, Canada and New Zealand.

Iran is in a similar position to Israel in that it is a non-Arab nation surrounded by suspicious Arab neighbours in a very dangerous region, so it puts a great deal of effort into intelligence-gathering. Along the way it collects information that may be of little interest to Tehran but that could be of considerable value to Australia.

Iran has a large number of its own troops in Iraq, and its eyes and ears there include members of its own special forces and the tens of thousands of Shia militiamen they are training and fighting with. If Australia is offered access to information from Iran, it would make little sense to ignore it. It can all be evaluated and accepted or rejected piece by piece. From this process may emerge information about terrorist threats to Australia or Australians abroad, or threats to Australian Defence Force personnel in the Middle East.

For instance, Iran may find out someone intends bombing a convoy containing Australian troops. If it passed on potentially lifesaving information such as that the whole process could be worth the effort. Clearly such intelligence might also pinpoint figures involved in people-smuggling.

Iran is also influential in Afghanistan, and officials in Tehran warned Bishop that Islamic State is offering disgruntled Taliban fighters there extra money to join it.

Peter Jennings, a former senior defence official who heads the Australian Strategic Policy Institute think tank, says it would be absurd to refuse to take intelligence from Iran just because it commits human rights violations. Intelligence comes at many different levels, says Jennings, and through the years Australia has dealt with many nations — even, on occasion, the Soviets during the Cold War. “At this stage we don’t know what the Iranians might be interested in passing to us,” he says. “The only sensible response is to say we will do it and start a process of co-operation, and we will know in good time if anything useful for us or for them comes out of it. “It certainly does not mean we will be opening the box for highly classified Australian product to be shoved over to the Iranians. We are nowhere near as silly as that.”

Jennings warns co-operation will have to be weighed against the different outcomes sought by the US-led coalition and Tehran in Iraq. While the West’s goal now is to leave Iraq, post-Islamic State, as a peaceful nation embracing Shi’ites and Sunnis, Iran would be satisfied with a Shi’ite-run neighbour as a buffer against the terror group, he says.

The fact Australian military instructors find themselves training Iraqi troops while Iranian Revolutionary Guards train Iraqi Shia militia groups on the same side reflects the staggering complexity of the maelstrom churning the region — and the extent to which a common enemy has created the most unlikely allegiances.

Much of what is happening in Iraq involves the cross-currents and interplay between Iran and the Arab states, and the struggle between the Shia and Sunni worlds. For years Iran has been seen as a villain for using terrorist surrogates to destabilise the region and for trying to build a nuclear bomb to destroy Israel. Tehran has constructed a Machiavellian strategic matrix to serve its foreign policy, with Syria long the jewel in the crown of this process.

In exchange for Tehran’s support, President Bashar al-Assad’s regime allowed the flow of weapons into southern Lebanon for Shia militant group Hezbollah, which was strongly backed by Iran with training, funding and supplies from the Revolutionary Guards.

That created problems in areas that mattered to the West, to counter Western pressure on Iran over its nuclear ambitions. To step up the impact on Israel, Iran made a marriage of convenience by backing the largely Sunni Palestinian Islamists of Hamas. Iran also applied pressure in the Strait of Hormuz, through which most of the West’s oil imports flow, by setting up missile sites in hardened shelters and “swarming flotillas” of small vessels it could use to attack US warships and oil tankers in a conflict. Tehran also scattered sleeper terrorist cells through the region.

In Iraq, Iranians are viewed warily by the US-led coalition as uninvited allies but its Quds Force (Jerusalem Force) is helping to hold the line against the jihadists.

Talks on the possibility of Tehran and Canberra sharing intelligence followed an unofficial contact made last year. It is not clear whether Iran or Australia made the approach. It was then discussed in October when Bishop met her Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif. The prospect was given impetus in December by the Martin Place atrocity by runaway Iranian Man Haron Monis, who was wanted in Iran for crimes including a major fraud. Bishop says ensuring a flow of information about possible threats such as Monis is an example of how intelligence sharing can serve Australia’s national interests: “We discussed the opportunities to share intelligence, information on who is in Iraq; clearly we want information on Australians, and they agreed that they would be prepared to share intelligence.”

Bishop says there will be practical moves to share information in the months ahead. “Intelligence agencies will have the opportunity to work much more closely,” she says,

adding that the agencies are open to this co-operation and there had previously been “unofficial overtures”. Bishop says she will keep the Americans fully apprised of what is happening and Australia’s intelligence agencies will keep very tight control over what changes hands. It is likely the Americans will look favourably on additional sources of information which they, like Australia, can weigh and accept or reject.

Bishop and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani also discussed the need for much more comprehensive de-radicalisation programs to help stop the flow of young people leaving nations such as Australia to become foreign fighters.

When Bishop raised the issue of apparently very normal young Australians abandoning a good life to go and fight for terrorists, Rouhani said he found it extraordinary that young men and women were leaving the comfort and opportunities of Australia to go to war. He told Bishop he was shocked by the violence of Islamic State, as demonstrated when it burned the young Jordanian pilot to death. Bishop says she and the President had a “very detailed and fascinating” discussion about the rise of Islamic State as such a brutal organisation, the threat it poses and why it is attracting so many supporters. “He was talking about it in such depth that I told him we would very much value further dialogue to consider their insights,” Bishop says. “He offered to discuss their insights about Islamic State, its ideology, its ambitions and what they believe needs to be done to counter it.

“Rouhani responded that ‘You have to understand what they are being offered. You have to understand the type of people they are preying upon.’ “He spoke of the misguided romantic notion of going off to fight for a cause and getting into the deep psychology of it all and what one can do to prevent it. It’s a very complex, multi-layered issue, but I thought that it was a useful conversation that we should continue to have with Iran,” she says.

Bishop says officials from Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs will explore ways to continue that discussion. “We have a common interest in defeating this ideology with a counter-narrative. Now our counter-narrative may well be different from theirs, but I believe it’s a path worth pursuing.”

Bishop says she has insights from her talks to share with the Israelis. She appears more cautiously optimistic that the current nuclear negotiations with Iran can produce results than before she went to Iran. Bishop says the Iranian leaders insist their nuclear ambitions are peaceful. “They say they are prepared to be very open with the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) inspectors and that the offer they have put as part of the framework agreement should satisfy all nations who have concerns about Iran’s nuclear program,” she says.

One of the three main legs of this week’s talks focused on people-smuggling and especially whether Iran can be persuaded to take back failed refugees who don’t want to go home. The fact Iran has agreed to send officials to Australia soon to examine the issue indicates Tehran is considering ways to shift from its rigid refusal to take back people who don’t want to go home. Bishop says that may involve Iran sending out strong assurances that those returning won’t be punished.

Iran is full of contradictions as a nation: it remains a police state that has officially long seen the US as the “great Satan” but at the same time madly absorbs American pop culture. As Bishop navigated the Islamic theocracy, she donned a scarf, a black sequined number topped at times with a black hat. She laughs off criticism about her decision to wear the headscarf by pointing out she agreed to wear one when she met the Pope: “You respect the culture wherever you are.”

Bishop says in her meetings, and especially on her walk through a local market, she felt a strong yearning for normality and an end to the sanctions designed to head off Iran's nuclear ambitions. She noted the American goods in the shops and the stylish clothes and lipstick under the black gowns, and quickly concluded that many Iranians wanted a greater share of Western culture reflected everywhere in Tehran, despite sanctions.

"They're a very proud people, but I think there is genuine regret that the relationship with the United States deteriorated to the extent that it did and that it has remained so for such a long time."