

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF KARIM SADJADPOUR
ASSOCIATE, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE
October 30, 2007

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I commend the committee for its interest in understanding the views of the Iranian people, who project a fundamentally different image of their country than that espoused by their president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

It goes without saying that it is difficult to make broad generalizations about a socially diverse population of 70 million. Yet I do believe there are some important thoughts and trends among Iranians which transcend age, gender, religiosity, and socioeconomic class distinctions. Based largely on my experience living and traveling throughout Iran intermittently from 2001-2005, I would like to outline briefly a number of important factors and their implications for U.S. policy.

I preface my comments by saying that any kind of U.S. military attack on Iran would alter substantially the factors I list below, almost entirely for the negative.

1. Discontent in Iran is deeply felt, widespread, and largely economic, but factors such as the Iraq war have tempered Iranian desire for abrupt change

Throughout the country Iranians' sense of alienation vis-à-vis their leaders is palpable and transcends socio-economic class, age, ethnicity, and religiosity. No matter where you go or with whom you speak, it is rare to find anyone who will say: "I am happy with the state of the country. The mullahs are doing a decent job."

The state of the economy is the greatest source of outrage. Despite the record oil windfall, Iranians are experiencing increased inflation and unemployment (unofficially both are around twenty percent). Underemployment is rampant. On a daily basis in Tehran and other large cities one encounters dozens of young men with professional degrees in fields such as architecture and engineering driving taxis and making pizzas due to a paucity of employment prospects.

Despite these socio-economic discontents people have become increasingly disillusioned with politics. In 1997, 2000, and 2001 they went to the polls in overwhelming numbers, twice to elect President Khatami and once to elect a reform-minded parliament, yet saw insufficient returns on their civic investments. As a Tehran-based intellectual once told me, "People's disengagement from politics is understandable. It's like exercising every day for six years and not seeing any results. Soon you are going to stop going to the gym."

What's more, without a clear alternative model or alternative leadership, the deep-seated desire for economic, political, and social reform among many Iranians is tempered by a strong aversion to unrest, uncertainty, and insecurity. Having already experienced one tumultuous revolution (or in the case of Iran's youth, the aftermath of one tumultuous revolution) and a brutal eight-year war with Iraq, Iranians have few concrete ideas as to how change should take place other than it ought to occur *bedun-e khoonrizi* – “without bloodshed.”

The post-war carnage and tumult in next-door neighbor Iraq has made Iranians even warier about the prospects of a quick-fix solution. As opposed to the aftermath of the U.S. removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan, when some Iranians could be heard romanticizing about the prospects of an equally swift U.S. intervention in Tehran, today no Iranians point to Iraq as a paradigm for change. As one middle class, middle-aged Tehran resident once told me, “When we look at what's going on in Iraq, it seems our real choice is not one between democracy and authoritarianism, but between stability and unrest. People are not happy in Iran, but no one wants unrest.”

Nonetheless, despite concerns about Ahmadinejad and his team's desires to return to the early days of the revolution, societal reform in Iran is a train that has left the tracks. While it may be slowed down at times, and will certainly face delays and obstacles, it is a process that will be very difficult to reverse, for sheer demographic reasons: Two thirds of Iranians are under 33-years-old; they increasingly are connected to the outside world via satellite television and the internet; and they have no special affinity for a revolution they did not experience and a revolutionary government which has not been able to meet their economic expectations

2. Tehran is not a microcosm of Iran

One reason why Ahmadinejad's 2005 election took analysts and observers by surprise is the fact that Tehran is not a microcosm of Iran. Similar to urbanites around the world, Tehran's population is generally more progressive, more informed, and more politicized than the rest of the country.

Rather than rely on official state television as its sole news source, Tehran boasts much higher rates of Internet penetration, satellite television viewership, and newspaper readership. Moreover, political discontent in the capital is exacerbated by exhausting traffic, suffocating air pollution, and high inflation. This sense of alienation was apparent in the 2005 Presidential election, as first-round voter turnout in Tehran was only 33% (as opposed to 62% nationwide).

Outside of Tehran, Iranians are similarly dissatisfied with the status quo, but they are far less politicized. Political discussion is usually centered on the lack of viable employment or the high cost of “meat and onions” rather than a lack of political and social freedoms. This presents a growing dilemma for journalists and analysts covering Iran.

Though Tehran is the country's political heart and soul (where the 1979 Revolution took place) and deserves the lion's share of the focus, national elections are increasingly being decided outside of Tehran, given the capital's low voter turnout. While the seeming gulf between middle-class north Tehran and working-class south Tehran was emphasized during the elections, more difficult to reconcile for Iran watchers is the gulf between Tehran and the rest of the country.

3. Ahmadinejad has failed to deliver on campaign promises, but his fate is uncertain

Ahmadinejad has failed to deliver on his lofty electoral pledges, namely that he would "put the oil money on people's dinner tables". On the contrary, since his inauguration in August of 2005 the country has experienced massive capital flight, a precipitous drop in foreign investment, rampant inflation and increased unemployment.

There are clear signs that his popularity is fading. In last December's municipal elections the President's political allies were trounced by more moderate and pragmatic politicians. Absent any drastic occurrence (i.e. a military attack on Iran), this is a trend that should likely continue in the March 2008 parliamentary elections, as well as the June of 2009 presidential elections, when Ahmadinejad is up for re-election.

Aware that he lacks support among the urban middle and upper classes, however, Ahmadinejad has courted economically disenfranchised Iranians in far-off provinces, promising loans and debt-relief. Cognizant of the fact that he lacks favor among the country's elite—technocrats, business managers, journalists, academics and even senior clerics—he has aimed to curry favor with the country's paramilitary groups, such as the *bassij*, and attempted to co-opt the country's top military force, the Revolutionary Guards, by granting them lucrative construction and development projects.

So while popular opinion in Tehran and other urban areas is not sympathetic to Ahmadinejad, the electoral behavior of the *bassij* and the IRGC, as well as the opinions of those residing outside the capital, will play an important but unpredictable role in deciding his fate.

4. The degree of popular support for the nuclear issue has been exaggerated

Despite the tremendous effort made by the country's ruling elite to appeal to Iranians' keen sense of nationalism—pointing out Western double standards, extolling the virtues of nuclear energy, and praising the country's scientists—popular opinion regarding the nuclear issue is more nuanced than what the Iranian government would like the world to believe.

Certainly many Iranians, even those unsympathetic to the regime, have been vocally supportive of their government's nuclear ambitions for a variety of reasons: Iran needs to prepare for life after oil; Western double standards permit India, Pakistan, and Israel to have nuclear programs; Iran lives in a dangerous neighborhood and thus need not only a nuclear energy program but also a nuclear weapon.

What's debatable is how deep, informed, and widespread that sentiment is. As the former *Economist* correspondent in Tehran best put it, "It would be quite remarkable if a populace increasingly disengaged from politics were suddenly energized by something as arcane as nuclear fuel and its byproducts." Even many among Iran's political elite have conceded that nuclear pride has been manufactured. In the words of Mohammed Atrianfar, a close advisor to former President Hashemi Rafsanjani,

"People have been hearing these things about having the right to have or to possess this [nuclear] capability. And, naturally, if you ask an Iranian whether [they] want this right or not, they would say they do want it. But if you ask, though, 'What is nuclear energy?' they might not be able to tell you what it is."

What's more, few Iranians romanticize the idea of conflict or militarization in the aftermath of an eight year war with Iraq that produced 500,000 Iranian casualties. In a strikingly candid opinion piece in the *Financial Times* in May 2006, former Iranian deputy foreign minister Abbas Maleki dismissed the notion that the nuclear program is driven by popular demand:

"Reports suggest that Tehran's official joy over the nuclear breakthrough is shared by a large segment of Iranian society. Such reports should not be taken as evidence that the Iranian people share their government's views, and should not be used as a pretext for using force against Iran's population.... The general public does not consider the nuclear issue to be of vital importance. Nuclear technology will do little for the average Iranian; it cannot create more jobs for a country that needs one million jobs annually, it cannot change the chronic low efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness of the economy and management, and it will do nothing to improve Iran's commercial ties with the rest of the world."

5. The government's enmity toward the U.S. and Israel doesn't resonate on the Iranian street, but the U.S. has lost political capital among Iranians

While it is widely noted that Iran's is the most "pro-American" population in the Muslim Middle East, in the aftermath of the U.S. occupation of Iraq it may be more apt to say that Iran is the "least anti-American" population in the Middle East. There still exists strong empirical and anecdotal evidence to support the argument that a majority of Iranians would welcome a normalization of relations with Washington, but the United States has lost considerable political capital on the Iranian street in the aftermath of the Iraq war. Skepticism has increased about U.S. designs for the region, as many Iranians have come to see the U.S. project in Iraq as less about democracy and more as a botched attempt to expropriate the country's oil resources.

When it comes to the issue of Israel, there exists no inherent reason why the Israeli-Palestinian struggle should be an issue of overriding concern to the average Iranian. Iran itself has no land or border disputes with Israel, no Palestinian refugee problem, a long history of contentious relations with the Arab world, and a long history of tolerance vis-à-

vis the Jewish people (the Jewish community in Iran, numbering around 25,000, is the largest in the Middle East outside of Israel). Though for both ideological and strategic reasons the regime has been relentless in its demonization of Israel the last three decades, popular Iranian sentiment toward the Arab-Israeli dispute has gradually grown numb. It is a distant conflict that has insufficient tangible impact on their daily lives to cause a significant portion of the population to agitate either for or against it.

6. The Iranian public has little impact on the country's foreign policy

There exists little correlation between Iranian popular sentiment and Iranian foreign policy. At a time when the majority of Iran's young population aspires to have normal relations with the U.S. and reintegration in the international community, Ahmadinejad's conduct is leading Iran down a path of confrontation with the United States and further international isolation.

Yet, an inability to influence their government's foreign policy is not high on Iranians' long list of grievances, given their more immediate economic and social concerns. Although popular grumblings may exist that Iranian money, much needed at home, is being used to support Hezbollah and Hamas or being defiantly poured into a nuclear program with uncertain benefits, neither issue in isolation is animus enough for Iranians to agitate.

This will likely remain the case as long as Iranians continue to perceive corruption and mismanagement—not an isolation-inducing foreign policy—to be the primary cause of domestic economic malaise. If and when domestic economic conditions deteriorate to such a degree that has a drastic impact on people's daily lives, however, the regime, in particular Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, may decide to alter course on foreign policy. Regime survival, not ideology, is paramount for the country's theocratic elite.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY:

1. In the current climate, U.S. democracy promotion efforts have been unconstructive and counterproductive

While prior to the Iraq war Iranian democratic activists often expressed appreciation for U.S. moral support, today it is important to ask what, if any, have been the benefits of the current administration's public efforts to promote democracy in Iran. Though Iran was neither free nor democratic prior to U.S. democracy promotion efforts, Iran is certainly less free and less democratic in the aftermath of U.S. democracy promotion efforts.

The repercussions of U.S. efforts to promote democracy in Iran have been various:

- The regime has clamped down on domestic opposition and criticism under the pretext of "protecting national security".

- Democratic agitators, civil society activists, and scholars (including several Iranian Americans) have been intimidated, silenced, or imprisoned.
- Interaction between U.S. and Iranian scholars, NGOs, and analysts has dropped precipitously, further limiting our understanding of Iran.

To be sure, it is unfair to place the onus of the Iranian government's human rights abuses and stifling of democracy primarily on U.S. policy. The Iranian government has exhibited cruelty toward its own population long before the Bush administration came to office; the administration's very public democracy promotion efforts simply provided Tehran a convenient pretext to act with impunity.

It is precisely for this reason, however, that Iran's most respected dissidents and democratic agitators have asked the U.S. government to cease such democracy promotion efforts. In the words of prominent dissident Akbar Ganji,

“Iranians are viewed as discredited when they receive money from foreign governments. The Bush administration may be striving to help Iranian democrats, but any Iranian who seeks American dollars will not be recognized as a democrat by his or her fellow citizens...Of course, Iran's democratic movement and civil institutions need funding. But this must come from independent Iranian sources. Iranians themselves must support the transition to democracy; it cannot be presented like a gift...So here is our request to Congress: To do away with any misunderstanding, we hope lawmakers will approve a bill that bans payment to individuals or groups opposing the Iranian government. Iran's democratic movement does not need foreign handouts; it needs the moral support of the international community and condemnation of the Iranian regime for its systematic violation of human rights.”

2. Objective, professional, Persian-language news sources would be well-received in Iran

For the last year there has been a debate in Washington regarding the content of Voice of America and RFE/RL's Persian language service. Some have argued that these broadcasts are not sufficiently supportive of the views of the U.S. government and/or not sufficiently critical of the Iranian government.

Professional and objective news broadcasts will find an important audience in Iran. There is a dearth of quality television news programs in the Persian language. Official Iranian state television broadcasts are tightly controlled by the government, and opposition satellite television networks broadcast out of Los Angeles and elsewhere in the West are not viewed as credible alternatives. The model should be the BBC World service; indeed the BBC intends to launch their Persian-language television broadcast sometime in early 2008.

Insisting that U.S. government-funded media outlets espouse U.S. views ultimately undermines its ability to attract a relevant audience. As one senior European diplomat

pointed out, “People around the world wake up in the morning to the BBC World service; I’ve never heard anyone say they start their day by listening to ‘Voice of America’”

3. A sudden upheaval or abrupt political change is unlikely to be for the better

John Limbert, the erudite Iran scholar and talented former U.S. diplomat (taken hostage in Iran for 444 days) once reflected on the 1979 Iranian revolution that his liberal-minded Iranian friends “who could write penetrating analyses and biting editorials” lacked the stomach to “throw acid, break up meetings, beat up opponents, trash opposition newspapers, and organize street gangs....and engage in the brutality that wins revolutions.”

Today we should be similarly sober about the realities of a short-term upheaval in Iran. There currently exists no credible, organized alternative to the status quo whether within Iran or in the diaspora. And despite the fact that a seeming majority of Iranians favor a more tolerant, democratic system, there is little evidence to believe that in the event of a sudden uprising it would be Iranian democrats who come to power. The only groups which are both armed and organized are the Revolutionary Guards (numbering about 125,000) and the *bassij* (numbering around two million). Any successful political reform must co-opt these forces and make them feel they will have some position in a changed Iran.

4. The U.S. should make it clear that it has no intention of undermining Iran’s territorial integrity.

Maintaining Iran’s territorial integrity is an issue which unites the vast majority of Iranians of all ethnic, religious, and political persuasions. Iran is not a post-Ottoman creation; it’s a nation-state with over 2,000 years of history. A sense of Iranian identity, an attachment to the soil of Iran, is very strong and transcends ethnic and religious affiliation.

To be sure, ethnic minorities in Iran have legitimate grievances against the central authority. Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs are economically disenfranchised and feel that the central government doesn’t tend to them as it does to Persian Shiites. The reality is that disenfranchisement is nearly universal in Iran, and the Islamic Republic is an equal opportunity oppressor. Far more Persian Shiites have been imprisoned in Iran over the years than Kurds, Arabs, or Baluchis.

There is a concern among many Iranians—including those opposed to the regime—that the U.S. is flirting with a strategy of fomenting ethnic unrest in Iran. This would be a disastrous step that would offer no strategic gain apart from provoking bloodshed among innocent civilians. Washington should do its utmost to reassure the Iranian people that such concerns are unfounded.

5. Altering democracy promotion efforts does not mean indifference to human rights abuses

The Iranian government's poor human rights record has gotten decidedly worse since Ahmadnejad's inauguration. In addition to the imprisonment of journalists, scholars, and activists, Iran has reinstated draconian punishments such as public hangings and the stoning to death of adulterers. Religious minorities and homosexuals continue to be persecuted. The U.S. government should be consistent in expressing its concern for human rights practices in Iran.