

# Nuclear Politics in Iran

Edited by Judith S. Yaphe



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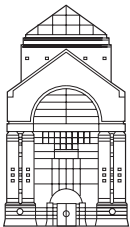
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## Introduction

This collection of analyses on the unintended consequences of Iran's nuclear policy for its domestic and international relations is the first in a series of papers that will examine the impact of critical issues and developments on key countries in the Greater Middle East and on U.S. security interests. Succeeding papers will identify similar emerging issues in Turkey, Iraq, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf region. For the most part, the papers will represent the independent research and opinions of academic scholars and regional experts prepared for and presented at the National Defense University.

This inaugural paper focuses on the nuclearization of Iranian politics, society, and security. Three prominent scholars examine the emergence of an Iranian nuclear political strategy and its role in shaping domestic political discourse and international security policy.

Farideh Farhi examines Iran's nuclear policy and the rhetorical instruments used in the shaping of public opinion between 2002 and 2007. She argues that while the foundations for a nationalist nuclear discourse were carefully laid out during the presidency of reformist Mohammad Khatami, the failure of negotiations between the reformist government and European representatives and subsequent increased pressure on the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad government contributed to the increasingly strident tone Iranian negotiators took after 2006.

Bahman Baktiari explores how Iran's leaders use Western opposition to the country's nuclear program to validate their quest for international legitimacy and to generate domestic national unity. Dr. Baktiari concludes that Iranian politics in the past three decades have been so contentious and chaotic and its leaders so immersed in internal political struggles that they have failed to see how their comments damage their goals of achieving international legitimacy and security.

Anoushiravan Ehteshami analyzes the troubled presidential election of June 2009 and finds that while we may not be sure of the makeup of a "new" Iran, we can be confident that the relationship between state and society and between the forces that make up the Iranian power elite will never again be the same. The zero-sum game in play has made compromise supremely difficult, and he believes we are probably witnessing the disaggregation of the Islamic republican state as a single ideological monolith. He blames Iran's lack of clarity in negotiating, its policy of deliberate obtuseness, and the diversity of its nuclear objectives for driving its neighbors to pursue their own nuclear programs. As the siege mentality of Iran's leaders and the boldness of the protestors and their leaders grow, some in the establishment will encourage acceleration of the nuclear program's weaponization dimension. For them, political survival can only be assured

by deterring outsiders from interfering in their suppression of the opposition movement. From the besieged elite's perspective, the nuclear program provides the best chance of achieving that objective. Iran's nuclear program has largely been about deterrence, and the regime is going to find in this crisis the perfect justification for accelerated weaponization.

Professor Ehteshami makes a telling observation in his paper: "We are entering a new period of uncertainty for the region. Iran's ability to influence politics and diplomacy in the broader Middle East means that developments in that country will cast a shadow over everything else in the region. Thirty years on from the revolution, Iran's place in the world remains ill defined, as does its self image." Electoral politics, in terms of openly contested elections and high voter turnout, have been the mantra of the Islamic Republic and the public face of its legitimacy. Ehteshami warns, "Once people have the vote and are encouraged to exercise that right, you cannot then dictate the outcome to them without major backlash. In this, there is also a lesson for Iran's neighbors."

Judith S. Yaphe

Editor, Middle East Security Perspectives



## “Atomic Energy Is Our Assured Right”: Nuclear Policy and the Shaping of Iranian Public Opinion

Farideh Farhi

*In addition to the closure of our country's nuclear centers, they were after the closure of universities and research centers connected to peaceful nuclear research, including classes in physics and mathematics and they had announced this officially.*

—President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, May 25, 2007

*If a nation wants to protect its rights against bullies, then it must also pay a price. One cannot sit in a corner and expect development and progress. . . . In accessing nuclear energy, Iranians cannot plead and beg.*

—Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, June 4, 2007

—*Did you hear that the Iranian government has just designated the date as the national fruit?*

—*Why the date?*

—*Because it gives energy and has a nucleus!*

—Iranian joke

This chapter examines Iran's nuclear policy and rhetorical instruments used in the shaping of Iranian public opinion between 2002 and 2007, noting the shift toward a highly strident discourse in 2006. It argues that while the foundations for a nationalist discourse were carefully laid out during the presidency of reformist Mohammad Khatami, the increasingly strident tone Iranian nationalism took later was made possible by the failure of negotiations between the reformist government and European representatives and subsequent increased pressure on Iran.

The success with which the Iranian government was able to turn an issue with limited public interest into a widely discussed and proclaimed public position of the “Iranian nation” is worthy of examination not only for the revelations it offers regarding domestic political dynamics but also because of the light it sheds on how Iran's confrontation with the West (particularly the United States) has worked itself out through public conversation. To be sure, as the widely

recounted joke above suggests, the “Iranian nation” has not lost its sense of humor and is ready to take government pronouncements about Iran’s sovereignty and national rights with a grain of salt.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, mostly anecdotal evidence but also some limited polling<sup>2</sup> suggests that various Iranian governments of both reformist and conservative bent were able to direct the public toward a rather hardened stance on this issue.

This hardened position was a relatively recent phenomenon. When in the late 1990s and early 2000 I did a study of the domestic conversation about Iran’s nuclear weapons program, I could not find a single person inside Iran who would acknowledge that the country had a worthwhile and existing program.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, there were sporadic discussions in some of Iran’s newspapers and magazines, particularly after Pakistan tested its first nuclear bomb in 1998, about whether Iran should pursue a nuclear weapons program, with the overwhelming majority of discussants opposing it. But when I asked questions about the nature of Iran’s extant program, even among those who opposed a future program, there was a total lack of knowledge and even quite a bit of skepticism about the existence of or even the capability to pursue such an effort. Even the possibility of a worthwhile civilian nuclear program, beyond the Bushehr nuclear plant, was not entertained. In the words of a prominent reformist, “The only thing nuclear in Iran was civil society.”

The situation changed dramatically in 2002 with the revelation of Iran’s plans for the development of a domestic uranium capability in Natanz and a heavy water reactor in Arak. Iran’s nuclear program rapidly became a focus of political conversation. Why this was so had much to do with the pressures imposed on Iran by other countries and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, these pressures would not have led to contentious conversation had there not been a very contentious political environment inside the country. The Iranian conversation shifted repeatedly as people reacted to details of Tehran’s negotiations with the IAEA or European Union (EU) representatives (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, or EU-3) and because of the political schisms that have characterized Iran’s political environment since the 1979 revolution. The public discourse focused on Iran’s relations with the world and on whether to reject the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), enter negotiations with the Europeans, sign the Additional Protocol to the NPT, continue the suspension of its enrichment program, temporarily suspend enrichment and enter negotiations with the Americans and Europeans over a package of economic incentives offered in summer 2006, and tone down the fiery language of Iranian officials and be more “diplomatic.”<sup>4</sup>

The end result, in a country known for its authoritarian ways, was ironically a relatively open field for discussion, with opposing elite points of view regarding one of Iran’s most im-

portant foreign policy and security issues. This open discussion developed an interactive dynamic with the decisionmaking process, increasingly forcing government officials to become more transparent and explain their decisions. An examination of Iran's domestic conversation between 2002 and approximately end of 2005 reveals quite a bit about the dilemmas that Iranian leaders faced during this period. It also illustrates the institutional and ideological instruments Iranian leaders increasingly relied upon to make their case. Caught between an intensely politicized domestic audience and demanding external players, Iranian leaders walked a tightrope in responding to both Western interlocutors and their domestic audience.

The referral of Iran's case to the United Nations (UN) Security Council in February 2006 and the subsequent sanctions against Iran generally coincided with the entrenchment of conservative control over all levers of government in Iran. The public conversation about what should be done about Iran's nuclear dossier became much more limited.<sup>5</sup> The nationalist discourse that had from the beginning been *part* of Iran's case for pursuing its nuclear program for all practical purposes became the *whole* of the case. In the process, arguments that proposed acceptance of the temporary suspension of enrichment-related activities were viewed as a reflection of "meekness" or "complacency" and therefore unsustainable.

As a result, no significant national leader was willing to publicly challenge the government's decision to abandon suspension (first of its uranium conversion program in Isfahan in August 2005 and then of its enrichment program in Natanz in March 2006). Instead, the conversation atrophied into a tactical discussion about the need to use acumen in diplomacy and avoid verbal adventurism, a reference to President Ahmadinejad's fiery speeches on non-nuclear-related matters (such as Israel and the Holocaust). The atrophied public conversation ended up reflecting an atrophied political process that increasingly excluded any discussion of compromise on enrichment.

What does this progression of domestic dialogue say about how the Iranian government has been able to shape the nuclear debate in Iran? To what extent has the nationalist discourse that has taken complete charge of the nuclear issue been an enabler of the hard-line ascendance, both rhetorically and politically? These are hard questions to answer. The same interactive process that initially supported relatively open debate about how Iran should approach external pressures over its nuclear program also opened the path for the full-fledged ascendance of the hard-line nationalist discourse that identifies stridence and standing firm as the only way to counteract tough external stances (or in Iranian parlance, "Western bullying").

## Nuclear Debate in the Khatami Period

In understanding the nature of the nuclear debate during the Khatami period, it is important to distinguish between two sets of nuclear discussions. One has to do with decisions regarding the extent of Iran's nuclear program (military or civilian) and the other with the way Iran responded or should have responded to external pressures. Not surprisingly, discussions about how Iran should have responded to external pressures were more vibrant than discussions of Iran's nuclear program itself. Still, some information came out about the logic, objectives, and eventual extent of Iran's civilian nuclear program.<sup>6</sup>

The domestic audience learned about Iran's civilian nuclear program from journalists, parliamentary deputies, political pundits, and commentators as well as from those trying to sell it as a "national project." This is an important caveat about the government's approach. From the very beginning, the government never marketed the nuclear program as a solution to Iran's security needs. In fact, various government officials repeatedly argued that the pursuit of nuclear weapons would undermine Iran's security.<sup>7</sup> Instead, they pitched the objective of civilian energy use on its own merits. Given the roots of the Iranian revolution, its celebrated mottos of independence and liberty, and years of war and isolation, the Iranian public proved receptive to the ideas of self-sufficiency and moving away from reliance on oil and gas as the sole sources of energy. The history of Islamic Iran's treatment in international organizations, particularly during the Iran-Iraq war years, led the public to agree that international organizations such as the IAEA were political tools of important international players, such as the United States, in their quest to deny Iran technological advancement and progress.

Although the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and the Foreign Ministry took the lead in negotiations with the EU-3, the task of explaining the history of Iran's nuclear program and its scientific objectives was left to the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI). However, the scope of these explanations was limited to those aspects of Iran's nuclear program under negotiation with the Europeans. Very little was mentioned regarding the reasons for Iran's deals with Russia over the Bushehr nuclear plant, the institutions or key players responsible for making the deal, or the details of the terms, which continue to remain obscure. This suggests that the domestic audience became more assertive as information was received from external sources, and that the authorities felt obliged to be more forthcoming to the Iranian public to counter the narrative offered by these external sources.

A review of media reporting in this period suggests that while the official explanation offered a nationalistic counternarrative, it was also detailed and mindful of the possibility that

it would be challenged if it conflicted with internationally known technical details. It is also significant that explanations were given through interviews with both conservative and reformist newspapers. In other words, the audiences of both types of newspapers were deemed important. However, the framework used to gain the support of each audience varied a bit. In conservative papers such as *Kayhan*, *Resalat*, and *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, the nuclear program was presented as a national program requiring indigenous sacrifice and ingenuity. The last stages of the Iranian program (production of uranium tetrafluoride [UF<sub>4</sub>] and uranium hexafluoride [UF<sub>6</sub>]) before uranium enrichment-related activities were suspended in 2004, were compared to “heroic operations of the sacred defense against Iraq.”<sup>8</sup> In reformist papers, such as *Shargh and Iran*,<sup>9</sup> nationalism was again emphasized but this time within the more reasonable framework of genuine disagreement with the Europeans: “Given the state of nuclear technology the Europeans are genuinely fearful that Iran will be capable of pursuing nuclear weapons; we have to offer them objective guarantees that we will not do so, while still not giving up our sovereign national rights.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite subtle differences in framing the issue in different outlets, the trajectory for Iran’s nuclear program was essentially the same. Iranians were informed that domestic “research and laboratory work” on production of nuclear fuel began in the Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani era (late 1980s), ultimately leading to the signing of an agreement with China’s National Nuclear Corporation during Rafsanjani’s visit to China in 1994. China agreed to build two 300-megawatt (MW) power reactors and a uranium conversion facility (UCF) plant in Isfahan. This agreement, as well as attempts to acquire sophisticated parts and designs, was voided in 1997 due to American diplomatic pressure, despite AEOI efforts to persuade China to proceed.

Iranians were also told that during this same period, P1 centrifuge components (though never a whole centrifuge) were purchased, as well as designs available on the black market. It is unclear which institutions or individuals were given the task of securing these parts and designs. It was stated that at some point in the early to mid-1990s, the designers and managers at AEOI decided that their efforts to secure components in the international market had failed. Accordingly, they decided to move toward replicating components in Iran as well as designing their own components. This decision was presented as being motivated by scientific limitations imposed on Iran by sanctions as well as political limitations revealed by China’s renegeing on its agreement with Iran.

In this narrative, Iran’s nuclear capability was enhanced significantly in the early to mid-1990s but was limited to laboratory and not industrial-scale experimentation. In addition, 1997 (the year of Mohammad Khatami’s election) is presented as the year when Iran’s government

decided to produce 7,000 MW of electricity through nuclear plants and the AEOI began preliminary work for the domestic production of the fuel needed for these plants (from raw resources all the way to enrichment). Khatami is depicted as being closely involved with and personally committed to Iran's aggressive pursuit of a nuclear capability. He reportedly created and headed the Supreme Council for Technology, a subcommittee of the SNSC, shortly after his election in order to complete the nuclear reactor at Bushehr, as well as other activities needed to master the nuclear fuel cycle. Khatami is also described as taking steps to ensure that an adequate budget was available.

The management of AEOI decided to embark on the UCF project rejected by the Chinese, using public and private firms, in 1999. Construction of the Isfahan Uranium Conversion Facility began (it was declared to the IAEA in 2000), leading to the production of UF<sub>4</sub> in April 2004 and UF<sub>6</sub> between May and June 2004. The decision to pursue production of UF<sub>4</sub> and UF<sub>6</sub> was made in the midst of serious negotiations with the European troika and intense international pressure. According to Mohammad Saeidi, AEOI's vice president for planning and international affairs, the conversion from yellowcake to UF<sub>4</sub> took a mere 20 days. Furthermore, the decision to produce UF<sub>6</sub> was announced "one hour after a meeting with the Leader" at AEOI headed by the organization's director Gholamreza Aghazadeh.<sup>11</sup>

In this narrative, "scientific success" is posited as a key factor in the continuation and expansion of Iran's nuclear program. Interviews with the management of AEOI are replete with sentences lauding their success: "When we started nobody believed we could develop an indigenous nuclear technology"; "Many thought we were acting too ambitiously"; "Many did not believe in our organization's decisions"; "Our scientists were working night and day, with incredible energy, knowing very well the dangers they were facing"; "Our scientists did not know if they were capable of doing this"; "They were petrified of the complexity this project entailed."<sup>12</sup>

The risky and daring nature of the program, in the face of international opposition and technological hurdles, was an important selling point in generating the pride as well as the zeal necessary to support the program. Indeed, the conflation of Iran's nuclear program and general scientific advancement was an important strategy in the government's attempt to present the nuclear program as the cornerstone of efforts to modernize the country, narrow the technological divide with the West, and frustrate the Western objective of hindering Iran's scientific and technological progress. In making their case regarding the scientific importance of the nuclear program, Iranian decisionmakers were clearly aided by the public argument (made particularly by the George W. Bush administration) that international pressure was intended to deny Iran not only nuclear weapons and the enrichment capability that might

fuel a nuclear weapons program, but also the “knowledge” inherent in the pursuit of such a capability. This backdrop gave Ahmadinejad’s later pronouncements that the West was after “the closure of universities and research centers” and “classes in physics and mathematics” a certain appeal to domestic audiences.

Framing the Iranian nuclear program in terms of the country’s scientific and technological progress made it much more difficult to challenge. This has not been the case with Iran’s intricate dealings with the EU-3, the IAEA, and Javier Solana, the EU’s foreign policy chief. Unlike decisions about the nuclear program, which were presented and justified after the fact, decisions about how to deal with external pressures, at least during the Khatami era, unfolded in public, requiring step-by-step justification in the face of public criticism. Many political as well as institutional players were engaged in a contentious debate about how Iran should respond to international pressure. These discussions occurred in the pages of daily newspapers and magazines, in the parliament, as well as in news conferences with various officials. Positions ranged from support for the negotiations with IAEA and the Europeans and even acceptance of their terms (as advocated by the opposition Freedom Movement and later the reformist Islamic Iran’s Participation Front and the Mojahedin of Islamic Revolution), to outright rejection of negotiations and even more vocal calls for withdrawal from the NPT.<sup>13</sup>

Two sets of criticism were hurled at the negotiation process with the EU-3. First, questions were raised regarding the wisdom of negotiating with parties that either wanted to limit Iran’s right to exercise its sovereignty or that had no power to deliver on their promises. Second, criticism was directed at the skills of Iranian negotiators who initially were mostly members of the foreign ministry (later supplemented with SNSC members). These two sets of criticism, publicly aired and coming mostly from the right of the political spectrum, had several effects.

First, they highlighted the stakes involved to the public, restricting the Khatami administration’s room to maneuver in negotiation with the Europeans. The government had to reassure domestic audiences at both the elite and public levels that under no circumstances would it permanently give up Iran’s “sovereign national right” to uranium enrichment. This position, which was based on “principled sovereignty,” was repeated in public conversations, ultimately limiting negotiating flexibility in the name of broader interests or expediency.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, the government had to portray its decision to pursue negotiation with the European troika as the decision of the “whole system.” This was intended to placate critics on the right who said that principles were being trumped by expediency. Greater prominence was given to the SNSC as the arena in which decisions are made, with the foreign ministry and the negotiating team relegated to mere implementers of decisions

made at the SNSC. According to Hassan Rowhani, the lead negotiator for the nuclear issue, the SNSC took the lead on the nuclear issue in September 2003. He explained that the council was not involved until then because “Iranian authorities said the country’s nuclear programs were purely peaceful and they were not a cause of any concern.”<sup>14</sup> “Emergency conditions” that arose in September 2003 necessitated the council’s involvement. Although Rowhani did not explain what those conditions were, he was undoubtedly referring to the September 12 IAEA Board of Governors’ resolution that urged Iran to accelerate its cooperation with the agency and called on Tehran to “remedy all failures identified by the Agency.”

More importantly, in their repeated appearances in the seventh parliament, both Rowhani and Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi were quick to note that they were not the decisionmakers in this area, and that “a group of high-ranking officials make the final decision.”<sup>15</sup> In a heated parliamentary session in the summer of 2004, Kharrazi defended the decision to negotiate with the EU by saying that it was made to “break the negative political atmosphere that had developed against Iran in the international arena.” He continued:

*Those who are in the Foreign Ministry, the supreme leader, and the honorable president of the country and the people of Iran have as much feelings as you do. The people support the government. Be sure that there is accountability and it is not as though anyone can do what he wants. The Foreign Ministry implements the laws of the country. It is neither the formulator of laws nor policy maker in the area of foreign policy. It cannot change the existing policies.*<sup>16</sup>

The result of this “system-wide” decisionmaking process during the Khatami administration was the simultaneous transmission of decisions to the domestic audience and the European players. The decisions emphasized that under no circumstances would Iran permanently give up enrichment; that it was ready to negotiate “objective guarantees” that it is not pursuing nuclear weapons; and that it was prepared to cooperate voluntarily with the IAEA regarding implementation of the Additional Protocol. It was also collectively decided (and reportedly relayed to the Europeans in no uncertain terms) that Iran would immediately suspend implementation of the Additional Protocol on the day its case was referred to the UN Security Council. Rowhani warned, “There is no doubt about this. We shall also resume enrichment.”<sup>17</sup>

Given these dynamics, it should not be surprising that with the failure of the negotiations to “build confidence” in Iran’s peaceful nuclear program, the *maslehat* (expediency) argument



for temporary suspension of uranium enrichment began to lose steam even before the end of the Khatami administration. From the beginning, the *maslehat* argument had not been based on the need for Iran to renounce its commitment to its nuclear program. Rather, those favoring negotiations argued that through engagement and concessions on the creation of a robust inspection regime, Iran could find a way to break the international consensus the United States sought to build against it. The atmosphere began to change by early 2005 with the failure to reach an agreement. Iran decided to abandon its suspension of enrichment-related activities in a step-by-step and calibrated process.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Ascendance of the Hard-liners**

Iran's decision in August 2005 to resume conversion of uranium yellowcake to UF<sub>6</sub> at its Isfahan plant was actually taken during the Khatami administration. The official reason for restarting Isfahan was dissatisfaction with the pace of negotiations (and skepticism about European intentions) after November 2004. The Iranian negotiating team had maintained all along that suspension of declared and legal activities under the NPT was a voluntary and temporary move to build confidence. In its tortuous negotiations with the EU-3, the Iranian team rejected the EU argument that the only way Iran could assure the international community about the peaceful intent of its nuclear program was by permanently suspending activity at key nuclear facilities, including the conversion plant in Isfahan, the enrichment plant in Natanz, and the planned heavy water research reactor in Arak, all of which were permitted under NPT guidelines so long as the activity was declared and subject to international monitoring. Iran premised its participation in the negotiations after November 2004 on the idea that there would be joint efforts to seek "objective guarantees" that did not entail permanent suspension. The Iranian negotiating team warned, publicly and privately, that they could not accept a solution to the nuclear dispute that would single out Iran, forcing it to forgo activities other countries were allowed to pursue and submitting Iran to restrictions not applied to other NPT signatories. These positions were repeatedly stated in the Iranian press.

After months of deadlock, Tehran came up with a proposal that would limit, but not end, Iran's enrichment-related activities for a period of time. According to details published in the centrist reformist newspaper *Shargh* on August 11, 2005, Tehran offered in March 2005 to produce only low-enriched uranium; to limit the amount of uranium enriched; to convert all low-enriched uranium to fuel rods for use in reactors (fuel rods cannot be further enriched); to limit the initial number of centrifuges in Natanz and to make the full operation of the fuel cycle incremental, beginning with the least sensitive part of uranium conversion; to refrain

from reprocessing spent reactor fuel and hence keep an open fuel cycle; and, finally, to give the IAEA a permanent on-site presence at all sites for uranium conversion and enrichment.

The EU-3 did not respond to this proposal. Caught between American insistence that Iran should not be allowed to master any aspect of the fuel cycle and Iran's equally intransigent position that it could not reasonably be asked to give up activities that other countries were allowed to pursue, the European troika delayed a response beyond the midsummer deadline set by Iran. A package was reportedly prepared, but none was delivered. The Europeans likely hoped that the Iranian presidential election of June 2005, which they expected former President Rafsanjani to win, would bring to power a seasoned politician willing to make a deal. This, in turn, would make it easier to press the United States for more flexibility. In other words, the Europeans banked on circumstances to allow them to reconcile the irreconcilable positions of Washington and Tehran.

Circumstances did not help the Europeans. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a hard-liner whose supporters had opposed the EU-3 negotiations process from the beginning, was unexpectedly elected president. Rumors spread that the Europeans had quietly withdrawn the package they were preparing to offer the Iranian government if Rafsanjani were elected. Concerned that negative reactions once Ahmadinejad assumed power would be interpreted as a hard-line turn due to a change in presidency, the Iranian leadership convened an emergency meeting while Mohammad Khatami was still president. To highlight Iran's internal consensus, the leadership made a point of announcing that not only Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad, but also Mir Hossein Mousavi, a former prime minister with close ties with the reformist camp, were present at the meeting. Iran's position was unequivocal: either Europe offered an acceptable package or Isfahan would be restarted.

Caught off guard, the Europeans produced a hastily assembled counterproposal in August 2005 that did not take into account Iran's offer and restated proposals Tehran had already rejected. Iran rebuffed this proposal and began a calibrated process of bringing its various nuclear programs out of suspension. By so doing, Tehran was trying to remind its external interlocutors and domestic audience that everything it had done so far had been voluntary and not legally binding, a point the latest resolution conveniently ignored. With staunch conservatives in control of all elective and nonelective institutions, the careful language used in discussions with external players also disappeared. At the UN World Summit that year, Ahmadinejad talked tough: "If some try to impose their will on the Iranian people through resorting to the language of force and threats with Iran, we will reconsider our entire approach to the nuclear issue."<sup>19</sup> The underlying factors that pushed Iran toward a hard-line position went beyond the

language used by the new president. Tehran's decision to move in a hard-line direction was not the result of the ascendance of a hard-line president, but a consensus-based response to what Tehran regarded as the EU-3's utter inability to negotiate as an independent actor and Tehran's perception that its conciliatory approach had only led to further demands on the part of the EU-3 and United States.

This view was relayed to the Iranian people. Public debates and reportage of the minutiae of the negotiations with the EU-3 had given the impression that Tehran's stances developed gradually through an intense process of internal discussions and in response to the negotiations themselves. Public debates clearly showed that from the beginning, some groups criticized either the idea of negotiating with Europe or the manner in which the negotiations were conducted. But the continuation of the negotiations suggested that this opposition was overruled in the hope that a compromise could be reached on the question of enrichment. The EU's failure to respond to Iran's offer of limited and controlled enrichment gave the upper hand to those who saw negotiations with Europe as futile. This led to a new three-pronged approach: first, a calibrated resumption of suspended activities; second, continued cooperation with the IAEA over Iran's nuclear dossier and resumption of suspended activities under the full supervision of that agency; and third, letting the world know, through parliamentary and Guardian Council actions, that a Security Council referral would lead Iran to suspend its voluntary adherence to the Additional Protocol. Iran would not leave the NPT, but it would withdraw a concrete and significant concession the Europeans had won in negotiations.

Following the actual Security Council referral and subsequent sanctions against Iran, the voices of those calling for some sort of negotiated settlement were further weakened. The UN referral could no longer be used as a warning or threat. Instead, the referral became an occasion for hard-liners such as Hossein Shariatmadari, editor of *Kayhan* newspaper, to remind everyone that he had predicted this path of growing Iranian concessions and empty European promises all along.<sup>20</sup> These sentiments were not unique. Demonstrations were held in front of the British embassy, and in October 2006, the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission approved the general outlines of a bill providing for the suspension of the government's voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol. Shariatmadari had previously dismissed the threat of referral to the Security Council. As far as he was concerned, an actual referral would either produce a divided Security Council (with Russian and Chinese vetoes) or a weak resolution that, like the IAEA resolution, was full of demands but lacked effective mechanisms to realize those demands. The referral would also be an opportunity for Iran to leave the NPT for good and reject the mentality that promoted concessions

due to fear of a Security Council referral. This, he insisted, would be like “committing suicide out of the fear of death.”<sup>21</sup>

Others were less sanguine. Acknowledging that Iran’s negotiations with Europe began from a position of weakness, reformist editorialist Abbas Abdi argued that Iran’s red line should have been preventing referral to the Security Council, since, in such a forum, Iran would have no control. For Abdi, the issue was not Iran’s national sovereign “right” to pursue nuclear energy but its “might” to do so without wreaking havoc on the economy and inviting military attack. If Iran could achieve this, then it should go ahead and do so. It should even go for nuclear weapons if it could. If not, better to back down now than later, when the terms may be harsher.<sup>22</sup> Abdi underestimated the increasing confidence of the Iranian leadership, given U.S. troubles in Iraq, about their “might” (or ability to withstand sanctions).

The reformists were no doubt correct about the difficulties faced by a government trying to fight on both domestic and international fronts, but their position was not without its own dilemmas. To be sure, Iran was being pressured because of decisions made by its leaders. At the same time, however, the EU-3 and the United States were (and are) asking Iran to do things that went well beyond its international obligations. Under these circumstances, reformist lamentations about the lack of accountability of Iranian leaders offer little practical guidance about how to get out of the present impasse, except for the possibility of giving in. That position, of course, gives further ammunition to hard-liners who claim that reformists are at best “meek” and at worst “agents of foreign powers.”

The conflict over “principles” and “interest” reached fever pitch in the early fall of 2006 after Iran refused to suspend its enrichment-related activities as a precondition for talks about a package of incentives offered by the EU and the United States. A significant public exchange between Mohsen Rezaie, former head of the Revolutionary Guards, and Rafsanjani, still head of the Expediency Council, revealed the depth of divisions. Making a comparison with the decisions of the political leadership during the war with Iraq, Rezaie argued that pursuing a political strategy rather than building on Iran’s military successes after the liberation of Khorramshahr had denied Iran many opportunities; a similar mistake was made during nuclear negotiations with the Europeans, where Iran did not gain anything because the Americans had closed off the diplomatic route.<sup>23</sup> In response, Rafsanjani published a classified letter from Ayatollah Khomeini showing how Khomeini, in response to reports from various agencies and individuals about the weakness of the Iranian economy and difficulties in recruiting soldiers, decided to end the war by accepting UN Resolution 598 (the ceasefire with Iraq). The timing of the released document highlighted the message about the need to take *maslehat-e nezam*

(the system's interest) into account under difficult conditions. Rafsanjani suggested that unlike Ayatollah Khomeini, who was willing to act in the face of military and economic dangers, the current Iranian leadership realized the limits of its "ability to withstand U.S. military or economic pressures and was not willing to enter negotiations over the nuclear program or Iran's regional role from a position of weakness, fearing a cascade of further demands that will eventually lead to destabilization of the regime."<sup>24</sup>

The reaction of Supreme Leader Khamenei, the ultimate decisionmaker on nuclear and foreign policy issues, made clear that the era of thinking about the need to compromise because of domestic and external challenges was over. As far as he was concerned, the tension between principles and interest on the nuclear issue was no longer a conflict at all. Different paths of compromise and confrontation had to be taken at different times in order to gain confidence in the ultimate (that is, current) path taken:

*In war, retreat is a tactic; it is not flight. In one place the commander finds it necessary to retreat tactically and if he doesn't it is treason; in the same way it is treason if in the place that he has to push forward he does not. What is a difference between a tactical retreat and flight? The difference is that [retreat] is under command and is a disciplined act. Flight is an undisciplined act. Where [it] is necessary, we will move forward; where necessary, rapidly and where necessary slowly; where [it] is necessary, [we will take] one step backwards, two steps forward and God will help too. In the nuclear case the same things have happened and will continue to happen. For two years, two and a half years, we took a path and if we had not taken we could have reproached ourselves. Not now, with strong heart and clear vision we know what we are doing. We experienced and saw that path too; no one has any argument against the administration and the system. . . . This is the path. We have experienced the other path; it became clear. Every word of the events of the various days has been written and recorded. One day they will be provided to the nation and hopefully it will become clear what happened during this period. It was also clear from that [beginning] day but it [tactical retreat] was a necessary move which did occur. Today too this move is a correct move. Our policy regarding the nuclear issue is a clear policy: progress, insistence on the right of our people without retreat; of course with the clear logic that we have.<sup>25</sup>*

## Looking to the Future

There is no doubt that the electoral shift away from reformist and toward hard-line leadership was a significant development in Iran. But with respect to the nuclear file, strengthening of the hard-line faction in the Majles and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election as president did not trigger a radical departure in nuclear policy on their own. The way fundamental questions were framed about Iran's right to develop a nuclear energy program, including the right to an indigenous enrichment capacity, remained the same and shaped Iranian decisions. During the painstaking nuclear talks that occurred during Khatami's era, Iranian negotiators, when criticized at home, consistently pointed out that their position had been approved by the highest authorities. The later shift toward a more strident approach, despite criticisms of Ahmadinejad's bellicose rhetoric in the wider foreign policy arena and charges of "adventurism"<sup>26</sup> even in hard-line newspapers,<sup>27</sup> must also be seen as having the blessing of the highest authorities and of important sectors of the population. As described by Ahmadinejad in early 2007:

*[Our enemies] attempt to use threats and propaganda to create shock, isolate us and promote their objectives through the use of some despicable and weak elements, but fortunately we ensured that these sinister objectives were also neutralized. The plan of the system was to prevent a [UN Security Council] resolution against Iran, or if a resolution was going to be issued, to delay it and ensure it had little content. And you saw that this is what happened. . . . The resolution was stillborn and will not have any effect on the economy and politics of our country. . . . Erroneously, they want to give the impression that with this resolution and sanctions Iran has to pay a heavy price. . . . But we have yet to pay a price.<sup>28</sup>*

This adaptability came through an argument that emphasized ideas of self-sufficiency, national pride and determination, and technological advancement as means to stand against the bullying of Western powers. Western rhetoric against Iran's nuclear program, coupled with the reality of American troubles in the region, empowered this strident nationalist stance, helping to push calls for compromise in order to placate Western hostility out of the public conversation. In the words of Ayatollah Khamenei, the time for compromise was over and the nation was ready "to pay a price." It could not "beg and plead."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are many more jokes about nuclear energy in Iran, some not fit to print for the use of foul language and most, given the Iranian penchant for limericks, rendered meaningless in translation.

<sup>2</sup> There is a dearth of independent and scientific polling in Iran. The only poll of the Iranian public's view was conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland in partnership with the Search for Common Ground and the United States Institute of Peace in October-December 2006 and involved about 1,000 respondents in Iran's 30 provinces. It reported public support for Iran's full fuel cycle nuclear program to be an astounding 91 percent (with 84 percent registering strong support) and agreement with the "need" to develop nuclear energy to be 96 percent (with 89 percent registering strong agreement). See <[www.usip.org/iran/iran\\_presentation.pdf](http://www.usip.org/iran/iran_presentation.pdf)>. The poll also suggests that the opinion of the Iranian citizenry reflects other Iranian government positions strongly, with 69 percent having heard of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), 66 percent approving it, 71 percent approving a nuclear-free Middle East that would include both Israel and Islamic countries, and 82 percent rejecting the notion that the United States fulfills its obligations under the NPT. For more anecdotal reportage see, for instance, "Iranians Defend Nuclear Rights," *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Farideh Farhi, "To Have or Not to Have? Iran's Domestic Debate on Nuclear Options," in *Iran's Nuclear Weapons Option: Issues and Analysis*, ed. Geoffrey Kemp (Washington, DC: The Nixon Center, January 2001), available at <[www.nixoncenter.org/publications/monographs/Iran's%20Nuclear%20Weapons%20Options%20-%20Issues%20and%20Analysis2.pdf](http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/monographs/Iran's%20Nuclear%20Weapons%20Options%20-%20Issues%20and%20Analysis2.pdf)>.

<sup>4</sup> The nature of these conversations has been discussed in detail in Farideh Farhi, "To Sign or Not to Sign: Iran's Evolving Domestic Debate on the Nuclear Option," in *Iran's Bomb: American and Iranian Perspectives*, ed. Geoffrey Kemp (Washington, DC: The Nixon Center, March 2004), available at <[www.nixoncenter.org/publications/monographs/IransBomb.pdf](http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/monographs/IransBomb.pdf)>; and Farideh Farhi, "Iran's Nuclear File: The Uncertain Endgame," *Middle East Report Online* (October 2005), available at <[www.merip.org/mero/mero102405.html](http://www.merip.org/mero/mero102405.html)>.

<sup>5</sup> This limitation is at least partially a reflection of direct government action to halt reporting on the nuclear issue. According to Borzou Daragahi, Iranian news outlets were issued a three-page letter from the Supreme National Security Council listing forbidden topics, which include the effects of sanctions on everyday life and on Iranian banks and travel bans on Iranian nuclear and military officials. "Iran Tightens Screws on Internal Dissent," *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 2007. But, as will be shown, the dynamic of the nuclear negotiations also increasingly limited the conversation.

<sup>6</sup> There is absolutely nothing in Iran's domestic conversation (even in the form of rumors) that hints at the existence of a military-oriented nuclear program or any possible sites that might be associated with such a program. Given the Iranian propensity for generating rumors, this is noteworthy and odd.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, the interview with Deputy Foreign Minister Mohsen Aminzadeh in *Iran*, September 23, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mohammad Saeidi, *Kayhan*, April 12, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Since the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, *Iran* is no longer a reformist paper.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ali Akbar Salehi, *Iran*, July 27, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Saeidi.

<sup>12</sup> See interviews with Salehi and Saeidi cited above.

<sup>13</sup> In the minds of many proponents, the calls for Iran to withdraw from the NPT did not necessarily mean a decision to pursue nuclear weapons. For instance, in a raucous exchange in the Majles on August 14, 2004, then-Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi was vociferously attacked for acknowledging the right of the parliament to mandate a withdrawal from the NPT but pointing out that such a move would constitute “the pursuit of nuclear weapons or that we have built nuclear weapons and now we want to leave the NPT.” Several Majles deputies insisted on recording that “the foreign minister’s interpretation is only one interpretation since the treaty stipulates withdrawal if it is necessitated by the country’s national interest.” *Shargh*, August 11, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Hassan Rowhani, *Rahbord*, September 30, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Hassan Rowhani’s interview with the hard-line *Kayhan*, July 23, 2005. Rowhani explains how the “highest authorities,” including the “eminent leader,” insisted on him becoming the chief negotiator and were involved in all the decisions.

<sup>16</sup> *Shargh*, August 11, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA), May 15, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> As early as October 2004, in an interview with an Internet site affiliated with him, Mohsen Rezaie, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and a critic of Khatami’s so-called passivity throughout the nuclear negotiations, stated that “Europe deceived our officials in charge of nuclear diplomacy. . . . They [Europeans] want us to abandon our peaceful nuclear program so that they can sell their products to us and expand the market for their nuclear products. This is also a serious deception. They . . . were assured that Iran is not after nuclear weapons. Today they want to go farther and take away our right to uranium enrichment and technology.” See <[www.baztab.com](http://www.baztab.com)>, October 23, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> ISNA, September 18, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> *Kayhan*, February 5, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> *Kayhan*, July 9, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> See <[www.ayande.ir/1384/11/post\\_15.html#more](http://www.ayande.ir/1384/11/post_15.html#more)>.

<sup>23</sup> *Etemad Melli*, September 23, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, “Iran: The Populist Threat to Democracy,” *Middle East Report* 241 (Winter 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei speaking to Iranian officials, October 10, 2006. See <[www.leader.ir/langs/FA/index.php?p=bayan&id=3295](http://www.leader.ir/langs/FA/index.php?p=bayan&id=3295)>.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Foad Sadeqi, “The Nuclear File: From Passivity to Extremism,” at <[www.baztab.com](http://www.baztab.com)>, December 26, 2006. Arguably the charge of adventurism is a serious one, since passivity leads only to concessions while adventurism has the potential of undermining the stability of the Islamic Republic.

<sup>27</sup> Reacting to Ahmadinejad’s description of the UN resolution as “a piece of torn paper,” an editorial in the conservative *Jomhouri-ye Eslami* accused the president of using “such an aggressive tone that sounds so stubborn to listeners,” January 9, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> ISNA, January 21, 2007.



## Seeking International Legitimacy: Understanding the Dynamics of Nuclear Nationalism in Iran

Bahman Baktiari

*The further backward you look, the further forward you can see.*

—Winston Churchill

How a nation's values shape policy formulation and implementation is an intriguing problem for practitioners of international relations. When it comes to conflict in international politics, relatively few decisionmakers have paid much attention to concepts such as *prestige*, *respect*, *honor*, and *dignity* as elements that influence their attitudes and policy positions. Despite the vast literature on nuclear proliferation, in-depth analyses have only recently focused on identifying the conditions that lead some states to seek nuclear capability not so much for purely security reasons, but as part of a quest to gain international legitimacy. This paper explores the significance of international legitimacy for Iranian leaders as a way of validating their quest for nuclear capability and argues that the ruling clerics have used Western opposition to Iran's nuclear program to generate national unity and purpose inside Iran on the basis of upholding Iranian prestige and national honor (*ezzat e melli*).

The paper makes several arguments. First, it posits the importance of understanding the normative aspect of the nuclear narrative in Iran and the Iranian leadership's preoccupation with international legitimacy. Second, it explains how this narrative connects, at least loosely, all sectors of the society to an accepted vision of defending Iran's rights and standing up for its national sovereignty. Third, it argues that an important but overlooked international relations paradigm—the struggle for international recognition as an independent and sovereign state—has been a central feature of Iranian politics for more than a century. This paradigm has manifested itself historically in responses to perceived threats to Iranian security and territorial integrity. Finally, it concludes that Iranian politics in the past three decades has been so contentious and chaotic and its leaders so immersed in their internal political struggles that they have failed to see how their statements damage their goal of achieving international legitimacy. According to Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), "A lot of the problems we face [with Iran], fifty percent at least if not more, is psychological. Substance is important, but fifty percent of it is how you approach it, how you reach out

to people, and how you understand where they are coming from.”<sup>1</sup> Iranian decisionmakers and leaders cannot avoid the conclusion that both who they think they are *and who they really are* largely depend upon how other actors treat them. By interjecting “prestige” as a focus of foreign policy, they hope to project an image that can be simultaneously translated into international and domestic legitimacy.

Through the state media, Iran’s leadership has popularized the idea that the nation’s nuclear program is about much more than nuclear weapons. Government propaganda and speeches by prominent politicians focus on enhancing Iranian national pride and making Western countries recognize the Islamic Republic’s legitimacy as an independent actor and as their equal. By placing selected Iranian historical periods into the narrative, Iranian leaders justify their quest not just as a strategy to correct historical wrongs, but also as a source of hope for the future.

### **International Legitimacy and Respect**

The nuclear dispute between the United States and Iran constitutes a significant case study on the importance of legitimacy in international politics, a subject on which there is much common ground between realists, liberal internationalists, and constructivists. Even traditional realist Hans Morgenthau would agree with liberal internationalist Joseph Nye regarding the link between legitimacy and state power. In Morgenthau’s words, “[p]restige has become particularly important as a political weapon in an age in which the struggle for power is fought not only with the traditional methods of political pressure and military force, but in large measure as a struggle for the minds of men.”<sup>2</sup> Achieving international legitimacy, therefore, is as important as having the most modern and powerful military. As Quincy Wright also reminds us, “[a] small state has to rely on geographic position and on reputation and diplomacy, gaining allies, while a great state can rely on its armaments in being and capacity to make more.”<sup>3</sup>

In the ambiguities of ordinary language, words like *prestige*, *recognition*, *dignity*, and *respect* all overlap with one word: reputation. Borrowing from Gregory Miller, *reputation* for the purposes of this paper is defined as “a judgment about an actor’s past behavior that is used to predict future behavior.”<sup>4</sup> Once a state acquires a negative reputation, its intentions and goals are viewed with suspicion. In international relations, reputation is socially constructed since a reputation is not based on the judgment of a single actor but requires that multiple actors believe that another actor possesses these qualities. In this context, states may have a negative or a positive reputation. International legitimacy is gained from having a *positive* reputation, because legitimacy is derived from the high level of respect accorded to states by the other actors in the international system. States with *prestige* are recognized by other actors as having a high

standing either generally or with regard to a particular issue area, which means they will receive respect or esteem from other actors. For example, Canadians care about their international image. The drive to be recognized as a moral authority underwrites many Canadian actions on the world stage. The Canadian self-image as an international actor rests on the idea that Canada is a good international citizen. This identity has an important influence over Canadian decisions to garner prestige via normative rather than military achievements.<sup>5</sup> One reason states pour large sums of money into training and sending athletes to the Olympic Games is prestige and recognition. The material payoff of a state's athletes placing in an international competition is negligible, but the international public endorsement for the athletes who receive a gold medal is the national anthem of their country. Other international efforts, such as putting the first person on the Moon, are even more costly endeavors that are undertaken by states primarily to win recognition of their scientific prowess and to garner prestige.<sup>6</sup>

Put simply, enjoying prestige means being widely accredited with having achieved valuable political ends or with having special abilities for achieving such ends. Prestigious political actors thus are considered capable, important, and valuable. Obviously, this comes close to the common usage of the term *respect*. In this context, states with a positive reputation are recognized by other actors as having a high standing either generally or with regard to a particular issue area, which means they will receive respect or esteem from other actors.<sup>7</sup> Hence, states will cultivate prestige as one way of gaining international recognition, and this translates into domestic legitimacy for the state. No one wants his or her country to have a negative reputation in the world; on the contrary, nations want to be seen as model international citizens and thus achieve a prominent place in the society of nations.

Like respect, the concept of *dignity* appears to be more in line with the social realities of highly individualistic and thus very heterogeneous societies. Dignity delineates the core area of human worthiness, as subjectively defined by the prevailing culture.<sup>8</sup> Usually, a person's dignity rests on his recognition as an autonomous agent with a moral worth of its own. The same can be applied to a state. Being the abstract and universally accepted core of human worth, some leaders have elevated dignity to the level of state interest. However, dignity is not related to specific traits, characteristics, or histories that political actors want to see recognized. While states seek international legitimacy and respect, adding the concept of dignity gives a particular cultural meaning to respect. For example, the Persian word for *dignity* is *sharafat*; it has deep roots in Persian culture and it is frequently used along with *respect* (*ehteram*). In Iranian history, when a leader has used the word *dignity*, it was meant to convey Iran's rights to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and freedom of development. What is most remembered and internalized, however,

is violation of dignity in its most hurtful form of disrespect: humiliation. For Iranian leaders, the core of what is identified as their national dignity largely coincides with the Iranian state’s material interest in security. As the nuclear narrative demonstrates, upholding the Iranian state’s worth as an autonomous actor provides an additional motivation for resistance to international pressures, particularly in hopeless cases when they face an overpowering military opponent such as the United States or Israel.

In sum, international legitimacy is an intrinsic aspect of national power and international influence. A nation may lose legitimacy in international politics when it dismisses the relevance of world public opinion. By contrast, a nation may win legitimacy when it exercises power according to widely accepted international rules, principles, and norms. According to Joseph Nye:

*Politics is not merely a struggle for physical power, but also a contest over legitimacy. Power and legitimacy are not antithetical, but complementary. Humans are neither purely moral nor totally cynical. It is a political fact that the belief in right and wrong helps to move people to act, and therefore legitimacy is a source of power. States appeal to international laws and organizations to legitimize their own policies or delegitimize others, and that often shapes their tactics and outcomes. And legitimacy enhances a state’s soft power.<sup>9</sup>*

**Views of Iran’s Influence in the World, 2006–2007 (in percent)**

	Mainly positive		Mainly negative	
	2007	2006	2007	2006
5+1 Countries				
China	22	32	44	37
France	6	11	86	68
Germany	6	3	78	84
United Kingdom	7	9	76	72
Russia	20	15	37	43
United States	21	7	63	81

Source: Data compiled from the BBC World Service Poll, “World Public Opinion: Global Public Opinion on International Affairs,” available at <[www.WorldPublicOpinion.org](http://www.WorldPublicOpinion.org)>; Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), March 2007; BBC World Service Poll, “World Public Opinion: Global Views of Countries,” available at <[www.WorldPublicOpinion.org](http://www.WorldPublicOpinion.org)>; and PIPA, February 2006.

## **Building International Legitimacy: Iranian Leaders' Perception of Respect and Dignity**

Leaders were emboldened by how quickly the revolution against one of the most powerful regimes in the region succeeded and ushered in a new era in Iranian history. Like the leaders of the French Revolution, the leaders of Iran's Islamic Revolution emphasized a new identity for the country. This identity included elements such as the significance of the "people" and not the state, an anti-status quo ideology for both domestic and international life, and the denunciation of all international norms and principles viewed as Eurocentric and imperialist as illegitimate. This language was incorporated into the official discourse of the Islamic Republic (such as the slogan "Neither West, nor East"), and as part of Iran's transnational solidarity with resistance movements, such as Hizballah in Lebanon.

After Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, most of this revolutionary discourse was replaced by elements of statist discourse in which the legitimacy of international institutions, international law, and diplomacy was recognized. According to one Iranian scholar, postrevolutionary Iran has evolved considerably over the past decade, but it still has some way to go before it becomes a "normal" state, defining and pursuing its national interests dispassionately.<sup>10</sup>

Because their country in the past century has experienced two revolutions, the end of two dynasties, the exile of several kings, periods of popular mobilization, several attempts at lasting parliamentary democracy, three rounds of international sanctions, and foreign occupations without colonization,<sup>11</sup> it can safely be said that Iranian leaders have long been preoccupied with how to sustain a perception of Iran as a country with 2,500 years of recorded history and a civilization that deserves recognition and respect. Most Iranians perceive their nation as a great civilization that has been deprived of its rightful status as a regional superpower by foreign intervention, including that of tsarist Russia, Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

Shi'ite history reinforces this deep sense of victimization. For most of Islamic history, Sunni majorities have persecuted Shi'ite populations, regardless of their minority or majority status. The relevance of this identity is not lost on Iranian politicians. Former reformist president Mohammad Khatami used Shia analogies to make the same point. In a speech in 2004, he stressed Iran's natural and legitimate right to nuclear technology and called on Iranians to remember Imam Hossein (the third Shia Imam martyred in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE) "whose thoughts ha[d] become all the more imperative" because he taught us "to safeguard our dignity and freedom."<sup>12</sup> As one Western observer on Iran put it prior to the 2005 presidential election, "[Former President] Khatami appears to be much more uncompromising than the conservatives on the country's nuclear program."<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Iranian history is saturated with wars, invasions, and martyrs, including the teenage boys during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s who carried plastic keys to heaven while clearing minefields by walking bravely across them. Iranian leaders have tried every conceivable means for spectacular resolution of grand issues of national sovereignty and international legitimacy.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution might have constituted a break in the sociocultural sphere, but not in terms of Iran's territorial understanding of itself.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, even though the clerical regime used religious language to mobilize soldiers for the Iraq war, they were acting more as national leaders of Iran, not Shia Islam. This determination to defend Iranian territory and maintain an Iranian presence on three islands in the Gulf claimed by the United Arab Emirates—the Tunbs and Abu Musa—must be seen in this light. The Islamic Republic justifies its defense of territory and other foreign and security initiatives in terms of Iran's otherwise rejected imperial past; the result is new policy that presumably should not be perceived as either politically motivated or questionable. The themes of national sovereignty, legitimate rights, and continuity with pre-1979 positions as means to legitimate post-1979 Iranian claims are also used to justify the development of nuclear energy.<sup>15</sup> This strategy linking the nuclear discourse to Iranian history, foreign victimization, and national dignity, honor, and respect has succeeded in mobilizing Iranian public opinion on nuclear and security policy issues.

Iran's argument about its nuclear program is based on nonmilitary objectives. Iranian officials insist that the country's nuclear program is peaceful and directed toward civilian purposes—that is, energy production. They argue that Iran needs to diversify its energy resources in order to meet rising domestic demand and to increase oil exports in order to increase the country's revenues. Furthermore, Iranian officials and media argue that nuclear energy/products have widespread civil applications, including medicine and agriculture. In sum, Iran's nuclear program is a legitimate and important component of the economic, social, and political development of the country. So why is the West opposed to this legitimate program?

When it comes to connecting the nuclear narrative to Iranian dignity and national honor, Iranian officials and media draw on analogies from important periods of Iranian history. The 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchai with Russia and the Oil Nationalization Movement of the late 1940s and early 1950s are such examples.<sup>16</sup> As a result of the 1828 treaty, Iran lost much of its territory in Central Asia, was forced to grant commercial privileges and extra-territorial rights to Russian subjects, and had to accept Russian demands on its sovereignty and independence. Iranians regard the Treaty of Turkmenchai as one of the most humiliating events in their long history; reference to it is intended to delegitimize any current efforts

aimed at compromise.<sup>17</sup> Iranian diplomats refer to the suspension of nuclear research as “a scientific Turkmenchai.”<sup>18</sup>

The Oil Nationalization Movement, which began in the late 1940s and led to the nationalization of the oil industry in the 1950s, is celebrated as the most significant achievement of Iranian nationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By extension, the nuclear issue is a nationalist matter that demands the same national support and sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other officials frequently draw analogies between their current nuclear confrontation with the European Union and the United States to Britain’s unwillingness to accept Iran’s nationalization of its oil resources and British and American plots to overthrow Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh because the latter stood up for Iranian dignity and independence.<sup>20</sup>

Iranians view science and technology as important components of a country’s international status and prestige. Tehran stresses the importance of scientific growth and development if Iran is to become a modern, self-sufficient, and prosperous society.<sup>21</sup> Iranian leaders have transformed scientific achievements and self-sufficiency into a moral crusade. Not a day goes by in which Iranian leaders are not filmed visiting a major scientific center devoted to nuclear enrichment. In choreographed public appearances, officials are shown making speeches to university academics, scientists, and experts working in different important research centers. They point to the Islamic Republic’s success in taking electricity to villages or to the huge expansion of the number of women being educated since 1979. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reminded a group of academics in 2006 that “we are still at the beginning of our scientific progress and should continue our way by relentless efforts.” He urged the professors to show “scientific courage, innovation, national pride and self-confidence as well as being hard working and preventing the copying of Western scientific development.”<sup>22</sup>

Political leaders frequently warn of the efforts of hegemonic foreign powers, real or imagined, to prevent Iran from reaching its goals of independence and self-sufficiency by denying it advanced technology. Instead, foreign powers want Iran to remain dependent and weak. In 2006, nearly 30 years after the revolution, President Ahmadinejad, in an interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, repeated points made by the Shah:

*At what point has scientific progress become a crime? Can the possibility of scientific achievements that can be utilized for military purposes be reason enough to oppose science and technology all together? If such a proposition is true, then all scientific disciplines, including physics, chemistry, mathematics, medicine, engineering, etc., must be opposed.*<sup>23</sup>

This perspective is shared by former nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani, who was elected speaker of the parliament in 2008. Although he disagrees with Ahmadinejad on how Iran should negotiate, he certainly shares the president's perspective on scientific training and knowledge. Larijani has warned that "it is possible that other countries will one day decide to stop supplying nuclear fuel to Iran and we should therefore be capable of producing it ourselves as a manifestation of our national dignity and independence."<sup>24</sup>

Every now and then, the country's success in reaching self-reliance in a field is declared—from wheat and rice production to light industrial products. Scientific advances in nanotechnology, genetics, petroleum engineering, long-range missile systems, and nuclear technology (manufacture of cyclotrons for its new reactor/reactors and uranium enrichment) are represented as moves toward that end. Iranian officials see having nuclear plants and being able to supply them with fuel from within the country as steps toward greater self-sufficiency. A large number of scientists, engineers, and technicians have been trained to make the nuclear program an indigenous one. It is in this context that mastering the nuclear fuel cycle becomes a must and is celebrated as a national victory, while building new nuclear power plants without foreign aid is the long-term plan.

If we put the above in the context of Iran's postrevolutionary experiences of chaos, war, sanctions, and estrangement from the international community, we can understand the impact of initiatives that greatly enhance national prestige and solidarity. The nuclear dispute creates a shared sense of embattlement in a hostile environment, allowing the postrevolutionary state-builders to portray themselves as the true guardians of Iranian dignity and independence, with the internal added benefit of promoting scientific growth and discovery. This is why key elements of Iran's nuclear policy remain the same under pragmatist, reformist, and radical leaderships.

Many Iranians may question the government's official claim that the purpose of its nuclear program is peaceful, but few would question Iran's right to pursue nuclear technology and any capabilities it chooses to develop. Nuclear issues were not a topic debated in the controversial 2009 presidential election except for criticism by Ahmadinejad's relatively moderate opponents that he was willing to compromise Iran's security on the nuclear enrichment issue to end Iran's pariah status and "engage" the United States. Ahmadinejad and his ultraconservative backers had levied the same allegations against the reformists in 2005.

Popular opinion on the nuclear weapons issue, however, is more nuanced. Iranians are without a doubt a ferociously nationalistic people. Even those unsympathetic to the regime vocally support the government's nuclear ambitions. They say that Iran needs to prepare for life after oil resources run out; that Western double standards permit India, Pakistan, and Israel to have



nuclear programs; and that Iran lives in a dangerous neighborhood and needs not only a nuclear energy program but also a nuclear weapon. An opinion poll conducted by the InterMedia Survey Institute in 2006 indicated that 41 percent of Iranians interviewed strongly support the development of nuclear weapons. Among those supporters, 84 percent said they would be willing to face United Nations (UN) sanctions, and 75 percent would risk hostilities with the United States in order to develop them.<sup>25</sup> Yet other Iranians, concerned about the direction in which the country is headed, also express uncertainty about the nuclear project. The Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) was one of the bloodiest wars of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, killing or wounding about 500,000 Iranians. The country is still emerging from its postwar depression, both emotionally and economically, and few Iranians romanticize the prospect of conflict or militarization.<sup>26</sup>

After the 2002 revelation of the advanced state of Iran's nuclear program, President Khatami understood the extent of the problem. When he publicly confirmed the developments in Natanz and Arak in February 2003, the reformist president realized that Iran's international credibility would suffer, particularly after more than a decade spent rebuilding Iran's international image. Again, as happened following the 1980 hostage crisis, Iran stood to lose much if it did not initiate a series of confidence-building measures. In October 2003, the foreign ministers of Britain, France, and Germany (referred to as the European Union [EU]-3) made a sudden trip to Tehran, which garnered Iran and its nuclear dispute unprecedented international attention. For their part, the EU ministers saw an opportunity to broker a resolution of the conflict by offering Iran incentives for a settlement. In a sense, the trip of three foreign ministers accorded Iran the international legitimacy it had been seeking and offered hope that this would be the first step toward full normalization of relations. Yet far from being a major step forward, an Iranian scholar warned:

*It was a theatrical moment in the best sense of the term: a showpiece event, intended to prove to the world that diplomacy and the methods of Old Europe could yield results. . . . Such was the mutual cynicism that some Iranian diplomats privately conceded the psychological importance of achieving even the most modest treaty agreement with the West. Yet far from being the crowning success, it contained the seeds of future difficulties.<sup>27</sup>*

The breakdown of negotiations and the subsequent victory in 2005 of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an ultraconservative, as president of the Islamic Republic increased anxieties in the West. Emboldened by Washington's problems inside Iraq and the EU-3's inability to deliver on

the promises it made to Iran, the regime in Tehran began to take a tougher line in the negotiations. Under Ahmadinejad, Iran's tactics became more confrontational. The strategic goal, however, remained the same and just as elusive as it was under his predecessor. The issue for Tehran remained one of international legitimacy: why are some states given the green light on their nuclear programs, even though they clearly have military objectives in mind? Why is Iran denied this legitimacy when other states do not accept the international norms expected of Iran?

Under Ahmadinejad, hard-liners have shifted the focus to the discriminatory nature of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) that divides nations into nuclear "haves" and "have-nots," allowing some actors to have specific rights as far as nuclear technology and weaponization are concerned. This argument is advanced by the negotiators appointed by Ahmadinejad. They note that countries such as Israel, India, and Pakistan have been more or less accepted as nuclear powers against all international norms. Yet, they say, the countries that condemn Iran for its nuclear program are accused of being silent about or complicit in these countries' acquisition of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, these new diplomats have to be cautious in not pushing this argument too strongly since international instruments are applied to the countries that accept them as part of their membership, and Iran is a signatory member of the NPT. Ahmadinejad's government has actually lost ground in negotiations with Western countries due to his hard-line statements on EU and U.S. intentions, denial of the Holocaust, and rejection of IAEA findings.

Iran has used this discourse effectively to justify its position to domestic and international audiences, raising doubts about international pressures on Iran. Ahmadinejad attended the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) conference in Havana in September 2006, where the 118 members (two-thirds of the membership of the UN), reaffirmed "the basic and inalienable right of all states to develop research, production and use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes." It also resolved that the standoff over Iran should be solved through "negotiations without preconditions" (the Iranian position). The NAM statement called for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East and for Israel to sign the NPT.<sup>28</sup> In the 15<sup>th</sup> NAM Ministerial Conference in Tehran in July 2008, the group issued a statement on Iran's nuclear program affirming "the basic and inalienable right of all states to develop research, production and use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes, without any discrimination and in conformity with their respective legal obligations."<sup>29</sup>

Iran's political culture allows leaders to frame the nuclear issue in the language of nationalism. Past experiences and historical grievances are selectively employed against the West with the emphasis on Iran as victim and not as perpetrator of similar deeds. Iranian leaders cannot deny the fact that part of the problem in achieving international legitimacy has to do with what

they themselves challenge and ignore in important international norms and concepts. Iranians demand that the United States apologize for the Mossadegh coup of 1953, in which American and British intelligence agencies managed to remove the elected prime minister and restore the Shah to his throne. They do not see that the Islamic Republic's support for the 1979 seizure of the U.S. Embassy with the taking of American hostages and a series of kidnappings and terrorist operations against the West, the United States, and the Gulf countries in the 1980s clearly influences American suspicions of Iran's nuclear and nonnuclear intentions. The late Ayatollah Khomeini unequivocally endorsed the students' takeover of the U.S. Embassy, thereby making the act the responsibility of the Iranian state.<sup>30</sup> No one—neither the Embassy staff nor the student captors—could have predicted that that would be the beginning of a hostage crisis that would seize the imaginations of both countries for 444 grueling days. And no one could have predicted the impact these events would have in shaping relations between the two governments over the next 30 years.

Tehran and Washington have constructed narratives of each other to fit an idealized picture of an enemy since the hostage crisis ended on January 20, 1981. The United States and the Islamic Republic have confronted one another through a series of insults, terrorist operations, and military threats.<sup>31</sup> Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told Western journalists after taking office in 2005 that the U.S. Government seemed “arrogant and overbearing and that it should not humiliate others.” He concluded, “We think the era of utilization of force and pressure in international relations has ended.”<sup>32</sup> But Ahmadinejad cannot ignore the complications of history and the fact that the 1979–1981 hostage crisis, the terrorist confrontations of the 1980s instigated by Iran, U.S. support for Iraq in the 1980–1988 war, and his own provocative statements continue to shape the discourse of distrust that marks Iran-U.S. relations. This distrust triggered America's policy of political, economic, and military containment toward the revolutionary regime. In addition, it enabled the United States to pressure other nations to curtail their dealings with Iran. The impact of the Embassy takeover and the students' dismissal of the importance of international legitimacy for the Islamic Republic is echoed in Iran's current isolation as evidenced by the world outcry of disapproval of Iranian behavior in international forums.

## **Obstacles to Agreement**

Some in Iran oppose any form of negotiation or international agreement that would restrict or suspend any part of the country's nuclear program on the grounds that concessions would amount to a betrayal of Iranian national interest. Hossein Shariatmadari, appointed by the Supreme Leader to be the editor-in-chief of *Kayhan* newspaper, is perhaps the most articulate exponent of this position. Just as the George W. Bush administration characterized Iran

as part of an “axis of evil” with whom no compromise is possible, a group in Iran is convinced that the United States is a Great Satan with whom they are unwilling to negotiate. The influence of these ideologues in the United States and Iran gained appreciably from the degree to which their respective positions seem anchored in contemporary reality. In Iran, the argument that the United States will never negotiate in good faith gained ground with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; with the American and EU reaction to Iran’s rejection of terms they proposed; with the talk of tougher sanctions to include banning bank transactions; with the boycott of Iranian companies and international companies trading with Iran, especially in importing refined gas for domestic consumption; with American support for the 2006 Israeli onslaught on Lebanon; and with the passing of the Iran Freedom Act.<sup>33</sup> The election of President Barack Obama and his efforts to engage Iran and the Muslim world surprised Iran’s leaders who now must deal with a volatile domestic crisis. If the political situation deteriorates further in Iran and the regime, its leaders, and the Islamic Republic appear at risk, whatever regime is in power will have little reason to show flexibility toward the United States, the West, or the Arab neighbors that border Iran. At the same time, the United States and Europe should not assume that any change will be an improvement over the current regime or be more willing to accommodate foreign desires on the nuclear issue.

In sum, since 2003, Iran and the West appear to be losing the will to work for any agreement. A regime official remarked in October 2007, “Both are now just emphasizing their own positions: Iran wants its rights and the Europeans want suspension. Neither is sufficiently ready for compromise.”<sup>34</sup> Another senior Iranian diplomat opined in 2006, “The leader’s view is that we should negotiate if our dignity is respected. This is an Iranian mentality rooted in a long history.”<sup>35</sup> Ahmadinejad is quoted as saying, “Pursuing nuclear technology is the legal and ultimate right of Iran and therefore the Iranian nation will not discuss this right with anybody.”<sup>36</sup>

It seems that the Iranian government and the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States) group lack the necessary strength to resolve the dispute without compromising basic principles. Iran has been unable to build its international legitimacy, while the United States lacks the credibility essential to build an international consensus. As long as the United States, the EU, and the IAEA demand concessions that Iran’s political class is unwilling to make, it is highly unlikely that any government in Tehran will agree to the terms demanded of them. The Iranian government needs to define a more flexible red line so that it can negotiate an end to this dispute. Nuclear technology will do little for the average Iranian. It cannot create jobs in a country that needs one million new jobs annually; it cannot change the chronic low efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness of the economy and management; and it

cannot improve Iran's commercial ties with the rest of the world. Certainly no country likes to be publicly humiliated, which is why discussions of conflict resolution so often involve face-saving. The difficult line to navigate here is how to address Iran's dignity without undermining the legitimate security interests of all parties involved.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is not hard to find examples of the peculiar divergence between how the world looks from Tehran and how it looks in the West. From Tehran's perspective, the latest reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) show Iran's innocence and prove the evil intentions of the United States and its allies. From Washington's perspective, the focus is always on how each report justifies a push for further punitive sanctions on Iran. But in many ways, the sparring capitals look more like mirror images than polar opposites. On different scales, both Iranians and Americans tend to take an imperial view. *Financial Times*, February 19, 2007, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, revised by Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: McGraw Hill, 1993), 85, 93. Morgenthau also referred to recognition as a major state goal: "In both spheres (international and domestic politics) the desire for social recognition is a potent dynamic force determining social relations and creating social institutions. The individual seeks confirmation, on the part of his fellows, of the evaluation he puts upon himself."

<sup>3</sup> Quincy Wright, *The Study of International Relations* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1955), 139.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Miller, "Hypotheses on Reputation: Alliance Choices and the Shadow of the Past," *Security Studies* 12, no. 3 (Spring 2003), 40–78.

<sup>5</sup> Yet part of the priority given to these values over physical coercion reflects the simple fact that Canadians no longer have any military muscle. Though it once had a relatively large military, the Canadian military now has approximately 60,000 regular troops and 20,000 reservists. That said, Canada's decision to demobilize to this degree certainly reflects priorities that arise from the Canadian identity.

<sup>6</sup> Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996–1997), 74.

<sup>7</sup> When it comes to India's nuclear status, "national prestige, including the aspiration for big power status," is mentioned as a factor behind India's decision to go nuclear. According to Sharif M. Shuja, "The New Delhi Administration believes that nuclear weapons remain a key indicator of state power, and holds that acquisition of nuclear power by India will act as a symbol of prestige and as a tool of leverage at the international level. Since this currency is operational in large parts of the globe, undoubtedly the issue of national prestige contributed to India's nuclear decision." Sharif M. Shuja, "India's Nuclear Decision," *Contemporary Review* (December 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Ali A. Mazrui, "Numerical Strength and Nuclear Status in the Politics of the Third World," *The Journal of Politics* 29, no. 4 (November 1967), 791–820.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Longman, 2003), 164.

<sup>10</sup> Shahram Chubin, "Iran's Strategic Predicament," *The Middle East Journal* 54, no. 1 (Winter 2000), 10–24.

<sup>11</sup> On Iran's economic problems see W. Morgan Shuster, *The Strangling of Persia* (New York: Century, 1912). Shuster, an American financial consultant, was invited to Iran by the Shah in 1911 only to be thrown out by the British. For economic problems in post-World War I Iran, see the evidence of another American who lived in Iran, Arthur Millspaugh, *The Financial and Economic Situation of Persia, 1926* (New York: The Persia Society, 1926).

<sup>12</sup> Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), September 20, 2004. In Shia history, Imam Hossein refused to pledge allegiance to Yazid, the new Umayyad caliph. According to Shia tradition, Hossein, who was the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, rebelled against Yazid in order to found a regime that would reinstate a true Islamic polity as opposed to what he considered the unjust rule of the Umayyads.

<sup>13</sup> Sadegh Zibakalam, "Iranian Nationalism and the Nuclear Issue," Media Monitors Network, January 10, 2006, available at <[http://usa.mediamonitors.net/headlines/iranian\\_nationalism\\_and\\_the\\_nuclear\\_issue](http://usa.mediamonitors.net/headlines/iranian_nationalism_and_the_nuclear_issue)>. Despite their intense dislike of each other, Khatami's statement is similar to one made by Ayatollah Ali Jannati, an ultraconservative who chairs the powerful Council of Guardians: "The Security Council can do what it likes. We must *stand against it since nuclear energy is the dignity of Islam*" (emphasis added). *Iran Focus*, March 17, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> For analysis of the reasons for the Iranian revolution and its aftermath, see Farhad Khosrokhavar, "The Islamic Revolution in Iran: Retrospect after a Quarter of a Century," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 76 (February 2004), 70–84.

<sup>15</sup> According to former foreign minister Ardeshir Zahedi, the Shah's strategy was to create a surge capacity, meaning "the know-how, the infrastructure and the personnel needed to develop a nuclear military capacity within a short time without actually doing so. . . . The assumption within the policymaking elite was that Iran should be in a position to develop and test a nuclear device within 18 months." Quoted in Colin Dueck and Ray Takeyh, "Iran's Nuclear Challenge," *Political Science Quarterly* 122, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>16</sup> This analogy has been made by many Iranian officials, including former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, quoted in *Iran*, October 1, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> As a result of the 1828 treaty, Iran lost sovereignty over Yerevan (current capital of Armenia), Nakhichevan, Talysh, Ordubad, Mughan (now part of the Azerbaijan Republic), and all lands north of the Aras River. In addition, Iranian ships lost full rights to navigate the Caspian Sea and its coasts and had to grant Russians extraterritorial privileges, concessions known as the "hated capitulations." Finally, Iran paid the equivalent of 4 million British pounds and gave Russia the authority to establish offices anywhere in the country. In 1828, a mob in Tehran attacked the Russian embassy and murdered the ambassador and his staff. Russia then forced Tehran to make the most humiliating apologies to Russia.

<sup>18</sup> Iranian Students' News Agency, November 20, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> The analogy is frequently made by President Ahmadinejad.

<sup>20</sup> For statements by the former first deputy of the Iranian parliament, Mohammed Reza Bahonar and Ahmadinejad, see *Mehr* news agency, September 20, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent book on how education was viewed by modern Iranian leaders as a source of prestige and international recognition, see David Menashri, *Education in Modern Iran* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, speech to academics, October 6, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, *Der Spiegel*, May 30, 2006, available at <[www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,418660,00.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,418660,00.html)>.

<sup>24</sup> *Arabic News*, August 16, 2006, available at <[www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/060816/2006081602.html](http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/060816/2006081602.html)>.

<sup>25</sup> “Iran: New Survey Finds Polarizing, Hardening of Iranian Attitudes over Nuclear Program,” InterMedia Survey Institute, May 23, 2006, available at <[www.intermedia.org/news\\_press.php](http://www.intermedia.org/news_press.php)>.

<sup>26</sup> Karim Sadjadpour, “How Relevant Is the Iranian Street?” *The Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 1, 151.

<sup>27</sup> Ali Ansari, *Confronting Iran* (New York: Basic Books), 209.

<sup>28</sup> Diplomats from many Non-Aligned Movement member countries, Muslim and non-Muslim, express annoyance that the United States and the European Union often claim to be speaking for the international community in their approach to Iran’s nuclear program. Venezuela was the lone vote in the Governor’s Board of IAEA against referring Iran to the Security Council. Twelve countries abstained, including Russia, South Africa, and China. India, Peru, Ecuador, Ghana, and Singapore all voted with the majority. The vote was 22–1–12.

<sup>29</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement, July 27–30, 2008; see <[www.mfa.gov.ir/cms/cms/nam/en/index.html](http://www.mfa.gov.ir/cms/cms/nam/en/index.html)>.

<sup>30</sup> R.K. Ramazani, “Iran’s Hostage Crisis: International Legitimacy Matters,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 25, no. 22 (2005), 273–278.

<sup>31</sup> William Beeman, “Iran and the United States: Postmodern Culture Conflict in Action,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (2003), 671–691.

<sup>32</sup> *The Washington Post*, September 16, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> In July 2008, China, France, Germany, Great Britain, Russia, and the United States reworked the 2006 proposal and offered Iran another chance, this time with a proposal called “freeze-for-freeze.” Iran would suspend its uranium enrichment program, in return for which no more sanctions would be sought while negotiations continued. While these proposals were being discussed, Britain imposed major restrictions on Iran’s biggest bank, Bank-e Melli.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with author, October 21, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> IRNA, October 12, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Fars News, September 13, 2009.



## Iran's Tenth Presidential Election: Implications for Iran and the Region

Anoushiravan Ehteshami

*The sole winners of the presidential election of 2009 were the Iranian people, whoever they voted for—some 40 million of them, out of an eligible voting population of 48 million, upward of 80 per cent. This election showed the democratic will of Iranians has matured beyond any point of return, no matter how violently the unelected officials of the Islamic Republic wish to reverse it. It is too late. As made evident during the presidential election of 2009, Iranians are perfectly capable of organising themselves around competing views, campaigning for their preferred candidates, peacefully going to polling stations and casting their vote.<sup>1</sup>*

Elections in the Middle East have come to play a significant part in the shaping of the region's landscape. Indeed, electoral politics and the mediation of public space have become so significant in recent years that electoral politics can be considered one of the region's key strategic challenges today. In the first half of 2009 alone, electoral politics in Israel, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Iran made a major impact on the strategic landscape of the Greater Middle East, affecting both interstate and intrastate relations. Elections in Iraqi Kurdistan just weeks after Iran's presidential poll show that electoral politics is taking hold at the subnational level as well. Given the prominent role that Kurds play in post-Saddam Iraq, what happens there is significant for the Iraqi polity as well as for Iraq's Arab and non-Arab neighbors, particularly those with their own Kurdish minorities.

It was in this context that Iran's tenth presidential election took place in June 2009. Iran's election would be hugely important not only for Iranians but also for the region and the West. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had raised the stakes high, and this contest would inevitably be as much a referendum on his first term as it would be about the path that the Islamic Republic was going to chart for itself. A series of serious domestic and international challenges added even more interest in the outcome of the poll. However, none of us watching Iranians go to the polls on June 12 expected the unfolding of a major political drama in Iran. Few observers, if any, were prepared for the political crisis that followed the announcement of the results the same day as the election, and fewer still could have anticipated the crisis of legitimacy that has since gripped the country.

Before voting began, conventional wisdom outside Iran was that a Mir Hossein Mousavi victory would enable the moderate Arab states and the United States to build on the success of the pro-American and pro-Saudi faction in Lebanon's parliamentary elections a week earlier to check Iran's rampant rise in the Levant and open a dialogue over regional security issues with the country's leadership.<sup>2</sup> This kind of analysis was to be expected given that three of the four presidential candidates in Iran left the door open for engagement with the West and the moderate Arab states. Mousavi went even further, promising a new *détente* with the West if elected.

Other voices in Washington on the far right of the political spectrum argued, however, that "whatever the outcome of Iran's presidential election today, negotiations will not soon, if ever, put an end to its nuclear threat." Their solution was an Israeli military strike.<sup>3</sup> John Bolton, Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) for a short time under the George W. Bush administration, speculated that a military strike "accompanied by effective public diplomacy could well turn Iran's diverse population against an oppressive regime." These words were written well before the Islamic Republic plunged into darkness after the election. Many would have regarded Bolton's views as tantamount to warmongering and detached from reality. Robin Wright argued that "one day before the June 12 presidential election, the Islamic republic had never been so powerful. Tehran had not only survived three decades of diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions but had emerged a regional superpower, rivalled only by Israel. Its influence shaped conflicts and politics from Afghanistan to Lebanon."<sup>4</sup> However, Bolton's observations should be viewed in light of events after election day, when they had far more relevance to the rapidly changing situation on the ground in Iran.

Two sets of challenges formed the backdrop to the June vote. One was homegrown and largely domestic in character, while the other was external and therefore regional and international in nature. But the external challenges, as suggested by Bolton's analysis, also posed significant domestic difficulties for the regime. The establishment in Tehran was attuned to the reality that it had to keep the country's nuclear options intact as it charted a response to the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States, and Germany) package of incentives in exchange for Iran's suspension of its uranium enrichment. Since July 2008, the international community had been waiting for Tehran's response, and the elections were seen by the diplomatic community and analysts alike as the catalyst for some movement, if not solid progress, on this front.

### **Domestic Challenges**

Ahmadinejad's first presidential term had started with a nuclear crisis. In his last executive act in July 2005, outgoing president Mohammad Khatami ended Iran's self-imposed morato-

rium on uranium enrichment activities. Ahmadinejad rejected any compromise with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), creating an impasse with the agency, which in September 2005 issued a resolution of noncompliance on Iran. The new administration declared the resolution “illegal and illogical.”<sup>5</sup> From Ahmadinejad’s perspective, his strategy in rejecting the IAEA resolution was successful, but the domestic and international political price has proved to be high. Ahmadinejad’s administration had to balance the nuclear program against its blatantly populist socioeconomic measures. By 2009, several domestic challenges—including fiscal mismanagement, the absence of financial transparency, unemployment and underemployment, inflation, and bazaar and worker protests—formed the backdrop to the elections. The domestic challenges were due partly to the political, cultural, and economic disenfranchisement of a substantial portion of the population. There was also a political cost—Ahmadinejad fired Ali Larijani, a nuclear hard-liner who as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council was Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator, pushing him into a different camp. Politically, this damaged the president, particularly as Larijani was close to the Supreme Leader and would return to Tehran as speaker of the Majles, an institutional rival of the presidency and Ahmadinejad.

The regime also began to deliberalize public space, leading to repression of all manner of fora for debate about Iran’s strategic choices. Deliberalization not only closed down much public space, it also gave rise to the securitization and gradual militarization of politics, the consequences of which were to be felt throughout Ahmadinejad’s first term as well as in the 2009 presidential elections.

Relations with the West and the wider international community (as represented in the UN Security Council after 2005) worsened because of the nuclear debacle and the imposition of new sanctions on Iran. Indeed, the fallout from Iran’s intransigence during its protracted negotiations with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (the European Union–3) and then the P5+1 not only led Tehran’s potential allies to abandon it (in the end leading to significant sanctions being imposed on the country through three Security Council resolutions), but also initiated the nuclearization of the whole region. Lack of clarity in Iran’s negotiating position, probably due to a policy of deliberate obtuseness, and the diversity of its nuclear objectives fueled the worst suspicions of neighboring countries and has driven them to counter Iran by pursuing their own nuclear programs.

Iran’s structural economic problems intensified under Ahmadinejad. When the price of oil was over \$140 a barrel, peaking in July 2008, the Iranian president carried with him an air of total control and indestructibility. The 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate had concluded that Iran was no longer pursuing a nuclear weapons program, which was interpreted as a vic-

tory by Ahmadinejad, and the high price of oil allowed him to enjoy popular support for his spending initiatives. In the words of the *Economist* magazine, “America’s belligerence [during the Bush years] allowed Iran’s president to pose as a heroic underdog while record oil prices enabled him to pay for a binge in public spending.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, despite many warnings about rising prices and inflationary pressures fueled by a reckless fiscal and monetary policy (leading to high-profile resignations of both the economic minister and the governor of the Central Bank), the president pressed ahead with his ill-conceived and poorly executed economic policies. The direst warnings came from the Majles, which must approve the annual budgetary allocations and planned investments. Iranian parliamentarians expressed what were described as “grave concerns” over the proposed 2008 budget, describing the projected spending plans as unrealistic.<sup>7</sup> Also noteworthy was the fact that for the first time in the republic’s history, the budget was being drafted by the presidential office itself instead of the much more inclusive and technocratic-led economic planning body, which Ahmadinejad had disbanded.<sup>8</sup> It was estimated that in the year beginning March 21, 2008, the government would spend around \$31 billion in hard currency (largely earned from crude oil exports). But even before this request was lodged, the government had already spent just over \$120 billion of hard currency in the 2 years since it had taken power.

Iran’s government went on a spree, spending its oil price windfall faster than it was coming in. High oil prices helped shield the depth of the brewing crisis, but as oil prices began to soften in August 2008 the cracks in Iran’s economic facade appeared with great rapidity. For a man who in summer 2008 confidently claimed that oil prices would never fall below \$100 a barrel, the average year-end price of \$75 per barrel should have come as a worrying reality check. The crisis gripping the country was profound, even though Iran had not been a direct victim of the credit crunch and financial crisis hitting many more open economies. By 2008, Iran had already spent the bulk of the \$200 billion in oil exports earned since 2005, and the strategic oil fund had been raided so intensively that there probably was less than \$7 billion left. Ahmadinejad’s position had become so vulnerable that even the former top nuclear negotiator under Khatami, Dr. Hassan Rowhani, blasted him for his economic policies, alleging that the government had withdrawn \$46 billion from the strategic fund established by Khatami in 2005, dramatically reducing Iran’s capacity to withstand economic shocks such as falling oil prices. As one analyst put it, “In fact, Ahmadinejad has run Iran’s economy into the ground.” He noted that on October 11, just a day after Ahmadinejad declared that inflation was easing, the Central Bank reported that annual inflation had reached 30 percent. At the same time, labor and social affairs minister Mohammad Jahromi estimated the ranks of the jobless at 3 million, 2.4 million of whom were

young people; unemployment among young people (defined as below the age of 35) was 21.8 percent, or twice the national average; and approximately 14 million Iranians were living below the poverty line (at a per capita monthly income of 969,750 rials, equivalent to about \$100).<sup>9</sup>

The problems did not end here, for according to the International Monetary Fund, Iran is likely to face an unsustainable budget deficit if the price of oil remains under \$75 per barrel. Officially, the government has assumed oil prices of \$55 a barrel as its minimum expenditure baseline, but its spending has been so extensive that the foreign currency reserve fund is empty. My analysis suggests that in 2007–2008 alone, as much as \$17 billion was withdrawn from the fund. With its annual budgetary commitments based on the minimum \$80 per barrel price of oil (and with oil income accounting for 80 percent of the government's overall revenue), Iran would face some stark choices as the price of oil fluctuated between \$50 and \$80 after September 2008. This was not good news for the incumbent as he prepared for the presidential race.

Senior figures, including former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, began openly to criticize Ahmadinejad's economic and diplomatic strategies. The criticisms piled up against the background of unprecedented personnel changes at the highest level of his administration. In May 2008, he sacked interior minister Mostafa Purmohammadi without warning or explanation. Purmohammadi was the ninth cabinet minister dismissed since 2005. Also dismissed was economy and finance minister Davud Danesh-Jafari, who had protested in public about what he called unrealistic government policies. On May 15, Central Bank governor Tahmasb Mazaheri criticized Ahmadinejad, saying that the president's decision to set bank interest rates at between 10 percent and 12 percent—well below inflation—was unworkable. Mazaheri, who had been Ahmadinejad's third Central Bank governor, was soon removed.

Iran's main reformist groups were now openly criticizing the government and accusing President Ahmadinejad of squandering Iran's windfall oil earnings and driving up inflation. The Islamic Iran Participation Front, for example, said that the government had not saved enough when oil prices were high to maintain spending for when prices dropped. Mohsen Mirdamadi, the party's secretary-general, bitterly complained that President Ahmadinejad's "main campaign slogan [in 2005] was to share oil wealth fairly." But, Mirdamadi warned, Ahmadinejad's economic policies had caused major problems for Iranians, particularly for lower income people. "Since the revolution, Iran's total oil income has been \$700 billion. Over 36 percent of it was earned during the tenure of office by Ahmadinejad, but inflation and unemployment rates are the highest now."<sup>10</sup> So, despite the historically high oil prices for much of his presidency, the economy was in much worse shape at the end of his first term than at any time since the early 1990s. Ahmadinejad was running for the office of the president with

perhaps the worst economic record in the history of the republic, though he and his allies were adamant that things had never been so good for Iranians.

## **International Challenges**

On the international front, too, the country faced a number of uncertainties as it prepared for the tenth race for the presidency. Three questions stood out: President Obama's new diplomacy toward Iran, the effects of regional power politics, and the political impact of Iran's nuclear program.

### **The Obama Effect**

The first was the election of President Barack Obama, whom Iranian conservatives were convinced would never be elected to the White House. Tehran had scored many strategic points, built coalitions, and gained sympathy across the Muslim world by feeding on President Bush's failures. President Obama posed a very different challenge to Iran, for he now reached out to Iran, recognizing the regime's legitimacy and extending it the hand of friendship. Between his election victory in November 2008 and his Middle East tour of June 2009, Obama on three occasions publicly invited Iran to clasp his extended open hand. The Bush administration's policy of regime change had given way to engagement and dialogue. Demonization of the United States with Obama at the helm was going to be a much harder affair, ultimately affecting Tehran's public diplomacy in the region.

What was different about Obama? President Obama's drive for improved relations with the Muslim world, as set out in his June 4, 2009, speech in Cairo, had a dramatic impact on the politics of the Middle East. From the peace process to Iran's position in the region, all of the core issues have come under the spotlight. Obama has posed a challenge to Tehran on a number of fronts: by reaching out to and building bridges with Iran's only real regional ally (Syria), by appearing more even-handed as he presses for the resumption of the Arab-Israeli peace process, by mending America's strategic partnerships in the Arab world, by engaging Russia and the European Union more closely on Iran, by incrementally increasing the pressure on Iran to account for its nuclear program, and by reaching out to the Muslim world.

President Obama's Cairo speech was, not surprisingly, condemned in Iran before he had opened his mouth. Ayatollah Khamenei used the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the death of his predecessor to suggest that the United States remained so deeply hated that words could not change America's standing. He noted that:

*in the past few years, American governments, especially the government of the foolish former president [George W. Bush] . . . have occupied two Islamic countries, Iraq and Afghanistan, under the pretext of the fight against terrorism. You witness that in Afghanistan, American warplanes bomb people and kill some 150 not once, but 10 and 100 times. They kill people continually. So, terrorist groups, do what you are doing there. . . . If the new president of America wants a change of face, America should change this behavior. Words and talk will not result in change.<sup>11</sup>*

Khamenei's statement demonstrated the unwavering mindset that dominates Tehran. Alternative perspectives on Iran's international diplomacy and public engagement in the course of the June 2009 presidential election campaign were therefore unlikely to be well received by the Supreme Leader and Iranian neoconservatives. Yet in live televised debates, the candidates debated alternatives and Ahmadinejad had to endure sustained criticism for his public diplomacy and foreign policy adventures. Ahmadinejad's throwaway comment that the election was not between four candidates but three against one was not without substance, for the other candidates had much to criticize on both domestic and external fronts.

### **Power Politics**

Second, in terms of regional power politics, Ahmadinejad's success in positioning Iran at the heart of regional extremists' resistance fronts exposed the country to mounting pressures from the moderate Arab camp (from Morocco and Tunisia to Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia) on the one hand and Israel on the other. For both camps, Iran's role in Lebanon and Palestine and extensive links with Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hizballah were unsettling. The Arab states are also worried by Tehran's apparently overwhelming influence in Iraq, which they believe poses a new and unprecedented geopolitical and geocultural challenge. Iraq, they fear, has been turned from the eastern gateway to the Arab region to the motorway for the extension of Iranian influence and power to the Levant. By 2008, the Arab states had begun to regroup, and Obama's electoral success provided them with more solid assurances that the United States would no longer substitute adventurism for foreign policy and that the new White House would reach out to them to find collective solutions to the region's many problems. They were now able to rely on the United States without the mention of their superpower ally causing them embarrassment or anxiety.

## Nuclear Politics

The Arab states and Israel, as much as the West, share a third fear: the apparently unstoppable, intensive, and comprehensive nuclear program that Ahmadinejad so vociferously and proudly champions. For Israel, Iran's program is an imminent and existential security threat; for the Arab states, it is a sign of Iran's drive for regional domination, if not hegemony. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-based analysts conclude that "the basic fact is that the Iranian nuclear program poses a serious and equal threat to all the GCC states."<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, in the Persian Gulf context, Iran's apparent rapid progress in uranium enrichment, heavy water research and development, and related technologies since 2007 has set the alarm bells ringing even more loudly. From the GCC states' perspective, the situation is deteriorating rapidly.<sup>13</sup> These fears have compelled senior GCC figures, such as the United Arab Emirates's foreign minister, Shaykh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, to raise the subject of Iran with the United States.<sup>14</sup> This is to be expected given the fear that revolutionary Iran has engendered in its Arab neighbors, but Ahmadinejad's bellicose tones have magnified fear of Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Furthermore, pressure on Iran has been building since the July 2008 Geneva meeting between Iran and the P5+1 group and the latter's submitted package of incentives. The negotiating ball has been in Tehran's court in terms of a formal response since then. Given the direct security aspects of the nuclear program (and the fact that the regime has successfully turned the program into a national symbol of state power and technological prowess), it was not surprising that this matter was not featured as an election issue. But at the back of everyone's mind was the need for a response to the package of incentives offered by the P5+1, and also the fact that the nuclear negotiations would feed directly into the diplomatic exchanges being mooted between Tehran and Washington. Internally and internationally, the nuclear program would be a major issue, despite not receiving much air in the election campaign.

The candidates, however, were conscious of the fact that Ahmadinejad's first term in office ended with the IAEA having no clearer a picture of Iran's ultimate motivations and nuclear ambitions than it had previously. Indeed, the last comment from the outgoing head of the IAEA—that his gut feeling was that Iran was looking to acquire a nuclear weapons capability—reinforces the sense that despite the nuclear issue not appearing on the election radar, it was a matter of concern to the political elites competing for the presidency.<sup>15</sup> These internal socioeconomic and political problems and a complex set of potentially difficult international problems formed the backdrop to the tenth presidential poll.



## The 2009 Presidential Election

Many Iranians as well as European and American-based analysts still doubted that the election would result in any major changes. Indeed, a prominent Paris-based lawyer, Mohammad Seifzadeh, declared that the screening process by the Guardians Council prevented the election from being free and fair and, as such, the “election is a race between government candidates, not people.”<sup>16</sup> Events since then have proven him wrong.

More immediately, the four candidates who emerged from the Guardian Council’s scrutiny of 471 candidates were fully aware of this wider—and for some, rather troubling—context. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; former Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander and deputy to Rafsanjani Mohsen Rezaei; former Majles Speaker Mehdi Karroubi; and the republic’s last prime minister, Mir Hossein Mousavi, each cut their electoral cloth according to their vantage point. Ahmadinejad expressed pride in how his economic policies had helped the poor and had turned the direction of resources toward them. He even unveiled an economic transformation plan that he claimed would reform the country’s tax and subsidies system, give more freedom to the private sector, and reduce Iran’s reliance on oil revenues.<sup>17</sup> For the incumbent, there was nothing wrong with Iran’s international strategy and posture. Iran’s standing tall had won the republic international respect and disabled its enemies’ efforts to curtail its nuclear program. Ahmadinejad would observe in April:

*Four and a half years ago, those who went to negotiate said to their interlocutors, after they agreed to freeze all [uranium enrichment], “We want [nuclear energy for the purposes of] science and technology. Give us permission to operate 20 centrifuges.” But the other side answered insolently. . . . But today, with the grace of God, and thanks to Iran’s national unity . . . nearly 7,000 centrifuges are spinning today at Natanz, mocking them.*<sup>18</sup>

He had made maximum use of his overseas trips and had struck a number of new partnerships for the country’s benefit. If anything, he appeared to have raised the country’s reputation and ended the treacherous compromises of his predecessors. Regionally, Iran’s demonstrated strength had empowered Hamas, Hizballah, and the Shia forces in Iraq. An Iranian analyst pointed out:

*Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy has been consistently radical at both the regional and global levels; but, if you listen to him, this radicalism has restored Iran’s stature in*

*the eyes of the world. . . Under Ahmadinejad's tenure, Iran successfully launched an independent uranium enrichment process, resisted economic sanctions imposed by the U.N. Security Council, and finally forced the United States to propose direct talks on Iran's nuclear enrichment program. He recently stressed that Iran will not negotiate with the United States on suspending enrichment, but that it would be willing to discuss fighting terrorism and resolving regional crises together.*<sup>19</sup>

The other three candidates did not quite see things Ahmadinejad's way. All three criticized his economic policies and his international diplomacy. Karroubi, for example, challenged Ahmadinejad's regional approach: "First of all, the Holocaust existed. . . Secondly, the Palestinians themselves say, 'What [is the use] of bringing such things up?' Thirdly, it [the Holocaust issue] is not related to us."<sup>20</sup> Mousavi promised a return to détente and argued that Iran would need to gain the trust of the international community over its nuclear program. But he stopped short of saying Iran should halt its controversial uranium enrichment activities. Karroubi was apparently content to leave Iran's nuclear policy in the hands of the Supreme Leader. Rezaei emerged as the only candidate to fathom the idea of establishing a multinational uranium enrichment facility in Iran that would have included U.S. participation.

Ahmadinejad's opponents were also highly critical of his economic policies. Candidate Rezaei warned that under Ahmadinejad, Iran was headed toward an economic "abyss," and Mousavi pointedly asked where the oil money that Ahmadinejad had promised in 2005 to bring to people's tables had gone. He also attacked Ahmadinejad's wider economic record—over gross domestic product growth, inflation figures, household income, employment opportunities, and the government deficit.

The candidates and their supporters raised hopes for change among many Iranian voters. The candidates repeated the theme, "Not voting is not a protest, it is retreating." Campaign text messages warned, "If you plan not to vote, just think about the day after, when you find out Ahmadinejad has been re-elected."<sup>21</sup> Experienced commentators such as Mashaallah Shamsolvaezin said that:

*it seems that the younger generation, women, students, and all of those who had boycotted the election [in 2005] have been inspired by the election in the United States which brought Barack Obama to power, and also by the elections that took place in Iran's neighbourhood—in Pakistan, Turkey, and Iraq. . . . They are not willing not to vote, to throw their vote away by abstaining from voting.*<sup>22</sup>

Was it any wonder then that the voting population, along with Mousavi and Karroubi, so strongly resisted the official results of the election?

All three opposition candidates deployed new information and communications technologies and took advantage of the unblocking of the Facebook social media Web site in February 2009 to engage with Iran's youth. SMS, Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter sites emerged as tools for bypassing the state media's overwhelming support for the incumbent. One Web site, *setadema.com*, had even gone as far as asking any Iranian with a telephone to call five friends and convince them to vote against Ahmadinejad. The same tools came to play an instrumental role in the postelection protests, facilitating the protesters' strategy of getting their message and their image to the outside world in an unprecedented manner. Thus, the gap between tradition and modernity was not only evident in the election campaign but also became a significant focus of the postelection crisis, in which the electorate (the society at large) openly challenged the traditional values of the Islamic Republic and posited before the government and the Supreme Leader a modern and inclusive alternative for Iran.

### **Postelection Crisis: Velvet Revolution Nipped in the Bud?**

Events since June 12, however, tell us much more about Iran's domestic and security options than we had ever imagined. The conservatives' campaign to nip a reformist-led velvet revolution in the bud and keep control of the streets indicates the strength of their forces in combating what is more coup than revolution.

### **Security and the Crisis of Legitimacy**

The conduct of the election has been found to be flawed. One observer who studied the official statistics stated that "the data give very strong support for a diagnosis that the 2009 election was affected by significant fraud [and] ballot-box stuffing."<sup>23</sup> Another analyst described the election as "nothing but a coup in its worst form. I never imagined I would see the day when Ayatollah Khamenei would become a tool in the hands of the Revolutionary Guard."<sup>24</sup> Hossein Aryan, a military and security analyst, noted, "The regime is aware that it has lost its credibility in the eyes of many Iranians, and now its survival is the only important issue. No one is worried now about a possible attack by the United States or Israel or any other issue: The IRGC and the supreme leader are now completely focused on what they call 'soft subversion.'"<sup>25</sup>

Security has always been a critical factor in Iranian domestic politics, but the June 2009 crisis has revealed much about its expanding role in the last decade. During President Khatami's 8 years in office, security concerns were used to check his policies and initiatives on at least

three occasions.<sup>26</sup> Several of his ministers were forced out and he had to sit by while pro-reform newspapers were closed down on the orders of the Supreme Leader. Who can forget the threats issued against his administration by the IRGC after student demonstrations were brutally suppressed in 1999 by the basij, a regime security militia under IRGC control? Senior commanders in the IRGC issued a series of ultimatums denouncing the Khatami government and its allies, warning that the corps would not stand by and watch the country's Islamic and revolutionary values be trampled. In Ahmadinejad's first term, security was critical in shaping the republic's internal debates, with particular focus on regime security and threats to Iranian territory from the United States or its allies. Ahmadinejad, in partnership with the security apparatus and in full view of the Supreme Leader, has taken security concerns to new and dangerous heights.

Iran's postelection crisis is less about the disputed poll itself than it is about the nature and exercise of power. It is about the balance of power in Iran, regime legitimacy, political and revolutionary identity, state ideology, the republic's political culture, foreign relations, and Iran's place in the Muslim world. The very edifice of the Islamic Republic is under scrutiny. Robin Wright noted that the day after the election, the Islamic republic had never appeared so vulnerable:

*The virtual militarization of the state has failed to contain the uprising, and its tactics have further alienated and polarized society. It has also shifted the focus from the election to Iran's leadership. The uprising has transformed Iran's political landscape. Over the past month, dozens of disparate political factions have coalesced into two rival camps: the New Right and the New Left. . . . What was a political divide has become a schism. Many Iranian leaders served time together in the shah's jails; today, their visions of the Islamic republic differ so sharply that reconciliation would be almost impossible. . . . With each flash point, the regime's image is further tainted, its legitimacy undermined.<sup>27</sup>*

### **The Clerical Elite and the Legitimacy Crisis**

Deep cleavages over the issue of legitimacy quickly surfaced among prominent clerics. Just after the violence broke out in June, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri stated that confronting protesters threatened the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic because it no longer represented the people.<sup>28</sup> Other clerics agreed. Ayatollah Jalaledin Taheri, the former Friday prayer leader in Isfahan, described the reelection of Ahmadinejad as "illegitimate" and "tyrannical." According to one observer, clerics in Qom "believe that the way the election was con-

ducted was not correct and healthy.”<sup>29</sup> They called for an independent investigation because of allegations of massive vote manipulation and the state’s violent and uncompromising reaction to the protests. Prominent respected figures, such as Ali Reza Beheshti, son of Ayatollah Khomeini’s closest ally until his assassination in 1981, sided with Mousavi. Other senior clerics, such as Ayatollahs Abdolkarim Ardebili and Yousef Sanei (sitting and former members of the Guardians Council, respectively) spoke against the government and in support of the protests. Reports from Qom said that:

*with the exception of a few clerics who have ties with the government, the majority of clerics have not issued any statements in support and confirmation of the election results. Ayatollah Safi, Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, Ayatollah Zanjani, and Ayatollah Montazeri and other figures have not only not confirmed the election results, but have made explicit or implicit . . . protests. The degrees of their stances and condemnation have been different but what I want to say is that there are no real divisions.*<sup>30</sup>

Mehdi Karroubi, a cleric, said bluntly, “I don’t consider this government legitimate.”<sup>31</sup> Mirhossein Mousavi, a former prime minister, said, “The majority of the society to which I belong will not recognise the legitimacy of the [future] government. . . . We will have a government that will have the worst relationship with the people.” Mousavi repeated his call for a complete new vote after the Guardians Council on June 30 declared the results final following a recount of 10 percent of ballot boxes. He said, “Our historic duty is to continue the protests to defend the rights of the people . . . and prevent the blood spilled by hundreds of thousands of martyrs from leading to a police state.” Mousavi warned, “I will not compromise on people’s rights and votes, which have been stolen. . . . If we do not resist today we will have no guarantee that such bitter events will not happen again in the future.” He pledged to create “a legal political body to defend citizen’s rights and votes that were crushed on June 12, publish documents about the frauds and irregularities and to start legal action.” Mousavi called for a guarantee of freedom of assembly, a free press, the lifting of bans on independent newspapers and Web sites, and for the possibility of “an independent television network.”<sup>32</sup>

Factionalism is nothing new in Iran. The ruling establishment has been factionalized for the entire lifespan of the Islamic Republic. Academic observers have stressed that this faction-based politics allowed pluralism and competition in Iranian elections, which had been held regularly for 30 years and made the country unique in a neighborhood of authoritarian regimes

and dictatorships. The regime boasts that it is legitimate because its people buy into the system through active participation in elections. Factionalism only became a political problem with the emergence of a strong reform camp and the 1997 election of Mohammad Khatami as president. Electoral politics came to be seen as the means through which change could be brought about and through which factions could gain control of the levers of power. Using elections for the express purpose of change was a new and dangerous departure from orthodoxy, and after 1997, the Supreme Leader himself openly rejected many reformist policy initiatives because of their noncompatibility with “the norm.” His actions and the policy fires that the reformists lit during their control of the presidency and the Majles led to the deepening of factional cleavages and encouraged the neoconservative backlash.

In this context, Ayatollah Rafsanjani’s Friday Prayer sermon on July 17, 2009, his first since the election, was significant. His message was clear: measures adopted by Ahmadinejad were detrimental to the Islamic Republic; his excesses were creating and perpetuating an unnecessary and dangerous crisis; the leadership’s decisions were flawed and some of the government’s actions were excessive and beyond the law. Indeed, things were so bad, he told the crowd of worshippers, that he had discussed the crisis with the Expediency Council, which he chairs, in order to chart a way forward. Instead of heeding the Supreme Leader’s message to beware of the full force of the security forces, Rafsanjani spoke of the need to mend fences and free the prisoners. He continued:

*This period, after the results of the elections, is a bitter era. I do not believe anyone from any faction wanted this to happen. We have all lost in this event. . . . We need unity today, more than ever. . . . In my view, we should all think and find a way that will unite us, to take our country forward. . . . What should we do? I have a few suggestions. . . . our important issue is that the trust that brought so many people to the polls, and is now harmed, will be restored. This should be our holy objective. . . . Under current circumstances, there is no need for us to have people in prisons. Allow them to return to their families. . . . Sympathy should be shown to the victims of the recent incidents which took place. We should offer condolences to those who are mourning and bring their hearts closer to the establishment. And this is possible.<sup>33</sup>*

Not only was Rafsanjani openly challenging the authenticity of the election results and the role of the Guardian Council, but also most significantly, he was questioning Khamenei’s actions and directly rejecting the Leader’s demand of an end to inquiries into the election results.

Furthermore, by referring to the Expediency Council, he reminded the people that he had his own levers and would play a central role in the resolution of the crisis. The response to his challenge was swift. The state media, parliamentarians, and members of such bodies as the Council of Guardians lashed out immediately at Rafsanjani. But the most significant retort came from Ayatollah Khamenei himself, who warned Rafsanjani that the elite should be watchful: “Failing the test will cause their collapse. Anybody who drives the society toward insecurity and disorder is a hated person in the view of the Iranian nation, whoever he is.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Divisions Between State and Society**

The presidential election crisis has ruptured relations between the state and the communities of electorates who have historically provided legitimacy for the regime. The stakes have never been this high for the Islamic Republic. The crisis has been internalized and a new phase in factional politics has begun. As President Khatami stated, “Many people voted because we called for a high turnout. With this result and the way of confrontation you can be sure that even us [reformers] cannot ask people to take part in the next election. . . . This is not in the interest of the establishment.”<sup>35</sup> It is this sense of injustice that has energized the people and at the same time given Mousavi the strength to speak for them and carve the role of political savior and opposition leader for himself.

A real opposition now emerged. Mousavi supporters cried, “Ya Hossein, Mir Hossein!” The slogan refers to Shia Islam’s martyred Imam Hossein and Mousavi in the same breath. The symbolism is clear: Mousavi is elevated to the status of Hossein, a savior who is pure at heart and unafraid of a struggle, even if it is an unequal one. One Iranian said Mousavi’s movement “has swept across all dividing lines in Iranian society—both rich and poor, the merchants and the intellectuals, the young and old—all are now involved [in] a national campaign.”<sup>36</sup> Mousavi had become the willing revolutionary and the reform leader. Hossein Marash, spokesman for the *Kargozaran* newspaper, noted, however, that Mousavi is “not the leader of the opposition to the system. He is the leader of a majority who think their rights are trampled on by Mr. Ahmadi-Nejad and the Guardian Council.”<sup>37</sup>

By early July, Mousavi sounded and acted like an opposition leader. During a public meeting with families of those arrested in the postelection crackdown, he responded to the government’s announcements:

*[W]ho believes that they [protesters] would conspire with foreigners and sell the interests of their own country? Has our country become so mean and degraded*

*that you [Ahmadinejad and the Leader] attribute the huge protest movement of the nation to foreigners? Isn't this an insult to our nation? You are facing something new: an awakened nation, a nation that has been born again and is here to defend its achievements. . . . Arrests . . . won't put an end to this problem. End this game as soon as possible and return to the nation its sons.*<sup>38</sup>

The theocratic basis of the regime has also come under fire. Hojjatoleslam Kadivar asked Grand Ayatollah Montezari, “Can implementing justice be suspended . . . under the pretext of preserving the regime’s interests? What is the believers’ religious duty if some position holders confuse the regime’s interests with their own, and insist on enforcing their mistake?” Montazeri replied:

*Clearly, it is not possible to preserve or strengthen the Islamic regime via oppression—which contravenes [the precepts of] Islam. This is because the need for a regime stems [from the need] to dispense justice and to protect [the people’s] rights—that is, to implement the directives of Islam. So how can injustice, oppression and [other] contraventions of Islam possibly [serve to] strengthen or preserve a just Islamic regime? A regime that uses clubs, oppression, aggression . . . rigged elections, murder, arrests, and medieval or Stalin-era torture, gags and censors the press, obstructs the media, imprisons intellectuals and elected leaders on false allegations or forced confessions . . . is despicable and has no religious merit. . . . The state belongs to the people. It is neither my property nor yours. . . . When the Shah heard the voice of the people’s revolution, it was already too late [for him]. It is to be hoped that the people in charge [today] will not let [themselves] reach the same situation, but will become more amenable to the nation’s demands, and as soon as possible.*<sup>39</sup>

Rafsanjani also addressed the philosophical basis of the regime in his July 16 Friday Prayer sermon. He stated that “the term *Islamic Republic* is not a ceremonial title. It is both a republic and Islamic. [Both] have to be together. If one is damaged, then we will no longer have a revolution and an Islamic Republic.”<sup>40</sup> Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi drew a different picture of the Islamic Republic, describing it as one in which the people had to obey the Supreme Leader as the faith’s champion on Earth: “In Islam, the legitimacy of a government is granted by God and its acceptance by the people.”<sup>41</sup>



These debates, which had plagued the regime 30 years ago, have returned to test the legitimacy and identity of the Islamic Republic and to question the source of authority in Iran. The renewed discussion is akin to throwing incendiary devices into a smoldering fire—they will help to feed the flames and raise more questions about the theocratic dimension of the republic and its relevance to governance.

### **Postelection Crisis and the Region**

As the drama on the streets of Tehran unfolded, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton commented that Tehran now suffered from “a huge credibility gap.” Since the revolution, the Islamic Republic has championed extremist Islamic causes and radical resistance fronts. Moral, political, and financial support enabled it to develop a presence and support Hizballah in Lebanon in the 1980s and in the 1990s to expand links to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, both Sunni extremist factions. The shockwaves of Iran’s postelection crisis are likely to be felt across the Greater Middle East, just as the shockwaves of its 1979 revolution were felt well beyond its borders. The idea that the Iranian Islamic Republic is a model of political jurisprudence worthy of emulation by all Muslims now is uncertain. The challenges come from many sides—from the Shia clerics in the Iraqi shrine city of Najaf who have long opposed Khomeini’s version of clerical participation in governance (*velayat-e faqih*) to Iranian citizens who question their leaders’ credibility and legitimacy. Political Islam will have to find ways of absorbing the blow to the credibility of its widely used slogan, “Islam is the solution.”

Nevertheless, the more immediate challenge for Tehran comes from pro-Wahhabi and pro-al Qaeda radical Sunni groups who will use the crisis in Iran to mount new ideological and political attacks on a weakened Iran. Anti-Iranian and anti-Shia voices will try to discredit Shia Islam as a legitimate community in the Muslim world while containing Iran’s ability to pressure the GCC countries. The damage to Iran’s credibility as a just and accountable Islamic state model may become so great that its voice is weakened in all manner of Muslim settings. On the other hand, Iran’s current crisis could encourage further adventurism abroad and strengthen the hands of those who would like to return to exporting the revolution as their prime directive. Some of the radical forces attached to the security apparatus could choose to demonstrate their power and influence by initiating subversion in the neighborhood. This kind of action can only threaten the fragile security of the region and attract more external intervention. The result would be increased pressure on Iran and deepened isolation.

On the nuclear front, as Iran refuses to reduce or suspend its enrichment activities, it is hard to see how the parties can avert further tensions with the West. A new president might have

introduced a possible mandate for change that could have helped break the logjam. He could have used his new mandate to reopen unconditional dialogue with the IAEA and the P5+1 even if the nuclear issue were not an electoral issue, on the basis that he was elected to improve Iran's relations with the outside world and the socioeconomic situation at home. Room for maneuvering that could have made a real difference to the security environment of the Middle East did exist. Today, however, that opportunity is in doubt. Indeed, the strategic climate may have considerably worsened. John Bolton's comments indicate the seriousness of the current situation:

*there is no point waiting for negotiations to play out. . . . Those who oppose Iran acquiring nuclear weapons are left in the near term with only the option of targeted military force against its weapons facilities. Significantly, the uprising in Iran also makes it more likely that an effective public diplomacy campaign could be waged in the country to explain to Iranians that such an attack is directed against the regime, not against the Iranian people. This was always true, but it has become even more important to make this case emphatically, when the gulf between the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the citizens of Iran has never been clearer or wider. Military action against Iran's nuclear program and the ultimate goal of regime change can be worked together consistently.<sup>42</sup>*

Bolton may no longer hold public office, but his arguments still carry weight in some policy-related communities in Washington.<sup>43</sup> The link today between political developments in Iran and external challenges is real and threatening to the Islamic Republic.

### **Conclusion**

Iran's regional stature has grown considerably in recent years, due partly to President Khatami's soft diplomacy and reform agenda, to the polarization and fragmentation of the Arab world that allowed for redistribution of regional power, and to the 2001 and 2003 military campaigns that eliminated anti-Iranian regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Of the two, by far the more significant was the fall of the Sunni-dominated Ba'ath regime in Iraq to U.S. forces in April 2003, which opened the way for the extension of Iranian influence to the heart of the Arab world. Besides the benefits of regime changes in the region, Iran's own policies have played a key part in expanding its vision and role as regional power. Most observers agree that Iran's soft power has been growing for over a decade and that its views are now an important consideration in regional diplomacy. In addition, its outspoken opposition to the presence of American forces in

the region has enabled Tehran to propel itself into a dominant position in Middle East radical/Islamist politics. Iran has strengthened Hizballah in a weak Lebanon and increased financial, political, and military links with Sunni Palestinian rejectionist groups ( Hamas and Islamic Jihad), giving Tehran new levers to pull at the heart of Arab politics. Iran in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become a regional broker, competing and cooperating with Arab actors at will.

Iran's nuclear program, with its comprehensive nuclear and satellite launch ambitions, reinforces regional fears. The strategic advantages of being an independent political, military, and scientific actor are in some ways immeasurable. But they reinforce the impression of a powerful Iran acting in its national interest on the international stage. There is, of course, a heavy price to be paid for this more aggressive image of Iranian power. Iran's apparent prowess has invited counterbalancing instead of bandwagoning, and its pro-Western neighbors have chosen to draw closer to the United States and seek protection from the West, India, and China as a way of heading off Iran's influence. The West, in turn, has also sought Arab allies to contain Iran's irredentism. This is matched by the international isolation of the country and the domestic price for its growing regional role. At home, we have seen a securitization of public life and politics and massive mismanagement of the country's political economy since 2005 as misguided populism and militarism took hold. Indeed, this pattern has been reinforced since the controversial reelection of Ahmadinejad in June 2009.

In a wider perspective, Iranians are now second-generation revolutionaries. One might have expected that the country would have settled down into a more clearly defined development path that would also have helped carve out its role and position in the international and regional system. Three decades after the revolution, however, Iran has yet to decide what role it will play. The tense regional setting and the country's growing geopolitical importance have not helped. So long as Iran sees itself as a beacon of resistance to foreign domination, it will not be able to chart an accommodating role for itself, which in turn will refuel tensions with its neighbors and the wider international community. Also, so long as Iran and the United States see each other as regional hegemonic rivals, Tehran will find it difficult to accommodate neighbors looking to the Americans to balance Iranian power.

This could change. Personnel changes at the top of the Islamic state have brought new priorities to the fore. These changes underline the use of force to uphold revolutionary values and ideology and set President Ahmadinejad apart from his predecessors, including Khamenei when he was president. It is a consequence of the fluidity of Islamist Iran and the undeniable power of the ballot box that someone like Ahmadinejad can take center stage and so dramatically change the tempo and mood of the country while renegotiating the country's regional role on its own terms.

Weakness and uncertainty at home have made Iran vulnerable abroad. Tehran's ability to shape the regional security environment is limited by forces beyond its control. Regionally, the postelection crisis has adversely affected Iran's appeal as well as the legitimacy of its voice as the region's only authentic, popular, and legitimate Muslim state. Its allies are on the defensive. Karim Sadjadpour notes, "Hezbollah is now in the awkward position of being a resistance group purportedly fighting injustice, while simultaneously cashing checks from an Iranian patron that is brutally suppressing justice at home."<sup>44</sup> At the same time, its voice on wider Shia issues is being morally challenged by quietist Najaf, the traditional bedrock of Shia thought in the Muslim world. Finally, Tehran's ability to pressure non-likeminded forces to yield has waned, exposing it even more to the winds of change being brought by the Obama administration and the revitalized Saudi-led Sunni Arab front.

It is impossible to say with any certainty where the postelection crisis will lead and what kind of Iran will emerge on the other side. Political change could be rapid or could require months of gestation before manifesting itself. We may not be sure of the makeup of a "new" Iran, but we can be confident of two things. First, the relationship between state and society has been changed in ways beyond the regime's control. Society is fighting to throw the state off its back, and the more that the state pressures the people, the more likely that the people will become more daring in challenging the state. Second, the relationship between the forces that make up the Iranian power elite will never again be the same. The zero-sum game in play has made compromise supremely difficult, and as both camps fight their battles purportedly for the soul of the revolution, we are probably witnessing the disaggregation of the Islamic republican state as a single ideological monolith. As Mozaffari has noted:

*it is no longer a matter of election fraud. The issue is not Ahmadinejad as a personality, or the role of the Guardians Council vetting body, or who is the supreme leader. The entire structure of the Islamic republic is under question and the era of public political apathy is over. The protest movement has already weakened the Islamic regime considerably. No matter how the ruling elite manages the situation, the days of the Islamic republic in its current form are numbered. It won't happen tomorrow, but the new will of the people may yet sweep away both the ayatollahs and the IRGC.<sup>45</sup>*

Indeed, if the political establishment proves unable to reconcile its differences in an amicable manner, or if one side fails to totally subdue the other, then it would not be beyond the

realm of reason to expect an IRGC-led government in which the Guards would hold the balance of power. The Reza Khan syndrome, in which a uniformed man emerges as the savior of the nation, is still alive in Iran and the only quarter from which such a figure could today emerge is from the senior ranks of the IRGC. Secondly, as the IRGC's constitutional mission is the protection of the gains and values of the revolution, it can use any aspect of the postelection crisis to justify its actions. A military-led Iran is unlikely to be good for Iran or its neighbors. One writer opined that "Iran is at a crossroads. One road is complete militarization and control of the people and being completely cut off from the rest of the world like North Korea, and another road is being the dictatorship it is but opening up to the rest of the world."<sup>46</sup>

For a paranoid regime whose worldview is shaped by conspiracy theories and fear of regime change, to have its very foundations shaken by its own citizens is not good news. As the siege mentality is reinforced by the boldness of the protestors and their leaders, there will be those in the establishment who will in all probability encourage the acceleration of the nuclear program's weaponization dimension. For them, survival can only be assured by deterring outsiders from interfering in its suppression of the opposition movement at home. Germany's foreign intelligence service claims that Iran never stopped its nuclear weapons program in 2003 and that it has made significant advances since 2007.<sup>47</sup> If true, then the postelection political crisis and the huge support the protestors have received internationally can only intensify the government's efforts to keep it safe from such pressures. The nuclear program would seem to provide the best chance of that from the besieged elite's perspective. Iran's nuclear program has largely been about deterrence, and in this crisis the regime is going to find the perfect justification for accelerated weaponization.<sup>48</sup>

We are entering a new period of uncertainty for the region. Iran's ability to influence politics and diplomacy in the broader Middle East means that developments in that country will cast a shadow over everything else in the region. Thirty years on from the revolution, Iran's place in the world remains ill defined, as does its self image. Indeed, the very nature of the political regime that grew out of the revolutionary coalition is now openly contested. Things for Iran and for the Middle East are unlikely to be the same again. Electoral politics, in terms of openly contested elections and high voter turnout, have been the mantra of the Islamic Republic and the public face of its legitimacy. Now, they are the forces that are straining the fabric of the political system that emerged from the ashes of the Pahlavi monarchy. Once people have the vote and are encouraged to exercise that right, you cannot then dictate the outcome to them without major backlash. In this, there is also a lesson for Iran's neighbors.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hamid Dabashi, "People Power," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, June 25–July 1, 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> See Margaret Coker, "Saudis Could Counter Iran," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 12–14, 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> John R. Bolton, "What If Israel Strikes Iran?" *The Wall Street Journal*, June 12–14, 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Robin Wright, "Tipping Point in Tehran," *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> Daniel Dombey and Gareth Smyth, "Iran Defiant in Face of IAEA Criticism over Nuclear Stance," *Financial Times*, September 26, 2005.
- <sup>6</sup> "Iran: The Party's Over," *The Economist*, November 15–21, 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> Radio Farda, November 7, 2007.
- <sup>8</sup> Ahmadinejad indicated in January 2008 that his government had reduced the budget text from 100 pages to just 1½ pages, thus saving parliament a great deal of time debating the proposal.
- <sup>9</sup> Hossein Aryan, "Falling Price of Oil Compounds Iranian President's Problems," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), October 29, 2008, available at <[www.rferl.org/content/By\\_Hossein\\_Aryan/1336169.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/By_Hossein_Aryan/1336169.html)>.
- <sup>10</sup> Reuters, December 5, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei was speaking at a ceremony marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini. See BBC news, June 4, 2009.
- <sup>12</sup> Nicole Stracke, "GCC and the Challenge of U.S.–Iran Negotiations," *GRC Analysis*, March 5, 2009.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> At a meeting on Palestinian issues held in Sharm El-Sheikh in early 2009, the United Arab Emirates foreign minister told Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of his country's growing concern about the lack of progress in curtailing Iran's nuclear program. Jay Solomon, "U.S. Doubts Iran will Respond to Overtures, Clinton says," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 3, 2009.
- <sup>15</sup> *The New York Times*, June 18, 2009.
- <sup>16</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, "Four Candidates Approved to Run in Iran's Presidential Vote," RFE/RL, July 3, 2009, available at <[www.rferl.org/content/Four\\_Candidates\\_Approved\\_To\\_Run\\_In\\_Irans\\_Presidential\\_Vote/1735949.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Four_Candidates_Approved_To_Run_In_Irans_Presidential_Vote/1735949.html)>.
- <sup>17</sup> See "Iranian Presidential Elections," Centre for Iranian Studies Policy Brief, Durham University, 2009.
- <sup>18</sup> Iranian Revolutionary News Agency (IRNA), April 15, 2009.
- <sup>19</sup> Kayhan Barzegar, "The List: Iran's Presidential Wannabes," *Foreign Policy* (June 2009).
- <sup>20</sup> Esfandiari, "Four Candidates Approved to Run in Iran's Presidential Vote."
- <sup>21</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, "Reformers Hope Iran's 'Silent Voters' Will Be Heard in June," RFE/RL, May 28, 2009, available at <[www.rferl.org/content/Reformers\\_Hope\\_Irans\\_Silent\\_Voters\\_Will\\_Be\\_Heard\\_In\\_June/1741914.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Reformers_Hope_Irans_Silent_Voters_Will_Be_Heard_In_June/1741914.html)>.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> See Walter R. Mebane, Jr., "Note on the Presidential Election in Iran, June 2009," University of Michigan, June 29, 2009, 9.
- <sup>24</sup> Comments by Mohsen Sazgara, one of the founders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard

Corps who returned to Iran with Khomeini in 1979 and is now based in Washington. See Hossein Aryan, "Dilemmas in the Midst of a 'Coup,'" RFE/RL, June 19, 2009, available at <[www.rferl.org/content/Dilemmas\\_In\\_The\\_Midst\\_Of\\_A\\_Coup/1757862.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Dilemmas_In_The_Midst_Of_A_Coup/1757862.html)>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> See Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Wright.

<sup>28</sup> This statement was issued on his Web site. The 87-year-old Grand Ayatollah died in December 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> "Cleric Tells RFE/RL Many Religious Figures Critical of Election Results," RFE/RL, July 1, 2009, available at <[www.rferl.org/content/feature/1767177.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/feature/1767177.html)>.

<sup>31</sup> Reuters, July 1, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> See *The Peninsula*, July 2, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> IRNA and Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA), July 17–18, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Reuters, July 21, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Reuters, July 1, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Reza Aslan quoted in Samira Simone, "Opposition Movement in Iran Not Over, Experts Say," CNN, July 1, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> *Financial Times*, June 21, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Ali Akbar Dareini, "Supreme Leader Confronts Resurgent Iranian Opposition," *The Independent*, July 21, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> See <[www.khandaniha.eu](http://www.khandaniha.eu)> for the full exchange between Grand Ayatollah Montazeri and Hojatoleslam Mohsen Kadivar on political developments in Iran, July 11, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> IRNA and ISNA, July 17–18, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> ISNA, July 18, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> John R. Bolton, "Time for an Israeli Strike?" *The Washington Post*, July 2, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Alan J. Kuperman, "There's Only One Way to Stop Iran," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2009, A23.

<sup>44</sup> Karim Sadjadpour quoted in Nicholas Blanford, "Will Iran's Political Turmoil Shake Hezbollah?" *Christian Science Monitor*, July 20, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Mehdi Mozaffari, "What Comes Next for Iran?" RFE/RL, July 16, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Paneta Beigi, quoted in Simone.

<sup>47</sup> Bruno Schirra, "Germany's Spies Refuted the 2007 NIE Report," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 20, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> For my analysis of Iran's nuclear program, see "Iranian Perspectives on the Global Elimination of Nuclear Weapons," in Barry Blechman, ed., *Unblocking the Road to Zero: Perspectives of Advanced Nuclear Nations* (Washington, DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2009), 19–46.

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