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Middle East Brief

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Conservatives, Neoconservatives and Reformists: Iran after the Election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad

Dr. Naghmeh Sohrabi

On the HBO television series “The Sopranos,” after an escalation of violence between two competing mob bosses, one of them, Little Carmine, stands in front of the fireplace and says, mournfully: “How’d it get to this? Retaliation, counter-attacks; we’re in a [expletive deleted] stagmire [*sic*].”

Little Carmine’s malapropism is perfectly apt in describing the current international standoff with respect to Iran’s nuclear ambitions. On April 14, 2006 President Mahmud Ahmadinejad called Israel “a Zionist regime” that “is on the road to being eliminated.”¹ This comment was only the latest in a series of events that has led to the current escalation of fear surrounding Iran’s nuclear programs. His October 2005 call for the elimination of Israel and his December 2005 comments denying the Holocaust were a gift for both U.S. policy makers and Iranian groups in exile who had been warning the global community about Iran’s expansionist and terrorist activities. These two groups, united in their desire for regime change in Iran, have recently been encouraged by the \$85 million requested by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and by the opening of an Iran Affairs desk in the U.S. Department of State. Shortly after, Vice President Richard Cheney, whose daughter, principal deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs Elizabeth Cheney, oversees the funds, warned Iran of “meaningful consequences” should it continue its insistence on nuclear enrichment activities.² In yet another example of the ways in which life imitates art—or, at least, cable television—Mr. Cheney’s threat of “retaliation” was followed by Iran’s verbal “counter-attack,” warning the United States that it would suffer “harm and pain” should it proceed with its intended course of action.³ We are indeed in a true “stagmire.”

How we got here is linked to a general lack of understanding of the Iranian political system, which breeds a climate of fear that itself can result in unnecessary acts of violence both by and toward Iran. The purpose of this Brief is to highlight some important misconceptions about the Iranian political process, not in order to defend Iran’s actions but rather to demonstrate fault lines and openings that

could have allowed for a more measured and productive course of action toward Iran. The tragedy of a misguided and inflexible American policy toward Iran is not only that it may result in real violence, let alone the further escalation of rhetorical violence between the two sides; more importantly, and from a long-term perspective, it will only strengthen the most rigidly conservative groups within the Iranian ruling elite at the expense of all other voices inside Iran.

The Role of Anti-Israeli and Anti-American Rhetoric in Iranian Politics

The atmosphere of fear surrounding Iran's nuclear ambitions has been enhanced in no small measure by President Ahmadinejad's public comments regarding the Holocaust and Israel. In October and December 2005, speaking to domestic audiences, Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be wiped off the map and spoke of the Holocaust as a myth.

Understanding the function of revolutionary slogans in Iranian political discourse, however, has often eluded Iran watchers. One of the most popular slogans of the revolutionary era was "Neither East nor West," a catch phrase that, despite Iran's various moves toward both East and West over the past quarter of a century, has maintained its pride of place both in state-sponsored demonstrations and on urban murals. Anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans—like, for example, mandatory veiling—serve as signifiers of a revolutionary era that, for all intents and purposes, is no longer a reality. Thus, while veiling is the law of the land in Iran, in some segments of Iranian society the veil has dwindled into a small, fashionable, see-through cloth resting gently on its wearer's head. Despite slogans, signs, and warnings demanding head-to-toe covering of women, Iranian authorities, for the most part, tolerate this form of veiling. And much like veiling, which women have drained of the revolutionary fervor that gave it its original meaning, anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans—voiced in demonstrations, written on walls and missiles, and even expressed by Iranian diplomats—have become tedious state rituals that reveal nothing but the anti-imperialist and anti-Western past of the Islamic Republic.

This interpretation of the function of revolutionary slogans in Iran in no shape or form excuses their existence, or their resonance for some segments of society. It merely suggests that these slogans are not an indicator of Iranian foreign policy, and their repetition by schoolchildren and government employees not a reflection of some sort of "culture of death" permeating Iranian society. On the contrary, to draw on an American analogy, they are the Islamic Republic's own version of "spin." To state that the persistence of such slogans in Iranian politics and society betrays the intentions of those in power is to ascribe a degree of transparency to the Iranian government unparalleled in the world.

Notwithstanding the alarm caused by Mr. Ahmadinejad's comments in 2005, they revealed more about who he is than about what he intends to do. Nicholas R. Burns, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, underscored this point when he observed that "the Iranians have been engaged in gratuitous Israel-bashing for twenty-five years, and there's no excuse for it, but people had heard this kind of thing before. But to have a modern leader come out and question the historical veracity of the Holocaust shocked the German public. So Ahmadinejad dug a hole for the Iranians, and he kept digging."⁴ Seemingly overnight, the public face of the Islamic Republic of Iran changed from that of the "smiling seyed" (and Ahmadinejad's predecessor as president), Mohammad Khatami, to that of the "dangerous demagogue," Mr. Ahmadinejad. This shift from the cleric who called for a dialogue of civilizations to the bureaucrat who seems to be a believer in the *clash of civilizations* has had and will have consequences for Iranian domestic politics,

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an issue that will be addressed below. But in terms of foreign policy, it is naïve to think that in and of themselves, Ahmadinejad's remarks set any sort of agenda.

During Khatami's two terms as president, both his detractors and his supporters pointed out that the office of the presidency in Iran has very little power—or, rather, that there are multiple levels of power above it that can, and do, rein it in. For the detractors, the weakness of the office of the presidency was a fundamental part of their arguments depreciating the significance of the reform movement in Iran's post-1997 elections. Khatami, it was argued, was merely putting a civilized face on an uncivilized regime in order to prolong its existence. The real power lay elsewhere—presumably with the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. The supporters of Mr. Khatami made almost the same argument in attributing the failures of the reform movement—the arrests of journalists, the closing down of newspapers, the bloody crackdown on student protesters in 1999—to the fact that real power in the Islamic Republic lay elsewhere than with the office of the president.

The constitution of the Islamic Republic has not changed since June 2005. So how is it that suddenly the president of Iran, a “modern leader” at that, has come to possess such enormous power? And if one believes that regardless of the real power of the Iranian presidency, the words of an Iranian diplomat must be taken seriously, then why is it that only Mr. Ahmadinejad is the one that the world is exhorted to take seriously? On February 22, 2006, for example, Dr. Manouchehr Mottaki, the Iranian foreign minister and a member of Iran's nuclear negotiating team, declared that “nobody can remove a country from the map. This is a misunderstanding in Europe of what our president mentioned.”⁵ If such statements are reflections of policy, then how do the words of Dr. Mottaki change our perceptions of Iran's foreign policy? And if they are not, then on what is our evaluation of Iranian public statements based?

Mr. Ahmadinejad goes to (the Conservative) Parliament

Dr. Mottaki's counter-statements to Mr. Ahmadinejad are but one instance of a neglected yet vital development in Iranian domestic policy since the 2005 elections: the beginning of a splintering among nonreformist voices in Iran. This situation has been either masked or ignored by current United States policy toward Iran and is disregarded in the current “all-or-nothing” policy regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Iran's seventh parliamentary elections in 2004 brought into power an overwhelmingly conservative parliament—which, coupled with the election of Mr. Ahmadinejad, at first seemed to indicate a complete takeover of Iranian

politics by the so-called hardliners. Iran, it appeared, had gone back to the glory days of its revolution. This view of Iranian politics, however, overlooks the peculiarity of Ahmadinejad's presidency. Although he and his supporters are undoubtedly believers in the fundamentals of the 1979 revolution and its mythology, they were able to come to power precisely because of the success of the reform movement's discourse. In a speech during his second presidential campaign in 2001, Mohammad Khatami stressed the fact that despite all the setbacks, the reform movement had succeeded in injecting the term *mardum salari*—“the rule of the people”—into Iranian political discourse, so much so that even the most conservative groups and candidates were framing their policies in those terms.⁶ Mr. Ahmadinejad's populism—his stress on the corruption of the old guard, his persona as a “man of the people” (exemplified by his humble background and lifestyle), his promise to bring oil revenues straight to “the people's tables,” his constant travels to various Iranian provinces—is a direct result of the success of the reform movement in changing the vocabulary of domestic politics in Iran.

If we think of Iran's 1997 elections as having split Iranian politics into conservatives and reformists, then in 2005 another splintering occurred within the ranks of the conservatives, dividing them into old guard and hardline populist factions. This division is attested to by the reformist newspaper *Shargh's* designation of Mr. Ahmadinejad's supporters in the Iranian parliament as “neo-conservatives,” a term whose irony cannot be lost on any student of current American politics.

This fractionation of politics has already made Mr. Ahmadinejad's short time in office a bumpy ride. Ahmadinejad nominated, and the seventh parliament rejected, three candidates for the Oil Ministry. The first and third candidates failed to receive a vote of confidence, and the second withdrew his name when the extent of parliamentary opposition to his nomination became clear. Ahmadinejad's fourth and final nominee, Kazem Vaziri-Hameneh, had been a deputy oil minister in Mohammad Khatami's government.⁷ This rejection of presidential ministerial nominations was unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic, and that it was carried out by a conservative and self-proclaimed “fundamentalist” (*usulghara*) parliament pointed to the deep rifts in the conservative camp caused by Ahmadinejad's election.

This rift only deepened with the presentation to the parliament of President Ahmadinejad's annual budget on January 15, 2006. True to his campaign promises to improve the economic lot of the Iranian people and fight economic corruption in the country, Ahmadinejad proposed a budget allocating \$68 billion “to the public

sector and \$149 billion to other state enterprises such as banks and nonprofit organizations,” out of a total of \$217 billion dollars”⁸—which represented a marked increase from the previous year’s budget. Both the conservative and reformist factions in Parliament voiced criticism of the government’s budget; much of the criticism was directed at the budget’s overestimation of the price of oil and its almost exclusive reliance on oil revenues, and at the allocation of funds to certain religious institutions at the expense of other cultural and educational ones.⁹

In the public sessions of the parliament, some of the most conservative representatives discussed the ways in which the proposed budget might lead to the so-called “Dutch disease” and an inflation rate of approximately 33.5%.¹⁰ Ahmad Tavakoli, an influential conservative member of Parliament, derided the president’s defense of his budget. Objecting to the president’s characterization of his budget as a “tightly knit edifice” (*bunyan-i marsusi*) that could fall if tinkered with, he argued that “this notion that anything handed to the parliament by the government is a tightly knit edifice that will fall if it is touched goes against the fundamentals of religious democracy (*mardum salari-yi dini*). Additionally, it could lead to the exclusive rule of an individual and take away from the parliament’s authority.”¹¹

In an opinion piece titled “In the Absence of the Elite,” published in the reformist newspaper *Shargh*, Mohammad Quchani laid out some of the background to the deadlock between the conservative parliament and the neoconservative president.¹² Quchani points out that Mr. Ahmadinejad offered his candidacy for president despite the fact that none of the “fundamentalist parties” had invited him to run. Once he declared his candidacy, one faction in Parliament gave its support to Mr. Ali Larijani and another to Qalibaf; as far as anyone can tell, nobody supported Ahmadinejad.

Upon his election, Mr. Ahmadinejad chose, in populist fashion, to bypass again and again the ruling elite of Iran, taking his message directly to the people. But, Quchani notes, there is a difference between democracy and populism: The former operates through civil society organs and parties, while the latter sees no need or role for these institutions, and no value in their collective experience and their potential contributions to society. “The current state of the government,” he observes, reflects “a continued lack of trust on the part of the elite, and the cutting off of relations between the head of state and the elite.”

A Narrowing of Options

These perspectives, along with Mr. Ahmadinejad’s nonclerical status, suggest possibilities for criticism of the Iranian government by opposition groups such as the reformists. But the current standoff between the United

States and Iran with respect to Iran’s nuclear ambitions has all but closed off avenues of action both within and outside Iran, for three interrelated reasons.

First, despite Mr. Ahmadinejad’s weaknesses as president, the international reaction to his October and December comments regarding Israel and the Holocaust actually gave new life to what had been empty slogans. In many ways the reaction rewarded Ahmadinejad for bad behavior, and showed that bypassing traditional institutions of governance in Iran could indeed invest the president with *more* power. Whatever the internal rifts among the Iranian ruling elite, it would be unreasonable to expect any public condemnation of the president by that elite. Thus, while Ahmadinejad’s comments did not actually reflect Iran’s foreign policy, the strong reaction to them, and the subsequent escalation of the United States’ and the European Union’s real and rhetorical response, made them into a foreign policy problem that had to be addressed.

Second, considering the political landscape of the Middle East today—Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Palestinian Authority—the United States, despite its tough rhetoric, has very few options for action toward Iran, a fact that is not lost on the Iranian leadership. The current media obsession with Iran’s nuclear activity has all but turned off the spotlight on Iran’s domestic changes since the election of Mr. Ahmadinejad, with grave consequences for the Iranian public. And in the end, the isolation of Iran and the threats to the survival of its current regime have and will hurt precisely those who have, for the past eight years, been struggling to bring about change. In private conversations and in their public statements, various Iranian reformists have expressed dismay at the steadily growing constrictions on their activities, while viewing with alarm the beginning of a reversal of the changes brought about in Iranian society during the Khatami presidency. These include reports of sex segregation at Internet cafes (popular hangouts for many young Iranians), the gradual appearance of checkpoints in Tehran streets, the increase in restrictions on university students,¹³ and the escalated harassment of known reformists and journalists. Finally, the current referral of Iran to the United Nations Security Council, along with the United States’ open call for regime change, has led to calls for “national unity.” Even in the most democratic of countries, raising the banner of national unity in the face of threats to the nation is wielded as a method of silencing criticism and opposition. On March 9, 2006, Seyyed Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, reiterated Iran’s right to nuclear technology, proclaiming that “the main way to combat the conspiratorial plots of [Iran’s] enemies is to reinforce unity . . . In front of this enemy, we must strengthen our internal foundations.”¹⁴ To what degree this call for unity will tighten even further the screws

on internal Iranian debate and the voicing of opposition remains to be seen.

Conclusion: Exploiting an Opportunity

The current standoff regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions, and the looming possibility of economic sanctions and even U.S. military strikes, has all but masked the political divisions, infightings, and potential power struggles among Iran's ruling elite. But the urgency that the United States has attached to curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions is mistimed, and counterproductive with respect to both the United States' and Iran's interests. The worsening situation in Iraq, compounded by the Bush administration's domestic woes, leaves the U.S. in a strikingly weak position. If the United States' end goal in its current confrontation with Iran is to prevent Iran from manufacturing nuclear weapons—and if, as even the most optimistic estimates indicate, Iran will be able to build a bomb no sooner than 2009–2010¹⁵—then, one can argue, it would be advisable to ease up the pressure on Iran, accept alternative offers for limited suspensions in uranium enrichment, and allow the political rifts and divisions within Iran to fully develop and ripen.

The fact of the matter is that the military option does not have an expiration date. There is no urgency in taking this most severe of actions, since for at least another three years, Iran does not pose any real nuclear threat. Additionally, there are ample signs, some of which were laid out earlier in this Brief, that new political and economic divisions are slowly developing among Iran's conservative and hardliner groups. If we strip away the nuclear grandstanding of the Iranian government and examine domestic developments in Iran since Mr. Ahmadinejad came into power in the fall of 2005, we see the degree to which his ideological and revolutionary rhetoric and, especially, his economic policies have created these divisions.

In many ways, Ahmadinejad's election has brought into power a marginalized and radicalized faction of the non-reformists, a faction that has become radicalized in part because, since the end of the Iran-Iraq war, it has more often than not been pushed to the side and ignored by the mainstream ruling groups. That there will be, given time, a power struggle between this governing faction and the traditional ruling elite is a given. The question then becomes how to exploit this rift to end the current nuclear crisis. The answer is to use the opportunity provided by the upcoming talks between Iran and the United States over Iraq as a face-saving out for both sides, and as enabling the beginning of a new American policy toward Iran that provides economic incentives and increases trade between Iran and the international community. This carrot (and not

stick) policy will have two important consequences.

First, the eight years of Mr. Khatami's presidency and the active presence of Iran on the international scene have shown the degree to which the Iranians are responsive to international public opinion. The mere fact that despite its referral to the Security Council and its escalation of war rhetoric Iran has yet to pull out of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and close the door to all forms of diplomacy indicates that there is little desire among the Iranians to return to the isolation of the 1980s.¹⁶ It is in the interest of all who have fears of a nuclear Iran that Iran remains more, not less, transparent to the world. To this end, continued trade and talks—even over questions of regional security—are crucial.

Second, considering the divisions between Iran's hardliners and conservatives, and given President Ahmadinejad's return to the rhetoric of the early revolutionary period, providing trade incentives will only deepen this rift. Ahmadinejad's campaign rhetoric was based on rampant corruption in government and the deepening gulf between the rich and the poor in Iran. A trade incentive aimed at precisely the targets of Mr. Ahmadinejad's criticism will only add to the widening disagreements within Iran's government, forcing the hands of the two factions. It will also place the new administration in a dilemma: To respond to the incentives would go against precisely the values it preaches, possibly alienating the government from its political base. To reject them and plunge Iran into more isolation would lessen its standing among the majority of the population—for whom, more often than not, the economy is seen as a priority.

(Endnotes)

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