



Iranian Public Opinion on the Nuclear Program

A Potential Asset for the International Community

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Front cover: Iranian riot police attempt to control a demonstration on ethnic rights outside the parliament complex in Tehran, May 28, 2006. Copyright AP Wide World Photos/Amir Kholoosi

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Introduction

"I wish God would take this sense of national honor away from us; no, I wish he wouldn't but I wish we'd use it at appropriate times..."

Why is it that our planes crash, our buildings collapse at the slightest tremor, our cars burst into flames, we don't have even half-standard football stadium in the entire country, but when it comes to nuclear energy, it's a national issue?! ...

Anyway, it smells of war. God help us. Our people have suffered a lot over these past 100 years"

—An Iranian blogger, January 18, 2006, www.rah-e-man.com/, as cited by "Iranian Blogs Debate Nuclear Row," BBC News, January 31, 2006

While the international community weighs and debates its options for halting a defiant Iran's foray toward nuclearization, relatively little attention is given to Iranian public opinion on this very issue. Many, if not most, international actors and observers seem to share the underlying assumption that the Iranian public widely supports the regime's nuclear program and that even if some dissent exists in Iran on the issue, it evolves over tactics or it makes little difference. A closer look at Iranian public opinion, however, reveals a much more nuanced picture, offering an additional, and rarely focused-on, policy tool for existing international efforts to compel the Iranian regime to change its nuclear policy. That tool is to trigger Iranian public opposition to a potentially militarized and both domestically and internationally costly nuclear program. The seeds exist of such opposition within Iranian public opinion, constituting a major vulnerability of the Iranian regime.

Conventional wisdom holds that although a majority of the Iranian population dislikes the mullah-led regime, it nonetheless supports Iranian nuclearization—both as a function of its country's sovereign rights to develop and modernize, and as a measure of the national pride so emphatic with Iranians. *Newsweek's* Mark Hosenball has recently reported that this widespread perception is also shared by U.S.

intelligence agencies.¹ From a policy perspective, solid public support for the nuclear program would mean that pressuring the regime to change course through sanctions or other measures is bound to backfire, rallying the populace around the regime and hindering the international community's ability to stymie Iranian nuclear development.

Moreover, this common opinion has been boosted by a well-orchestrated publicity campaign initiated by the regime to garner domestic support for the nuclear program and to demonstrate that support to the outside world. This campaign has greatly expanded since Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad assumed the presidency in August 2005, in no small part because the populist president makes it a point to address the issue in front of wide popular audiences across the country. The regime has organized a propaganda arsenal of supportive demonstrations (busing around schoolchildren and other members of the public), slogans (using television, radio, posters, and even sporting events), and opinion polls. The most recent poll, which was conducted in late January 2006 by the Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA) and published by the Iranian News Agency (IRNA), indicated 85.4 percent public support for the continuation of Iran's nuclear activities.² The regime's slogan, "Nuclear en-

¹ Mark Hosenball, "Iran: The Intelligence Reports vs. the Hard-Liners," *Newsweek*, May 1, 2006.

² Iranian News Agency (IRNA), February 5, 2006.

ergy is our indisputable right,” has come to dominate the public landscape to such an extent that it has become a subject of popular jokes in Iran.³

Hassan Rowhani, former secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), who led the Iranian nuclear negotiations with the Europeans from late 2003 until August 2005, revealed in a speech delivered while he was still in office how Iran had tried to buy time by conning the West and covering up its secret nuclear activities. In a closed address to the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution leaked to the press in late 2005 and never denied, he explained that by negotiating with the Europeans, Iran bought time to complete its uranium conversion facility in

Isfahan and to prepare for the referral of its case to the UN Security Council. Discussing Iranian public opinion in this context, Rowhani lamented the fact that debating the nuclear issue “has become larger than it should in the public opinion,” thereby negatively affecting the economy. He went further to note that “the public is very sensitive about this issue. Whatever we do, we must have the support of the public. This point... is a problem. If the country’s political decisions conflict with the public opinion, we definitely would have problems.”⁴ Why would the regime find it imperative to “have the support of the public” if it were confident of public support or indifferent to it? What necessitated an apparent internal public relations effort?

³ See, for example, Karl Vick, “Everyday Iranians Nervous about Push for Atomic Power,” *Washington Post*, March 8, 2006. BBC News’s “Iranian Blogs Debate Nuclear Row” (January 31, 2006), cites an Iranian blogger bitterly complaining about the regime running this catchphrase on television while broadcasting an international soccer game, thereby mixing sports and politics and “insulting the foreign viewers’ intelligence.”

⁴ Text of speech by Supreme National Council Secretary Hassan Rowhani to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council (place and date not given), “Beyond the Challenges Facing Iran and the IAEA Concerning the Nuclear Dossier,” *Rahbord* (in Persian), Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Iran/Afghanistan Division (FBIS-IAP20060113336001), September 30, 2005, pp. 7–38. For a good analysis of this speech, see Dr. Chen Kane, “Nuclear Decision-Making in Iran: A Rare Glimpse,” Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, no. 5 (May 2006). Rowhani is still a member of the SNSC and the director of the Expediency Council’s Center for Strategic Research.

What Do Iranians Really Think about the Nuclear Program?

Portraying a comprehensive yet accurate picture of Iranian public opinion on the nuclear issue is somewhat challenging; public expression on such a sensitive matter is controlled and limited by the mullahs' repressive regime, and no free polling exists. About two years ago, the Iranian National Security Council issued a circular banning publication of any news or analysis regarding the nuclear program outside the official media and state news agencies, calling these nongovernmental reviews a threat to national security. Since then, articles, essays, and reports raising questions about the feasibility and viability of the nuclear program have been systematically suppressed.¹ Nevertheless, one can still derive what seems to be a good impressionistic picture from a variety of sources that penetrate or bypass the walls of official censorship. Those sources include extensive Iranian blogging on the Internet (recent statistics indicate that more than 70,000 Farsi blogs exist, about half of them estimated to originate within Iran); occasional semi-independent opinion polls; some of the Iranian press, especially the reformist-affiliated one; and reports by Farsi-speaking researchers or journalists who spoke to people in Iran, some of them during extensive visits to the country, gauging public opinion on the nuclear issue. All of these sources suggest a nuanced public opinion with far more debate on the issue than common wisdom purports. Following is a brief summary of the conclusions derived from this volume of evidence.

Clearly, the overwhelming majority of Iranians naturally support their country's right to master nuclear technology. Most Iranians

believe that this entitlement is both a natural right of a sovereign state and an important factor in becoming an advanced player in the modern world. For them, it is a matter of national honor and pride, and they resent the apparent discrimination of "haves" against "have-nots."² Mindful of this sentiment, the regime beats the nationalist drum to sell the idea that the international community discriminates against Iranians because they are Muslims. Thus, for example, President Ahmadinezhad framed the standoff between Iran and the international community as an effort by "a few countries that are armed with various types of weapons" to impose "a kind of *scientific apartheid* and nuclear monopoly in the world."³ "We have to understand," he said later, "they do not want the Iranian nation to have technological programs."⁴ Analyst Frederic Tellier rightly noted that the guardians of the revolution are "abandoning the terrain of ideology, on which the broken bonds between regime and society cannot be restored, for that of nationalism and technological development, where a consensus still prevails."⁵ To support and hold its line, the regime withholds important information from its public and blocks public debate on nuclear policies.

The public opinion picture begins to shift, however, when additional elements are added. First is the distinction between a peaceful nuclear program and a military one. The regime

¹ Mehdi Khalaji, "Miscommunication between Iranian Society and the West on Iran's Nuclear Program," *PolicyWatch* no. 1078 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 10, 2006).

² This perception is well expressed, for example, in John Daniszewski, "Iranians Defend Nuclear Rights," *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 2006; Mahan Abedin, "Iranian Public Opinion and the Nuclear Stand-Off," *Mideast Monitor* 1, no. 2 (April/May 2006); and Azadeh Moaveni, "How to Love a Hard-Liner," *Time Magazine*, April 3, 2006.

³ Iranian News Agency (IRNA), January 3, 2006.

⁴ Karl Vick, "Iranian Says Pressure Won't End Nuclear Bid," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, January 15, 2006.

⁵ Frederic Tellier, "The Iranian Moment," *Policy Focus* no. 52 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2006), p. 9.

usually speaks of a peaceful program or just blurs the distinction, and almost all public opinion polls that have been published fail to consider the difference between the two. Some opinion surveys have reported that many Iranians express the conviction that even a nuclear military capability is a matter of right and justified for their country⁶ or doubt whether a military program is really where the regime is heading. Nevertheless, convincing evidence suggests that when specifically focused on the military dimension, public opinion clearly provides less support for the nuclear program.

Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran analyst with the International Crisis Group who spent months doing interviews in Iran, reported in early 2004 that “Whereas few Iranians are opposed to the development of a nuclear energy facility...most of the Iranians surveyed said they oppose the pursuit of a nuclear weapons program because it runs against their desire for ‘peace and tranquility.’”⁷ A survey of Iranian public opinion conducted in Iran by Trita Parsi for the Tharwa Project in July–August 2004 concluded that average Iranians make a distinction between weaponization and access to nuclear technology. “Contrary to media reports,” wrote Parsi, an Iran specialist at Johns Hopkins University School for Advanced International Studies, “support for an Iranian nuclear bomb was rarely expressed by ordinary Iranians during my many taxi-rides.... The vast majority of Iranians argued that going nuclear [militarily] would make Iran less, rather than more safe.”⁸ A similar impression

was formed by Ray Takeyh, senior fellow and Iran specialist at the Council on Foreign Relations, after discussing the issue with Iranians.⁹ A public opinion survey in Iran conducted by the Tarrance Group in May–June 2005 for the Iran Institute for Democracy discovered that: “A plurality of adults, 42 percent, says that the Islamic Republic’s access to nuclear weapons would add to their anxiety and discomfort. Only 37 percent of adults indicated that this would not.... Anxiety over nuclear weapons in the hands of the Islamic Republic increases among young adults, going from 34 percent among 50+ adults to 50 percent among 16–24 year olds.”¹⁰

Many Iranians appear to withdraw their support for the nuclear program when it comes to military nuclear development, mostly for fear of the potential costs such a program would incur in terms of international isolation, sanctions, and a possible military strike against Iran. Here again, the regime plays down this cost element and most opinion polls ignore it; but when included, it results in decreasing levels of public support, even though this decrease is hard to quantify in most cases. Anecdotal surveying has found a wide range of Iranians voicing concerns about the prospects of economic sanctions, which they fear may exacerbate existing high levels of unemployment and inflation, and about the possibility of Iran’s becoming an international pariah. Furthermore, many fear the prospect of war, citing either the fate of Iraq or the live memories of the bloody eight-year Iran-Iraq War.¹¹

⁶ Mahan Abedin, “Iranian Public Opinion and the Nuclear Stand-Off,” *Mideast Monitor* 1, no. 2 (April/May 2006). Abedin traces this support to a deeply ingrained insecurity complex, a feeling of being alone and exposed to external threats, which was exacerbated by the trauma of the eight-year bloody Iran-Iraq War initiated by Iraqi aggression. Abedin notes, however, that “While anecdotal evidence suggests that the vast majority of Iranians would like their country to be a nuclear power, what this means precisely, and at what expense they are willing to achieve it, are difficult to assess.”

⁷ Karim Sadjadpour, “Iranians Don’t Want to Go Nuclear,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 2004.

⁸ Trita Parsi, “Tharwa Feature: Iranian Public Opinion and Tehran’s Nuclear Program,” Tharwa Project, April 4, 2005. Available online (www.tharwaproject.com/node/1902).

⁹ “Takeyh: Iran’s Populace Largely Opposes Nuclear Program,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 2, 2005.

¹⁰ “Iran Survey,” Iran Institute for Democracy, June 2005, p. 9. The poll was based on random telephone interviews with 758 adults (age 16 or older) across the country.

¹¹ Karim Sadjadpour, “Iranians Don’t Want to Go Nuclear,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 2004; BBC News, “Iranian Blogs Debate Nuclear Row,” January 31, 2006; Karl Vick, “Everyday Iranians Nervous about Push for Atomic Power,” *Washington Post*, March 8, 2006; Golnaz Esfandiary, “Iran: Iranians Voice Mixed Views on Nuclear Conflict,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Radio Farda), March 10, 2006; “US Threats Make Their Mark on Iranians,” *Financial Times* (Tehran), May 4, 2006; Abbas Maleki, “Iran Is Eager to Defuse the Nuclear Squabble,” *Financial Times* (Tehran), May 10, 2006; Frances Harrison (Tehran), “How the

Perhaps most telling in this regard is the previously mentioned poll conducted by the ISPA in January 2006. The official Iranian News Agency (IRNA) highlighted only the general finding of 85.4 percent majority support for the resumption of the nuclear program. ISPA revealed, however, that the level of support drops to 74.3 percent in the case of referral to the UN Security Council, and drops further—to 64 percent in the case of economic sanctions and to 55.6 percent in the case of military actions against Iran.¹² Inadvertently, this poll does not tell the story that the regime wanted to tell.

Public concerns have significantly intensified since Ahmadinezhad assumed the presidency and pushed Iran toward blatant defiance of the international community. In fact, much of the domestic criticism is focused on him. Criticisms regarding substance and tactics are not always easy to distinguish between—that is, the *raison d'être* of the nuclear program and the potential price of brazenly challenging the international community. In any case, looking beneath the thin veneer of public unanimity exhibited by the regime, one gets the clear impression that a growing number of Iranians are raising serious questions or expressing dissatisfaction over the regime's nuclear policy, especially among the more informed strata, but not limited to them. Some question or disagree in faceless cyberspace or anonymous press reporting, while other brave and reform-minded Iranians do it more openly and publicly.

A good example is Ahmad Shirzad, a nuclear physics professor at Isfahan University and a former member of the Majlis (parliament), who recently asked where Iran would get uranium if it insisted on developing a program with no outside trust or help, given the

fact that its own uranium mines could power one 1,000-megawatt reactor (namely, the Bushehr reactor) for only seven years. "There is a feeling that the nation is being led toward war on an issue about which only a handful of men were informed," said Shirzad. "We fought the eight-year [Iran-Iraq] war because we knew what we wanted and what we were fighting for, but what do we want today?" A report by Tehran University's seismographic center, parts of which have been leaked, warned that Iran may not be suitable for maintaining nuclear power plants given its location in an active earthquake zone.¹³ In February 2006, Iranian journalist Hamid Muhamadian published in the Iranian reformist Internet daily *Rooz* an analysis raising questions about the economic viability of turning to nuclear energy in light of Iran's scarce uranium reserves and the high costs of extracting Iranian uranium and implementing the nuclear program.¹⁴

Furthermore, *Rooz* reported in March 2006 on an open letter signed by five well-known reformists under the title "A Warning about the Dangers Facing the Revolution," criticizing the situation in Iran. According to opposition journalist Ahmad Zeidabani, the major concern behind the letter was the potential escalation of Iran's nuclear crisis to economic sanctions or military attack, "especially since Iran is considered to be one of the poorest countries that have raw uranium resources—though this fact is not often mentioned in Iran." The authors of the letter did not explicitly refer to the nuclear issue, fearing the regime's heavy hand.¹⁵ Exposing the lack of uranium ore deposits in Iran, as was done by Shirzad and Zeidabani, may well have trig-

People of Natanz View the Nuclear Facilities," BBC in Persian, May 23, 2006.

¹² Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA), February 6, 2006. Available online (www.ispa.ir/en/MorePage.aspx?tName=ANews1&pType=ANInXML&Id=2).

¹³ Karl Vick, "Everyday Iranians Nervous about Push for Atomic Power," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2006; Amir Taheri, "Iran Sleepwalking into War?" *Arab News* (Saudi Arabia), March 11, 2006. Arab Gulf states are particularly concerned about the potential effects of an earthquake hitting the area of the Bushehr nuclear reactor, which is located on the shores of the Persian Gulf.

¹⁴ Available online (<http://roozonline.com/01newsstory/013979.shtml>).

¹⁵ "Iranian Reformist Website: The Regime Is Trying to Silence Internal Dissent Regarding Iran's Nuclear Program," *Special Dispatch* no. 1127 (Middle East Media Research Institute, March 30, 2006).

gered the announcement in early May by Iran's deputy chief for nuclear research and technology of the finding of three new uranium ore sites in the center of the country.¹⁶

In this public debate, lots of valid questions are being asked about national priorities—should the nuclear program be so highly prioritized given Iran's abundance of oil on the one hand and pressing infrastructural and economic problems on the other? Already in May–June 2005, the previously cited poll conducted by the Tarrance Group for the Iran Institute for Democracy¹⁷ recorded 53 percent of Iranians as believing that pursuing nuclear technology is a higher priority than modernizing the petroleum infrastructure and 37 percent as believing the opposite—not an overwhelming majority. Following Ahmadinezhad's April 11, 2006, announcement that Iran reached “the peak of progress” by joining the nuclear club, one Iranian blogger sardonically commented that instead of progressing from the bottom up by tending first to the state of economy, freedom of expression, and social culture,

thanks to our nuclear achievement, we have reached the top of an elevator that works in a reverse fashion from the roof and going down.... The reason why in recent years we have suffered from high prices, unemployment, an ailing agricultural sector, press closures, freeze on freedom of expression, Peykan [locally manufactured] cars, plane crashes, a stagnant cinema and film industry, and an almost zero-level cultural progress, is this: we were busy building the final stage of progress.¹⁸

Some Iranians do not stop there; rather, they go a step farther and air concerns about the nuclear standoff's potential to strengthen the mullah-led regime's heavy hand domestically and to prolong its rule. For instance, if the nuclear program is a national project and repre-

sents an absolute right, asked one Iranian blogger, then why are its opponents' views suppressed? Furthermore, this blogger continues,

Do we not have any other absolute rights? Is nuclear energy the be-all and end-all? Why have you not spoken about the rest [of the absolute rights]? Respect for human dignity ... Respect for people's privacy ... Justice ... Freedom of expression and press.... The right to choose freely, to determine one's destiny, to choose one's clothing, to stage civil protest, to form NGOs [nongovernmental organizations], and to lead a calm and a tension-free life, are all absolute rights.¹⁹

Moreover, demonstrators are now regularly playing on the regime's slogan of nuclear “indisputable rights,” invoking other “indisputable rights.” Thus, a traditional May 1, 2006, demonstration in Tehran, intended by the regime to exhibit public support for the nuclear program, turned into a spontaneous protest over unemployment and low wages, with people chanting, “To strike is our indisputable right” and “Permanent employment is our indisputable right.”²⁰ The latest popular slogan has come to be “an elected leader is our indisputable right”—a poignant reference to the unelected Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

This sentiment had already been recorded in early 2004 by Karim Sadjadpour²¹ and later by researchers Jared Cohen and Abbas Milani (the former traveled to Iran in December 2004 and conducted a series of interviews there), especially among Iranian youth. In July 2005, they reported that “every time the students were [asked] whether they still want a nuclear program if it means the consolidation of the regime

¹⁶ Associated Press, May 2, 2006.

¹⁷ “Iran Survey,” Iran Institute for Democracy, June 2005, p. 7.

¹⁸ “Iranian Bloggers Criticize Nuclear Policy,” BBC News, May 2, 2006. Available online, see entry dated April 29, 2006 (<http://rah-e-man.com>).

¹⁹ Ibid. See similar views expressed by opposition journalist Ahmad Zeidabani, who noted that “if the Iranian government wishes to insist that the nuclear issue is a ‘national’ one, it must first recognize the rights of people and only then use such terms.” *Rooz*, October 1, 2005. Available online (<http://roozonline.com/1/english/010552.shtml>).

²⁰ AFP (reporting from Tehran) and BBC (based on reporting by Iranian TV, Iran Network 1), May 1, 2006.

²¹ Karim Sadjadpour, “Iranians Don't Want to Go Nuclear,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 2004.

in power, they became almost unanimously against the idea.”²² Likewise, Menashe Amir, who runs the Voice of Israel Radio in Persian, disclosed in a recent news interview that many Iranians who call his station express the fear that “a nuclear bomb will give this brutal re-

gime a certificate of security.”²³ When Iranians do make the conscious connection between the nuclear program and their general negative feelings about this widely unpopular regime, it seems to have a significant detrimental effect on popular support for the nuclear program.

²² Jared Cohen and Abbas Milani, “Iran: The Passive Revolution,” *Hoover Digest* 2005, no. 3 (Fall 2005), p. 10.

²³ Translation of interview to Israeli Channel B radio, TMCnet, March 8, 2006 (author’s transcript).

The Iranian Regime in the Face of Dissent

The regime's internal publicity campaign regarding the nuclear issue is two pronged. On one hand, it is designed to rally the populace behind the regime and to fend off pressures for domestic reform and liberalization. On the other hand, it is designed to convince the international community that it cannot drive a wedge between the regime and the populace and that, therefore, any external pressure would only backfire. Although the regime exudes confidence in the public's support, it is nevertheless well aware of the fragility of that support as revealed by Rowhani. That awareness drives the regime to work on public opinion—selling the public a specific narrative with underlying messages while tightly controlling the picture presented to the public, manipulating information, and curbing any dissenting voices at home. State censorship has become stricter under President Ahmadinezhad; indeed, Iranian reformists have revealed that Iranian newspaper editors were warned in recent months by regime officials not to publish criticism against the government's nuclear policies. Furthermore, they received guidance as to the preferred manner of reporting on the issue. For instance, when Iran's case was referred to the UN Security Council earlier this year, editors were instructed not to highlight this fact in news headlines.¹

The regime has traditionally aimed at walking the fine line between playing down external pressures to justify its nuclear policy domestically, and playing them up to externalize domestic pressures and rally the populace in the name of patriotism. Although those goals are still generally the same, Ahmadinezhad has added color and impetus to the latter, generating a sense of

immunity from outside punishment. The Iranian president is assiduously highlighting the message that the populace need not worry about the potential costs of the nuclear pursuit because

- The United States is bogged down and vulnerable in Iraq.²
- Pro-Iranian forces scored electoral victories in Iraq and in the Palestinian Authority, thereby dealing a blow to American designs in the region.
- The international community is too dependent on Iranian oil to jeopardize its own economic interest and is far too divided to agree on applying economic sanctions or a military option against Iran.
- A military option is questionable in terms of cost-effectiveness (Iran's considerable capacity to inflict damage in response compared to the limited external capacity to destroy the Iranian program).

Ahmadinezhad has encapsulated this line of thinking in exclaiming, "They need us more than we need them." On the other side of this coin of rationalization lies the conviction that what the United States really desires in Iran is regime change and that therefore giving up on the nuclear program will only weaken the regime, inevitably lead it onto a slippery slope, and expose it to the danger of external or internal attack.³ Though he appears to be his nation's irrational zealot, Ahmadinezhad's confrontational line of policy seems to reflect careful calculation.

² See in this context a press statement (Associated Press, May 30, 2006) by Manoucher Mottaki, Iran's foreign minister, saying that the United States is incapable of attacking Iran, because "they are in a lot of difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are not in a position to create a new crisis in the region."

³ This whole line of thinking was strongly expressed in an interview given by Hassan Abassi to the reformist Iranian Internet daily *Rooz* on March 19, 2006, translated in *Special Dispatch* no. 1126 (Middle East Media Research Institute, March 28, 2006). Abassi heads the Doctrinal Center for National Security and is considered an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps theoretician and close to Ahmadinezhad. See also "A View from Tehran," Saban Center for Middle East Policy, April 6, 2006, summarizing a discussion with Najmeh Bozorgmehr, Saban Center visiting fellow and correspondent for the *Financial Times* in Tehran.

¹ Michael Slackman, "In Iran, Dissenting Voices Rise on Its Leaders' Nuclear Strategy," *New York Times*, March 15, 2006; Ali Akbar Dareini, "Iran Leader: Nuclear Path Irreversible," Associated Press, March 15, 2006; "Iranian Reformist Website: The Regime Is Trying to Silence Internal Dissent Regarding Iran's Nuclear Program" *Special Dispatch* no. 1127 (Middle East Media Research Institute, March 30, 2006).

Domestic Debate about Ahmadinezhad's Confrontational Approach

Evidently, not all the Iranian political elites share this line of thinking. Since Ahmadinezhad steered the wheel toward a defiant and confrontational posture vis-à-vis the international community, a debate appears to be raging between the proponents of his approach and the proponents of the previous path of pursuing diplomatic brinkmanship while avoiding confrontation.¹ That debate most likely provides the context for the leaking to the press, in late 2005, of Hassan Rowhani's address, justifying the freeze on uranium enrichment.² Following Ahmadinezhad's recent announcement that Iran had joined the club of nuclear countries, the same Rowhani publicly called for "more balance ... more reason, and less emotion" in Tehran's approach to the nuclear crisis and advocated negotiations with the West. "Unfortunately," Rowhani was quoted as saying, "with the new [Iranian] administration, nuclear policy and tactics were changed.... Although these tactics had some success, we still had to pay a hefty price."³ Some of the criticism remained anonymous, such as the following statement from a senior Iranian official: "For 27 years after the revolution, America wanted to get Iran to the Security Council and America failed. In less than six months, Ahmadinezhad did that."⁴

Ahadinezhad's camp retorts by pointing out that the previous course of action got Iran nothing, only a freeze on its nuclear development and the exposure to never-ending demands regarding both nuclear and domestic issues. "We know well," declared Ahmadinezhad, "that a country's backing down one iota on its undeniable rights is the same as losing everything."⁵

Former president Khatami joined the public debate after the March 8 referral of Iran's case to the UN Security Council. He, too, openly criticized the government's aggressive approach and called for a return to his government's strategy of confidence building and reconciliation with the West. Khatami warned that confronting the international community could ultimately affect not only the Iranian economy but also Iran's very right to nuclear energy.⁶ Similar positions were proclaimed by Iran's largest reformist party, the Participation Front—headed by Khatami's brother, Muhammad Reza Khatami—and by Iran's largest student organization, Tahkim-e Vahdat (Movement of the Consolidation of Unity). Both urged the Iranian government to suspend uranium enrichment and to cooperate with the international community.⁷ And while hardliners were busy recruiting the parliament to enact legislation binding the government to continue enriching uranium, reformist parliament members, such as the deputy speaker Muhammad Reza Ba-

¹ A detailed description of this political debate was recently provided by Karim Sadjadpour in testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Available online (www.senate.gov/~foreign/testimony/2006/SadjadpourTestimony060517.pdf).

² Text of speech by Supreme National Council Secretary Hassan Rowhani to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council (place and date not given), "Beyond the Challenges Facing Iran and the IAEA Concerning the Nuclear Dossier," *Rahbord* (in Persian), Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Iran/Afghanistan Division (FBIS-IAP20060113336001), September 30, 2005, pp. 7–38.

³ *Financial Times* (Tehran), April 20, 2006, citing Iranian News Agency (IRNA).

⁴ Michael Slackman, "In Iran, Dissenting Voices Rise on Its Leaders' Nuclear Strategy," *New York Times*, March 15, 2006.

⁵ Elaine Sciolino, "Showdown at U.N.? Iran Seems Calm," *New York Times*, March 14, 2006.

⁶ Ibid.; Michael Slackman, "In Iran, Dissenting Voices Rise on Its Leaders' Nuclear Strategy," *New York Times*, March 15, 2006.

⁷ "Iranian Reformers Call for Nuke Freeze, Negotiations," *Iranian Alert Online*, March 19, 2006 (available online at www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1599270/posts); Eli Lake, "Iran Students Asking Regime to Suspend A-Bomb Effort," *New York Sun*, April 20, 2006.

honar, started demanding governmental explanations of the nuclear policy.

Yet another voice in the choir of criticism is that of ex-president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who called on the regime to show “patience and wisdom” and warned that the crisis “is about diplomacy rather than slogans.” Rafsanjani, who lost to Ahmadinezhad in the 2005 presidential elections and who heads Iran’s Expediency Council (an influential political arbitration body), seems to suggest that he could better advance the nuclear program through a policy of “stealth,” implying that he would not necessarily freeze the nuclear program, unlike others who criticize the confrontational approach.

Mounting domestic dissent on the nuclear standoff now echoes in public debates revolving around the theme of “national unity.” Hardliners accuse those criticizing or opposing the government’s nuclear policies of breaking the line of national unity so critical in the face of external pressure. One hardline conservative cleric, Ahmad Khatami (no relation to ex-president Khatami), went so far as to accuse the critics of having “joined the enemy and helped it at the most sensitive time.”⁸ The dissenting voices respond by saying that national solidarity means a wider inclusion in decisionmaking and the right to raise queries and to sound dif-

ferent opinions. “Many people speak of national solidarity,” cleric (and former interior minister) Abdul-Vahid Moussavi-Lari was quoted as saying, “but in practice, take a pair of scissors and eliminate the forces loyal to the system.”⁹ Obviously, no reason exists to call for unity unless disunity in fact exists.

The breadth of the circles actively supporting Ahmadinezhad’s defiant stance is not clear. In any case, the final say on the nuclear policy lies not with Ahmadinezhad but with Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. For weeks Khamenei kept uncharacteristically silent while the debate within the political elites built up around him. Iran’s referral to the UN Security Council finally forced him to sound his voice, and he clearly weighed in with the hardliners, echoing the strongly ingrained “slippery slope” argument. A day after the referral, on March 9, 2006, he publicly stated, “We will resist and continue the path of progress.... If we give in this time, then the Europeans will come up next with new excuses to deprive us from scientific achievements.”¹⁰ “The U.S. administration should know,” added Khamenei later, “that they will suffer two times if they dare to inflict any damage on Iranian interests...Iran will retaliate by damaging the U.S. interests worldwide twice as much as the U.S. may inflict on Iran.”¹¹

⁸ Bill Samii, “Iran: Politicians Seek Unity amidst Nuclear Standoff,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 18, 2006.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Iran’s Supreme Leader Orders Resistance in Nuclear Dispute,” Deutsche Presse-Agentur, March 9, 2006.

¹¹ IRNA, April 26, 2006

Opportunity for the International Community

Contrary to what the Iranian regime would have us believe and to what so many international actors and observers do believe, the support of the Iranian public for their country's nuclear program is not a given. It is true that Iranians are predisposed to a sense of national entitlement to nuclear energy and of basic suspicions toward the outside world, and therefore many of them are susceptible to the effective misinformation and disinformation campaign propagated by the regime. Nevertheless, a surprising divergence of public opinion exists on the issue, as well as an ongoing debate—part of which surfaces despite the regime's concerted efforts at suppression and concealment. The more the nuclear standoff has intensified, highlighting potential costs for Iranians, the more the debate has heightened. As it is poised to halt the Iranian nuclear program through the use of incentives and disincentives, the international community should regard Iranian public opinion as a potentially major vulnerability that could and should be used against the mullah-led regime.

This potential draws on several important sources. First, Iran is characterized by a young population—over two-thirds of the population is under the age of 30—by and large disillusioned with the current clerical regime and yearning for reform. Global in their general attitude, they dislike the idea of having to pay the price of nuclearization by becoming an international pariah and facing international pressures and isolation. Furthermore, they decry the thought of paying the price domestically in terms of economic hardships and, above all, enhancing domestic repression and prolonging the longevity of the regime. Second, these feelings are augmented by the fact that the Iranian economy is a mess. As a result of mismanagement, the public at large does not enjoy in its daily life the benefits of Iran's windfall of oil revenues; little oil income

trickles down and a high (two-digit) percentage of unemployment and inflation exists. Third, even though Iranians at large are suspicious of the United States, they are not fundamentally anti-American. In fact, American symbols are popular with Iranians at large,¹ and most people have been supportive of a U.S.-Iran dialogue and the establishment of relations even when the regime officially dubbed that notion a “forbidden tree.”² Finally, Ahmadinezhad's posture and the ensuing deteriorating dynamics with the international community have clearly polarized Iranian society rather than uniting it behind the nuclear cause.

Against this background it is highly important that the international community makes a conscious policy effort to reach out to the Iranian public through an orchestrated campaign of media and public diplomacy designed to counter the regime's public campaign on the nuclear issue and to spark the domestic debate. The effort should be of high priority and focused, with backing of financial resources and incorporating as many international actors as possible. Its messages should draw on the previously mentioned vulnerable points exposed by the survey of Iranian public opinion to offset tightly controlled official messages. The field should not be left open for the regime to exclusively dominate with its own campaign.

The U.S. administration recently took initial steps in this direction by highlighting its desire to reach out to the Iranian public and

¹ Ironically, although America could be considered unpopular in most of the Middle East, it is very popular in two Middle Eastern countries: Iran and Israel, as well as in the Kurdish area in Iraq.

² Mehdi Khalaji, “Perils and Promises of U.S.-Iranian Negotiations,” *PolicyWatch* no. 1100 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 10, 2006). A public opinion poll conducted in September 2002 by the Iranian official National Institute for Research Studies and Opinion Polls found 74 percent over the age of 15 supported a dialogue with the United States and 45.8 percent believed that Washington's policy on Iran was “to some extent correct.” Subsequently, the pollsters were thrown into jail.

translating it into requests of funds for democracy and public diplomacy efforts, with an emphasis on developing communication channels to the Iranian people.³ Although this beginning is promising, current and projected American and European activities in the field still require much reinforcement in terms of prioritization, scope, volume of broadcasts, development of communication channels, enlistment of international participants, and the contents of the campaign. The aim should be to dramatically increase Iranian audience share, currently in the low percentage points—that is to reach millions, not hundreds of thousands, and affect their thinking.

THE WHAT

This campaign should include and highlight the following messages:

- *The basic message.* The international community is not averse to Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology and to Iranian technological and scientific advancement. In fact, it made available to Iran highly sophisticated technologies when political relations were good. Nor does the international community disregard Iran's important role in the community of nations or disrespect Iran's culture and history. Rather, the issue is the regime's thrust toward nuclear military capabilities. That message should be backed with whatever record exists to support the suspicions against the regime, including its past record of lying to the international community, suspicions reported by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), reports about nuclear military designs and administrative connections implicating the military in uranium enrichment, and the otherwise inexplicable investment in a heavy water reactor. It should be pointed

out that although dozens of countries use nuclear energy, only very few do so through indigenous enriching and reprocessing; mastering those capabilities for civilian purposes is only a screwdriver's turn away from using them for military purposes and thus easily constitutes a potential threat, especially with this regime.⁴

- *The information withheld by the regime.* The regime is withholding essential information from its own public (as well as from the international community). The counter-campaign should provide Iranians with ongoing information about developments in the nuclear crisis as well as basic information concealed by the regime. One example is the regime's failure to disclose the scarcity of raw uranium in Iran and the fact that it is laced with impurities, which will make Iran dependent on external supplies, contrary to the regime's insistence that nuclearization breeds independence. In contrast, Iran's huge oil and, no less important, gas reserves could provide all of Iran's energy needs for many decades to come. Another example is hiding from the public the seismographic threats to nuclear power plants in Iran, which could well materialize into a Chernobyl-like disaster. Iranians who suspect American propaganda should be referred to the reporting of the IAEA, which is an independent international body run by a director who is considered no friend of the U.S. administration.
- *The prices the public may pay for the regime's ambition.* The regime wants to get hold of nuclear capabilities not because Iran really needs them but because it suits the regime's pursuit of domestic power

³ Testimony of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, February 15, 2006. Available online ([http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2006/Rice Testimony/060215.pdf](http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2006/Rice%20Testimony/060215.pdf)); Office of the Spokesman, State Department, (www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/61268.htm).

⁴ By Rowhani's own admission, "a country that possesses fuel cycle technology can enrich uranium, and the country that can enrich uranium to about 3.5 percent [civilian level] will also have the capability to enrich it to about 90 percent [military level]." Text of speech by Supreme National Council Secretary Hassan Rowhani to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council (place and date not given), "Beyond the Challenges Facing Iran and the IAEA Concerning the Nuclear Dossier," *Rahbord* (in Persian), Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Iran/Afghanistan Division (FBIS-IAP20060113336001), September 30, 2005, p. 1.

and international prestige and influence. However, although the regime may enshrine itself in domestic power through the nuclearization process, its nuclear endeavors may actually negatively affect Iran's prestige and influence in the international arena:

- *The domestic dimension.* Success in the nuclear endeavor may grant the regime its wish for more longevity and more freedom of action to repress its citizenry. If this regime goes nuclear, it will be to the detriment of the people. A message to this effect could strongly resonate with the Iranian public.
- *The international dimension.* The regime is misleading its people to believe that Iran can defy the international community and come out without paying a hefty price. The regime is wrong to underestimate international resolve and to overestimate Iran's power in the face of the international community. Although this message should make reference to possible disincentives to the regime, it should at the same time refer to specific incentives offered by the international community in return for halting uranium enrichment in Iran, including an international commitment to provide Iran with light water reactors, nuclear power plants, and cheap fuel to operate them—and rejected by the regime.

Obviously, the credibility of the campaign in the eyes of the Iranian public will be strongly affected by the way both Iran and the international community play their cards in the future and hence the way the standoff between them evolves. The more determined and united the international community appears to be in the eyes of the Iranian public, the more impact the international community could have on the Iranian public. Over the last few months, the heightening atmosphere of crisis (which has already created de facto interna-

tional economic sanctions by encouraging capital flight, discouraging foreign investment, and bringing about a sharp decline in the Iranian stock market index) seems to have fueled domestic dissent in Iran regarding the regime's nuclear policy.⁵ From this perspective, keeping all options on the table while seeking and opening avenues to a more direct dialogue with the Iranian people will be important. This is especially true against the background of the "dialogue" President Ahmadinezhad recently initiated with the United States through a letter to President Bush and the U.S. decision to allow a direct U.S.-Iran engagement regarding the nuclear program, within a multilateral framework and through a package of "carrots" and "sticks."

Against this background, careful attention should be given to the definition and presentation of the relation between the international effort to halt Iran's nuclearization and the West's interests in a more democratic Iran. This attention is critical in order to sustain the credibility of the message in the eyes of the Iranian public and to maximize the powerful potential of tying basic public discontent with the regime to the latter's nuclear ambitions. The recent shift in U.S. policy toward direct engagement of the Iranian regime could well be perceived and interpreted by Iranians at large as an American willingness to go for a deal trading Iran's current nuclear program for guarantees regarding the stability of the regime and its free hand domestically.⁶

The suggested public opinion campaign should therefore clarify that although current U.S. and international efforts are focused on

⁵ By Rowhani's own admission, international pressures coupled with public dissent have a negative effect on the Iranian economy. Text of speech by Supreme National Council Secretary Hassan Rowhani to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council (place and date not given), "Beyond the Challenges Facing Iran and the IAEA Concerning the Nuclear Dossier," *Rahbord* (in Persian), FBIS-IAP20060113336001, September 30, 2005, p. 35.

⁶ See, for example, statement by Abbas Hakim Zadeh, one of the leaders of Iran's largest student organization, Tahkim-e Vahdat, rejecting direct talks between America and Iran if the negotiations centered around security guarantees in exchange for promises on nuclear enrichment. Quoted in Eli Lake, "Determined Foes Mount Challenges to Iran's Mullahs," *New York Sun*, May 25, 2006.

changing Iranian nuclear policy and behavior through engagement, no deal on halting the regime's nuclear program will sell out the Iranian people's aspirations and the international encouragement and support for reform, democracy, and human rights in Iran. Although a deal may provide security guarantees to Iran's territorial integrity, it will not provide guarantees regarding regime continuity in Iran. It would also serve the message to clarify that U.S.-Iran relations cannot be normalized until Tehran abandons terror and other patterns of negative behavior, both at home and abroad.

THE HOW

Policymakers would be well advised to translate these ideas and strategies into an effective working plan. As noted, this campaign requires a prioritized effort backed by designated structural and financial undertakings. While the U.S. government is allocating additional funds to promote democracy in Iran, investing in this type of campaign seems more appropriate and potentially more effective than funding Iranian opposition groups. The United States must do all it can to incorporate as many additional international partners in this endeavor as possible, with an emphasis on America's European allies but also with an eye to some of Iran's neighbors who are concerned about its nuclear ambitions. Given the thick walls of Iranian censorship, every possible channel should be used to reach a significant cross section of the Iranian public, including increased airtime for more popular radio broadcasts, expanded satellite television (which is widely watched in Iran), greater emphasis on the Internet and Farsi blogs, and investment in means to over-

come the extensive jamming efforts carried out by the Iranian regime. The message should be pitched at a level that any layperson in Iran can understand. Through this campaign the international community must remain consistent, forceful, and on message, frequently repeating it and drumming up as much support as possible. Frequent statements by top officials reaching out to the Iranian people and addressing their aspirations are also of importance.

In addition to these improved methods of communication, the United States and its allies must seek out more legitimate and transparent ways of polling Iranians and assembling an honest picture of public opinion. Better ways should be sought and found to poll. These polls must gather statistics in an unbiased, scientific, and comprehensive manner, and they should include the use of more appropriately worded questions and more-accurate measures of Iranian views. Polls should make a distinction between peaceful and military nuclear programs; weigh the cost element of the nuclear program in the level of public support; and be geared toward determining the importance ordinary Iranians place on the nuclear program compared to democratic reform, civil rights protections, or economic prosperity. Most of all, they should measure public support for what could be framed as a package in which nuclearization promotes longevity for the regime. These improved techniques and questions will better reflect the perspectives of the Iranian citizenry, their understanding of the potential internal and external costs of their leaders' actions, and their priorities and desires for the future of Iran.

Why Is Public Opinion Important?

Although the Iranian regime has emerged as a very tough international political player on the nuclear issue, its concerted efforts to rally its people behind the nuclear program demonstrate the leaders' sensitivity to public opinion in this area. As far as this regime is concerned, public support for the nuclear program is a highly important aspect of its strategy to fend off both domestic and external pressures. The more confident the regime grows of public support, the more defiant the regime stands to act. An effective international message to the Iranian people could create more popular pressure regarding the nuclear issue and display to the regime the potentially heavy cost of its current path—namely, the loss of domestic support. Ahmadi-nejhad will probably not be convinced, but perhaps Khamenei will, because an effective campaign sparking a growing public dissent could certainly energize more public figures within the elite to step forward, sound critical voices, and add their input to existing domestic pressure. Iranians' greater willingness to pro-

vide the international community with important and sensitive information about nuclear developments within Iran could be an additional benefit. Indeed, some of the most significant exposures of the current nuclear program were leaked by internal sources in recent years and led to international inspections of certain sites (such as the enrichment facility at Natanz). Internationally, an effective campaign that sparks growing debate and dissent in Iran about the nuclear program could possibly encourage and help maintain a relatively wide coalition pressuring Iran to change course.

Whatever course of action the United States and the international community ultimately take to halt Iran's nuclear program, massive outreach to the Iranian public must be a key element of a broad strategy combining effective "carrots" and sticks—and the sooner the better. The Iranian regime and its policies are quite vulnerable, and the biggest of their vulnerabilities is Iranian public opinion. Why not use this effective weapon against them?

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