

The 2009 Iranian Elections: A Nuclear Timebomb?

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2009/08/11/the-2009-iranian-elections-a-nuclear-timebomb/>

STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, AUG 11 2009

In 2003 Iran made the final in a series of gestures toward possible normalisation in relations with America. The Regime, under the influence of the moderate President Mohammad Khatami, had come to the majority viewpoint that maintaining its course as a pariah state was not in its immediate interests. Iran had assisted America in the invasion of Afghanistan – principally by acting as a mediator in the involvement of the Northern Alliance, and had offered to assist in Iraq. Contact between America and Iran had reached a level unprecedented since before the Islamic revolution, though it was tentative and far from normalised.

Since that point in time, both Iran and America have undergone two Presidential elections. In America, President George W. Bush won a second term in late 2004, and in Iran the moderate experiment of Khatami came to an end with the ultra-conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad triumphing in the Presidential election of 2005. There could not have been a more polarised change in Iranian Presidential politics than the one witnessed in 2005. In 2009 a new President, Barack Obama came to power in America promising a “new beginning” with Iran.[1] For a short while it appeared that a candidate representing a more moderate position in Iranian politics, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, would triumph there – and perhaps answer Obama’s call. Alas, it was not to be. One way or another, Iran will have to reconcile itself to another 4 years of Ahmadinejad and the anti-American jingo-ism he embodies – save the occurrence of a major domestic Iranian incident. There is a risk of over simplifying this issue, and it must be noted before moving forward that Obama’s moves to court Iran are far from universally supported in Washington, nor is it entirely clear how open Iranian political society is to embracing the nation their revolutionary father, Imam Khomeini dubbed ‘The Great Satan’.

Before the wake of the contested 2009 election, the issue of Iranian development of civilian nuclear technology had been the major issue driving international concerns regarding the Islamic Republic. Ahmadinejad’s arrival as President represented a major problem: the overt international mistrust in Iran and its intentions had been downplayed (though certainly not forgotten) during Khatami’s presidency, but would now resurge in full force due chiefly to the belligerent posture of Ahmadinejad and his government. His actions provoke opposition often by default – particularly regarding the perceived ‘personality’ of Iran internationally – in much the same way as President George W Bush did of America amongst nations opposed to his Manichean foreign policy posture. The similarities between the two leaders even caused two prominent Iranian experts to dub Ahmadinejad and his supporters Iranian neoconservatives[2]. The result of this dynamic has been to reinforce stereotypical attitudes and fears over Iran’s character that had somewhat abated, or were at the very least open to interpretation, during Khatami’s Presidency.

One example that can be attributed to Ahmadinejad personally is the resurgence of an openly hostile position towards Israel together with overt holocaust revisionism[3]. His infamous statement that Israel should be ‘wiped off the map’[4] comes immediately to mind. It should be noted that the translation of this remark is subject to contention, and his statement more accurately read that Israel should ‘vanish from the pages of time’.[5] Ahmadinejad’s remarks were a direct attack on the nature of the state of Israel as a racist Jewish state, situated within the Muslim world, which excludes and persecutes Iran’s fellow Muslims (the Palestinians). This is a perception which endures in Iran and is embodied by Ahmadinejad and through the legacy of Khomeini who frequently made similar remarks during his reign as Supreme Leader.

On the other side of the fence, senior members of the Israeli leadership continue to quote the ‘wiped off the map’

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mistranslation, attempting to use it to show the international community, particularly America, that Iran is up to no good and that regime change should be enforced there. There have been allegations that such a plan, including surgical nuclear strikes, was considered at the highest level in the Bush administration[6] [7]. This may seem like an extreme measure, but Israel's situation must be understood within the context of Iran's nuclear development programme. Israel feels vulnerable. It exists in what it calls a 'tough neighbourhood', surrounded by non-democratic regimes. Furthermore, its treatment of the Palestinians has incited a wave of regional discontent and opposition from its neighbours that manifests through measures as extreme as suicide and conventional terrorism right down to standard political pressure. Iran is the embodiment of Israel's fears, a potential peer competitor with an antithetical world and regional view. When the prospect of a nuclear missile is added to the mixture, the situation becomes of immediate toxicity. Israel acutely fears that Iran will attack it when it feels it has the tactical advantage unless concerted action is taken to remove the threat.[8] The personal role of Ahmadinejad, supplanted by his image and his rhetoric, only enhances that fear. The merits of this argument are hotly debated. After all, Israel has one of the most technologically advanced militaries in the world, and maintains an official policy of 'ambiguity' regarding its own nuclear arsenal – which is undoubtedly significant. Israel has by conservative accounts an advanced nuclear arsenal numbering warheads high into the double figures, if not triple figures. It is highly doubtful that Iran would be any match for Israel in a nuclear face off, and any attack would surely signal the gravest consequences for Iran. It is therefore the settled majority opinion of the international community that an Iranian attack on Israel is extremely unlikely; however the determination of Israel to see things differently remains a grave concern.

In the context of the 2009 election, the 'victory' of Ahmadinejad means two major things with regard to international politics. Firstly, it means with near certainty that Iran will continue to pursue nuclear technology and presumably (though no proof can be established) a nuclear weapons program. Though, this point is irrelevant in the practical sense as whether Iran is, or in fact is not building a bomb, its international character is not trusted at its word due in major part (at least currently) to Ahmadinejad. The suspected complicity of the Regime and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in the alleged electoral rigging and Khamenei's well established close relationship to Ahmadinejad will certainly not help. Secondly, by extension, Israel will continue to feel its fears are being ignored by an international community hesitant to act decisively. Israel sees this election as a confirmation that the Iranian regime, if not its people are unwilling to change their desires to endanger Israel.

The return to the office of Israeli Prime Minister by Binyamin Netanyahu is worth mentioning as a final note. Israel now has an established hard line right wing Prime Minister, and Iran has an ultra conservative populist President who has harnessed the nuclear proliferation issue and popular anti-Israeli sentiment to buttress his own power base. Netanyahu stated on the eve of his election that if America does not solve the Iranian problem quickly that Israel will have to act on its own[9]. For Israel, the Islamic Republic of Iran must not *ever* have the ability to build a nuclear bomb. This is an immovable reality, and when the dust settles after the contested Iranian election of 2009, it will remain the principal issue for the international community to address. What will be interesting for observers is whether Ahmadinejad is forced to alter his posture and/or his policies on nuclear proliferation. Will the popular support the project has received in Iran continue in the wake of the apparent split in the Iranian political and clerical elite over Ahmadinejad's Presidency? This may open a new avenue for international negotiators in finding a solution to the previously irreconcilable positions of Israel and Iran and the nuclear issue. Only time will tell.

Notes

[1] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7954211.stm>

[2] Anoushiravan Ehteshami & Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution*, I. B.Tauris, 2007.

[3] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4529198.stm

[4] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4378948.stm

[5] <http://www.antiwar.com/orig/norouzi.php?articleid=11025>

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[6] http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/08/071008fa_fact_hersh

[7] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-plan-for-air-strikes-on-iran-backed-by-brown-395716.html>

[8] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alan-dershowitz/taking-a-stand-against-ir_b_212835.html

[9] <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200903u/netanyahu>

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