

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Elephants in the Room

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, NOV 10 2009

The Iranian President is a rare gift to journalists and analysts of foreign policy. He talks, a lot. Often candidly, in a way that few politicians at his level do; at least in the ultra-polished and spun Western world. Recently, in a true to form display of such candour, Ahmadinejad noted that America under President Obama had not changed from the America of George W. Bush in its foreign policy application in the Middle East. Obama has not closed Guantanamo Bay despite promising to do so, has not altered American refusal to countenance a truly independent Iranian 'civilian' nuclear program, and he has not changed course in Afghanistan nor in Iraq. Similarly, unconditional support for Israel – the frequent demon in Iranian domestic discourse regarding America, has been retained unblemished. Such statements are of course true, despite their unpopular source. Cutting through the friendly appearance and conciliatory rhetoric of the Obama administration, the Nobel Peace Prize fiasco, and considering its refusal to use the term 'War on Terror' do not detract from the reality that regarding foreign policy towards the Middle East, nothing of substance has indeed changed. The fact that arguably the world's most notorious 'elected' statesman has pointed towards this elephant in the room does not mean that it should be ignored.

The wider context of these statements by Ahmadinejad was the news that Iran had yet again stalled on signing a nuclear compromise deal. The quest to find a mutually acceptable way for the international community, most vocally America, to tolerate the reality of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) having a nuclear programme dates back to 2003 when the EU-3 (Britain, Germany and France) collectively pursued a diplomatic solution to the issue. Faced with American insistence that the IRI was not to be trusted with enriching uranium due to the possibility that this could be used to build nuclear weapons, and the general climate internationally considering the Bush Doctrine and invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, there were genuine concerns that a major regional incident would unfold including a possible preventive attack on Iran's nuclear facilities by either Israel, America or both in tandem. After all, this had happened before in 1981 when Israel secretly bombed a French built Iraqi nuclear plant over fears that Iraq *might* use it for a nuclear weapons program. The EU-3 process failed to reach a conclusive deal, though it did have some success in stalling the Iranian programme.

A change of administration in America, and the highly publicised promise to 'reach out a hand' to the IRI by Obama, brought America into direct involvement in the successor P-5+1 negotiations which included the original EU-3, China, Russia and America. This was a landmark in itself considering that there have been no direct official negotiations between America and Iran for almost 30 years: Perhaps one notable change in American foreign policy that Ahmadinejad has omitted. Despite this, no deal with any realistic chance of long term success looks likely to be made. Why? The international order as we have come to know it, and the IRI are incompatible. This is the inescapable fact of international politics that no sugar coating can mask. The IRI will continue to enrich uranium, and continue to generally do what it likes in spite of international diplomatic rambling – much as it has done since 1979. Perhaps a deal will be fashioned, but if so, it is highly unlikely that it will serve as anything more than a stalling move in a larger political game by the IRI. America may have not changed much recently as Ahmadinejad laments; but then again, neither has the IRI.

The IRI owes its existence to its identity as a reaction to the Western way of life and of doing business. To come to a conciliation with the international community, spearheaded by the American insistence that Iran must not ever have full mastery of the nuclear cycle is in essence dismantling the foundations and the pride of the Regime. From its inception it was a lone actor, surviving in spite of the uproar within the international community over the 1979 hostage

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crisis and a gruelling war with Iraq, which it did not start. In short, it has a siege mentality soldered into its psyche. In another respect, Iran has always been a nation that despite different manifestations in its internal shape and character has aspired to a greater stature internationally – or at the very least regional predominance. For example, the Shah of Iran whose rule was brought to an end by the 1979 Revolution that created the IRI, had grand designs for Iran as the premier nation of the Middle East. This vision was shared by successive American administrations, particularly the Nixon and Ford administrations which generously armed Iran with advanced weaponry and aircraft in the mid 1970's at levels dwarfing its regional peers, including Israel. The current regime is in this sense, no different to the Shah, with the significant caveat that the regional and global role Iran was to play under the Shah was largely in line with western desires, while the role the IRI envision is perceived as deeply antagonistic at best. Put simply, the IRI does not consider itself the pariah state the international community, especially America, sees it as. It views itself as an ambassador for a non-western way of life, free of a perceived American global hegemony.

At a time when Iran is internally politically volatile – particularly after the contested Iranian elections of 2009 which saw Ahmadinejad controversially re-elected – it would be political suicide for the Regime, of which Ahmadinejad is chief spokesman, to take a 'deal' over an issue with as much primacy as its nuclear program. The recent course of domestic Iranian politics has determined the course of Iranian foreign affairs – and no statesmanship is likely to alter this, no matter how skilled. When Ahmadinejad replaced the 'moderate' Khatami as President (though one should not read a clear distinction here as of course, the nuclear program actually began under Khatami, not Ahmadinejad), the Iranian regime decided to return to its traditional values of confrontation with the wider world as voiced by Imam Khomeini, the father of the Revolution. The possibility of moderation and/or reform of the IRI died a decisive death when Ahmadinejad retained his Presidency and received full backing from the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. Meanwhile, The Iranian people are often said to be at odds with the Regime, favouring a more liberal, or dare it be said 'westernised' way of life. Perversely, the internal desire for a changing Iran is likely to have the opposite effect with respect to international politics as the Regime seeks to quieten the weaknesses it is experiencing at home with a show of strength abroad over the nuclear program and in its general foreign policy; a tactic that is observed time and time again in politics. For now, the Regime most certainly has enough momentum to survive at least in the near term. The Western negotiators should therefore stop attempting to negotiate with the Iran they would like to see and accept reality. This may mean that the nuclear negotiations may have to be significantly altered, perhaps abandoned, and the international community may have to accept that they cannot control or influence the IRI directly now that it has chosen its path. All attempts to do so will only provoke more animosity from the IRI and embolden it further. Presumably the extremely ill-considered idea to attack Iran is now 'off the table', therefore the aforementioned is the only realistic choice, no matter how unsavoury.

The latest 'deal' offered to Iran on the nuclear issue was the most conciliatory yet – by all standards a very generous deal. However, it denied the IRI the freedom it desires and the respect it demands. In its mind, why should it have its right to civilian nuclear power subject to strict bargained conditions when other countries do not have to suffer this? More controversially, Iran's regional neighbour, Israel, has a large clandestine nuclear weapons program which it refuses to officially admit or open up to international inspection. This is the second elephant in the room. Iran is quite rightly pointing out international hypocrisy. There is, for better or worse, a blatant double standard in effect here and the IRI is quite willing and able to play this card effectively. That double standard exists because despite all other factors and possible compromises yet to come, the IRI will never be trusted by America or many of its international counterparts. For any progress to be made, either the IRI must cease to exist in its current format, or the international community, principally America in this case, must fundamentally change its stance on the IRI and allow it to assert itself in spite of Israel – including allowing Iran to develop its civilian nuclear program as it sees fit unless there is clear and incontrovertible evidence of a clandestine weapons program. Neither of the aforementioned changes are likely any time soon. Deadlock has characterised Iran's role in international relations since 1979, and deadlock will almost certainly continue to characterise it in the near future as long as Iran remains the IRI. Hence, as the old saying goes; the more things change the more they stay the same.

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