



Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel

Iran -

An International Challenge

By Dr. Emanuele Ottolenghi

Iran's Power Politics

Iran's June 12 presidential elections represent a watershed for Western policymakers hoping to crack the code of their nuclear standoff with Iran. Henceforth, it will be hard to ignore the blatant rigging of the results, the brutal repression of peaceful street protests, and the crackdown on reformist figures across the clerical establishment, the political elites and the media.

Western hopes that Iran's elections could constitute a positive turning point in the nuclear negotiations were dashed. Mir Hossein Mousavi's career suggested he was the regime's poster child. Mousavi, the only one of three challengers to the incumbent, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, reputed to stand a chance to win, was not the kind of reformist many Westerners had imagined him to be. After all, Mousavi, as prime minister of Iran in the 1980s, presided over the early years of the Revolution, with its mass purges of dissidents and the ferocious internal repression against opponents of the regime. Mousavi is reputed to have had a direct role in mandating the terror attacks in Beirut, in 1983, against the US marines barracks (241 dead) and the French paratroopers (53 dead). And he was privy to the decision of the regime, in 1987, to turn to Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdel Khader Khan, to clandestinely procure nuclear technology that would enable Iran to build its own nuclear military programme. Admittedly then, Mousavi probably would not have offered a different policy on Iran's nuclear ambitions to the West – and this, on the mistaken assumption that the president has the final word on nuclear matters. And possibly, he might not have been the agent of internal change that many assumed he could be. Regardless, the consensus in Western capitals was that his election would still make a difference. Therefore, it would be unhelpful, especially at a time when the new US Administration was offering engagement to Iran, to expand the sanctions regime and tighten the pressure on Iran before the vote. Such a move, diplomats reasoned, would give succour to the radicals inside the regime without yielding substantial results in the short term.

Nobody anticipated the turn of events that followed the elections – and given Mr Mousavi's profile, one can only assume that the regime's reaction was to the wave of popular mobilization triggered by his candidacy. Clearly, the regime must have assumed that it could lose control of the 'Green Wave' and would ultimately be swept away by the yearning for change that its restive population was hoping for. The elections, paradoxically, have offered some clarity then – the most intransigent elements of Iran's ruling elites are firmly in power. They are uninterested in the international image of their country. An economic cost-and-benefits analysis is secondary to

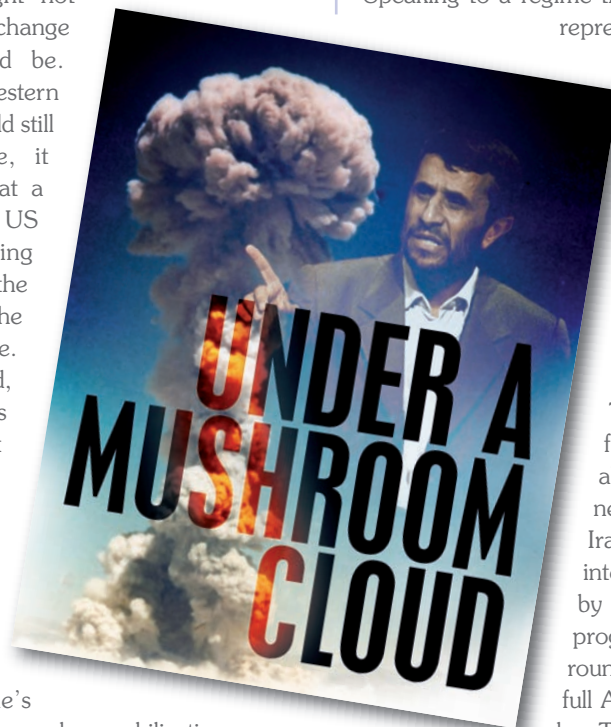
their concerns. And they have decided to do away with the appearance of democracy that the electoral process offered to Iran's propaganda machine. They also have revived conspiracy theories and sought to shut off any avenue for dialogue with the West. Amidst human rights violations, Iran's rulers have revived the spectre of sordid Western plots to undermine their authority and targeted Western journalists and diplomats. Arresting British embassy staff after expelling two British diplomats and throwing a French student into the dungeons of Evin Prison is unlikely to encourage the EU to pretend the elections and the regime's subsequent behavior can be ignored. At the same time, the widespread popular protests, the considerable, and considerably visible, cracks in the regime have also exposed another aspect of Iran's power politics which Western diplomats would be foolish to ignore: this regime's legitimacy rests on shaky grounds – the extent of its repression and the inability to fully impose order after a month are a measure of such internal weakness.

An International Dilemma

Herein then lies the dilemma for the international community – but especially Western democracies. Relying on the possibility of an Iranian democratic counterrevolution to unblock the nuclear impasse is more a hope than a strategy. The demise of the Islamic Republic could happen tomorrow, in six months, or in six years. The nuclear programme's timeline is much shorter.

Speaking to a regime that concocts enemies abroad to justify repression at home is unlikely to yield a suitable compromise – a weakened regime that relies on repression to survive will not be prone to concessions that might show weakness to its internal opponents. Shaking its leaders' blood stained hands as if nothing happened will not buy the West a deal – it will only buy time for the regime.

That Iran's main strategy is buying time for its nuclear programme should be abundantly clear. Despite constant negotiations over nearly seven years, Iran has conceded nothing to the international community. As documented by reports of the IAEA, its nuclear programme marches on, regardless of two rounds of incentives offered to Tehran with full American backing. As recently revealed by The Times, Iran's suspension of its clandestine military programme in 2003, which was first reported by the joint estimate of 16 US intelligence agencies in December 2007 in the National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, had nothing to do with Iranian fears of US invasion after the demise of Saddam Hussein. It also had nothing to do with a decision taken under the presidency of reformist Iranian leader, Mohammad Khatami, to pursue negotiations with the US through a back channel. Instead, it had



to do with the fact that Iran's scientists had completed the weaponisation programme far in advance of completing their efforts to enrich uranium at weapons' grade level and well before Iran's ballistic missile programme could produce an effective means of delivery of a warhead.

For the international community, the choice at this point is between prevention of Iran's bid for a nuclear weapons (through sanctions if possible and military action if necessary) and deterrence (through massive military deployments, public warnings, iron guarantees to threatened allies, extension of a nuclear umbrella and the like). Prevention has its costs and uncertainties – and especially in the case of the military option, it is understandable that policymakers in the West would be loath to subscribe to it. The debate over what to do with Iran's nuclear ambitions however forgets to look at the price tag carried by the alternative.

In his bid for re-election, Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that Iran is a nuclear power, ready (and entitled) to take an active role in running the world. Assuming Iran will succeed in its goals, what would the world look like under the shadow of an Iranian nuclear arsenal? Does Iran seek nuclear capability merely as an instrument of dissuasion against what it sees as powerful and threatening enemies? Or is the bomb an instrument to fulfil Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East? Can Iran be deterred, much like the Soviet Union was?

To answer, we must grasp the nature of Iran's regime.

30 years after its Revolution, Iran's regime remains devoted to its founding ideals – not just the establishment of an Islamic order inside Iran, but also its export to the region, in open antagonism with the established Sunni Arab powers, and beyond, in the name of a Shi'a brand of anti-Western revolutionary zeal. In the context of Islam, Iran's aim no doubt is to redress what is clearly perceived as a terrible injustice of Islamic history – the dominance of Sunni over Shi'a Islam. While traditional Shi'a Islam sees the origins of this schism – the martyrdom in Karbala of the Prophet's grandson at the hands of his political adversaries – as a tragedy to mourn, the fiery brand of revolutionary Shi'ism espoused by Iran's revolutionary clergy viewed it as an injustice to be redressed. This indicated that the era of Sunni dominance could be challenged – and under Iran's leadership the Shi'a would regain its leadership at the expense of the other powers, whose monarchical rule Iran's revolution viewed as the iniquitous outcome of that schism. Iran's revolutionary worldview thus poses a direct challenge to Sunni dominance in the world of Islam and Sunni monarchic rule in the heartland of Islam – Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf.

But this should not be construed, simplistically, as evidence of Shi'a hatred for Sunni Muslims or proof of the irreconcilable nature of the Shi'a-Sunni divide. Iran's revolution seamlessly blended the subversive and the divine – Shi'a revivalism alongside Marxist revolutionary doctrines – turning Iran into a power constantly searching for a new regional status quo. This synthesis transcended both Iran and Shi'ism. Its goal was to put Iran at the helm of a revolutionary front stretching across the barrier of Persian/Arab, Shi'a/Sunni and East/West divisions,

in the name of a common struggle against imperialism, the dominance of Western values and their underlying international economic and political order. It proclaims Iranian leadership in a worldwide front of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist forces and it seeks to limit or nullify the influence of its enemies in the region and beyond.

Iranian Domination

The new world that Iran seeks to create will be dominated by Tehran. It will be characterised by fierce competition with the U.S. for hegemony over the Gulf and by efforts to cement alliances to confront Iran's ideological antagonists: America and Israel. Challenging the regional status quo and the economic, legal and political foundations of the international order remain today at the heart of Iran's revolution. Iran's quest for nuclear weapons must be understood and explained within this context.

Iran's nuclear ambitions do not necessarily serve the logic of apocalyptic politics – though its shrill rhetoric suggests otherwise. The fact of the matter is, an Iranian bomb would enable Tehran to fulfil the goals of the Revolution without using it. For if there is one purpose for nuclear capability, it is power projection; a nuclear bomb is a force multiplier that, as US President Barack Obama aptly said, constitutes a game changer. Iran's success will forever change the Middle East – and for the worse. Once obtained, an Iranian bomb will set Iran on a collision course with its regional adversaries and its ideological banes.

Terrorists will act with impunity under Iran's nuclear umbrella; and neighbours will proliferate in response – these are givens. Less understood are the dynamics that will emerge even if Iran chooses not to use the bomb against its enemies. Little does it matter that Tehran may act rationally. Yes, Western arsenals and an explicit threat to use them may deter Iran against initiating a nuclear strike. But the possibility of an uneasy peace that a nuclear equilibrium may guarantee tells us next to nothing about the conventional proxy wars nuclear powers wage against one another. During the Cold War, the price of nuclear equilibrium – never settled, always fragile – was the recognition of spheres of influence. If Iran goes nuclear, the Western world will have to negotiate a Middle East Yalta with Tehran – one that may entail a retreat of US forces from the region, an unpleasant bargain for the smaller principalities on the Gulf's shores and an unacceptable one for Israel and Lebanon's Christians. Middle East crises that are difficult to resolve today will become intractable, much like conflicts in Africa and Central America had to wait for the collapse of the Soviet Union in order to come to pass.

And in the end, we may not avoid a conflict either. Even the Soviet Union and the United States teetered on the brink of nuclear war at least once, during the Cuba missiles crisis. It happened between two countries who knew each other well, had diplomatic relations, and kept important official and discreet channels of communication open even as they competed for ideological dominance. Iran and many of its prospective nuclear adversaries do not share such luxury – no Israeli or American embassy in Tehran, no hotline between the

Supreme Leader and the Saudi King. The potential for misreading, misunderstanding and miscalculating is immense, especially as Iran will aggressively pursue its revolutionary aims of changing the region to its own ideological image under the shadow of the bomb.

We can ill afford this risk. That is why Iran must be stopped at all costs

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Israel's place in the Middle East



The Objectives of the Liberal Democrat Friends of Israel

- Maximise support for the State of Israel within the Liberal Democrats and Parliament
- Develop a relationship of mutual trust and respect between the Liberal Democrats and the Jewish community
- Support and promote policies which lead to peace and security for Israel in the context of a comprehensive and lasting Middle East peace settlement.
- To encourage a broad understanding of Israel's unique political situation as the only democracy in the Middle East.

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