



# The Rise and Impact of Iran's Neocons

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## Anoush Ehteshami

*Professor Anoush Ehteshami is Professor of International Relations and Head of the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University. He was Vice President of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) 2000-2003. His book-length publications since 2000 include Reform in the Middle East Oil Monarchies (coeditor); Globalization and Geopolitics in the Middle East: Old Games, New Rules; Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution (with Mahjoob Zweiri); The Middle East's Relations With Asia and Russia (coeditor); The Foreign Policies of Middle East States (coeditor); Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era (coauthor); Iran and Eurasia (coeditor).*

## Introduction: New Domestic Trends Versus Enduring Iranian Interests

Iran has continued to loom large on the West's radar since the shocks of 2003 and 2005, the revelations about its nuclear program, and the election of a neo-conservative to Iran's presidency. For the United States, the country is said to pose a formidable challenge. For others, like Israel, it is said to represent an existential threat. Several of Iran's Muslim neighbors accuse it of intentionally meddling in their affairs.

### Domestic Trends

Iran is a country in which factional politics continue to reign, and its complex elite structure is divided among three distinct political camps: conservative, reformist, and neoconservative. The conservatives enjoy the support of the clergy and Ayatollah Khamenei's political circle, and this group believes in a mixed economy (state intervention alongside market forces), and an economy and society that are not closely associated with the West. The neoconservatives, in contrast, are closely associated with Iran's security apparatus and the radical factions of the clerical establishment. This movement represents a new breed of conservatism that is politically and economically populist and that is driven by the basic instincts of the revolutionary period. This faction tends to see the world through a security lens and is keen to export the fruits of Iran's Islamic revolution to the rest of the region and beyond.

Between these two factions stand Iran's reformists, who believe in the reform of Iran's power structures,

the necessity of opening them up to public scrutiny and accountability, and the reform of Iran's economy and its foreign relations. This latter goal includes a desire for better diplomatic and political relations with the rest of the world, including the United States, and for open economic links. This camp is now closely allied with the centrist forces around former President Hashemi-Rafsanjani.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in 2005 proved that Iran was still a deeply polarized society 25 years after the victory of the revolution. His victory showed that a significant number of Iranians strongly support non-reformists and believe in neoconservatives' demands for the redistribution of wealth, elimination of poverty, eradication of corruption, and protection of the Islamic nature of the state. Despite these populist statements and goals, however, Ahmadinejad does represent a far more radical shift in the social structure of the country's elite than is immediately apparent, and his multifaceted agenda has presented a more radical program even in comparison to the first revolutionary generation. He himself hails from those who inherited the country from the monarchist Pahlavis and thus formed the country's new, emerging, urban-based social classes. Many of his core allies come from the ranks of the populist and powerful Islamic Republic's Revolutionary Guards Corp (Sepah), and they are eager to defend Ahmadinejad and this new power base at the heart of the state. Religion dominates the lives of these people. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his presidency are products of this social environment.

## Enduring Interests

Iran's policies are as much a product of regional circumstances as they are of domestic imperatives. Therefore, the Iranian neocon movement aside, it is vital that we understand the relationship between Iran's historical regional interests and recent domestic trends, and learn to act on both factors for the sake of regional stability. Iran's international interests and objectives will not change overnight, even in light of the ascendancy of the "neocons" in Tehran.

Several Middle Eastern states, Turkey, and many members of the European Union (EU) now recognize the complexity of the relationship between Iran's domestic politics and its external behavior and have framed their responses to Tehran's policy initiatives by combining overtures with the insistence on "red lines." A similar understanding from Washington is now the only way of breaking the regional logjam.

Despite Iran's many excesses and inconsistencies, its geopolitical, cultural, and economic weight in West Asia means that the United States must initiate its own "critical dialogue" with Tehran if we are to avoid another major and costly confrontation in the Middle East. This is not to suggest that Iran be "rewarded" for questionable behaviour, but be encouraged to swim in a direction consistent with the aspirations of its neighbors and compatible with a reinvigorated process for peaceful change in the region.

This brief examines the details and realities of the rise of Iranian neocons under President Ahmadinejad, its domestic and foreign effects, and the future trends in both popular and elite circles on social, economic, and foreign policy issues—trends that do not fall entirely within the narrow confines of Iranian elite circles. The brief concludes with a strong argument for balanced, long-term, strategic US engagement of Iran on its enduring geopolitical interests, the latter of which are shared among factions and will affect Iranian behavior regardless of the ruling faction or party.

## Electoral Barriers to Reform, Part I: Manipulated Institutions

In preparing for the March 8 elections to Iran's eighth Majlis (the country's legislative body), forces of all political colors and persuasions were

rushing around to organize winnable platforms. A total of 768 candidates vied for these 290 seats, submitting their applications to the Interior Ministry and the Council of Guardians (CG). This election, like many of its predecessors, is likely to be of great importance both in policy terms, and in terms of providing us with an accurate reading of the balance of power in Iran's faction-ridden political system. As of this writing, the results seem to affirm Ahmadinejad's ascendancy.

The electoral time shifted in 2004 as the conservative-dominated CG barred more than 2,500 of 8,172 prospective candidates (including the president's brother, several clerics, and several dozen incumbent members of Parliament) from registering for the seventh Majlis elections. Only under intense pressure did it reinstate a few hundred of these applications. The majority of the barred candidates belonged to the reformist camp, and in the elections, the conservatives secured more than 150 seats and the reform bloc no more than 60. Turnout was 50 percent, much higher than predicted, but low enough to steal some of the conservatives' thunder.

Against this backdrop, it was not surprising that for nearly a year political forces were busy drawing new battle lines in anticipation of the next campaign. Indications that the reform bloc would assemble a coalition of 21 parties and organizations, and that it would suffer from institutional bias have been received with dismay both inside and outside of Iran and abroad. Indeed, before the end of January, the Interior Ministry had announced that 3,000 prospective candidates, most of them reformists, had been disqualified. This mass disqualification removed the biggest barrier to the victory of the hardliners, but paradoxically it also sharpened the boundaries between the traditional conservatives around the "leader" (Khomeini) and the CG, and the entrenched neoconservative forces around the president and his security establishment-driven alliances.

Out of the initial 7,000 prospective candidates registered for the eighth Majlis, fewer than 4,200 remained in the race; even these had to be vetted by the CG. In Tehran alone, the Interior Ministry's vetting process had declared 400 out of 1,400 hopefuls ineligible. Perhaps the hardest hit in the vetting process were the Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF)—Iran's largest reformist party—and

the reformist Islamic Revolution Mojahedeen Organization (IRMO). All prospective candidates fielded by IIPF and IRMO in Tehran were rejected. Of 200 IIPF hopefuls registered throughout Iran, 190 were disqualified. Many of those were key lawmakers or cabinet ministers under President Khatami. The reformist National Confidence Party said that more than 70 percent of its candidates had been rejected by the Interior Ministry authorities.

## Electoral Barriers to Reform, Part II: Popular Support for Radical Conservatism

Looking back at the outgoing Majlis, it was suggested that after their victory in 2004 the conservative-dominated seventh Majlis would be eager to conduct business with the West, and would be more receptive to engaging in dialogue with the United States and to pursuing peace and stability in the region. As we know, this proved wishful thinking and the seventh Majlis adopted a hard-line foreign policy agenda. The seventh Majlis did, however, unleash political forces, paving the way for the overwhelming victory of Ahmadinejad in June 2005's presidential election—a victory that resulted not only from the exclusion of most reformist candidates, but also from the popular will of many of the disenfranchised and highly religious citizens in Iran.

In short, despite the manipulation by the CG, the election of Ahmadinejad constituted a watershed in Iranian politics.<sup>1</sup> There are two main reasons for Rafsanjani's defeat and Ahmadinejad's success: Rafsanjani's failure to gain the support of Ayatollah Khamenei and his coterie of advisers, and Rafsanjani's failure to convince the people of his sincerity and the soundness of his policy priorities.

At a broader level, reformists and even dissidents failed to understand the possibility of a regressive revolution taking hold in the country. They assumed that their slogans in support of political development, multiparty politics, and the integration of Iran into the international system would guarantee their place at the center of power, giving them perpetual victory in elections.

However, Ahmadinejad's victory has demonstrated that Iran remains a deeply polarized society a quarter of a century after the revolution. Just as Khatami's victories in 1997 and

2001 revealed grassroots support for reform and Iran's integration into the international community, Ahmadinejad's victory has shown that a significant number of Iranians strongly oppose the reformists.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has presented himself as a politician who wants to serve the Iranian nation, in particular those who were forgotten by previous governments. His social and religious background is implicit in his every move and statement. Using religious phrases about the return of the hidden Shia Imam, for example, or speaking extensively about the need for social justice and redistribution of wealth, he has consolidated his populist credentials despite his failure to keep many of his campaign promises. He also has brought many new but inexperienced faces into politics, none of which are women's.

Despite his populist rhetoric and goals, Ahmadinejad does represent a far more radical shift in the social structure of the country's elite than is immediately apparent, and his multifaceted agenda is an even more radical program than that of the first revolutionary generation. His family inherited the country from the Pahlavis and thus formed the country's new, emerging, urban-based social classes. The majority of this group comprises migrants from rural areas to the capital, swelling its population to 12 million.

From the outset, the interests of these internal migrants have been inextricably linked to those of the Islamic regime, and it is only with Ahmadinejad that they feel their voice being heard in the halls of power. Many of his core allies, moreover, hail from the ranks of the populist and powerful Islamic Revolution's Guards Corps (Sepah), and together they are keen to defend Ahmadinejad and this new power base in both the executive and legislative branches of government. These forces are dominated by their religious beliefs. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his presidency are products of this social environment.

Elected on an anticorruption and religio-populist platform, Ahmadinejad's second-round success in the ballot enabled him to take office as the clear champion of Iranian conservatism—articulating a neoconservative position somewhat different from that of the circle of merchants and mullahs around Khamenei. President Ahmadinejad began to adopt policies that were consistent with his new priorities and

endeavored to move beyond the established interests of the state as drawn by the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations. Ahmadinejad's policy pronouncements were unnerving at home and abroad, and they renewed suspicions of Iran's motives and strategic objectives in the region. Iran, it can be argued, entered a new era of post-détente after August 2005.<sup>2</sup>

The Iranian neocons are in power because they “rediscovered” the traditional lower and middle classes and because they separated themselves from the traditional conservatives, who were seen as not having done enough to protect the masses. The masses were also angered by the corruption among Iranian politicians, who were perceived as self-interested, and as using their offices for personal gain. Ahmadinejad used opposition to corruption to great effect in his campaign, arguing that such people were not only immoral but also untrustworthy, for they had abused the religion of the people. Only he, Ahmadinejad claimed, could rid the republic of these unworthy politicians.

His election for the first time brought into the political mix the powerful Sepah and has given them a strong political voice in both domestic and external affairs of the republic. The Ahmadinejad administration, therefore, marks a break in both policy terms and outlook from its reformist and conservative predecessors.

## External Imprint: The Foreign Policy Impacts of Radical Populism

President Ahmadinejad's foreign policy agenda has shown a hardening of Tehran's line.<sup>3</sup> Several cases reflect this reality: pronouncements on Israel in October and December 2005 and his position on the EU3 (France, England, and Germany) negotiations over Iran's nuclear activities.

### Zionism and Israel

The president's call for Israel to be “wiped off the map” in his speech at the “World Without Zionism” conference signalled a very different approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict from that established in the early 1990s by President Rafsanjani. This speech was followed by two more in which he raised doubts about the validity of the Holocaust, and a call for the West to host a Jewish state. In his presentation to the extraordinary summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Mecca in December

2006, the president made a formal submission to his counterparts of the need to remove the oppression of “the usurper regime” for the sake of Islam. He proposed setting up an OIC commission to plan for a referendum on the future of Mandate Palestine to be held after the return of Palestinian refugees to their former homeland. In his second speech in December, carried live on Iranian television, he not only questioned the truth of the Holocaust, but also proposed to the West that if “[you] committed the crime, then give a part of your own land in Europe, the United States, Canada, or Alaska to them so that the Jews can establish their country.”

Whatever the operational realities of Tehran's actual policies, the content of the president's speeches have been widely interpreted as a hardening of Iran's position toward the peace process and a new effort to lead the rejectionist camp in the region. Iran, it was said, was moving away from the middle ground. Evidence of this proposition emerged in the summer of 2006 when Iran stood squarely behind Hezbollah's 34-day war with Israel.

Concerns over the possibility of a direct confrontation between Iran and Israel raised the temperature in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and increased their worries about the direction of Iran's regional strategy under Ahmadinejad. For such countries as Pakistan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman—which have been striving to build links with the Jewish state—the Iranian president's call for the destruction of Israel went down like a lead balloon. The Arab world's collective condemnation of President Ahmadinejad's message added a new geopolitical twist to an already tense situation. In security terms, the president's comments added to the sense of crisis being generated by Tehran—an unsettling reality for Iran's neighbors who had become accustomed to the conciliatory line of the previous two presidents, who between them had been in power for 16 consecutive years. The winds of change blowing from Tehran were received with much trepidation.

### Nukes

The second example relates to the nuclear discussions that have dominated Tehran's relations with the West since 2003. Ahmadinejad's UN speech in September 2005 and his key personnel changes in Iran's negotiating team (the latest being the depart-

ture of Ali Larijani and his replacement by a neocon hard-liner, Saeed Jalili) provide the most direct examples of the new thinking in Iran. After two European-backed UN Security Council resolutions against Iran for its nuclear excesses, we are now far from the Paris agreement of November 2004 in which Iran and the EU3 talked optimistically of forging closer economic ties and creating a regionwide security structure on the back of a nuclear agreement. With Iran's GCC neighbors highly suspicious of Iran's moves and motives, it is less likely that they will accept Iran's terms for closer security discussions without having a US presence at the talks, something that the current Iranian administration will find harder to accept.

This said, US policymakers must understand that Ahmadinejad's tougher stance is nonetheless consistent with Iran's view that the country's right to peaceful use of nuclear technology, know-how, and power are enshrined in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and therefore any agreements that Iran reaches with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) or the EU3 will be based on the demonstration of good will by the negotiating parties and a clear recognition of Iran's rights under the NPT. Ahmadinejad is comfortable that Iran is meeting all its NPT obligations and therefore not in breach of IAEA rules—as he puts it, “the nuclear file is closed.” Furthermore, he has gone on the offensive since summer 2007 and has challenged the EU3, the United States, or the IAEA to identify breaches in Iran's NPT responsibilities, support for which has arrived from a most unexpected quarter: the collected wisdom of the United States' 16 intelligence agencies in the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) released in December 2007.

For the Iranian leadership, the agreement reached between Iran and the IAEA, on August 27, 2007, according to which UN questions about tests with plutonium—fuel for atomic bombs, which Iran says it has no intention to make—were resolved, and the UN watchdog considered the issue closed. Since then, the Iranian president has insisted that the nuclear file is no longer a matter for international concern or pressure. Overall, the wider security fallout from Iran's nuclear ambitions has not been systematically considered in Tehran—that is, Iran's nuclear policies are based on internal prerogatives and the principles of Article IV of the NPT as much as they are on a cold calculation of geopolitical consequences, based on a realistic understanding and acceptance

by Iranian decision makers of the worst-case threat scenarios of its own neighbors.

### The Regional Security Backdrop: Oscillations Between Détente and Confrontation

Since 9/11, the “securitization” of international politics and grand geopolitical developments in West Asia have had such a dramatic impact on the Iranian polity that today its administration, if not many of its personnel, is dominated by the security spirit of the revolution. Policy in Iran (as elsewhere) is not shaped in a vacuum, and the role of the wider context in determining the national agenda should not be overlooked. What this implies is that positive changes in the regional environment could translate into the strengthening of moderate forces in Tehran and in due course moderate Iran's role abroad.

While future positive developments are therefore possible, for the time being the international community remains uneasy about Iran's nuclear activities, which link to worries about Iran's regional role. Iran's Arab neighbors, particularly the GCC countries, have become apprehensive about Iran's nuclear program on the one hand, and about the failure of negotiations leading to a new war in the region, on the other. For Riyadh, the first nightmare scenario is a nuclear-armed Iran, closely followed by a second nightmare scenario of an American (or US-Israeli) military attack on Iran. They fear the direct military as well as the indirect social, economic, and political costs of such a conflict. If the United States and/or Israel eventually take military action against Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and Iran is unable to target the United States itself, then the comments of Iran's military commanders and political figures about Iran's military contingencies lead one to conclude that it will have little choice but to unleash a regional war on the friends and allies of the United States.

Ultimately, while the main threats to its national security may have been eliminated (notably the removal of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban), Iran's own activities (in the nuclear realm amongst others) and political priorities are such that it could now be generating such huge security challenges for the future that it could end up with little alternative but to build up its defenses in anticipation of external confrontations. Thus, the dawn of post-détente in Iran's regional policies has left a big mark on an already tense regional system.

The position that Tehran has been adopting since the autumn of 2005 raises several issues about Iranian intentions within the regional security system. If any new evidence for this observation was needed, then one need look no further than the Lebanon crisis and the significant role that Iran has consequently managed to carve for itself at the heart of the Arab world. Like most wars, this one injected a noticeable degree of dynamism into the regional system and allowed the proactive parties to it to capitalize on its course and make gains at its end. In Iran's case, the gain has been at the regional level, giving it another platform for the exercise of its role in the Middle East in general, and in the Gulf in particular.

Iraq and the standoff between Iran and the United States have overshadowed Iran's relations with its neighbors, despite attempts to defuse tensions following the Lebanon war in 2006 and the political crisis in Palestine from mid-2007. As 2007 drew to a close, we saw evidence of the United States' desire to engage with Tehran over Iraq as it invited Tehran to a fourth round of bilateral discussions. At about the same time as this announcement was made, US General James Simmons (who is based in Iraq) stated on November 15 that in the US estimation, Tehran appeared to be honoring its pledge to stem the flow of arms into Iraq, contributing to a sharp fall in the number of roadside bomb attacks in recent months. However, to add to the confusion in relations, by mid-December 2007 the US military was again suggesting that Iran was supplying insurgents with weapons and logistical support. So, the Iraq-US-Iran saga is likely to continue.

America's growing confidence in the success of its military "surge" strategy in Iraq, however, made it easier for Washington to deal directly with Tehran; but ironically, it also brought a renewed focus on Iran's role and presence in Iraq and a greater awareness of the real challenge that Tehran could pose to the US efforts to stabilize Iraq. Iran's extensive links with the rainbow of Iraqi actors has meant that Tehran has enjoyed considerable access to the power elite of Iraq. Iran's political reach means that the United States can do little in Iraq in the short to medium term without Iranian involvement, which in turn gives Tehran a considerable advantage.

In addition, the relative stability in Iraq doubled the US focus on Iran's nuclear program and its

stated rush to make 3,000 centrifuges operational as soon as possible, which Iran claimed to have accomplished in autumn 2007. But in a wider strategic context, the NIE's report, released in early December 2007, raised hope that conflict might be averted.<sup>4</sup> The new intelligence estimate claimed that Iran had halted its military nuclear program in 2003 and that it was unlikely to reach weaponization even with a reactivated program for another decade at least. The NIE has considerably weakened the White House's momentum toward a third UN Security Council resolution against Iran and also the buildup toward a military strike. While the NIE does not exonerate Iran, it did nevertheless throw a strong diplomatic lifeline to the Ahmadinejad presidency, which was being battered internally and internationally for its aggressive policies and refusal to compromise on the nuclear issue.

Interestingly, the NIE report was released during President Ahmadinejad's participation at the annual GCC heads of states summit in Doha, adding momentum to the Gulf parties' desire to make peaceful coexistence a priority. The NIE provided a valuable way out of the crisis management mode of the GCC and allowed them to adopt a much more relaxed posture, in public at least, over Iran's nuclear program and its regional policies.

The nuclear dispute, however, has colored the entire Ahmadinejad presidency and Iran's relations with its neighbors. These countries now fear the consequences of another war, even if they admire Tehran's ability to stand against the United States. Yet paradoxically, even the prospect of peaceful coexistence has its own threats and uncertainties: while GCC states do feel threatened by Iran's apparently long reach (Lebanon 2006, Palestine 2007, Iraq, nuclear issues), they also seem to fear the consequences of a rapprochement between Tehran and Washington in a "grand bargain" that potentially excludes them. The latter partly accounts for the neighbors' desire for dialogue with Tehran (in a sense, "preempting" a US-Iranian détente). Iran now has in place a string of bilateral agreements with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman designed to strengthen economic and cultural links across the Persian Gulf. The effect, ironically, is to increase Iran's regional reach as the region continues to oscillate uneasily and unpredictably between détente and confrontation.

## Hard-Line Populism Versus Regional and Domestic Realities

In Iran itself, the effects of its neoconservatives' "regional hubris" have surfaced in the forms of domestic protests against economic mismanagement, rampant inflation (in excess of 23 percent per year), unemployment (around three million), limits on political activity and sociocultural freedoms, and the administration's inability to curb corruption. High profile resignations—from chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani's in October 2007 in addition to ministerial resignations (Industry and Mines Minister Alireza Tahmasebi and Oil Minister Kazem Vaziri-Hamaneh) in August and the Central Bank governor Ibrahim Sheibani's departure in September—have added to domestic political tensions. Larijani's departure caused a political uproar, with criticism emerging even from Ali-Akbar Velayati, the foreign policy adviser to the supreme leader and key player in the system. According to one Western source, "Ahmadinejad has been behaving as if he's not afraid of anything and the regime is not doing anything to steer him to the centre.... It's puzzling because the basic hypothesis—that the leader is the conservative par excellence—isn't holding since Ahmadinejad should be seen as dangerous for the regime."<sup>5</sup>

Even criticism of Iran's nuclear strategy has been heard: in September, former reformist legislator Ahmad Shirzad told the Spanish daily *El País* in Tehran that Iran's nuclear program was too costly relative to the opportunity costs of sidelining other major national projects.<sup>6</sup> Shirzad is a respected physicist, working at a mathematics and physics research center headed by Mohammad Javad Larijani (former deputy foreign minister and brother of former Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani). According to Shirzad, the \$5 billion spent on the nuclear program could have been much better used in developing Iran's rich gas deposits. He and others have also claimed that Iran does not have sufficient uranium deposits to fuel an entire nuclear electricity program, and much of the technology being used remains foreign-sourced, thus not having a major impact on the development of the country's national scientific base.

Most telling has been growing internal criticisms of the administration's international posture from former Presidents Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Khatami and the large team of experts who had served in their administrations. Expressions of concern about

President Ahmadinejad's strategies and policies had become commonplace by the end of 2007. Hojjatoleslam Hassan Rouhani, for example, is on the record with the statement: "One cannot eliminate one's rivals. One cannot characterise one's rivals as enemies. One cannot lead the country with just three or ten people."<sup>7</sup> Iran would fail to reach its economic goals "with slogans, superstitions, and accusations," added the former chief nuclear negotiator. Even the proconservative, hard-line *Jomhouri Eslami* is now of the view that "the general climate of the country has been overwhelmed by propaganda against individuals.... A lawful country does not deserve an individual—in any position—to become plaintiff, judge, and executor."

The administration, though, appears content to highlight the successes of the Ahmadinejad presidency, rejecting all criticism. According to Iran's Culture Minister Mohammad Hossein Saffar-Herandi (speaking in Mashhad in June 2007), Iranians chose Ahmadinejad because of his populist promises and because under this administration they feel safe "inside and outside the country." Outside, "people in many countries wish their head of government was someone like Ahmadinejad." This administration had done "the equivalent of 15 years' work in one year."<sup>8</sup>

## In the Final Analysis: The Inevitability of a Western Policy of Détente

Within Iran, politics as usual (in other words, debilitating factionalism) is likely to be the order of the day—in spite of major elections scheduled in the next two years. The marginalization of progressive and reformist forces as a strategy of the neocon and traditional conservative elites is continuing, and the question will have to be raised as to how long this domestic scene can be sustained.

What should the international community's position be when elections in this context do little more than perpetuate an increasingly authoritarian and inflexible regime? What should be the response to statements such as "one of the main reasons for the leader's support is Ahmadinejad's foreign policy, which has made Iran more popular in Islamic countries"? If success is being measured in terms of Iran's ability to champion the minority sect of Islam globally—"under former President Khatami, radical Sunnis were completely taking over radical Shia. But Ahmadinejad has reversed that"<sup>9</sup>—then it is hard to see how current domestic political developments in Iran can salvage the strategy of

détente, which was so prevalent in the eight years preceding President Ahmadinejad's rise to power.

Ultimately, however, there is really only one question for the West: given that Iran's domestic scene is a constant (i.e., factionalism, traditional conservatism as represented by the supreme leader, and populist-neocon conservatism as represented by Ahmadinejad and the Sepah), what is the variable that can be altered? The obvious answer is: the larger regional environment is the variable that can be shaped positively by the United States and its friends and allies. To effect change, then, two things need to happen: the regional environment needs to be stabilized, and the West needs to accept that it will need to deal with the leaders that Iran *has* instead of waiting for the election of leaders that it *wishes* to see.

Where that will leave the next US administration's approach is the critical question, and despite Iran's indiscretions and excesses, little else but an EU-style critical dialogue between the two parties is likely to advance America's wider interests in this strategic but volatile neighborhood. The upshot of such a courageous move could be the reinvigoration of proreform forces in Iran who are currently being sidelined partly thanks to the "securitization" of the region that has followed US action in Iraq and beyond.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion see Ehteshami and Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See special issue of *Aspenia* (Aspen Institute Italia) *La Persia Dietro l'Iran* (No. 39, 2007) and my "L'Iran Post Détente," (pp. 140-47) in the same.

<sup>3</sup> This point was made again by Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Shariati, adviser to former President Khatami. See MEMRI, No. 1827, January 25, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of Intelligence, November 2007).

<sup>5</sup> *Financial Times*, October 24, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> *Elpais.com*, September 18, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Agence France-Presse, November 22, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> *Financial Times*, October 24, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

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The Stanley Foundation  
209 Iowa Avenue  
Muscatine, IA 52761 USA  
563-264-1500  
563-264-0864 fax  
[info@stanleyfoundation.org](mailto:info@stanleyfoundation.org)