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**IRANIANS CONSIDER REACHING OUT TO U.S.
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Coming after younger Iranian hardliners dominated the 2003 municipal council elections and the 2004 parliamentary contest, the victory of Mahmud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential race represented a seemingly unstoppable political juggernaut. Yet within weeks of Ahmadinejad's inauguration, the legislature demonstrated that it would not be a rubberstamp by rejecting four of his cabinet nominees. In the following months, the legislature expressed its dissatisfaction with many of Ahmadinejad's personnel appointments, his economic measures, and his annual budget. Tehran also finds itself dealing with ethnic disturbances in the northwest and southwest. Ahmadinejad's international political initiatives -- his call for the destruction of Israel and the United States, his denial of the Holocaust, and his administration's obstinacy on the nuclear issue -- also earned a great deal of criticism at home. These aspects of Iranian politics have implications that are relevant to our discussion today about U.S. policy, and they shed light on cleavages in the Iranian body politic.

A lack of diplomatic unity

Shortly before Ahmadinejad's inauguration, state news agencies made much of a meeting between the president-elect and his predecessors -- Mohammad Khatami, Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Ali Khamenei, and Prime Minister Mir-Hussein Musavi -- to discuss nuclear policy (*Sharq*, 27 July 2005). The purpose of this was to show that regardless of elections, the country remains united on this issue. In practical terms, furthermore, nuclear decision-making in Iran is a consensual matter with input from the regime's top officials, so the president cannot change policy unilaterally.

The president's diplomatic gaffes, however, have caused concern at home. And as Iran faces isolation over the nuclear issue, some officials are suggesting that it is time to engage with the United States. The chairman of the Expediency Council, Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, said Iran should talk with its opponents -- which he identified as "America, Europe, and others" -- and achieve trust (Iranian state radio, 30 September 2005). "I would like to let the [Iranian] managers in this sector know that here you need diplomacy and not slogans," he said. Hashemi-Rafsanjani called for prudence, patience, and wisdom, while avoiding provocations. He said this issue must be resolved while protecting Iran's rights. The legislature's reformist minority met with Hashemi-Rafsanjani in late January and urged him to step in (*Sharq*, 1 February 2006).

Reformist legislator Mohammad Reza Tabesh said the Ahmadinejad government has failed to adequately conduct talks with the EU-3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), and he urged the return of Iran's former negotiators (Radio Farda, 10 October 2005). Referring to the personnel brought in by Ahmadinejad, legislator Hussein Afarideh spoke out against the "mistaken measure" of a "hasty" reshuffle of the negotiating team (Radio Farda, 10 October 2005). The reformist *Sharq* newspaper commented that Ahmadinejad's eastward-oriented foreign policy has proven to be ineffective, and it recommended the creation of a "crisis-diplomacy team" (2 October 2005). The hardline *Resalat* daily called for the creation of a foreign-policy think tank to find a way out for Iran (29 September 2005).

Or a diplomatic crisis?

Iran's leading officials and political figures are united in the desire to master the peaceful use of nuclear energy, but there is much less unity over Tehran's diplomatic efforts. After the International Atomic Energy Agency's governing board voted to report Iran to the United Nations Security Council in early February, the Iranian government issued an advisory saying the media must not portray it as unsuccessful or say that the country suffered a loss. Warning against discouraging the Iranian people, the advisory called for stories that avoid stirring fear or worry, and that in no way suggest diplomatic efforts had reached a dead end. The advisory did not have much of an effect.

Hojatoleslam Hassan Rohani, who was secretary of the Supreme National Security Council for 16 years and who still serves on the council as a representative of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was for some time Iran's top nuclear negotiator. He made it clear at a speech in Tehran that he is unimpressed. "Shouting alone will not help us to achieve our goals," he said (Iranian Students News Agency, 9 February 2006). "To stand up to our enemies, we need a multidimensional, proactive and dynamic strategy." Rohani recommended widening Iran's "circle of consultants" -- in other words, bringing in people with better experience, diplomatic skills, and negotiating abilities.

An earlier speech by Rohani to a governmental body, in which he described the nuclear program and related negotiations in great detail, recently has been interpreted by some experts as a questioning of the value of the nuclear program (*Rahbord*, 30 September 2005). In light of Rohani's close and lengthy involvement with the issue and the forum in which the speech was made, as well as the content of the actual speech, this seems unlikely.

Other commentators recommended the involvement of seasoned politicians who inspire greater confidence internationally, such as Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Khatami, Rohani, and former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karrubi.

By early March, as the nuclear crisis worsened and negotiations with Russia and Europe fell through, more voices suggested that it is time to engage directly with the United States. Kazem Jalali, rapporteur of the legislature's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, said Iran might as well eliminate the intermediaries and negotiate directly with the U.S. (*Aftab-i Yazd*, 2 March 2006). He explained that both the Europeans and the

Russians appear to be acting in line with U.S. desires, and furthermore, they are taking advantage of the lack of alternatives to improve their negotiating position.

"It is better to negotiate with the Great Satan than with little Satans," National Security and Foreign Policy Committee member Ali Zadsar said (*Aftab-i Yazd*, 5 March 2006). He explained that Moscow is acting as Washington's proxy, and history has proven that the Russians are more treacherous than the Americans.

Creating a new elite

Internal Iranian disputes over the conduct of foreign affairs see little exposure in the West. Instead, one hears the rhetoric of angry clerics and enraged politicians as they fume about imagined Western efforts to retard the country's development and deny them their rights. The Iranian government strives to portray a united facade on all issues. In reality, President Ahmadinejad was in office for less than a month when he ran into his first serious roadblock, and the pressure has never really subsided.

Ahmadinejad chaired the first session of his new cabinet in the northeastern city of Mashhad at the shrine of Imam Reza, saying "We have come to such a holy place to be inspired before rendering services to the nation" (Islamic Republic News Agency, 25 August 2005). It seemed a good time for inspiration, because one day earlier the legislature had rejected four of the 21 people he had nominated for cabinet seats.

During his campaign Ahmadinejad promised to bring new faces into the country's leadership, and it was obvious when he introduced his cabinet that a new generation of Iranians was taking the reins. Ahmadinejad was 48, and the average age of the proposed ministers was 48 1/2. Moreover, five ministers served with the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, and several others were veterans of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. The clerics in his cabinet had extremely hardline backgrounds.

Yet conflicts over the cabinet choices surfaced among the conservative political parties even before the early-August inauguration. The initial conflicts related mainly to younger and more radical conservatives versus older and more traditional ones, and the direction they believed the government should take. There also were disputes within the group that backed Ahmadinejad's presidential bid, and these mainly related to the desire for cabinet positions. When the nominees were debated, legislators expressed concern over their lack of qualifications, and even among those who were approved there were objections to their backgrounds in security institutions. Three ministers were approved the next month, but it was not until December that the petroleum ministry nominee was approved.

Ahmadinejad also vowed to decentralize government operations and give greater power to the provinces, and he pledged to appoint provincial officials only after consulting with legislators and local Friday Prayer leaders. It later became clear that such consultations were only token efforts, and he mostly appointed individuals with backgrounds in the intelligence and security institutions. Other appointees were presidential cronies with shared professional links or an affinity for unorthodox religious beliefs. Several legislators submitted their resignations over this matter in September, and there was

renewed controversy in February, when it was announced that all but one of the country's provincial governors-general had been replaced.

Political calculation and strategy has as much to do with these appointments as cronyism does. The new officials could stay in place for at least eight years -- the length of two presidential terms. The new officials could have a profound influence on voting for members of the Assembly of Experts (2006 and 2014), legislature (2008 and 2012), executive branch (2009 and 2013), and municipal councils (2007 and 2011). Moreover, officials with a background in the Revolutionary Guards are more likely to use force to deal with civil unrest, and they would be more willing to implement martial law should there be a crisis. Another implication is that the appointments are a payoff for the support the Guards Corp and the Basij militia gave Ahmadinejad during the election.

The annual budget -- which was introduced in mid-January -- is another area in which Ahmadinejad has encountered resistance from right-wing and left-wing parliamentarians. They are critical of the attention given to religious institutions that fit the president's conservative preferences. Another concern relates to excessive dependence on oil as the only source of revenue -- something that they say could have an inflationary effect. Some also argue that the government is basing its figures on an unreasonably high price for oil -- \$40 a barrel. This latter figure was adjusted downward, and on 2 March the general outline of the budget won approval

When he introduced the budget, Ahmadinejad said spending in the provinces would increase by 180 percent, adding that he is trying to move jobs from the center to the periphery, and he emphasized rural development. However, several parliamentarians complained about inattention to real needs, such as poverty-reduction projects and infrastructure, and more than 100 parliamentarians threatened to hold a sit-in (*Sharq*, 18 January 2006). A legislator from Gilan Province in the north complained that insufficient funds have been allocated to build dams and water-supply projects, and 6,000 families do not have access to running water, electricity, or good roads (Iraj Nadimi, cited by *Gilan-i Imruz*, 21 January 2006).

Ethnic cleavages

Iran's population of roughly 69 million people includes sizable minority groups -- Azeris (24 percent), Kurds (7 percent), Arabs (3 percent), Baluchis (2 percent), and Turkmen (2 percent). There are almost 100 independent tribes throughout the country, according to a 1987 census, and a 1998 census says there are 1.3 million tribesmen. There is greater religious homogeneity -- the state religion is Shia Islam and is practiced by 89 percent of the population, 9 percent of the population practices Sunni Islam, and the remaining 2 percent of the population is Bahai, Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian. There is some overlap between ethnic and religious minority status. Iran's northwestern provinces are heavily populated by Kurds, 75 percent of whom are Sunni, and the southeast is heavily populated by Baluchis, most of whom are Sunni.

In the last year there have been numerous ethnic clashes. None of these incidents threaten the unity of the state or Iran's territorial integrity, and for the most part, ethnic activists

mostly call for the realization of constitutionally guaranteed rights rather than separatism. Nevertheless, they are a continuing irritant to the regime.

There have been several bombings in the oil-rich Khuzestan Province in the southwest. Tehran has pinned the blame on the United Kingdom, and on 2 March 2006 two alleged bombers were executed after their confessions were broadcast on state television. Ethnic Arabs cited by local newspapers often complain that although much of the country's oil wealth comes from this area, they do not benefit from it, and they note underdevelopment, discrimination in securing jobs, and poor educational opportunities

Kurdish activists in the northwest reportedly have encountered greater difficulties. Two were executed in September, three Kurdish journalists were imprisoned in October, and the killing of a young Kurd in Mahabad in November led to a riot (Radio Farda, 6 September 2005; ILNA, 3 October 2005; Radio Farda, 20 November 2005). Security forces killed some eight people when they shot at Kurdish demonstrators in Maku in February, prompting a demonstration in Tehran (ILNA, 21 February 2006). Nine Kurdish parliamentarians protested to President Mahmud Ahmadinejad about this last incident (ILNA, 4 March 2006). The legislators' letter said vigilantes attacked the demonstrators, killing and injuring 35 of them. Many others were arrested and are imprisoned. Who is responsible for "these crimes," the letter asked, and what government agency authorized such actions? "Why must some people use government resources and equipment to settle ethnic scores and to subject the Kurdish inhabitants of the town to such a merciless killing?"

An opening borne of weakness

There has long been an absence of unity in government circles regarding relations with the U.S. In 1979, there were disagreements pitting revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his Islamist entourage against secular nationalists connected with the National Front and the Liberation Movement of Iran. Contacts with the U.S., however, led to the downfall of the Provisional Government of Mehdi Bazargan. The Islamists and the student activists who seized the U.S. Embassy in 1979, furthermore, used evidence of such contacts against their political adversaries.

Contacts with the U.S. continue to be a sensitive topic in Iranian politics. Such contacts start out in secret, but with some inevitability they see the light of day and are then wielded as a weapon against one's opponents. The exposure of secret Iran-U.S. contacts led to the Iran-Contra affair in the late 1980s, for example, and in the early part of this decade alleged contacts between Iranian and American representatives on Cyprus led to a political uproar.

Anything but the most overt hostility can engender a backlash. When then-President Mohammad Khatami expressed regret over the hostage crisis and invited Americans for cultural and educational exchanges in January 1998, the hardline media criticized him heavily. It is fairly certain that Khatami would not have made such comments without the Supreme Leader's approval beforehand, but Khamenei was forced to say that he still sees the U.S. as "the enemy of the Islamic Republic."

This may explain the statement by Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Assefi two days ago, when he described the circumstances under which Iran will consider negotiations with the U.S. He said, "What we are saying is that if America abandons its threats and creates a positive atmosphere in which it does not seek to influence the process of negotiations by imposing preconditions, then there will be no impediment to negotiations" (*Farhang-i Ashti*, 6 March 2006).

If current trends continue, with Iran's isolation increasing and with its hardline president getting weaker, it may be Tehran that initiates the negotiations.