

Iran - An Overview



Policy Brief #4
May 2008

University of Durham

Centre for Iranian Studies

About the Centre

Founded in 1999, The Centre for Iranian Studies is a subsidiary research body of the Institute of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the University of Durham. Its central aim is to facilitate and encourage debate, research and the growth of Iranian Studies in the UK.

To achieve this, the Centre encourages links and exchanges between academics and academic institutions in the UK and Iran and hosts lecture series, seminars, workshops and conferences. Furthermore, the Centre for Iranian Studies facilitates the publishing of policy-relevant studies in Policy Briefs aimed at addressing Iranian affairs in a highly academic fashion.

The Centre for Iranian Studies' areas of expertise however transcends contemporary and policy-driven concerns and includes medieval, pre-modern and modern history of Iran, Iranian culture, Shi'ism, Modern and Classical Farsi alongside archeology of the ancient Near East, Sasanian Iran and early Islamisation.

Who's Who:

The CIS Committee

Dr. Reza Molavi
Executive Director

Prof. Anoush Ehteshami
Head of School
School of Government & International Affairs
Durham University

Dr. Paul Luft
Director, Centre for Iranian Studies

Dr. Collin Turner
Director, Centre for Iranian Studies

Iran - An Overview

Contents

Iran - An Overview

1. Domestic Developments
2. Iran's Regional Influence
3. Iran's Nuclear Programme

About the Authors

Editorial Board

Anoush Ehteshami
Reza Molavi
Fouad G Marei

Authors

Christopher Rundle
Honorary President
Centre for Iranian Studies

Iran - An Overview

by Christopher Rundle

I shall discuss the internal situation, Iran's foreign policy and the nuclear question, and end with a few thoughts about negotiating with the Iranians.

First I'd like to recommend the report on Iran published on 2 March 2008 by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons, which among other things highlights the complexity of the issues that are discussed.

ing political theorists - is still active; the reformist ideas of the President Khatami era have not gone away. But the movement is in retreat at the moment. Under Ahmadinejad the red lines which people should not cross are being zealously policed. Newspapers continue to be closed down, and human rights activists arrested. Iran's human rights record as a whole is poor, with use of the death penalty ris-

the days of tribal politics are over, so the alleged efforts by foreign powers to stir up trouble in places like Baluchistan or Khuzistan are of little consequence - except to add to the atmosphere of distrust between Iran and Western powers.

Prominent Iranian political and human rights activists believe that reform has to come from within, and that it will be a slow

The Centre for Iranian Studies attempts to present divergent ideas and sympathies by its contributors, while it does not necessarily represent the editorial boards own sentiments or beliefs. Some of our writers and readers may disagree with the views and opinions represented in this or other Policy Briefs. Articles published as part of CIS's Policy Briefs are the sole responsibility of the authors, we do not accept responsibility for the views expressed in any articles, signed or unsigned, that appear in these pages. What we do accept is the responsibility for giving those writers and opinions a chance to express their views, for the sake of balanced and an unbiased publication of CIS's Policy Briefs.

The Editors



ISNA/PHOTO:AMIR KHOLOOSI

The internal scene is certainly complex. To summarise brutally, Iran has a vibrant society but a government which has become increasingly repressive under President Ahmadinejad. Civil society - the women's rights movement, the student's movement, film makers, artists, intellectuals of various kinds includ-

ing. There have been reports of increased discrimination against religious minorities - the Bahai's in particular, but also some Christians.

Like it or not, the regime is firmly in power; there is no credible alternative. We can discount the Mojahedin-e Khalq. And in Iran

process. They include people like the Nobel-prize-winning lawyer Shirin Ebadi, still working in Iran, and journalist Akbar Ganji, who took refuge abroad after his release from prison.

So what are the immediate political concerns? One of them is the recent elections to the

Majles. Another is that people are already looking ahead to next year's presidential elections.

These elections raise the question, how democratic is Iran? The answer is, very much so, if one just looks at the record of elections being held regularly, every four years. But much less so if one takes into account the controlled manner in which elections are held.

To illustrate the point concerning control, it is widely believed that when Ahmadinejad was elected president in 2005 it was as a result of a last-moment decision by the Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, to back him; and to allow the Revolutionary Guards, one of president Ahmadinejad's

Majles but also has the leading role in vetting candidates for election to it.

Here I would go back to what I said about lack of dynamism in the political system and lay much of the responsibility for that on Ayatollah Khamenei and those around him. It is he who appoints members of the clergy to the Guardian Council. And rather than use his powers to encourage much needed reform he has appointed what I would describe as hard-line traditionalists.

Looking ahead to the world in 2009, there will of course be a change of president in the US. (Incidentally the Iranian media are already demonising John

in the regime. On the other hand, his three predecessors all managed to be re-elected for a second term. So if there is a precedent it is that. It is also said that, whatever their superficial differences, Ayatollah Khamenei is comfortable with him because Ahmadinejad, as a non-cleric, is not a threat to the Leader's own position. (It is easy to forget that Ahmadinejad is the first layman to have been elected president since 1981. But he is a religious zealot, and has actually upset some of the clergy by his messianic utterances.)

We can't expect much change in Iran's policies as a result of the Majles elections: partly because attitudes in the new Majles are unlikely to be very different, partly also because the Majles is not as important in the hierarchy as the president. If a new president is voted in next year there could well be some manoeuvring, some modification of policies, but we should not expect any immediate U-turns.

Going on now to Iran's foreign policy, here I would identify three key features:

1. Iran opposes the world order as currently established, and in particular the US as its leader.
2. Iran aims to increase its influence in the region surrounding it, including Iraq. It does this partly through religious networks.
3. Iran is determined to continue its nuclear programme. This is largely because of national pride, but also because it doesn't trust the outside world. The nuclear thing has unfortunately become the big issue between Iran and the "International Community", a term incidentally which Iran does not like.



Overall, Iran is confident at the moment. Its arch-enemy Saddam Hussain has been removed in Iraq, as have the Taliban in Afghanistan. And the prospect of an American military attack has receded since the publication of the National Intelligence Estimate last December.

Apart from the nuclear issue, which I'll come to in a moment, Iran's relationship with Iraq is one of the matters of greatest interest to us. Ahmadinejad's visit to Baghdad earlier this month may have been in part an act of defiance towards the US. But he also had important work to do in cementing relations with the Iraqi government. Iran wants, above all, to ensure that the threat from Iraq never materialises again.

The unity of the Iraqi state is certainly important to Iran: if Iraq is split up that would have implications for Iran's own Kurdish area in particular. By and large it is also to Iran's advantage that there is a democratically elected government in Baghdad, with a Shia majority. I do not believe that a Shia-led government in a fully independent Iraq will be a

puppet of the Iranians. But Iran can expect to have influence; after all, a number of those in the current Baghdad government lived for years in Iran as refugees and are sympathetic to Tehran.

There is also the purely religious connection, including visits by pilgrims to the Shia shrines in Iraq. I read recently that Iran was constructing a new airport near one of the shrines.

Two important things that Ahmadinejad discussed in Baghdad were trade and economic cooperation. (The close nature of commercial relations is underlined by the fact that Iranian currency circulates openly in Iraq - as indeed in Syria.) But one thing seems to have been missing from the visit. Prior to it the Iranian media had been reporting Iraqi agreement that the frontier in the Shatt al Arab - one of the main things over which Saddam went to war in 1980 - should be that of the 1975 treaty. But there was silence on that issue on Ahmadinejad's return. So there is plenty of work to do before there is a settled framework for state-to-state relations.

From a Western viewpoint, much of what Iran does in Iraq is far from benign in nature. The UK has been particularly concerned at the extent of Iranian support for Shia militias, including reportedly the supply of roadside bombs (IEDs) and other munitions. Some of these have been used against coalition forces. And I hardly need remind you of a provocative act last year, when Iranian Revolutionary Guards seized a number of British naval personnel in Iraqi waters. Margaret Beckett, then Foreign Secretary, wondered how Iran could be trusted on the nuclear file if it was capable of actions like that.

This brings me to Iran's nuclear programme, and international opposition to it. There are two broad reasons for such opposition. One concerns technical



Turnout for Iran's legislative elections last month are believed to be around 60%: higher than turnout rates in 2004, though not reaching the 80% mark that flooded polling stations in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

main constituencies, to rally support.

As for this year's Majles elections, one of the main features was the number of candidates disqualified - over 1,500. They were mostly of the reformist tendency. They fell foul of the state institution called the Guardian Council, which not only scrutinises legislation passed by the

McCain as a hardheaded militarist in league with the CIA). In Iran too there could be a change. Ahmadinejad will be standing for re-election, and it is far from certain that he will be successful. He has not fulfilled all his economic promises. And the damage that his rhetoric against Israel and the West has done to Iran's image abroad has not gone down well with more pragmatic figures with-



The Syrian-Iranian special relationship can be traced back to the late Imam Musa Sadr, the Iranian-born head of the Shiite Supreme Council in Lebanon.



Iran is alleged to be a force for instability in the Middle East: a leading state sponsor of terrorism, largely through its support for Hamas and Hezbollah.

questions, the other political and security considerations.

Technical questions include the view that Iran failed in the past to meet its obligations under the Safeguards Agreement by developing unreported clandestine facilities; that the IAEA has still not given it a sufficiently clean bill of health; and that Iran's success so far in enriching uranium might lead one day to it producing highly enriched uranium, of weapons grade.

Political and security considerations include the following. Iran is alleged to be a force for instability in the Middle East; to be a leading state sponsor of terrorism, largely through its support for Hamas and Hezbollah; to be threatening Israel's existence; to be seeking regional hegemony; and to be supporting insurgents in Iraq - and perhaps even some Taliban in Afghanistan.

In other words, one might say that Iran is against all that the US stands for in the region.

Add to this that American neo-conservatives in particular believe that Iran's leaders are

irrational and irresponsible and could not be trusted with a nuclear weapon.

Iran's attitude, on the other hand, is that its policies are in fact principled and pragmatic, reflecting its national interest and international norms; that it is a peace-loving nation with no territorial ambitions; that in the recent past it has been the victim of aggression by Iraq; and that it is currently threatened by the US.

It believes it has the right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, in accordance with the provisions of the NPT. It denies that it is developing nuclear weapons, and strengthens this argument by referring to the National Intelligence Estimate. Iran's leaders have also said that it would be against Islamic principles to have such weapons.

In addition to all this, Iran accuses the West of double standards in the attitude it takes towards her on the one hand and Israel, India and Pakistan on the other - all three of course developed nuclear weapons outside the NPT.

When, in June 2006, Iran rejected the demand by the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany that it suspend enrichment in return for various incentives, it considered the demand demeaning - the exact word used by Iran's ambassador to the UK.

Iran has since sought to ignore, delay, or get watered down, Security Council resolutions, by continuing discussion with the IAEA. It argues that the latest IAEA report gave it a clean bill of health.

Iran must be worried by the likely effect of the UN resolutions, but there are no signs it will give way. Some commentators believe that it will give way to pressure. But it seems to me that it could only be expected to yield to pressure of a kind far more extreme than the Security Council as a whole is likely to contemplate. The Foreign Affairs Committee's report judges that it is very unlikely that Iran will accept the demand that it suspend enrichment before substantive talks begin.

This brings me finally to the subject of negotiating with Iran. Here we have to bear in mind that Iran wants to be treated as an equal, and not bullied by the US or any other state. The revolutionary regime makes great play of having brought Iran independence.

In my view - and I'm not alone - it was a tactical mistake by the Permanent 5 and Germany to demand that Iran suspend enrichment before substantive talks could take place. That demand has since become a stumbling block in the way of the dialogue and engagement which

might otherwise have taken place. There have been a number of ideas as to how the impasse might be broken - the paper written for BASIC by Sir John Thomson last year is still relevant - but as he and others have pointed out the underlying problem is a massive lack of trust on both sides - particularly between Iran and the US, who have not had diplomatic relations since 1980.

I would add that while I am in favour of a policy of engagement - which when possible has been British policy ever since the revolution - I can also understand

American reluctance to suddenly get involved in any "grand bargain" negotiations. Among other things, the Iranians would be likely to prevaricate, procrastinate, and raise side issues. Jack Straw when Foreign Secretary commented that during international negotiations they "threw up chaff".

So I end on a note of frustration. Perhaps next year the political climate will thaw a little. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama both favour dialogue. But anyone looking for an abrupt change in policy from the Iranian side is likely to be disappointed.

University of Durham

Centre for Iranian Studies

The Centre for Iranian Studies would like to invite its readers to take part in its publications by contributing to future Policy Briefs. CIS welcomes contributions from a wide audience of academics, policy-makers, students and everyone with an interest in Iranian studies. It welcomes contributions from a wide array of disciplines ranging from security studies, political economy, development, religion, culture, regional and international relations, geopolitics, language, political Islam, Shi'ism, history and archeology in Iran.

CIS would also like to welcome the contributions and support of its readers and individuals and institutions with an interest in Iranian Studies. Furthermore, CIS offers unpaid internships for undergraduate and postgraduate students hoping to engage in Iranian Studies.

For more on how you can contribute to CIS's work on Iran, please contact Dr Reza Molavi at reza.molavi@durham.ac.uk

About the Authors

Christopher Rundle is a graduate of St John's College, Cambridge. He joined the Foreign Office in 1963 before becoming Oriental Secretary in Kabul, Afghanistan between 1968 and 1970. He was later posted to Tehran both before and after the 1979 revolution. In London, Mr. Rundle was a research counsellor with responsibility for Iranian affairs until his retirement in 1998.

His paper '*Reflections on the Iranian Revolution and Iranian-British Relations*' was published in 2002 as part of the Durham Middle East Papers series. His memoir, *From Colwyn Bay to Kabul: an Unexpected Journey*, was published in 2004.

Christopher Rundle is currently the Honorary President of the Centre for Iranian Studies, Durham University.
