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CSS *Papers*

*The World Responds
to Iran's Elections:
An Early Assessment*

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Abstract

As the 2009 Iranian elections came to an end, many states and groups waited with anticipation to see who would lead Iran for the next four years. To the concern of many Western governments, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second term as president was confirmed by the Guardian Council after a questionable recount. This paper tracks reactions from countries and groups following the election and assesses their possible implications for the future. The damning exchanges between Iran and the West are reaching a level of hostility that bodes ill for a future rapprochement. If they continue to escalate, and if Iran is unwilling to scale down its nuclear programme, is the possibility of military action against this country coming closer to realization?

Introduction

The Iranian presidential election was held on June 12th 2009. Three candidates vetted by the Council of Guardians challenged the incumbent. The focus of the election was on two candidates, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the independent reformer, Mir-Hossein Mousavi. At the end of the election these candidates received 63.8 percent and 32.7 percent of the vote respectively.¹ The early announcement of the result and some irregularities in expected outcomes led to suspicions of foul play. Defeated candidates then led large popular protests demanding a recount or annulment of the vote. These protests grew and were met by a fierce security clampdown by the Iranian security forces and Basij militiamen loyal to the regime. Demands for a recount led to a review of ten percent of the vote, but the outcome was reaffirmed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, as "definitive and absolute".²

These developments – the fraudulent elections and the brutal crackdown on protestors – have exacerbated the already tense relationship between the West and the Islamic Republic. Governments in the Middle East and Europe, and the great powers with whom Iran conducts nuclear negotiations (the so-called P5 + 1: China, France, Germany, Russia and the United Kingdom, plus the United States) must now anticipate the course Iran will take for the next four years in domestic and foreign policy. Initial optimism for a more flexible relationship with the country has dwindled in light of Ahmadinejad's re-election³ and the government's uncompromising reaction to popular protests. It appears likely that Iran will, despite recent overtures from the American government, face severe isolation and further sanctions. This paper therefore aims to assess the possible factors that may influence the course of the Islamic Republic over the next four years. The implications of President Ahmadinejad's re-election upon foreign relations will be considered in a historical perspective, taking into account historical developments and the internal tensions of the Islamic Republic. Second, the probable short-term consequences of the election results (particularly the implications for future negotiations on the nuclear program), such as further sanctions, will be analysed.

1. Ahmadinejad 'set for Iran victory', 2009, Al-Jazeera.Net, available from: <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/06/2009612195749149733.html> [Accessed: 12.07.09]; Ahmadinejad 'set for Iran victory', Al-Jazeera.Net, available from: <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/06/2009612195749149733.html> [Accessed: 12.07.09].

2. Iran TV: partial vote recount verifies election result, 2009, Reuters, Available from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSDAH456610> [Accessed: 12.07.09].

3. Pipes, D., Assessing the Iranian Election, 2009, DanielPipes.org, available from: <http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/2009/06/assessing-the-iranian-election> [Accessed: 28.07.09].

Iran's Internal Political Tensions

In order to understand the implications of the election results domestically and in terms of foreign policy, it is first necessary to understand the internal tensions with which the Islamic Republic grapples. Firstly, the conflict between Iran's reformist and conservative camps has become clear in recent weeks. The allegedly rigged elections and controversial recount, and the authorities' brutality in dealing with the opposition and post-election demonstrations, has widened the gap between hard-line conservatives aligned with President Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, on the one hand, and reformists like ex-President Rafsanjani, who urges liberalization and rapprochement with the West, on the other. The competition between these two factions over the direction of Iranian affairs appears likely to persist, as disunity spreads even within Iran's political and religious elite.

The concord of the clerical elite has been severely tarnished by the episodes following the presidential elections. The idea of the 'Islamic Republic of Iran' has been seriously called into question; any real claims to being a 'republic' have been entirely lost, and rather than defending the principles of Ayatollah Khamenei's 'rule of the jurispudent', the Iranian regime has succumbed to political infighting, brutality and repression. Furthermore, several clerics have in past weeks openly criticized Ayatollah Khamenei; Ayatollah Montazeri, a senior grand ayatollah, recently issued a fatwa stating that Khamenei's rule was illegitimate, which is "probably the greatest verbal challenge to Khamenei's leadership in the last 20 years".¹

To make matters even more complicated, the hitherto close relationship between President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Khamenei may be about to change. It seems that the formation of the new cabinet is proving an area of contention between the two men. Khamenei was extremely critical of Ahmadinejad's appointed vice-president, and demanded that he be sacked immediately. The president reluctantly forced him to resign a week later on July 24. Barely two days later, the president sacked the Minister of Intelligence, an act which many interpret as a counter-attack against Khamenei. It seems that both are trying to assert their authority and independence from one another in a new and less stable political climate. Time will tell, however, whether this is the beginning of a permanent split or merely a blip.

International Sanctions and the Iranian Economy

In order to more fully make sense of Iranian foreign relations, the country's domestic political economy must first be understood. Iran's reliance on rent from oil and gas revenues renders the country highly sensitive to fluctuations in the prices of these commodities; oil accounts for 80 per cent of the country's foreign exchange receipts, and oil and gas constitute 70 per cent of government revenue.² Since oil prices plunged in the summer of 2008, the Central Bank of Iran estimates that the country has lost up to USD 54 billion in revenues. The loss of vast amounts of revenue would only exacerbate social problems of chronic unemployment – more than 35 per cent of the population under 30 are experiencing long-term unemployment – and growing inflation rates of more than 20 per cent. Furthermore, collapsing oil rents may endanger the government's energy and housing subsidy programs.

1. Sadjadpour, Karim, *The Evolving Situation in Iran*, 2009, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, available from: www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=23401 [Accessed: 29.07.09].

2. Melik, J., *Iran threatened with economic meltdown*, 2009, BBC News, available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7907326.stm> [Accessed: 27.07.2009].

Additionally, Iran must grapple with sanctions imposed by the United States and the United Nations. After hostages were taken in Tehran in 1980, the US imposed sanctions on Iran which prohibit American citizens from having transactions with Iran; Carter's executive order (EO 12170) blocked "all property within US jurisdiction owned by the Central Bank and Government of Iran". Further, President Clinton passed Executive Orders 12957 and 12959, which banned "...contributions to the development of petroleum resources in Iran" and implemented "...a total trade and investment embargo on Iran"¹, thereby impeding investment in oil and gas companies that have previous associations with Iran. Many of these sanctions are no longer effective, but they are sufficient to show that the US is not afraid to take drastic measures against a country which it deems a threat, even if its economy is as weak as Iran's.

Furthermore, UN sanctions were imposed in December 2006 due to the country's alleged attempts to develop nuclear weapons; the Security Council resolution 1737 orders countries to stop supplying Iran with material and technology contributing to uranium-enrichment programs. Assets relating to those programs were frozen, along with the foreign assets of 13 Iranian companies, and some Iranian officials were banned from travelling abroad. These sanctions have proven highly effective, as they include regions and countries that do not abide by sanctions imposed by America. Consequently, as the Islamic Republic cannot make trade agreements with the US or the EU, Iranian companies pay between 12 and 20 percent more for technology and commodities, according to Dr Mehrdad Emadi-Moghadam of Staffordshire University.² The International Monetary Fund last year estimated that Iran needs a price of USD 90 per barrel in order to prevent a growing budget deficit, and to compensate for falling oil prices, delays and lack of gas treatment facilities. It also stated that Iran needs to compensate through investments and technology, the two main elements which it is unable to procure due to international sanctions.³

Following the elections, many European leaders issued bold statements. German Chancellor Angela Merkel immediately called for a recount of the June 12 election.⁴ French President Nicolas Sarkozy called the election "a tragedy" and the result a "fraud".⁵ The EU, Iran's most important trade partner, froze the assets of Iran's biggest bank, Bank Melli, and imposed visa bans on some Iranian officials.⁶ Great Britain, due to the detainment and later expulsion of British diplomats by the Iranian authorities for having played a 'significant role' in the demonstrations,⁷ has responded with tit-for-tat expulsions, while Italian Prime Minister Silvia Berlusconi openly floated the possibility of sanctions on the eve of the G8 L'Aquila Summit.

At the summit of July 9-10, almost a month after the Iranian elections, the G8 nations deplored post-election violence, and a joint statement noted that the leaders "sincerely hope that Iran will seize this opportunity to give diplomacy a chance", calling the Iranian authorities' recent media restrictions and the detention of foreign nationals "unacceptable". Furthermore, the G8 stipulated a deadline of September 2009, when the G20 meets in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for the Islamic Republic to accept

1. Franssen, Herman and Morton Elaine, "A review of US Unilateral Sanctions Against Iran," *Middle East Economic Survey* Vol. XLV: No. 34. (2002).

2. Cited at: asianenergy.blogspot.com/2009_02_22_archive.html (2009)

3. Unrest further isolates Iran's reeling economy, MSNBC, 2009, available from: http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/31491846/ns/business-world_business/ [Accessed: 27.07.2009].

4. Adams, S., Iran election violence: world reaction, 2009, Telegraph.co.uk, available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/5614580/iran-election-violence-world-reaction.html> [Accessed: 12.07.09].

5. Sarkozy denounces 'fraud' in Iran elections, 2009, France 24.com, available from: <http://www.france24.com/20090616-france-sarkozy-denounces-fraud-iran-elections-ahmadinejad-mousavi> [Accessed: 12.07.09].

6. Piscioneri, F., Berlusconi says G8 sanctions likely against Iran, 2009, Reuters, available from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSLT352885> [Accessed: 12.07.09].

7. Iran <must free UK embassy staff' , 2009, BBC, available from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8123261.stm [Accessed: 12.07.09].

negotiations on its nuclear program or face further sanctions. (Measures include an immediate freeze of Iran's enrichment activities, increased inspections under an Additional Protocol of the NPT, and the tagging and sealing of Iranian centrifuges and other nuclear components to guarantee that they cannot be used.) For observers looking for decisive action on the issue, the G8 summit proved disappointing.

The US, Russia and China

The lack of a firm response of the G8 nations may be attributed to the foreign policy of three great powers in particular: the US, Russia and China. In accordance with US President Obama's policy of so-called "smart power", Vice President Biden made the following statement about the June elections:

"Talks with Iran are not a reward for good behavior. ... It's in the best interest of the United States of America, our national security interests, to talk with the Iranian regime. Our interests are the same before the election as after the election, and that is we want them to cease and desist from seeking a nuclear weapon and having one in its possession, and secondly to stop supporting terror. That's why we've joined with the so-called P5 plus 1. We've laid out to the Iranian regime what it is that we, the P5 plus 1, are prepared to talk about."¹

This stance quickly changed after Obama faced mounting domestic pressure to condemn Iran's harsh response to protests in the aftermath of the election results. However, as the brutality of the Iranian authorities became clear for all to see, pressure from both Democrats and Republicans² mounted for President Obama to condemn the Iranian government's "unjust actions"; they said that his strategy for a detente with Iran had been damaged by Iran's suppression of freedoms.³ Action can be seen in Washington, where the 2005 Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act (IRPSA) has once more been put before Congress; as Iran imports up to 40 percent of petrol for its heavily subsidized transport network, further sanctions could be potentially crippling. However, no multilateral action has been taken in response to the election irregularities, serious breaches in human rights, and Iran's unrepentant drive to further its nuclear arms program. While the EU and G8 technically do not have the authority (unlike the United Nations Security Council) to impose sanctions on Iran, their responses have been limited at best. While more substantive action may perhaps be expected at the upcoming G20 summit, recent statements by the EU and the G8 highlight the limitations which the US faces in preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons without the cooperation of Russia or China.

1. 'Middle East Progress', Clear-Eyed Engagement Still in the U.S. Interest, 2009, available from: <http://middleeastprogress.org/2009/06/clear-eyed-engagement-still-in-the-us-interest/> [Accessed: 28.07.09].

2. Obama Pressured to Strike a Firmer Tone , 2009, New York Times, Available from: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/18/us/politics/18prexy.html?_r=2 [Accessed: 12.07.09].

3. Iran in crisis: live , The Guardian, 2009, available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global/blog/2009/jun/23/iran-crisis> [Accessed: 12.07.09].

Russia has been eager to play down criticism of the elections. Within a week of the results being announced, President Medvedev received Ahmadinejad in Moscow, and his country played an important part in softening the G8's statement on the Iranian post-election human rights abuses, which did not overtly condemn the Iranian government. Furthermore, Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, advised the G8 to avoid isolating Iran and to remain focused on the importance of keeping dialogue open for future nuclear negotiations.¹ These overtures are best explained by Russia's resentment of the Iranian-American rapprochement that Obama hopes to achieve, as such a relationship could diminish Russia's close energy ties with Iran, thereby endangering its role as a major supplier and transit route for oil and gas. But recent weeks' crackdowns on protests have hindered the formation of a new US-Iranian relationship, and Russia hopes to take advantage of this. Given its membership of the G8 and the UN Security Council, this country will remain a central player in the game that decides Iran's future.

China too may prove important. Obama has repeatedly called on China to cooperate in ending Iran's nuclear drives. As a veto-wielding member of the United Nations, it has in the past opposed Western calls for tougher Security Council sanctions against Iran and North Korea over their nuclear programs. In the wake of the elections, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang voiced respect for "the choice of the Iranian people" and called for stability in post-election Iran.² A further complication is China's close energy ties with Iran: just one month after the elections, Iran's Oil Ministry announced that China had agreed to invest USD 40 billion in refining Iranian gasoline and to finance the major new Hormoz refinery in southern Iran.³ Despite vast oil reserves and exports, Iran still imports 130,000 billion barrels of gasoline per day because its refineries are too few and too old to match domestic demand. Currently, Iran's gasoline imports are not affected by American or UN-agreed sanctions. Unlike China, the willingness of other countries to sell gasoline to Iran has faltered under heavy political pressure mounting over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. India, a major supplier, recently suspended exports of gas. "If you really want to use effective sanctions, then you want to cut off gas imports," explains Erica Downs, energy fellow at the Brookings Institution of Washington. "If the Chinese go invest \$40 billion and dramatically increase Iran's refining capacity, it would definitely weaken one of the weapons in the U.S. arsenal".⁴

1. G8 tells Iran to respect human rights , 2009, UPI, available from: http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2009/06/26/G8-tells-Iran-to-respect-human-rights/UPI-33891246027627/ [Accessed: 12.07.09].

2. Cited at: virtualreview.org/.../china-calls-for-stability-solidarity-in-post-election-iran

3. Walt, V., How Iran Might Beat Future Sanctions: The China Card, 2009, TIME Magazine, available from: <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1910669,00.html> [Accessed: 29.07.09].

4. Walt, V., How Iran Might Beat Future Sanctions: The China Card, 2009, TIME Magazine, available from: <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1910669,00.html> [Accessed: 29.07.09].

Israel

Israel's immediate reaction to the election of Ahmadinejad was one of concern. Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon stated, "If we had any shred of hope for change in Iran, the re-election of Ahmadinejad demonstrates the increasing Iranian threat."¹ Although this statement suggests that there was optimism for a new relationship before the election, Avigdor Liberman, Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs, made a comment following the election which demonstrates Israel's unwavering distrust for Iran:

What is important for us is not the personal creation, but the creation of policy. What we saw during these elections, there was only one point on which all candidates were united: it's achieving 'nuclear capability'; and maybe the other point, the hatred to Israel. This is what is important, is real - not the domestic problems of Iran, but their [unchanging foreign] policy.²

Since the post-election crackdowns, Israel has become increasingly critical of Iran's democratic process, suggesting that the "true nature" of the regime has been "unmasked".³ Its attempts to influence the opinions of the international community and the US with this kind of rhetoric have drastically increased since the election. Statements from Foreign Minister Lieberman (above), Israeli President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu show Israel's grave concern over Iran's nuclear projects.⁴

Since the nuclear issue has always been Israel's main worry, significant change in Israeli policy was unlikely from the start. Despite Lieberman's emphasis on Iran's policy rather than its president, Ahmadinejad's election nonetheless allowed Israel to promote military strikes against a leader who has a history of threatening words and actions. The Institute for National Security Studies states, "... Israel has a certain advantage in Ahmadinejad's re-election. With Ahmadinejad as president, it is easier to explain the significance of the Iranian threat."⁵ Beyond the role of personalities, the importance of Israel's overall concern with the nuclear issue was also made clear by the institute: "Even had Moussavi been elected, he would have continued to lead Iran's nuclear program and the hostile attitude towards Israel."⁶ By focusing discourse on Iran's democratic and nuclear problems, Israel is painting a picture of an Iran that is both unstable and aggressive towards Israel and also the West.

In regards to future Israeli actions, the state is able and willing to act unilaterally in order to confront what it sees as a security threat. In a recent meeting with the US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak stated, "We clearly believe that no option should be removed from the table. This is our policy."⁷ The statement implies that Israel is willing to take military action, if it thinks it necessary. Barak's statement may be clear, but given the ambivalent US position over air strikes against nuclear targets in Iran and the current strain in Israeli-US relations,

1. Cited at: www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/.../ml-israel-iran/

2. Cited at: www.mfa.gov.il/.../Joint_press_conference_FM_Liberman_US_Secretary_Clinton_17-Jun-2009.htm

3. Iran: Statements by Israeli leaders - June 2009, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Available from: http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/The+Iranian+Threat/Statements+y+Israeli+leaders/Iran-Statements_Israeli_leaders-June_2009.htm [Accessed: 22.06.09].

4. Ibid.

5. Malti, D., Israel keeps anxious eye on Iran turmoil, 2009, AFP, available from: http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5juH_zTtuxifuZg_O31ZLVbx6ITLg [Accessed: 30.06.09].

6. Ibid.

7. Keinon, Herb, Gates warns of tougher Iran sanctions, 2009, Jerusalem Post, Available from: <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1248277900220&pagenam e=JPost/JFArticle/ShowFull> [Accessed: 27.07.09].

it cannot be assuredly determined whether Israel will heed US policy or act independently. Unclear statements from different representatives of the White House and the State Department¹ have severe implications given current regional tensions. If Israel believes the security situation to be deteriorating, the temptation to take military action will become ever greater. But whether or not they would make this decision without a go-ahead from the US remains unclear. Since the US administration stresses that it has not given Israel the “green light”² to strike military and nuclear targets, the immediate future is likely to be limited to only aggressive statements from Israeli and Iranian leaders, and perhaps an escalation in displays of military might. In June 2008, Israel conducted a large military demonstration, clearly intending to send a message to Iran; a military official commented that the country’s air force “regularly trains for various missions in order to confront and meet the challenges posed by the threats facing Israel”.³ More recently the Jewish state has sent two Saar-5 warships and a submarine through the Suez Canal.⁴ And the head of the Revolutionary Guard force, Mohammad Ali Jafari, has stated that Iran will respond firmly to Israeli strikes on Iranian soil by attacking Israeli nuclear sites.⁵

The Arab World

Arab states were largely supportive of Iran’s election and sovereignty. Some deviations from a united response, however, showed the mixed sensitivities of each individual country in regards to its relationship with Iran. Given that so many regimes in the region unable to reach Iran’s nascent level of democracy, they are hardly well placed to pronounce judgement on the June elections. Not only this, Iran’s ability to influence internal politics within some of these countries has no doubt softened their tone, as will its ongoing attempt to emerge as a nuclear power in the region. At this time, direct provocation will seem like a risky business. Arab states have instead, with the partial exception of Saudi Arabia, allowed the US to voice criticism while opting to align with US policy in order to obtain military equipment and (in the case of Egypt and Saudi Arabia) develop nuclear technology.⁶

Saudi Arabia, Iran’s historical rival as a dominant regional power, has kept official statements mild and has avoided challenging the sovereignty of the result. Such caution is perhaps due to fears of political conflict in its oil-rich Eastern province, which has a large Shiite community. The Saudi media, however, which is controlled to a great extent by the government, has not been so shy; regime in-fighting and police clashes have received considerable coverage.⁷ Yet despite these grumblings, the country will not be looking to aggravate relations with Iran. As the government in Riyadh sees it, the threat from Tehran is not Ahmadinejad or Ayatollah Khamenei but the rise of the Iranian nation as a regional power. The re-election will not change this. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia must also keep an eye on the US, which will look to increase its influence in the region if Iran continues to pursue its nuclear programme: this was made clear when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked that the US will seek a “defense umbrella” in order to deter Iranian ambitions in the region.⁸

1. Lynch, M., Say it ain’t so, Joe, 2009, Foreign Policy, available from: http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/07/05/say_it_aint_so_joe [Accessed: 05.07.09].

2. ‘No green light’ for Iran attack , 2009, BBC News, available from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8139655.stm [Accessed: 08.07.09].

3. Israel appears to rehearse Iran attack: report , 2009, Reuters, available from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/newsOne/idUSN1939158020080620> [Accessed: 01.08.09].

4. Fleishman, J. and B. Sobelman, Israeli warships> passage through Suez Canal causes a stir , 2009, LA Times, available from: <http://www.latimes.com/news/nation-world/world/la-ig-suez-warships24-2009jul24,0,1352326.story> [Accessed: 24.06.09].

5. Iran will strike Israel nuclear sites if attacked, 2009, Yahoo! News, available from: http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20090725/wl_mideast_afp/iranisraelnuclear [Accessed: 27.07.09].

6. Khaitous, T., Iranian Elections Increase Middle East Proliferation , 2009, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, available from: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1315> [Accessed: 27.07.09].

7. Pollock, D. and M. Yaghi, Saudi Media Take the Lead Against Iran>s Regime , 2009, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, available from: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3083> [Accessed: 26.07.09].

8. Sanger, D., Clinton Says Nuclear Aim of Iran is Fruitless , 2009, New York Times, available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/27/us/politics/27clinton.html> [Accessed: 26.07.09].

The Gulf States surrounding Saudi Arabia were keen to suppress criticism of the elections, banning demonstrations in their large Shiite communities in the pursuit of stability.¹ There were even some statements of explicit approval: in Qatar, emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani commented that, "...during 30 years, Iran had four presidents, when in some Arab countries the president has not changed during that period."² This is an interesting sign of support for the democratic process in Iran. The Sunni ruling family of Bahrain, a country with a large Shia community, was quick to support the locally popular Ahmadinejad. In the UAE, home to the largest expatriate Iranian community outside the USA, officials also highlighted the importance of non-intervention in Iran's "domestic affairs".³ Although the aforementioned "defense umbrella" proposed by the US will most likely include the states of the greater Gulf region, the monarchies therein will have to be careful that they do not alienate or anger their Shiite populations by aligning too strongly with the US and Israel over Iran's nuclear program. But until the details of the US's defense policy in the region are clarified, the extent to which Gulf States will hinder Iranian ambitions is yet to be seen.

In Egypt the press have remained non-partisan. This reaction is part of a broader Egyptian policy that aims to improve (or at least steady) deteriorating relations with Iran: as of 2008, Iran has been highly critical of Egypt's actions towards the Palestinians in the Gaza strip and Egypt has not taken these remarks lightly;⁴ and Egyptian police have recently arrested 26 men whom they say are linked to Hezbollah⁵ (who are allegedly determined to carry-out terrorist attacks within Egypt) and also a Shi'i Egyptian cleric who has ties with Iran.⁶ Yet Egypt did not criticise the Iranian elections. Overall, it is unlikely that its policy towards the country will be either active or unilateral. Here, the situation is similar to that of the Gulf's "defense umbrella": the US will deliver military and financial aid in return for a degree of influence in the countries' policies.

Syria's government, which engages more actively with Iran, has sent out signals of support to Ahmadinejad. Reports state that the country sent a delegation to Tehran in show of solidarity, and that Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem said on July 1st that "anyone betting on the Iranian regime falling will lose."⁷ That might suggest that the two countries are as close as ever; but with the US increasing its diplomatic engagement with Syria, this relationship may be compromised. Indeed, it can be argued that as Iran becomes more internally focused, some of its key allies will be stolen from its side.⁸ The US's re-engagement with Syria is perhaps just such a case. This was spearheaded by Middle-East envoy George Mitchell, who visited Damascus in June 2009, and it has now been suggested that a new US ambassador should be sent out. Significantly, it appears that these overtures have been well received by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who on July 4th extended an invitation to Obama and complimented him on his position towards the Middle East. A re-alignment that eased sanctions and enabled much-needed foreign investment would certainly be in Syria's interests; and the US might hope that even Syria, Iran's close political and ideological ally,

1. Black, I., Arabs ponder implications of Iran's unrest , 2009, The Guardian, Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/25/ian-black-on-middle-east> [Accessed: 25.07.09].

2. Qatar says Iran stability important for Gulf, Inside the Gulf, 2008, available from: <http://insidethegulf.com/central.php?o=1&s=2064&d=3&i=2492> [Accessed: 25.07.09].

3. Ibid.

4. Egypt refers Hezbollah case to emergency court , 2009, Reuters, available from: http://mobile.reuters.com/mobile/m/FullArticle/CWOR/nworldNews_uUS-TRE56P11W20090726 [Accessed: 26.07.09].

5. Michael, M., Egypt arrests group it says plotted Suez attacks , 2009, AP, available from: http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5i_GCwpmlQ9nMi-AwKBHw3C16EwOUAD99B5ERO0 [Accessed: 09.07.09].

6. Hassan, A., Egypt: Cleric backed by Iran charged in Egypt , 2009, Los Angeles Times - Blogs <Babylon & Beyond>, available from: <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2009/07/egypt-security-detains-12-accuses-hundreds-of-spreading-shiism.html> [Accessed: 19.07.09].

7. Bassam, L., Iran's Arab allies relieved to see crisis easing , 2009, Reuters, available from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/middleeastCrisis/idUSLQ92367> [Accessed: 26.07.09].

8. Ignatius, D., Bet on Neda's Side , 2009, The Washington Post, available from: <http://www.reuhttp://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/23/AR2009062303318.html> mters.com/article/middleeastCrisis/idUSLQ92367 [Accessed: 24.06.09].

With these countries looking over to the other side of the Atlantic, and with Iranian politics divided, Syria may see the present situation as a turning point. Furthermore, if the US can negotiate a deal between Syria and Israel over the Golan Heights, Iran may find that one of its closest allies will begin to look to Washington instead of Tehran. On the other hand, given recent divisions within the Israeli government as to the possibility of a partial or full return of the Golan Heights to Syria,¹ the US may not be able to achieve this easily. Such a re-alignment is, therefore, by no means certain.

In Lebanon, the coalition congratulated Ahmadinejad on his election, albeit only after the vote had been recounted. The cause of this delay is perhaps to be found in political tensions: the ties between the coalition and the US conflict with the interests of Hezbollah and its affiliates (whose influence over Lebanese affairs is enormous, albeit not officially recognised). President Michel Suleiman therefore had to perform a difficult balancing act: by congratulating Ahmadinejad too early he would have received criticism from Washington, but by not congratulating him at all he would upset Hezbollah. Once Iran's Guardian Council re-confirmed Ahmadinejad's election on June 30th, Suleiman told Ahmadinejad that his re-election had 'thrilled' the government and people of Lebanon.² It remains to be seen to what extent the new Prime Minister of Lebanon, Saad Hariri, will satisfy Hezbollah's demands and how Washington and Tehran will ultimately react to his government.

The religiously diverse population of Lebanon puts it in a peculiarly complex position with regard to its relations with the US, Israel and Iran. Many resent Israel, with the result that Hezbollah's Resistance movement and its activities in the South of Lebanon receive considerable support.³ On the other hand, there are those (particularly non-Shi'is) who fear the prospect of Hezbollah gaining further political power within Lebanon; others again fear its ties with Iran. It is hard, then, to speculate with any certainty before Iran's post-election government is formed and before the US-Israel-Iran nexus becomes more clearly defined.

In Iraq, the Iranian elections were notably absent from political discourse. Mithal al-Alusi, a Sunni lawmaker "who is known for speaking his mind" stated that "many of us are afraid to talk about it at all, or to even say the word 'Iran'."⁴ Such fear presumably derives from Iran's ability to influence sectarian tensions within Iraq. Indeed, as al-Alusi rightly says, "key Iraqi political parties still receive substantial funding and 'instruction' from Iran."⁵ Although in previous Iraqi elections there has been a decline in pro-Iranian political parties, the nation exerts great control over many Shi'i groups (political, religious, and military) in Iraq. If Iran wishes to extend such influence over its neighbour, and if US military forces withdraw, the consequences could be disastrous. In Iraq the upcoming Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) referendum may provide an opportunity to rally anti-American and sectarian grievances. But the degree to which Iran will wish to affect Iraq's stability remains unclear.

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5. Ibid.

Non-state actors: Hamas and Hezbollah

Hamas and Hezbollah have naturally been supportive of Ahmadinejad's victory. Since, however, they are both currently aspiring to be recognised as legitimate political institutions, they have placed little emphasis on their sponsor's suppression of pro-democracy protests. In Lebanon, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who sees Iran as a bulwark against Israel, sent a letter of congratulation to President Ahmadinejad: "Your re-election represents a great hope to all the oppressed people, holy warriors and resistance fighters who reject the powers of arrogance and occupation."¹ And Hamas' response carried similar implications: "...the results of the elections in Iran show the wide public support for Iran's policy of challenge."² Yet despite this interest in Iranian affairs, it should be remembered that both of these groups have enough with which to busy themselves at home – a recent election in Lebanon and dismal conditions in the Gaza strip – and such domestic matters are for the moment likely to remain a priority.

It is possible that Ahmadinejad's victory will lead Iran to strengthen its ties with Hezbollah and Hamas;³ for the president may hope to compensate for a divided (and therefore weak) government by using non-state actors to exert influence over foreign affairs.⁴ But the reverse is more likely: with Iranian politics looking increasingly divided, Ahmadinejad may cut back support for non-state groups and focus on domestic issues.⁵ Mahjoob Zweiri, an Iran expert at the Center for Strategic Studies in Amman, Jordan, suggests that domestic instability will limit the Islamic Republic's ability to exert influence upon its neighbours and the wider Middle East. Furthermore, Hezbollah has already distanced itself from Iran in order to preserve its Lebanese identity, and the international condemnation of its response to the June elections may actually increase that distance further.⁶ As EU members begin to recognize the legitimate role of Hezbollah within the Lebanese parliament it may not be too long before the group begins to look towards Europe for financial aid, especially since the EU will be looking to expand its role in the Middle East.

Iranian ties with Hamas may also weaken over the coming months. This Islamic group may not be too worried about losing Iranian support, whose financial aid is not drastically significant compared to contributions from countries such as Saudi Arabia,⁷ which is currently looking to heal the Hamas-Fatah split. In fact, recent statements from Hamas indicate that the group itself is keen to come to an agreement with the Fatah government.⁸ All in all, it seems probable that there will be a decline in Iranian influence over Hamas and its activities in the Gaza strip.

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Conclusion

As this study has shown, Iran's foreign relations continue to be complex after the 2009 re-election of President Ahmadinejad. The international community's initial reaction to the post-elections human rights issues has predictably been surpassed by what has for some years been the main area of contention: Iran's nuclear ambitions. Over this issue tensions remain high; whether or not they escalate will depend on the attitude that the Iranian government adopts towards international opinion. In terms of imposing new sanctions, the elections have had little effect: the national economic interests of Russia and China, both of whom have powers of veto in the UN Security Council, remain an obstacle in the path that the US is attempting to forge. With the prospect of a firm multilateral stance looking unlikely, the US and EU will no doubt continue to pursue unilateral sanctions. As things stand, they have given Iran until September 2009 to scale down its uranium enrichment programme and return to negotiations with the P5 + 1. Whether or not Iran complies will be extremely significant.

Since the Revolution of 1979 there has been a lack of trust between Iran and the West. Military confrontation with Israel has never been unthinkable. Apart from the devastation that such a clash would cause to the parties involved, it would also have an enormous destabilising effect on the region as a whole. Is war, we may ask, any more likely at the present moment? Whether or not the June elections were rigged, Ahmadinejad's victory may be interpreted as an indication that the Iranian nation has expressed its approval for the man who has always pursued a controversial nuclear program, taking little notice of international opinion. For the time being, the West has adopted a 'wait-and-see' approach, studying the internal divisions emerging within the political and clerical elite of Iran. It may be convenient for the West, in the short term, to see whether domestic tension and debate on the future course of Iran are sufficient to disrupt a consistent stance on the nuclear program. If it is not, the long-term concerns—security and energy issues—will return to the foreground, and the international community will resume their old game. If sanctions and diplomacy continue to be as ineffective as they have so far been, then air strikes may indeed be a more real possibility. It is known that both Israel and (to a lesser extent) Iran are currently training and manoeuvring armed forces; but for the moment these remain mere demonstrations of power which have not been translated into action. Significant also is the question of Israel: will it break away from a US that seems at present decidedly against military action? If anything, Iran's elections make such an outcome more likely, but only time will tell.

Much has not changed since the June elections. Indeed, have those elections resulted in any significant development for Iran's position in the world? Should the government's defiance remain unchanged in Ahmadinejad's second term, diplomacy and sanctions may be seen to be exhausted, and a military confrontation cannot be ruled out. So far the president has given no sign that he will move on the nuclear issue. Yet despite this continuity, one change seems certain: cracks are beginning to show within the political and clerical elite, and as a result there is a new unpredictability about the direction of Iranian affairs. The world has responded to Iran. Now it must wait for Iran to make the next move.