

The Summary on Iran



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Issue No. 1, May, 2007

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Introduction

The summary on Iran is a brief analytical coverage of the most prominent issues and topics related to Iran. This coverage aims to shed further light on these issues and interactions that are taking place from the perspective of a specialist in Iranian affairs. The summary focuses on domestic policy-related issues, which are generally overlooked, as a way of understanding Iran the state. Yet, this does not mean neglecting the issues related to the dimension of foreign policy and its interactions, which will receive their fair share of analysis.

This summary represents a translation of the role that the newly-founded Iranian Studies Unit is keen to play, which is to generate a better understanding of the Iranian society and Iran's foreign political life, in addition to producing a serious and in-depth study on Iran.

Iranian Universities and the New Cultural Revolution

The unexpected victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian President, in the presidential elections of June 2005, raised many questions about the domestic and foreign policies that he will pursue during his tenure as President.

The main focus has been on domestic policies- which is also the focus of this article- because the Iranian President had emphasized, during his electoral campaign, such concepts as justice, equality, fighting corruption and concentrating on every aspect of people's daily lives, like education, improving living and working conditions, supporting youth by facilitating marriage.. etc. As a result, the Iranians, who once saw political reform and the openness of the society as important priorities, were forced to rearrange their priorities.

Nearly two years on, the Iranians are raising questions about the promises made by the President. Food and housing prices continue to rise. Gasoline prices rose from 25 tomans to 100 tomans per liter. All this reflects the inflation experienced by the Iranian economy during the past two years.

All this was accompanied by further restrictions on the use of the global information network (the Internet) by blocking access to many news and political sites.

But what seems important in all this is the pressure that the Iranian universities have encountered on two levels. The first level is imposing restrictions on the so-called liberal and secular professors, in an attempt to force them to resign from their posts by offering early retirement opportunities.

This policy has forced dozens of professors to leave state universities; some went to Azad {private}University. This implied an attempt to re-islamize the state universities, the policy that began in the early 1980s, within the framework of what was then known as the Cultural Revolution.

The second level is preventing students from completing their studies at the Iranian universities for political reasons. Figures show that more than 150 students were ranked by what is known there as the "star-rating" system, i.e. putting a star next to their names to indicate that they not allowed to register for courses which they have passed.

These students say that after completing their baccalaureate degrees, they applied to continue their studies, passed both their written and oral exams and were selected by academic committees. Yet, they were shocked to find that they were given three stars next to their names, which is an indication for the university registration officers that those students are not allowed to register.

The Iranian authorities and higher education officials have ignored the questions we raised about this issue. But the global media coverage of the developments in this issue in the world press, and some local newspapers, forced the Iranian Minister of Science, Research and Technology, to acknowledge that some students were punished and barred from enrolling in Iranian universities. He also admitted that the decision of punishing the students was taken by the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution in coordination with the Ministry of Security.

Additionally, it was indicated that the students were ranked based on their political references and the political activities in which they had participated during their previous years of university studies. The chair of the Parliamentary Research and Training Committee conceded that the number of these students does not exceed 20 students, and maintained that this issue has been greatly exaggerated, claiming that there is no problem in the first place.

It should be noted that the Iranian President faced fierce criticism during his visit to Amir Kabir University in December 2006, where students chanted "Death to the dictator". It should be indicated here that the pressures faced by the higher education institutions, students, and teachers in Iran reopened the debate in Iran on the issue of brain drain. This problem is highly prevalent in Iran; large numbers of university graduates and skilled professionals left the country due to these pressures.

It is also noted that the former President, Khatami, pursued a different policy based on attracting Iranian competencies from abroad and encouraging them to return and work in Iran. Domestic unrest in Iran in response to the pressures exercised on the universities and some students and teachers exacerbates the gap between the political elite, which runs the country now, and the intellectual elite. This will cast a dark shadow over the economic, political and social progress of the society, which, according to many Iranians, has stalled since August 2005, when President Ahmadinejad took office officially.



Iran and the Dilemma of Imposing the Veil

At the beginning of every summer, the authorities in Iran wage a campaign against what they call "the bad veil", which means lack of respect for the Islamic dress code (the Hijab). In Iran, this means covering the head with a scarf while letting too much hair peek out from under the veil, wearing tight clothes that either describe or show the body, and/or wearing makeup.

Men were not exempt from the crackdown, which also targeted young men who wear tight jeans and T-shirts with pictures or words that are conflicting with the Iranian and Islamic culture according to the authorities. This was the reason behind the campaigns launched by government authorities against young men and women, in an attempt to force them to adhere to the dress code in Iran, which was introduced as part of a package of changes known by the authorities in Iran as (The Cultural Revolution). Among the aims of this revolution is to Islamize the Iranian society, including the clothes.

In the past 27 years since establishing the Islamic Republic, the authorities launched more than 13 campaigns in a bid to force the society to respect the dress code and laws. This has opened the debate between public and private behavior of individuals. In addition, it has evoked the important question about nature of the State's role in intervening in people's freedom and imposing a dress code, without taking into account people's freedom and the religious and culture diversity of the society.

This issue is still a source of great concern to many in the Iranian society, or to those who study the phenomenon of religious governments.

Since establishing the Islamic Republic, the Iranian government has committed itself to preserve morals and values. In this context, imposing veil and complying with the requirements of modesty in the Iranian society are part of what the government calls binding religious rules, which regulate all aspects of life in Iran. This matter has not been addressed in the same manner. Over the 8 years of the



presidency of Mohammad Khatami, the former Iranian President, the veil issue was not among his government's priorities. This gave the impression that the state softened what Iranians saw as hard-line approach.

Khatami's presidency was an era of genuine openness on the social dimension, and, perhaps to a greater degree, on the political one. Black, navy blue and dark brown were the dominant colors of clothes in Iran, especially women's. However, when Khatami came to power, dark colors were replaced with bright ones and the chador was replaced with what is called there "the manteau". Very shortly after that came the trousers and the jacket. The head cover, or what is called in Iran "the khimar", was replaced with slipping headscarves which allow parts of hair to be revealed. This change alarmed the authorities.

But the nature of the domestic political openness, which was serving the interests of the regime, was a catalyst to adopt non-violence and view the issue as cultural one that could be addressed by taking cultural measures.

However, this began to change in the second term of Khatami's presidency (2001-2005). Criticisms of these aspects intensified as they were considered a kind of cultural invasion to which the government failed to respond due to its focus on political reform, as was alleged. The issue of Hijab resurfaced with the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, especially since the President comes from a religious family and belongs to a very conservative political wing. Hence, it was widely expected that Ahmadinejad's government would impose further restrictions regarding the traditional dress code in the Iranian society. These fears were further reinforced by the fact that a parliamentary majority in the Shura Council supports the president's thesis about this issue. Hence the passing of the so-called Islamic dress law, submitted to the Shura Council by Ahmadinejad's government, which contains 113 provisions.

Under this law, the government, the private sector and the Iranian society are all obliged to work together in order to promote Islamic morals and values. Wearing short trousers, tight jacket or a loose headscarf, are punishable offences under this law. The law also covers men, who have been issued warning not to wear jeans or T-shirts which describe their bodies.

The Islamic Shura Council approved this law in April 2006, so as to take effect on April 22, 2007. Since launching the campaign in Tehran and other cities, like Shiraz, 1300 women have been stopped in Tehran, and advised on the need to adhere to the law. 307 men and women have been arrested for wearing clothes that do not conform to the dress code. 235 of them have been released after signing a written commitment to respect the dress code, while 76 people have been referred to the judicial authorities.

The approach of the authorities in dealing with the issue was not only criticized by the reform forces in Iran, but also by various people in the power hierarchy. The head of judiciary, Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi, warned that violence and tough measures to address social crisis could backfire. The Prosecutor General in Shiraz openly criticized this approach, saying that the society cannot be reformed with violence and coercion.

The real challenge the authorities face in imposing veil has been evident since the first days of their campaign, especially as women in Iran have been creative in devising clothes in different styles and designs, which left the government in a very difficult situation. Moreover, such designs are popular among women, especially in the big cities, which makes it harder for the authorities to achieve the desired success.

Iran and the Minority Question

The debate about the ethnic and religious minorities in Iran has started to take a turning point after the military campaign against Iraq in March 2003. the minority issue in Iran is particularly important given the ethnic and religious diversity in Iran.

In addition to Muslims (Sunnis and Shiites), the constitution recognizes Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as religious minorities in Iran. In the absence of accurate statistics, the information available indicates that the proportion of these religious minorities does not exceed, at best, 3% (of the total population of 68 million). Taking the 1.250 percent population growth in Iran into consideration, it is believed that their numbers have diminished, which indicates that many of them immigrated after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The Jewish synagogue in Hamedan points out that its visitors numbers have decreased due to the immigration of many people to the United States or Israel.

As is known, the majority of Muslims in Iran (89%) are Shiites, while Sunnis, who are mostly Kurds or Baluchis, constitute about 9%. Kurds follow the Shafii school, while Baluchis follow the Hanafi School. There are seven ethnic groups which constitute the social fabric of Iran: Persians, Lurs, Kurds, Baluchis, Azeris, Turkmen and Arabs. Each group has its own language and traditions.

A quick look at a map of the Iranian society reveals that Kurds live in Kurdistan, Elam and Kermanshah; Baluchis live in Sistan and Baluchestan; Azeris live in northern and western Azerbaijan (Zanjan and Ardabil); Turkmen live mostly in Golestān while Arabs live in Khūzestān.

The available figures indicate that Persians, who number some 34 million, constitute about 50% (of the total population of 68 million); Azeris, who number some 17 million, constitute about 25% in Iran; Arabs, who number some 2.5 million, constitute 3%; Baluchis, who number some 1.5 million, constitute about 2%; Turkmen, who number some 1.5 million, constitute 2% and finally, the Lurs, who number some 1.5 million, constitute 2%.

The previously mentioned international attention for the minorities in Iran was preceded by the establishment of a committee to investigate facts and study the minorities' problems in Iran. The committee was formed by a decree of the former President, Mohammad Khatami, in 2000. The committee submitted its recommendation to the then government and the Shura Council to adopt its recommendation to provide equal compensation in «blood money» to non-Muslim crime victims. The Shura Council approved this recommendation in 2002. It also allowed establishing associations that defend religious minorities.

Figures indicate that there are more than 50 institutions affiliated with these religious minorities. But a study conducted in 2005 by the Islamic Shura Council's research center in Iran warned that it is in the interest of the government to deal in a more serious manner with the minorities' problems and give them the same opportunities as other Iranians. It seems that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government has formed a new committee in the Ministry of Interior to deal with the minority question.

Although the authorities in Tehran are keen to highlight their policies of tolerance toward these minorities, saying that the Iranian constitution guaranteed their rights and clarified their duties, this did not save the government from increasing criticism by international human rights organizations. Hardly a report appears without referring to some kind of discrimination against these minorities, especially religious minorities. For example, the Bahá'ís still suffer from government pressures and are discriminated against in employment and education, according to human rights reports.

On another front, the Iranian government has a wary relationship with Baluchis and Kurds because they are Sunnis. According to reports by human rights organizations, these minorities are under continued pressures and harassments in the market place, and face difficulties in enrolling in universities or building their mosques.

These concerns were reinforced by the bombings in Zahedan in 2006, and the subsequent attack on members of the Iranian police by groups who are associated, according to the authorities in Tehran, to radical Sunni groups. Khūzestān, particularly Al-Ahwaz, suffered as Zahedan. A wave of bombings swept that city (Al-Ahwaz) in the years 2005/2006, which was considered to be a serious threat by the authorities in Iran. Reports indicate that these bombings are linked to the discriminatory practices against these minorities, such as exclusion, marginalization and denying their rights. Reports also link the reality of these minorities to the American policy towards Iran. They state that the United States seeks to benefit from the discriminatory practices against these minorities in any future confrontation with the regime Tehran.

The Financial Times, a British newspaper, reported that American marines are trying to penetrate these ethnic groups in the border areas- an indication, it seems, to the Arabs, Kurds and Baluchis- to benefit from them in widening the gap with the government in Tehran. It should also be indicated that a conference was held in Washington in early 2006, which was attended by organizations representing Kurds, Azeris, Turkmen and Baluchis. It appears that the aim was to establish a front against the political regime in Iran.

The minorities issue, their relationship with the government and the discriminatory practices against them, are still controversial between those who support the regime in Iran and those who oppose it.

It seems clear that the political conditions that prevail in the region, and the political fallout that followed the military campaign against Iraq, are part of this hot debate about the situation of minorities in post-revolution Iran.

Iranian and the Simultaneous Elections Bill

Immediately after holding any elections in Iran, whether parliamentary, local or presidential, the Iranians start talking about the next elections. The ninth presidential elections left many impressions on Iranians, especially in terms of the sharp division of opinion, which led to a second round of elections in post-revolution Iran. When President Mahmoud Ahmadi-najad took office in August 2005, the talk started about the need to rethink the manner in which elections are conducted, not least because every election is usually preceded or followed by another election in Iran.

Given the fact that the political reference of the Islamic Shura Council (Parliament) and the President is the neo-conservatives, there is some sort of consensus or agreement between both the executive and the legislative branches about the need to hold the parliamentary elections (eighth round) simultaneously with the presidential elections (tenth round). Hence, the Shura Council submitted a draft bill in 2006 to hold the tenth presidential election and the eighth Shura Council elections.

The draft bill was rejected because it contained a provision that would shorten the presidential term by eighteen months. The proposal failed to gain a majority despite the arguments that were provided in favor of the draft bill: reducing costs and efforts spent to organize the elections.

What complicated matters for the sponsors of the proposal was that it was rejected by the constitution's Guardian Council, which thought that the bill violates the provisions of the Iranian constitution.

The bill's opponents argue that it violates Articles 63, 68, 114 and 119 of the Iranian constitution, which discuss the Shura Council elections and the presidential elections separately, and that any change requires a constitutional amendment. Due to the escalation of the parliamentary confrontation with

the constitution's Guardian Council, headed by Ayatollah Jannati, the bill was referred to the State Expediency Council, headed by Hujjat Al-Islam Hashemi Rafsanjani, which in turn returned the bill to the Shura Council for reconsideration.



Thus, the Shura Council reconsidered the bill and submitted a new proposal in early 2007, which includes one amendment: shorten the term of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to four months, instead of eighteen, and extend seventh parliamentary terms by seven extra months, in order to facilitate holding the presidential and parliamentary elections simultaneously. Amending the proposal did not affect the basic rationale behind the bill: to reduce expenditures.

The debate is still raging on the Iranian political scene. The new draft bill was rejected by the constitution's Guardian Council, and the issue now awaits the decision of the State Expediency Council. Although the draft bill is still pending, it received many criticisms. The president of the Shura Council, who was absent during the voting sessions on the above mentioned draft bill, did not hide his dissatisfaction. "Holding the eighth parliamentary elections simultaneously with the presidential elections is not in the interest of Iran," he said. Likewise, the Chairman of the Cultural and Social Committee, Emad Afrouq, expressed his dissatisfaction, and even threatened to resign if the bill was passed. Similarly, the reformist movement in Iran openly criticized the bill, claiming that it violates the provisions of the constitution and arguing that Iran's political elite, public opinion and reference authorities should resist passing this draft bill.

This draft bill is a reminder of the extent of competition between the Iranian political elites, which often leads to confrontation. This caused the reformists to lose the 2004 seventh parliamentary elections and the 2005 ninth presidential elections. Moreover, referring the bill to the State Expediency Council, headed by Rafsanjani, who almost lost the seventh parliamentary elections, but preferred to resign, and who lost the second ballot to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the ninth presidential election, will cast a shadow over the final decision on this bill. The heated debated is still raging between the government and the Shura Council, who are supposed to work together in full harmony- something that has been lacking during the past two years.

Intelligence War between Tehran and Washington

Away from the television cameras and journalistic buzz and all the talk about negotiations, a war of a different kind is taking place between Tehran and Washington. Battlefields: Tehran, Ankara and London.

In February 2007, reports of the disappearance of Ali Reza Asgari, deputy of Iran's former Defense Minister, Ali Shamkhani, have increased dramatically. Given the sensitivity of his position as a military man, his disappearance in Turkey raised a lot of questions about the possible role of American or Israeli intelligence. It has been nearly two months since he disappeared. Yet, despite the pressures exercised by Iran on Turkey to make every effort possible to obtain information, the fate of the missing Iranian official is still unknown.

Remarkably, the Iranian official disappearance was followed by the disappearance of a former Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) officer, Robert Levinson (59 years old).

Reports from Washington suggest that Levinson was arrested by the Iranian security services, in an attempt to exchange him for the Iranian official who vanished in Turkey (Ali Reza Asgari). Other reports imply that Levinson may have been working for Iranian security services.



There seems to be a lot of questions about the aim of Levinson's trip to Tehran. American sources say that he went to Kish Island in early March 2007, where he disappeared. No information was found regarding his whereabouts. Authorities in Tehran, as quoted by the Minister of Security, Mohseni Ejei, deny any connection with Levinson. This was also confirmed by Gholam-Hossein Elham, Iranian government spokesman, on 17/4/2007.

Apparently, the American authorities asked the authorities in Tehran about Levinson, providing the Iranian authorities with all the information about Robert Levinson, including his trip to Kish Island. The authorities in Iran replied by saying that they don't know if he is in Iran. Surprisingly, Levinson returned to Washington without

hoopla or fanfare; his return was announced on April 30, 2007. As a result, U.S media linked his release with Sharm el-Sheikh conference, in which both Washington and Tehran participate, describing it as "a sign of good faith" by Iran.

This "intelligence war" is not confined to Tehran and Washington. It is already spreading to Kirkuk in northern Iraq. An attack was carried out on the Iranian consulate in Kirkuk, according to Iran,



and five people were kidnapped. The United States claims that they are linked to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and that they support armed groups which fuel the sectarian conflict in Iraq.

The crisis is still evolving. Iraqis are trying to convince Americans to release the captives. It seems that Iran has tried to take advantage of this by implying that if the United States does not release the five detained Iranians, it may not participate in the Iraqi security conference, which was held on the 3rd and 4th of May 2007. Americans seek to prolong the detention of the captives to exert pressure on Iran and play down Iran's role in Iraq. The United States seems to link the release of the captives with any future talks that might take place in Sharm el-Sheikh between the Iranian foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, and the American Secretary of State Dr. Condoleezza Rice, which did not happen.

The third front of this war is in London, where Nosratollah Tajik, the former Iranian ambassador to Jordan (1999-2003), faces trial. Information from London indicates that Tajik was arrested by British security authorities for allegedly attempting to purchase night-vision goggles. According to the merits of the case, the former Iranian ambassador served as an intermediary in the alleged purchase, which is considered by the United States a violation of the economic boycott imposed on Iran. The United States provided the British security authorities with all the necessary information, and he was arrested there. Tajik was released on a bail, and the court decided to extradite him to stand trial in the United States, which is what America was demanding.

The U.S sees this as part of its war on terrorism, while Iran sees it as part of America's inherent hostility towards Iran. The case is still pending. Nevertheless, it clearly represents an important chapter in the intelligence war between Tehran and Washington.

America and Iran: "Our Goal is to Change the Regime's Behavior, not to Change the Regime."

Thus, Sharm el-Sheikh conference has ended without a high-level meeting between the Iranian foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, and the American Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, on Iraq or on the nuclear issue. Another opportunity was lost, thus complicating political issues in the Middle East, which bring Americans and Iranians together despite 27 years of estrangement.

This failure brings to mind an important question: what does America want for Iran? In other words: Does the United state think that it can coexist with Iran?

Condoleezza Rice, the American Secretary of State, told a British newspaper in an interview before the conference, that she thinks that Iran should participate in the Iraq Neighbors Conference, which was due to be held in Sharm el-Sheikh the following month. Rice reaffirmed that the American administration wants the regime in Iran to change its way in handling issues in the region. These statements and their timing call to mind a number of issues that need to be studied to evaluate whether they truly reflect the American vision of Iran.

In reviewing Iran's nuclear file, and the manner with which the American administration deals with it, and whether the American policy towards this issue aims to change the regime or the regime's behavior,

, we find that the United States actively participated in formulating the two proposals made by the European Union to Iran in August 2005 and June 2006, to encourage Iran to halt its uranium enrichment activities.

The United States, as is known, did not sign the first proposal, but it was keen to actively participate in the second one. What is the secret behind this? Security guarantees! The first proposal included strong security guarantees under the title "The Political And Security Cooperation". The U.S refused to give Iran security guarantees, and therefore did not participate in the proposal. It was betting that Iran would refuse the proposal.



The second proposal did not include security guarantees, which were replaced by a more general term "Regional Security Cooperation" without using the word "Guarantees" or any of its synonyms in English.

Iran interpretation of the absence of security guarantees is that the United States does not hide its hostility to the political regime in Iran, and that the neo-conservative theoreticians in America strongly advocate the military option, and expect that it will bring about a regime change in Iran.

Moreover, the political elite in Tehran believes that threatening Iran with sanctions, to dissuade it from continuing its nuclear program, is a tactic in a strategy that the United States plans to implement after completing all necessary preparations. This belief is strengthened by the continuous condemnation of Tehran, its role in Iraq and not taking an active role to calm the situation in Lebanon.

The American Iranian relationship, as described earlier, is one of the most complex relationships in terms of international relations policy. Unclear attitudes and statements of both sides, which also seems a tactic, highlight the great difficulty of evaluating the evolution of these relationships. This leaves open the question of whether the United States really wants to change the regime's behavior.

Iran and Syria and a New Stage of Military Cooperation*

In the last week of April 2007, a high-ranking Syrian military visited Iran in an official visit for one week. This visit followed an important visit of the Syrian defense minister to Tehran in June 2006. During this visit, the two sides signed an agreement for military cooperation against what they called the «Common Threats». This agreement, and the visit of the high-ranking military delegation to Tehran, comes amid mounting pressures on the two countries, whether by the United States or by other western and regional countries, which paves the way for further rapprochement between the two countries, who see their relationship an indispensable strategic and security option.

Iran, which faces another UN resolution at the end of May if it does not cooperate- by suspending uranium enrichment according to the West- and the growing criticism for its role in Iraq, desperately needs a regional portal which does not condemn its policies and its nuclear program. Additionally, Iran considers Syria a regional ally and a genuine partner on the issue of the Kurdish question, which seems to be the next regional crisis.

As a result of the growing pressures that Syria is exposed to due to her role in Lebanon, and the talk about an international tribunal to investigate the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, it, too, considers Iran a regional portal, almost the only one, which does not condemn its regional policy.

The two countries feel that Baker-Hamilton report and other recommendations about the need to talk with Damascus and Tehran to address the worsening situation in both Iraq and Lebanon, was a belated acknowledgment of their regional role. Therefore, they feel that they should benefit from this historical opportunity. They also feel that they should be rewarded for playing this role, which helps to end the chaos and insecurity in Iraq, as well as calming the situation in Lebanon.

Syria and Iran, who do not hide their alliance and their zealous desire to strengthen this alliance, are opening up to the American public opinion, in an attempt to reassert their regional role, and influence the public opinion. It seems that results achieved by the visit of the House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, to Syria have encouraged some in Tehran, and some democrats, to talk about a possible visit by Pelosi to Tehran. In the same context, this visit is important to Syria to explore the declared Iranian position to help Islamic countries develop their peaceful nuclear capabilities.

Apparently, this is important to Syria, since it will shift from being a net exporter of oil to a net importer by 2010, which means that Syria is searching for alternative energy sources, of which nuclear energy is a particularly attractive choice. These changes have prompted both sides to develop cooperation and political

and military rapprochement, which will cast a long shadow on the accelerated developments in the Middle East.



* This article was published in Jordan's Al-Rai newspaper on May 4, 2007