

MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Panel Discussion
Millenium UN Plaza Hotel
Wednesday, 2 November 2005

Iran & the Nuclear Question

SUMMARY

On November 2, 2005, CIS convened Iranian scholars for presentations at a public forum and briefings at the United Nations on the structure and context of nuclear decision-making in Iran.

An understanding of recent history is critical to gain purchase on the current nuclear crisis. In spite of—perhaps because of—the election of the reform-minded Khatami in 1997, conservatives have spent the past eight years consolidating a shadow decision-making apparatus within the government. It has made analysis and anticipation of Iranian politics very complex, not least to Iranians themselves. Recent years have seen an increasing personalization of politics, especially by the Supreme Leader, while the exercise of formal political institutions has atrophied. Meanwhile, the Revolutionary Guard (RG) has extended its powers, securing leading positions in the private economy, as well as strengthening their influence over the military. The RG is present on the powerful but obscure National Security Council, where it weighs in heavily on issues of nuclear relations.

In the high-turnout elections last spring, conservatives officially reclaimed the government by electing, in a contest widely believed to have been manipulated, the mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Reformers are in retreat. The new regime is more confident, more militaristic, and more rash than during the previous eight years. It has solved the problem of political challenges from within for the time being, and can focus more easily on external challenges, such as international opposition to its moves towards development of nuclear weapons.

Among the more vexing issues is how global and regional geopolitics since 9/11 have tended to strengthen Iranian conservatives' claim to security concerns and legitimate their invocation of defense. While two of its hostile neighbors—Afghanistan and Iraq—have been decapitated by the U.S., the growth of a regional U.S. military presence (with troops in Bahrain, Qatar, Afghanistan and Iraq, and sizable naval and air power nearby) and a rhetoric of regime change constitute clear threats to Iran, as does Israel. Iran considers itself to hold two deterrent cards against these putative

threats—one is its role in Iraq; and the other is the possibility of developing nuclear weapons.

The conservative view that nuclear weapons are a deterrent “strategy of peace” resonates with the Iranian population. In addition to the arguments above, the memory of the Iran-Iraq War remains vivid, not least the use of chemical weapons on a weak and vulnerable Iran, with silence from many Western governments. Nuclear weapons are an assurance that such a traumatic experience will not again prevail, at least in the near term.

Now that conservatives have consolidated their political power, the question remains whether real decision-making will shift back to the hands of government or remain under the Supreme Leader. Evidence so far is unclear. It was the Supreme Leader’s pick, Rafsanjani, who was recently sent to Saudi Arabia to discuss regional power balances, while the President’s Foreign Minister was not allowed into Riyadh. Several of President Ahmadinejad’s choices for the cabinet have been rejected by the Majlis, another sign of uncertain power.

The bottom line is that management of the new regime in Tehran promises to be even more complicated than before. It may be more militant and rash, but the depth of support is difficult to gauge.

---*Nichole Argo*

Panelists

Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo
Visiting Scholar, MIT Center for International Studies, Member of the Majlis,
2000-2004

Dr. Ali Mostashari
UNDP, Co-founder of the Iran Studies Group at MIT

Prof. Vali Nasr
Naval Postgraduate School, author of *Democracy in Iran* and *Shi'a Revival*

Prof. Hadi Semati
University of Tehran and Fellow, Woodrow Wilson International Center for
Scholars

John Tirman (moderator)
Executive Director, MIT Center for International Studies