



Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

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Iran at a Crossroad

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is at a crossroad. 2009 closed with the Islamic Republic regime witnessing the most fundamental challenges to its rule over Iran. As a result both the regime in power and the country of Iran begin the year 2010 with more uncertainty than at any other time in the thirty years since the triumph of the Islamic revolution. The uncertainty in Iran not only translates into insecurity for the regime, but also for the region and beyond, as the regime flexes its muscles to demonstrate relevance and authority. This presents a challenging security environment. Chief among the growing security challenges are Tehran's continued defiance in negotiations over its nuclear program, and the weakening of the chains of commands which hitherto had kept Tehran from stepping beyond certain redlines in projecting its influence beyond its borders. Which way is Iran heading?

Nuclear Negotiations and International Security Issues

The issues surrounding Iran's nuclear program continued to go unresolved. Revelations, such as the discovery of the undeclared Fordow underground nuclear enrichment facility near Qom, have only created more questions and concerns over Iran's true intentions. Tehran continues to walk a tight rope with regards to its nuclear program. The Iranian leadership appears to make concessions and keep dialogue open with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) by suggesting alternatives to the P5+1 backed IAEA offer to ship the bulk of Iran's low-enriched uranium to Russia and France for conversion into nuclear fuel for a medical research reactor in Tehran. Thus far, the alternatives Tehran has offered, ranging from gradual shipments of its uranium "abroad" to shipping the uranium to the Iranian island of Kish, do little, if anything, to ease security concerns. They can only be viewed as attempts to stall talks and avoid sanctions or other more robust action by the international community, all the while Tehran moves forward with its nuclear program.

MES Notes

Upcoming MES Lecture Series

Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University will be hosting a Lecture Series throughout 2010 entitled "A Multidisciplinary Approach to AfPak Region and Its People."

The first speaker in this series is Dr. James Caron, who will be discussing his work on social and political dissent in Pashtu poetry.

The lecture will take place 20 January from 1400-1530 in rooms 163/164 of the GRC.

POC for this event is Adam Seitz at seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu.

MES Website is Available

The Middle East Studies Website is now available and is accessible from the Marine Corps University homepage at www.mcu.usmc.mil.

MES at MCU Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.

If obtaining nuclear fuel for “peaceful” use had been the sincere objective for Tehran, accepting the proposal agreed to in principle by Iran during the October 2009 negotiations held in Geneva ought to have been sufficient. Therefore, little doubt should remain that Tehran’s ultimate objective in its nuclear policies is something other than securing nuclear fuel for its planned power plants and other legitimate uses.

Exacerbating the nuclear dilemma in the past year was Tehran’s repeated missile tests, increased Iranian political and military support of militant groups not limited to the Middle East region, and provocations against specific targets in Iran’s neighborhood and beyond. As nuclear negotiations drag on, Tehran is taking this opportunity to rearm and position its proxies in the region. Throughout 2009 the international community witnessed an increase in the frequency and size of Iran-origin weapons shipments seized en-route to militants throughout the Middle East, raising concerns that Tehran is preparing for confrontation with the West through proxies in the event of a bolder action against the Islamic Republic or as a leverage in gaining a better deal in the nuclear negotiation roundabouts.

Domestic Insecurity and Leadership Issues

Prior to the highly disputed June 2009 presidential election and the internal fallout which has followed it, there was some sense that the Islamic Republic had a defined, albeit complicated and convoluted, leadership structure. The supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was the final arbiter, and he and his office acted as a source of ultimate legitimacy within the regime. Khamenei, while not omnipotent within the system, was clearly the person who stood, at least in the public perception, outside of the wrangling of Iran’s multifaceted power structure and was the one who checked and balanced various forces competing for primacy within the regime. However, Khamenei’s blatant support of Mahmud Ahmadinejad prior to the election and after his disputed victory has stripped the Supreme Leader of any aura of impartiality that he had retained. The massive protests which have rocked Tehran and other Iranian cities since June and the government’s brutal suppression of these protests have left a greater rift in many Iranian decision-making apparatus, illustrating the limits of Khamenei’s power and control over the system in charge in Iran. All the while as the Iranian leadership continues to scramble to regain order and legitimacy, the door has been opened for the Islamic Republic Guard Corps (IRGC) to step in amid the power struggle with clinched fists to fill the power vacuum.

MES December News

3 December 2009

Dr. Amin Tarzi participated in a conference for The Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies at Stanford University entitled “Alienated Nations, Fractured States: Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

Dr. Tarzi’s presentation was entitled “Yaghistan Revisited: The Struggle for Domination of Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands.”

8 December 2009

Dr. Amin Tarzi participated in a conference at the Asia Society entitled “Can President Obama’s New Afghanistan Strategy Succeed?”

Video and transcripts are available through the MES Website.

17 December 2009

Dr. Amin Tarzi gave a talk at Camp Pendleton for the Marine Corps School of Infantry entitled “Measures of Success in the Afghanistan Theatre.”

It is too early to predict that Iran is turning into a shadowy military dictatorship unofficially headed by elements within the IRGC. But it is becoming clearer that there are major rifts among civilian political circles and also among the clergy, leaving the hardliners in the IRGC ranks as the powerbrokers and eventual deciders of the course of action for the Islamic Republic.

The internal threats to the security of the Iranian regime and the apparent lack of resolute leadership among the traditional civilian forces in charge in Tehran have created concerns about a host of issues; prime among them for the international community are the Iranian regime's threat perceptions and the IRGC's reaction to further domestic unrest. Beyond questions about gross violations of human rights currently taking place against protestors and political opponents of the regime, the two aforementioned interrelated dilemmas are likely to be key questions facing the international community regarding Iran this year.

To address the first dilemma, the international community needs to anticipate and prepare for the Iranian regime's reaction should the domestic upheaval gain momentum. It is likely that the regime will continue to accelerate the pursuit of nuclear technology beyond peaceful uses to gain more legitimacy for the system and bolster nationalistic fervor among Iranians, both in concrete actions and also in opaque actions aimed at raising more concerns about Iran's nuclear program. Tehran seems to be calculating that by inviting more international condemnation for its nuclear activities, it can divert attention from its internal problems and also to blame the international community for fomenting those problems. Incorporating this understanding effectively into negotiation strategies and engagement planning is critical to advancing the international community's position in the region.

The second challenge is about Iran's leadership. Is there an individual or an identifiable institution, other than the IRGC, with which the international community could continue to negotiate the fate of Iran's nuclear program as 2010 begins? In desperation, Tehran might gamble to invite harsher international actions as a diversionary tactic. With lack of decisive leadership and with access to advanced nuclear technology, this could be a dangerous gamble for all involved. It is imperative to identify in the near-term an empowered, acceptable interlocutor that can be a reliable partner at the table.

As 2010 begins, Iran – both regime and country – is at a crossroad. Which path will it take? This will depend heavily on internal pressures, of course. However, the international community has a hand to play as well. It is in the playing that the course will be determined.



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