

Everything Must Change, So That Everything Can Stay the Same:¹ Ahmadinejad and Khamenei,

2005-12

Ahmadinejad

Mahmud Ahmadinejad was born in the small town of Aradan, near Garmsar, south-east of Tehran, in October 1956. His father ran a grocery shop there, but was devout and also gave classes teaching the Koran. His mother came from a *seyyed* family. Only one or two years after little Mahmud was born, his father moved the family to Tehran in search of better work, changing his name to Ahmadinejad from his previous family name, Sabaghian – which signified a dye-worker – in order to conceal his humble rural origins. The name Ahmadinejad means ‘of the tribe or family of Ahmad’, Ahmad being another name connected with the Prophet Mohammad. Suggestions that he changed the family name because the original one indicated a Jewish origin seem to have no basis. Once in Tehran, Mahmud’s father set up a small workshop making metal window-frames and doors with two others in Narmak, on the eastern edge of the city. As time went on Narmak became more prosperous and so did the Ahmadinejad family, in a modest way. Mahmud’s father made enough money to pay the fees for a private school, but he also made his sons get up early to study the Koran with him (Mahmud had two brothers and four sisters). Photographs of Mahmud from his schooldays and youth in the 1960s and 70s show a short, rather cocky boy. At the end of his school years, in 1975, he did well in the university entrance exams and went on to the Elm-o-Sanat – the University of Science and Technology, which was based nearby.²

At the university Ahmadinejad studied development engineering, remained devout and followed the trend of student politics of the time,

; the work of Shariati and possibly developing an association with the Hojjatieh, though this was trumped by his devotion to Khomeini when Khomeini returned from exile in 1979. It was suggested after he became president that Ahmadinejad was one of the students involved in the hostage crisis (and some former hostages even identified him from photographs), but in fact, although he was one of the most forthright student activists at his university at that time, and had dealings with wider student organizations involved in revolutionary activities, Elm-o-Sanat was the only one of the five Tehran universities that did not participate in the hostage-taking. Being more inclined to the religious right than the left-inclined students at the other universities, the students of Elm-o-Sanat, like Ahmadinejad, tended to come from humbler backgrounds. Some have suggested that Ahmadinejad was more in favour of occupying the Soviet embassy, seeing the communist Russians as a greater threat than America; alternatively that he took seriously an injunction from Khomeini not to take part in provocative actions. It seems quite likely that once the occupation of the embassy began, he regretted that he had not got involved, but the students in the embassy were quite jealous of their prize at the time and wary of outside involvement in any case.³

A few months after the beginning of the hostage crisis, when the universities were closed down as part of what was called the Cultural Revolution, Ahmadinejad was apparently instrumental first in ensuring that Elm-o-Sanat was one of the first to close, and then in the activities of one of the committees set up to purge leftist students and university teachers. But the friendships and contacts he made at Elm-o-Sanat remained important to him. From there he went to West Azerbaijan, where he worked with Mojtaba Hashemi Samareh (another Elm-o-Sanat graduate), who had been appointed as the deputy to the provincial governor responsible for political affairs. Ahmadinejad was responsible for helping to combat the Kurdish separatists in the region. He spent the next few years on similar work in different parts of Azerbaijan; work that became only more pressing for the regime after the beginning of the war in September 1980. He kept up his studies and passed his first degree while in Sanandaj in 1986 before going on to serve with the Sepah for two years, allegedly taking part in a daring raid on Iraqi oil installations at Kirkuk at one point (in September 1987). But details of this period in his life are hazy. Some have suggested that he served with

the Basij rather than the Sepah as such, and that his role as an engineer was technical rather than as an active combatant. After the war, he continued his administrative and political career, and was sent in 1993 to be governor of Ardebil province, where he stayed until 1997, when Khatami and Nuri replaced previous provincial governors with reformists of their own choosing.⁴

While he had been serving as governor in Ardebil, Ahmadinejad had also been working on a doctoral thesis in transport engineering and planning through Elm-o-Sanat, on a distance basis. In 1997 he took his doctorate and returned to his old university to teach; he continued to do so even after he became mayor of Tehran in 2003. All through this period he was still involved in politics, and particularly in the reaction of the hardline right to the Reform phenomenon. He stood in the local elections of February 1999 without success, and was selected again as a candidate for the Majles elections of 2000, but again saw his hopes swept away by the success of the reformists. Through all this period, Ahmadinejad had close connections to the Ansar-e Hezbollah street fighters who periodically broke into offices or disrupted meetings of the reformists, shouting slogans, wielding fists, clubs, knives and chains. They were also on the streets to enforce *hejab* (with less and less effect, at least in affluent areas like north Tehran) and to reprimand couples holding hands in parks. Many of them were present or former members of the Basij. Because of the support given them by clergy like Ayatollah Jannati, and especially Mesbah-Yazdi (and more or less openly, by Khamenei himself), and through the complicity of the judiciary, the police and the law-enforcement authorities, for the most part the *hezbollahis* could act with impunity.⁵

In Kerman at this time (2002), there were a series of murders carried out by *hezbollahis*; murders of people they regarded as morally reprehensible, mainly for sexual reasons. One couple were abducted and drowned in a ditch while on an outing to look for accommodation – they were about to get married. Their bodies were dumped in the desert outside the city. When taken to trial, the six perpetrators confessed to five killings out of a total of eighteen suspicious deaths, but claimed they had received personal guidance from Mesbah-Yazdi authorizing them to kill people who were acting immorally (Mesbah-Yazdi had apparently made the humane reservation that the victims should be given at least two warnings to desist from their immorality first). When

asked about this alleged guidance, Mesbah-Yazdi was evasive and attempted to get Khamenei to make a judgement on the matter – an attempt that the supreme leader also seems to have evaded. The six (all Basijis) were convicted, but appealed to the supreme court in Tehran. The supreme court returned the case to a different court in Kerman province for retrial. This happened three times, and each time the regional court convicted the six over again (feeling in Kerman was strongly against them, naturally enough). The police chief who had made the arrests and prepared the evidence was sacked from his job. Encouraged by what had happened in Kerman, religious vigilantes carried out similar killings in Tehran and Mashhad. The supreme court could not bring themselves to uphold the local verdicts, nor to condemn the defendants, whom they saw as ‘pious individuals’, nor to say that the (dubious) shari‘a justification for the killings, as set out by Mesbah-Yazdi, was incorrect. Eventually, in April 2007 a fourth court in Kerman acquitted the killers.⁶

Abadgaran and Usulgarayan

In Tehran, Ahmadinejad was near the centre of debate and discussion among people of his generation and political background. They were frustrated by the lack of political success of the right over the past few years, and to a certain extent at the way that the paternalist-minded hardline leadership failed to engage with or listen to younger grassroots activists like themselves. But as Khatami’s second term wore on, and as the shine went off the reformist movement, they also sensed an opportunity. In the run-up to the local council elections of February 2003, Ahmadinejad and some like-minded colleagues formed a new political grouping, calling themselves the Abadgaran, which means ‘developers’ – an awkward choice that always sounded as though it was selected because the terms for reform and reconstruction were already taken. Eventually the term was dropped in favour of Usulgarayan, which means ‘followers of principle’ – sometimes translated awkwardly as ‘principle-ists’ or ‘principlists’. The term Usulgarayan had first appeared earlier, in the 1990s; it derived a certain dignity through its association with Usulism, the school of Shi‘ism that overcame the Akhbaris in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ahmadinejad became

their election campaign manager. He focused on getting Basijis and their families to come out to vote for candidates of the right – many of whom in Tehran, like him, identified with Abadgaran. Because reform-oriented voters stayed away (disappointed particularly by the childish behaviour of some of the reformist councillors elected in 1999) the right swept the board, winning all but one of the seats. Elsewhere in the country the right did similarly well, on a low turnout, for similar reasons.⁷

The new councillors selected Ahmadinejad for mayor of Tehran – a natural choice given his position among them up to that point. Initially Khatami's Interior Ministry refused to accept him, but eventually they relented. Where his predecessor Karbaschi had planted trees in Tehran, Ahmadinejad planted martyrs. In the battlefields of the war with Iraq, bodies were still being found. Rather than put them in the usual cemeteries, Ahmadinejad proposed putting them in busy squares, parks and other open spaces, to remind people of the soldiers' sacrifice in the war. But the policy had provocative generational and class overtones, seemingly formulated as a reproach to younger and richer Iranians less affected by the war. It seemed that he was targeting north Tehran particularly, and parks where young couples tried to spend a few illicit minutes together. When some bodies were buried in an open space at Tehran University, students rioted. The initiative became a national scandal, and Ahmadinejad retreated from some of the more provocative plans (the episode became a part of a wider debate about the instrumental use – *estefade-ye abzari* – of those who had suffered or died in the war for political purposes).⁸ Most of his other initiatives as mayor had a similarly pointed political significance. In council spending he did his best to favour Basijis, the Sepah and other groups of the right. He used the Sepah's considerable resources to help him carry out major construction projects, and gave them easy terms for schemes of their own within the capital.

On 20 February 2004 elections were held for the seventh Majles since the revolution. The reformists attempted to repeat their tactic from 2000, swamping the Guardian Council with reformist candidates, but in the run-up to the elections the Expediency Council (chaired by Rafsanjani and sending also a signal about its attitude to Khatami's ill-fated constitutional reform legislation) had agreed to quadruple the Guardian Council's budget, so it could cope with its task of vetting large

numbers of candidates. Accordingly, in January 2004 the Guardian Council rejected 3,600 out of the 8,200 candidates who had put themselves forward, including eighty who were sitting members of the reformist-dominated sixth Majles. There were protests; the reformists were outraged, but little could be done:

What moron out there dares to think our elections are not free? When for each constituency, on average, there are 19 candidates . . . and then you have the nerve to say we do not have free elections? For instance in our village! We don't need more than one elected candidate, do we?

You can vote for Hajji Aghah. God forbid you don't think he is suitable. His daughter is also standing in the elections! Well, there is no difference between men and women? Is there?

Now listen, you dog eaters! You don't like her? His son is also a candidate. All the more his uncle and his sister-in-law and . . . all are candidates! How could an election be more free than this?⁹

For some time, reformist figures like Akbar Ganji (from prison, in his case) had been saying that Khatami should resign and the reformist movement should boycott elections to show their disgust for the machinations of the hardliners and their manipulation of the institutions of the state (though Khatami and others urged people to vote). Some reformist candidates who had been approved withdrew in protest. The reformist interior minister threatened to postpone the elections, but on 11 February Khatami again put the system before reform and said they should go ahead. The reformist movement began to go into a sulk. As they did so, many ordinary Iranians who were already half-disposed to see them as spoilt rich kids and fickle windbags turned away.¹⁰

The immediate consequence was that, as with the local elections of 2003, the hardliners won a major victory. Khamenei was able to say as he made his vote on election day that the boycott showed how the enemies of the revolution and the country 'are trying to prevent the people from going to the polling booths'. Turnout was lower than for any previous Majles election – around 51 per cent. Conservatives won over 150 seats in the first round. The right could now see, through manipulation of the system, through the reformists' abdication from the process and through populist politics, their way forward. In Tehran, Ahmadinejad

was massaging and building up his connections with a support base that could help him on his next move – as candidate for the elections to the presidency in 2005.

As with previous Iranian presidential elections, there was a script for the elections of 2005. They were supposed to go to Rafsanjani – apparently. By now, after his humiliation in 2000, most hardliners seemed to have forgiven him for siding with the reformists in 1997. Some regime media supported him – even the strongly hardline newspaper *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* supported him. The Guardian Council again excluded reformist candidates – Khamenei intervened to allow one of the least charismatic, Mostafa Moin, to run for form's sake, in addition to Mehdi Karrubi. Once again, many leading reformists demanded that their supporters boycott the elections in protest at the behaviour of the Guardian Council. In pre-election polls, Rafsanjani was well ahead – one poll gave him 19.1 per cent of the vote, with his nearest competitor (Qalibaf, the leading hardliner) with 9 per cent and Ahmadinejad coming next to last with 2.8 per cent. Despite his efforts in Tehran, Ahmadinejad was still little known and not taken particularly seriously. But Khamenei and his advisers may have intended an unpleasant surprise for Rafsanjani – hence (if so) the decision to allow eight candidates to run, reducing the likelihood that any would win an outright victory in the first round of voting by getting over 50 per cent of the votes.

In the election campaigning, there were some contrasts. Somewhat unnoticed, Ahmadinejad was already more active outside the capital than any of the other candidates – emphasizing his humble, man-of-the-people image. Repeatedly he had to deny reports that he would drop out of the race to give other candidates of the right a better chance. By contrast, Rafsanjani was already presenting himself in a presidential style, leaving most of the actual electioneering to his supporters. Qalibaf, striving to portray himself as a man of action (he had previously been head of law enforcement) was sometimes coming across as an eccentric, making his supporters doubt their wisdom in backing him. At one point he even made the gaffe of suggesting that he would be the Reza Khan of the Islamic republic. It has been suggested that this contributed to a decision at a meeting held by Khamenei just a few days before the poll that the hardline circle should withdraw their support from Qalibaf (who was also suspected of financial irregularities) and back Ahmadinejad instead. An instruction was issued via the supreme

leader's representative to the Sepah that indicated that they should allocate their votes and their support according to the simple lifestyle and modest campaign funds of their chosen candidate – which was taken as a clear directive to swing behind Ahmadinejad.¹¹

On the day (17 June 2005), there were seven candidates, because Mohsen Rezaei had withdrawn to try to reduce the split in the hardline vote. When the results came through, Rafsanjani topped the poll with 21 per cent, but Ahmadinejad surprised everyone by coming second with 19 per cent. Karrubi came third with 17 per cent, followed by Moin and Qalibaf. The turnout was about 62 per cent; again low by Iranian standards, thanks to the reformist boycott. Several of the candidates (including Rafsanjani) protested about irregularities in the poll; protests that were taken rather more seriously after the elections of 2009. The Guardian Council had taken some time to produce the results, and there were rumours of ballot-boxes being stuffed, particularly in out-of-the-way constituencies where Ahmadinejad did well. In a twist reminiscent of Gogol or Hogarth, members of the Sepah were alleged to have voted several times by using the identities of people who had died, but whose birth certificates had not expired.

Rafsanjani, probably thinking he was sitting pretty and that the reformist votes would swing to him, dropped his objections, but Karrubi continued to protest vigorously (at the time, he was also accused of having bribed voters). He would have needed only a few more votes to have beaten Ahmadinejad to second place and to have gone ahead against Rafsanjani in the run-off. But his complaints achieved nothing, and in the event the run-off was between Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani. The second round of voting was held just a week later – enough time for the contrast between the aloof, establishment mullah with the palatial lifestyle and the proletarian, populist newcomer to become much more apparent. The right swung their support fully behind Ahmadinejad; Rafsanjani attempted but failed to draw the reformist vote out to support him. Ahmadinejad was invited to speak to the Majles, and told them that there had been a smear campaign against him, orchestrated by foreign powers. He benefited from the fact that he was not a member of the post-revolution political elite, was not a mullah and obviously was not wealthy or from a well-to-do, educated background. When the count was finished (the turnout was 3 per cent or so lower than in the first round), Ahmadinejad had won with just over 60 per

cent of the vote; Rafsanjani about 36 per cent. Again, there were questions. Rafsanjani, defeated and humiliated yet again, cried foul. Comparing voting from the two rounds, it looked as though reformist voters had switched over to vote for Ahmadinejad, which was improbable (alternatively, that people who had voted reformist in the first round had not voted at all in the second, and a roughly equal number who had not voted in the first round came into the poll for the second, and all voted for Ahmadinejad – equally implausible). But again, those who disputed the results got nowhere, and against all the expectations of just a few weeks earlier, Ahmadinejad was president.¹²

A central point about Ahmadinejad was that, unlike almost all the prominent politicians of the Islamic republic who preceded him, he was an outsider. This was true even where he had most support, within the Basij and the Sepah – Ahmadinejad had never been a part of the upper circle of Sepah commanders, like Qalibaf, Ali Larijani or Rezai. The reformists had tried to bring in a new form of politics, but their well-known main politicians had all been familiar figures from the 1980s and 90s. Reformism had been new wine in old bottles. By contrast, no one had really known anything about Ahmadinejad before 2003; the people he brought with him into office (many of them associates from his time at Elm-o-Sanat) were equally unknown. Ahmadinejad's outsider status and his lower-class origins doubtless had something to do with the cheeky, provocative streak in his character – he was happy to upset people. This just reinforced the scorn with which he and his followers were regarded by many middle-class Iranians. They also scoffed (more or less openly) at his obscure background, his doctorate in traffic studies, and his uneducated, uncultured hangers-on:

'Mongoloid,' said one leading member of the old guard, himself the son of an Ayatollah and a noted reformist, for every name I mentioned in the Ahmadinejad clique. 'Mongoloids, all of them.' Sitting there in his home in North Tehran, sumptuously decorated with Persian antiques, he wasn't aware of the offensiveness of that term in the West . . . he meant that they were grossly unqualified for their jobs.¹³

While many in Iran were sneering and running him down, others outside Iran were dramatizing him and the threat he represented – Niall Ferguson hailed him in the summer of 2005 as the Stalin of the Iranian revolution; whether this signified a greater misunderstanding of Stalin,

of Ahmadinejad or of the Iranian revolution is not easy to say.¹⁴ Neither the sneering nor the scaremongering seems to have bothered Ahmadinejad much – in fact both benefited him in his relationship with the only constituency he cared about – the Basijis, the poor, the uneducated and traditional-minded Iranians from the provinces. They liked his simple language, his cheap clothes and his nationalist rhetoric – they felt he was like them. They liked it that he offended privileged, rich people and foreigners. His occasional wackiness and apparent ignorance either did not trouble them, or went over their heads.

Ahmadinejad made the most of his humble origins, but he knew the system and was not in awe of it. He was keen in his first months to show his allegiance to Khamenei as the supreme leader, but he saw no reason to defer to the rest of the political establishment. When it came to nominating his cabinet, his choices were his own, and many of them were disliked by the Majles. After ten days of wrangling, most of his choices were approved, but four were not, including his selection for the important Petroleum Ministry. All of the four rejects had worked with him as mayor of Tehran. His second choice for the Petroleum Ministry was rejected too, and only his third suggestion (Kazem Vaziri Hameneh) was accepted. In general, Ahmadinejad's cabinet reflected his conservative and hardline views, and his desire to reassert them after the reformist episode; many of his ministers had been members of the Sepah or were war veterans. Two of them, Gholamhosein Mohseni Ejei and Mostafa Purmohammadi, were restored to high office after having been removed from the Intelligence Ministry or demoted after the Serial Murders scandal. Ahmadinejad made them minister of intelligence and minister of the interior respectively.¹⁵

Ahmadinejad was keen from the start to mark a dividing line between his conduct of government and the way his predecessors had operated. He held his first cabinet meeting in Mashhad and a succession of the following meetings in other provincial towns and cities. Within a few months he recalled Iranian ambassadors from a variety of overseas posts, including all ambassadors to EU countries, and replaced them with new men closer to his own outlook (this was perhaps a sly retaliation for the Khatami government's sacking of provincial governors in 1997, in which Ahmadinejad had lost his own job). But his conduct of government was soon also showing a departure from the image he himself had presented during the election campaigns. Then he had made

economic policy and the plight of the poor his main concern; declaring he would bring the oil money to the table of the underprivileged and questioning how wealthy people had prospered at the expense of the *mostazafin*. He had made no secret of his piety, but had expressed himself mainly in secular terms. Now in office, he began to emphasize Iran's foreign policy and international position, the nuclear issue and his religious beliefs much more.

The Nuclear Question

In the 1970s the Shah, with the full support of the US and several other Western countries, had embarked on a plan for the generation of civil nuclear power that would eventually have resulted in the building of twenty-three nuclear power stations around the country, securing Iran's energy needs well into the future, independently of her huge oil and gas reserves, and making possible the export of electricity to neighbouring states. Using oil profits in this way seemed then a sensible way of investing a finite resource in order to create an infinite one. Two nuclear reactors were begun at Bushehr with the help of German contractors Kraftwerk Union (KWU), and work had reached an advanced stage by 1979. But as in other ways, the Shah's policy anticipated that of the Islamic republic in the twenty-first century by covertly pursuing a nuclear weapon capability in addition to the civil nuclear programme; despite having already signed up to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear-weapon state (in 1968). The idea of a nuclear-armed Iran seems to have been acceptable to the US at the time – it fitted with Iran's geostrategic 'policeman' role and US sales to Iran of other high-specification weaponry. In June 1974 the Shah told a Western journalist that Iran would have nuclear weapons 'without a doubt and sooner than one would think' – later he retracted the statement.¹⁶

Immediately after February 1979 the leadership of the Islamic republic took a similar attitude to both the civil nuclear programme and the possibility of nuclear weapons to that it held towards the expensive conventional weapons that the Shah had bought – they were signs of extravagance and excess, and were not needed. Khomeini disapproved of nuclear technology in general. Beheshti was in favour of a nuclear programme, but he was an isolated voice in the leadership in the

early 1980s, and Bazargan's government stopped work on the plants at Bushehr.

From 1984 there was renewed activity after Khomeini apparently reversed his previous decision to abandon the nuclear programmes. But potential international partners were wary of making new commitments to Iran, especially while the war continued, and KWU eventually refused to resume work at Bushehr. Despite talks and rumours of talks with a variety of countries including China, Argentina, North Korea and Pakistan, serious work on nuclear technology seems not to have begun again until the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani, whose government finally agreed a deal with Russia in January 1995 to renew work on the reactor in Bushehr that was nearest completion. The reactor was supposed to be finished within four years, but was subject to extended delays due to technical problems, sanctions and other international interference. There was a launch for the reactor in August 2010, and the first fuel was loaded, but then there were further delays because of damage to a cooling pump. The reactor began low-level operation in May 2011,¹⁷ and on 4 September 2011 Iran announced the plant had finally begun producing electricity.

But in addition to the civil nuclear programme, there were persistent rumours about Iranian plans to build a nuclear weapon, supported by statements from Western countries that their intelligence services believed Iran was engaged in such activities.¹⁸ Iran consistently denied this, but after the testing of the Shahab 3 missile in 2000, concern intensified. On 14 December 2001 Rafsanjani made a statement at Friday prayers that addressed the regional nuclear balance and speculated about the possibility that 'the world of Islam' might acquire nuclear weapons to balance those of Israel. He suggested disturbingly that if that were to happen, a nuclear exchange could destroy Israel but 'only cause damage' to Islamic countries.¹⁹ This gave some in the West the impression that, despite the pacific position of the Khatami presidency, there was an underlying commitment by the *nezam* – the system – to the acquisition of a nuclear weapon capability. This would have contravened not only Iran's continuing obligations under the NPT and her repeated declarations of adherence to it, but also religious statements by the supreme leader and others that possession or use of nuclear weapons was un-Islamic. Others suggested that Iran could still be consistent with all these statements and commitments, and still pursue a weapon capability, if she did so on

the basis that the programme worked all the way through the development of a weapon, but stopped just short of the final stage of actually assembling it. This would give Iran a deterrent, without the opprobrium of breaching either treaty or religious commitments (there are other so-called threshold states that do not possess nuclear weapons but could quickly produce them if necessary – notably Germany and Japan).

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which entered into force in 1970, is something of an oddity in the world of diplomacy and international law.²⁰ Most multilateral treaties have, for hundreds of years, been drawn up on the principle of parity between the states that sign; that all the signatories are committed to honour the same commitments. The NPT is unusual in that it discriminates between the five nuclear-weapon states (NWS – the US, Russia, Britain, France and China) and the rest, designated as non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS). The basic structure of the treaty is that the NNWS commit themselves not to acquire nuclear weapons in return for a commitment from the NWS to help them with civil nuclear energy and (in article VI – often overlooked) to negotiate ‘in good faith’ toward an eventual treaty on general and complete disarmament. Some have criticized this structure for fixing an unjust inequality between nations. Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea have acquired nuclear weapons independently of the treaty (either having never signed up to it, or having withdrawn from it). Those who defend the treaty do so on pragmatic grounds, saying that whatever its defects and inequities, it has helped to preserve a degree of geostrategic stability and has prevented a nuclear free-for-all in which a diversity of states that could ill afford it might have acquired nuclear weapons for fear that their neighbours would do so first. Its detractors question it on a variety of grounds. From an Iranian perspective, some find it hard to understand why, if a state like Britain for example (in the middle of peaceful Europe, and protected by EU and NATO alliances) continues to value nuclear weapons for self-defence, the same should not apply for a state like Iran, which suffered attacks from Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in the 1980s, and whose neighbours include some that are unstable (Iraq, Afghanistan), several near-neighbours that are nuclear-armed (Russia, Israel, China) and one neighbour that is both unstable and nuclear-armed (Pakistan). But Iran is a party to the NPT, and the international community expects Iran to abide by its provisions.

Iran was already under serious pressure to sign up to the Additional Protocol to the NPT (which provided for a more rigorous inspection regime to ensure compliance) when in August 2002 the MKO announced that the Iranian regime was building two secret nuclear installations, including one at Natanz between Isfahan and Kashan in central Iran designed for enriching uranium. Many commentators believed that the MKO had been used as a front for release of the information, probably by Mossad, but the information itself was accurate and was later confirmed by the Khatami government. The Iranians claimed with some justice that they were not under an obligation to notify the installations to the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA – the UN body responsible for monitoring compliance with the NPT) because they were not yet operational, but from this point on international pressure on Iran was stepped up further.

Uranium enrichment is achieved by spinning uranium hexafluoride gas in a centrifuge to separate out the more fissile uranium 235 isotope from the less fissile uranium 238 isotope. Uranium 235 is the isotope needed for nuclear reactions. Uranium enriched to 2–3 per cent Uranium 235 is satisfactory for a civil nuclear reactor, but needs to be further enriched to 90 per cent or more for a nuclear weapon. This is the problem: civil uranium enrichment is a legitimate activity under the NPT (as a non-nuclear-weapon state Iran is entitled to develop civil nuclear power, *and* to receive help from other treaty signatories toward that end) but the difference between enrichment to levels consistent with civil use and the levels necessary for weapons may be difficult to verify from outside once the enrichment process has begun. Iran has been enriching uranium since at least February 2006, and estimates for the time needed to gather enough highly enriched uranium for a bomb have ranged from two to eight years (depending on the number of centrifuges and the efficiency of their operation).

Under Khatami's presidency Iran's chief nuclear negotiator was Hasan Ruhani, who also served as secretary to the SNSC. In 2003 he was discussing Iran's nuclear policy with representatives from the UK, France and Germany (the EU Three), and in October he accepted that Iran would sign the Additional Protocol, which authorized the IAEA to make short-notice inspections. This was, of course, also the epoch of the US/coalition conquest of Iraq and the Guldumann Grand Bargain offer. If, in that context, Iran could have secured a wider settlement, it is

possible that the regime would have abandoned Iran's nuclear weapons plans permanently – the US National Intelligence Estimate judged later (at the end of 2007) that Iran had halted work toward a nuclear weapon in the autumn of 2003.²¹ In October 2004 Iran agreed to suspend nuclear enrichment activities temporarily, pending proposals from the EU Three for a more permanent settlement.

This was a delicate juncture, but the two sides' interpretations of it were very different. The Iranians had emphasized that the suspension of work towards enrichment was temporary, but for the EU Three suspension was the main objective. Behind the EU Three, as the Iranians knew, was the US, and the US was unwilling to allow the Iranians an enrichment capability or any kind of nuclear programme. This made any attempt by the Three to negotiate possibilities for uranium enrichment outside Iran, or for some kind of supervised nuclear programme, almost impossible. The Bush administration would neither negotiate with the Iranians, nor allow the EU Three the negotiating freedom to do so meaningfully. The ultimate failure of the negotiations is unsurprising in the circumstances.

When Ahmadinejad came to power in June 2005 it was clear that there would be a hardening of Iranian attitudes. Iran no longer felt as vulnerable as it had in 2003; the occupation of Iraq was not going well for the US, and Iran was already in an influential position there. Even before becoming president, Ahmadinejad, taking his lead from the hard-line Majles elected in 2004, was critical of the Iranian team that had agreed to suspend enrichment. On 5 August, after the EU Three finally presented their 'Framework for a Long-Term Agreement', Ahmadinejad's government rejected the proposals derisively, calling them an insult. Ruhani resigned as the chief nuclear negotiator and was replaced by Ali Larijani. In his first visit to the UN General Assembly in New York the following month, Ahmadinejad was defiant, saying that the stance of the 'hegemonic' Western powers on Iran's alleged nuclear weapon programme was just a ploy to prevent Iran from developing civil nuclear power (later, back in Iran, he claimed that while speaking to the General Assembly he had been surrounded by a protective halo of light, and that the assembled world leaders had not blinked for several minutes, as if a hand was holding them there, and had 'opened their eyes and ears for the message of the Islamic Republic').²² At a separate meeting with representatives of the EU Three, he accused them of being

lackeys of the US. This was not the kind of language to which the diplomats were accustomed. In February 2006 the plant at Natanz began enrichment, and within a short time Ahmadinejad was announcing that Iran had enriched uranium successfully, could now do so on an industrial scale, had mastered the uranium fuel cycle from its own resources and had joined the nuclear club.²³

The IAEA continued to make their assessments of the Iranians' nuclear activities. After the revelations of 2002 they had said that the Iranians had repeatedly failed to meet safeguards obligations and that they could not be confident that there were no further undeclared nuclear activities or materials in Iran. The IAEA chairman, Mohamed El Baradei, called for greater cooperation and openness from the Iranians to dispel legitimate suspicions about an Iranian nuclear weapon programme. In the autumn of 2005 the IAEA declared that Iran was not in compliance with the NPT Safeguards agreement. The UN Security Council called upon Iran to suspend uranium enrichment, and eventually, with resolution 1737 on 23 December 2006, imposed the first of a series of sanctions measures.²⁴

Ahmadinejad's confrontational, declamatory stance on the nuclear issue shocked and worried many among the international community, and worried some within Iran itself. In October 2007 Ali Larijani resigned as nuclear negotiator, because like Ruhani before him he had been constantly undercut by Ahmadinejad's statements. He was replaced by Said Jalili, but along with his other brothers, continued to be influential in the circle around Khamenei. He became speaker of the Majles in 2008 and his brother Sadegh was made head of the judiciary in 2009.

Within Iran the nuclear dispute produced an upsurge of nationalist feeling in favour of Iran's right to nuclear power, and it was difficult (not just because of regime censorship, but because of the general strong feeling on the subject) for anyone to express dissent. Ahmadinejad may not have invoked the ghost of Mossadeq or memories of 1953 specifically, but the parallel (with foreigners again interfering in Iranians' right to exploit their own natural resources) was too obvious to miss. The enthusiasm for nuclear power shaded ambiguously into support in some quarters for Iran to be a nuclear power – i.e. a power with nuclear weapons like Pakistan, India, Israel, France, the UK and the US. Since 2006, with the centrifuges spinning, Israel has warned that it may take

military action to destroy the Iranian nuclear (weapon) programme if the programme is not halted by other means. At times the Bush administration, with Cheney and Rumsfeld leading the way, appeared to be considering the options for military action against Iran, but pulled back after senior military commanders rebelled against the idea.²⁵ Some interpreted the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of November 2007, which had the effect of dampening speculation about an attack on Iran, as a similar rebellion, this time by intelligence experts within the US system (the main operational conclusion of the NIE was that Iran had halted progress toward a nuclear weapon by the end of 2003).²⁶ Again, Iraq was in the background: the experts were embarrassed that their assertions about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction had proved exaggerated or unfounded once Saddam's regime fell, and part of their caution on Iran may have expressed a reluctance to repeat the error.

At the beginning of 2008, after further talks with the IAEA had broken down, Iran announced it would be enriching uranium to 20 per cent for use in a medical research reactor. Following a similar Western proposal the previous year, in May 2010, Brazil, Turkey and Iran announced a deal whereby 1,200 kg of Iranian uranium enriched to a low level could be exported and swapped for 120 kg of uranium enriched to the 20 per cent level, which would have meant the Iranians would no longer have needed to enrich the uranium themselves. But despite having encouraged the initiative earlier, the US would not endorse it when it neared reality. The deal was not implemented, and in November the IAEA announced that Iran had enriched 25.1 kg of uranium to the 20 per cent level at Natanz.²⁷

In the summer of 2010 it emerged that a computer virus or worm called Stuxnet had been used to target Siemens industrial software used on computers that the Iranians had been using to control uranium enrichment and other processes related to the nuclear programme. Centrifuges were damaged, and the enrichment process was delayed. The origin of Stuxnet was never directly avowed, but it has been assumed that the Israeli and possibly the US governments were behind it.

Despite everything, Iran continued to enrich uranium. It is hard to know how far his nuclear policy has benefited Ahmadinejad politically within Iran, but many Iranians who would be critical of him in other respects have supported his defence of Iran's nuclear interests.

Sanctions

Iran has been subject to trade sanctions imposed by the US for over thirty years, since the embassy hostage crisis. The severity and efficacy of them has risen and fallen over the years, and the US has tried more or less hard to pressurize other countries to match their sanctions against Iran. In applying that pressure the US government has gone beyond usual measures, to threaten varying degrees of extraterritoriality – seeking to punish foreign firms that have had dealings with Iran by action against their interests within the US, or even by threatening to apply US law against them as if they were US firms.

The Iranian economy has adapted to sanctions. For example, most computers in Iran, as elsewhere, use American software, and a high proportion use hardware manufactured by US companies also. Much of this has been imported via Dubai, where many wealthy Iranians have apartments and bank accounts. Smuggling has become a major activity, and, as in other authoritarian states, organs of the Islamic regime (especially the Sepah) have used their privileged position to take over a major role in smuggling operations. In this way, measures that were intended to pressurize and weaken the Iranian regime have often had the perverse effect of feeding extra revenue to parts of it. Like Mafia-type organizations in other places and times, the Sepah have profited by the increase in prices caused by restricted supply of some commodities in the economy generally, by controlling the flow of goods through a bottleneck. By contrast, many among the classes in society most closely identified with reform and opposition in Iran, the liberal middle classes, have seen their businesses punished by sanctions and the inflation caused by sanctions.

Since 2005, the UN Security Council has approved six resolutions demanding that Iran suspend uranium enrichment, four of which have applied sanctions against Iran, freezing assets, imposing an arms embargo and banning the supply of nuclear-related goods. Many countries have set up their own bilateral sanctions in addition, with varying degrees of severity, often focusing on dual-use goods and financial contacts. In the case of the UK, those measures have been tightened to the point that almost all goods may be subject to dual-use restrictions. Israel treats Iran as an enemy state by law and bans any trade or contact. US sanctions are

scarcely less tough; almost all economic activity involving Iran is banned, requiring a licence from the US Treasury; the US Treasury has allegedly been active outside the US also, pressurizing foreign firms with Iranian contacts to curtail them or face adverse consequences in their dealings with the US.²⁸

Another effect of sanctions has been to force Iran into closer trade relations with countries like China and Russia; so-called Black Knights who are prepared to supply goods sanctioned by others – for a healthy profit of course. But sanctions have had a damaging effect on the Iranian economy, causing shortages, inflation and a run on the rial in international exchange markets (in January 2012 the rate had fallen to around 17,000 or 18,000 rials to the dollar; about half its value two months earlier), and contributing to continuing high levels of unemployment. The rial suffered a further slide in value in the autumn of 2012; the rate fell to 40,000 to the dollar by the beginning of October. As Rafsanjani discovered in the 1990s, few things damage a government more than a currency crisis.

A new phase of even stronger sanctions pressure began in the autumn of 2011, after the (seemingly deliberately timed) announcement of an alleged plot against the life of the Saudi ambassador to the United States.

Ahmadinejad, Israel and the Holocaust

Ahmadinejad's position on the nuclear programme could, from a sympathetic perspective, at a stretch, be regarded as statesmanlike, if confrontational and populist. The nuclear issue involved serious Iranian national interests. But at the same time Ahmadinejad was pursuing a gratuitous campaign of provocation over Israel and the Holocaust that had little to do with Iran's national interests nor any other conventional policy objective. Again, he began with his new, radical line within a few months of taking office. In October 2005, quoting Khomeini, he included in a speech the words 'in rejimeh eshghalgareh Qods bayad az safeyeh ruzegar mahv shavad', which in a more or less literal translation means 'this Jerusalem-occupying regime must disappear from the page of time'. But many Western media reports used a pithier translation that had been used by the Iranian regime to translate the same phrase before – 'Israel must be wiped from the map'. As part of the same speech Ahmadinejad urged a single-state solution in Palestine, the return of

Palestinian refugees and a vote to decide the nature of the state (among Palestinians only). Later on Ahmadinejad used stronger language that came closer to the 'wiped from the map' translation, and the original phrase appeared on banners draped over missiles in televised military parades; a combination that delivered its own message, seeming to confirm the connection many had already made, with Iran's nuclear ambitions.

It may be that, when Ahmadinejad first made these remarks, he had no intention to be especially provocative, or to make provocation on this point a major part of his presidency. The October 2005 speech was made at a relatively minor venue (a conference of secondary-school students). Harsh words about Israel had been commonplace since the revolution; initially from the left, later from the right. In the immediate aftermath, Iranian diplomats claimed to be baffled, saying that Ahmadinejad had said nothing new – this had long been the position of the Islamic republic. The attitudes behind the things Ahmadinejad said were shocking in the West, but were nothing unusual in Iran, still less in Arab countries in the Middle East. Iranian politicians routinely described Israel as a 'tumour' or a 'cancerous tumour' in the region. In 2001 Khamenei had made a speech in which he had said that Zionists had collaborated with the Nazis in order to produce 'exaggerated statistics on Jewish killings' and thus facilitate the establishment of a Zionist state in Palestine. That speech had made little impact in the West.²⁹ But by October 2005 Western observers were looking for radical statements from Ahmadinejad: he was rapidly becoming their favourite bogeyman. And he was not averse to being elevated in that way. When he saw the worldwide reaction of outrage his words had created, he was not dismayed, still less ashamed – it seems he was encouraged.³⁰

On a trip to Mecca in December 2005 Ahmadinejad elaborated further on his views of Israel. Ignoring the fact that in the first decade of Israel's existence roughly equal numbers of Jews had arrived there from European and from Islamic countries, he asked why the Palestinians should have had to pay for the Holocaust. If Germans and Austrians had mistreated Jews, then (he suggested) find a place for Jews to live in Germany or Austria. In another speech a day later he said that some European countries insisted on saying that 6 million Jews had been killed, and that people who denied it might be put in prison. With egregious equivocation, he went on: 'Although we don't believe this claim ... let's suppose it is true,' before suggesting again his notion of

resettlement to Germany or Austria. In another speech later in the month, he referred to the 'myth' of the Holocaust, saying that in Europe it had been elevated above everything else, so that the deity and the prophets could be abused with impunity, but Holocaust denial was punished severely.³¹

Again, these comments were widely condemned outside Iran, and taken collectively, contributed among other things to a shift in position by Russia and China to take a stronger line against Iran in the UN. Within Iran too, some began to question what Ahmadinejad was up to. Some conservative and hardline politicians spoke out against Ahmadinejad's provocative statements, as well as reformists and moderates, questioning what effect they were likely to have on Iran's position internationally. It is rare for the Iranian Jewish community to assert itself in political controversies, but community leaders did so on this occasion, condemning Ahmadinejad's questioning of the Holocaust and warning that it could encourage an upsurge in anti-Semitism.³²

But the regime continued to back Ahmadinejad. Khamenei stayed silent. Foreign Ministry spokesmen endorsed Ahmadinejad's declarations, saying that they reflected the views of the government. Then, in December 2006, a conference of Holocaust deniers was held in Tehran, under the aegis of the Foreign Ministry. This was a truly bizarre event, such as could only have been put together by someone who combined ignorance and *chutzpah* on Ahmadinejad's comic-heroic scale. Perhaps not since the release of Mel Brooks's *The Producers* can something simultaneously so appalling, so inadvertently hilarious and so bog-glingly tasteless have burst upon the scene. Participants included a former head of the Ku Klux Klan, who rubbed shoulders with members of Neturei Karta, an ultra-orthodox Jewish Hasidic sect who opposed the establishment of the state of Israel, various assorted white supremacists, loony fringe wannabe historians and others whose views had won them prison sentences in free countries.³³ Ahmadinejad addressed the assembled delegates and made his now-familiar points on the Palestinians and Zionism. Forgetting past denunciations of racism by the regime the foreign minister, Manuchehr Mottaki, said the purpose of the conference was not to confirm or deny the Holocaust, but to 'create an opportunity for thinkers [*sic*] who cannot express their view freely in Europe about the Holocaust'.³⁴

The conference deepened the baffled distaste with which many in the

West viewed Ahmadinejad and the Iranian government. Ahmadinejad believed he was renewing the revolutionary vigour of the regime; returning to the religious zeal of the revolution's early days. There were some ironies to this – the most zealous and outspoken of the revolutionaries in the early days, especially in foreign policy matters, had of course been on the left: people like Montazeri and Musavi-Khoeniha. Since those days many of those people had moderated and become reformists; only now to find their old rhetoric being given new life by their political enemy. But at a deeper level, to have such an intellectually bankrupt event run by the Iranian state, given Iran's ancient history as a place of learning and tolerance, and given the ancient status of the country as a home and refuge for Jews (dating back even beyond the beginnings of the Achaemenids in the sixth century BC), was a national disgrace.

In the aftermath, a closed session of the Majles rebuked Mottaki for his own involvement and for involving his ministry in the conference. Other conservative voices denounced it, and Ahmadinejad's whole position on the Holocaust – notably the Baztab internet website, which had connections to Mohsen Rezai and the Sepah. Dissatisfaction with Ahmadinejad among veteran hardliners was spreading and deepening. But there was no word of criticism from Khamenei, for whom the presidency of Ahmadinejad, whatever its wilder moments, was still in general a welcome return to regime orthodoxy, and a relief from the challenges and the turbulence of the Khatami years.

Iraq, Lebanon and the So-called Shi'a Crescent

Another result of Ahmadinejad's provocation and posturing was that, once again, it became the norm to lay crimes at the Iranians' door for which others were responsible. This was particularly noticeable as the United States got into greater difficulties in Iraq in 2006. The Bush administration (backed up as usual by Tony Blair) attempted to portray Iran as a major cause of their difficulties in Iraq, if not the major cause. But the evidence for this was thin, and it seemed inherently implausible that the Iranians would seriously be trying to destabilize a government in Iraq that represented the grouping in Iraq with which Iran was most closely aligned. By contrast, there was good evidence that there was a lot of support from individuals and groups within Saudi Arabia for

Al-Qaeda and the Sunni insurgency in Iraq, which was the more serious problem for the coalition (most notably, few incidents were more destabilizing, in creating serious inter-communal violence in Iraq, than the Sunni suicide bombing of the shrine of the Imam Ali in Najaf in August 2003). At one point, half of the foreign insurgents captured by coalition forces in Iraq were Saudis – many of them having trained as suicide bombers.³⁵ But because Saudi Arabia was supposedly the West's great ally in the region, these awkward facts have in general been ignored by Western media and politicians alike.

It is nonetheless likely that elements in Iran inspired by the perennial anti-Western rhetoric of the regime were giving some help to groups fighting Western forces. For example, in June 2003 the editor of the regime-aligned paper *Kayhan*, Hosein Shariatmadary, wrote:

The American and British military are now within easy reach of Islamic and revolutionary countries. The revenge of the blood of innocent civilians massacred by these savage militaries is easier than ever before. Today there is no need for revolutionary Muslims to go to the effort of carrying bombs and explosive materials to faraway bases, when the punishment of the American and British military is possible with the use of grenades, Molotov cocktails or even sticks and stones. This is a blessing from God: Islamic countries have been given a golden opportunity for revenge against these aggressors.³⁶

But despite much speculation in the Western media (particularly about the alleged supply of components for Improvised Explosive Devices – IEDs), the level of actual support from Iran has never been established with any clarity. As the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan grew in severity in the period 2008–11, there was speculation about Iranian actions, but again, a huge question mark over Saudi involvement, whether directly or through Pakistan. Overall, by comparison, the adverse effects of Iranian involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan must have been relatively minor, though it may for example have been significant in contributing to the British withdrawal from Basra in 2007. The deaths of coalition troops in IED attacks were nonetheless tragic and Iranian involvement in them, whatever its true extent, particularly perverse and misguided. An example may help to illustrate the kind of incident involved. On 5 April 2007 a device exploded under a British Warrior armoured vehicle on patrol west of Basra, killing five of the

occupants. One of those killed was Second Lieutenant Joanna Yorke Dyer, an Oxford graduate who had only left Sandhurst a few months earlier. One of her colleagues said of her that her smile could light up a room; she was just twenty-four years old.³⁷

Another theatre, where Iranian involvement was more plain, was Lebanon. On 12 July 2006 two Israeli soldiers were abducted by Hezbollah fighters after a clash at the border between Israel and south Lebanon. Israeli forces tried and failed to rescue the two men, after which a full-scale invasion ensued, with airstrikes and artillery bombardment. In the process, their forces took heavier casualties than expected from Hezbollah fighters, who proved to be well trained and equipped, using night-vision equipment, anti-tank guided missiles, bunkers and tunnels to good effect. They were also using unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) and computerized communications interception devices.³⁸ Most observers agreed that both training and equipment reflected the help given to Hezbollah by the Iranians via the Sepah (derived ultimately, of course, from the infantry tactics developed during the Iran–Iraq War). As with other actions beyond Iran's borders, most have assumed that military aid was extended to Hezbollah primarily through the Qods force of the Sepah; the long-standing unit tasked with the extraterritorial activities sanctioned by the constitution. Iran was vocal in its support for Hezbollah during the invasion. The conflict confirmed the deepening hostility between Iran and Israel, and the awareness in Israel of the multilayered threat from Iran. The fighting cost thousands of lives (mainly Lebanese civilians) and caused extensive damage to housing, and transport and power infrastructure. But some regarded it as a defensive success for Hezbollah. Among ordinary Iranians there was general sympathy for the Lebanese, but less enthusiasm for the money spent after the war by the Iranian regime to help Hezbollah rebuild war damage.

With the renewed prominence given to Hezbollah by the fighting in south Lebanon, and the Shi'a resurgence in Iraq following the defeat of Saddam Hussein, some began to warn of the danger of an Iranian-backed Shi'a wave that could damage existing regimes in the region and Western interests that depended on them. This was the so-called Shi'a Crescent theory, aired initially by King Abdullah of Jordan, and taken up by Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, the government of the UAE, Tony Blair and others.³⁹ It suggested that Iran was actively seeking to destabilize the region via radical Shi'a groups in countries with substantial Shi'a

populations like Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. In fact, the theory originated at least as much in traditional Sunni sectarian disdain for Shi'as and the existential unease of regimes like that of Mubarak and the al-Saud family, which offered little in the way of representative institutions to their populations (in this sense one could see the paranoia of the Shi'a Crescent theory as heralding the Arab Spring of 2011). For privileged Sunni elites in the region, the theory served also perhaps as a smokescreen to divert Western attention away from the awkward fact that the most vicious anti-Western extremism and terrorism of the previous decade had been Sunni in origin, and had been connived at to a significant degree by some among those same elites (especially in Saudi Arabia). The Shi'a Crescent theory ignored the way that Shi'a confessional politics had developed in the Middle East since 1979. Many of the Shi'a communities and political groups on the southern shore of the Persian Gulf and elsewhere had connections with Iranian clerics. But the connections were not a simple case of Iran controlling such groups as a kind of puppet-master. In each state the Shi'as had their own preoccupations and concerns, and were not open to Iranian manipulation, as Laurence Louër has shown in an important book.⁴⁰ But the threadbare theory helped to raise the temperature of anti-Iranian sentiment by a few more degrees, contributing to the picture of Iran as a malevolent, manipulative influence in the region, whose real power was mysteriously greater than was immediately apparent.

In reality, Iran's enhanced influence in the region by 2005–6 was not the consequence of Machiavellian strategic manoeuvring by Ahmadinejad or other members of the Iranian leadership, but was a direct product of *American* military action in the region, which had destroyed Iran's two main enemies – Saddam and the Taleban. Iran's military spending was relatively low by comparison with her neighbours', and as a proportion of GDP at around 2.85 per cent on average between 2002 and 2007 (though the standard figures are questionable, and do not include spending on the Sepah, which should probably lift the figure by around another half of a percentage point).⁴¹ For comparison, the equivalent figure for 2011 for Saudi Arabia was 11.2 per cent, for Israel 6.3 per cent, and for UAE 7.3 per cent. Arguably, these figures are misleading because those states have small populations relative to their strategic commitments, but other comparators (same year) include Iraq with 5.4 per cent and the US with 4.7 per cent. Another instructive figure

(especially given the parallel sometimes drawn between Iran and the former Soviet Union) is that for Soviet defence spending – an estimated 15 to 17 per cent in the mid-1980s. By no measure is Iran among the leaders in regional or world defence spending.⁴² If defence spending is any measure of militarism or a sign of expansionist intent, then Iran is not a militaristic or expansionist state.

The impression of irrationality and dangerous unpredictability in Ahmadinejad's conduct was strengthened by a number of other statements and incidents. Although when appointed by Khamenei as president Ahmadinejad kissed the supreme leader's hand as a sign of deference, Khamenei was allegedly surprised and amused to be told by Ahmadinejad that he did not expect to be in office for long, because the return of the Hidden Imam was imminent. Ahmadinejad repeated this view several times thereafter, more or less publicly, contributing to an upsurge in popular belief about the return of the Hidden Imam, and a belief in parts of the West in turn, as the phenomenon was reported, that Iran would use a nuclear weapon in order to bring about the apocalypse and the return of the Hidden Imam – the so-called Martyr State myth.⁴³ There can be few better examples of the way that bizarre irrationality on one side of the Iran–US divide has encouraged bizarre irrationality on the other. Ahmadinejad later told an audience in Kerman that the US was desperately trying to find the Hidden Imam in order to prevent his return – 'they are looking for his address so that they can go there and finish him off'. Would the CIA get to the right telephone book in time?⁴⁴ On later occasions Ahmadinejad wrote to President Bush in the US, attempting inter alia to convert him to Islam, and to Angela Merkel in Germany. In the latter case he explained that the victors of the Second World War had invented the Holocaust in order to humiliate Germany, just as the same powers had humiliated Iran. Iran and Germany should join forces to put those powers in their place and restore justice and order in the world. Ahmadinejad had unwittingly found the line of argument best fitted to reduce even the most self-satisfied modern German politician to squirming embarrassment.

Another incident that exacerbated tensions was Iran's detention of a group of British naval and marine personnel in March/April 2007. They were captured at sea by Sepah-manned launches on 23 March in an area adjacent to the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab. American and British coalition forces had come to an understanding among themselves about

where boundaries between territorial waters were in this sector, but no one had thought to notify, still less consult the Iranians, and in reality the boundary between Iranian and Iraqi waters never had been conclusively defined. In the end the sailors and marines were released on 5 April by Ahmadinejad as an act of magnanimity in the full glare of world media coverage. British embarrassment was deepened by a succession of revelations based on paid interviews with the former captives, which revealed their conduct as less than Nelsonian.

Talk of war with Iran intensified through 2006 and 2007, feeding on these various stimuli, but faded after the NIE in November 2007.

Economy and Society

Failure to reform the economy, an overblown public sector, over-dependence on the oil sector and the effect of sanctions (notably the effect of sanctions in preventing inward investment in the oil sector, and especially petroleum refining) had all contributed to the continuing weakness of the Iranian economy, to inflation and unemployment. This had been much the same picture since the time of Rafsanjani's presidency. Inflation and unemployment were high – 10.1 per cent and 14.6 per cent respectively in 2010 – and probably higher than those official figures suggest.⁴⁵ And yet growth in years up to 2009 averaged around 5 per cent per annum, which compared rather well with many other countries, in difficult economic times; and although this growth rate was the result of rising oil prices to a substantial extent, there were other optimistic indicators; notably in education and engagement with new technologies.⁴⁶ The IMF estimated growth at 3.5 per cent for 2009/10, with good development in the non-oil sector.⁴⁷ The economy – or at any rate some parts of it – had adapted to sanctions. In particular, this was the case for the Sepah, whose economic interests had become broad and substantial, and which profited by controlling the limited flow of commodities through bottlenecks. It was widely believed that this included involvement in the illegal drugs trade on Iran's eastern border. This meant that, rather as with the classic Mafia mode of operation, the Sepah and the ruling clique actually benefited from sanctions, while the rest of the country suffered. Recent rounds of sanctions against Iran had been announced with the assertion that they would be smart

sanctions that would target the elites, but in the past the Sepah had consistently proved themselves smarter than the sanctions.

Another surprise in 2011, in more than one sense, was the qualified success of a drive by Ahmadinejad to reduce state spending on subsidies. This began in 2007 with a deep cut in the subsidy to petrol prices, which was greeted with anguish at the time but was gradually, quietly accepted (many cars in Iran now run on liquid gas). More measures to cut subsidies on other staple commodities and services (including bread and public transport) were pushed through in 2008 and 2009, and in 2011 the IMF praised Ahmadinejad's government for making them work.⁴⁸ It was characteristic of Ahmadinejad that these should be the sort of essentially anti-statist, free-market measures favoured by the right; but also that he announced that the savings would be used to give handouts to the poor.

Women and Social Change

Over the thirty years since 1979, Iran has changed in many important ways. Many of these changes were in train already, in the Shah's time, but reached fruition only under the Islamic republic. Iran is now predominantly urban, and literate. The success of women's education, and the consequent expansion of the importance of women in the workplace and in the economy is a huge social and cultural change in Iran, and one that, in time, and combined with other factors, is likely to have profound consequences for Iranian society as a whole. It also contributes to the different atmosphere Iran has by comparison with other countries in the Middle East. Women are particularly prominent in skilled roles in the public sector – a third of doctors, 60 per cent of civil servants and 80 per cent of school teachers are women. But women also work in a wide variety of other jobs – including as taxi drivers. The following is an account taken from an internet blog of an interview with a formidable sixty-year-old taxi driver, Mrs Elahi:

the journalist wanted to find out about our motivations for doing what we do, but it was as if she had already written up her article and wanted our answers to fit in with her preconceptions . . . 'Ladies,' she said 'what would you say is your main motivation for choosing this career?'

Mrs Elahi immediately answered, 'Money, obviously.'

The reporter looked at her . . . as if she had not given the appropriate answer and said, 'I really need more elaborate answers for my report. I have to . . .'

Mrs Elahi said, 'What do you want us to say? To lie?'

The reporter got closer to Mrs Elahi. The camera was now focused on her face and she said: 'You live in a country where you are denied many of the basic rights awarded to women. Yet you have taken up a profession that is generally considered a masculine occupation.'

'Well you really fail to appreciate who we are,' said Mrs Elahi, 'and clearly you don't think much of us . . . You come from a country where women are astronauts and pilots and you still think it's amazing that we merely drive cars for a living!!' And then she added: 'Listen lady. You can ask as much as you like but my motivation is still money. Anyway, you know best.'

The reporter looked very serious, impatiently waiting for Mrs Elahi's words to be translated.

We all knew that Mrs Elahi was toying with the reporter.

When the reporter left, Mrs Elahi scornfully said, 'May she rest in peace! My grandmother could shoot an apple in half while galloping on horseback. Yet after all these years they think it's amazing that we drive cars!'⁴⁹

It is remarkable that the changes in the position of women should have happened under the aegis of a socially conservative regime that acted initially, directly after the revolution, to constrain women and their rights in ways that appeared to reverse the progress made under the Pahlavis. One explanation is the war – women were able, quietly and without any kind of concerted plan, to take advantage of the war and the absence of men to aggrandize their position in society (as has happened in wartime in other countries). But the phenomenon also reflects the commitment of the clerical regime to education as a good in itself and a good for all, irrespective of its social or political effects. Surveys have indicated that the great change in the education and social position of women is already emerging in changed attitudes, more liberal attitudes, to education, the family, and work;⁵⁰ and is paralleled by other changes in attitude, away from religion toward more secular, liberal and nationalistic positions.⁵¹ Some among the *ulema* (notably Shabestari, Kadivar and Eshkevari) have challenged the religious

judgements on the status of women that were pushed through into law at the time of the revolution. Women were prominent in the reform movement, and again (especially) in the Green movement of 2009, even in the face of regime violence against street demonstrations. The social change to a more urbanized, highly educated society in which women play a much more assertive role is of huge significance, and is bound to change politics in Iran too in the medium to long term.

(As this book went to press in the autumn of 2012, in line with the general hardening of regime attitudes after 2009, the Iranian government announced that women would be prevented from attending a variety of courses at different universities, including engineering, computer science, English literature and business studies. They did not give reasons for their action, but the regime made statements around the same time calling for a return to traditional family values and a higher birth rate. It was also unclear whether the policy would be maintained, and how significant an effect it would have.)⁵²

Even Ahmadinejad had seemed to acknowledge the new status and political power of women when in 2006 he attempted to organize a change to the rules by which women had been prevented from watching football matches. Strange though it may seem, this had been forbidden by religious experts previously because they believed viewing the naked limbs of the strapping lads would excite desire among the female fans. Ahmadinejad's attempt to allow women to watch football from segregated sections in the stands failed – the clerics overruled him and forced him to abandon the measure, not without some acrimony. The episode indicated that like any populist politician, Ahmadinejad was prepared even to take what might appear to be liberal positions if he saw a potential advantage for him in it. It was not forgotten by the conservative clerics, who already distrusted him and disliked his tendency to meddle in religious matters that were not his proper business.⁵³ But like the continuing struggles over *hejab*, it showed again the gap between the traditional clergy and the aspirations of ordinary Iranian women.

In 2009 another indicator of the shift in social attitudes emerged when the regime tried to humiliate a reformist prisoner, Majid Tavakoli, who had tried to evade arrest by dressing as a woman, by publishing photographs of him wearing a woman's *hejab*. Male friends and sympathizers in the Green movement showed their support for him and their disdain for the authorities by putting out on Facebook and other internet

sites images of themselves, also wearing *hejab*, with the caption 'We are all Majid'. In this way, as Ziba Mir-Hosseini put it, Majid Tavakoli was multiplied, not humiliated.⁵⁴

Another symbolic event was Women's Day, on 8 March 2009. In advance of the event, activists had drawn attention to it as an opportunity to bring forward the one million signatures campaign, an initiative across the Islamic world for women to have equal rights before the law. But in Tehran on the day the women demonstrators had their event broken up, and many of them were beaten harshly by the police and arrested. With hindsight, some have pointed up the incident and the authorities' treatment of it as a precursor to the larger demonstrations that followed the disputed presidential elections in June.⁵⁵

Elections 2009

The election of President Obama at the end of 2008 created a new predicament for the ruling group in Iran. His early declarations of openness to direct talks with the Iranians, his preparedness to speak of the Islamic Republic as such rather than in circumlocutory terms that avoided appearing to recognize the nature of the regime, as previous administrations had done, and his cleverly crafted Noruz message in March 2009 (in which, among other things, he spoke of 'the true greatness of the Iranian people and civilization' and 'your demonstrated ability to build and create')⁵⁶ challenged the stale rhetoric of the Iranian regime and forced them to contemplate a change in their own policies of intransigence. But both sides knew that little could be expected to shift in the US–Iran relationship in advance of the Iranian presidential elections scheduled for June 2009. Many people, both outside Iran and within, hoped the elections would produce an Iranian leader with a new, positive outlook to complement Obama's, permitting some real progress at long last.

It was not to be. Once again, the Iranian presidential elections produced a surprise – all the more so because this time the surprise was of a different order altogether from the surprises of past elections. In 1997 and in 2005, surprise outsiders had won the elections. This time the surprise was in the conduct of the elections themselves, which led to weeks of demonstrations and unrest of an intensity not seen since the revolution of 1978–9.

In the last weeks before election day on 12 June 2009, many observers discerned a growing wave of enthusiasm for the movement behind the leading opposition candidate, Mir Hosein Musavi. A journalist wrote afterwards:

The run-up to the elections was unlike anything that the generations that grew up after the 1979 revolution had ever experienced. On these nights the police left the campaigners alone. It was as if a breeze of liberty was blowing through the streets. The cries and slogans that resounded were voicing demands which did not conflict with the Constitution.

However, the previous year's message from the Leader of the Islamic Republic, addressed to Ahmadinejad's cabinet, was not forgotten by the people. It had stated that they must consider planning for the years ahead. It was brought to attention by people like Mostafa Tajzadeh, who said in a campaign meeting that on the eve of the elections news had arrived that the personnel in the Ministry of the Interior had been changed. Alongside the fraction-by-fraction steps towards liberty, he seemed certain that we were on the verge of witnessing some serious events take place.

For the first time in the Islamic Republic's election history, candidates debated with each other in the American style; publicly before the people. Heated words were exchanged about the country's current policies on a platform provided by the media whose head is selected by the Leader. Prior to this, no one had dared to utter a word about the corruption of the sons of Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Nateq-Nouri in front of the Iranian government's cameras. But now Ahmadinejad, in order to escape from being cornered, referred openly to these affairs, though, of course, he was not pushed by the Leader or any judicial institution to answer for this.

The televised debates caused an immediate reaction. The slumber that had characterised these years was left behind and people exploded out into the streets. The enthusiasm over the elections was at its peak.⁵⁷

Another commented on the televised debates (each candidate faced each other one-to-one in a series of programmes broadcast between 2 and 8 June):

The debaters' bold and public criticisms of one another seemed to have lifted the dam of political censorship which usually prevented the people from saying what was truly on their minds. Society's public atmosphere also became freer for the greater criticism and the expression of people's

true feelings. As a result, during the final month before the elections, everyone living in Iran, particularly in the bigger cities, witnessed a public enthusiasm, energy and excitement. The people were constantly speaking of a change of circumstances. Even in the days leading up to Mohammad Khatami's victory in 1997, when he was elected president with an unprecedented 20 million votes, society's public atmosphere was not as critical of the current conditions as it was at this time.⁵⁸

Having served as prime minister in the 1980s, Musavi had been out of politics since 1989 and like Khatami before him, he appeared to have neither the track record nor the charisma of someone likely to shake the foundations of the state. The perception of a developing movement behind Musavi was reinforced by early indications of a high turnout on the day of the vote, suggesting that pro-reform voters who had boycotted the elections in 2005 had changed their minds and turned out this time. There were long queues outside polling stations in Tehran; in some, the voting hours were extended and in others they ran out of ballot cards. All of this augmented the expectation of those on the opposition side that they were about to win a major victory, and this seemed to be confirmed when Ali Larijani telephoned Musavi at 5 p.m. on 12 June (in advance of the polls closing) to congratulate him.⁵⁹

But although the final results, when they emerged, certainly showed a high turnout – 85 per cent – they gave not Musavi but *Ahmadinejad* a whopping 63 per cent of the vote: well over the 50 per cent threshold needed to win the poll outright (less than 50 per cent would have meant a second round of voting, with a run-off between the two candidates who had won most votes in the first round).

No one has yet produced conclusive proof that the results of the presidential elections of June 2009 were falsified,⁶⁰ but there have been a number of suspicious indications and pieces of partial evidence that, taken together, produce a consistent picture to that effect. One sign was that previous precedents for release of the results were abandoned – normally results emerged by region, but this time successive announcements were made on the basis of a larger number of votes counted each time, for the country as a whole. The distribution of votes for each candidate, when the final results were out, showed a suspicious consistency across rural and urban voting districts, and in those dominated by religious and

ethnic minorities – as if someone had picked figures for the final result and had then applied that formula to each part of the country in arbitrary fashion, with the help of a computer programme. Against all previous experience in Iranian elections, there was no significant sign of a swing towards candidates in their home districts: the proportional formula held up even there.

A defector from the Basij told a Channel 4 journalist later that they had received instructions through their chain of command that the supreme leader had decided that Ahmadinejad should win the election, and they should do all that was necessary to ensure he did. On the day, blank ballots and the ballots of illiterates and others were filled in for Ahmadinejad, irrespective of the actual wishes of voters; some ballot boxes were counted, but then all were sent back to 'the centre' with most still uncounted.⁶¹

The regime's handling of the results deepened suspicions to the point at which the election looked increasingly like a coup carried out by the ruling group to keep Ahmadinejad in office. Several months before the elections, Khamenei had made statements supportive of Ahmadinejad that already marked a departure from previous practice. After the election results came out, Khamenei spoke forcefully in support of Ahmadinejad's re-election within a few hours, acclaiming it as a divine judgement – previously the supreme leader had waited until the Guardian Council ratified the result, which usually took three days. Even before the final results were known, in the small hours of the morning, police and troops were on the streets to forestall demonstrations. They surrounded the Interior Ministry (from which the results were being announced) and Musavi's campaign headquarters, severely hampering the opposition movement's communications and their ability to respond to events. All these actions were unprecedented.

Over the following weeks a number of rumours emerged that, taken together, may go some way to explain how the election turned out as it did. It seems that the ruling clique became increasingly concerned in the spring of 2009 that the elections might develop a bandwagon effect comparable to that which resulted with the election of President Khatami in 1997 – an outcome they were determined to avoid. One version says that the government conducted a secret poll that showed an outright win for Musavi. Several reports purporting to come from

dissidents in the Interior Ministry alleged that reformist-oriented staff were purged and swiftly replaced by Ahmadinejad's supporters, who set about a plan to falsify the results. There were a number of suggestions that the cleric most closely associated with Ahmadinejad – Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi – had issued a ruling that all means were legitimate to ensure the continuation of the prevailing form of Islamic government – 'everything is permitted'.⁶²

There is little doubt that many voters did turn out for Ahmadinejad on 12 June. The usual judgement is that his support was strongest in the countryside and in the more remote parts of Iran. Voters who distrusted both the regime and the perceived urban sophistication of the opposition candidates may still have voted for Ahmadinejad because unlike other politicians, he looked and sounded like them – they understood him and felt they could trust him in spite of his failure to reverse worsening economic conditions and standards of living in his first term. Many Iranians supported his strong stance against the West and in favour of Iran's right to a civil nuclear programme. In the smaller towns and cities outside Tehran and in the countryside it was also easier for the regime to coerce voters – whether by increases in salaries just before the election, or by threats. But one should not go too far (as some have) in characterizing the elections as a confrontation between an urbanized, Westernized, vocal minority versus a relatively silent, rural majority. The population of Iran in 2009 was more than sixty per cent urban. It seems unlikely that more voted for Ahmadinejad in 2009 than did in 2005, when his opponent was Rafsanjani. One Western reporter, who went out of her way to speak to working-class Ahmadinejad supporters, found some that would be vocal in his support, only to whisper 'Musavi' to her afterwards, when they could be more confident that no one was listening.⁶³ But the suspicious behaviour of the regime, the furore over the election and the demonstrations that followed may have obscured the real level of support for Ahmadinejad, especially for observers outside Iran. Significant numbers of lower- and lower-middle-class voters, including urban voters from those sections of society, whose support had always been crucial since 1979, had shifted their allegiance toward him after the failure of the reform movement in Khatami's time. Whether those numbers amount to 20, 30 or even 40 per cent of the population is hard to assess. But part of the story of 2009 was that Iran had become a divided country. The actions of the regime could be ascribed either to panic in the face

of the growing opposition movement or to the desire to avoid the unpredictability of a second round of elections, or both.

Whatever the truth of what happened, the immediate and strong reaction told its own story. Thousands of Iranians turned out on the streets of Tehran and other cities to protest, wearing scarves or bandanas in green, the colour of the Musavi campaign. No previous Iranian election had produced such demonstrations. Within a few days, the number of protestors had grown to hundreds of thousands, with estimates suggesting a million or more on Monday 15 June. Their numbers and their diverse origins belied the thought that this was merely sour grapes from an isolated group, disappointed that the result had gone against them. European and US news media reported excitedly that these were the biggest demonstrations in Iran since the revolution. In the evenings, Iranians gathered on rooftops to shout 'Allahu Akbar!' as they had in 1978–9.

Over the first weekend of demonstrations, Ahmadinejad referred to the demonstrators as 'Khas o Khashak' – dust and trash, or flotsam and jetsam, that would be swept away. But the demonstrations did not go away. Despite beatings and arrests, and despite efforts by the regime to prevent any reporting of the protests, they continued, and Iranians found ways to get reporting out of Iran, including through new internet channels like Facebook and Twitter. Several reports indicated that the hardliners themselves were unnerved by the demonstrations. One (derived from a US diplomatic telegram via Wikileaks) suggested that at a high-level meeting Ahmadinejad himself said that the people felt suffocated, and there should be greater personal and social freedoms, including freedom of the press. Angered by this, the Sepah commander Mohammad Ali Jafari responded: 'You are wrong! It is YOU who created this mess! And now you say give more freedom to the press!' According to the source, Jafari then slapped Ahmadinejad in the face, causing an uproar in the meeting.⁶⁴ Others suggested later in the year that Khamenei had an aircraft overhauled to ensure it was in good readiness to fly him out of the country at short notice, though the reliability of this story was doubtful.⁶⁵

The ruling clique responded to the outcry, the demonstrations and the accusations of an electoral coup by alleging an attempted coup by the other side – saying that the regime had foiled a Western-backed attempt to overthrow the Islamic republic, along the lines of the Velvet Revolution

of 1989 in Czechoslovakia, the Rose Revolution of 2003 in Georgia or the Orange Revolution of 2004/5 in Ukraine. They declared that the instigators of this new Velvet Revolution were, of course, the US and Britain.⁶⁶ To support the story, the MOIS arrested several Iranians working at the British embassy, all of whom were eventually released.

On the evening of 20 June, a young woman called Neda Agha-Soltan got out of her car, which was obstructed by the protesting crowds around Kargar Avenue in Amirabad in north-central Tehran, to escape the heat. She was accompanied by her middle-aged music teacher. Soon afterwards, she was shot in the chest and despite the efforts of those around her, including a doctor, to staunch the flow of blood, she was dead within a few minutes. Bystanders filmed the event on mobile telephones, and the images went around the world on YouTube. Neda became a symbol of the protests and of the brutality of the regime's conduct (their spokesmen later tried to claim that she had been shot by the CIA or other foreigners). Despite the dwindling of the street protests in later weeks, under pressure from the police and the Basij militia, demonstrators turned out again in large numbers on 30 July, the fortieth day after her death, to protest against the shooting.⁶⁷ There were demonstrations again on 18 September, when the regime attempted to hold its usual event (Qods day – Jerusalem day) to show support for the Palestinians against Israel. Opposition demonstrators, making use of the fact that the colour used to symbolize the Palestinian cause, like that of the Musavi campaign, was green, appeared again en masse, took over the event and shouted down the official slogans.

The demonstrators pulled off a similar trick on 4 November, when they took over the official event to mark thirty years since the occupation of the US embassy in 1979. Thousands of protestors appeared in Tehran, defying arrest by the police and the Basij, and there were similar manifestations in Isfahan, Rasht, Shiraz and Tabriz. Instead of the weary regime mantra of 'marg bar Amrika' ('death to America') some called instead 'marg bar hickas' – 'death to nobody'.

Through the summer and autumn ugly stories spread of the torture and death of protestors in custody. Estimates of the number of deaths mounted to several hundred. At the end of July the supreme leader ordered the closure of the Kahrizak detention centre after protests about torture, and the death of Mohsen Ruholamini, the son of a prominent conservative politician. In November a young doctor, Ramin

Pourandarzjani, who had seen Ruholamini shortly before his death and had been pressurized to say that he had died of meningitis, himself died in suspicious circumstances at Tehran police headquarters.

Some Western commentators said or wrote that the outcome of the elections was immaterial because there was little to choose between the policy intentions of the two main protagonists, Musavi and Ahmadinejad. That missed the point. Musavi and his reformist supporters were not looking to overturn the Islamic republic, but what had happened was no less important for the fact that they were not following a Western-inspired agenda. By falsifying the election results (as was widely believed to have happened), the regime had gone much further than ever before in subverting the representative element in the Iranian constitution and had precipitated a crisis over the very nature of the Islamic republic. Important figures like former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami were openly critical of what had happened. Opposition candidates Musavi and Karrubi refused to be silenced. Khamenei was forced to take a more partisan position than ever before, abandoning the notion that his office put him above day-to-day politics. The demonstrators rewarded him with the chant 'marg bar diktatur' ('death to the dictator'). His position was weakened.

Ever since the revolution, the Islamic principle and the constitutional, republican, democratic principle had worked uneasily together, and from early on the democratic element had been eroded. But after 12 June those who had cherished the representative strand, who had believed that had been one of the achievements of the revolution, and that its survival gave some hope for renewal and peaceful change, were faced with the bald fact that it had been snatched away. They were now being ruled under the threat of naked force, by a ruling group who had abandoned Khomeini's principle of balancing opposing forces under a regime umbrella, and whose claim to Islamic legitimacy had worn very thin. Several leading clerics were critical of the conduct of the elections, and others stayed pointedly silent. The crisis was not just a confrontation between the regime and a section of the populace; it was also a crisis within the regime itself, and it is still not resolved.

In the meantime, the regime continued to blame Western governments for instigating the demonstrations, presenting the Obama administration with a sharpened dilemma: should America pursue its policy of détente with a regime that had just, in the judgement of many of its own citizens,

stolen an election in such a bare-faced manner? The logic of engagement with Iran had not depended upon the virtue or otherwise of the Iranian regime, and cautious attempts to engage with the Iranians continued. But revelations in the autumn that showed that the Iranian government had been constructing a further uranium-enrichment facility near Qom and was conducting new missile tests increased the pressure for new sanctions. The Obama administration seem to have concluded that their attempt at a reconciliation with Iran had been a failure, whereas in fact it had put the Iranian regime under greater pressure, more effectively, than thirty years of sanctions regimes, and had helped to precipitate the biggest challenge to those controlling the regime since the revolution. But Obama was subject to his own political pressures. From the autumn of 2009 Hillary Clinton became more prominent in the presentation of US policy toward Iran, which returned to the usual barren pattern of admonitions and exhortations familiar from earlier US administrations, and the grinding process of cranking out ever more restrictive sanctions measures.⁶⁸

The elections and their aftermath further strengthened the position of the Sepah. Ahmadinejad's debt to them was well known, and there were many reports (as in 2005) of their engagement in the election campaign in his interest – though the firmness of their commitment to him was less clear. The regime's dependence on them to face down opposition and keep the ruling group in power was only intensified by the outcome of 12 June. The role of the Revolutionary Guards in every aspect of Iranian life, and especially in the economy, had been increasing and strengthening for many years. It was emphasized further in October 2009, when a company linked to the Sepah paid the equivalent of \$8 billion for a controlling share in the state telecommunications monopoly. The country was looking more and more like a military dictatorship – a tighter and more effective version of what the revolution had brought down in 1979. After the 12 June elections, Ayatollah Montazeri commented, 'What we have is not Islamic republic, but military republic.'⁶⁹ The prominence of Montazeri and some other clerics in the opposition was another significant phenomenon in the aftermath of 12 June. One of them, Yusef Sanei, a reform-inclined moderate and a *marja* for many religious Iranians, had denounced the elections as illegitimate. Regime-oriented clerics attempted to begin proceedings to remove his status as

marja-e taqlid (recalling the way Shariatmadari had been treated in 1982) but others resisted them on his behalf.⁷⁰

Montazeri died in his sleep at the age of eighty-seven on 19 December 2009. There were further demonstrations associated with his funeral in Qom on 21 December, and pro-regime thugs attacked Musavi and Karrubi there in the street. There were further demonstrations on 27 December, the day of Ashura, in Kermanshah, Isfahan, Najafabad and Shiraz as well as in Tehran;⁷¹ opposition demonstrators were again attacked, and Musavi's nephew was shot and killed:

By noon, Tehran was practically ablaze with clashes. There were unprecedented numbers in the huge crowds of opposition supporters and people were confronting the regime's forces with more intensity than ever before. The clashes reached their peak in Vali Asr Square when the crowd seized a police kiosk and were met with extreme ferocity when the police drove a car straight into the throngs, running people over in front of everyone.⁷²

The opposition's practice of using familiar dates in the calendar to take over official events was countered by the regime on 11 February 2010 (the anniversary of the final triumph of the revolution in 1979) by closing down internet servers and mobile phone networks, and by closing off access to Azadi Square by all but pro-regime supporters bussed in from outside. That attempt was the last for some time by the opposition to express their continuing disapproval of the regime on the streets. They tried again on 14 February 2011 – again the regime's tactics of flooding the streets with police and Basij, preventing small groups from coalescing into larger ones, and closing down telephone and internet communications, proved effective. But the hardline leadership were apparently scared enough this time to take Musavi and Karrubi into house arrest, where at the time of writing they remain. Large numbers of reformists, politicians, journalists and others have left the country and gone into exile since June 2009 (including Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Shirin Ebadi and Ataollah Mohajerani), and an unknown further number are still in prison (including the film maker Jafar Panahi, director of *The Circle* and *Crimson Gold*). A new low point was reached in the summer of 2011, when, after the death of the veteran liberal-nationalist Ezzatollah Sahabi, his daughter Haleh was assaulted by Basijis at his funeral and died shortly afterwards of a heart attack.

Totalitarian or Democratic? Or Neither?

Since 1979, despite much speculation and many predictions at different times of the imminent demise of the Islamic republic, despite the vicious eight-year war and various other attempts at regime change along the way, the Islamic republic has survived and has proved more stable than expected. It is not fanciful to make a connection between this stability and the fact that the republic is an Islamic republic, unlike the anti-clerical or secular regimes set up by the French and Russian revolutions, for example. Islam has given the regime deeper ideological roots in Iranian society than the innovative ideologies of the Jacobins and Bolsheviks achieved (ideologies that most of the mass of the French and Russian populations probably never understood). Islam could have sustained a more liberal, democratic regime; instead it has been used to sustain a less liberal, more autocratic form of government (albeit with democratic elements that are still significant, though in retreat). Islam is a more serious idea than Jacobinism or Marxism: it is more embedded in people's lives than those political ideas ever became; in the cultural/intellectual race, it has longer legs.

But those at the top of the regime run a risk – a known risk that people have been pointing out ever since 1979. Shi'ism more than any other form of Islam is traditionally, acutely, almost obsessively sensitive to the abuse of political power. Islam still works as a support to the regime because a significant portion of the population still accept its Islamic credentials. But when innocents are beaten up, tortured and shot for asking what has happened to their vote, and when peaceful funerals are broken up by club-wielding thugs, the risk run by the regime intensifies. An example of this is a statement by the young Basiji who witnessed abuse and rape of prisoners arrested after 12 June, who told a Western reporter: 'now I am ashamed in front of people . . . and I am ashamed in front of my religion'.⁷³

Islam is not susceptible to the control of the regime in the way that Jacobinism and Marxism were – it is an independent standard, which is ultimately beyond the reach of the regime. *No one owns the church*.⁷⁴ If a critical mass of believers among the Iranian people ever decide that the Islamic regime has become un-Islamic; if they begin to call it the rule

of Yazid, as they did the government of the Shah, then Iran's rulers will be gone as if they had never been more substantial than a puff of smoke.

What do we in the West want to happen in Iran? Broadly, we want the Iranians to have a free democracy, for Iran to normalize her external relations with the US and other Western countries, to end whatever plans she may have for developing a nuclear weapon, to recognize Israel and stop funding Hamas and Hezbollah – to become what we would regard as a normal country. To come back into the international fold, to stop being a problem. The events of June 2009, when large numbers of Iranians demonstrated for their Green movement and against the re-election of President Ahmadinejad in what they believed to be an electoral fraud, indicated that many Iranians, perhaps a majority, think more or less the same way, on many of those points at least. But they did not get their way, and there is no sign that they will get their way in the immediate future. Why did they not succeed?

Some of the complexities, paradoxes and incomprehensibilities of Iranian behaviour are hard to grasp, even for those with an understanding of the events covered in this book. Some of the complexities are intractable, and it is a feature of contemporary comment on Iran that subjectivity tends to reassert itself over objectivity. Our response to Iran says as much about ourselves as about Iran. When struggling to assess what may happen, we tend to betray what we want to happen. And our problems with Iran to some extent reflect problems with our own, Western model of development.

Comparisons are sometimes made between contemporary Iran and the former Soviet Union.⁷⁵ Is Iran the Soviet Union of the twenty-first century? No . . . and yes. Taken strategically, the comparison is dangerously misleading (and unfortunately, for various reasons, there are some who are ready to mislead, and to be misled). Iran is not a threat to the West in any remotely comparable way. Iran may be on the point of acquiring a nuclear weapon, but it does not have, and will never have the global strategic reach of the former Soviet Union, nor the offensive military power in conventional forces to back it up, nor the defence spending (as noted already above), nor the military-industrial complex, nor the military occupation of half a continent, nor the totalizing grip on the thought of its own population. Neither Stalin nor Brezhnev would have tolerated Musavi, nor demonstrations on the scale achieved

by the Green movement. They would have sent in the tanks, as in 1956 in Budapest and 1968 in Prague.

The Iranian regime has been reluctant to use the full force available to it against demonstrators. The events of the Arab Spring of 2011 and since have provided a comparison for this (some Iranians have claimed that the demonstrations of the Green movement, and their innovative use of new technologies, were the precursors of and the inspiration for what happened in Tunisia and Egypt). The Iranian regime has used brutality, but it has not gone to war with its own people like Gaddafi in Libya or the Assad regime in Syria. For a long time, Musavi and Karrubi were allowed to stay at large, speaking out against what had happened. The regime still wanted to maintain its own myth of democracy. When he came under pressure, Khamenei closed down Kahrizak. The origins of the regime in popular struggle against tyranny still act as a restraining factor, albeit ever more feebly. Despite the regime's success in putting down the opposition, its response still looks more like Egypt in 2011 than Syria in 2011-12 (at the time the hardback version of this book went to print in the latter part of 2012, the Iranian regime was maintaining its firm support for the increasingly embattled and increasingly vicious Assad regime). So there is still uncertainty about how far the regime will go in its repression, and whether its security instruments will obey it if it goes too far. Some have questioned why overthrow of the regime in Iran did not follow on from the overthrow of other regimes in the Middle East in 2011 – that may yet happen, but the crushing effect of the repression, imprisonments and exiles that followed the events of 2009 is for now a sufficient answer.

The nuclear weapon programme is a concern, but Iran would never use a nuclear weapon against Israel or anyone else in a first strike. Like the states that have nuclear weapons already, it wants a nuclear weapon as a deterrent; its geographical position and history would be argument enough to justify that, if it were not for the treaty commitments Iran has made *not* to acquire nuclear weapons. In addition, where the Soviet Union represented an ideology that was persuasive to some within Western societies, and stood for one side of a debate or conflict within Western democracy itself, Iran's Islamic ideology has no such purchase within Western society. Some might argue that Islamists are indeed active in Western society; but they are active only within communities of Muslims, mainly immigrants. The general appeal of their views is limited and small; their views do not

form one end of a continuum of political debate as Soviet-aligned communism in Western society used to do. Iran's attachment to the minority, Shi'a side of the Muslim schism further limits her ideological reach.

Does Iran, like the former Soviet Union, interfere in neighbouring countries and attempt to spread its revolution? Yes . . . and no. The present regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, perhaps best called proto-democratic and supported by the US and the West, are pro-Iranian and were set up with Iranian help. As we have seen, Iranian involvement in the insurgency in Iraq became something of a chestnut between 2003 and 2009 as some tried to blame Iran for the Western coalition's difficulties, but there was much more evidence for the destabilizing effect of support for insurgency originating in Saudi Arabia, which tended to be ignored. Similarly now in Afghanistan. For the most part, Iranian rhetoric about exporting revolution did not survive the earlier phases of the Iran-Iraq War, and the Shi'a Crescent theory, of a threat of Iranian-backed revolt by the Shi'a underclasses of the Persian Gulf region, is bunk (despite its enthusiastic espousal by Tony Blair, in his unconvincing role as Middle East peace envoy). Iran has interests and associates in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and the interests, like the borders, are permanent (unlike, perhaps, those of the US and her allies). Iran does not like the heavy US and allied military presence so close to its borders. Though largely unproven, there probably has been covert Iranian involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷⁶ But the closer to Iran's borders, the more pragmatic Iran's foreign and security policy has been. The stated Iranian policy towards both Iraq and Afghanistan has been to foster stability in both, and it is a serious failure of Western (and Iranian) diplomacy that we have been unable to make better use of the strong alignment of interests between ourselves and the Iranians.

On a minor scale, the comparison between Iran and the Soviet Union is more apt. Opposition to the US is a fundamental ideological tenet of the Iranian regime, and the enmity and supposed interference of the US is used to justify internal repression. As in the former Soviet Union, the ideology has become fatigued and the ruling clique increasingly uses its security apparatus to uphold its dwindling authority.⁷⁷ There are other similarities. In his book *Living in Truth* Vaclav Havel described the debilitating effect of living in a society like that of Czechoslovakia under communism, in which dishonesty and lies were necessary for survival and essential for preferment, entering the soul and creating a kind of

moral anomie. Azar Nafisi (author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*) and others have described a similar effect in the Islamic republic, where the dishonest nature of the regime and compromise with it is made more dismal by the unemployment that keeps many Iranians, especially young Iranians, in a limbo of desperate inactivity and disappointed ambitions, and induces others to do a deal with the regime.

And yet . . . Sartre once wrote that the French were never so free as they were under Nazi occupation, in the sense that moral choice and the pressing seriousness of consequences were never so sharp as they were at that time. That too is true in Iran. In many Western countries, for many of us, we have it easy and have become morally lazy, relativistic and cynical. In Iran, the essentials of right and wrong, freedom and repression have been everyday matters of discussion and choice. This moral earnestness emerges in some Iranian cinema. One outcome of the furore over the 2009 elections was that the authority of the supreme leader, once taboo, now came openly into question. The field of debate, under repression, actually widened – at least in that area.

Is Iran a democracy?⁷⁸ We are probably too ready to dismiss democracies for not being perfect – for example some said Britain was no longer a democracy after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 because large numbers had demonstrated against the invasion, and opinion polls suggested a majority opposed it. Democracy has some categorical attributes. Firstly, it needs a democratic constitution. Iran has that, at least potentially; it is flouted and manipulated by the regime in many respects, but elections have been held regularly, politicians have accepted loss of office and government has proceeded without *coups d'état* (albeit with a question mark over the events of June 2009). More importantly, it needs a democratic people, in other words, a people who believe in or aspire to democracy. Iran has that too, as the Green movement has demonstrated, and Khatami's reform movement before that. If democracy is most alive where people are most willing to struggle, suffer and even die for it, then the events of 2009 showed democracy alive and vigorous in Iran. Some have suggested that this is the most important aspect of the events of 2009 – that they marked the renewal of the Iranian people's commitment to the principles of democracy and freedom.⁷⁹ But a functioning democracy, in which the will of the people is expressed through elections and determines the nature of the ruling government – no, Iran does not yet have that.

Crisis of Legitimacy?

The crisis of 2009 threw into high relief a number of important questions about a subject dear to the hearts of academics – the legitimacy of government.

It is plain that the legitimacy of the Islamic regime in Iran, and especially that of its supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, was damaged by the events of 2009. But when the regime still commands the loyalty of the security apparatus, the Basij and the Sepah, how much does that matter? Any attempt at an answer involves a number of intangibles. The stolen election of June 2009 may have taken Iranians closer to totalitarianism, but they are still not there yet. Someone once said that if communism could not succeed in Germany, it could not succeed anywhere. If not in Germany, how much less easy it will be to maintain a police state in Iran. It is as if you squeeze politics in Iran in one area, it bulges out irrepressibly in another.

This was demonstrated afresh by the public row between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad in the spring and summer of 2011. Beginning with a dispute over Ahmadinejad's attempt to dismiss his minister of intelligence, Heydar Moslehi, it developed into a major rift, with the dangerous accusation of 'deviance' being levelled at Ahmadinejad and the arrest of some of his associates (some of the latter, bizarrely, were also accused of sorcery). There was even talk of Ahmadinejad being impeached, like Bani-Sadr in 1981.⁸⁰ Given the lengths to which Khamenei went to defend Ahmadinejad's election result in 2009, few would then have predicted that within two years they would be so estranged from each other. It is not democracy, but it is not the frozen, moribund stability of the Soviet Kremlin either.

If there are limits to the degree to which the state will use its coercive power, there are limits also to the lengths Iranians are prepared to go against the regime. Since June 2009 there have been many reiterations of the opposition's commitment to non-violence, and it is a commonplace to hear Iranians say that they have experienced one revolution and they do not want another. In Iranian politics, the principle of non-violence may yet prove a strength rather than a weakness, but the reform movement generally, since the 1990s, has proved frustratingly weak at using its support to achieve real political results.

Revolutionary Iran

Many observers have stressed that the crisis of 2009 was as much a crisis within the regime itself as a confrontation between regime and citizens. The way that Rafsanjani has been (apparently) marginalized since 2009 is a measure of that. One element in the success of the Iranian regime in surviving since the revolution has been the way that its institutions have adapted to absorb faction and dissent. Khomeini himself organized and reorganized the system and shifted his interventions to favour now one faction, now another, to achieve that effect and to keep a diversity of elements and factions in play. But now, the hardline right have made themselves dominant, have excluded the left and the reformists, including a large number of prominent former regime adherents and supporters, have subverted revolutionary institutions, have become ever more reliant on naked force, and have fallen to squabbling among themselves.

It has been a phenomenon of revolutions that they develop towards extremes. The French revolution marched to the left, removing moderates and Brissotins, then removing dissident Jacobins like Danton, ending up with an impossible extreme under Robespierre and St-Just – not because those men had been incorrigibly evil from the start, but because of a combination of instability, ruthlessness and paranoia, and the pressure of events. In Iran the progression followed a different pattern, but with some family resemblances. In particular, the powerful charisma of Khomeini acted as a stabilizing factor up until 1989. In the early years, the IRP under Khomeini removed liberals, leftists and Tudeh from the scene, and further movement towards extremes was prevented because Khomeini's unique authority held factions within the IRP in balance, and in check.

But after Khomeini's death, the *nezam* began to march to the right. Khomeini had intended that the duumvirate of Khamenei and Rafsanjani would provide stability, but they fell out with each other and their visions diverged. Rather against expectations in 1989, Rafsanjani lost credibility and Khamenei emerged as the stronger. Unlike a Robespierre or a Stalin however, Khamenei may regard his office as a crushing duty rather than an opportunity for megalomaniac ambition – he is more like the crippled King Amfortas in Wagner's *Parsifal* (or indeed, the former Shah), suffering

physically and burdened intolerably by the example of his predecessor, whose shoes he can never fill. *Shahid-e zendeh* (living martyr) indeed.

Khamenei and the circle around him were taken aback by the success of Khatami in 1997, but ultimately they judged that they had to break the reformists, or see the right broken by them. After that experience in the Khatami years, he and the leading clique could not face repeating it in 2009. But the outcome of 2009 was a loss of credibility, a further loss of balance, greater dependence on naked force, a deeper entrenchment of the right and in particular the Sepah in the system, and a greater dependence of Khamenei personally on them. In the name of the revolution, and with Ahmadinejad capering on top of the regime barrel-organ, the country lurched ever further to the right, confirming the most conservative forces and classes in power, and excluding large swathes of Iranians from influence – especially young, educated and middle-class Iranians.

The outcome of thirty years of a revolutionary Islam since 1979 has been a conservative government that employs the rhetoric of revolution but represses dissent, and a potentially revolutionary opposition that holds back from violence.⁸¹ For the hardliners, to paraphrase Lampedusa, everything had changed with the revolution, so that everything could stay the same. In particular, the revolution enabled the bazaar and the clergy (or rather, a self-selected element from among them) to preserve their values and what they regarded as their traditional position of power in Iranian society. In fact, that position has itself been distorted in the process; the political clergy have narrowed ideologically, have distorted the tenets of traditional Shi'ism, have pushed to the margin many clerics who dissent from the regime line, and have made themselves dependent on the Sepah, Basij and law-enforcement forces. Meanwhile, urbanization, universal education and the war have changed Iranian society enormously, in ways that will in the long run prove hard to govern; and a large proportion of the population languishes impoverished and marginalized by inflation and unemployment.

The *nezam* may endure under Khamenei, but with change sweeping through other countries of the Middle East, prompted by similar conditions of social, political and economic exclusion that persist in Iran, one has to question for how long that will be possible. The next event to watch will be the presidential elections of 2013; Ahmadinejad cannot stand for a third term, and there is no obvious *nezam* candidate

who can also be expected to galvanize the large turnout that Khamenei and his circle will be hoping for.

It would be tempting to conclude that all that was at stake in 2009 was the survival in power of a cynical, self-interested ruling clique, that controls restive Iranian society through the Sepah and through its patronage system – notably the *bonyads*. The clique itself, plus its dependants, plus a further number that could be bribed or cajoled – perhaps the support for Ahmadinejad extended no further than that? But that would be too black and white a picture. If that had been the case, the Green movement might have swept them away. Just as Musavi and his people still upheld the Islamic identity of Iran's political structure, so democracy is also in the DNA of the ruling clique (albeit perhaps with a flawed gene). Otherwise, they would not have backed the democratic constitution for Afghanistan in 2002, and they might have made a more naked grab for absolute power in 2009, claiming an emergency and suspending the constitution for example, as has been done in other countries. The ruling clique *want to believe they are democratic*, and they would have liked to have persuaded a clear majority to vote for them in a free election. But having failed to persuade a dangerously large proportion of the people, they can't permit unfettered freedom, or let the strong role of the Islamic element in the constitution lapse.

Why not? This is the crux of the matter. It is because Iran's rulers fear that if they were to allow greater freedom in Iranian society, Western influence, Western culture and the forces of globalization would gather an unstoppable momentum (such is the yearning of many ordinary Iranians for them) and would bury them. They fear that they would lose Iran's hard-won independence and self-determination, and Shi'a Islamic character; the fruits of the revolution (and the war). And that is a real concern – no abstruse clerical obsession. They are right to be worried. That is why they stole the election (although of course they also enjoy and want to retain their positions of power). There are genuine reasons to dislike some of the consequences of the Western model – some of the outcomes of the Western idea of modernity. Drug abuse, family breakdown, the collapse of traditional moral values, the homogenization and stultification of international culture through consumerism: they are concerns with which religious conservatives and others in the US and elsewhere might sympathize – from any other quarter. In the minds of the ruling clique in Iran, their clerical rule is the barrier that the revolution

of 1979 erected against those things (notwithstanding that drug abuse and prostitution, for example, impelled by unemployment and deprivation, have become sadly rife in Iran since then). The crisis of 2009 was not just an Iranian crisis – it reflected global questions and tensions, and a problem with liberalism and the idea of political freedom generally, that affects us all: that free people may end up choosing things they really ought not to choose, to the detriment of society. Through the phenomena of cultural communication and globalization, freedom may destroy and homogenize traditions and cultural particularities that people value and which give them their identity. Once again, a phenomenon that looks peculiarly Iranian, proves on closer examination to be all-too-human, all-too-familiar; so far away, so close.

Since the revolution of 1979, religious conservatism and left-leaning republicanism, or if you prefer, Islam and democracy, have been continually in tension, in everyday politics as in the constitution, struggling for dominance in Iran. The events of 2009 may in the future be seen as the final, crushing victory of the hardline conservatives; or possibly as the consciousness-raising epoch of a new republican generation who will proceed inexorably from defeat to eventual triumph. But in 2012 it would be bold and probably foolhardy for a historian to predict either outcome.

The Iranian predicament is a particular and individual version of this common human predicament. The ruling clique, we might say, should have enough confidence in the Iranian people to let them choose, and to let the people work out for themselves, in the long run, the need to choose aright. Yes – but the same applies to us in the West, in a shifted sense. We and our governments need to set aside what *we* want for a time and to let Iranians resolve their predicament their way. To have enough confidence in the principles of freedom we believe in, to trust that they will eventually win through in Iran too.

Tougher Sanctions and Serious Talks

A series of events over the autumn of 2011 and the winter of 2011/12 again increased tension between Iran and the West, seemingly bringing closer the threat of war, as had happened four years earlier, under the Bush administration. In October 2011 it was alleged on the basis of an FBI investigation that Iran had inspired a plot to murder the

Saudi ambassador to the US in Washington (the same ambassador who had, according to Wikileaks, earlier urged US military action against Iran – to ‘cut the head off the snake’). Although some of those involved in the alleged plot seemed unlikely characters, and despite the fact that the director of the FBI commented at a press conference that the allegations sounded like a Hollywood film script, the Obama administration seemed to take the story as already proven, blamed the highest levels of the Iranian regime, and announced that new sanctions would be applied. A few weeks later, on 8 November, the IAEA issued a new report on Iran’s nuclear programme, which went into greater detail than ever before about suspicions that Iran was pursuing a nuclear weapon (drawing on information from Western intelligence agencies), but had little or no evidence to suggest that significant weapon development had gone forward since 2003 (seeming therefore to confirm the NIE of November 2007 on that point). But the report was much trumpeted before release, by Israeli and hawkish US commentators, as conclusive proof of Iranian misdoings. It looked rather as though the timing of these events had been coordinated as a new initiative to increase pressure on the Iranian regime. Certainly, the US and the West had the initiative in these months, where previously Ahmadinejad had been the one setting the agenda. There was renewed talk of military action against Iran, and of further rounds of sanctions. In mid-November the UK announced that (following the IAEA report) Iran would no longer be allowed access to British banking institutions, as part of what was hoped to be concerted international action. On 29 November police stood by while a mob of Basijis and alleged students broke into the British embassy compound in Tehran, ransacking staff accommodation and looting and destroying property. In the aftermath the UK withdrew her diplomats from Iran and expelled all the Iranian diplomats in London. Other Western countries also withdrew their ambassadors from Iran. In January 2012 the EU announced an oil embargo, to take effect from July. Over this period, there were several assassinations in Iran of people associated with the nuclear programme; the assassinations were widely believed to have been instigated by Mossad. A US unmanned aircraft crashed on Iranian territory in the east, near the border with Afghanistan; the Iranians refused to return it.

There was much discussion and comment at this time in the Western media about more sanctions and the threat of military action – but also a growing number of voices questioning Western policy and the apparent

drift toward war.⁸² There was a sense that greater pressure was being applied to Iran partly because policy-makers no longer knew what else to do, and because the process of securing international agreement to new sanctions measures in the UN Security Council had acquired its own momentum. New sanctions measures had become a way to deflect pressure from Israel, as figures within the Israeli government spoke more insistently about the likelihood of Israel taking military action against the Iranian nuclear programme. As the tension escalated, so too did the risk of miscalculation and war by accident.

Despite the new sanctions measures and increasing financial pressure, the Iranian regime remained defiant, resting on the conviction among the Iranian people, discussed in earlier chapters, hardened in the fires of the revolution and the Iran–Iraq War, that Iran would never again be bullied or humiliated by foreign powers. It would be a mistake to underestimate that determination to uphold national independence. Some doubted the wisdom of applying pressure to Iranian oil supplies. Whatever the other effects, an oil embargo would raise oil prices, at a time when the world economy, and especially the European economy, was vulnerable and weak. Two of the countries in Europe that were financially and economically most vulnerable, Italy and Greece, were also among those most dependent on Iranian oil, with refining infrastructure least capable of switching to other suppliers.

In this developing crisis, some of the essential elements of the problem remained somewhat vague and unfocused in the debates that went on. In Israel, the government of Benjamin Netanyahu maintained its account of the situation at a high pitch, accusing the Iranian regime of being aggressive, expansionist and irrational. It claimed that the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapon was an existential threat to the state of Israel. Notwithstanding that some irresponsible voices from within Iran had made statements that played into this interpretation,⁸³ this line was exaggerated and irresponsible in itself. Most knowledgeable observers accepted that, even if Iran acquired a nuclear weapon, it would never be used against Israel in a first strike, or at all unless Iran itself were attacked, because the retaliation from the US and Israel would be so overwhelming. This view was reinforced by statements from within Israel – from Meir Dagan, former Mossad chief,⁸⁴ and from Yuval Diskin, a former head of the Israeli Shin Bet⁸⁵ (internal intelligence – counterpart to MI5), in March and April 2012 respectively. The statements came shortly after

a visit to Washington by Benjamin Netanyahu, in the course of which Netanyahu failed to persuade President Obama to accept a position on Iran that said that an Iranian threshold capability was in itself an unacceptable red line⁸⁶ (Diskin accused Netanyahu of having misled the Israeli public with his dramatization of the threat from Iran). The threat to Israeli security interests was real and genuine, but what was threatened was the loss of the Israeli nuclear monopoly in the Middle East and the weakening of the Israelis' own (undeclared) nuclear deterrent – a serious matter, but not immediately apocalyptic. The supposed and oft-mentioned threat of an arms race in the Middle East was something of a chimera – Israel's possession of a nuclear weapon had not prompted Saudi Arabia, for example, to acquire one.⁸⁷ Another peculiarity was that the sanctions were all primarily directed at getting the Iranians to suspend their uranium enrichment activity – but that activity had by 2012 been running long enough and had developed to a point at which continuing enrichment seemed rather immaterial. More important than the actual uranium was the understanding of the enrichment process and the confident know-how the Iranians had acquired. Essentially, what the US and the EU were trying to do was to reverse the Iranian *intention* to develop a nuclear weapon. But the Iranians themselves continued to deny any such intention, and the evidence seemed still to indicate that substantial progress toward their nuclear weapon had halted in 2003. How would we know, beyond what we already knew, if we were to succeed in reversing this Iranian intention?

Some suggested that these and other ambiguities in the Western position indicated that the real Western objective was not resolution of the nuclear problem, but regime change in Iran – a situation reminiscent of a similar dangerous ambiguity before the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. An ambiguity that went some way to legitimate the resistance of the Iranian regime, and which objectively might be regarded – for example in the context of the clause in the NPT permitting a state to withdraw from the treaty if it considered itself to be under a serious security threat – as just cause for the Iranian regime to want a nuclear weapon after all.

It became apparent over the first half of 2012, as new negotiations on the nuclear problem unfolded in successive rounds in Istanbul, Baghdad and Moscow, that the Iranian side was negotiating with a greater degree of seriousness and application than in previous talks. In particular, the Iranian negotiators had a clearer and more direct mandate to speak with

the full backing of the supreme leader than had been the case previously. Spoiling statements by Ahmadinejad, a feature of earlier talks, were conspicuous by their absence. The greater seriousness from the Iranian side may have reflected a perception on their part that these talks, with a more prominent and more serious level of US participation than ever before, in turn merited more concentrated attention from them too. Alternatively, they may have judged that they had secured most if not all of what they had intended in the way of progress with enrichment, and it was time to make a settlement and bank those achievements. Or (as many assumed) it may be that they were keen to see the new, tougher sanctions measures removed. Insistence that this should happen was certainly a prominent feature of the Iranian negotiating position in Istanbul, Baghdad and Moscow. In fact, it was most likely a combination of all these factors.

Strangely however, the US side at the Moscow talks seemed at one point to say that whatever concessions the Iranian side made in the talks, the sanctions could not be lifted (reflecting the institutional inertia of the sanctions process in the US Congress, the UN and the EU). It appeared that the US and the West expected not to negotiate, to make concessions in exchange for concessions (as is normal in diplomacy and negotiations of any kind), but to deliver an ultimatum and dictate a settlement. It is hard to imagine any government, except under the most extreme duress, capitulating to such a demand, and it was no surprise that the talks did not prosper. But they did continue – neither side wanted to break off. In fact, however Western governments presented the state of the talks, the real question was when and how the US (with Israel muttering dark threats in the background) would be prepared to come off their previous position of no enrichment, and accept the fait accompli of the Iranian enrichment capability – albeit at a low level (3–5 per cent) and with tougher inspection safeguards. The parameters of the deal that was in the offing were fairly plain – but it was plain too that the Obama administration, in the run-up to a presidential election in November 2012, was not in a position to seal that deal.

In the meantime, the assassinations of Iranian scientists, assumed to have been perpetrated by the Israelis, appeared to receive a response in incidents in Georgia and Delhi. In the latter case a car belonging to the Israeli embassy was targeted on 13 February 2012 with a magnetic bomb delivered by an assailant on a motorbike (the method resembling that used in the attacks in Iran), and four people were injured. The Delhi police said

they believed there was a connection with the Sepah,⁸⁸ though doubts were raised about this later. Then on 18 July, a bomb exploded next to a tourist bus carrying an Israeli tour group at Burgas airport in Bulgaria, killing five Israelis, a Bulgarian bus driver and the man carrying the bomb. Initially the local authorities assumed it had been a suicide attack, but later it emerged that the bomb had probably been detonated remotely. There appeared to be a connection with Lebanese Hezbollah.⁸⁹ Responsibility for all these incidents remained unclear, but they contributed to the general air of tension, and together threatened to escalate, and to displace what fragile grounds for optimism remained in the continuing talks.

Amid this uncertainty and complexity, some firm realities stand out. The question of an Iranian nuclear weapon is an unwelcome extra problem in the Middle East, and potentially a dangerous one. But it is inextricably tied in with the long-running hostility between the US and Iran, and between Iran and Israel.⁹⁰ The nuclear weapon's only purpose is deterrence – in this case as an instrument to bolster Iran's hard-won independence and the survival of the Iranian regime. If there were no hostility, or if the level of hostility could be reduced and made safe, the threat and the need for deterrence would also be reduced. The fundamental problem is that hostility and the need to resolve it – easier said than done, of course. But it is perhaps relatively easy, notwithstanding the history, the harshness of the rhetoric, the intransigence, the failures of understanding and imagination on both sides, and the vested interests some have on both sides in the continuation of the hostility. Relatively easy because this dispute lacks many of the features that make other longstanding international crises and problems intractable. The three states most deeply involved, Iran, the US and Israel, share no mutual borders. There are no border disputes or territorial claims. There are no refugees demanding the right to return. There is no intercommunal violence. Within quite recent memory the peoples involved have been allies, and even today there is no deep-seated hatred between them – for the most part, indeed, rather the reverse.⁹¹ When Obama made a serious attempt at reconciliation in the first six months of his administration, the response from ordinary Iranians was such that it helped to produce the Iranian regime's most serious crisis since 1979. Far from failing, the reconciliation effort worked more dramatically than anyone could have imagined. But then it was abandoned. It needs to be resumed, reinforced, and maintained with determination until it succeeds.