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Iran: A Dangerous Evolution from Theocracy to Military Dictatorship; Violence, State-Sponsored Terrorism and Nuclear Weapons

The recent events in Iran remind us of a well-known quote from one of the most infamous tyrants of the 20th Century: "It is not really who votes that is important, but who counts the votes." This scenario has been playing out in Iran during the past few weeks, rendering Iran a far more dangerous player in the concert of nations than ever before. The Iranian theocracy has become a "thugocracy," one that will likely prevail because of its use of force against the population. Not only does the Iranian challenge still exist, it is escalating rapidly — due in large measure to Iran's continued pursuit of nuclear weapons, its influence in Afghanistan and Iraq and its support of Hezbollah and Hamas, all against the backdrop of internal unrest and the rising political force of the Iranian military.

Historically, Iran has always strived for superpower status in the Middle East. While its religious elements still exert some influence over the militia and the Revolutionary Guards, they are to some extent now beholden to these aggressive forces. The hard liners, who cling to an agenda of destabilization, revolutionary vengeance and violent intimidation — including terrorist acts — are definitely in the ascendancy, while the government appears to be evolving into a clerical military dictatorship. It is clear that recent events will drive Iran deeper into isolation, while mounting pressure from sanctions may push it further into a corner, resulting in more radical policies. Unfortunately, this vulnerable and isolated position will only serve to help fuel Iran's drive for nuclear weapons. This issue of The Lipman Report® will explore how Iran has come to this crisis: its historical development, support of terrorism and pursuit of nuclear weapons; analyze the current situation and venture a likely prognosis for Iran and international security.

History of Iranian Politics and Anti-American Sentiment

The first Shah, Reza Shah Pahlavi, instituted many military and administrative reforms meant to modernize and secure independence, but fell out with the Allies in World War II. In 1941, he was forced to abdicate in favor of his son Muhammad Reza Shah, known in the West as The Shah of Iran, or simply as The Shah. Following World War II, the United States began to take over Britain's role as the leading foreign player in Iranian politics. Iran is rich in oil, and the West had a strong interest in keeping the pipelines

flowing. The Truman Doctrine of 1947 provided aid to Iran to help maintain relations with the West, keep the oil coming and discourage cooperation with the Soviet Union. In 1952, however, popular Iranian Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq attempted to nationalize the oil industry and dethrone The Shah. The American CIA and British intelligence services then stepped in, staged a coup against Mossadeq and restored the Shah to the throne six days later. Among other forms of support, the United States helped to establish the feared Savak, a brutal secret security force. As an unforeseen result of the United States' collaborative efforts with The Shah and Savak, a wave of anti-Americanism rolled across Iran in the late 1970s. At the same time all of Iran's past political, social, economic and religious problems resurfaced, creating widespread dissent and unrest. In 1978, The Shah instituted martial law, but prolonged illness took the force and effectiveness out of his resolve. The escalating demonstrations, protests and riots convinced The Shah that his days were numbered, and in January 1979, The Shah and his queen left Iran "for vacation" and never returned home.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

The new power in Iran that emerged, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, represented to Muslims and the West in the 1970s and 1980s roughly what Osama bin Laden represents to the world today. When riots erupted in 1964, The Shah had several of the leading clerics arrested, and a number of mullahs — including Ayatollah Khomeini — went into exile. Agitating from abroad, the Shiite exile Ayatollah Khomeini seized the opportunity to convince many Iranian dissidents that all of Iran's ills could be traced to two sources of anti-Islamic contention: The Shah's secular practices and policies and the influence of the "Great Satan" — the United States. Long before the Internet, Khomeini exercised Western technology to achieve his aims; he launched a campaign to oust the Shah from power through the Western media and taped sermons that made their way back to Iran. The campaign succeeded in instigating widespread riots in 1978.

With The Shah out of the picture, Khomeini flew from Paris to Tehran and announced he would establish the Islamic Republic of Iran, the first truly Islamic state in modern history. Khomeini set up a theocracy and proclaimed that the rest of the regimes throughout the

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Muslim World were corrupt as result of their close ties with the “Great Satan.” According to Khomeini, establishing an Islamic Iran necessitated the forced removal of all un-Islamic elements of society through arrests, torture and execution. Tensions with the United States reached their nadir in 1979 when — with Khomeini’s blessing — a group of about 500 students scaled the walls of the compound housing the American Embassy, seizing 67 American hostages and holding 52 of them in captivity for 444 days.

Iran’s Islamic Revolution of the 1980s was the first of its kind. Khomeini built an intolerant Islamic theocracy that repressed the Iranian people, fought a costly eight-year war with Iraq and spread Islamic militancy across the region. After 10 years of turmoil, repression, and war Khomeini died in 1989, leaving an intensely frustrated and defeated people, a crippled economy, a destroyed infrastructure and an authoritarian regime to fend for itself. Nevertheless the Ayatollah’s image today remains untarnished in the eyes of his supporters; setbacks, chaos, deprivation and violence during his reign are seen unequivocally as the work of outside enemies of Islam — primarily American or Israeli — not as the result of Khomeini’s extreme measures.

Irreconcilable Ideologies

When Khomeini died in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei replaced him as the Supreme Leader, and little changed in Iran until 1997. During these years, the Islamic Left — representing the reformists — was exiled to political purgatory, but abandoned its hard line in favor of an agenda of liberalization, freedom of expression, the relaxation of Islamic social codes and friendlier dealings with the rest of the world. On the strength of this platform in 1997, the reformist Muhammad Khatami won the Presidency in a landslide. The Iranian parliament soon fell to the reformists as well. However, these elected officials were still subordinate to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the Guardian Council, a council of 12 clerics that represented a powerful brake on liberalization and reform, vetoing much of the legislation passed by the parliament. A hundred independent newspapers and magazines that opened during this period were forced to close, and many of Khatami’s inner circle were imprisoned. As a result, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president in 2005, the reformists had neither a credible leader nor a constituency. Under Ahmadinejad, a crackdown on

dissent forced scores of journalists, intellectuals and activists to flee the country. Ahmadinejad centralized government, empowered the Basij militia (shock troops) and the Revolutionary Guards, flouted expert economic advice and packed the ministries with ideological cronies. Iran seemed headed for a confrontation between irreconcilables: the forces for secular democracy and those for autocratic theocracy.

Contemporary Iran

At this point, Iran is a country in the grip of massive socio-economic malaise. Inflation stands at nearly 30 percent. Unemployment is rampant, officially pegged at over 10 percent but unofficially estimated to be much higher. Nearly one-quarter of the Iranian population lives under the poverty line, while prostitution and drug abuse are rampant. President Ahmadinejad’s mismanagement of the national economy over the past four years explains why there is outrage over this disputed election. However, despite the recent economic problems, oil continues to be the magic potion that enables Iran’s leaders to snub their noses at the world. As long as oil prices remain high, Ahmadinejad can lecture to willing ears about how the West is in decline and the holocaust was a “myth.”

On June 13, 2009, Iranian authorities announced the final results of the presidential elections: President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected to a second term after gaining 62.63 percent of the votes, defeating his main challenger, former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, who garnered 33.75 percent. A hard liner in the past, Mousavi was now considered a moderate compared to Ahmadinejad. Although there was no indication that Mousavi would win the election, in view of Ahmadinejad’s broad unpopularity the two-to-one margin was surprising and difficult to believe. On June 15, nearly two million people participated in a protest march on Azadi Street in Tehran, the biggest protest Iran has seen since the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah. This protest was against the current generation of leaders, who, with their history of repression, have created this situation in Iran.

As Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei rules Iran from the top. The recent crackdown on protesters of the election results indicates that he is probably granting greater influence to military and security forces. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) — also

known as the Pasadaran — is an elite force perhaps 120,000 strong that has emerged as Iran's most powerful organization and has been heavily involved in the post-election suppression. The Revolutionary Guards have also taken command of the domestic police force in Teheran. Even more importantly, however, they control and protect the nuclear program. Far from fretting about an impending attack from the United States or Israel, Guard leaders have been warning the Ayatollah that the most formidable threat to the Islamic Republic is a "soft regime change policy" involving the use of "orange revolutions."

During the past several years, there has been a definite shift of the center of power from the clergy to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and many experts feel Iran is no longer a theocracy, but a government headed by military chiefs. Government agents have launched a reign of terror, beating and arresting protesters, and blocking independent news coverage of events all across the country. Perhaps the most important question is whether the leadership can successfully navigate the deep divisions that the election has widened within Iran's political elite, which represent the most serious threat to the system in its 30-year history.

Iran and Terrorism

Over the past several decades, Iran has emerged as one of the leading sponsors of terrorism in the world. Shortly after establishing the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini dispatched 1,000 Pasadaran to set up training camps in southeastern Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. The Pasadaran recruited young Shiite extremists from existing militant organizations and provided them with military training and religious instruction promulgated by Ayatollah Khomeini. This core group emerged as Hezbollah, or The Party of God, and Khomeini vowed to use this organization to replicate his success in Iran through the establishment of Islamic States in the Middle East.

Tehran has armed, trained, financed, inspired, organized and otherwise supported dozens of violent groups over the years. It has backed not only groups in the Persian Gulf neighborhood, but also terrorists and radicals in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Bosnia, the Philippines and elsewhere. This support remains strong today; the United States government regularly contends that Iran is tied to an array of radical groups in

Iraq. Tehran fuels terrorism abroad through the Quds force, an elite branch of Iran's Revolutionary Guard whose primary focus is on the Middle East. The Quds force reportedly gives weapons, training and funding to Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian anti-Israeli groups, Lebanon's Shiite group Hezbollah and other Iraq-based militants, Taliban fighters in Afghanistan and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. This group has also been linked to the flow of explosives, roadside bombs, rockets and other small arms to Shiite militias in Iraq and to the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The triumph of the Iranian revolution in February 1979 kindled a burst of terrorist actions by Iran itself. These include kidnappings sanctioned and sponsored by the government, the taking of hostages throughout the 1980s and the bombing of United States installations. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran actively pursued a strategy of maritime terror, using unmarked gunboats and floating mines to attack noncombatant shipping. Numerous assassinations of enemies abroad in the late 1980s and 1990s — as illustrated by the fatwa against Salman Rushdie — were conclusively attributed to Iranian official sponsorship.

Iran was also accused of sponsoring the Argentinian bombings of 1992 and 1994 and the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia — attributed to Hezbollah — and is currently suspected of supporting terrorist acts against Israel through its backing of radical Palestinian factions. It has sponsored airplane hijackings, lethal attacks against United States soldiers stationed in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, kidnappings of Americans and Europeans and the bombings of restaurants and hotels. In short, Iran's support of terrorism extends far and wide; Hezbollah alone has killed more Americans than any group other than al Qaeda.

The Revolutionary Guard Corps remains a powerful political and economic force in Iran. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad rose through the ranks of the Guard and came to power with support from its own network of veterans; its leaders are linked to many mainstream businesses in Iran. The Guards are heavily involved in everything from pharmaceuticals to telecommunications and pipelines — even the new Imam Khomeini Airport, which allows for a great deal of smuggling. Furthermore, many of the front companies engaged in procuring nuclear weapons are

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owned and run by the Revolutionary Guards. And with its own navy, air force, ground troops and special forces units, the Guard is a rival to Iran's conventional troops. Its naval forces abducted 15 British sailors and marines in 2007, sparking an international crisis, and its special forces armed Lebanon's Hezbollah with missiles used against Israel in the 2006 war. The Guard also play a key role in Iran's military industries, including the attempted acquisition of nuclear weapons and surface-to-surface missiles.

Prior to the recent events in Iran surrounding the contested election, Iran shifted its focus from hostage taking, bombings, assassinations and subversion to financing, training and supporting proxy organizations whose actions have provided some measure of deniability for Iran but could not overcome suspicion of Iranian involvement. Over the past several years, the focus of this proxy relationship has been on the Israeli-Palestinian situation.

Iran and Nuclear Weapons

The Middle East has been a hotbed of nuclear proliferation for five decades. Driven by security fears, regional ambitions and nationalism, at least seven Middle Eastern States have sought to acquire nuclear weapons. The only Middle Eastern country aside from Israel within reach of developing a nuclear weapon capability is Iran. Like others in the region, Iran's historical interest in nuclear weapons is deeply rooted. As part of his ambition to secure Iran's dominance in the Persian Gulf, the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi began an extensive nuclear power program in the 1970s, which included plans for a latent nuclear weapons option. The 1979 revolution shattered the program; scientists fled the country and sources of external support dried up. However, even though Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was religiously suspicious of nuclear technology, the program slowly re-formed in the mid-1980s as Iran began small-scale research on centrifuge enrichment technology that it had secretly acquired from Pakistan. After Khomeini's death, the covert enrichment program was expanded and nuclear reactor deals were pursued with China and Russia. The Russian technology allowed Iran to begin a secret plutonium production program to complement its enrichment program. Following the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in August 2005, Iran resumed its enrichment activities, apparently banking on the fact

that mounting turmoil in Iraq weakened American options to punish or attack Iran. Moreover, divisions among the major powers helped block broad economic sanctions against Iran, and the pain of existing sanctions has been blunted by the high oil prices.

Iran continues to cling to historical aspirations to assert its regional primacy, and its nuclear program has become intertwined with national pride and ambition. Its current pursuit of a nuclear program would almost certainly be the policy of any regime in Tehran. In fact, Ahmadinejad stated very recently that a "freeze" of Iran's nuclear program was out of the question. Around the same time, an Israeli report indicated Venezuela and Bolivia were supplying Iran with the ingredients for bomb grade uranium, which would augment what Iran has already acquired by sending teams to North Korea and Pakistan to tap their nuclear knowledge. Additionally, the head of the Center for Strategic Nuclear Forces in Moscow revealed that Iran is actively working on a missile development program and is two years away from having a nuclear weapon. Should Iran acquire a nuclear deterrent, there would be a great deal of pressure on Arab countries to acquire their own nuclear capability, dramatically undermining efforts to promote nonproliferation in the region. Sadly, even the toughest diplomacy and sanctions may not be sufficient to keep Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold, and it seems that hopes that a new political leader would cut back on Iran's nuclear program have been dashed. The next likely step will be Iran reaching out to Russia for potential sales of Russian strategic air defense systems; Moscow may give Iran what it needs to complete the Bushehr nuclear facility. Regarding Iran as static in the nuclear landscape would be a grave error at this time. A combination of an ascending military power, internal unrest and isolation might very well intensify both terrorist actions and the Iranian nuclear threat. An ongoing awareness of the evolving situation and strategic, immediate diplomatic efforts are needed to help defuse the violence and nuclear risk. The time for urgency is now.®



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