



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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Iran's Clenched Fist Election: What Next for U.S. Policy?

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

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The Carnegie Endowment hosted an excellent panel on the aftermath of Iran's elections and the implications for U.S.-Iran relations. The speakers were **Ambassador Nicholas Burns**, professor in the Practice of Diplomacy and International Politics at Harvard, **Abbas Milani**, Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University and **Karim Sadjadpour**, an associate at the Endowment. The moderator was **David Ignatius** of the *Washington Post*. All of the panelists, with the exception of the moderator wore green.

Setting up the discussion, **David Ignatius** pointed out that during the event, **President Obama** was holding a press conference on Iran during which he deplored violence against civilians and derided the "tired strategy of using other countries as scapegoats" for Iran's internal problems. Addressing **Abbas Milani**, he observed that **Ayatollah Khamenei** and **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** have dreaded a "color revolution" and have, in effect, organized a pro-regime coup. Milani pointed out that Khamenei has gone to great effort to avoid soft revolutions, having commissioned **a study three years ago that identified the early stages of all previous color revolutions worldwide so that they could be nipped in the bud**. With overwhelming indication from inside Iran that the election was indeed stolen—including a purported 15 million extra ballots being printed—the one big question that remains is whether the coup was organized by the Revolutionary Guards and presented to Khamenei, or if he was the mastermind behind it the whole while, which appears increasingly likely..

Indeed, Milani hypothesized, this **election rigging may well be one of the final parts of a long-planned move by the Guard to capture control of the state apparatus**, since Ahmadinejad's presidency has ensured that every state governor is a former Guard, along with a 75-85% of government ministers. The challenge facing **Mir-Hossein Mousavi** and his supporters going forward is that **the battle is unfair on two fronts**: not only does one side have weapons and the other doesn't, but the reformists respect human rights and life while the state has no such concerns. **Mousavi knows that if his movement becomes violent he will lose mass support**. Indeed, Ayatollah Montazeri, the most important Ayatollah living in Iran issued a *fatwa* saying that beating people and oppressing them is a sin. Milani points out that **many members of the Guard are actually pious Muslims, and it will be difficult for them to continue to kill and beat the people, particularly if more fatwas are issued**. Khamenei is already under fire, and protesters regularly shout "down with the dictator." The regime, Milani reasons, does not have the tools and ability to hold down a popular vote for long...they might as well try holding back a volcano. Milani said that **in terms of democratization theory, the situation in Iran has one of the necessary qualities for a transition into a functioning democracy, namely a substantial split amongst the "bad guys" in the ruling elite**.

Ignatius drew **Karim Sadjadpour** into the debate, asking him to expand on Khamenei's role. Sadjadpour shared an anecdote of a trip he took to Oslo last summer where a former Iranian President (**Mohammad Khatami**) explained to him that there are forces not just in Washington, but also in

Tehran that do not want the U.S. and Iran to engage, namely the Supreme Leader. Khatami reported that **Khamenei** had once told him that “**we need this enmity with the U.S.**” Sadjadpour argued that it is clear the regime did predict that Mousavi’s campaign would pick up the steam that it did, otherwise he would not have been allowed to run. Khamenei is very worried about Mousavi, since Mousavi was at one time at least equal to—if not higher up than—Khamenei in the revolutionary hierarchy. Combined Mousavi and Obama presidencies would have signaled to the Iranian people that it was solely Khamenei standing in the way, thus conflicting with what Sadjadpour identifies as Khamenei’s thirst for power without accountability. **Khamenei is insecure because he has never had the respect of his clerical peers that Khomeini did**, having been made an Ayatollah overnight.

Speaking on the scale of the demonstrations, which many observers have noted have decreased over the past week, Sadjadpour argued that the current lull is not an indicator that the protestors are lacking in backbone. Rather, the physical layout of Tehran is more like Los Angeles than Manhattan, and the regime can perform crowd control effectively by closing down arterial highways. **The depth of popular rage has not subsided, if anything it has increased.** Smaller protests though, have been easier for the *Basij* to handle. **The Basij have been particularly ruthless in this confrontation, and are “a cross between Hells Angels and al-Qaeda” and are truly thirsty for blood.** Sadjadpour notes that we have seen videos of young girls shot and killed, elderly women and even seven-year-old children beaten. The opposition, Sadjadpour argues, sees this and know better than to flex their muscles in the street. **Instead, they are going to target the main arteries of the economy** by attacking the petroleum industry, the Bazaar, labor and everything else.

Regarding the U.S. role in Iran, Sadjadpour mentioned that the regime paints the protestors as a foreign force; that he received text messages from an Iranian official telling him that “we have defeated Saddam once and we can do it again.” The regime calls the demonstrators foreign terrorists, including the 26-year-old girl who was murdered. For more perspective on the U.S. role, the conversation turned to **Nicholas Burns**, who applauded **Obama** for handling the crisis in a careful manner, with his statements growing appropriately stronger in line with events. In particular, Burns argued **that Obama resisted pressure to play politics over the issue, as he doubtless could have anticipated the right-wing attack and pre-empted it to his own advantage.** Rather, he has kept a long-term view. This, Burns notes, is much better than giving **Ahmadinejad** the pretext to blame the crisis on Americans in order to rally the people around him.

Sometimes, Burns said, “**megaphone diplomacy**” **does not work, particularly when dealing with Iran.** This is a very different context from Reagan calling on Gorbachev to “bring down this wall.” It was, Burns said, very good of Obama not to pull out the “conventional playbook” and make a list of demands of the Iranian government, as such demands do not work; it has been thirty years since the U.S. and Iran last engaged in diplomatic relations. For the entirety of Burns’ career, even as point person on Iran, he had not set foot in Iran or met with an Iranian official. Instead, Burns reasoned, the U.S. should not just seek engagement, but reconciliation with the regime *and* the Iranian people at large. **The Obama Administration’s “big policy question” is how to engage Iran without legitimizing the regime that has cracked down on its people.** This will require patience, as the U.S. must wait “until we absolutely positively know that there is no prospect for the reformers to succeed.”

Taking a question from **Abdulwahab Alkebsi** of CIPE, **Milani** asserted that the opposition movement is not without leadership, as **Mousavi** himself has become the face of the movement, though **he is careful to humbly acknowledge that he is “the creation of this movement, [but he] did not create it.”** Indeed, Mousavi has responded brilliantly, in Milani’s eyes, surprising many including his closest

aides in not folding and staying neither ahead of the curve or behind it. Milani also noted that we should watch out for **Ayatollah Rafsanjani**, who may be working to organize a system of collective clerical leadership, as many originally intended to do after the death of **Khomeini**.

Tulin Daloglu of *HaberTurk* discussed **reactions to the election from within the region**, as Turkey and Iraq have both congratulated Ahmadinejad. **Burns** noted that Russia had also officially recognized Ahmadinejad, which he sees as most disappointing since Russia's opinion is crucial in the international community. **Sadjadpour** thought it was hypocritical for Turkish **Prime Minister Erdogan** to come out and endorse the Iranian election results after taking such a strong stance on injustice in Gaza.

There was also brief discussion of **Obama's** acknowledgment of the U.S. role in Iran's 1953. **Burns** said that the United States should not be too profuse in apologizing, as Iran has done many things to the U.S. for which it should apologize as well, including the hostage crisis, Hezbollah's attacks on the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon, etc. **Sadjadpour** also wanted to "set the record straight" on 1953, noting that people in the current regime were not on **Mossadeq's** side, as many clerics preferred the Shah who was more accommodating to their religion. Rather, Sadjadpour asserted, **the Islamic Republic can be reduced down to just three pillars: *margh ba Amrika* (death to America), *margh ba Israil* (death to Israel), and the *hijab* for women.**

Responding to another question, **Sadjadpour** noted that his personal contacts say that Rafsanjani has been going to Qom to lobby the Assembly of Experts—"a body whose average age is 'deceased'"—but he has not yet been able to assemble a majority as **senior Ayatollahs fear the consequences of turning against Khamenei upon whom many of them rely**. If the tide shifts, however, this may change. Sadjadpour also took the opportunity to point out that in the first round of the 2005 election Ahmadinejad got 5.7 million out of 40 million votes cast. Khatami, by contrast, got 24 million votes. Nobody is voting for Ahmadinejad because he denies the holocaust, but because he promises to put oil money on the dinner tables. **Sadjadpour** finds it difficult to believe that people went out and said **"Mahmoud has doubled inflation and wrecked the economy, let's go out and vote for him in record numbers, a 50% increase in turnout."** Quoting **Thomas Friedman**, Sadjadpour joked that if he were to win an election two-to-one he would be happy to have a recount.

On a lighter note, **Milani** commented that when **Burns** was in government—under the Bush Administration—he was invited to meet with Burns. Each time Milani left he asked himself "how can policy be so wrong when they have so wise a person managing Iran?" In an aside to **Ignatius**, Burns retorted, "that's a long story", to which Milani replied: **"Being a good Persian, I always thought it was a British conspiracy!"**