



IRAN, 25 YEARS LATER

A GLORIA Center Roundtable Discussion

On February 25, 2004, in conjunction with the U.S. State Department, the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center held an international videoconferenced seminar on events in Iran. The seminar is part of the GLORIA Center's Experts Forum series. Participants' comments have been updated where necessary to reflect later events.

The seminar's purpose was to take stock of the Iranian Revolution on its 25th anniversary, especially in light of the recent parliamentary elections. Of particular concern was the status of the reform movement in Iran and what its future may hold.

There is no intention here of making policy recommendations or reflecting any political agenda, but only in presenting the individual views of several scholars studying the region who are thinking out loud in trying to develop their own understanding of these issues. It is hoped this edited transcript will inspire additional thought, debate, and ideas on the subject.

Brief biographies of the participants can be found at the end of the article.

Dr. Stephen Fairbanks: The Islamic Revolution from the beginning has defied the expectations of many over the years. In recent years there has been a lot of analysis of Iran as a crumbling revolution. Its failures can be said to include the current economic malaise, unemployment, and the brain drain. Democratic hopes have been dashed in recent years and especially in recent weeks and Iran remains as a regional threat as we learn more about the extent of its nuclear program.

But above all, Iran's revolution remains an enduring one. Essentially the same ruling clique remains in power after 25 years. It survived Khomeini's death and war with Iraq and gives all appearance of continuing now for some years to come. So, those who have said in recent months that the Iranian Revolution is in its final days, I think are as wrong as they have been practically every year since 1979.

At the time of the revolution there were wonderful expectations of a glorious time to come. Many of us thought that Iran without the Shah would

become free to realize all of its great potentials. There were others as the revolution got underway who had the worst expectations of what was to come and many of these have not been realized. One was that Iran or Tehran was going to become another Beirut which, at that time, was at the height of a civil war. We never did see such all-out ethnic or class warfare.

I remember in 1979 executives from one American bank came to Tehran to review the damage, saying there was no way the revolution could survive because its leaders were so economically incompetent. The fact is that they have muddled along despite so many predictions of economic disaster and give all appearances of continuing despite the economic problems that are so obviously there.

Some people also expected in 1979 that there would be a second revolution, one brought about either by the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization, or by Western-educated democrats, or by those wishing for a return to the monarchy. There was never a second revolution and

if there ever is to be one, it doesn't seem likely to happen any time soon.

If we look at the aspirations of the revolution twenty-five years ago, the most popular slogan at the time was "Independence, Freedom and Islamic Republic." They certainly got an Islamic Republic without having particularly any idea of what they were getting into. It is Republican in a sense that it is not a monarchy. As far as independence goes, the aspiration to belong neither to the eastern nor western blocks was realized, but the country never realized the economic independence that it expected to have with an economy that they somehow imagined could remain independent of the rest of the world.

Iran is a dependent country and always has been throughout this revolution. If it became independent of America, this forced it to become more dependent on Moscow and, more recently, the European Union in order to stand up against the United States.

This makes the regime dependent on the United States in a reverse way because it cannot escape being forced to pay the price of appearing constantly defiant of the United States. Indeed, one might suggest the leadership has nothing else to be revolutionary about any more.

How long they can maintain that stance is questionable since there are many signs that in order for this regime to fulfill its promise of economic betterment it is going to have to enter in some kind of at least economic relationship with the United States.

Finally, as regards freedom, in discussing contemporary shortcomings of recent years we should also remember how things were in the 1970s, when I lived in Iran, and how many people would speak of the lack of freedom under the Shah's regime. People were afraid to talk about any political matters with me. Perhaps the lack of freedom for many people is no worse now than it was then.

When I directed Radio Free Iran from Prague I was amazed constantly at the numbers of people every day who would call us up, talk with us, and even be interviewed on the air talking about Iran's problems and their hope for democratic change. I can't imagine that happening back during the 1970s before the revolution, even in the sense of women's rights. I have been amazed, particularly in my experiences with the radio and seeing how bold and articulate many Iranian women have become since the revolution in real contrast to what existed before.

I don't want to sound in any way like an apologist for the revolution, but the fact is that with these perspectives the situation is not always as terrible as it might have seemed.

Prof. Barry Rubin: I want to make four points briefly. First, we should recognize that the Iranian Revolution is the most important event in the Middle East in the last twenty-five years and has, more than any other event, set the course of the region. After all, the revolution was the factor behind the strategic change in the Gulf which led Saddam Hussein first to invade Iran--with the resulting eight-year-long war--and then Kuwait. These events also led to the U.S.-Iraq war of 2003. Three major wars came out of the situation created by the Iranian Revolution.

In addition, while there are other factors involved, the rise of the radical Islamist movement was also much inspired by Iran's revolution. This is true due to the fact that the revolution happened, survived, and popularized a new type of Islamism, as well as to direct assistance from the Tehran government. This connects the Iranian revolution to the development of radical Islamist groups as the main opposition force in every Arab country, the violent events in Lebanon during the 1980s, and other events down through September 11. U.S.

policy was also greatly affected by these events and also such bilateral matters as the 1979-1981 hostage crisis, the 1985-1986 arms deal, and so on. This is an incredibly important event whose reverberations are still felt daily.

Second, to echo the previous speaker, we should not make a mistake of underestimating the revolution and its survivability.

The third point is the way the revolution has survived. Here I will take a structuralist approach. I would say that the revolutionary leadership has been very clever about retaining power, but very poor in making policies. In all matters pertaining to survivability of the regime, they have done a very good and clever job. They have institutionalized, they have infiltrated the conventional armed forces and they have created their counter-armed forces, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. They have established rich foundations to shore up the regime. They created a parliament as a safety valve for popular sentiment but also a Council of Guardians to control the actual legislation. Contrary to other Middle Eastern revolutions, they have not been adverse to a great amount of institutionalization. In terms of regime survival they have played their hand very cleverly.

This strategy involved far more than repression. The regime developed a clear ideology, incited the people against demonized enemies (with whom it could also associate those seeking to challenge or reform their own system), and provided material benefits to a sizeable portion of the population. There are many who feel that they have improved their situation due to the revolution and therefore are loyal to it. Even if they are a minority they provide a significant base of support.

Finally, as already indicated, they have been--up to now, at least--clever about seeing a certain amount of openness and democratic process as a

valuable safety valve. We should discuss why they have decided to dispense with this approach at present by barring most of the reform-oriented candidates and thus turning the 2004 elections into a typical farcical type.

Incidentally, this experience is very interesting in the context of the whole debate over democracy in the Middle East because for the Iranian regime greater democratization actually enhanced the regime's survival. Of course, there were limits. For example, newspapers were allowed to publish whatever they wanted. They might be shut down and the editors thrown into jail for a while but then they were allowed to reopen.

But the point is that this system did not jeopardize the regime's survival. They held elections which they lost by huge margins. Yet Khatami and the reform-dominated parliament was unable to make a single significant change in the country. But the regime was able to allow this, you had the safety valve, people's lives were freer and they felt better off. So even though they were criticizing the regime, their motivation for trying to overthrow it was reduced. This was a remarkably clever and well-developed tactic. I am not sure how consciously it was developed, how consistently. It is now the tactic that they abandoned.

In recent years, the message the regime sent to the population of Iran is this, "We know that you don't like us and you would like a change. We are not going to allow a change unless you defeat us in a civil war in which there will be hundreds of thousands of casualties. The country will be in ruins. Are you really willing and ready to take up this challenge, particularly since you have the alternative of a tolerable existence?" The reform movement understandably said, "No, we are not willing to take up this challenge." So the regime remains very deeply entrenched in power, despite all

the shortcomings that could be mentioned.

So, this is a fascinating story and situation. As a social revolution to create an ideal society and a radical transformation of people's lives, the revolution has failed. As a political movement to gain and hold power in the name of a specific set of ideas and for particular individuals, it has succeeded brilliantly.

When I wrote my book, Paved with Good Intentions in 1979, I concluded by saying that I thought the revolution would last at least thirty-three years. We still have eight years to go on that but I wonder if it will take even longer.

Dr. Suzanne Maloney: I would question the idea that the safety valve of semi-democratic elections in fact helps ensure regime survival because clearly four years ago at the time of the parliamentary elections the questions about the government that were coming particularly from figures like Hashem Rafsanjani and the allegations that were being made about it led to a palpable tension on the streets. I was in Tehran shortly before those elections and clearly there was a sense that anything could happen and anything could change.

To my mind that would be one of the reasons why the conservatives took the fairly drastic steps that they took this time around to ensure that there would be no more of that kind of confrontation within the parliament itself.

Dr. Soli Shahvar: I think we must distinguish between the revolution itself and the ideas that came out of the revolution. To my mind the revolution was not an Islamic one but rather an anti-monarchical revolution and in that it succeeded. Its victory came because it was joined by a wide array of forces in Iranian society.

After a short while, the revolution moved to an Islamic rule over Iran and at

that point we can talk about whether or not it was a success. I would say it was both. In terms of revolutionary ideas we can sum up by saying that the regime wanting to establish a society basically modeled on one of 1,400 years ago in the modern 20th century failed. In terms of the system having a jurisprudent as the head of state and Islamic laws implemented in Iran, all these failed. The legitimacy that the Islamic regime enjoyed at its beginning had been lost through the twenty-five years until now.

In certain aspects, though, it proved to be a success. Consider for example the issue of literacy rates. At the end of the Shah's regime there were about 37 million Iranians with a literacy rate of about 50 percent. Today Iran has almost 70 million people with a literacy rate of more than 80 percent.

Even on the cultural front, while stressing the Islamist point of view, Iran has a successful film industry and publishes many books of literature and in other areas. Certainly, too, the regime has made great achievements in the armament industry.

As a result of the Iraq war, Iran stepped up its nuclear effort which has a delivery system through missile technology and is now on the verge of having nuclear weapons themselves. It is already working on the fourth and fifth generation of the Shihab missile. In terms of conventional armament, it has had great achievements and became largely self-sufficient in some systems.

Dr. Daniel Tsadik: The use of terms like failure and success, as far as I am concerned, don't really provide a better understanding of the situation in Iran. I totally agreed with Dr. Fairbanks in this regard. People in Iran can now talk and say what they think. This is linked to the fact that this revolution came not from the rulers--or, as in Egypt, Syria or Iraq from military officers--but from the people. It was a revolution from below

and this makes it a unique phenomenon in the region.

Today, there are fights and tensions, attempts by the conservatives to stop dissent and so on. But the mere fact that there is a struggle and debate--the attempts of many to promote civil society--is an important issue.

Dr. Abbas William (Bill) Samii: I want to address Professor Rubin's point about the revolution's survivability and building on his discussion of institutionalization. I think that was one of the key things the revolutionaries did back in the 1979-1981 period. They realized that merely relying on ideology or even coercion is inadequate. They built a lot of things into the constitution. Even though you have all the trappings of a democracy, elections, president and so on, you will always have institutions and individuals who can counteract these sort of popularly elected institutions like the parliament.

I think the Council of Guardians is a good example of that, not just in the way it can reverse legislation but in the ways it supervises elections. When someone asked the Council of Guardian's secretary, "What would you do if you made a mistake?" He said, "First of all, we don't make mistakes. Secondly we are only answerable to the people who appointed us." But they are appointed by one person who is also appointed. When you have that kind of setup the regime is bound to survive in whatever way these individuals want it to. You can have elections every day but that is pretty much irrelevant.

This translates into the inability of President Muhammad Khatami and the parliament to deliver on the promises they made. People voted for them because they wanted a change. They were dissatisfied with the status quo. Maybe Khatami wasn't the ideal candidate or president but it was at least a change from the hardline conservatives.

But Khatami could not bring change because institutions like the Guardian's council counteracted all kinds of legislation.

In the case of the 2004 parliamentary election this went even further, disallowing massive numbers of candidates and even stopping some who had not even declared their candidacy yet from doing so. This whole system is set up so that whatever the people want is always going to be secondary to what the ruling elite wants. That is why the system can survive in its current form.

Menashe Amir: When I am asked to give a definition of the nature of the Iranian regime I used to say, "This is the most democratic dictatorship and the most dictatorial democracy." Elections in Iran have been a democratic process, but it was a dictatorial one also because of the control over who could run and what they could do afterward. In assessing the twenty-five years of the Iranian regime, I think that they have failed in their three main goals: helping the common people to improve their life; export their revolution; and attract massive popular support within the country. In fact, as Iran failed to export its revolution to Lebanon, Iraq, or Afghanistan, it was in fact the United States which has been more successful at this effort, changing the regime in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In strategic terms, the Iranians are regressing all the time because they have failed to attract the people of other countries and to bring them to support the Iranian revolution. They have also failed to attract Iranian support and today most Iranians want a change of their regime and to overthrow this government. In some cases, they are ready to accept U.S. help in doing so.

Prof. Barry Rubin: At this point, the interesting question becomes: Why in 2004 did the regime decide to change the system and so undermine the election that

the reformist opposition boycotted it. Was it that they thought the ability of reformists to win elections without bringing change was damaging the regime's stability? Or was it that they expected things were going to worsen in the future?

Tom King: To respond briefly, my sense is that the regime took a hard look at the fruits of the reform movement over the previous four years since the 6th Majles was elected and the kinds of manipulations they had to go through to neutralize constantly the reformists' efforts. In particular, I think they saw the statements coming from some of the more radical reformists about changing the nature of the government. They saw that as having some reverberation, particularly that the United States might think that there was in fact a viable opposition and an alternative that could be encouraged from the outside.

In addition, given the U.S. response to the September 11 attacks and the presence of American forces on both Iran's western and eastern borders, in Iraq and Afghanistan, the regime felt pressure closing in. I think they felt that Iran was pretty high on the list that Washington would likely be turning toward as soon as it finished up its business with Baghdad.

There was a combination of two pressures--the internal pressure of the reform movement and the external pressure of regime-change rhetoric coming from Washington and actions that seemed to be backing up that rhetoric. I believe that the regime decided that it could not withstand another four years of troublemaking from the legislative branch and that they would risk whatever public reaction might occur in order to avoid that. They were prepared to put down any kind of street reaction that may have occurred and they also moved to preempt that ahead of time anyway and did it rather effectively actually. Such strong action, I think, was directed from the top

and the intent was very clearly to retake control of parliament and reduce these two sources of pressure.

Dr. Suzanne Maloney: Let me add that the conservatives risked relatively little by taking the aggressive moves that they did. The population had been so effectively de-politicized over the past four years, particularly since April 2000, and in fact, there were many questions about whether had the conservatives not taken the aggressive approach that they did, would they have done better in the elections than in the past. Given the results of the city council elections last year in which identifiably reformist candidates did not in fact do very well both because of public disengagement--meaning a refusal to vote--or frustration with the reformists in general.

That is why I get back to this whole idea of freedom being the most important essential good for the revolution to provide. I think clearly the sense you get from talking to average Iranians is that the most important thing they are looking for in their government is in fact economic progress. While one could question the credibility of this image, the conservatives have at least this image of focusing more intently on the economy. Thus, they were both confident and able to act while, at the same time, were concerned that they could not withstand another four years of reform within the process.

Dr. Soli Shahvar: I think the regime knew that it had lost the legitimacy it had in 1979 by the end of the Iran/Iraq war in 1988. That is why it tried to change its image into one of pragmatism and allow the limited liberalism of Khatami. But they found that this policy created too many problems for them, like the 1999 and 2003 student revolts and demonstrations. Once they did better in the local elections, this encouraged them to ensure they retook control of the

parliament and eventually of the presidency as well.

As for the opposition, it seems that the six years of Khatami and reformism proved to the people that actually there is no hope and no future from the reformist side of the regime, therefore they have given up. In this respect, once the reformist themselves understood the situation, they realized that their only alternative was to boycott the election, a tactic discussed for some time in Iranian opposition circles both inside and outside the country. That was, I would say, one of the only cards open to them and they had to take it. But their deeper problem is what to do now. While reformism is not dead in Iran, the public no longer believes in the promises of the movement so many of them supported over the last six years.

Dr. Bill Samii: I agree that the reform movement is not dead. Even before the election, several leading figures in the reformist movement seemed to realize they were going down and what they said is, "This is an opportunity for us when we are out of power to regroup, evaluate where we made mistakes, look forward, and think about how we can serve the people in the future."

I think they genuinely do have to reconsider why the Iranian people have become frankly very cynical about the political process and see a lot of statements about people saying that, "it is a club in which these elites argue back and forth but don't really get much done." As Dr. Maloney said, when you don't think involvement of politics is going to help you in any way, then economic well-being becomes primary. If you have a family, you have got to support them. If you have got to try to find a job, things like that certainly become really important.

Another reformist member of parliament said basically the same thing. "We have to get back in contact with the

people, find out why they are dissatisfied with the reformist movement and then we can advance from there."

Dr. Stephen Fairbanks: Reformist politicians are out of power but that doesn't mean that reformism itself has come to an end. Also, many of the politicians labeled as conservative have adopted a lot of the reformist rhetoric as far as also advocating increased democracy. Whether that is really going to happen or not, I am not going to predict. But the conservatives themselves are tremendously divided between the very hardline ones that we think of most often and quite a number of others more technocratic who want to bring about economic reforms in a way that the reformist politicians were never able to do and who also talk about much more democratic reform, including establishing stronger political parties which appeal more to the people.

I would also point out as far as whether the revolution has been a failure or not, the situation of the provinces to which this regime over the years has devoted much more attention than I think the monarchy ever did. In terms of economic development of the rural areas, it brought water and electrification and inroads and other improvements to their lives. I think we see that reflected in the rural areas' voting statistics which have in recent years given stronger support for the regime in the rural areas because of the economic benefits that they have been getting.

Dr. Bill Samii: One movement that probably is on its last legs is the Islamic Participation Front, basically created for Khatami. It was created in late 1998 or early 1999 and since that time has basically become more and more radicalized. In contrast, the Mujahadin of the Islamic Revolution Organization--not the group based in Iraq but the reformist movement within Iran--seems to have

more staying power, with some serious political activists involved.

Menashe Amir: I think the next four years will be a very difficult period for the reformist movement in Iran for several reasons. First, the movement is made up of a number of groups, divided among themselves, and they are not well-organized as parties. The second issue is that they have failed mainly because they didn't have the power in Iran. They had aims and programs but authority was in the hands of the hardliners. Now that they are out of parliament, they have much less power and much less support from the citizens in Iran.

The third difficulty is that they will not have financial support for fulfilling their activity and it will be much harder for them after the elections than it was before. They have been considered as a part of the regime and now they are out of the power. They will still not have the popular support. I think that during the next four years they will not be effective in Iranian internal politics.

Dr. Daniel Tsadik: Even if indeed reformist movements were weakened, and this is probably the case, there is still a need for reforms, including such economic problems as unemployment, etc., etc. I will raise a question: "Do you think the regime itself will pursue these reforms, give them some kind of Islamic garb and some Islamic symbols, thus actually pursuing some of the reformist agenda, which previously was led by the reformist movements?"

Dr. Soli Shahvar: The hardliners claim that the reformists have failed and that they will improve the Iranian economy, to succeed where the reformists have failed in solving Iran's problems.

Dr. Suzanne Maloney: I think what was just referred to is the idea of a "China model" that would let the conservatives

push for economic reforms while maintaining some degree of political orthodoxy and probably a certain amount of cultural liberalization or at least social tolerance of greater freedom on the streets in order to preserve their own basis of credibility and legitimacy. I think that this government--and frankly any Iranian regime--is going to have a very difficult time in actually implementing those reforms.

First of all, the track record of former President Rafsanjani in the immediate postwar period and those associated with him, many of whom are coming back into the center of political power with these new parliamentary elections, it is a poor record. Iran benefited from a brief "peace dividend" at the end of the war with Iraq and the reconstruction boom that followed. But in fact most of the reconstruction era during Rafsanjani's time as president was not particularly productive in addressing the real structural flaws in the economy.

I think that any government in Iran at this point, given how serious those structural flaws are--the extent of the subsidies, the issues of unemployment and lack of development of the non-oil sector--is going to have a great deal of difficulty in addressing those successfully. You simply can't restructure twenty billion dollars worth of subsidies in a very easy way unless you have no fear of popular reaction. I think even a conservative government is going to be very reticent to raise the price of gasoline or raise the price of bread to do what is necessary to address the structural reforms.

I would say this is, in fact, one area on which the Khatami administration and the Reformist Parliament did make very modest improvements. One can point to changes in the climate in general and the popular involvement with the concept of political change and credit that to the reform movement. But in fact, the only legislative changes and administrative

changes that have any value I think from this period are these very modest economic reforms: the attempt to unify the exchange rate and some of the other very basic steps taken to open up to private banking and modify the foreign investment. They are admittedly not nearly enough to address Iran's economic issues, but at least began to look at some of the underlying issues that create the very negative economic conditions that you have in Iran, despite for better or for worse, a positive rate of growth due to the high price of oil at the moment.

I would probably be the one person here to actually declare the Reform Movement to some extent dead and that is not so much the movement but the paradigm of reform from within, change of the institutions that Dr. Rubin and Dr. Samii described so effectively. The idea that these institutions can be changed by the institutions of the government themselves I think is no longer valid in the current power structure of Iran. The reformist parliament made great efforts to take on the Council of Guardians by attempting to address its spiraling budget and trying to create trouble for some of the now hardline nominations back in 2001 and take some of these other steps along with the twin bills which would have addressed the Council of Guardian's power to actually vet candidates.

Clearly, they failed in all of those regards and now they are out of power. I think to some extent the whole idea that the government could change itself from within was a hopeful one and might have worked had the reformists addressed their task in a slightly more aggressive way and used their popular mandate. That clearly now is no longer valid. I guess for me the question is really, "Will the reformists be able to successfully push for change from outside the system itself?" To me that really comes down to, "Will they be able to--or will they be willing to--push for the idea of

referendum," which I think has a certain degree of popularity on the Iranian street.

Dr. Bill Samii: When Mr. Hashemi Rafsanjani was throwing his little ballot in the box on February 20 he said, "The next parliament is going to be moderate without paying any attention to right wing or left wing slogans." In a way he is right, that it is going to be moderate, because I suspect the next parliament is not going to have any trouble with the Guardian Council and once President Khatami is out of office in 2005 they are not going to have any trouble from the administration either. So it is going to seem very moderate and you are going to have that sort of political calm that the conservatives were saying is necessary because the reformists were always playing politics rather than with dealing with the public's needs.

Now, as I see it, this will have an impact on developments in Iran's foreign relations and domestic relations. In terms of international relations, I think we are going to see greater public hostility to the United States and to Israel. Just to give you an example. On February 21, Supreme Leader Khamene'i gave one of his usual firebreathing speeches and then he said that the winner of this election is the nation and "those who lost the elections were America, Zionism and the enemies of the Iranian nation." You usually expect something like this from him so maybe it is not that unusual, but I think he is sort of setting the standard for how they will be dealing with issues like relations with the United States.

So we are not going to be seeing any more of these meetings between Kharrazi and the speaker of parliament with members of Congress when Kharrazi happens to be in the United States. There may be more of these meetings that take place in places like Geneva that people don't know about for many months, because I think that is the style of business of the conservatives in the

Iranian government. They are quite happy to do business with whoever they have to do business with, but they want to be able to continue to decry their enemies and use it as a sort of whipping boy, so to speak.

In terms of the nuclear issue, I think that is another matter that was somewhat politicized in Iran in the last year with one member of parliament giving a speech in November in which he decried the Iranian nuclear program. He, of course, was denounced for this. But I don't think you are going to see members of Parliament, the Seventh parliament, talking negatively about the Iranian nuclear program anymore.

One of the other issues is the Majlis refused to approve some conservative Guardian's Council candidates in November 2003. The Council will just wait until a new Majlis is sworn in and these hardline figures will get approved as members of the Guardian's Council.

Then, I think things like a press crackdown is a distinct possibility because without members of parliament to speak out in defense of these publications, they can be closed quietly and they will just disappear. In the past, the parliament worked on oversight of the foundations and the State Broadcasting Organization. The current Parliament has pressed hard to find out how money is being spent by the State Broadcasting Organization and by these foundations. I don't think that is going to be a real problem for them anymore.

Prof. Barry Rubin: Clearly, I think that Suzanne Maloney was correct in saying that even without this election crisis the reform movement as it has been constituted was nearing its end. Is an opposition going to try extra-parliamentary means to bring down the government, like massive demonstrations, in the next three or four years?

A second question is, what effect would this have on Iran's foreign policy if hardliners feel less subject to challenge at home. Are they going to be bolder and more adventurous at supporting terrorism, trying to destabilize the situation in Iraq, and developing nuclear weapons? Finally, might there be more of a role for the armed forces in the future given the relative absence of the reform movement?

Dr. Bill Samii: Back in October 2003, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was accused of being prepared to play a role in the parliamentary election, including running candidates. But by law nobody in the armed forces can stand for elected office unless he resigns two months in advance. There have been press reports that a number of commanders were actually elected to parliament. Also the Interior Ministry reported that on the night of February 17 at the IRGC base on Azadi Avenue, there was a meeting of officers who were given a list of candidates and told to support that list from a conservative group. The IRGC denies these stories.

Dr. Soli Shahvar: Providing leadership for the opposition will be a problem because the regime always makes sure that if somebody raises his head a little bit to play that role they are thrown in jail or harassed. As for the Iranian opposition groups outside the country, there is no unity. In this context, many Iranians are looking at what the United States will do towards Iran. If it will be a kind of policy that President Bush has pursued until now, viewing Iran as part of the axis of evil, distinguishing between the Iranian people and regime, and calling for support to the latter, this might have an encouraging effect for the opposition within the country.

At the same time, as the ruling faction consolidates control it can claim strong legitimacy, insisting that other countries

must talk to it and cannot look for any alternative force in the country to back. Note that Senator John Kerry, who is a presidential candidate, has already said that if he would be elected he will try a different policy toward Iran. I don't know whether he will stick to that or change it, but assuming that he implements such a policy the Iranian regime might hope for more recognition from its biggest external enemy. Such a step would make them feel secure from both internal riots and external intervention.

Within the military, there was strong support for Khatami in the lower ranks and backing for the regime by the commanders. I don't see much hope for change coming from the armed forces. In my mind, the battle for more freedom and basic human rights will continue to inspire opposition activity.

Dr. Stephen Fairbanks: Regarding the effects on foreign policy from the lack of so much factional conflict within the regime itself, conventional wisdom among Iranian analysts for years now has been that if there were not this huge divide between reformists and conservatives, it would make it much more possible to enter into relations with the United States. That, I think, may happen. We will wait and see.

But I have been impressed after the elections by statements from a number of conservatives--including Rafsanjani--and some editorials calling for thinking about holding talks with the United States. Certainly they have an incentive to do so.

PARTICIPANTS

Mr. Menashe Amir is Director of the Voice of Israel Persian language radio program. He is an adviser and political analyst on Iran.

Dr. Stephen Fairbanks was the Iran political analyst for the Department of

State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research from 1986 to 1998. From 1998 until its close in 2002, Dr. Fairbanks headed the U.S. broadcast service to Iran, known as Radio Free Iran, a part of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which was based in Prague, the Czech Republic. He now works for a Washington-based consulting company.

Mr. Tom King has been the Iran political analyst for the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) for the past six years. His prior service has included INR Afghanistan analyst, staff aide, intelligence watch officer, and various other positions since joining the Foreign Service in 1987.

Dr. Suzanne Maloney is currently directing an independent Task Force for the Council on Foreign Relations on U.S. Policy toward Iran, and serves as a Middle East advisor for a major international company in Washington, D.C. Dr. Maloney previously worked at the Brookings Institution and is the author of Ayatollah Gorbachev: The Politics of Change in Khatami's Iran (forthcoming), and several articles and book chapters on Iran and the Gulf region.

Prof. Barry Rubin is director of the GLORIA Center at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, and editor of the Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA) Journal. He is the author of numerous books on the region, including Paved with Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran and recently co-authored Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography.

Dr. Abbas William Samii is the senior regional analyst for Southwest Asia at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, where he prepares the weekly "Iran Report." Dr. Samii's articles in have appeared in Middle East Journal, Middle East Policy,

The Weekly Standard, International Herald Tribune, Los Angeles Times, and Wall Street Journal. His articles in the Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA) Journal include "Iran's 2000 Elections"

<<http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2000/issue1/jv4n1a1.html>> and "Sisyphus' Newsstand: The Iranian Press Under Khatami"

<<http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2001/issue3/jv5n3a1.html>>.

Dr. Soli Shahvar is a lecturer in the Department of Middle Eastern History at Haifa University. He focuses on modern history of Iran, the foreign policy making in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Baha'i community in Iran.

Dr. Daniel Tsadik is a lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and focuses on Iran, Shi'a Islam, and Jews in Iran. He has recently written on "The Legal Status of Religious Minorities" in the Journal of Islamic Law and Society.