Karim Sadjadpour

How Relevant Is the Iranian Street?

Gauging popular sentiment in Iran is notoriously difficult. Domestically conducted independent opinion polls are rarely allowed, and the results of government-sponsored polls are often, though not always, predictably skewed. In 2003, former revolutionary hostage-taker turned prominent reformist Abbas Abdi conducted an independent poll and found that three-quarters of Iranians favored having relations with the United States.[1] He was summarily imprisoned for publishing the results, charged with "collaborat[ing] with U.S. elements and British intelligence" and conducting "psychological warfare" aimed at overthrowing the government. Not guaranteed the "freedom after speech" of open societies, Iranians, although more publicly outspoken than most peoples in the Middle East, are inherently suspicious of formal questioning, making telephone polls conducted from abroad highly unreliable. Moreover, a socially diverse population of nearly 70 million people does not lend itself easily to sweeping generalizations about "what Iranians want."

In the absence of reliable public opinion measurements, alternative means of discerning the hopes, demands, and concerns of the Iranian street include campaign platforms, voter turnout, and election results. To be sure, elections in Iran are not open. Candidates are vigorously prescreened and vetted by the unelected Islamic Guardian Council. Of the council's 12 members, six are appointed directly by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; the other six are appointed by the head of the judiciary, who is also selected by the supreme leader. Those deemed insufficiently sympathetic to the country's theocratic system of governance are weeded out. Candidates espousing a secular platform are barred from entering all elections, and women are barred

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from running in presidential elections. Once the filtering occurs, however, genuine competition and debate does take place among those permitted to run. Further, ever since the unanticipated landslide election of reform-minded president Muhammad Khatami in 1997, whose platform of democracy and social liberalization unexpectedly electrified the country's younger generation and women, successful Iranian politicians have learned to employ language that will appeal to voters.

During Iran's June 2005 presidential elections, seven candidates marketed themselves to the masses. Former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, considered the man to beat, acknowledged the country's many shortcomings—economic malaise, social restrictions, international isolation—and vowed to deliver change. Former Revolutionary Guards commander Muhammad Bagher Ghalibaf promised law and order. Moderate cleric Hojatoleslam Mehdi Karroubi claimed that he would somehow dole out 50,000 toman (about $60) per month to every Iranian. Mostafa Moin, the hope of the reform movement, ran on a platform of democracy and human rights. Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then considered a dark horse, vowed to fight corruption and put oil profits on Iranians' dinner tables.

Iran's foreign policy has in no way reflected demands of Iran's young population.

If there was a common theme among all of the candidates, it was change. Nearly every one acknowledged the country's decrepit economy, corruption, and despair of the youth. Several, including Rafsanjani, claimed they would "fix" relations with the United States. Even hard-line Ahmadinejad vowed he was not interested in pushing a religiously austere, socially conservative agenda. As one blue-collar worker in Tehran wryly commented days before the election, "Everybody is running on a platform of reform now. Does that mean they're admitting what they've been doing for the past 26 years had been wrong?"[2]

The issues not raised in campaigns were equally telling. Despite the Iranian government's fixation with Israel, no candidate vowed to champion the Palestinian cause or to pursue a hard-line policy against Israel. Indeed, Israel, or "the Zionist entity," was hardly even mentioned. Despite widespread reports both in the state-monitored Iranian media and Western media that all Iranians feel very strongly about the nuclear project, no candidate vowed to deliver Iran nuclear energy or to pursue an uncompromising nuclear posture. On the contrary, Rafsanjani's top aide, Muhammad Atrianfar, claimed that Rafsanjani would suspend uranium enrichment if elected president.[3]

Yet, despite the fact that Iran's young population likely aspires for international integration more than uranium enrichment and for conciliation with

the United States rather than confrontation with Israel, Iran's foreign policy posture has in no way reflected these demands, especially under Ahmadinejad. This is due in part to the fact that the constitutional authority of elected institutions in Iran, particularly the presidency and parliament, are dwarfed by those of unelected institutions, such as the supreme leader and Guardian Council. Although it is widely believed that Khamenei makes decisions by consensus rather than decree, Iranian public opinion has never appeared to figure prominently in Khamenei's consensus-building process. This begs the question: How, if at all, do the demands of the people factor into Tehran's foreign policy? Do the Iranian people care about their government's foreign policy? If so, and their opinions continue to be ignored, will people start agitating?

Palestine: A Regional, Not Domestic, Recruiting Tool

On the surface, Iran's belligerence toward Israel is puzzling. At a time when most Arab governments, including mainstream Palestinian leaders, have come to terms with Israel's existence, non-Arab Iran continues to call for eradication of the Jewish state.[4] Ahmadinejad has attacked Israel as a "tumor" that should be "wiped off the map" or relocated, and dismissed the Holocaust as a "myth." In the face of widespread international criticism, the Iranian president has been essentially unrepentant, saying, "Western reactions are invalid.… [M]y words are the Iranian nation's words."[5]

Ahmadinejad's confidence that the Iranian public shares his intense hostility toward Israel is misplaced. Throughout nearly three decades of calls for the liberation of Jerusalem, Iran's revolutionary regime has never come to terms with essential realities. There exists no inherent reason why the Israeli-Palestinian struggle should be an issue of overriding concern to the average Iranian. Iran has no territorial disputes with Israel, no Palestinian refugee problem, a long history of contentious relations with the Arab world, and an even longer history of tolerance vis-à-vis the Jewish people. To this day, the Jewish community in Iran, numbering around 25,000, is the largest in the Middle East outside of Israel. Although the regime in Tehran continues to demonize Israel and lionize Palestine in the media, popular Iranian sentiment toward the Arab-Israeli dispute has gradually grown numb. It is a distant conflict that has insufficient tangible impact on their daily lives to cause a significant portion of the population to agitate either for or against it.

Ironically, anti-Israel sentiment among Iranians was much greater prior to the 1979 revolution, during the reign of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. The shah's cozy relationship with Tel Aviv was widely unpopular, not least because Israeli Mossad agents were rumored to have trained the shah's seemingly ubiquitous and oppressive secret police force, SAVAK. When Iran's monarchy was overthrown, the keys to the de facto Israeli embassy in Tehran

were handed over to Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization, and the ascendant Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared that Iran's Islamic Revolution would march onward until the "liberation of Jerusalem." Exaltation of the Palestinian cause and excoriation of "the Zionist entity" quickly became one of the hallmarks of the foreign and domestic policies of the newly inaugurated Islamic Republic of Iran.

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Three decades later, however, few among Iran's restive young population have much interest in marching onward to Jerusalem. Beset by double-digit inflation and unemployment, Iran's postrevolutionary generation is well aware that the ideological hubris of their parents' generation, a hodgepodge of Islamism, anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, and Marxism, has bore the country little fruit apart from a soiled international reputation, political isolation, and economic hardship. During student protests in the summer of 2003, amidst calls for greater democracy and freedom, one popular slogan, delivered in rhythmic Persian, was "forget about Palestine, think about us!"[6]

Much of Iran's political elite, despite remaining sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, has also come to terms with the fact that the government's rhetoric toward Israel is self-defeating. Widely echoed in Tehran are the words of Ali Reza Alavi-Tabar, a strident revolutionary cum reformist who has said, "We need to reinvent ourselves. We shouldn't be chanting 'death to Israel'; we should be saying 'long live Palestine.' We needn't be more Palestinian than the Palestinians themselves." [7] The popular reformist party, the Islamic Participation Front, criticized Ahmadinejad's comments on Israel, saying, "When the country is facing an international crisis, such expressions impose a heavy burden on the country's political, security, and economic interests." Even conservative lawmaker Heshmatollah Falahatzadeh similarly claimed, "Our officials should realize that there are many facts in the world that we should not pass judgment on in a way that the world finds fault with."[8]

Iran's continued support for Hizballah and Hamas is another elite-driven policy on which the domestic public has had little or no impact. Aid workers in Iran log complaints from resentful Iranian earthquake victims who claim their government would be quicker in sending support if the earthquake had been in Gaza or southern Lebanon.[9] In the aftermath of Israeli bombings in July 2006, Iran's offer to help finance and rebuild southern Lebanon spurred resentment at home. As one Tehran resident said, "We Iranians have a saying, 'We should save our own house first and then save the mosque.' A lot of people think this way. The government should help its people first, and then help the people in Lebanon."[10]

Ahmadinejad's diatribes against Israel make more strategic sense in the regional context. Iran sees itself engaged in a battle with the United States for regional power, influence, and Arab and Muslim hearts and minds. In taking on the United States, Iran has also targeted U.S. regional allies Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. From Tehran's perspective, these "scandalous" governments may be aligned with Washington, but their populations are ripe for recruitment. In this context, Ahmadinejad's denunciations of Israel read as calculated attempts to shame U.S.-loyal Arab leaders and score political points on the Arab and Muslim street, rather than the random musings of a deranged fundamentalist. Although such language alienates the West and falls largely on deaf ears among Iran's slogan-fatigued population, it makes Ahmadinejad's star shine in places such as Cairo, Amman, and Damascus.[11]

Currying favor on the Arab street is integral to Iran's goal of becoming the Middle East's dominant power and a bulwark against perceived U.S. imperialist ambitions in the region. Although Tehran's stock may be soaring at the moment, its ambitions to be the anti-imperialist vanguard of the largely Sunni Arab Middle East will ultimately be undermined by the fact that it is Shi'a and Persian. As 1,400 years of contentious Arab-Iranian relations have shown, Muslim solidarity has never transcended the Arab-Persian divide. Moreover, there is reason to believe the Arab masses admire Iran's Islamic republic much in the same way the Latin American street once romanticized Fidel Castro's Cuba. They praise the defiant political order from afar but do not wish it for themselves. Opinion polls show the Arab nation in which Arabs would most like to live is not religiously austere Saudi Arabia but economically thriving, socially open, and internationally integrated Dubai.

Manufacturing Support for the Nuclear Project

A similar story is told by looking at the nuclear issue. In early 2006, hundreds of Iranian schoolgirls were bused to a government-organized rally in support of the country's nuclear program. The smiling teenage girls shouted slogans and held up hand-written placards in Persian and in English for the benefit of the international media, extolling Iran's nuclear project. The next day, the *Financial Times* ran a front-page photo of a young Iranian girl holding up a sign that was intended to read, "Nuclear energy is our obvious right." The word "nuclear" was misspelled, however, and instead the unwitting girl's sign read, "Unclear energy is our obviouse right."

This incident is in some ways emblematic of the Iranian government's painstaking but often clumsy efforts to project the nuclear project internationally as popularly driven and universally supported. How strongly could a 14-year-old girl feel about indigenous uranium enrichment? As Atrianfar, Rafsanjani's adviser, said, "People have been hearing these things about hav-

ing the right to have or to possess this [nuclear] capability. And, naturally, if you ask an Iranian whether [they] want this right or not, they would say they do want it. But if you ask, though, 'What is nuclear energy?' they might not be able to tell you what it is."[12]

As Tehran has presented it to the Iranian public, the goal of France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States is not to prevent Iran from enriching uranium and weaponizing it but to deny Iran access to nuclear energy in order to keep it backward and dependent on the West. As lead nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani frequently says, "The West wants two classes of nations … [t]hose that have nuclear technology and can be advanced, and nations that must be restricted to production of tomato juice and air conditioners."[13]

Even those sympathetic to Iran's nuclear project and critical of U.S. "double standards" testify to the government's manipulation of "popular opinion." As a respected Iranian intellectual said in 2005, "The regime consistently represses popular will, but when it comes to the nuclear program they conveniently invoke the name of the people."[14] In a strikingly candid op-ed in the *Financial Times* in May 2006, former Iranian deputy foreign minister Abbas Maleki dismissed the notion that the nuclear program is driven by popular demand.

> Reports suggest that Tehran's official joy over the nuclear breakthrough is shared by a large segment of Iranian society. Such reports should not be taken as evidence that the Iranian people share their government's views, and should not be used as a pretext for using force against Iran's population.… The general public does not consider the nuclear issue to be of vital importance. Nuclear technology will do little for the average Iranian; it cannot create more jobs for a country that needs one million jobs annually, it cannot change the chronic low efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness of the economy and management, and it will do nothing to improve Iran's commercial ties with the rest of the world.[15]

Christopher de Bellaigue, an *Economist* correspondent who has spent the last several years living in Tehran, has also voiced skepticism regarding popular Iranian support for the nuclear project.

> Iranians who vocally support their country's nuclear ambitions tend to be strong supporters of the Islamic Republic, and they are a minority. In today's sullenly depoliticized Iran, it is the mundane issues that animate people: the price of staple products, for instance, or changes in the terms of required military service. In the four and a half years that I have lived in Iran … I have never witnessed a spontaneous discussion of the nuclear program among average Iranians.

> True, the few opinion polls that have been commissioned, mostly by organs close to Iran's conservative establishment, found strong public support for the country's declared goal of becoming a nuclear fuel producer. But there is good reason to be skeptical about their findings. It would be quite remarkable if a populace increasingly disengaged from politics were suddenly energized by something as arcane as nuclear fuel and its byproducts.[16]

Adding to the uncertainty, Tehran closely controls debate and research on this topic in the domestic Iranian media. The Iranian government has successfully presented the nuclear program as one supported by all Iranian patriots and as an issue of deep national pride. Visiting Western reporters have largely followed suit, with numerous headlines declaring that all Iranians, regardless of their political creed, are united behind the country's nuclear program.[17] In the absence of solid empirical evidence, analysts and journalists cite government-sponsored surveys that indicate that nearly 85 percent of the Iranian public supports the country's nuclear program.[18] Aside from the obvious bias of government-sponsored polls, such surveys are inherently flawed because their questions imply that the nuclear program is a risk-free enterprise and offer those surveyed no alternative.[19]

Ascertaining what the public really thinks about nuclearization is difficult.

Popular opinion is more nuanced than what the Iranian government would like the world to believe. To be sure, Iranians are a ferociously nationalistic people; and many, even those unsympathetic to the regime, are vocally supportive of their government's nuclear ambitions for a variety of reasons: Iran needs to prepare for life after oil resources run out; Western double standards permit India, Pakistan, and Israel to have nuclear programs; Iran lives in a dangerous neighborhood and thus need not only a nuclear energy program but also a nuclear weapon.

Yet, many Iranians also express uncertainty about the nuclear project, concerned about the direction in which the country is headed.[20] The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) was one of the bloodiest wars of the second half of the twentieth century, leaving about 500,000 Iranians killed or wounded. The country is still emerging from this postwar depression, both emotionally and economically, and few Iranians romanticize the prospect of conflict or militarization.

Given the tremendous effort the government has made to invoke Iranians' keen sense of nationalism, pointing out Western double standards, extolling the virtues of nuclear energy, and praising the country's scientists, the government clearly perceives public opinion as a powerful bargaining tool. Yet,

ascertaining what the public really thinks about nuclearization is difficult. Few Iranians spend much time debating the merits of uranium enrichment, but any popular opposition to the government's nuclear posture has so far been negligible, given that Iran has paid few tangible costs for its intransigence. Objectively speaking, Iran has thus far seemingly outwitted Western interlocutors consumed with bloodletting in Iraq and soaring oil prices. Whereas the "dialogue of civilizations" of the Khatami era landed Iran in the "axis of evil," Ahmadinejad's uncompromising and sometimes belligerent posture has netted Iran economic and nuclear incentives from the European Union and a conditional offer of dialogue from the United States that were not offered during Khatami's eight-year tenure.

Popular Upheaval: A Bridge Too Far?

So, if Iranians do not wake up in the morning with enriched uranium or the fate of Palestine on their minds, what are they thinking about, and why are they unhappy? The simple answer is economic dignity or a lack thereof. In real terms, per capita income in today's Iran is roughly one-half what it was shortly before the shah's downfall. As de Bellaigue puts it, "For most Iranians, the price of food and the government's failure to lower it are more important [than the nuclear program]."[21] Among the older generation of Iranians, revolutionary promises of economic deliverance have gone largely unmet.

The regime's fundamental challenge, however, is not middle-aged or geriatric Iranians nostalgic for the economic and social freedoms of their youth. Rather, it is the two-thirds of the population under the age of 32 that did not experience the repression and corruption of the shah's reign and hence have no special loyalty to the 1979 revolution or the Islamic republic. At the onset of the revolution, Khomeini encouraged families to produce many offspring in order to produce a robust Islamic society, an edict that has now come back to burden the regime tremendously. These "children of the revolution" struggle to enter university and find jobs and identify very little with the austerely religious society in which they live. Many have access to satellite television and the Internet and see how their counterparts in the rest of the world, particularly in the West, are living and long for the same freedoms and opportunities.

An inability to influence their government's foreign policy positions may not be high on Iranians' list of grievances given their economic and social woes. Indeed, both anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that popular discontent in Iran is deep seated and widespread and that the majority of Iranians aspire to see sweeping political, economic, and social reform in their country. Yet, when asked how and when this change should occur, they offer few concrete ideas aside from hoping that it occur *bedun-e khoonrizi* (without bloodshed).[22]

After the removal of the Taliban from Afghanistan, some Iranians romanticized about the prospect of a U.S. intervention in Tehran.[23] After more than three years of tumult and insecurity in next-door Iraq, however, talk of regime change is muted and a distant memory. Skepticism has increased about U.S. designs for the region. Although Iran arguably remains the least anti-U.S. population in the entire Muslim Middle East, the United States has lost considerable political capital on the Iranian street in the aftermath of the Iraq war.

Many Iranians have come to see the U.S. project in Iraq as less about democracy and more as a botched attempt to expropriate the country's oil resources. As such, no one looks to Iraq as a paradigm for change. As one middle-aged Tehran resident said, "When we look at the situation in Iraq, it doesn't appear to us a choice between democracy and authoritarianism but rather stability and unrest. Few people are happy in Iran, but nobody wants unrest."[24] Whereas prior to the Iraq war, hope for a swift and painless change of leadership in Tehran may have existed, the abstract optimism of a rapid political upheaval has been eclipsed by the fear of the unknown tumult that would follow. Given the prevailing chaos in the Middle East, millions of Iranians, even those fundamentally opposed to the Islamic republic, prefer the continuation of a flawed system to the potential lawlessness and destruction seen in Iraq and Lebanon. They are increasingly inclined to deal with the devil they know rather than the one they do not.

Little evidence that change is imminent exists despite Iranian popular discontent.

Although to the casual observer the depth of Iranian popular discontent appears unsustainable, facts on the ground give little evidence that change is imminent. For one, nothing close to an organized channel for the political expression of popular discontent exists, namely a credible, united opposition movement with significant support and concrete proposals. Domestically, the country's reform movement is at the moment impotent and indecisive. Its members may be dubious that the system can be reformed from within, but at the same time they are largely unwilling to take the route of reformist cum dissident Akbar Ganji in calling for a referendum on the system.[25] Although unhappiness with the government is broad and deep and there may likely be periodic hiccups of unrest, as of yet there is no easily viable mechanism for this displeasure to find a political outlet or build greater momentum.

As past pro-democracy and student protests have shown, the war- and revolution-weary Iranian populace's aversion to violence and confrontation makes it no match for the regime's intimidating and seemingly unwavering security and intelligence apparatus, namely the easily roused Basij mili-

tia and Revolutionary Guards. Moreover, few Iranians can be compelled to take to the streets given an economic situation that for many teeters between subsistence and poverty, affording people neither the luxury to risk their livelihoods waging political protest nor the "nothing to lose" desperation and rage that can result from penury. Support for the regime also comes from roughly 20 percent of the Iranian population that can be counted on to vote for conservative candidates consistently and a wealthy and powerful coterie of *bazaaris* (businessmen) and *bonyads* (religious "foundations") that are heavily invested in the status quo.

At the moment, foreign policy is not a bread and butter issue in Iran.

It is unclear, therefore, if the fundamental disconnect between Iranian popular sentiment and Iranian foreign policy can be sustainable over the long term. At a time when the majority of Iran's young population wants to be reintegrated in the international community, Ahmadinejad's conduct is leading Iran down a path of further isolation. At the moment, however, foreign policy is not a bread and butter issue in Iran. Although popular grumblings may exist that Iranian money, much needed at home, is being used to support Hizballah and Hamas or being defiantly poured into a nuclear program with uncertain benefits, neither issue in isolation is animus enough for Iranians to agitate.

This will likely remain the case as long as few costs in terms of domestic economic conditions are associated with the government's defiant stance. If and when domestic economic conditions in Iran begin to deteriorate, however, whether as a result of isolation, sanctions, or general economic mismanagement, the regime, in particular Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, may decide to change course. Despite often projecting an uncompromising stance, regime survival, not ideology, is paramount for the country's theocratic elite.

A recently publicized letter written by Khomeini in 1988 shows that, despite his previous avowals to continue the Iran-Iraq War until Saddam Hussein's removal from power, the Iranian public's war fatigue was a primary factor in compelling Khomeini to swallow the "poison chalice" and agree to a cease-fire—after eight years and nearly 500,000 casualties.[26] Today, Iran's leadership, faced with a larger, younger, and revolution-fatigued society, is cognizant of the fact that it cannot ask the nation to make similar sacrifices of blood and treasure in order to maintain a defiant foreign policy. At the moment, however, buoyed by soaring oil prices and U.S. difficulties in Iraq, the regime is banking on the fact that it will not have to.

Notes

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