

VOICES FROM IRAN



ALEX BIGHAM

PREFACE BY STEPHEN TWIGG

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Alex Bigham

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of The Foreign Policy Centre.

Preface

It is surely no understatement to say that Iran holds the key to the long term stability of the Middle East. This summer's tragic events in Lebanon and Israel served to remind the world that Iran has enormous influence beyond its borders. The nuclear question has not been resolved; Iran's support for Hezbollah remains in place and Tehran has the power to make the situation in neighbouring Iraq even more chaotic than it is today.

Earlier this year, the Foreign Policy Centre launched our new Iran programme with an emphasis on the importance of understanding the country and in particular the complexity of its power structures. Since then, two of our research staff have spent time in Iran listening to the perspectives of a diverse group of Iranians. It is these perspectives that are reflected in this pamphlet.

A striking statistic referred to here demonstrates the very real differences and divisions in modern Iran; whilst 36% of Iranians would like their country to be more religious and conservative, 31% would prefer a move in the opposite direction towards a secular and liberal Iran.

President Ahmadinejad represents a significant and powerful current of Iranian public opinion but there is no consensus amongst his people either for his conservative approach domestically or necessarily for his hawkish approach on the world stage. Once again the case is made for serious engagement between the international community and Iran. A case, surely, that has been strengthened by the appalling events in Lebanon and northern Israel over the summer.

Alex Bigham's introduction raises the possibility of direct engagement between the US administration and Tehran. The obstacles to this are well documented. The risks of engagement are real but a good case can be made that the risks of not engaging with Iran are greater - sanctions and isolation have not brought any positive change; vile human rights abuses continue and the reformist forces in Iran are weak. The US hard line provides Iranian hardliners with a perfect alibi for their own failures.

For me, perhaps the most interesting of the Iranian voices in our pamphlet are those most critical of the regime - the human rights activist, the feminist and the reformist. Their message to global progressive opinion is very clear

- they want us to make the case for human rights and democracy in Iran but they want us to do so by engaging with their country not by diplomatic isolation let alone military intervention. These voices are the natural allies of the West - are we listening to what they have to say?

Stephen Twigg

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‘Voices from Iran’

“Never think ill of any word uttered by someone, which could have benefits.”

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

Introduction

The letter that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the neo-conservative President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, sent George W. Bush, the neo-conservative President of the United States of America, a few months ago is an unusual document. It is clearly intended to be his magnum opus, and he doesn't shy away from tackling every global issue that springs to mind – Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Latin America, Africa, the war on terror, 9/11, in what stretches to 18 pages of prose.

“For sometime now I have been thinking, how one can justify the undeniable contradictions that exist in the international arena – which are being constantly debated, especially in political forums and amongst university students. Many questions remain unanswered.¹”

But some points remain unanswered about Iran's nuclear programme. The absence of an offer on that front, led the Bush administration to dismiss the letter as irrelevant. “This letter isn't it,” the Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, said. President Bush told reporters, “It looks like it did not answer the main question that the world is asking, and that is, ‘When will you get rid of your nuclear programme?’” The letter did, however, make some allusion to the thorny issue:

“Aside from the Middle Ages, in what other point in history has scientific and technical progress been a crime? Can the possibility of scientific achievements being utilised for military purposes be reason enough to oppose science and technology altogether?²”

The treatise is full of grand thoughts, but doesn't deal with specifics. It is significant, however, because, as Henry Kissinger, a Republican supporter of engagement with Iran pointed out, it is “the first direct approach by an Iranian leader to a US President in more than twenty-five years”. The letter was eventually answered by the US. In May 2006, there was what

¹ Transcript of President Ahmadinejad's letter to President George W Bush, from Iranian Embassy in Austria, <http://www.iran.embassy.at/Letter.asp>

² Ibid.

appeared to many observers to be a significant breakthrough. Dr Rice announced that the United States would be prepared to join the EU in negotiations with Iran. In other words, the White House was interested in hearing those voices from Iran too.

Ahmadinejad’s writing voice is polite, if extremely critical. He doesn’t call the US the ‘Great Satan’ or directly question the veracity of the Holocaust. He says the September 11th attacks were ‘deplorable’ and ‘horrendous’ but also makes unsubstantiated allegations, that have worrying currency in the region:

“September eleventh was not a simple operation. Could it be planned and executed without co-ordination with intelligence and security services – or their extensive infiltration? Of course this is just an educated guess.³”

One thing seems certain – this is Ahmadinejad’s authentic voice. Although much of the language would have riled the White House, it was an example of what is known as ‘public diplomacy’. It is likely he wrote the letter himself - it doesn’t seem to have been drafted by diplomats or other government figures. The style is formal but has a stream of consciousness feel about it. It is similar to the apocalyptic visions of the speech he made to the UN General Assembly in September 2005:

“O mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten the emergence of your last repository, the Promised One, that perfect and pure human being, the one that will fill this world with justice and peace.⁴”

On returning to Iran from New York, Mr. Ahmadinejad recalled the effect of his peroration:

“One of our group told me that when I started to say, “In the name of God the almighty and merciful”, he saw a light around me, and I was placed inside this aura. I felt it myself. I felt the atmosphere suddenly change, and for those 27 or 28 minutes, the leaders of the world did not blink. ... And they were rapt. It seemed as if a hand was holding

³ Ibid.

⁴ Address by H.E. Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, before

the Sixtieth Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York ,17 September 2005
<http://www.un.org/webcast/ga/60/statements/iran050917eng.pdf>

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them there and had opened their eyes to receive the message from the Islamic republic.⁵”

A new term entered Iran's political lexicon – the *mahdaviat*, derived from the *mahdi* (the 12th imam, or messiah whose return Shi'ites anticipate). According to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the *mahdaviat* is the “the restorer of religion and justice who will rule before the end of the world.⁶” Rumours abound, though officially denied, about Ahmadinejad's preparation of a grand avenue for the return of the *mahdi* when he was Mayor of Tehran. What have been confirmed are the allocation of \$17 million for the Jamkaran mosque, and the possibility of a direct train link to Jamkaran from Tehran. According to legend, Jamkaran was built on the orders of the *mahdi*. Does Ahmadinejad believe he is the *mahdaviat* – the one who will prepare for the return of the mahdi? It is a moot point, but one that needs considering. If he does, he may not be trusted by some clerics, who warn of the possibility of false prophets assuming such a role. The Assembly of Experts elections, due to be held later this year, will be one test of the growing conflict between the war veterans led by Ahmadinejad and the mullahs loyal to Khamenei.

According to Scott Peterson, Ahmadinejad's self-confidence could also make engagement with the West difficult:

“Any possibility of détente with the US may also be in jeopardy, if the US-Iran conflict is cast in Mahdaviat terms. That view holds that the US, - with quasi-religious declarations of transforming the Middle East with democracy and justice, deploying military forces across the region, and developing a new generation of nuclear weapons - is arrogantly trying to assume the role of Mahdi.⁷”

The irony is that, unlike during Khatami's time when there was an offer of a 'dialogue of civilisations', the US is now far more engaged with the issue of Iran – suggesting that perhaps both sets of neo-conservatives can actually work with each other. Reports abound of a secret process of dialogue with the Iranians. The appearance earlier this year of an Iranian government official – Mohammad Nahavandian in Washington with a US green card - provoked a non-committal response from Secretary Rice that merely fuelled speculation.

⁵ CNN Transcript, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0512/07/ywt.01.html>

⁶ Reproduced by Daniel Pipes, <http://www.danielpipes.org/article/3258>

⁷ *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 21, 2005

The final section of Ahmadinejad’s letter is a religious sermon, ending with an appeal to Bush’s faith. President Ahmadinejad’s assertion that “monotheism” is the way to unite the “followers of divine religions” is sincere but flawed. There is a greater need to respect the variety of perspectives of those of different (‘divine’ and ‘non-divine’) religions and those of none at all. In parallel, Iran is not a monolithic society, or even a monolithic political structure, as we showed in our earlier report *Understanding Iran*.

This report, *Voices from Iran*, seeks to flesh out the spectrum of opinion amongst Iranians. In a recent trip to the Islamic Republic, we conducted interviews with people both inside and outside government. We believe, and we felt throughout our trip, that, whatever the style of debate, and however tense the discussions may be, engagement is the only means to avert a military conflict, and an informed dialogue will avoid such a crisis.

The potential crisis that could occur if Iran were attacked has been hideously illustrated by the conflict between Israel and Lebanon. Some have seen a conspiracy in the timing of that crisis. The leaked memo by the Foreign Office’s Political Director John Sawers, argued that there was an opportunity to send a united message to the Iranians at the G8 meeting in St Petersburg.

“...the obvious occasion to do so would be in the margins of the G8 Foreign Ministers’ meeting. The period running up to the G8 Summit will be when our influence on Russia will be at its maximum, and we need to plan accordingly.”⁸

However, the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah, and the subsequent air assault on Lebanon put paid to any kind of substantive discussions on Iran while the G8 leaders thrashed out a muted compromise statement on the Lebanese conflict. Both sides have produced their own theories of the timing behind the attacks. From the Israeli perspective, the Iranians gave the green light to Hezbollah to launch Katusha rockets into Northern Israel, many of which have ‘made in Iran’ stamped on their sides. This was a deliberate attempt to distract the attention of world leaders from Iran’s ongoing nuclear research and development.

⁸ Leaked letter in full: UK diplomat outlines Iran strategy, The Times, 22 March 2006.

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From the Iranian side, Israel's disproportionate retaliation to the kidnappings was part of a two-pronged strategy. The strikes against Hezbollah were not just about erasing a threat to northern Israel, but a preemptive strike against Iranian ‘stooges’ who could form part of Iran's retaliation to any attack against the country. The attempted removal of one of Iran's means of response would swiftly be followed by either Israeli or US air strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities and long range missile sites. US military sources have suggested these could be launched from bases that the two countries share in Turkey, such as Inchirlik.

Iran's support for Hezbollah, along with its main (and possibly only) regional ally Syria, is well documented. Shipments of arms, including small weapons and missiles have been intercepted en route from Iran to Lebanon. Khamenei has echoed Hezbollah rhetoric calling Israel an ‘evil and cancerous being’ while Ahmadinejad said Israel should be ‘wiped off the map’. The extremist Shi'a terrorists have their origins in Iran, and have gained political and ideological backing from the ulama, in addition to financial and military support. However, for Israel to open a new front against Iran and Syria would be impossible unilaterally, and even with the support of the US would be a move that would cost the region dearly. As emasculating as such a strategy may seem, dragging Iran directly into the conflict with Hezbollah wouldn't enable the Lebanese army to reassert control over its own territory or serve the interests of wider peace and stability. The proposed international force in Lebanon, with the teeth to both hold back the Israeli armed forces and disarm the militants is the best hope for the long term.

As this report went to press, there is now a UN resolution and a fragile ceasefire in place between Israel and Hezbollah. For this peace to last, Iran and Syria will need to persuade the terrorist group to stop their attacks on Israel, while Israel holds its nerves and works towards a long term solution of its border with Lebanon and resolving the Palestinian question. Iran can play both a constructive and damaging role in regional conflicts such as this one. However, it is far more likely to respond positively to requests, if the international community engages, rather than isolates.

The UN Security Council has also agreed a resolution on Iran's nuclear programme, which set a deadline of 31 August for Iran to suspend uranium enrichment. The threat, mainly led by the United States is that if Iran does not comply that sanctions would be imposed, possibly in the Autumn. Sanctions against Iran would fail to achieve the aims of the international

community and do more damage than good. Isolating Iran through trade and economic restrictions would boost government coffers as the oil price rises; strengthen the hardliners in the regime and damage the chances of a negotiated solution. Imposing sanctions is like trying to shoot Iran through your own foot. You might cause some damage, but you would hurt yourself more. The effect on countries such as Germany, Japan and China who rely on Iranian oil could be very harmful.

The difficulty with sanctions is twofold. Firstly, they often hurt the people who you want to support – the ordinary citizens who may not support the regime they live under. The second is they take a long time to have any effect. Sanctions against South Africa took years to end apartheid. Iraq lived under sanctions for decades, and they had no effect on Saddam Hussein’s behaviour. There is a finite amount of time before Iran develops a nuclear weapon, if indeed that is the aim of its programme. Estimates vary between 5 and 15 years, but there is a limit. Sanctions would not prevent that happening in time, and would jeopardise the chance of a diplomatic solution.

As we observed in *Understanding Iran*, knowing exactly what is happening in Iran is complicated by the fact that military and political power is divided between the Supreme Leader and the elected president in a way that is not entirely clear. On that occasion, we tried to map the regime and to explain the different roles of the Council of Guardians, the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council. The regime may or may not be popular – Iranians have a deeply divided view of what path their country should take. A recent poll by Zogby International found that nearly 31% of Iranian respondents wanted the country to become more secular and liberal, while 36% wanted it to become more religious and conservative⁹.

In the current situation, talk of a ‘New Middle East’ is on the one hand a great opportunity and on the other a cause for concern to many in the region. In the end, the so-called ‘arc of extremism’ will only be defeated when democracy is embedded. What makes Iran so fascinating is that along with a constitutional separation of powers, it has tantalising

⁹ Would you most like to see Iran’s society become more secular and liberal, more religious and conservative, or just stay as it is? More secular and liberal= 30.7%; More religious and conservative=36.0%; Just stay as it is=15.0%; Not sure=18.3%. Source: Zogby International / Reader’s Digest Methodology: Telephone interviews with 810 Iranian adults, conducted from May 18 to Jun. 1, 2006. Margin of error is 3.5 per cent.

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possibilities. Those possibilities are clearly articulated in the following voices from Iran.

The Foreign Policy Centre conducted interviews in Tehran and Qom between 1st and 14th May 2006, which were supplemented by later telephone interviews in July and August 2006. The chapters that follow – the voices from Iran are an edited summary of those discussions. Any errors are the responsibility of the authors.

‘The reformist journalist’

Aged fifty-three, this journalist and reformist politician is a senior editor of a leading reformist newspaper. He is involved in the ‘Executives of Construction Party’ and a political adviser to Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former President, defeated by Ahmadinejad in last summer’s election.

Before joining the newspaper, this reformist was an elected member of the Tehran City Council, becoming head of the council, though his term in office ended in acrimony and stalemate. As *The Economist* put it, “The air was getting filthier and the traffic more anarchic. The building of roads had been delayed by disputes over the purchase of properties in their path. Infrastructure contracts had been bought, not won, and minor engineering work took ages. The armed forces ignored demands to pay taxes on commercial properties they built.” It was indicative of the huge challenges facing any Iranian leader, national or municipal, who wants to get things back on their feet.

The journalist said that Ahmadinejad would face a tough challenge in the months ahead because he is vulnerable on his domestic agenda.

“From an emotional point of view, the Islamic Revolution answered people’s needs, but from a practical point of view it has not delivered. Of course, you could look at some of the useful things that have been done since the early years of the Revolution. You could say problems with Europe have been reduced. And there is the building of towns. There is also more individual freedom than there was at the beginning of the Revolution – and the economic outlook has improved in the sense that people’s lives have been regenerated, in villages, for example, where there is now water and electricity. These improvements people naturally put down to the Islamic Revolution. In other words, the Revolution is much respected and people feel it was a positive. I think, to some extent, this is a post-Khatami view because Khatami did make a difference (especially if you were a woman!) So it’s wrong to say that Ahmadinejad was elected because of Khatami’s failure. For 16 years, Rafsanjani and Khatami pursued a constructive economic and foreign policy but what you can’t explain to Westerners about the presidential election in 2005 is that it had two very different aspects: a political and a legal aspect.”

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“Ahmadinejad’s position is not essentially legal. He owes his victory to something unexpected in terms of organised support – organised, I mean by the conservatives. It was a mini coup d’etat carried out by the Basijis, who were the backbone of the country during the Iran-Iraq war and still have a lot of power in the country. Over the past 27 years, an enormous amount of money has been spent on the Basij – and I think it would be accurate to say that today the Basij number around eight million people, though perhaps only three million are involved directly. There are 70,000 branch organizations up and down the country. Persia has 65,000 villages – and 40,000 of them have more than 50 families, and in every village there is a Basij office. There are 7,000 mosques in Persia and in each one there is a Basij base. In every government office there is a Basiji. It’s like a cancerous growth that seems to have a hold on everything.”

“Each Basij had a duty to get ten people who would vote in a certain way. They use brainwashing techniques, printing leaflets extolling Ahmadinejad’s characteristics, but to be honest, Ahmadinejad only had about 6 million supporters. The other 11 million was a semi-military activity. The mass of people in the country were in favour of Rafsanjani and Khatami.”

“In the villages, it’s a different way of life. The basiji is the guy with the gun, maybe he’s a hero from the war. People think, ‘Maybe one day I’m going to need this guy,’ and so they respond to his bidding.”

“The whole thing has got out of hand and we need to get back to a view of the Islamic Revolution which says it’s not just about women wearing a scarf, a view of the Basij as a military force to protect our borders, not to agitate politically inside the country. These kinds of improvements are still possible and could be achieved if the West did not constantly look at Iran in the same way that it looks at itself. Iran is a complex country, in which no single politician – be it Rafsanjani or Khatami or Ahmadinejad – can be said to be representative of the people.”

“The people and the regime are separate, and if we are to think of the nuclear crisis as an example, it’s wrong to imagine because the president stands up and says the Iranian people demand nuclear technology that such a thing is true. If it were explained to people properly, the nuclear programme, I mean, with all the potential drawbacks, not just in terms of radioactive hazards but also our overall security in the midst of a regional arms race, then no ordinary Iranian would be in favour of the going nuclear.

But it’s not explained like that. It’s explained in a nationalistic and often emotional way that is not really about uranium enrichment at all. It’s about pride. After all, the average man wouldn’t know the difference between atomic energy and a pizza anyway.”

A poll conducted on behalf of Reader’s Digest¹⁰, said that 41% of Iranians thought that reforming the national economy so it operates more efficiently is more important than a nuclear capability (27%). Despite this, Iranians remain defiant in the face of possible economic consequences such as sanctions. 52% would still wish for Iran to continue with the nuclear programme, even if it meant a worsening of the economy, compared to 37% who would wish for nuclear development to stop. Of course, opinions may change once people are confronted with the actual economic impact of sanctions.

“So maybe it’s nice or reassuring to have a bomb in your hand because it makes you feel strong, but if you thought that bomb was going to blow up while you were still holding it, then you’d probably throw it away. And the same applies at the moment with Iran and the nuclear question. Iranian people are not given any opportunity through the media to see that becoming a nuclear power would pose a threat to our own safety – if it was explained to people the huge detrimental effects – well, I think the President’s rhetoric would have to change. Our newspaper explains this within limits but the limits are imposed by the regime.”

“I don’t like to speak all the time with analogies, but I think the West is approaching Iran in exactly the wrong way. It’s like there is a dangerous element, a radical element in this country and perhaps at the moment it is holding us hostage. Rather like a terrorist who runs down the street with the police chasing after him and then takes refuge in a building. What should the police do? Negotiate with the people in the building until the people deliver the terrorist to them or the terrorist gives himself up; or attack the building, killing the terrorist but also killing lots of other people? If the United States were to attack Iran it would be like storming the building, a tragic mistake, because negotiation can resolve this dispute without anybody

¹⁰ What do you think the most important long-term goal for the Iranian government should be? Reforming economy so it operates more efficiently=41.0%; Developing arsenal of nuclear weapons for defence=27.1%; Expanding the freedoms of Iranian citizens=22.9%; None / Not sure=9.0%. Source: Zogby International / Reader’s Digest. Methodology: Telephone interviews with 810 Iranian adults, conducted from May 18 to Jun. 1, 2006. Margin of error is 3.5 per cent.

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getting killed. But you can't really blame Ahmadinejad. He's not the terrorist, so to speak. He is just a dupe, a vehicle for others. He is like one of these disposable cups you use once and throw away."

‘The insider turned reformist’

This man was a former foreign minister and a senior diplomat in Europe. He was sidelined by the Ahmadinejad government, and went on to set up his own research institute on economic affairs in Tehran. He is urbane and well travelled, and seen by many as a reformist critic of the current administration. He is a well known economist and was previously a senior official in the Iranian Central Bank. A supporter of Khatami, he spoke of the way international relations have worsened since Ahmadinejad took office.

“The gap between the two sides, between the West and Iran is widening. During Khatami’s period the nuclear policy could be characterised as ‘defensive defence’, and the diplomatic strategy reflected that. Ahmadinejad has changed this to become an ‘aggressive defence’ strategy.”

“The Iran-EU3 negotiations are a good thing, and it is a process which could lead to a successful conclusion. They put on the table the clause that the ‘technology must not be diverted into illegal activities’, it must be all peaceful. The framework for technical supervision to implement this is difficult. Nobody questioned the activities, though. Jack Straw recognised Iran’s rights under the NPT. Iran said they wanted him to go further than that – they wanted him to say he recognised the exercise of Iran’s rights under the NPT. He agreed, and he said it. During the last exchange, Iran also recognised any kind of supervision that the IAEA thought necessary.”

“It is the US that has changed this – they have said that Iran must suspend the programme forever and stop it. They are opposing the capability of Iran. Unfortunately, the EU3 has no more relevance anymore.”

“When Ahmadinejad announced the enrichment to 3.6%, this meant that the problem is already solved. We are in a new situation now. You can’t question the capability any more. Thousands of people are working on the programme. It’s not just AQ Khan, it’s a domestic, localised programme. It has been indigenously developed over years, it’s not just been brought in from outside. It’s not been reverse engineered.”

“For the EU3, R&D (research and development) enrichment is not a problem, so there’s a new window of opportunity there. However, the US is saying don’t develop your capacity on an industrial scale. Also, people here think that the nuclear crisis is not the real issue. They are targeting the

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wrong thing. Iranians think the US is not concerned about the nuclear programme, but just wants regime change. This creates a sense of insecurity, if they want to get rid of the regime – this is bad. The reformists are increasingly saying this too, they are opposed to the US, and want the Russians and the Chinese to campaign against it.”

“If I was Ahmadinejad, I would have continued the EU3 process, both sides were better off, it was a great opportunity. The current approach has a lot of potential costs. These could have been avoided, with less tension. I don’t support the current development [the low grade enrichment], but one piece of the problem has already been addressed.”

“The announcement was timed to commemorate the centenary anniversary 1906 constitutional revolution – talk about a celebration!”

“We need to learn from past mistakes. Khatami was an opportunity that was missed. Khatami extended olive branches, but these were not responded to properly, there was potential agreement during this period, which was missed.”

“The best way to deal with Ahmadinejad would be if he were left alone for a couple of years. If he can’t use foreign pressure to repress more, he will face internal challenges. The most dangerous class is the workers – he told them he would raise their salaries. He has given them too much expectation, there’s a possibility they could strike.”

“Engagement with Iran has a much better effect for pushing the reforms, if the world wants to fully change the people, even those considered to be hardliners. Even they could become pro-Western. Why do I think that? Well, there’s a strategic element in foreign relations. The current situation for Iran isn’t good. We are surrounded by a lack of friends. We don’t have many Muslim allies – people are Iranians first, then Muslims. Engagement is the most effective weapon. We can use our capacity in the region to contain terrorism. Isolation just fires back. The ex-officials of US make sense – there need to be more talks.”

“Ahmadinejad’s victory was about the fatigue of one person. People [reformists] who wanted to stay there [in power]. They were entrenched – and that’s why the voters wanted an alternative to Rafsanjani. Iranians voted for Ahmadinejad because they didn’t want an ‘ex-power’ [Rafsanjani, who had previously been President]. But of course there was also the

failure of reformist’s campaign. Rafsanjani is incapable of getting 7 million votes.”

“In terms of opposition to the regime, people attack Ahmadinejad and they are still here. You are free to criticise government policies, but not the system. One conservative MP, Emad Afrough, who is the chair of the cultural committee of the Majlis, said ‘I am striking a warning bell to the government of Ahmadinejad’. The Majlis is setting itself up to expose and tackle incompetence in the government.”

“Something is happening. For the first time in twenty years, many different parties are meeting each other. It’s an indication of a loose unwritten coalition that is not in favour of Ahmadinejad. There’s an axis between the Islamic coalition, the Mujahedin Revolutionaries and the reformists. The fact that they’ve met indicates that something is now boiling, although they’re not making a formal coalition. This is very interesting, because the Islamic Coalition wouldn’t have taken part if they were happy with Ahmadinejad. Their focus is on domestic policy, before foreign policy.”

“People aren’t opposing on foreign policy – they talk tough. Even junior reformists like Ahmadinejad’s approach – they say ‘he rode free of charge on a wave’. However, they want to see investment in economic and social policy. The domestic front is increasingly important for Ahmadinejad and people don’t think he will be capable of encircling the leader [Khamenei]. The leader is using his powers to wipe out corruption, to make it in his words, a ‘plant without roots’. Ahmadinejad has had some run-ins with the ulama in Qom, such as the gaffe over women attending football matches.”

“It’s impossible to think that Khamenei will be ousted. He is of course weaker than people in Qom. He’s not a Grand Ayatollah. He has followers, but most people in Iran follow Sistani, and then Montazeri, Sa’afi, Sa’ani, but politically Khamenei is still okay.”

“Iran has a dualistic system. The only group that’s not been engaged with the government, is the current group in government. This is the last group to take power. People have tried all the different possibilities within the system. First, you had Mossadegh and the leftists. Second, you had Rafsanjani, and the centrists, or centre-leftists. Then you had the right during Rafsanjani’s second term, when he bowed to the conservatives. Fourth, you had Khatami and the re-emergence of the new left. They got

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frustrated and became the reformists. Now, fifth, you've got the war veterans. They voted for Ahmadinejad because he's not a thief."

"What's interesting is that you've been through all the possible types of government, and the different ideologies. When they've done with the current government, people will go back to their original nature – the non-religious trend. This could change the whole system."

‘The human rights activist’

This activist spent several years in prison, during which he conducted a high-profile hunger strike and so gained the support of many, including the President of the United States, George W Bush and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. He is a respected author and journalist who has criticised the actions of the theocratic regime, implicating senior government officials in the murder of writers and intellectuals. He worked as a Revolutionary Guard, but became one of Iran’s most well known political dissidents.

He campaigns tirelessly on behalf of political prisoners in Iran, and raises the cause of human rights amongst the international community. He is the recipient of many international awards and is currently in voluntary exile from Iran, on a world tour to meet intellectuals, philosophers and other human rights activists.

He was asked why he was let out recently. He was in prison until 2005, when he was released. He was then rearrested and returned to prison voluntarily. While he was in prison, some had speculated that he would never be let out until he withdrew his comments about the Supreme Leader, Khamenei.

“I think the simple reason is my six years was over. My imprisonment period had come to an end, although of course I still think the whole six years wasn’t legal, but I had done my time. There was no more reason for me to be in prison.”

He was accused by the press court of “making propaganda against the Islamic regime and its institutions.” The court accused him of “making provocative speeches that threatened national security.” Does the government still consider him a threat?

“I hope not. It depends what happens when I return to the country. My speeches have been censored and I think I will be arrested when I return.”

With recent visits to the UK by Shirin Ebadi, Hossein Bagherzadeh and other activists, there is a suggestion that the government might have a policy of letting human rights campaigners leave the country.

“Not really, I don’t think it’s a policy, it’s very inconsistent after all. The reaction to people leaving has been slightly lighter than in the past, but

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there are still lots of pressure and criticism. In terms of my own personal case, I can hope and wait, but I’m not sure if I can go back.”

He explained the purpose of the trip to London, which is one stage in a world tour that he’s conducting in 2006. His next stop will be New York.

“The main reason for the trip is to raise the voice about human rights abuses and make the international community hear that voice. In the Middle East, and the wider region, there are two voices: one voice says terrorism, war and Islamists. It talks about Mullah Omar, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and in the West about Christian fundamentalists. The other voice is the voice of peace, democracy, freedom and equality. There needs to be a solution between Islam and democracy. If the West wants a peaceful Islamic world you have to listen to the voice of reason. In Iran there is a movement toward democracy – it is different to Iraq, we can carry out our own democracy project. Any military action would destroy our country and it would also be a blow to our democracy movement.”

“Democracy is not like a plane, you can’t just export it. You have to have social basics and foundations on which to build democracy. People must want democracy if you want to create democracy. If you truly want to change this government, you have to bring in a completely democratic government. The voice must be heard in the West – I want to make a union between a peace loving Iran and a peace loving West.”

Some have suggested that he may write another book based on his experiences, but he was keen to emphasise that he wanted to highlight the case of others, rather than just focusing on his own encounters.

“I am trying to talk about the prisoners still in Iran. I’m already known enough, so I won’t write about my experience. The people in prison – even our fellow countrymen don’t know their names. I am going on a three day hunger strike – the 14, 15, 16 July to highlight the cause of human rights and political prisoners. It will be a three day event in 12 different countries in the world. The first day will be in London, the second will be in New York in front of the United Nations building. 1,000 people in Iran are supporting the hunger strike as well. There will also be opposition activists outside Iran supporting the hunger strike which is to help political prisoners. We want to bring this issue to the world’s attention. The nuclear standoff shouldn’t result in the human rights situation being neglected. I would rather write about the other prisoners and abuses of human rights than myself.”

“There is a big democratic movement in Iran. It has two problems though, it doesn’t have an organisation – there is a variety of people fighting in this corner – left, right, religious, atheist; outside and inside the country. Because of this variety, it doesn’t have a steady leader. We’re trying to gather people, in a nationally recognised, democratic manner to choose a leader for this movement. It should be someone like Gandhi. We all have anger, hate and spite inside us but you can’t build a democracy based on hate. You can’t make democracy by violence, our resistance is completely peaceful. For the first time, the elite have a hold on democracy, freedom and human rights.”

“The meaning of democracy is equality of all citizens – all have citizens’ rights under a democratic government, it has nothing to do with religion. A key facet of democracy is the separation of religion and politics. This is why we believe that all minorities should have the same citizen rights – the Baha’i like anyone else, we are all human.”

Some have taken issue with his approach, and suggested that you shouldn’t forgive those who committed crimes and atrocities.

“It’s been about a decade, so of course you do not forget, and we don’t forgive people who did wrong, because we all do wrong. You have to forgive the criminals in a democracy. To resolve the situation, there must be fact finding committees, these must investigate all criminal activities and then report to the nation. The criminals must be tried in fair and public trials. For forgiveness to happen legally, the criminals must account for their actions to the people and families of those done wrong to. We all need to forgive if we want democracy – we have no other choice. The problem is you can’t build hanging posts to build a democracy. We must forgive in order to build democracy, but we will never forget. We will only forget if we repeat those crimes ourselves. We mustn’t build a government worse than the one before. We should follow the examples of Gandhi and Mandela, and encourage truth and reconciliation.”

“The situation now is that there aren’t that many political prisoners, compared to some other countries, such as Pinochet’s Chile. But the people in prison are in very poor conditions. When they are arrested, they have no documents. They are thrown into single cells, with no representation, no visitation rights, no phone, no newspapers. It is like being in a grave. The prisoners are interrogated and blindfolded. They are then put in front of Stalinist show trials which are broadcast on state

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television. They then force them to admit to being spies working for the West. Confessions are then extracted based on false admissions. We object to this whole process. Even if we have only one political prisoner, there is no freedom in society.”

“We are also faced with heavy censorship. It is similar to China – the government filters the internet, and arrests web loggers. The government is acting as if there was a state of emergency, it is a nervous and paranoid state we live in. A young girl was demonstrating recently, and she was battered by the police, they hit her with batons. It really is life or death over there.”

He has complained of a lack of leadership within the disparate democratic forces. Some suggest that he has become the de facto leader of the movement.

“I am not the leader of this movement. I am merely an unhappy intellectual. We should try and oppose leaders all the time, even in a democratic state. If we're not careful, we'll end up with corruption if there is no opposition. This is the newspaper journalists' and intellectuals' fight against the people and controls.”

The key difficulty, which is continually expressed by foreign diplomats from the US and the EU, is what the West can do to support the nascent democratic movement in Iran.

“We're 100% opposed to military action, we don't want any foreign interference in Iran. We do, however, have a few requests. The lack of human rights is not an internal affair for any country. Any person whose rights are trodden upon, means all our rights are abused. In addition, we have no vessel for our voice to be heard, inside or outside the country. Our first request is for the West to provide a voice inside and outside for human rights to be heard internationally. Our second request is for intellectuals, journalists, activists to take up cause of human rights, to raise their voice against abuses. We need the moral support, not a physical thing, but moral and ethical support for our cause. Our third request is for a union to be made between international and internal movement through peace. We need to make a union of peace.”

“I have visited many intellectuals on this side, trying to get their support. In Germany, I met with Habermas, in the UK with Tony Giddens and David

Held, who have given their support to this movement. The membership of the movement will give us international credibility and the regime won't be able to accuse us of spying. World leaders have invited me to meet with them, but I haven't done because I want this to be a civil movement.”

Another possible source of support is the Iranian exile community, who live mainly in London, New York and Paris. Some are wealthy, some intellectuals, and many, despite having family members back home, are not able to return.

“The diaspora is a big community and will eventually have to return to Iran. For building a free Iran, we have to fight the fight together. We have to put aside our differences and work side by side. By working together we can concentrate on building democracy.”

“Our political activists have various different opinions, and the claimants of leadership are many. They shouldn't just be activists, but open minded people should be the leaders. I've insisted on modelling Gandhi. In the future, those who disagree can join us. We're not one party, we're a social movement, so there's no easy way to democracy. The fact that we're all different groups is a good thing though. But the problem is we haven't been able to unite. The movement needs a moral vacuum to operate in. I insist people should come together to form the nation's view in a democratic forum, but this is just my opinion, I might be wrong.”

The world's media is almost unanimously focused on Iran's nuclear programme, which some say obscures discussions about human rights abuses.

“I think we're in a very dangerous situation, and this crisis is costing the democracy project heavily. If you look closely at the case between Iran and the international community, you ignore other things. This has resulted in democracy and human rights being thrown to the sidelines. Previously, Western countries had big trade with Iran. For their own personal gain they chose not to see Iran's violations. Now that there's an atomic situation, nothing else is important but an agreement on the nuclear file.”

“On the other hand, we may be facing war. It won't be like Afghanistan or Iraq, however. Even if they bomb Iran's infrastructure, they'll just destroy our country. Look at Iraq – is there a democracy there? There are free elections, but not democracy. There are tens of other things that are

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important to democracy. You must have a separation between civil society and government. You must have a divide between the private and the public. You must have a split between religion and the state. There needs to be tolerance and pluralism.”

“You can't fix any of this by military action. If you don't have a democratic culture, you can't bring in a democratic culture by war. Being a citizen is a precondition of democracy. A stable, free market economy is another part of democracy. Oil is a very big anti-democratic force in the region, but you can't solve the oil problem by military action. The governments with oil are not answerable to the people. In the West, people pay taxes therefore governments are answerable to the people. But in Middle East region, people have to beg for handouts from government based on oil revenues.”

“How can we solve this problem of self serving governments? The answer certainly isn't the nuclear one. If there's a free economy then democracy will take shape. There are lots of criticisms of capitalism at the moment, and the economists seem to be the main critics. However, even social democrats accept that a free market is a precondition for a free democracy, and oil countries lack this.”

“The international community worries about Iran being a nuclear power. There is no reason to worry, it won't be an atomic bomb that will destroy West. There is no such bomb. It will be Chernobyl style events that might destroy our own nation. All of this expertise and equipment were acquired on the black market. These factories and reactors lack safety standards. The West has very transparent reactors, and at the same time you have the greens and the environmental lobby keeping a check. When something is secret and unknown, you can have no confidence for safety. We should be worried, not you. You're scared for us, and that's very strange.”

“On the nuclear issue, you need to look how the West treats people. There are two policies – one for countries like Israel, Pakistan and India, but they tell Iran that they can't even have a nuclear plant. This double standards policy can't be explained. The regime is using this to provoke people's pride. This is creating a war-like situation.”

“Our first issue is the human rights issue. This is where we'll beat the regime. The joke in Washington is that the US attacked Iraq and Iran won. Are people in the US happy with the situation in Iraq?”

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“The situation as it is in the Middle East – if there is a democratic election, the extremists will win. This is what outsiders think. Iran is one place where this might not happen.”

“People in the US have no familiarity with Iran’s society. They only want a Chalabi to be leader. Iranians are clear – they don’t want a Chalabi or the Islamic Republic regime. Would the US like it if we chose their President or the people of the UK, if we chose your Prime Minister? I expect we will choose the leader for us, it’s as simple as it is.”

The activist was part of the government. Some have criticised him for being an accomplice to tyranny, but others suggest that it is exactly such a ‘former insider’ who is best placed to expose the dark actions of the government.

“‘We are all part of the totalitarian regime’ – those are the words of someone in prison for years. We must learn not to confuse things, to destroy each other. Someone studying at university today – are they in hand with the government?”

“Our role is to bring in a democratic candidate, the structures of democracy and allow people to choose a leader. Whoever they chose, we will respect them. We’ll even tell people when they’ve made a mistake. It’s like football, no-one thought that Italy was going to be first. But it’s the game that matters, the result doesn’t matter, it’s the rules that matter. Democracy is a collection of rules – and you need to play the ball, not the head. We mustn’t look at everyone as a suspect. You must provide the structure to restrict people from making massive mistakes. You can restrict their movements – we won’t allow them to take advantage of power. There is only one way of peacefully changing the regime. Democracy is a negative, not a positive – but it is a necessary evil. There is no such thing as heaven, whoever promises heaven, will build hell.”

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‘The government researcher’

The researcher holds a senior post at the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS). IPIS is a think tank which provides research support to the Iranian foreign ministry. It uses the classic methodologies of think tanks – roundtable seminars, research publications, major conferences and international exchanges. By developing relationships with other institutes such as the Foreign Policy Centre, it can bypass the often cumbersome and time consuming diplomatic channels. IPIS has developed personal relations with a number of institutes in the US, Europe and the rest of the world.

The researcher was welcoming, urbane and was well versed not just on international affairs, but also about UK domestic politics. The institute is situated on several acres of manicured gardens. This ambient environment allows for more sustained, perhaps rational analysis of thorny foreign policy problems, than perhaps the pressured hubbub of a busy government department. The campus overlooks the rest of the city nestling on a hillside in Northern Tehran. He attempts, in the manner of an experienced diplomat, to allow proceedings and formalities to smooth over any points of potential tension. When we ask him what he thinks of the current crisis, he smiles and asks us, do we not think the garden is beautiful?

“IPIS is part of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA), and provides research on matters of foreign policy to promote knowledge and understanding for officials in the MFA. We seek to inform policy implementation and use academic means and methodologies.”

IPIS is another example of a Western style institute in Iran’s Islamic government. Their work is starkly similar to that of many think tanks in the UK. They partner with many organisations like the FPC, Chatham House and RUSI. The main focus of their research – Central Asia and the Persian Gulf reflects a shifting geo-political balance. With hostile governments now removed in Afghanistan and Iraq, ties to Hezbollah, and Syria out of Lebanon, Iran is attempting to project itself as a regional hegemon. IPIS’s research on relations with Gulf countries, Syria, Turkey, Egypt and others provides the knowledge to back up the frantic diplomacy and coalition building that President Ahmadinejad and Ali Larijani are currently undertaking.

“We’ve held 40 roundtables in different European countries and the Center for Euro-American Studies has worked in 30 partner countries and produced reports in Farsi, Arabic and English. The work is informed by meetings with officials – MPs, parliamentarians, government officials, civil society and ordinary people.

“One example of our work is a recent trip organised for the Deputy Oil Minister – we organised for him to meet his counterparts in Europe, this is much easier and simpler than through the embassy – we did it directly.”

He is diplomatic in his tone, but repeats what many government staff and others say to Westerners – that Iran’s problems result from the mistakes made by other states, in colonial and post-colonial periods. In effect, Europeans and Americans need to ‘apologise for history’. He mentions the many missed opportunities in relations between the West and Iran.

“We do not indulge in criticism – of other countries or of our government, but we do this for the benefit of good relations and honesty. But we do look at mistakes in the past. Inevitably we have to look at the past, and try not to repeat those mistakes. In terms of Iran-EU relations, the EU3 supported the reformists, but failed to support them responsibly. So when Khatami needed some credit economically, there wasn’t the support there.”

Those missed opportunities are the result of a misunderstanding, which organisations such as IPIS and the FPC seek to correct: “The question we are asking here is what is the EU looking for? Are they looking to have a constant, long-term relationship with Iran? When you look at the economic relations – there is a potential for the EU to be a rich, nice economic partner. But the EU is considering other elements and means to the relationship – human rights, political situation and cultural affairs. This is a sensitive region – and there is a feeling that ‘you cannot do this with this government now’.”

Like many, the researcher reserves most of his criticism for the US, but remains open to the sort of dialogue that Khatami had called for, and seems possible in Condoleezza Rice’s offer: “The US is suffering from a lack of permanent policy, it’s suffering with this dimension. We need to work together, organisations like ours to arrange relations between the West and Iran. There need to be normal economic relations. For a long term relationship, there needs to be the support of the societies – that will prevent the repetition of mistakes of the past. Societies can help channel

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the government, for the benefit of both sides. There is a need for the institutionalisation of long-term connections.”

What is needed to channel this sort of dialogue is a deep understanding of Iranian society, and the demands they make of their government: “You can convince your domestic audience very easily if you already have the support of the societies – of the people you are talking to. You have to consider the image of society – of Iranian people, which is different to the rest of the Middle East. There are positive elements to this – for example there were no demonstrations in Iran against the US war in Afghanistan. It is up to organisations like ours to build on this potential.”

‘The civil society leader’

The civil society leader runs an organisation which acts as an umbrella for Iranian NGOs. His organisation works to develop the capabilities of civil society by holding training events, for sharing best practice and acting as an advocate for the interests of NGOs both nationally and internationally. Although philanthropy has been a part of Iranian and Islamic culture for hundreds of years, the expansion and development of Western-style NGOs is a relatively new phenomenon. The watershed came in February 1998, when 50 Iranian NGOs came together for a meeting in Bushehr with government and international agencies to create an action plan for civil society groups. The result was the Iranian NGO Initiative (INI) which resulted in a plan to develop not just the capacities of Iranian NGOs but to also establish their place within the framework of state-society relations.

Civil society is seen by international agencies and foreign governments as the means to political liberalisation, poverty alleviation, and economic development. This can be a daunting task for what are determined but fledgling groups, nervous of the suspicion with which they can be viewed by the government. The US administration is particularly keen to foster the growth of NGOs, especially those who oppose the regime either from a political or ethnic background. However, the American \$100 million ‘pro-democracy fund’ was largely rejected by local groups who fear the implications of being tarnished as the tools of foreign agents. Those we spoke to suggested they had been offered money, originating from the US fund, through intermediaries. It is very tempting for struggling NGO groups to take these funds, but they have refused in order to maintain their independence. There are supporters for Iran’s NGO community - often it is wealthy exiles based in cities like London or Los Angeles. The civil society leader comes from a wealthy family outside of Tehran, and there is, as is common to many activists, a sense of patrician benevolence that informs his thinking and activities.

“My own history and experience of the world of Iranian NGOs comes from working in local development, I’ve been working to develop local institutions on the ground, and using the expertise and best practice of British institutions such as Birmingham and Bradford Universities. We’ve used this to develop a coalition of training and research centres which have delivered training in 3 local government training municipalities.”

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“While many people are talking about the importance of Track 2 diplomacy in resolving the crisis between Iran and the West, it will be Track 3 diplomacy that produces many of the long-term solutions, through building democratic development, fostering healthy civil society and so on. Track 3 diplomacy is about engaging the disparate groups that form the map of civil society – NGOs, human rights advocates, women’s networks, disability groups, those working in disaster relief, in education, in health and other fields.”

“In the last 8 years, our organisation has been working to promote greater transparency in the work of NGOs. We prefer to work in the open, so we always inform the government of our actions, and this helps to reassure them about our intentions. Many sociologists have written about the ‘Conspiracy theory in the Middle East’ – and people are suspicious, as they are of so many different areas and believe that development and NGO work are part of some Western conspiracy.”

“We started our work as a collaboration between Iran and the US, but in order to allay the conspiracy theorists, we informed the foreign ministry of our work. In addition, we began our activities with ‘non-political’ activities, so we looked at the issue of the environment, and worked to devise projects with scholars, and others who were active in civil society.”

He greets us with warmth and affection but there is an initial suspicion of us, which is only semi-serious. Firstly he accuses of us being foreign agents – while the Americans are the ‘Great Satan’, the British are the ‘Little Satan’ – but by extension, also the cleverer one, the ‘hidden hand’ which is behind many of the activities and problems in the country. This kind of conspiracy theory was a joke, but one based on a perception which is common across the Middle East region – the region which, it is said, invented the conspiracy theory.

Some of this suspicion derives from the way that NGOs are viewed by governments in the Middle East. Interaction with civil society groups is not seen as part of a healthy democratic process of consultation, but often viewed as a cover for subversive activity. NGOs are monitored by the intelligence and security services. Meetings of women’s groups or conferences that debate human rights are seen as subtle ways that, with the support of foreign powers, opponents of the regime can undermine and even overthrow the government. A particularly depressing episode was a conference organised in Berlin where many of the participants were

arrested for taking part in the event when they returned to Iran. The civil society leader is, however, particularly keen to show us that it is possible to organise events, with the support of foreigners, which have the tacit approval of the government.

“There have been problems with NGO activities, such as what happened with the Berlin conference. Firstly, they didn’t inform the government beforehand, which made people suspicious. Secondly, they made it completely open, so anyone could walk into the meeting. This meant of course that elements who were opposed to these activities, and wanted to monitor these activities, could easily get in.”

“However, you should not be dispirited by these problems. You can achieve a successful conference with NGO groups, if you take a number of precautionary steps. We held a very successful event in Amsterdam on women’s rights, without any of the problems that were seen after the Berlin conference.”

“Firstly, you have to get the government on board. You tell them you’re holding the conference, you explain how you are inviting and selecting participants and then you brief them afterwards on the outcomes. They shouldn’t interfere in the process as long as they are kept aware throughout the different stages. Secondly, you have to ensure that there is no political agenda on either side, so you need to clearly screen your partner organisation/s. Thirdly, you have to have transparency at all stages and a strong code of ethics to ensure this.”

“You have to be sensitive to the issues you are exploring, and often, if they are not handled in the right way, highlighting human rights and democracy can be counter-productive. There are four particular areas which are worth exploring for an NGO event: disaster management; children’s issues, especially early years learning; poverty alleviation; and the environment.”

His previous experience of working for the UN, and his contacts in the regime, give him an expertise in treading the line between empowering the NGO and satisfying the government official. “The advice of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been that it is extremely important to engage with the UN and its institutions. The UN has produced a document on civil society which the government has endorsed. There is a Cabinet decree which I am trying to translate at the moment, which was begun in the last few weeks of Khatami’s Presidency and has been put into place by Ahmadinejad’s

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government. It is relatively progressive – it invites civil society to monitor government programmes, and it *directs* (not just suggests) the government to engage civil society. It is snappily called “The Regulation governing the collaboration of government and civil society”. Perhaps surprisingly it was drafted by the Ministry of Intelligence – this is a good sign if the Ministry is taking a relatively progressive step as they would be the ones monitoring, interfering with or potentially closing down the work of civil society groups. There is always the danger of the security services ‘stepping in’. Even in the present administration, which has made more progressive steps, every association of more than 3 or 4 is regarded as suspicious.”

“You can compare the situation to what happened in Egypt, where there was a progressive female Minister for Social Affairs who drafted a new NGO law and seemed to have the backing of the government. She held a dialogue with human rights activists, but then the security services intervened, arrested participants and ended the process.”

“So security plays a big role in the NGO community, because the police have to license activities, and the more police interference there is, the worse it is for civil society, and we can see a similar pattern across the Middle East region. However, we’re not in a position to change this, to end the police and security services involvement, but may be able to change some of their attitudes – to engage without appeasing them. The police and security tend to be more daring than the bureaucrats, which is a danger but also an opportunity – there is a need to educate the police and the security services, and I’ve suggested that the British police could provide some training in this regard for the Iranian police. The ICRC talks about the importance of knowledge dissemination given the fact that 80% of violence comes through ignorance. “

“There is a great deal of potential for civil society in Iran, and recently many NGOs and other groups have been invited to come back to Iran, after they left in the aftermath of the revolution. The main focus of NGO groups is the traditional charity based groups, which have their origins in the bazaars and in the Muslim faith with the concept of *zakat* (donating a percentage of income to charity, one of the pillars of Islam).”

“I believe that a turning point came in February 1998, with the Bushehr consultation. The relevant UN agencies participated, as well as NGOs and so on. It produced a 5 point programme and the organisers, the Population Council, received a licence from the government – which crucially had no

time limit to it. The government had given them the space to operate in, to work in the areas of children, families and population studies and their work and exchanges are taken very seriously.”

The distinct focus of his centre is community empowerment. This overused phrase has a real meaning in Iran, where provincial cities and regions, with stunning architecture and historical legacies outweigh the modern, ugly and, despite the political and social intrigues, rather soulless capital. Citizens think local first and national second – locating their communal identity by reference to their roots in Shiraz or Esfahan or Masshad for example. This required the government to adopt a new paradigm, moving away from seeing its role as dictating development policies and projects from the centre and imposing them on often reluctant and sometimes fiercely opposed local communities. This changed after Bushehr, as projects increasingly allowed local community members to become actively involved in issues of development. The civil society community is in the process of fleshing out this new development paradigm in two ways. Firstly, they are developing the organic capacities and abilities of local NGOs with support and enrichment from the centre. Secondly, the centre has ensured that when the annual consultation meetings are held, they rotate around a particular provincial capital. This means that even as an event brings together participants from across the country, it still has its own distinctive local flavour. This becomes a kind of ‘rite of passage’ for the development of that region’s civil society.

“The Germans helped to organise an event which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs approved, though it was a civil society not a government backed event. They were keen to strengthen links with the EU, but within certain parameters – they respected the laws of the countries and kept their relative independence, which is especially important when there is so much suspicion of ‘foreign interference’ in Iran. Some concrete things happened from these partnerships, such as Oxfam’s very active support in Bam following the horrendous earthquake. In terms of disaster management training, there is an opportunity for international assistance, especially in areas like Lorestan. There is a need for capacity building, linked to specific projects at the regional level, and the need for training government in participatory management, which could come from the US.”

“The key point is: *Britain and the EU should support Iranian initiatives for addressing Iranian problems with Iranian approaches enriched through*

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international experiences. It is this sort of enrichment that is much more helpful in the long-term than uranium enrichment.”

“You must be independent and seen to be independent. It’s difficult when you’re a small organisation in need of funds. I’ve had meetings with potential partner organisations and they offered me very large sums of money to hold events and so on, and thought it was all above board. I always ask them where the money has come from, and then by the second and third meeting they say it’s come from the US – from the pro-democracy fund that Bush and Rice set up and I say I can’t take the money. It’s very tempting of course, because I think what I could do with the funds, but I realise it would totally undermine my aims, and destroy my credibility.”

‘The Young Entrepreneur’

The young entrepreneur is one of the new wave of young Iranians, who are described with such optimism by both locals and outsiders. They are seen as forward looking, dynamic, industrious and impatient for change. He is the Operations Manager for a private equity company. This generation is viewed as the vanguard that will remove the theocratic incumbency and instigate Iran’s path to a liberalised economy and an open democracy. Whether such an ambitious weight on their shoulders will cause them to stand tall as giants or collapse under such pressure is a moot point. Meeting people like the young entrepreneur fills you with optimism, which is somewhat dashed by the materialistic youths that lounge around the shopping centres and fast food restaurants of Northern Tehran.

As one of this ‘new wave’ of young businessmen, he has the appearance of a surfer dude – all big white toothed smiles, perfect tanned skin and slick, glossy hair. He is the poster boy of Iran’s new talent pool. This glamorous personal appearance is somewhat deceptive. Educated at the University of London, he flawlessly switches between Farsi and English, and is well schooled in the international language of business management. He has been brought up on a diet of CNN, MTV and the BBC, so can act as a bridge between the competing cultures of Iran and the West. He is that bridge in his work life as well – his business is to persuade foreigners to invest in Iran’s economy. This requires courage at a time of great political instability and when Iran’s stock market is languishing. The potential rewards could be immense, and some would say that this is the perfect time to invest. Like many of his wealthy contemporaries, the young entrepreneur is well travelled, and we spend the initial parts of the meeting talking about mutual friends who we studied with in the University of London.

For him and his colleagues, it is economic change that drives political change – it was the bazaari merchants who instituted the Islamic revolution in 1979 and it will be businesses and consumers with a Western outlook who will eventually be the seeds of change to build an open, secular democracy. As mentioned earlier, a poll found that 41% of respondents felt that reforming the economy was the most important long-term goal for the Iranian government, over and above developing nuclear weapons¹¹.

¹¹ What do you think the most important long-term goal for the Iranian government should be? Reforming economy so it operates more efficiently=41.0%; Developing arsenal of nuclear

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This generation is clean shaven, in business suits and ties. Tie wearers were once derided as lackeys of imperialism, and conservatives still wear shirts buttoned to the top with no tie. The new wave choose American pop music over the call to prayer. They see the US as an opportunity to make money and discover new sources of knowledge and learning rather than as a threat to their culture and way of life. Why should the West be a threat anyway, when they have embraced all that appeals about that culture and assimilated it with their own more traditional upbringing.

Family and personal contacts are still crucial in a vibrant and close knit society, but this generation is different in its style and outlook. Personal freedom and civil liberties matter, and while nothing is ever officially acknowledged, the ability and willingness of the Basij to enforce the dress code, to prevent the playing of loud foreign music and to ban the consumption of alcohol at private parties is gradually diminishing. Crucially, this generation understands how to do business – how to encourage foreign investment, the concepts (alien to many Iranians) of negotiations, contracts and concessions, the importance of economic competence and stability and of liberalising the state’s stifling grip on the economy.

“Our fund is a private equity fund which is being set up to provide a pool of equity to allow greater investment in the private sector and fund commercial development in Iran. We’re a small fund, but one of the first to set up in Iran, and still one of the only ones in existence. Setting up in Iran is quite easy – registering the company is relatively straightforward as they are getting rid of some of the bureaucracy on that front. On paper, the potential for investment in Iran is unique – there’s the petroleum industry of course, but also the other untapped mineral potential, a highly literate and well educated society, so what could be a very dynamic economy. However, there is a great political risk, and that’s not just to do with the current nuclear crisis, but the uncertainty that the political system brings with the Islamic Republic, and the heavy state involvement in the economy.”

weapons for defence=27.1%; Expanding the freedoms of Iranian citizens=22.9%; None / Not sure=9.0%. Source: Zogby International / Reader’s Digest. Methodology: Telephone interviews with 810 Iranian adults, conducted from May 18 to Jun. 1, 2006. Margin of error is 3.5 per cent.

‘Voices from Iran’

“The private market has not been exploited effectively. Iran has such a young population, who aren’t just a force for the future, but are a force of the present. People’s consumption habits are changing – their basket of goods includes new items – the average person can afford things like snacks and shampoos now.”

“In terms of specific industries, there are great prospects for development – there is a need for investment in terms of technical assistance in the petro-chemical field, there’s mining of copper, zinc and lead, where there’s been no new exploration for the last 27 years. Iran is now starting to compete in the auto parts industry. They are unlikely to ever compete in terms of building whole cars, (as they used to do with the Paykan) but they do often produce parts for Japanese car manufacturers. There are an extra 1 million cars in Iran every year, which certainly contributes to the pollution in Tehran. The number of auto parts being produced is increasing even more rapidly – between the years 1995 and 2000, the parts capacity has risen by 1700%.”

“The stock exchange has kept the prices artificially very low. From 2003, the Price Economy (PE) has fallen from 10.5 to just 5. That would seem to imply it’s a good time to invest here, but of course there’s still the chance it will get worse. Even if there is military action, I think in the long-term the economy will pick up.”

“Our fund is looking to attract investment of \$100m – and it is the first and largest fund of its type in Iran. We are looking for financial engagement from Western companies – this will be the way a new breed of Iranians will gain greater economic power. In the past, sanctions have merely supported the conservatives’ political position, strengthening the hardliners.”

“In terms of the work that people in the outside write about Iran – it should include an understanding of Iran’s history if you want to delve into Iran’s psyche and correct the misperceptions that exist within the West. Iranian people have certain psychological features which are very different to people in the West. They don’t understand what it means to be individualistic, and the concept of ‘company’ as in business doesn’t exist. This makes business negotiations very difficult. The term concession (which is crucial for business deals) has an extremely negative connotation and ‘agreement’ is often seen as a form of compromise where you come off the poorer.”

‘Voices from Iran’

“In terms of the economy, the bazaaris are still the dominant power, with their economic and political influence. They played a major role in the Islamic republic – without them, there wouldn’t have been a revolution. It is also very difficult for the government to reform the economy without the agreement of the bazaaris. However, even the bazaaris are reforming. There is a new generation of bazaaris that are studying abroad in places like MIT and in London. When they come back from their time outside Iran, they have often changed their mentality and outlook.”

“One example of this change is what happened with ‘Shahran’ – a chain of superstores that a business group tried to start up in 1995/6. It was an Iranian attempt to emulate the Walmart chain, and many bazaaris were vehemently against it. The bazaaris even went so far as to pre-purchase all the key Iranian factories, so the new superstores couldn’t get the produce they needed to sell. However, the superstores still managed to set up and were helped by municipalities. Some of the new bazaaris have changed their mind, and are doing business with these superstores. The traditional bazaar is slowly losing its power to the modernised companies. There is a new generation however – one of my classmates from high school has started to export Iranian textiles on a large-scale – so these ‘big’ bazaaris will be relevant.”

‘The Rafsanjanites’

The Centre for Strategic Research (CSR) is an academic research institute which is part of the Expediency Council of Iran. Appointed by the Supreme Leader, the Expediency Council effectively mediates between the competing forces of the Parliament and the Guardian Council (which is also appointed by the Supreme Leader), though tends to favour the latter. The Council acts as an adviser to the Supreme Leader, especially when there is political or legislative stalemate, and can override the constitution and *sharia* law. Both the Council and the CSR are led by Ayatollah Rafsanjani, and Hassan Rohani, the Secretary-General of the Expediency Council is the Director General of the CSR.

Having been President, Rafsanjani became Chairman of the Expediency Council in 1998. Following the presidential elections, his position was entrenched and his powers extended by the Supreme Leader as a bulwark against Ahmadinejad. He is seen by many as a political centrist – a moderate conservative while he was President, who has become more reformist – indicated by his appointment of former President Khatami as senior adviser to the Council. He remains a major rival to Ahmadinejad, even after having embarrassingly lost the Presidential elections to him in 2005. Marred by corruption allegations suggesting he enriched himself and his family from state coffers, he is nevertheless a key figure in the regime, and arguably 'number two' in the hierarchy. The two officials we meet are senior figures in the CSR, and one sits on the editorial board of their in-house journal.

The common rejoinder in government pronouncements on foreign policy is that Iran will only act in its relations with the international community in ‘the national interest’. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that the main publication of the CSR is called ‘National Interest’. In style, it is extremely similar to journals found in libraries in the UK and the US with academic article titles such as: ‘Intellectual Foundations of Al-Qaeda: Neo-Wahhabsim’ that wouldn’t be out of place in *Foreign Affairs* or the like. However, unlike many Western academic journals, the articles tend to be loyal and uncritical of the government’s foreign and security policies. One of the Rafsanjanites recently wrote an article on the nuclear programme which talks of Iran’s “very good standing in all non-proliferation agreements” the government’s “commitment to international nuclear rules” and how “the Israeli lobby have greatly kept away Iran from utilizing the [nuclear] technology”.

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So, perhaps unsurprisingly, the institute tends to follow the government line on the nuclear issue and blame the United States for most of Iran’s difficulties amongst the international community. Both the Rafsanjanites interviewed are experienced diplomats, having been a Minister and a senior official respectively. They are stern and serious people, with a talent for tough negotiation.

They work in a building which, like many in Tehran, combines a modern glass and chrome shell with traditional furnishings – some might say like the country itself: a modern veneer, with a traditional heart. As at all meetings, I am offered tea and politely accept. One of the Rafsanjanites sucks his tea through a sugar cube wedged between his front teeth and top lip. This is the classic way to drink tea in Iran, and as an experienced drinker keeps his sugar lump going for most of the meeting.

They are somberly suited in grey wool, both without ties and speak in long soliloquies. In spite of this formality, they are welcoming and tentatively disposed towards engagement. They believe in a negotiated, diplomatic settlement to the current impasse, and see the importance of relationships between institutes and think tanks such as the CSR and the Foreign Policy Centre.

“If you consider the West and Iran, we have a lot in common, and we should be working together, not against each other. If we look at structural issues, it’s clear that trade and the economy are the backbone of industry. We are looking towards joint co-operation, and Iran would prefer to work with the West, rather than with Russia and China. Overall there is a lot of potentiality. In terms of culture, there are a lot of things in Iran that are of great interest to people in Europe and the US. In terms of the political and security situation in the region – if you look at Afghanistan, Iraq, Central Asia, Iran has played and could continue to play a positive role in terms of stability for the region.”

“Iranians want to work with others for a normal situation. In the last 25 years, there’s not been a normal situation. When the people of Iran overturned the Shah, the West did not welcome what the people did. The West tried to take up the Shah and impose him on the people of Iran. What has been lacking is respect for each other’s principles and norms.”

“On the nuclear issue, we believe we can solve this problem by negotiation, and through confidence building measures. One of the main problems is

that many misperceptions exist, and we’re not sure that you can do a lot to change this. What you can do is change the atmosphere – the present climate of mistrust. You need to put all of history on one side, and start to understand each other, to look at economic, political and cultural co-operation.”

“Two of the things that are lacking are the unity of the West and the distances of our cultures. The West can’t seem to agree on a common agenda, especially on the nuclear issue. On cultural issues, there needs to be more work by researchers and think tanks. There are not enough people to people exchanges. Even while people are travelling more generally, students for example are visiting the US and the UK. But visits need to be done in a sensitive way, otherwise they can be unconstructive and remind people of the colonial history. When people make foreign trips they should be prepared to listen and not lecture.”

“After September 11th, there has been a worrying rise in Islamophobia, and we need these kinds of trips and exchanges to tackle this problem.”

“We really agree with the point you make in your report [Understanding Iran] that to resolve the nuclear standoff, we need to look more at Article 6 of the NPT, and less at Chapter VII of the UN Charter¹².”

“Iran has had sanctions imposed on it for 27 years, both declared and non-declared. We feel that we’ve been singled out by the international community. Iran has not transgressed any international obligations but Iran has been treated very differently, especially compared to other countries in the region. This has not been a fair treatment, it’s been driven by political goals. Iran is for some reason seen to be an exceptional case - Brazil is not being checked with additional protocols. With the situation that exists right now, Iran should pay the price, but the West will pay the price too, although Iran will inevitable pay more of a price, as it has done in the past. Isolating and confronting Iran will not be for the benefit of the West. Look at the situation in the region. In Afghanistan, all the problems remain, and the situation will be worse. In Iraq, people are suffering, with lack of food and insecurity. This is not a situation that the West is looking for, and confrontation is not the solution.”

¹² Article 6 of the NPT commits signatories to disarmament of nuclear weapons, while Chapter VII of the UN Charter outlines the legal basis for military action by one member against another

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“Iran is working with the IAEA, there have been 2,000 inspections, including military sites. The government should answer to its own people, to parliament, not to the demands of foreign powers. Iran has co-operated with the IAEA.”

“With regards to economic effects, of course sanctions will affect our economy. But we’ve had sanctions from the US up to now, and we’ve lived with them. The key question for us is: are sanctions legal under international law? Everything has to be done according to international law, and we don’t think sanctions are according to international law.”

“On the NPT, we’re now seeing Britain, France and Germany pushing for a Chapter VII resolution. This could affect the future of the UN – and we’ve requested reform of the UN. We think taking the case to the Security Council would be a serious mistake. Iran prefers to see the case dealt with in the IAEA, which would give certainty as they are the experts. Not only would it be unfavourable for Iran, but it would be a big mistake for the UN. “

“The US must also bear in mind who the nuclear weapon states are. Although we agree that the NPT is inadequate at present, and there are many challenges to address, at the same time the US is undermining it by not abiding by Article 6. We’ve made it clear during recent conferences that we need to realise a consensus amongst the 188 constituent members of NPT. Renewing the NPT will be impossible, if you try to take a shortcut by applying new restrictions on certain members and then try to universalise them. The Non Aligned Movement countries are opposed to this, despite their obligations.”

“Whoever it is in Iranian government who’s negotiating – they can’t give up the demands of the people, who feel they have been cheated, been given promises by the EU3 which have not been delivered, so there are legitimate grievances.”

“In terms of so-called ‘carrots’, the main one that would help is for the West to accept Iran’s position in the region. At present, Iran is continually deprived of its legitimate privileges – Iran must be accepted as it is, and its status in the region acknowledged.”

“Once there are interactions, there will be no problem of nuclear weapons – these are not in the mind of the people right now. We should look at the

model of Japan, in fact I have written a paper on that scenario, arguing we need to be much more positive.”

“Looking at other carrots, we have already passed the benefits of WTO, enrichment etc. These incentives wouldn’t achieve non-proliferation, so they are not practical. We need to look at other incentives now. There have been many missed opportunities. When we started dialogue of nuclear file, with the 3 foreign ministries (EU3) nobody expected after 3 years that it would end, it was a total surprise for everybody.”

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'The Feminist'

This woman is a well known lawyer and human rights campaigner, who fights for the rights of women and children in Iran. She was a senior figure in the legal establishment, losing her position after the Islamic revolution. She is the author of several books exposing human rights abuses and calling for greater protection for children and young people. She has been hassled by the government on many occasions, with threats of jail sentences and even death threats. This harassment has not stopped her outspoken criticisms of the Islamic Republic.

President Mohammad Khatami's two terms of office created an 'illusion of openness' in Iran, according to this feminist. Some of the social burdens on women relaxed. Clothes became brighter and tighter, make-up more visible and a greater amount of hair was exposed from under headdresses. Young people met up more and non-married couples could go out in public. On the political front, there was a boom in the newspaper industry with relaxed press laws. Students and activists were able to more actively demonstrate, most famously in the 1999 protests when new demands were made of a President thought to represent the interests of women and young people.

Ultimately Khatami failed to deliver and now his successor is a hard-line conservative. The situation of women in Iran has been complicated by the change of government; even while Ahmadinejad famously tried to lift the ban on admitting women into stadiums to watch football matches. Ahmadinejad's initiative upset the clerics and he had to back down. According to the feminist, the controversy highlighted the discriminatory principle that underpins the Islamic Republic.

"Things are definitely better for Iran's men than for its women. You only have to look at the marriage and divorce laws, or ask yourself how many secular men have taken second wives, because it's not just the conservatives. You'll find there are plenty of intellectuals among the bigamists, even the ones who make the headlines with their claims about freedom and all that."

"The situation of women shows all the contradictions of the revolution. It was central to the clerical revolutionaries, who abrogated the Family Protection Law before any other law and re-established *sharia* law. In the first years of the revolution, great limits were placed on women's rights. Khomeini and his associates enforced many laws and practices that were

unfavourable to women. They barred the judiciary to women, and dismissed many professional women from their jobs. But at the same time they insisted on women’s political mobilisation, encouraged girls’ education, and also supported women’s activities during the Iran-Iraq war. So the anti-feminist project backfired in a way because the active participation of women in revolutionary politics awakened the consciousness of women, particularly in the middle class, who increasingly acted to promote women’s rights. And even though life remains unequal and unfair for the women of Iran in lots of ways, there has been terrific progress during the Khatami years, and I believe it will continue. Take the number of women studying at university, it’s going up and up. They’re already more than half the student population. Now, of course women go to university for a number of different reasons, not just to gain a qualification – it may also be a way of asserting independence, of choosing one’s friends and even a husband for oneself – but there is a knock-on effect in terms of political change.”

“Higher education gives women a clearer understanding of inequality and oppression, and that understanding will produce change. It’s already happening, in vocal opposition to policies that sanction polygamy, temporary marriage, free divorce for men, and child custody to fathers and their families. If you pick up a women’s magazine in Tehran, you’ll find it’s full of stories of wives suffering at the hands of despotic husbands, a long list of wife-beatings, suicides and loss of children. At the moment it’s happening at this kind of anecdotal level because the courts discriminate against women, not just in terms of outlook or judgment but technically speaking, so a man’s testimony is equivalent to that of two women.”

“But change is inevitable, regardless of which faction holds the presidency. Education is giving Iranian women a new understanding of freedom, the freedom of choice, which is not displaced by *sharia* law. Ultimately the mullahs cannot make women wear the *hijab* or the *chador*, and the women of Iran are beginning to see this. Satellite television and other media help because they get to see how things are organised in other parts of the Muslim world. So, for example, they can see that life is better for them, in lots of ways, than it is for their sisters in Saudi Arabia, who are not even allowed to drive a car. But, at the same time, they are denied other freedoms, which the Muslim women of Pakistan or Syria enjoy. We had a woman vice-president in Iran but in Pakistan and Bangladesh women have been elected as the head of state.”

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“If you look at what happened when Ahmadinejad came out and said that women should not be prohibited from going to stadiums to watch football matches. Nobody was expecting such a move because right up until that moment everybody was talking about how the new administration was going to crack down on women who do not observe the *hijab* in a proper fashion. Of course the mullahs got very upset when Ahmadinejad came out with his statement about the football matches. They were saying things like, the *ulama* [Islamic scholars] should be consulted before the president makes such remarks. But I think they’re mistaken if they imagine that Ahmadinejad is quite so formal in his policymaking. I believe he is much more instinctive. He makes speeches off the cuff – and policies too. He is inspired by his surroundings, by his audience. If he’s addressing a meeting of the Revolutionary Guard, he might say one thing. But if his audience is made up largely of women and the subject of the World Cup comes up, then he thinks up something on the spot to give them something to shout about.”

“That story, however trivial, tells you something about the nuclear dispute with the West. In Iran, the politicians come out with statements but the statements do not always correspond with the policy behind closed doors. Since the revolution, women have always been on the outside, on the wrong side of the closed door. They understand the need for advanced democracy better than most because they have suffered most of all from the lack of transparency.”

Conclusions

Trying to summarise these voices from Iran - such a varied collection of viewpoints is a daunting task – hence ‘conclusions’ rather than one ‘conclusion’. This may be the first time that a government official has featured on the same pages as a feminist and a young businessman. We have attempted in a modest way to represent the diversity of opinion that can still exist in the only theocratic government in the world, except perhaps the Vatican. As our civil society leader points out, Iran’s civil society may have relatively recent structures, in the Western sense, but its informal networks of family and personal contacts are strong, vibrant and not afraid to express themselves.

The contrasts are many – Iran is an old country with a young population. An empire that stretches back over 2,500 years, but over a quarter of the people under the age of 15. Young people are a force of the present, not just a force of the future, as our young entrepreneur points out. There are many voices in Iran who don’t remember what happened in 1979. They exist in and outside of government, with Ahmadinejad promoting veterans not of the revolution, but of the Iran-Iraq war. Change is rife in Iran, and not just amongst the neo-conservative politicians and the youth:

“the bazaaris are still the dominant power, with their economic and political influence...However, even the bazaaris are reforming. There is a new generation of bazaaris that are studying abroad in places like MIT and in London. When they come back from their time outside Iran, they have often changed their mentality and outlook.”

When Iranians look inwards at their political system, they seem to be looking through different glasses. Some see repression where others see purity, some see new found freedoms, which others call espionage. When they look outwards there is more agreement: the West missed an opportunity to engage during Khatami’s government; the West are guilty of double standards in the region; a peaceful nuclear programme is Iran’s legitimate right; there is an urgent need for diplomacy to avert an even deeper crisis.

Iran feels it is now pre-eminent in the region. In doctrinal terms, there has been a ‘Shi’a awakening’ – a crescent of communities that stretch from Lebanon, through the Gulf to the Indian sub-continent. They are disparate, but united by an increasing sense of empowerment. Some Sunnis, such as

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Egyptian President Mubarak, have claimed that these Shi'ites feel more loyalty to Iran than the countries they live in. What is clear is that American policies in the region have benefited Iran, and it wants to be recognised as a regional force. A discussion on Iran's future role in the region, and the need for a regional security agreement would be widely welcomed in both Europe and Iran. As our Rafsanjanite put it:

“In terms of so-called ‘carrots’, the main one that would help is for the West to accept Iran’s position in the region. At present, Iran is continually deprived of its legitimate privileges – Iran must be accepted as it is, and its status in the region acknowledged.”

There are many voices in the debate on Iran. We hope that the voices in this report go some way to enhancing the discussions, both official and unofficial. We have had heard some official voices – President Ahmadinejad’s letter and Condoleezza Rice’s offer to resume negotiations. What is clear is a willingness to negotiate on both sides, but with serious caveats that need to be overcome. European powers must act to bridge the gulf between Iran and America. This is not just the responsibility of governments, but of think tanks, journalists, academics and NGOs. As one of our contributors put it:

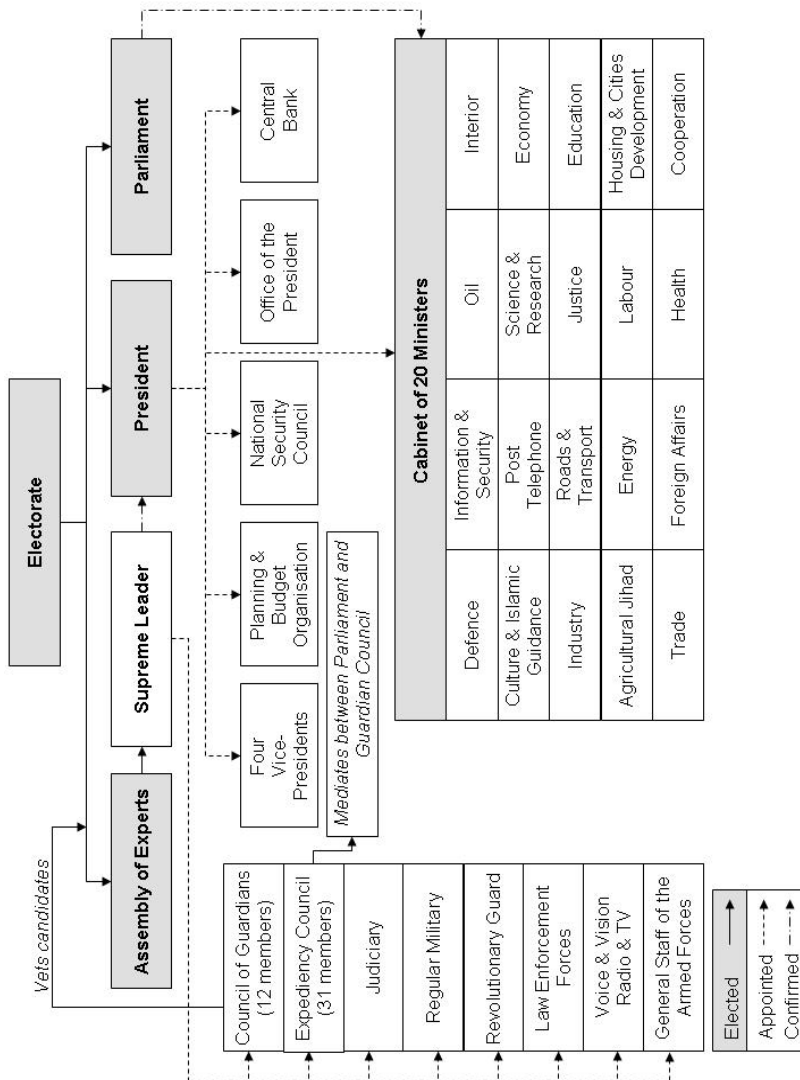
“Britain and the EU should support Iranian initiatives for addressing Iranian problems with Iranian approaches enriched through international experiences. It is this sort of enrichment that is much more helpful in the long-term than uranium enrichment.”

There is nascent democratic movement in Iran. It urgently needs support from the outside for a true awakening. The irony is that, unlike under President Khatami, where there was an offer of a dialogue of civilisations, the West has tended to hear the voices of extremism coming out of Iran, rather than the voices urging democracy. The West needs to attune itself to the different voices and end the ‘dog-whistle’ approach to engaging Iran.

“In the Middle East, and the wider region, there are two voices: one voice says terrorism, war and Islamists. It talks about Mullah Omar, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, and in the West about Christian fundamentalists. The other voice is the voice of peace, democracy, freedom and equality. There needs to be a solution between Islam and democracy. If the West wants a peaceful Islamic world you have to listen to the voice of reason.”

We believe that there is too much ‘megaphone diplomacy’ around Iran’s nuclear programme, and what is needed is a reserved, sustained, informed period of quiet negotiation. We hope that the next voice we hear is one announcing the resumption of dialogue between the West and Iran.

Appendix 1: Iran's Political Structure



About the Foreign Policy Centre

The Foreign Policy Centre is a leading European think tank launched under the patronage of the British Prime Minister Tony Blair to develop a vision of a fair and rule-based world order. We develop and disseminate innovative policy ideas which promote:

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'Voices from Iran'

