

Assessing Iran: The Arab Spring, The Nuclear Issue, and Canada's Response

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This Policy Brief focuses on three issues of great importance to Canada: Iran's government and its domestic situation; Iran and its region in the context of the Arab Spring; and the nuclear issue pertaining to Iran.

The Iranian Government

Iran's government is complex and diffuse. There are many power centres and factions, some declared within the Constitution, some informal. For most of the Islamic Republic's history, a range of opinions and movements has been allowed to exist and compete for power, provided they did so within a carefully defined and defended set of basic agreements about the nature of the overall system.

Beyond the constitutional arrangements, the government is primarily held together by informal arrangements, with corruption being a key aspect.

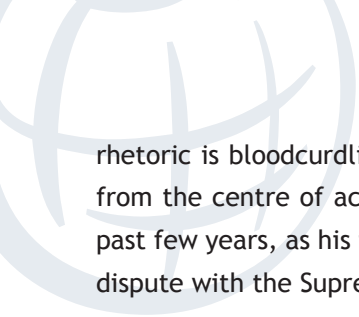
The most powerful individual is the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has a divine mission to defend the Revolution and

At a glance...

- *Iran's internal situation is troubled and getting worse, but it is impossible to say how long the regime will last.*
- *The Arab Spring has left Iran a 'net loser' in terms of both alliances and influence in the Arab world.*
- *Since Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear capabilities are likely motivated by interests of self-defense it is irresponsible for Canada or others to engage in conflict-stoking rhetoric.*

who balances the various factions and power centres. Since 2009, if not before, the Supreme Leader has systematically reduced the range of acceptable political parties and movements, and consolidated power around himself. In this, he has been backed by the Revolutionary Guard, a large elite force separate from the normal military of the country.

While one would think that an individual with the title "President" would be most important within the system, in Iran this is not so. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's



rhetoric is bloodcurdling at times, but he is a long way from the centre of actual power - even more so in the past few years, as his faction has come into a significant dispute with the Supreme Leader.

The Islamic Republic has never been a beacon of democracy or human rights, but for much of its history it has been more democratic and respectful of human rights than most other regional countries. In relative terms, Iran has featured an open press, a strong civil society, rights for women, and so on. Since the 2009 election, if not for a few years before, this has been systematically eroded, as part of the general erosion of democratic norms.

Iran's internal situation is troubled and getting worse. Corruption, poor governance and the growing impact of sanctions are pressuring the people. Standards of living are declining for most. There is growing unease at the way in which the Supreme Leader and those around him are eroding the democratic foundations of the Revolution. While most who study Iran do not necessarily see a violent uprising against the regime - which has shown that it will fire on the crowd to defend its position - it cannot be discounted. More likely is an ongoing disengagement of the people from political life and corresponding reduction in legitimacy of the government. Voter participation is declining, and it is rumoured that the regime is desperate to ensure a strong turnout in the upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for early March.

The trend-line is thus against the regime but we cannot know when or how it will be swept away. Everyone knew that the Soviet Union was rotten, and that many Arab regimes were rotten, but few predicted exactly when and how they were finally swept away.

Iran and the Arab Spring

Iran will be a net loser from the Arab Spring. Though Iran has proclaimed it the "Islamic Awakening" and has tried to claim that it is based on its own revolution of

1979, in truth if any events in Iran helped foment the Arab Spring, it was those after the 2009 elections.

The loss of Syria, if it happens, will be a significant blow, both as the loss of Iran's only ally in the Arab world and the loss of its direct supply route to Hizbollah. Beyond that, it is difficult to imagine any Arab regime that emerges from the Arab spring wanting to have a strategic relationship with Iran.

More fundamentally, Iran's attractiveness to the so-called 'Arab Street' has for many years been based on a sense, however misplaced, that Iran's Revolution was young, dynamic, representative and willing to stand up to the U.S. and Israel. If regimes emerge across the Arab world that claim these attributes, while Iran continues the slide towards corruption, authoritarianism and repression, Iran will no longer be a source of emulation for the Arab young. Its ability to influence the discourse of the region - its 'soft power' - will suffer. It will no longer be helpful for groups across the Arab world to receive support from Iran.

Iran and the bomb

Prime Minister Harper's recent comment that he believes that Iran is trying to acquire nuclear weapons, and that it would use them, is extremely serious. There are two aspects of his statement that do not hold up to further analysis.

First is his assertion that Iran definitely wants to acquire nuclear weapons. Most who study this issue believe that Iran is trying to acquire the capability to build such weapons, but that it has not decided to actually build them. Iran may prefer instead, like Japan, to be able to produce a weapon if its security requirements necessitate it, but not to actually do so.

In a statement on January 8, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said: "Are they trying to develop a nuclear weapon? No. But we know that they're trying to develop a nuclear capability. And that's what concerns us. And our

red-line to Iran is; do not develop a nuclear weapon.”¹

The much-respected Institute for Science and International Security, which has been quite hard on Iran over the years, has stated: “Iran is unlikely to decide to dash toward making nuclear weapons as long as its uranium enrichment capability remains as limited as it is today... Iran is unlikely to break out in 2012, in great part because it is deterred from doing so.”²

Second is the question of whether a nuclear-capable Iran would use these weapons in the service of a messianic impulse - knowing full well that the response would be devastating. The key issue in all of this is whether or not Iran’s leadership is ‘rational’.

Rationality exists on different levels. There is the issue of whether a regime’s objectives are rational, but there is also the question of whether their methods are rational. It is possible for a regime to have goals that appear irrational (not to mention, in Iran’s case, odious), but to subscribe to cost/benefit calculations that are perfectly sane.

That is the key question. Mr. Harper is right to say that the statements of Iran’s leadership about such things as Israel’s right to exist are disgusting and even irrational. But this does not mean that the Iranian regime would necessarily act upon these statements if it knew that doing so would result in its own destruction.

Here again, the evidence we have about how Iran’s leadership acts when its own survival is on the line is that they are far from crazy. As U.S. General John Abizaid, formerly commander of CENTCOM (the U.S. military command for the Middle East region, which includes Iran) has said: “Iran is not a suicide nation.

I mean, they may have some people in charge that don’t appear to be rational, but I doubt that the

Iranians intend to attack us with a nuclear weapon.”³ This reflects the view of most analysts. Whatever Iran’s rhetoric may be, its actions have been cautious and risk-averse. Iranian leaders will poke and probe their enemies for weaknesses, and will use blood-curdling rhetoric laced with references to martyrdom, but they back down when faced with a threat to their own survival.

Indeed, many analysts believe that the primary motive of Iran’s leadership in trying to acquire nuclear weapons capability is to assure their own survival in the face of what they perceive as threats. Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak recently stated, in an unguarded moment of candour, that he would likely seek a bomb if he were an Iranian: “I don’t delude myself that they are doing it just because of Israel. They look around, they see the Indians are nuclear, the Chinese are nuclear, Pakistan is nuclear... not to mention the Russians.”⁴ In other words, Barak was stating that Iran’s motives are rooted in an objective assessment of the risks they face, and not a religious impulse to destroy Israel.

Though Barak was quickly yanked back on message, his statement is essentially supported by former Mossad chief Meir Dagan⁵, and current Mossad chief Tamir Pardo⁶, who have both argued that a nuclear-capable Iran, though obviously a serious problem, would not be a threat to Israel’s existence. Indeed, based on these comments, and on my own recent trip to Israel to talk to leading officials dealing with the Iran issue, there is a growing sense that inflated talk of Iran’s ability to threaten Israel’s very existence is becoming a problem, in that it inflates Iran’s ability to deter Israel from acting to shape the region in its interests.

³ Parker, J., “Abizaid: We can live with a nuclear Iran,” ABC News, Sept 17, 2007, at: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2007/09/abizaid-we-can/>

⁴ Barak made the comment in an interview with Charlie Rose on Nov. 15, 2011. See the interview at: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/149855>

⁵ Bronner, E., “A former spy chief questions the judgement of Israeli leaders,” New York Times June 3, 2011, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/04/world/middleeast/04mossad.html>

⁶ Ravid, B., “Mossad Chief: Nuclear ‘Iran not necessarily existential threat to Israel,” Haaretz, Dec. 29, 2011, at: <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/mossad-chief-nuclear-iran-not-necessarily-existential-threat-to-israel-1.404227>


¹ Panetta made this statement during an interview on the CBS News programme “Face the Nation.” For a transcript see: http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-3460_162-57354647/face-the-nation-transcript-january-8-2012/

² Zakaria, T. And Hoseball, M., “Iran won’t move toward nuclear weapon in 2012 - ISIS report,” Reuters, January 26, 2012, at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/01/26/uk-usa-iran-nuclear-idUKTRE80P06120120126>

What should Canada do?

We must begin with a recognition that Canada's influence is modest.

We are right to join the international sanctions and to seek to deny Iran access to dual-use technology. These steps should be maintained and strengthened where possible.

But irresponsible talk of the inevitability of Iran's getting a nuclear weapon - or worse, using it - is not helpful. It raises the temperature where it does not need raising, and creates a sense that conflict is inevitable. It is not. 

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